Insularity, Omission and Exclusion at Cambridge University Press

A Review Essay on *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice* (Cambridge, 2015)

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Recently, in the process of moving some file boxes of papers from our home to my office at the university, I was pleasantly surprised to find among them documents from the early 1990s—old Shakespeare Oxford Society newsletters, photocopied articles and chapters on the Shakespeare Authorship Question obtained via interlibrary loan, as well as correspondence with other Oxfordians. It was a reminder of those (now almost unimaginable) days before the arrival of the World Wide Web, when authorship research and the means of engaging with others interested in it was comparatively slow and difficult, was confined to paper, microfilm, email and listservs, and, if not entirely invisible to the mainstream, then very easily excluded and dismissed.

A quarter century on, scholarship and pedagogy across the disciplines have been radically enhanced and transformed by digital resources, online publishing and social media. In the case of the SAQ, these tools have granted new audiences access to resources long available only to in-person scholars, while enabling the discourse on Shakespeare's identity to become increasingly heated and to penetrate ever closer to —and actually influence —the mainstream.[1]

This influence is clearly evident (if deliberately muted) in Christie Carson's and Peter Kirwan's new edited collection, *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, a useful but compromised effort to chart the digital future of Shakespeare studies, teaching and performance.

It may at first seem incongruous that *Shakespeare and the Digital World* (*SATDW*) exists at all as a book: Given its focus on the use of e-books, blogs, wikis, open-access journals, databases, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and

multimedia in support of research, teaching and performance in the humanities, the content here might well have been served better with an online platform, in which all the resources mentioned in the text could have been linked to directly. Yet, as editors Carson and Kirwan state in their introduction, the monograph format is superior in terms of its ability to develop an extended argument (which, in their case, they describe as "carefully constructed" [6]). Even so, the authors of the book's seventeen essays continually engage with the debate over the merits of and challenges posed by digital technologies, and the nature of their relationship to the monograph—and, by extension, their transformative force in the world of scholarship. This tension underscores the entire book, and warrants even closer examination than the editors appear to be aware (or, as is more likely, are willing to admit), for it leads to additional tensions, contradictions and omissions which, I believe, have significant implications for the authorship debate.

On its own terms, *SATDW* is a practical introduction to (and, at times, meditation on) the many tools available for digital humanities practice and scholarship in an era of ubiquitous mobile computing and networking. It should be of interest and value to a wide audience, including librarians, students and researchers wishing to understand and utilize the digital resources available at university libraries (such as *English Books Online* and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*), instructors designing courses around blogs and wikis (especially for distance education), and arts organizations looking to shape their online presence and engage their users through social media.

Its lasting value, however, will be undermined by its unfortunate lack of an appropriate philosophical foundation, and its startlingly impoverished view of Shakespeare himself as an author—shortcomings which I believe to be fundamentally related.

My (admittedly presumptuous) purpose, then, is twofold: to review the book on its own terms and then to supply what I see as its missing theoretical framework —drawn from the philosophy of technology literature—which, I propose, would have gone a long way toward making this a truly significant (but, as we shall see, quite different) book.

A "Carefully Constructed Argument"

The book is a collaboration between editors Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan and their contributors, many of whom refer to each others' chapters. Carson is well known for her work on digital media in Shakespeare performance, in particular as the co-editor of The Cambridge *King Lear CD-ROM: Text and Performance Archive,* and her research agenda focuses on the uses of digital technologies in documenting, teaching and researching dramatic performance history. Kirwan (who blogs at *The Bardathon*) and whose research focuses on Shakespeare collaboration and apocrypha, was an associate editor of Jonathan Bate's and Eric Rasmussen's *Collaborative Plays by Shakespeare and Others* (2013).[2]

Carson and Kirwan are to be commended for the book's excellent organization and thematic integrity. The book is divided into two broad themes, each of which is subdivided into two further parts and framed with their own introductions by Carson or Kirwan (while both supply the conclusion). Their stated intention with this scheme was to afford readers the option to read the book according to interest (much like one would on a website) rather than sequentially (though what effect this would have on their "carefully constructed argument" they don't say). Parts one and two are dedicated to "defining current digital scholarship and practice," first by examining "Shakespeare research in the digital age" (10-55), and then by considering "Shakespeare pedagogy in the digital age" (57-112). The second half of the book sets about "redefining the boundaries and practices of Shakespeare studies online" by looking at "publishing and academic identity" (127-186) and then through "communication and performance" (187-257).

