

"Ol' Billy Shakes": Shakespeare in the Blogosphere

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Abstract

This essay examines the presence of Shakespeare on weblogs — from glancing references to sustained political engagement — to argue that blogging's performative and collaborative nature makes political blogs that evoke Shakespeare, in particular, ideologically comparable to the early modern theater itself.

In a 1956 article from *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Emmett Avery begins his discussion of the Shakespeare Ladies Club by claiming that:

Everyone knows, one phase of the appreciation and, sometimes, adoration of Shakespeare has been the literary or study club, whose members, responsive to his beauties, have enriched their minds and emotions by reading his works or elevated his reputation by spreading his fame beyond their own circle. (Avery 1956, 153)

Commenting on the reputation of Shakespeare a little over forty years later, Gary Taylor argues, to the contrary, that Shakespeare's omnipotence is "shrinking," as fewer people dedicate themselves to the cult of Shakespeare in the same vein as Shakespeare's ladies did. Indeed, Taylor predicts that "the number of people attending to Shakespeare, the intensity of their attention, the frequency and complexity of their appropriations, will inevitably diminish" (Taylor 1999, 205). In this Afterword, Taylor also dismisses Shakespeare on the Internet as merely "provid[ing] an alternative way to satisfy the existing Bard market" (Taylor 1999, 198). By contrast, Terence Hawkes (1992 and 2002) argues for the relevance of Shakespeare in the present by providing examples from significant historical moments and arguing for their respective relationships to the bard's works and to early modern experience. According to Hawkes, "a criticism more responsive to its opportunities (or demands) must be one whose roots in and connections with the here and the now are fully and actively sought, deliberately foregrounded, exploited as a first principle" (2002, 21). In laying the foundation for his argument for presentism, Hawkes asserts that "facts and texts [. . .] don't simply speak, don't merely mean. We speak, we mean, *by them*" (3, italics in original). My main

focus in this study is the effect that blogs, in terms of presentism, have on Shakespeare's image and cultural function. I will highlight a small sampling of sites that, moving beyond bard-bashing and bardolatry, engage with Shakespeare in more substantive ways. When viewed through the lens of presentism, Shakespeare's presence on a variety of blogs suggests his continuing influence as a cultural touchstone.¹ The essay concludes that although Shakespeare serves a number of rhetorical purposes in this medium, the phenomenon of presentism accounts particularly for the somewhat surprising, but persistent, evocation of Shakespeare by politically-motivated blogging communities. The connection suggests as well an ideological parallel between the politics of blogging and of the early modern theater

The Performance of Blogging

Blogs, which began to appear on the Internet around 1997, are web-based collections of articles ranging from one writer's personal diary to sites with multiple contributors, each format allowing readers to express their opinions through online postings.² The typically informal nature of blog postings, the optional inclusion of images and multimedia files, and the conversational quality of reader comments make this forum inherently performative, a hybrid of oral and written communication. By using the term "performative" to describe this rhetoric, I refer not only to the non-textual aspects of blogging such as audio and images, but also to the construction of a virtual identity through authorial style. Many bloggers, as well as responders, create personae that they present on their blogs, in a way that recalls Judith Butler's conception of gender-as-a-construct (Butler 1993).

Butler's definition of performative identity, within the contexts of hate speech and gender construction, takes as its point of departure J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), which had argued that language was not merely descriptive, but capable of action. While Austin "distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of speech, between actions that are performed by virtue of words, and those that are performed as a consequence of words" (Butler 1997, 44), as Butler cautions, this "distinction is tricky, and not always stable" (44); in either instance, a performance takes place because of words. Butler then complicates Austin's concept of performatives — utterances, such as "I now pronounce you man and wife," that perform the actions they describe — by considering the power that language has to incite certain actions, which occur as a consequence of words. In trying to locate the force of performance, Butler argues that "performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power" (1993, 225). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that the power of the judicial system, for instance, stems

precisely from the performative nature of language (i.e., a judge delivers a sentence to a defendant, and the sentence is then carried out). In building a case for sexuality-as-performance, Butler also draws on the work of Jacques Derrida, contending that in the case of sexual identity, "performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (Butler 1993, 95). Thus, in Butler's view language constructs identity through reiterated verbal performance that gives utterances an authoritative status. To this extent, rhetorical performance is also always politicized.

