

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 923rd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 12 February 2019. Professor Miriam Gilbert's subject was 'Henry V: Hero-King or Scourge-of-God?'. The meeting was chaired by Sylvia Morris.

Professor Gilbert explained that her title came from the programme of the RSC's 1984 production of the play which set up the conflict between the two facets of Henry's character, the charismatic leader of the St Crispin's Day speech and the brutal soldier of Henry's threatening address before the walls of Harfleur. She described her experiences of seeing and teaching the play from 1973 at the Oregon Shakespeare festival to the present and how these seemingly irreconcilable representations of the king were dealt with in performance.

She focussed on the Harfleur speech in which the king at the walls of the besieged town threatens rape, infanticide and murder of the defenceless citizens if the Governor does not open the town to the English. Beginning with Olivier's film of 1944 and ending with the BBC's 2012 Hollow Crown series, she showed clips of the scene from six TV and film productions, examining in detail the cuts made in the speech as printed in the Folio, the iconography of the setting with Henry viewed from above or below, the French represented or not, the number of English soldiers shown and their reactions to the speech, as well as the contemporary context of the productions. The general tendency was to cut many of the brutal lines in the speech, especially the repetition of the threats of rape, to portray Henry in a less harsh way. And many productions, for example Robert Hardy's in the Age of Kings in 1960, Kenneth Branagh's in 1984 and Michael Pennington's in the English Shakespeare Company production in the 1980s, undercut what he says by showing him injured, exhausted, relieved at the end of the speech when the French have capitulated.

Professor Gilbert argued that what we now know almost first-hand through the media of the atrocities of warfare, we cannot pretend to believe that the dark part of the play is not realistic. The Harfleur speech must be kept intact. Recent productions have become darker and darker but the possibility of relief at the end of the speech has now become part of the performance text. Henry V is still a character about whom we have questions but that was one way to reconcile the two facets of a complex role.