Interestingly, the four essays ostensibly on "Shakespeare research in the digital age" are really more about defining digital humanities in general, with only tangential references to Shakespearean texts or digital projects. John Lavagnino argues that what we have since 2008 been calling "digital humanities" actually has a much older history, with relevant literature emerging as early as 1973 with the first computer-assisted analysis of Shakespeare's plays. Bruce Smith's offering is a charming and even moving reflection on the importance of the physical book, especially for capturing the "pastness" in medieval and Renaissance texts. By contrast, Farah Karim-Cooper focuses specifically on the supplementary role of the iPad when researching and communicating about these time periods, while David McInnis describes the history of and remarkable collaborative research breakthroughs afforded by the *Lost Plays Database*.

For the section on pedagogy, Erin Sullivan stresses that when planning the physical and online course offerings of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-Upon-Avon, content and outcomes are the primary considerations, with digital tools being of secondary or tertiary concern. Sarah Grandage and Julie Sanders look at the online potentialities for the global "brand" of Shakespeare, particularly in terms of the 2012 "Globe to Globe" festival which saw the venerable theater host thirty-seven productions from around the world, many in languages other than English. Next, Sheila Cavanagh and Kevin Quarmby continue in this international vein by offering their positive experiences with Transatlantic pedagogy, in which actor-scholar Quarmby, Skyping from London, co-taught a "Shakespeare in Performance" course with Cavanagh at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Finally, Kirwan shares his own use of blogs and wikis in the classroom, noting their value for personal reflection in a "post-consensus society" (105), and for challenging, albeit to a deliberately constrained extent, traditional notions of authority and the hierarchization of knowledge.

In between parts one and two, a "half time...pause for reflection" by Sharon O'Dair cautions against a thoughtless embrace of digital technologies and media, given their origin in massive, market-driven corporations, and the concomitant neoliberal orientation of institutions of higher learning, both of which, she says, threaten true scholarship.

Kirwan introduces the section on "redefining boundaries and practices" by observing that it is problematic for institutions to take ownership of Shakespeare in the digital age, when his identity as "person and text" is debatable, as is that of the blogging and podcasting academic him/herself (129). No less disruptive, argues Katherine Rowe, has been the instability wrought by the shift, especially in classrooms, to digital texts, and the sheer unpredictability of content to which students may be referring (videos, Facebook, etc.). Peter Holland explores the virtues of virtual communities, highlighting his own experiences with the SHAKSPER listerv, while Sylvia Morris advises arts organizations to loosen their grip on online assets (e.g., low-resolution images) so that they may be shared by users.

This section also includes one of two chapters of most obvious interest to the authorship scholar: Eleanor Collins's "Unlocking scholarship in Shakespeare studies: Gatekeeping, guardianship and open access journal publications." It opens with the controversy over Roland Emmerich's 2011 film, *Anonymous*, then frankly criticizes the Shakespeare academy for its restrictive, insular, and exclusive gatekeeping, before discussing how new online, open-access models of scholarly discourse are challenging it (favorably mentioning *Brief Chronicles* twice in the process). While she does not address the authorship question directly, she closes with the provocative "central question of what Shakespeare scholarship will be in the future: Whether it chooses to occupy an embattled centre, or to question received truths and in doing so open the way for fresh readings and critical paradigms" (141-142).

The final section on "communication and performance" also includes the impacts of *Anonymous,* and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's "unashamedly evangelical" (195) campaign against it, which authors Paul Edmondson and A.J. Leon—in a decidedly galling and self-aggrandizing rhetorical flourish—characterize as "championing freedom and democracy" (193). According to the authors, the Trust's approach to its much-pilloried "60 Minutes with Shakespeare" website consisted of "break[ing] down the assault on Shakespeare into *soluble spoonfuls for the general public*" (199, emphasis added). The tone is unabashedly, and revealingly, patronizing.

