

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 922nd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 8 January 2019. The speaker was Dr Jem Bloomfield, whose subject was 'Motive and Malignity: Shakespeare and the Golden Age Detective Novel'. The meeting was chaired by Melissa Mailer-Yates.

Dr Bloomfield's talk focussed on the detective novels of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Ngaio Marsh, published in the five decades after the First World War. All used Shakespeare in their novels but for different purposes and effects. Detective fiction of all the literary genres was the most semantically obsessed, using signs to encourage readers to look beyond and below the surface of the text, though, interestingly, references to Shakespeare's works were not on the whole used as clues in their plots. Dr Bloomfield discussed Ngaio Marsh's *Light Thickens* which drew on the theatrical superstitions surrounding 'The Scottish Play' and her *Singing in the Shrouds* which began with a discussion between characters about *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Turning to Dorothy L. Sayers he focussed on *Gaudy Night* in which Shakespearian epigraphs and references worked out the emotional difficulties of her characters. He was particularly delighted by a barmaid in *Strong Poison* whose maiden name was Miss Montague, introduced in a scene where two clever characters discussed *Romeo and Juliet*. Agatha Christie, with her reputation as a prolific writer of easy-reads, nevertheless drew on Shakespeare and the Bible in her work, especially in *The Hollow* and in *Cat Among the Pigeons*, a Poirot story, which pivoted on the point where Shakespeare was quoted. Detective fiction was eminently suitable for linking with Shakespeare, Dr Bloomfield argued, because his works constantly questioned reality as did their plots and characters.

After questions from the audience, which included an informed discussion of the Shakespearean influences in the TV series based on the novels of Colin Dexter, the meeting closed at 9pm when members and visitors retired for refreshments.