

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On Tuesday 11 May the final meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon's 2020-21 season took place virtually. This was the Club's 940th meeting.

The Club's speaker was Professor Carol Rutter of the University of Warwick, on the subject "*Not know me yet?*": *Cleopatra and the politics of performance*. She was introduced by Club Chairman Susan Brock. The subject has emerged from writing her stage history of *Antony and Cleopatra* in which she felt she had not focused on the politics of the play, in particular on Cleopatra's own political actions. The Battle of Actium, fought at sea during the play, was a crucial moment in history when power in the Middle East and Africa took a dramatic shift towards the west.

Asking herself the question "Does Cleopatra do politics differently from how the men do it?", she realised that her ambiguous, contradictory actions are political rather than merely personal.

She illustrated this idea using a number of key scenes including the arrival of Caesar's ambassador Thidias following the Battle of Actium. Cleopatra appears to agree to capitulate with Caesar, betraying Antony, but has she been dissembling with Thidias, or with Antony? Does she understand the political game Caesar is playing, and does she intend to outwit him?

Referring to Shakespeare's source, the translation of Plutarch's Life of Antony, she noted that it was Cleopatra's conversation and fluency in many languages that made her alluring, rather than physical beauty. Speaking persuasively was, and still is, the most important of political arts.

She has also mastered the art of performance. Cleopatra's carefully-staged appearance on the famous barge was a political performance designed to both humiliate and entrance Antony.

At the end of the play she combines these skills. After Antony's death she fantasises to Caesar's messenger about Antony, in what is actually a political speech designed to captivate him. Betraying his own master, he gives her secret information, advising her to "make your best use of this".

The scene in which she is confronted by Caesar is intensely political. While she appears to be submissive and he appears honourable, both are lying. After he exits, her line "He words me" shows she is aware of his deception and has herself been dissembling.

Finally, her death scene shows her mastery of performance as a political act. As she dies, she presents herself as Queen, mother and wife. Caesar has been outplayed by the final gesture of a supremely political Queen.