Ryan Nelson then discusses the Globe's online outreach (including its "Adopt an Actor") while Stephen Purcell explores digital broadcasts of live performances offered by the Globe, BBC, the National Theatre, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, as well as more innovative digital performances, including a *Romeo and Juliet* performed exclusively on Twitter and other social media. Carson then delivers the penultimate essay, asking what is the role of the expert or in this new, unmediated world? To what extent can order be re-established when postmodern conceptions of "truth" expressed via digital media threaten all coherence?

The answer, as provided by herself and Kirwan, is both inconclusive and complex: The amateur scholar may appear to have equal access to audiences, but the system still favors large, corporately owned information sources and institutions. At the same time, in this new environment the audience must now to some extent participate in the conversation; passivity is no longer entirely possible or desirable.

For all of their cautious enthusiasm about the potentialities of digital

technologies and media in the study, teaching and performance of Shakespeare, the editors and many of the contributors are clearly conflicted and anxious about what the liberating and leveling forces unleashed by digital publishing portend, when it is no longer possible to exclude or ignore the voices of the amateur scholar, student or audience.

To some extent these tensions should have been anticipated and pre-empted by the editors via a broader interdisciplinary engagement, in particular with reference to literature from the philosophy of technology. Surely they should have recognized that Shakespeareans are not the only practitioners facing these issues and asking these questions. Instead, many of the contributors appear to spin about in their own orbits, pursuing rhetorical questions for which answers (or at least more original and fruitful lines of inquiry) exist had they but looked beyond their narrowly defined fields. However, as will be shown, those answers would have been decidedly discomfiting.

Theory: From Focaltechnic to Pragmatechnic Shakespeare Studies

What the editors and authors of *SATDW* apparently failed to understand or address is that their questions and problem statements are among the oldest foundational themes in the philosophy of technology. As Albert Borgmann puts it in his classic *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984), these concerns are described as *instrumentalist*, *substantive*, or *pluralist* views:

> Is technology a powerful instrument in the service of our values, a force in its own right that threatens our essential welfare, or is there no clear problem of technology at all, merely an interplay of numerous and variable tendencies?[3]

Accordingly, the instrumentalists *in SATDW* describe how digital media can be put to use by themselves or their organizations to fill a need or solve a particular problem (e.g., Edmondson and Leon); the substantivists warn that digital technologies threaten the nature and future of scholarship (e.g., O'Dair), while the pluralists (e.g., Sullivan) adopt no particular position on the matter, seeing technology as just one consideration among many.

Borgmann expands upon this foundation with what he calls "focal things and practices": those objects around which we are engaged socially and to which we direct our attention, and the social practices we build around them (e.g., a meal and its preparation and consumption). In an advanced technological society, as machinery becomes more sophisticated and its processes hidden from us (or as Lewis Mumford would have it, "etherealized") the practices around that thing erode and it becomes merely a commodity which is procured, e.g., a Big Mac.[4,5]

Again, we see this concern reflected in *SATDW*, for example with Rowe's discussion of students' response to digital texts: The focal thing (text) has long had particular social practices built around it (book-based pedagogies) which are changing as the text has etherealized and been transformed into a commodity.

In his explication of focal things and practices, Lawrence Haworth refines Borgmann's ideas further by identifying some practices which are "guarding" and others that are aimed at "internal goods." The first he likens to religion, the second to arts and crafts: that in the first instance God (or the object of devotion) is independent of the practices built around Him/Her, while a particular work of fine art cannot be physically created without the traditions and the practice of that craft.[6] In the case of guarding practices,

> [T]he thing is in the care of the practice. This involves that the thing has significance apart from the practices by which it is guarded, but is, shall we say, fragile, at least under modern conditions, and so needs the practice to preserve it.[7]

But adds,

> The tie to external realities is never so strong that tradition and history play no role in determining the shape of the goods internal to a practice. This follows from the very idea of a practice.[8]

To address this reality, Haworth proposes a *synthetic* model, in which it is not possible to distinguish between the excellence of the object of the practice, and the nature of the practice itself: that if a practice too slavishly follows tradition and does not adapt to changing conditions, then the realization of the object with which it is concerned will suffer.[9]

At this point we are obviously beyond any of the analysis to be found in *SATDW*; yet, using an anti-Stratfordian lens the implications coalesce rapidly: that orthodox Stratfordian Shakespeare scholarship is a "guarding practice" dedicated to an "object of devotion" shaped by its practice but which is, indeed, fragile under modern (digital) conditions, and is seeking to preserve it. At the same time, the academy's slavish adherence to tradition and refusal to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions wrought by digital technologies is, for all practical purposes, etherealizing its focal object.

