

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On Tuesday 12 October 2021 the first meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon's 2021-22 season took place virtually. This was the Club's 941st meeting.

The subject of Dr Sarah Dustagheer's talk was "*Would I were in an alehouse in London! I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety*": *Shakespeare and London*.

The quotation from the night before the battle of Agincourt in *Henry V* shows a longing for London, and the author's dictionary-format book *Shakespeare and London* explores references to the city just outside the playhouse.

Dr Dustagheer examined the role of London in the drama of the time. It was dynamic and exciting, more than doubling in size from around 1550 to 1600. Plays now known as "citizen comedies" both satirised and celebrated the city and its people.

Shakespeare did not write citizen comedies, and it has been suggested that he did not engage with London. With the current lively debate about collaboration, many of the references to places in London in Shakespeare's plays are in sections now acknowledged to be by writers such as Fletcher and Marlowe.

The speaker though found ample representations of the city in Shakespeare's works. Rather than including references to current locations, he gives historic landmarks character. The Tower of London is a malevolent influence in the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*, and the rose-plucking in Temple Garden is a reminder of the biblical Garden of Eden. Shakespeare's greatest London creation is the Boars Head Tavern in the *Henry IV* plays, ostensibly set in the 14th century but actually recognisable as a contemporary tavern.

Dr Dustagheer found many references to the City's livery companies. Fishmongers are mentioned in *Hamlet*, Mercers in *Measure for Measure*. Tradesmen appear onstage such as a Goldsmith in *The Comedy of Errors* and a Haberdasher in *The Taming of the Shrew*. None of these plays are set in England. There are allusions, too, to the Officers of the City such as the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, Recorder, and landmarks such as the Guildhall and City Gate as well as bawdy houses and taverns.

Audiences in the London playhouses would have recognised their fellow-Londoners in Shakespeare's Roman mobs in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*.

Cities distant in time and place are substitutes for contemporary London. There was no need to name specific places for his audiences to recognise their city or themselves, and they would never have forgotten where they were.

The talk was viewed online 156 times.