Butler's account of performativity fits well the activity of blogging and will help to account for the genre's connection with political as well as literary enterprises. Despite blogging's status as a subcultural phenomenon, it encourages its own set of norms that define the blogosphere as a community, such as linking and commenting. Applying Butler's highly politicized sense of performance to blogging also seems appropriate insofar as bloggers use language to represent their respective identities and to establish their ethos, a performance that depends upon the existence of the blogosphere as institution, just as a judge's puissance relies on the judicial system. Furthermore, the blog is not only more performative as a forum than its online counterparts, such as the discussion board or chat room, but it is also more public as a website that can be accessed globally by anyone with an Internet connection, whereas the other outlets are limited to a specific group. Even if those groups are large in number, they still require access into that specific community, most commonly through a registration or subscription process. Blogs, however, do not discriminate with a members-only policy; anyone with Internet access can read and comment on postings anonymously.³

Not only do blogs provide easy access for readers and commentators, but they are also user-friendly for writers and performers. Free services such as LiveJournal and Blogger allow all persons with Internet access to publish their work online; these outlets require no knowledge of web-based languages or coding. Thanks to its accessibility, blogging has boomed over a relatively short period of time. According to Rebecca Blood (2000), twenty-three blogs existed in early 1999; a recent visit to Technorati.com revealed an estimated twenty-eight million blogs in its search base. In addition to its rapid growth, blogging has also undergone a shift in demographics. In the beginning, most bloggers were twenty-something men; now, an overwhelming percentage of bloggers are teenaged girls (LiveJournal 2006).⁴ A defining feature of blogs that encourages readership and community is the ability to link to other blogs. This interconnectedness in the world of blogging constitutes the blogosphere, a rapidly growing community.

Finding Shakespeare in the Blogosphere

Most references to Shakespeare within blogs — a passing reference here and there, an imitation of the bard's language, or a flurry of frustration over a term paper — support Taylor's assessment that Shakespeare has "become, like caviar, familiar to the General but arcane in the ranks" (Taylor 1999, 202). A few bloggers "in the ranks" even appear hostile to Shakespeare, complaining about having to write papers on the plays and questioning his relevance to the twenty-first century.⁵ At worst, "Shakespeare's own good words are planted in fewer memories than they once were" (Taylor 1999, 202); at best, we can remark, with Valerie Traub, on "how omnipresent and how dispersed a figure of cultural authority 'Shakespeare' has become" (Traub 1993, 159)

A closer analysis, however, suggests that Shakespeare is not only alive and well in the blogosphere, but that his presence there satisfies a range of rhetorical needs. Given the sheer volume of blogs and primary users, Shakespeare's presence in this realm may be difficult to parse. A general search for "Shakespeare" resulted in 211,290 posts on February 7, 2006 (Technorati 2006). While Shakespearean posts appear to make up a small percentage of the staggering number of blogs, the bard receives far more attention than any of his contemporaries or later literary writers. For example, a recent search on Technorati.com produced the following numbers: 5,192 for "Leo Tolstoy," 43,395 for "Mark Twain," 1,666 for "Christopher Marlowe," 1,106 for "Ben Jonson," and 116 for "Thomas Middleton."⁶ What constitutes a "Shakespeare" hit in the blogosphere varies greatly from site to site. After sorting through hundreds of postings, I found that "Shakespeare" hits in this forum included everything from a passing quote to a full-blown fan club, and a lot in between. One blogger merely complains repeatedly about reading Shakespeare's plays for an English class, while yet another site simply selects certain Shakespearean sonnets as "beautiful" (Blogger 2006). Even with refined search engines, it is difficult to pin down the exact number of Shakespeare-only blogs in existence.

For this study, therefore, I limited my search to Technorati, the self-proclaimed "authority on what's going on in the world of weblogs" and used "Shakespeare" as my search term ("About Technorati" 2006).⁷ Beginning with the substantial number of hits provided by Technorati and disregarding the praise-and-blame sites, I have divided the blogs that refer to Shakespeare into four distinct categories: non-academic work, non-academic analysis, academic humor, and politically-motivated discourse.

