

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On 12 December, at its 958th meeting, the Shakespeare Club welcomed Sir Stanley Wells in conversation with Rev Dr Paul Edmondson on the subject of the recently-published book "What was Shakespeare really like?". Dr Lindsay MacDonald chaired the meeting.

Sir Stanley has been associated with the Club for many years: he noted that on his first appearance he had been the Club's youngest speaker, and was now the oldest. He began by recounting his earliest Shakespearean memories. At school he was encouraged by a fine, inspiring teacher and recalled watching performances by Donald Wolfitt, a fine actor in his way, now judged an "old ham".

This project originated during lockdown when he gave online lectures, asking the question "How can we understand Shakespeare's personality?" He examined the evidence of those who knew him, and compared Shakespeare's life with contemporaries. For instance, he was relatively law-abiding, having remarkably few brushes with the law compared with Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe.

Some elements of personality can be judged by examining his writing, but Shakespeare rarely spoke in his own voice. His education at the King's School in Stratford-upon-Avon was important: early plays like *Titus Andronicus* often quote Latin texts that would have been read at school, a tendency that declined in later plays. On the subject of religion, Shakespeare was a conforming Protestant. The Bible is often quoted, for example a phrase from the book of Revelation was quoted in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is untrustworthy characters such as Edmund in *King Lear* who used rationality to explain natural events. Lady Macbeth, too, tried to rationalise feelings, later discovering the impossibility of ignoring human emotion. To resolve plots, Shakespeare often called on a sense of wonder and religious awe.

Shakespeare was a very practical playwright, taking account of the abilities and size of his acting company, rarely writing more than four female characters who had to be played by boys. He was a serious reader, consulting classical literature, poetry and history for inspiration and rarely writing solely from his own imagination. Shakespeare's own voice is heard more in additions that were not necessary to the plot: entertainment from Launce and Crab in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and scenes that reflect the action without adding to it as in the gardeners in *Richard II*, and the scene between the blind Gloucester and the mad King Lear.

Sir Stanley's favourite plays are *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, light-hearted but intricately plotted, and *King Lear*, which delves deeply into human imagination and goes beyond craftsmanship.

We hear Shakespeare's own voice in the sonnets. There is no evidence that they were intended for publication during his own lifetime and Sir Stanley sees them as a collection

rather than telling a personal story. It is not possible to know who put them in order, who the people in the sonnets were, or how a copy was surreptitiously acquired. He believes they were written over a long period, perhaps even while he was at school. Some show Shakespeare to be bisexual but the idea that most were written to a man is a narrative imposed by later editors.

Shakespeare loved situational comedy such as overhearing scenes, and comedy of character. Mistaken identity was one of his favourite devices. Shakespeare's comedy was never simple: tragic characters could also be comic, and early plays thought of as knockabout farce like *The Comedy of Errors* contain romance, grief, loss, separation, and the joy of reunion, themes that recur in the late plays *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*.

Summing up, Sir Stanley noted that Shakespeare was a master of linguistic expression, which he used to display a profound understanding of human character without judgement. Like *Richard II* he understood the human need of having friends, of the importance of hope, and the need to confront mortality. All these have ensured his enduring reputation, and quoted Ben Jonson's judgement that he was "not of an age but for all time".

Following the discussion with Paul Edmondson, Sir Stanley Wells answered many questions from his appreciative audience on subjects ranging from the influence of Shakespeare's personal life on the plays, on his compassion, and his lack of interest in political or personal satire.