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978-1-107-06436-2 - Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice

Edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan

Excerpt

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## *Shakespeare and the digital world*

### *Introduction*

*Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan*

In introducing a volume entitled *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, perhaps the first questions to address are what is encompassed in the term ‘Shakespeare’ and what is meant by ‘digital’. In working towards completing this volume the editors have been asked innumerable times two things; first, ‘why Shakespeare?’ and second, ‘the digital what?’ To deal with the first of these questions ‘Shakespeare’, for the purposes of this collection, includes the wide and varied arena of Shakespeare studies and all of its potential contributors and audiences. The scope of this collection therefore is vast, yet it is much more focused than other studies of digital humanities in that the subject focus implicates a particular group of people who self-identify as Shakespeareans. The sheer volume of material that is published online or in print that refers to Shakespeare makes it a verifiable and distinct cultural entity of considerable weight, and the size, popularity, duration and geographic spread of the debate that surrounds the author and his associated works positions it as a leader for other areas of the humanities. In yoking the ‘digital’ to ‘Shakespeare’ in this volume (with the ‘and’ that John Jowett argues ‘puts Shakespeare in relation to something that affects his work and leaves its impression on his work’ (2007: 3)) we assert the mutual importance of the ‘digital’ as a context that influences the study of Shakespeare and, conversely, the importance of Shakespeare as a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world. In asking ‘what does Shakespeare add to a discussion of the digital world?’ the answer must be scope, form and direction. This collection is concerned to address whether Shakespeare studies is acting on or reacting to technology, whether scholarship and practice are leading or following technological innovations. Looking at this specific field across the period of digital development is designed to confront these questions.

To address the second of our key terms, ‘digital’ might be seen to stand in contrast to ‘analogue’, ‘a series of discrete values’ (OED, ‘Digital’ B2a) in contrast to ‘the manipulation of continuously variable physical quantities’

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[More information](#)

(OED, 'Analogue' B1a). The 'digital' refers to a culture of computer-friendly data and communication, the transmission of information through crunchable, accessible and mediated methods. 'Digital' stands for the range of activities and concepts implicit in its adjectival usage that are part of common discourse: digital humanities, digital natives, digital communities, digital media, digital age. The 'digital world' of our title spatialises these terms, but needs to be understood in terms of its temporal and disciplinary reach as well as its global coverage. The premise of this collection, one which should be neither over- nor under-stated, is that Shakespeare studies in the digital age is significantly and specifically different to its previous incarnations. What the last two decades have taught us, if they have taught us anything, is that the digital world has both strengths and weaknesses and it is through an iterative dialogue with other forms that the digital world has emerged and continues to evolve.

What a book can do well, and has always done well, is to provide an extended argument on a topic through a structured approach that leads the reader through it in manageable stages. This collection is structured in a way that allows the reader to begin at the beginning and follow a developing conversation. However, if the reader wishes to move to a particular section, then the book is made up of four relatively self-contained sections which can be read in isolation. The volume is therefore browsable, in the sense that characterises reading on the internet. The individual sections, we hope, provide focused discussions on individual areas of this debate, but the book as a whole gives the reader a broad overview of the field at the present time.

When placed beside another topic both 'Shakespeare' and 'digital' provide an infinite variety of possible forms of association which might guarantee prestige, access, reliability, relevance, popularity and credibility in both the academic and the popular imagination. In placing these two powerful terms together we hope to create clarity out of potential chaos ('And where two raging fires meet together,/ They do consume the thing that feeds their fury' (*The Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.128–9)), in the sense that we will consider the wide range of topics caught at the intersection of these two large concepts, beginning with the other key thematic intersection considered in this volume; 'the world' both in its local and its global form.

Part of the movement towards a global world is a slow and steady drift in the direction of harmonisation, centralisation and the limiting of choices. The explosion of digital technology seems to have supported the process of globalisation in all sorts of ways that simply were not possible before internet connectivity (Google, Facebook, YouTube). This stands in contrast to local and distinct activity that has been highlighted and supported in the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare and the digital world: Introduction*

3

online world (the British Library's Treasures in Full site, the University of Pennsylvania's online Folio, Stageworks, a site which includes teaching materials for a range of productions across Britain). The irony about both of these global terms is that they can support such differing agendas and audiences. The collection oscillates between looking at these opposing forces, of the big, commercial and influential on the one hand and the small, not for profit and particular on the other. It is the strange conundrum of digital technology that it both breaks down old hierarchies and institutions and creates new monolithic powers with equal ease and without discretion. This volume wishes to take a moment to think about the consequences of the relationship between Shakespeare and digital cultures and consider what this relationship should be as well as what it is at present.

