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Reality in Shakespeare and the Digital World [A Review by John Sievers of *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan]

Part of the journal section “Forum: Shakespeare Alive Cluster”

Carson, Christie and Peter Kirwan eds. *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.

Reviewed by John Sievers. “Reality in *Shakespeare and the Digital World*”

The collection of essays edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan, *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, came to me at a pertinent moment. I started reading it after I had pushed a squeaky-wheeled cart full of twenty-eight iPads to class, then used a document camera displaying my iPad and fingers to show the class how to search a database. Later that day, I also observed a student use a smartphone-based online dictionary app to hear how to pronounce Ceres. The student then used his new knowledge to further a group discussion about scansion in lines from Ariel’s masque in *The Tempest*.

Teaching Shakespeare at Rochester Community and Technical College, in Rochester, MN, I don’t take nearly enough time to consider big questions like the ones Carson and Kirwan set out to contemplate in this volume. The collection of essays considers “whether Shakespeare studies is acting on or reacting to technology” and “whether scholarship and practice are leading or following technological innovations” (1). Ultimately, this book is rooted in the concept that the current state of Shakespeare studies is fundamentally different from its pre-digital incarnation.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first two parts focus on describing the current state of digital scholarship and practice for research and pedagogy, while parts three and four look forward to the theorization of identity, publishing, communication, and performance online. The volume also includes an essay by a “conscientious objector to the entire debate” (6), Sharon O’Dare.

This text provides practical examples and theorizations of how Shakespeare operates in the digital world by revealing several important fulcrums of tension: authority/celebrity, permanence/transience, gatekeeping/accessibility, stability/fluidity, and literature/science. For instance, considering the authority/celebrity fulcrum, Carson and Kirwan conclude, “The participation of the ‘amateur’ across these [digital] platforms...can develop an authority in

electronic discourse based on activity and an independent branded identity,” and they further suggest that this process “can mean a push towards the lowest common denominator” (255).

David McInnis points to the digital problems of permanence and transience when he states that, “The permanence of online resources is frequently and mistakenly taken as a given,” but then defends the worth of the digital Lost Plays Database (<http://lostplays.org>) since the “subject matter stands to benefit from the input and unique knowledge of a vast array of individuals” (43) that a digital platform allows.

The problems of the gatekeeping/accessibility issue are addressed by Stephen Purcell, as when he contemplates new digital performance spaces and the manner in which they work to construct ideas of “liveness.” Purcell concludes that “the illusion of infinite choice may well belie the forces of coercion and manipulation which steer that choice” (222). This idea suggests that the digital promise of open access and democratization is false.

Describing her inability to order a single text for her class, Katherine Rowe touched on how digital fluidity could lead to at least one positive outcome: “un-editing.” Rowe shows how the lack of one stable text lead her students to become more critical of their texts as multiple glosses in different editions called themselves into question (148).

Sharon O’Dair questions the validity of the digital humanities by positing that intellectual work is falling victim to corporate and capitalist models (117) as she suggests that digitization of literature helps speed up a scientization of the field (123). O’Dair’s thoughts, located in the volume’s “Half-time” section, ironically a location in sporting events that is heavily commercialized, resists the digital by embracing the “creation of powerfully styled writing” (124).

I should disclose that my thoughts about *Shakespeare and the Digital World* are based on an examination of an “analogue” version of the text. One of the many binaries this text establishes is the digital/analogue opposition. In a 05 June 2014 announcement on SHAKSPER (<http://tinyurl.com/l3n2a65>), Hardy M. Cook gleefully proclaims, “I bought it for my Kindle today. The hardcover and paperback are scheduled for publication on July 31, 2014.”

The preexistence of the digital version of the text connects with Karim-Cooper’s description of a young historian using “mobile technology in her search for a medieval past” who “brandished her iPad in front of the camera, juxtaposing photographic images of the real objects themselves in the various archives she visited, placing the past and present side by side” (40). Karim-Cooper later refers to this anecdote naming the medieval manuscript in question “real” in contrast to the present “digital” iPad version. Karim-Cooper aligns the “real” with “analogue” in the analogue/digital opposition and provokes a question about which version of *Shakespeare and the Digital World* is real.

I’m led to wonder, based on her alignment of primacy with both real and analogue, whether the electronic version of *Shakespeare and the Digital World* is the “real” text and my analogue copy is something I should hold up next to a screen to supplement my digital experience or vice

versa. Perhaps, based on the assumption of this volume that the digital world shapes the way we read, think, and even remember, I would have entirely different ideas about this text if I encountered it in a digital form. As I read this book, it repeatedly leads me to similar provocative questions.

