
Can Digitalization Making Shakespeare Easier for the Common Reader?

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Abstract

The canonical Shakespeare had remained, till the recent time, quite enigmatic and intriguing. His vast range of creation, covering both first-class poetry and plays, his fine vocabulary, his unique themes, his effortless borrowings from foreign languages had made him a multidimensional author whom it was not easy for an ordinary reader of literature to understand and enjoy. But with the advancement of technology, Shakespeare has become much nearer to common men. Technology has pervaded almost all spheres of modern life, and literature is not an exception. Nowadays, various types of literature have been made available for the common people who had earlier much difficulty to get hold of literature. The vast range of Shakespearean literature has also been quite ready to get through numerous audio books, YouTube videos and web-based learning materials. The digitalisation of Shakespearean literature and its easy accessibility has created a considerable number of e-readers and e-audience who claim to understand Shakespeare's literature easily. The YouTube videos, audio books, the e-books with lengthy explanations have made Shakespeare quite easy to grasp even for the students. Now a common man can boast of understanding the difficult passage of even Macbeth by reading the paraphrase only. But it remains doubtful whether these e-resources can really be helpful to a great extent or whether the common intelligence is being easily gratified by these ready-made materials, thus lulling actually the high intelligence. This paper tries to evaluate the validity of the claim of digitalization making Shakespeare easier. It further explores whether the classroom teaching of Shakespeare can ever be replaced by the digital resources.

KEYWORDS: digitalization, e-resource, Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

From the time forgotten, literature has always persisted even amidst chaotic situations. Common people have always given priorities to literature over other more serious and sombre aspects of life — even if to forget the world which sometimes becomes *too much with us* (W. Wordsworth) for a while. After the path-breaking discovery of Caxton, the chariot of literature got a new speed, spreading itself far and wide quite easily within a very short period of time. But not all types of literature proved to have the capability of providing solace to the injured spirits and endowing enjoyment of the pure kind to the seeking ones. The books which held the quality of universality of theme spoken in a grand and noble language can be proclaimed to be the great literature which is beyond the destructive power of time and space, thus

attaining the canonical position in the history of literature. Shakespeare is one of those writers whose claim to achieve such a towering position is never ever questioned. The versatility of his themes, the beauty of his noble language, both the clarity and the ambiguity with which he endows his adorned passages and phrases without any apparent hassle, the expressive characterisation, the flowery expressions— all lead to his immortal and well–deserved fame.

THE MYSTIC, CRYPTIC GENIUS OF SHAKESPEARE

That Shakespeare was a genius with the fascinating capacity of summarising the versatile range of human emotions — both fine and crude— is undeniable. He had the supreme mastery over delineating his subject matters. Whether writing a love poem or describing the magnificent scene of a battlefield he had no hassle over describing the appropriate setting, scene and detailing. And his choice of words made the description come alive in the minds of his readers. Not that his insight into human psychology was dearth. On the contrary, he portrayed the characters belonging to the different strata of society with equal ease and efficiency. The phraseology, the syntax, the figurative speeches all added to the fervour of his literary genius. But at the same time, it must be remembered that no genius is easy to understand and the same goes for Shakespeare too. His poetry and plays, strewn with social norms and protocols, societal conflicts, ambiguous phrases, borrowed words and expressions from other languages, real and imaginary socio-political incidents, real well known political and royal characters all lead to the obscurity of his works. Actually in order to understand Shakespeare fully, one must have a thorough background knowledge of everything that Shakespeare took interest in. Society has changed, and so have social norms. Language has undergone a great deal of change. No more are we acquainted with the particular behaviour of the Elizabethan era. And nothing to say of the unique words used by Shakespeare solely. His ready references to classics also do not make his works popular nowadays. Language is dynamic. And dearth in knowledge in classical literature or medieval history adds to the incomprehensibility of the enigmatic Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE AND DIGITAL MEDIA – GIFT OF TECHNOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BARD OF AVON