Another question to address, then, is why create a collection rather than write a co-authored volume? This is quite simply because there is too much to say and the structure we have created provides the reader with a wealth of experience through a carefully selected group of contributors. The variety and breadth of the individual voices that are contained in this collection demonstrates the diversity of perspectives that we are now accustomed to in the digital world, but their careful co-location creates a quite specific arrangement of knowledge. In both form and content we want this volume to reflect what the Shakespeare community has learned over the last two decades, addressing the global issues facing the Shakespeare community through local reflections, case studies and theorisations. Perhaps one of the most important lessons is that two heads are better than one, but a group of specially selected heads can create an experience that far exceeds anything that a single or even double voice could provide.

The group of people involved have been selected to provide an extension of our own experiences and so include newcomers to digital technology who are established scholars and new scholars who have never worked without these technologies. Both of the editors started their professional lives working on projects that involved digital technology (although a decade apart) so our acquisition of these skills was a professional necessity rather than a free choice to work in this way. In one sense this makes us the ideal sceptics to evaluate the technologies that have been the framework of our intellectual development. In another it makes us the worst possible reviewers of the changes that have taken place since we do not always fully grasp the nuances of what went before the arrival of these new ways of working, having not experienced them first hand. While the projects detailed within this volume are indeed cutting edge, this is a collection that does not come out of the vanguard of digital humanities specialists, but from

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan

the trial-and-error approaches of committed Shakespearean professionals working within an evolving field.

Terence Hawkes writes in a review of James Shapiro's book *1599*:

In our time, the present is never more evident than when we look at the past. We move forwards by looking backwards, and that kind of historicism has long been the true badge of the Shakespearean criticism of the twenty-first century. Shapiro's Shakespeare is thus firmly rooted in his own time, and the process is interactive. The historical context forms the plays, but the plays help willy-nilly to form the historical context. That is why we look at them: we are part of their world and they are part of ours. There is no separate pure and perfect time to which we can have access. To look backwards will also depend on looking forward. (2006: 249)

This assessment of the process of looking back in order to have a sense of what the future might bring is a key aim of this volume. However, we want to represent difference as well as indicate the similarities in our experience as digital Shakespeare scholars. Christie Carson is a Reader at a London university founded on traditional Victorian principles, female and educated in Canada. Peter Kirwan is an early career lecturer based at a regional university with satellite international campuses, male and educated in the UK. Carson has been engaged with large-scale archival and digitisation projects with institutional investment; Kirwan with the use of social media and blogging platforms freely accessible to scholars and enthusiasts alike. The collection of colleagues who we have drawn together to speak on this topic is designed to extend this range of institutional and personal perspectives and provide coherence in presenting an argument that has been debated by far too few people in the profession up until this point. Another aim of this book is to provide a single entry point for any Shakespeare scholar, student or interested member of the public to make sense of the widely divergent online world of Shakespeare studies. It is a road map rather than a bible, a seminar rather than a lecture.

What emerges from this debate between older and younger scholars and non-scholars, women and men, North Americans living in the UK and Brits living in North America, as well as people living and working in their own countries, is an understanding of how entirely ideas about education and scholarship are embedded in notions of identity. We believe it makes a difference whether one applies older research practices and habits of mind to the new technology or a scholarly research and teaching identity is formed at the same time as the skills of digital technology are learned and employed. It is for this reason that the volume contains a specific section on Publishing and academic identity (Part III below) since this is the most

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare and the digital world: Introduction*

5

obvious place where the digital world forces the individual to engage with a new public that may or may not understand the carefully articulated hierarchies of knowledge built up in the universities over many centuries (hierarchies that have been disrupted and displaced by this technology). How we form academic identity is changing, and this is happening both through the distribution of information to a wider public and through a shift in public perceptions and expectations of what scholarship is or should be when it is publicly funded.

The structure of the book is very straightforward and yet represents the wide range of perspectives that must be addressed in this field. The first half of the book looks at where we are now and how we arrived here. The two sections in this half of the volume focus on case studies in teaching and research and include only professional academics currently working with higher education establishments in Britain, Australia and the United States. In order to make clear the very real and expansive nature of the changes that have taken place in recent years the authors in the first half have been asked to focus on their own research and teaching practices in order to present a series of local examples. The usefulness of this focus on the local and the specific is made explicit in the detailed articulation of Bruce Smith's presentist approach to visiting the library in California and Erin Sullivan's case study of the work at the Shakespeare Institute which aims to recreate the Stratford experience for a cohort of students online. In the first half of the book, then, we look at the way space and time can be both overcome and reinstated virtually. Where we are now is both a practical, physical question and a metaphysical and theoretical issue. In the first two sections the emphasis is weighted more heavily towards the local to lay the groundwork for what is to come.

