

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On 21 April the Club held its 946th meeting, the first in person since March 2020 when its President, Professor Lena Orlin, gave a talk entitled "Testing the Evidence in Shakespeare Biography". The meeting was chaired by Susan Brock.

Her talk referred to her recent book *The Private Life of William Shakespeare* in which she had set herself the challenge of writing a biography that excluded references to her subject's literary output.

Her approach was to closely examine documents that relate to Shakespeare's life, times and the places he lived in. Previous biographies had taken clusters of documents to propose a particular view which then came to be accepted as truth. The prime example of this method was Shakespeare's marriage. It is common now to assume that he was forced to wed Anne Hathaway, and fled to London to avoid her. This was a misogynistic and selective reading, ignoring indications that Shakespeare regularly returned to his wife, and that Anne was a capable manager of the family's Stratford affairs. Early accounts suggested that Shakespeare was apprenticed to a butcher, and Professor Orlin proposed that his early marriage freed him from this commitment, allowing him to pursue a career in the London theatre.

She compared the monument in Holy Trinity Church with other surviving examples and suggested that its form indicates Shakespeare may have had links with the University of Oxford, the city where he is thought to have broken his journeys. She found that the bequests in Shakespeare's will, including the infamous second best bed, were not unusual, and proposed that the individual bequests could have had emotional significance which would have been recognised by his surviving family. His clothing and sword for instance would have been left to his son Hamnet had he lived, and the silver-gilt bowl left to Judith may have been related to baptism.

She ended her talk asking her audience for their opinions of her methods, and where they thought Shakespearean biography might go next. There followed a lively discussion of the details of her research. Around fifty members and guests attended the meeting which closed after refreshments.

After the meeting Professor Orlin kindly recorded her talk and this recording was made available to members online for a short period.