

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon held its 963rd meeting on 14 May 2024 at the Methodist Hall, Old Town. Dr Kathryn Harkup's talk was based on her book *Death By Shakespeare: snakebites, stabbings and broken hearts*. The meeting was chaired by Amanda Wood.

Dr Harkup set the scene by talking about the London of Shakespeare's time and the life of the 200,000 Londoners who were his audiences. They lived in cramped, unsanitary conditions, where disease spread rampantly and exotic illnesses were brought in from abroad. Shakespeare is preoccupied with illness and those who cared for the sick from wise women to court physicians. Both the pox and the plague are mentioned repeatedly. There were only three hospitals in the City, two for physical illnesses, the third for the insane. Anyone who could afford it was treated at home. Life carried on around the sick and everyone would have encountered dying and death.

Londoners would also have been familiar with executions. Methods included hanging, decapitation, and hanging, drawing, and quartering, as well as gibbeting when the victim was imprisoned inside hoops to die slowly. The heads of traitors were exhibited on London Bridge. These were all spectacles, free entertainment for crowds with which theatre had to compete. Audiences would not be shocked by onstage deaths, and stage violence had to be realistic. How accurate were Shakespeare's observations of death, and how well did he represent it on stage?

She focused on three of the deaths in Shakespeare's plays.

Firstly Cleopatra, a historical figure who took a scientific approach to researching suicide, testing poisons on her prisoners with the aim of finding a pain-free death. She died having been stung on the breast by an asp, but how realistic was this? Any snake capable of a lethal bite would have been 1-1.5 m. long, such as a cobra, not an asp carried in a small basket. A snake's poison consists of either neurotoxins or phytotoxins, neither acting quickly enough to kill her after speaking just a few lines, certainly not from a bite on the breast. Her death is not realistic, but leaves her a beautiful corpse to be found by the Romans in one of Shakespeare's most famous, even if not accurate, scenes.

Next she looked at the death of Julius Caesar. There is no doubt about what kills him. Shakespeare's sources document that he was stabbed 33 times. She focused on Shakespeare's technical brilliance in staging this violent and bloody attack. In reality there would have been a great deal of blood, but as the scene happens half way through the play it would have been impractical to cover the stage in blood, which must also be kept off the costumes of the murderers, who had to reappear with clean hands a few lines later. She concluded that as the murderers surrounded Caesar they covered him with a sheet covered in fresh blood from a slaughterhouse, probably sheep's blood

because it remains liquid for some time. The murderers are told to bathe their arms up to the elbow thus avoiding staining their costumes, the blood contained in a dish. Shakespeare's practical stagecraft made the assassination both spectacular and practical.

Her third case study was Juliet's coma in *Romeo and Juliet*. Is there a drug like the Friar's, that could have put her into a state of suspended animation from which she would naturally awake? Even with modern medical knowledge this would be a challenge, the only possible one being a nerve toxin deriving from the Japanese puffer fish, that causes breathing and the pulse to become almost undetectable particularly without a stethoscope. With no antidote, the only treatment is for a machine to breathe for the patient until the toxins clear. The puffer fish was unknown in this country in Shakespeare's time. The potion is in every version of the story and the idea of someone reviving after seeming to be dead was so popular that audiences would have accepted it even while recognising it to be fictional.

While Shakespeare was a sensitive observer and a careful reader of source books, he ultimately sacrificed accuracy in favour of pleasing audiences with a great theatrical show.

Dr Harkup responded to the many questions about other deaths in Shakespeare's plays, explaining that she was investigating the many mentions of syphilis (pox) in *Hamlet*, references that Shakespeare's audiences might have noticed but which modern commentators may have missed.