The alternative, according to Larry Hickman, is to utilize technologies in a more constructive and analytical way, one which can help us identify and set aside those things and practices which no longer serve their intended purpose. He finds Borgmann's theory (which he dubs "focaltechnics") wanting, calling instead for a *pragmatechnic* view, which, derived from the pragmatism of John Dewey

> is a thoroughgoing program of problem solving that involves analysis, testing and production: production of new tools, new habits, new values, new ends in view, and, to use Borgmann's phrase, even new "focal things and practices." Pragmatechnics thus takes up a matter that appears to be absent in focaltechnics, that is *how we come by focal things and practices in the first place*. [It] argues that if technology is to be responsible then it must

be able to test our focal things and practices...that we sometimes need to examine our enthusiasms, aesthetic experiences, and sympathies and to subject them to tests of relevance and fruitfulness and...reject the ones that are unproductive because they are based on what is merely personal or sectarian.[10]

The closest we come in *SATDW* to Hickman's pragmatechnics is Collins's plea to use digital media "to question received truths and in doing so open the way for fresh readings and critical paradigms" (141-142). What is missing, however, is the acknowledgement that the engagement with focal things is a social process, and that developing such new paradigms would require orthodox scholars to connect honestly with their ideological antagonists to generate new knowledge through dialogue. A pragmatechnic approach to Shakespeare studies, then, would be open to testing its assumptions and practices, and rejecting those which are "unproductive"—something desperately needed under the dominant Stratfordian orthodoxy.

Carson's and Kirwan's recognition of the new age of audience agency and participation is a partial step in this direction, but again lacks external support to develop the argument to its necessary conclusion. They unwittingly echo communications studies scholar Henry Jenkins, who, in his *Convergence Culture* (2006), argues that new digital media are changing the relationship between cultural producers and consumers, and unleashing and stimulating the collective intelligence of audiences to reshape cultural products as part of a "participatory culture":

> Consumption has become a collective process and that's what I mean...by collective intelligence...None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture.[11]

Lacking as they do any reference to Jenkins's work on "convergence culture," there is an inadequate appreciation on the part of the editors for the potential of this "collective intelligence" to not just affect the practices of Shakespeare scholarship, but to "pragmatechnically" alter social reality itself. Yet, as the University of Wyoming's Ali Raddaoui states:

> Web 2.0 actors are somehow controlling the means of intellectual, cultural and technological production. These actors are creating new knowledge, technological and otherwise, and...[b]ecause of the mass, connectedness and methods of operation of these actors, it is suggested that the democratizing power of Web 2.0 extends beyond offering forums, channels and gadgets for self and collective expression, adjudicating truth and writing popularly-validated, parallel versions of history and thought. Ability to describe and

comment on reality and to prepare a 'generic', non-expertly written version of truth, is strongly associated with the traditional exercise of democracy. The novelty of Web 2.0 may be that its actors are capable of impacting and transforming socio-political realities in ways unfolding right before our eyes…This consensus seems to be imposed by a newly-empowered majority in possession of the tools of production and change afforded by Web 2.0, and it is giving birth to new realities on the ground…redefining the world, and changing social reality.[12]

This brings us to the most problematic aspect of *SATDW*, and one that appears to be quite subconscious on the part of the editors and contributors: They share a profound lack of coherence regarding the focal thing that is Shakespeare himself, and an unspoken fear of the power of Web 2.0 to define it without reference to their expertise.