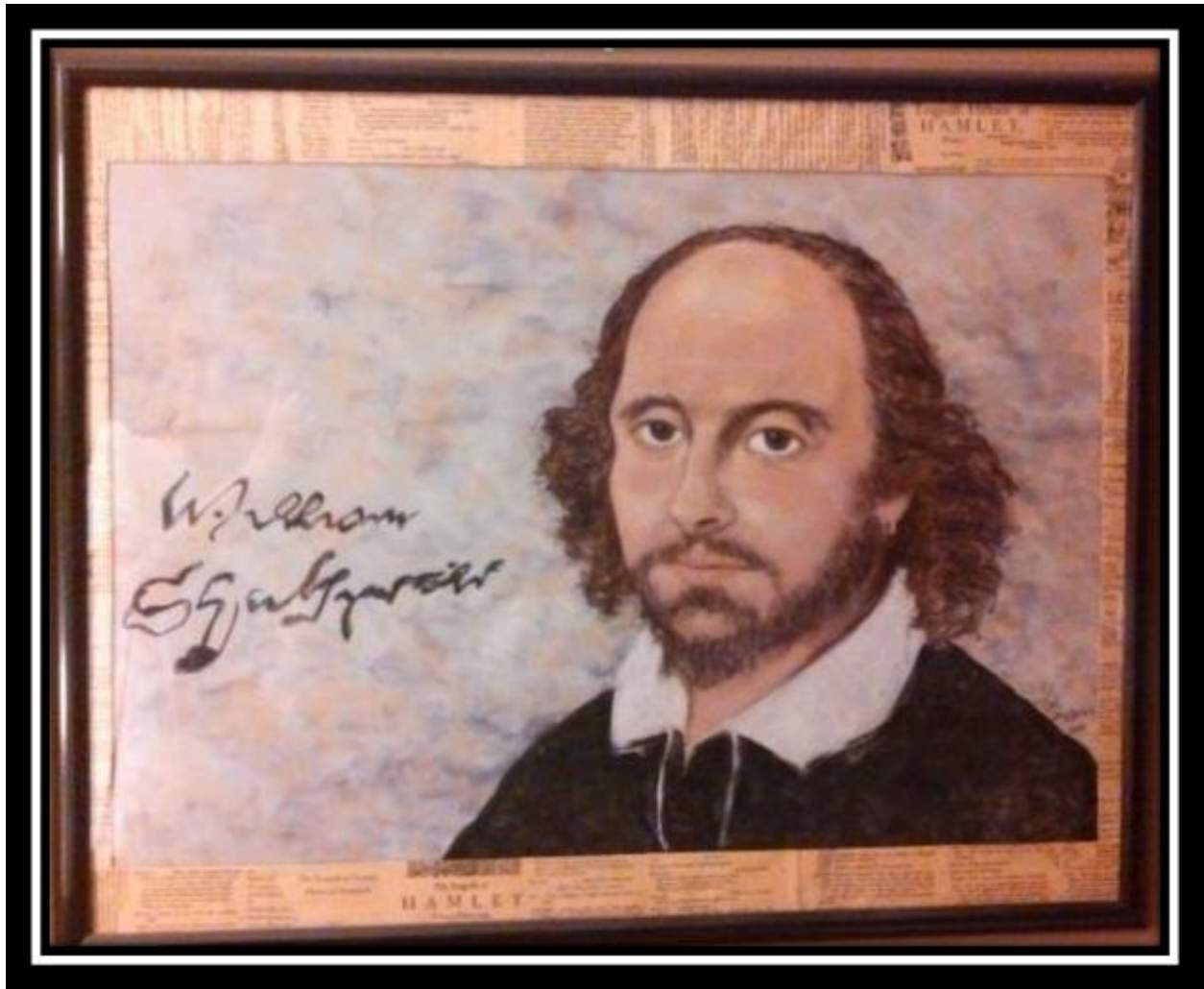
At times, these sorts of questions are created by entertaining anecdotes, such as Bruce R. Smith's description of finding a 400-year old printer's hair in Scaliger's *Poetics* at the Huntington Library (26). Through this experience, Smith muses about the way digital resources like Early English Books Online have superseded the slower and more social, yet perhaps fuller, scholarship demanded in physical libraries. Ultimately, Smith argues that "the ideal state of knowledge...is one that combines the accessibility and search capability of electronic texts with the multidimensionality of the books and manuscripts that the digital images represent" (30).

This review, published in an online journal, is part of the digital landscape that the volume in question explores. Kirwan notes that we live in an age when "information is generated by anyone with access to a keyboard" (60), and O'Dair suggests that the digital world fosters "learning, based in forgetting" (121). To some, this review may be symptomatic of these charges, but *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, though primarily presenting the digital world's positive potential, tackles important questions and provides a critical look at what exactly Shakespearean scholarship can and should be in a digital age.



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Will the Wordsmith

“Will the Wordsmith” (2012)—Vicki Simpson—chalk pastel on 21” x 27” velour paper encased in torn book pages from *Hamlet* (Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet, 2006), with a provenance of Cedar Falls, IA. Operating out of my reactions to an ephemeral world around me—a world permeated with texture, chiaroscuro, and juxtaposition—I pursue an expression of nuanced articulation wherein I utilize visual, verbal, and auditory cues to create a sensual, tactile, multifaceted work. This piece investigates my interests in the mystical origins of chance, passion, beauty, and fluidity.