

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The Shakespeare Club's 951st meeting was held on 10 January 2023 when Dr Ella Hawkins from the University of Birmingham discussed the question *Why stage Shakespeare in Elizabethan costume?* The meeting was chaired by Sylvia Morris.

In her beautifully-illustrated talk, Dr Hawkins showed several examples of surviving Elizabethan clothes. Although we can appreciate the quality of their construction and decoration, we no longer have access to the layers of meaning embedded into them. Since they have lost the cultural meaning they had to Elizabethans, why, in the twenty-first century, are they still used? At the Globe, half of the productions used Elizabethan costumes, at the RSC, fifteen.

Dr Hawkins offered close examination of three productions that each provided different answers. The first was the Globe's production of *Twelfth Night*, first performed in 2002, focusing on Olivia's striking costume. This production followed years of research into original practices, all the costumes being produced in an authentic fashion. She linked this to experimental archaeology where learning original skills such as the making of flint axes has enhanced understanding of the life of their creators.

Her second example was the RSC's production of *Richard II* in 2007. The audience was encouraged to associate Richard with Queen Elizabeth, with his auburn hair, white make-up and a ruff. The elaborate costumes characterised him as a decadent ruler, whose final penitence was signalled by his simple costume. The Elizabethan costuming also prepared the audience for the religious and political divisions of the play about an unfamiliar historical period.

Her final example was the 2016 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Globe. Here there was a division between two worlds: present-day London for Athens, and an archaic, anarchic, magical world for the fairies. They wore bedraggled farthingales and high hairlines: they were wrecked Elizabethan rock stars who had been alive 400 years, and the costumes explained to the audiences who they were.

These productions showed that the use of Elizabethan costumes on stage have several functions: historical research, recalling memories from our cultural imagination, or explaining who characters really are. She concluded that the spectacular Elizabethan period still has a hold on us that we are unlikely to shake off.

A recorded version of the lecture was also made available on YouTube for a few days, and was viewed 110 times.