The second half of the book opens up the theoretical debate to look at the future by discussing publishing, communications and performance in an online world more generally. Given that the world of Shakespeare contains a wide range of participants in the online world we felt it was important to include perspectives coming out of the library, archive, publishing house, theatre company and heritage industry as well as the academy. In this half of the book we include fewer professional academics working in traditional settings and more Shakespeare researchers working in a variety of professional environments. In this second section identity is often hybrid and the colleagues working in the wider online field of Shakespeare studies tend to have a more self-conscious sense of developing their own identity within a flexible framework rather than adopting an existing identity and following predetermined intellectual pathways. The movement into

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the more open public international arena of the online world is presented forcefully in Katherine Rowe's consideration of what constitutes a text that is 'good enough' for use in the classroom, study and bedroom, and Stephen Purcell's analysis of the nature of 'liveness' in performance and its relationship to new definitions of performance. These scholarly considerations of the broad theoretical questions link directly to the concerns raised by the non-academic contributors to these sections.

Between these two sections which look backward to look forward, which focus on the local in order to open out to the global, is a 'half-time' intervention by Sharon O'Dair, a conscientious objector to the entire debate. O'Dair takes on the position of the devil's advocate but in a sense asks the reader to take a step outside of the volume's carefully constructed argument. By trying to create a sense of coherence in this complex arena we leave ourselves open to the criticism of oversimplifying the questions at stake and presenting answers that suit our own purposes in the long term. While many volumes treating the impact of the digital humanities on scholarly practice have taken a more evangelical tone, pointing towards exciting future projects that may or may not be realised, we recognise that the day-to-day experience of Shakespearean scholars is often more hard-fought, torn between strong established practice and innovations that may offer losses as well as gains. It is difficult to create a dialogue that acknowledges its own parameters and limitations but that is exactly what this intervention is designed to do. In Hawkes's terms we are making it clear that we are 'firmly rooted in [our] own time, and the process is interactive'. We do not claim to have all the answers to the questions that this book raises. What we hope to do instead is to introduce the reader to the ideas we have been thinking about but also the discussions we have been involved in before we present our own conclusions on this topic.

The conclusion, rather than the introduction, will form the substantive contribution from the editors. The introductions to each section and the individual chapters which are authored by the editors aim to place our own ideas alongside those of others in an even-handed fashion. We are the guides and facilitators in this discussion, not the leaders of it. However, once we have reached our destination, which is a common frame of reference, we will present our joint thoughts on this gloriously chaotic world we have the pleasure of being immersed in. The timing of this volume is apt as it marks, in many ways, the end of Anglo/American domination of educational methods and production expertise in this field (culminating in the World Shakespeare Festival of 2012 sponsored by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the Cultural Olympiad) and the shift towards a truly

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare and the digital world: Introduction*

7

global and commercial environment for the study of the plays and the Renaissance period that will be firmly ensconced by the time of the 2016 celebrations of Shakespeare's life worldwide. There are great advantages to be gained in this new world but undeniably there are also skills and habits of mind that are being lost at the same time. It might be said that this volume is tinged with nostalgia for older ways of working but it is also infused with a great deal of optimism and confidence in the power of the collaborative, international dialogue that is just getting started. In one sense this volume might be subtitled 'Good-bye to all that', following Robert Graves in that it involves something of a 'bitter leave-taking of England [. . .] where [we have] recently broken a good many conventions' (1960: 7), but could perhaps more usefully borrow the title of the independently published online EP by the band Fine Excuses: 'Good-bye to all that, Hello to all this!'

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[More information](#)

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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PART I

*Defining current digital scholarship  
and practice  
Shakespeare research in the digital age*

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## *Introduction*

*Christie Carson*

Katherine Rowe, in her introduction to a special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* on 'Shakespeare and New Media', writes: 'Older forms and values provide a vital intellectual framework for the way we use newer media, shaping the needs we bring to the new tools and the opportunities we find in them' (2010: iii). This simple statement makes clear that what we bring to digital media helps to determine what we find in these new ways of working. Research in this environment is both enhanced and extended by the fact that large databases of information are now available at our fingertips and fragile texts are accessible at the click of a button. However, access to information is not the same as knowledge and the opportunities afforded by the new environment raise as many questions and problems as they answer. The chapters in this section look at the 'intellectual framework' of research as well as the day-to-day processes involved in that activity. Can research today be said to be the same activity as it was twenty years ago when finding and analysing texts and/or performance was considered the primary aim of Shakespeare scholarship?

The first step in 'Defining current digital scholarship and practice' is to map out a history for this area of activity as it relates to 'older forms and values'. This is achieved in the first two chapters of this section by John Lavagnino, who makes clear the relationship between the wider field of digital humanities and Shakespeare scholarship, and Bruce R. Smith, who looks in characteristically astute detail at the phenomenological shift that has taken place in terms of the physical activity of 'doing research'. These two scholars, both in form and in content, reassess the way we do what we do as well as why we do it. Returning to the first principles of research, first looking back for historical precedents and then looking straight down at the desk and the body of the researcher, begins the process of this volume, which is to stop and reconsider the changes taking place in our world, assuming that we have the power to have an impact on those changes if only we take the time to reflect critically. Because as Rowe points out,