Modern age is an era of technology. No field is left which has not been recreated by the magic touch of technology. Even the difficult texts of Shakespeare have become made easier with help of audio, video and detail annotation. There are comic strip versions of almost all the plays. There are SMS versions of his plays like “*Much Ado About Nothing: the SMS Version*” where Beatrice, through short message service explains her ideas regarding men and marriage. Both Shakespeare and digital media

have something in common. Both believe in free and extensive borrowing from others. According to Shamburg & Craighead, “Shakespeare and his plays are a product of remix” (Shamburg & Craighead, 76). Besides giving ample examples of Shakespeare being a great artist of remix, they provide current works where Shakespearean works have been reshaped, remixed and reconceptualized. Similarly, when a student of Toronto's York Mills Collegiate Institute named Terry writes “ My name is Macbeth / I'm the Thane of Glamis./ I might not be the king/ But I'm still hella famous” — Shakespeare becomes Rap Shakespeare easily. There are other digitalised sources of Shakespearean works like *Versoapp*, *No Fear Shakespeare etc.* There are animated movies, audio books, movies and almost everything can be found in Youtube, which has become the most used app to see Shakespearean plays. Undoubtedly, visual effects have a much more concrete and long-lasting impression on our mind. That is why these mediums are becoming more and more popular to make Shakespeare ‘easier’.

DIGITALIZATION OF SHAKESPEARE — AVAILABILITY OF THE “BARD OF AVON”

Nowadays, with the extensive explosion of the internet facility, literature has undergone a huge change. Earlier, whereas it was the opportunity of the privileged ones to read and study literature at their own will and leisure, today, with the flood of e-resources almost everybody willing to go through any literary piece is able to pursue it. The various types of e-resources have made literature easy to study as there are numerous e-books containing explanations and glossaries, various YouTube videos and also other e-resources which enable a common man to enjoy the complex works of literature. Shakespeare, being one of the most reputed English writers, also has his share in the realm of internet. The process of digitalising texts of Shakespeare had started in as early as 2001 with “Shakespeare database project” or “The Works of the Bard” etc. Then, and even a few years back, digitalisation of Shakespearean texts meant databases or digitalised versions of his texts easily traceable on the internet. Digitalisation made Shakespeare easily available for the laymen who could search the plays and poems online and save it offline for later reading. All the texts, be it Folio or Quarto, illustrations from past editions, full description and images of earlier productions of plays along with the sound and video recordings were made available on the internet. In 2010, the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* dedicated an issue on *Shakespeare and New Media* in which Whitney Anne Trettien explored some of the then contemporary online Shakespearean projects in her article *Disciplining Digital Humanities*. Thus, we see, the process of digitalising Shakespeare is quite age-old and consciousness about it is widespread.

Nowadays, the radius of the digital world has increased to an unbelievable extent. There are printed materials, radio, discs, cassettes, movies, youtube videos, e-books

available all over the world. And they can shape the understanding of Shakespeare to a great extent for the benefit of the common reader or audience alike. The ambiguities and difficulties of Shakespeare, which had hitherto been beyond the common intelligence without the help of a thorough reading or a better intelligence shaped and channelised in that particular field, can now easily be grasped.

The culture of digitalising literature with the help of technology is invasive in the present day. The trend of digitalisation has not left any field of literature untouched and Shakespeare's works have proved to be a gold mine which can be shaped and relocated with artistic freedom. Long gone are the days when people had only two sources to comprehend Shakespeare — one directly from his texts, the other from the stage performances. Nowadays, the various range of digital resources have become much more popular and available for the scholar and the layman alike. There are blogs, webpages, ppt, YouTube videos, annotated texts, movies and other e-resources, which enable the common people to understand the great author at their own pace and style. Nowadays, anybody willing can reach a rich reservoir of databases on Shakespeare and claim to be an expert by assimilating and imbibing the various sources, which present Shakespeare from different angles. Apparently, these digital cultures have made Shakespeare easy for grasp. Gone are the days when the common man needed the help of an expertised brain to lead him through the obscure ambiguous passages of Shakespearean drama. Today, the readymade materials provide us with instant help with clarification, graphic illustration or even moving video clips with vivid details..

IS READYMADE DIGITALIZATION AN EASY WAY-OUT FOR LEARNING SHAKESPEARE?

