

The 911th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 10 October 2017 after the Annual General Meeting. Professor Gary Watt, of the Faculty of Law at the University of Warwick, gave a talk entitled “Sound Rhetoric from Caesar to Theresa”, chaired by Paul Prescott.

Professor Watt began by putting into practice the rhetorical tradition of ‘awakening the ear’ of an audience, common in the law by the banging of a gavel to call a court to order as well as in Shakespeare’s plays. Speakers like Rumour in *Henry IV Part 2* and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* tune the ears of the audience as musicians tune their instruments. Continuing the musical analogy, Professor Watt argued that the text of a play was a score awaiting performance and asked what it was about certain words and sounds that made them appealing. He focussed on the ‘st’ sound from the proto Indo-European ‘sta’ which expresses what it stands for: ‘to stand’. Applying his theory to *Julius Caesar* he pointed out the ‘st’ sounds in Cassius’s description of his loyal nature

But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fix’d and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.

The audience were asked to examine a few lines in Antony’s speech praising Caesar after his assassination to demonstrate how Shakespeare, instinctively or artfully, built up echoes of particular sounds to emphasise a key word and used repetition to emphasise but then to undercut the meaning of his words: ‘Yet Brutus says he was ambitious/ And Brutus is an honourable man’.

Turning to today’s politicians he showed how the classical laws of rhetoric, taught to all grammar school boys in Shakespeare’s time, were still applied, even by those who aimed at a naturalistic delivery. Chiasmus and repetition were common in recent speeches by Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama and even Donald Trump whose tendency to use incomplete sentences and thoughts had a surprisingly strong effect on audiences. Perhaps Theresa May should have thought of what happened to Caesar when she repeated the slogan ‘strong and stable’ in her speech before the General Election?

Returning to Antony’s speech in *Julius Caesar* Professor Watt discussed how the sound and rhythm of short lines could be more powerful than meaning. Blank lines were resonant with the human heartbeat and short lines had the same effect as the heart missing a beat. Finally Professor Watt argued that no words at all could be the most powerful of rhetorical and dramatic tools: ‘the rest is silence’.

After lively questions the meeting closed at 9.15.