A reader wholly unfamiliar with Shakespeare could be forgiven for coming away from this book unaware that the word "Shakespeare" referred to an actual person, a writer who existed and created within a particular historical-political context and social and creative milieu. Instead, we learn that Shakespeare is a "cultural phenomenon" (30); a "commodity of the heritage industry" (133); a "brand" (75); a "global cultural field" (84); and even, more ineffably, a "cultural concept" (239). A sole passing reference on page 246 to "Shakespeare's grammar school" aside, any sense of using these tools to seek an identifiable author is all but absent; in a book dedicated to virtual practices, the sheer virtuality of its ostensible object is indeed remarkable. The book's cover art—featuring a highly pixelated, formless reproduction of the Droeshout portrait—is, ironically, most apropos.

More remarkable still is that this lacuna co-exists with a frank—and for the most part surprisingly restrained and respectful—conversation about the "Shakespeare authorship discussion," as it is referred to here. Aside from a cryptic reference by Kirwan to "conspiracy hubs" (61), as well as his frustration that online comments in mainstream media articles on Shakespeare often get "hijacked" by anti-Stratfordians (249-250), the existence of the Shakespeare Authorship Question is accepted as part of the landscape, its adherents tacitly included under the banner "Shakespearean."

Which makes all the more inexcusable what must have been a deliberate decision on the part of the editors to exclude anti-Strafordian voices. There are no equivalent contributions from the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition about its online campaigns, no discussion of the *Declaration of Reasonable Doubt,* no chapter from the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, no references to the popularity of Keir Cutler's videos, nothing about Hank Whittemore's methodical online list of "100 Reasons Why Oxford Was Shakespeare," or Roger Stritmatter's scholarly and often humorous "Shake-Speare's Bible" site. There is absolutely no sense at all that the Authorship Question—and the case for Edward de Vere in particular—has seen an explosion of vitality, influence and supporters over the past twenty years with the emergence of the World Wide Web and social media. The gatekeeping critiqued by Collins is, ironically, on full display.

Conclusion

SATDW is, indeed, a "carefully constructed argument," one that scrupulously avoids what, in the light of selected theories from the philosophy of technology, is the most significant digital development of all: That there is, in fact, a pragmatechnic revolution underway in Shakespeare studies, but one in which Stratfordians are playing no role, leaving the field entirely in the hands of anti-Stratfordians willing to use digital tools to examine, consider and discard obsolete focal things and practices in favor of those which bear more fruit.

Had *Shakespeare and the Digital World* been better grounded in these philosophies, the editors and contributors might have been more equipped to face what seems to me to be an inevitable conclusion: that the disruptive nature of these technologies and their ability to unleash our collective intelligence cannot help but reveal, undermine and erode the etherealized, virtual foundations of the field of orthodox Shakespeare studies. The center cannot hold when there is none.

Instead, the book sinks beneath the weight of its own insularity, exclusions, omissions and contradictions. That the seemingly limitless vistas afforded to us by new digital tools in understanding Shakespeare—the writer and his works as well as his place in our cultures —should instead elicit so circumscribed a response ultimately tells us more about the Shakespeare academy itself than it does about blogs, databases and wikis.

Endnotes

[1] For example, Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible, (which Roger Stritmatter studied for years in person at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and in so doing identified over a thousand underlinings and annotations, 246 of which strongly correlate with over 600 allusions in the works of Shakespeare), may now be viewed online by anyone searching the Folger Shakespeare Library website (Call number STC 2106).

[2] Reviewed by Ramon Jiménez in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter,* vol. 50 no. 4, 13-15.

[3] Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15.

[4] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations, and its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 112.

[5] Borgmann, 196-210.

[6] Lawrence Haworth, "Focal Things and Focal Practices," *Technology and the Good Life?* eds. Eric Higgs, Andrew Light, David Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 59-62.

[7] *Ibid,* 60.

[8] *Ibid,* 66.

[9] *Ibid,* 63-64.

[10] Larry Hickman, "Focaltechnics, Pragmatechnics and the Reform of Technology," *Technology and the Good Life?* 95-96 (emphasis added).

[11] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4.

[12] Ali Raddaoui, "Democratization of Knowledge and the Promise of Web 2.0: A Historical Perspective," *Proceedings of the 11th European Conference on e-Learning,* 2012, 440.