

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 904th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 8 November 2016. The speaker was Professor Philip Smallwood who spoke on “Two Comprehensive Minds: Samuel Johnson & William Shakespeare”.

In his talk Professor Smallwood examined how much Johnson the critic and Shakespeare the creative dramatist had in common. There were two centuries between them during which science and philosophy had been transformed, and they wrote for very different audiences: Shakespeare for a diverse range of theatregoers, Johnson for an increasingly educated readership. While Shakespeare’s creativity makes him universally recognised as an artist of the highest importance, Johnson is seen as a writer of a lower order, a distinction Smallwood questioned.

He went on to compare the men and what they reveal about each other. Although there are superficial parallels between their lives, we know few details of Shakespeare’s, ensuring he remains an enigma, whereas Boswell’s extensive biography created a myth of Johnson. In their work, each had their own vision of the world and their own way of expressing it. Both were fascinated with the human, their writing showing off their ability to acutely observe life. Johnson greatly admired the dramatic vitality of Shakespeare’s writing in which moral and philosophical questions were examined through the interaction of character, situation and plot. He experimented with the technique himself, in *The Lives of the English Poets* describing Swift’s Lear-like mental and physical disintegration. In this he successfully demonstrated that it is possible to be Shakespearean while writing in different genres.

Professor Smallwood ended his talk with a fantasy: if Johnson and Shakespeare had ever met, what would they have thought of each other? Their personalities were different: Johnson brusque and deliberate, Shakespeare fanciful and even careless. But would Shakespeare not have preferred to hear Johnson’s honest appraisal rather than uncritical adulation? Despite differences in their writing, what the two men shared above all was an obsession with humanity, and in this they may be more alike than we have thought.

After questions from the audience the meeting closed at 9 pm.