

## The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 937<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place virtually on Tuesday 9 February 2021 when Dr Anjna Chouhan gave an illustrated lecture on “King John and the Victorians”.

The speaker began by challenging the commonly-held belief that Shakespeare’s play King John was one of the most popular in the Victorian period. In fact statistics show that it has been performed more times in the recent past. There were only four major productions staged by major actor-managers in London during Victoria’s reign. The one major earlier revival, for Kemble in 1823, featured spectacular designs by the fashionable stage artist Planche.

By 1850 England was experiencing severe anxiety about the Roman Catholic church, with anti-Catholic riots and a wave of papal antagonism. Catholicism was seen as a challenge to the Church of England and national identity. As a symbol of Englishness, it is no surprise that Shakespeare’s King John and Henry VIII, both featuring Cardinals, were successful on stage. In 1850, in part of William Macready’s production, the actors were drowned out by the hisses and boos of the audience.

Charles Kean’s 1852 production was not the result of Anti-Catholic sentiment, but a manifestation of Kean’s obsession with antiquarian accuracy. Unlike Macready’s production, it was relatively unpopular.

The last Victorian staging was Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s spectacular production, in 1899. This coincided with the start of the Boer War, and its patriotism chimed with audiences. It glamoured war and the English state, and the final lines of the play were a rousing address to the gallery.

Recent productions too can be seen to refer directly to political events. One review of the RSC’s 2019 production commented that it “resonates in today’s Brexit Britain”.

Dr Chouhan concluded that King John, in Victorian times at least, was only celebrated at key moments in the national narrative, a phenomenon that should not be mistaken for popularity.

The talk was viewed online 144 times.