The first blog that I encountered, The True Shakespeare Community, is representative of those sites that feature non-academic work. This particular community boasts 274 members, with 251 persons having posting privileges. The moderator's welcome to visitors, on its face, seems guilty of bardolatry:

Welcome to the Shakespeare Community. Basically . . . this is the place to proclaim your undying love of anything Shakespeare, post your favorite quotes, tell us about what you're doing Shakespeare-wise (for you actors) . . . yeah. Basically . . . anything that has to do with ol' Billy Shakes. (The True Shakespeare Community 2006)

Nevertheless, the community's members, who range from high-school students to aspiring actors, take their Shakespeare seriously. One member recently posted a school-related project in which she rewrote *Twelfth Night* as a prose piece from Viola's point-of-view, while another member requested advice on how to play Rosalind in an upcoming production of *As You Like It*. In both instances, fellow bloggers offered feedback to these posts, which were then answered by the blogger in need of advice, sparking a constructive dialogue between members. While The True Shakespeare Community's welcome suggests a mere celebration of all things Shakespeare, the blog serves more as an informal participatory forum for people who engage and work with Shakespeare outside of academia.

In a similar vein, although Duane Morin's Such Shakespeare Stuff blog simply invites visitors to join in a dialogue about Shakespeare, the site is more serious than it seems at first glance. A self-described "computer geek [. . .] [who] also happens to be a big Shakespeare geek," Morin establishes his identity as an admirer of Shakespeare, not a scholar. The content of Morin's postings runs the gamut, from sharing links to Shakespeare websites to discussing his for-pleasure readings of Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2005) and Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998); this type of informal analysis occurs repeatedly on Such Shakespeare Stuff (Morin 2006). Morin's site does not receive as much traffic as the community-centered blogs, but the dialogue between blogger and commentator still takes place, exemplifying the type of blog that features "non-academic analysis."⁸ These bloggers, although more interested in discussion than practical feedback, are nevertheless intellectually engaged with Shakespeare.

While a few of the Shakespeare bloggers in my searches, such as Morin, do not have academic ties, many are members of the academy and make a point of establishing their identity within that community, even when the blog is primarily humorous. For example, on Shaksper Random, the stated purpose is "a Shakespeare community . . . for the fans. There are more than enough academic-style Shakespeare discussion communities, but what about fandom-style?" (2006). Yet the subtitle for this site is: "where academics go to blow off steam." Many of the one hundred members of this community self-identify as "academics" or "graduate students," as they attribute "HA HA HA! Marlowe's my bitch!" to a Shakespeare caricature on the homepage and rewrite *Hamlet* à la *South*

Park, with a wink and a nudge (Shaksper Random 2006). In other words, this blog appears to be where Shakespeareans go to play, but in a manner that welcomes fans to join in the fun.

Finally, Shakespeare's presence in politically-motivated blogs — a category much different than the blogs discussed above — suggests that Shakespeare's cultural "dispersion" signifies not so much the steady decline of his reputation, as Taylor and Traub claim, as a shift in his cultural function. In spite of suffering possible professional setbacks for expressing controversial opinions, many bloggers persevere for particular causes. One grass-roots site, in particular, claims to be "a progressive political blog for all manner of punditry, analysis, and complaint"; the name of this "progressive political blog" is Shakespeare's Sister (2006). Taking on politically-charged issues such as abortion rights, the blog is unapologetic in its rhetoric and invites heated debates. The nature of these debates sometimes turns ugly as commentators resort to name-calling and grandstanding, but the moderators do not discourage this sort of behavior, for they clearly celebrate freedom of speech. Using coarse and informal language to discuss politically-charged issues would never happen in a traditional media forum, such as the evening news, but this tactic is the norm on Shakespeare's Sister.⁹ Freedom from convention represents one of blogging's major appeals to its audience.

From Early Modern Theater to the Blogosphere

While the name of Shakespeare's Sister evokes primarily Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (2005), it may be argued that blogging, as a performance, does share important qualities with Shakespearean drama, and that these shared qualities may be in play when his name is evoked by political blogs. The particularly irreverent mood that characterizes both Shakespearean drama and blogging links their political dimensions to the phenomenon of carnival. While Michael Bristol (1985) has described the role of carnival in Shakespearean drama, the term fits the ritual of blogging equally well because many bloggers write from the fringes, attacking mainstream news sources, the government, and other agents of the controlling ideology (Bristol 1985; Farrell 2005). In fact, the need for a carnivalesque release after September 11 contributed to blogging's rise in American culture. Many blog analysts point to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent boom of "warblogs" as major turning points in the prominence of blogs in American popular culture (Glover 2006). As blogging's popularity grew, the focus shifted from coping with the trauma of terrorist attacks to advocating change (Glover 2006). Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner concur in their article, stating that "blogs have not always been political, but post 9/11 the phenomenon of Warblogging appears to be trumping the simple diary format. More blogs than ever are being created to deal with specific political positions and alternative media sources than

