

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 936th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place virtually on Tuesday 12 January 2021. Professor Tiffany Stern of the Shakespeare Institute talked on the subject “Shakespeare, Lavatories and Loo Paper”.

One of the earliest consequences of lockdown in 2020 was panic buying of toilet paper, followed by a national shortage. This caused Professor Stern to think about how our early modern ancestors managed without a supply of purpose-made paper.

She began by describing the toilets of the period, and how they were portrayed in illustrations and written work. Sir John Harington, often credited with the invention of the flushing toilet, wrote a satirical tract *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* that puns on the name Ajax and the word “jakes”, as does Shakespeare in the play *Troilus and Cressida*. Shakespeare also makes a number of references to privies and chamber pots.

What, though, about toilet paper? Professor Stern found references to a number of alternatives that might be used, including cabbage leaves, grass and even mussel shells. But where it was available, paper was used. Not all printed paper was valuable enough to keep, especially pamphlets and ephemera. She cited one parliamentary petition which exists in just one copy rescued from a privy. Our word “bumf” comes from the term bum-fodder, coined in the period and meaning ephemeral bits of old paper. Turning to Shakespeare, she speculated that this could be the reason for the rarity of some of Shakespeare’s early quartos. Some are known from just a few printed pages, and *Love’s Labour’s Won* from its title alone. Perhaps most of the copies were used in this way.

The complete lack of original Shakespeare manuscripts is often commented on, but Professor Stern suggested that printing-house practices can explain this. Documents were marked up and torn into pieces before being set in print, so by the end of the process the scruffy and defaced manuscript would have been seen as of more value in the privy. It’s a sad thought that this was the fate of Shakespeare’s priceless manuscripts.

Professor Stern’s lecture was views 181 times online.