ever before" (Kahn and Kellner 2003, 13). In "New Media and Internet Activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to Blogging," Kahn and Kellner argue that "bloggers have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention" (Kahn and Kellner 2004, 91). Blogging's power as a political force to be reckoned with became evident as well with the resignation of Trent Lott as Senate Majority Leader in late 2002. After the major news agencies buried his racist comments, a barrage of blogging began, demanding his resignation. Many view Lott's case as the first political victory for blogs and also point to blogging's role in the 2004 presidential campaign. During this campaign, bloggers contested Dan Rather's report on President Bush's military record, which led to the long-time anchor's resignation (Glover 2006).¹⁰ In both cases, bloggers exposed the mainstream media's mistakes, while establishing their own ethos. Due to these successes, blogging as a powerful political tool is now not limited to grass-roots bloggers within a confined community, but enjoys a growing recognition from the mainstream media and both major political parties.¹¹

At the same time, both the Internet and early theater have been subject to censorship. In a 2005 *Business Week* article focusing on the potential profits advertisers may make off of blogging in China, Bruce Einhorn and Heather Green highlight the fact that censorship is an important consideration of the Chinese marketplace. They explain that "the limits are clear. Chinese bloggers can't promote the banned Falun Gong religious movement, advocate Taiwanese independence, or call for China's withdrawal from Tibet — and the government is remarkably good at keeping such thoughts out of China's blogosphere" (Einhorn and Green 2005, 42-43). The Chinese government censors its citizens through a partnership with the handful of companies that provide blogging space. These companies use filters to block certain words or phrases, such as "democracy" (Einhorn and Green 2005). This article focuses on the filters used by Chinese companies, but Western-controlled businesses, like Google, also follow a similar protocol by limiting online searches. The scope of this censorship appears to make it "a productive form of power" (Butler 1997, 133). As Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech*, "the mechanism of censorship is not only actively engaged in the production of subjects, but also in circumscribing the social parameters of speakable discourse, of what will and will not be admissible in public discourse" (Butler 1997, 132).

An early-modern corollary to the experience of contemporary Chinese bloggers might be the censure of Ben Jonson, John Marston, and George Chapman over their collaborative comedy *Eastward Ho*. Under the reign of King James I, the playwrights received prison time over anti-Scottish sentiments expressed in the play. Trying to make sense of such politically-motivated censorship requires a foregrounding of the historicity of the here and now, inviting a

presentist approach. Materialist critics have long seen in Shakespeare's plays, and in early modern drama generally, the power to subvert political structures. According to Steven Mullaney, "the public playhouses were not a minor irritation to London." By virtue of their marginality, "they represented a threat to the political well-being and stability of the city" (Mullaney 1988, 53). Jonathan Dollimore, as well, posits that the drama was able "to demystify authority and even to subvert it" (1985, 7-8).

While the sweeping acts of Homeland Security are not exactly the Privy Council of 2006, the current culture of mistrust in the United States is comparable in relation to the reception that many bloggers receive in the workplace. According to a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a job search at a Midwestern liberal arts college took candidates' blogs into consideration before making a final decision (Tribble 2005). During the summer of 2006, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a series of articles dedicated to professors who blog. The impetus for this issue was Professor Juan Cole, a noted scholar of Middle Eastern and South Asian history at the University of Michigan and an avid blogger. The controversy concerning Cole began when he did not receive a tenure-track position at Yale University despite his qualifications and glowing recommendations. According to Daniel Drezner, "the combination of little to no comment from either Yale or Cole and the 'star chamber' politics of hiring at elite institutions has led to speculation that Cole's prominent, left-wing, take-no-prisoners blog played a role in his nonhiring" (Drezner 2006). Despite Drezner's inability to establish a conclusive case, his anxiety about academic blogging strongly echoes the anti-theatricalism of Renaissance England. Drezner suggests that "blogs and prestigious university appointments do not mix terribly well" because blogs can be used as "an outlet for unexpurgated, unreviewed, and occasionally unprofessional musings" (2006). He goes on to conjecture that "today's senior faculty members look at blogs the way a previous generation of academics looked at television — as a guilty, tawdry pleasure that should not be talked about in respectable circles" (2006). Drezner's characterization of blogging in the twenty-first century reflects the prejudice against the early modern stage as a site of corruption, devoid of credibility. Jean Howard examines the early modern response to this perceived corruption on the stage, and argues that antitheatricalism was prevalent in early modern England (Howard 19). In her analysis, she discusses tracts published during the period that decried the various moral dangers posed by the playhouses, such as challenging patriarchal order (Howard 1994). She contends that the pervasiveness of antitheatricalism was such that the tracts began to influence the playwrights and vice versa; in Howard's words, "all are informed by a discourses of theatricality" (47). This degree of anxiety, and of influence, provides yet another connection between Renaissance playwrights and contemporary bloggers.

Finally, blogs and Shakespearean theater can be seen as linked by their collaborative nature and democratic orientation. Despite the egocentric roots of blogs-as-diaries, which reflect the "print" of the Internet as "the technology of individualism" resulting from literacy, community building proves to be the lifeblood of blogs (McLuhan 1962, 158). According to Kahn and Kellner,

It is perhaps the new ability to syndicate one's blog that truly marks the blog subculture as a democratic and oppositional culture with which the mainstream must reckon. New blogs [. . .] daily log syndicated content and broadcast it globally to a diverse audience. This has resulted in a revolution in journalism in which subcultures of bloggers are continually posting and commenting upon news stories of particular interest to them, which are in turn found, read, and re-published by the global media. (2003)

Just as theater is an essentially collaborative art, so too is blogging dependent on the give-and-take of a group dynamic. Indeed, "to a Renaissance playwright, 'publication' meant presentation of the work to the public on a stage" (McDonald 2001, 196). Viewing the presentation in terms of publication speaks to the importance of the audience. Terence Hawkes posits that the early-modern audience "promote[d] a sense of 'communal identity' and became a part of the performance" (Hawkes 2002, 89). This idea of the audience being involved in the performance applies equally well to blogging; without an active audience, a blog cannot survive, for commentators are a necessary part of the experience (McLuhan 1962, 84).

Conclusion

Operating from the periphery distinguishes blogging from its online cousins such as Listservs and discussion boards, as it simultaneously mirrors the status of the playhouses during Shakespeare's time. In *Meaning By Shakespeare*, Hawkes argues that "for a culture to exist at all, and to be meaningful to itself, it will always need to establish principles of subordination, marginalization, and peripheralization" (Hawkes 1992, 140). In the political arena, blogs have clearly moved in on the mainstream media from the periphery. Likewise, the blogs devoted to Shakespeare subvert the traditional classroom discussions of Shakespeare for non-academics and academics alike.

My focus on American-based, English language blogs and the sheer volume of blogging both qualify my findings. This initial investigation of the implications and import of Shakespeare's presence in this forum and its effect on his image, however, suggests that blogging, at the very least, makes Shakespeare's works more accessible to an audience outside of the ivory tower, sparks spirited play among those within its walls, and serves as a prominent point-of-reference for groups

who question the existence of such a privileged space. The blog as a Shakespearean forum eludes both Avery's and Taylor's respective polemical claims as this emerging outlet promotes the building of democratic communities over deifying or denying the individual genius.

Notes

1. According to Hardy Cook, presentism was first discussed on SHAKSPER.net.
2. Blood (2000) credits Jorn Barger with coining the term "blog" in that year.
3. Some blogs require registration before one can comment, but many allow anonymous commenting. All can be read without any sort of registration.
4. According to LiveJournal.com's statistics, roughly 68% of bloggers are female; the average age of a blogger is eighteen.
5. Posts like this one at <http://innocentmetaller.blogspot.com/2007/04/how-i-hate-shakespeare.html> reflect a student's frustration with reading and writing about Shakespeare's work.
6. I conducted this search on 7 February, 2006. A more recent search conducted on 7 October, 2006 yielded 284,760 hits for "Shakespeare" on Technorati.
7. Since I conducted my original research, Technorati has modified the way one searches on its site. One can search "in blog posts," "in tags," or "in blog directory." An interesting addition is the option to limit the searches by the "authority" of the blogs. Technorati explains that it determines "a blog's authority by how many people link to it" (About Technorati, "What's Authority?"). I chose Technorati over other search engines, such as Google, because Technorati does not own any of the blog providers.
8. Unless sites include "hit" counters, it is impossible to measure the traffic a site receives. I am basing the traffic on the number of comments each blog receives.
9. The take-no-prisoners approach is common on cable news shows such as Fox's *O'Reilly Report* or MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, since this tactic produces good ratings.
10. See Daniel Glover's "The Rise of Blogs" (2006) for more details about blogging's role in politics and policy making.
11. Major news outlets such as ABC, Fox, and CBS host blogs as do the Democratic and Republican parties.

Online Resources

South Park Studio, Version 2 [cited 1 February, 2007]. <http://www.sp-studio.de/>.

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