Though recently there is a flood of information regarding Shakespeare over the internet along with audio and video materials, it cannot be said for sure that these informations are making people more knowledgeable about the works of Shakespeare in general. True that people lately have become engrossed by technology. Even students have been obsessed with the internet and digitalisation, claiming that it helps them to understand their lessons better in a more channelised, systematic way by giving auditory and visual help along with annotated texts. Recently, teachers are also sometimes seen to encourage students to fetch materials freely from the internet. As a result, both learners and teachers are resorting to YouTube videos, blogs and movies available on the internet. Moreover, it often makes them feel up to date in procuring information and knowledge in such a modern way rather than going to the library and rake up the required data by piling books on a table. It cannot and must not be denied that digitalisation in general and the internet in particular provide a flood of information regarding Shakespeare. And their easy accessibility makes them alluring

for the learners. But the real problem is, whether these internet materials can make Shakespeare comprehensible in the true sense. Shakespeare is an enigmatic ambiguous writer who is not easy to understand. And the recent attitude of understanding Shakespeare by procuring information from the digital archive is not totally trustworthy.

Nowadays numerous learning apps are mushrooming even for toddlers. That technology helps man not only to understand but also to think is being circulated. Katherine Hayles in her 2012 essay *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* has spoken of “technogenesis, the idea that humans and technics have coevolved together” and “the proposition that we think through, with and alongside media” (Hayles 2012, pp1, 10). But there are serious doubts about the all too good effect of technology upon the psychology of learners. The problems arising out of students' depending too much upon digital materials for obtaining knowledge can be divided into two main categories. Firstly, the dependency on technology can hamper cognitive efficiency. Human brain suffers when it continually receives information from the digital world as it becomes idle and finds no need to exhaust itself. As a result, anybody who depends extensively on technology as the means of information, often suffers from absentmindedness. Students are often seen to do more than one work simultaneously on screen claiming that they are multitasking, which is timesaving and handy. But when they are allowed to continue such type of multitasking, it has been seen that they cannot focus on any given task that requires concentration for a long period of time. They are quite incapable of expressing their emotions. They lose their analytical power to a great degree. Actually, they lack the retention capability of long-term memory.

Though the learners boast of multitasking with the help of their digital devices, actually only 2.5% of the whole population can multitask because the others lack the brains designed for multitasking. As a result, when people try to do two or three works at a time, their performance undoubtedly becomes poor. As Clifford Nass observes,

The research is almost unanimous, which is very rare in social science and it says that people who chronically multitask show an enormous range of deficits. They're basically terrible at all sorts of cognitive tasks, including multitasking. [. . .] People who multitask all the time can't filter out irrelevancy. They can't manage a working memory. They're chronically distracted. They initiate much larger parts of their brain that are irrelevant to the task at hand. And even—they're even terrible at multitasking. When we ask them to multitask, they're actually worse at it. So they're pretty much mental wrecks. (Nass 2013)

So, the bubble of exploring Shakespeare while dabbling with other works is burst. One simply cannot meddle with Shakespeare's obscure texts light-heartedly as it requires one's whole attention. One has to keep alert to grasp the meaning of now obsolete words. The sudden change of events might be missed if one keeps himself engaged with his digital device. The list of characters, the chain of events cannot be kept in mind without a strong memory. One cannot analyse the turn of incidents without properly developed analytical power. Even a complex text like *Othello* cannot interest students if and when they are busy with their multitask. So, multitasking is very much detrimental towards the cognitive retentive power of learners as have been found out by various recent studies.

Another problem created by digital resources is the F-shaped electronic reading. The idea that people, when they are reading electronic texts, tend to read in the shape of the letter 'F' was first propagated by Jakob Nielsen and the Nielsen Norman Group in 2006. Nielsen pioneered the theory which has been later supported by many others that people first read the top portion of a page in an electronic device, then they lower their gaze and read across in a second shorter horizontal movement. This reading practice means that people do not read each and every word as it appears on the screen. Rather they tend to skim through the text as their concentration power begins to droop. As a result, they tend to miss out important words, phrases or even sentences. They do not 'read' but they 'scan', thus not being able to grasp the meaning of any given text fully. Nielsen's saying that *79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 10 percent read word-by-word* (Baron 2015, p. 42) proves the detrimental effect of electronic texts over printed media. In the case of Shakespearean texts, if someone reads the text thus absentmindedly, he is sure to miss out the important events or dialogue. If one misses almost 70% of the words, it is never possible to grasp the beauty of a Shakespearean sonnet. Students are getting sufficient e-resources, but whether they are trying to utilise them at all is the main concern.

The ability to read and comprehend complex literary works like those of Shakespeare's is becoming quite a trial for the new generation whose constant interactions with the digital world is making the ability to focus a real problem. As clearly put down by Gregoire

What psychologists and brain scientists tell us about interruptions is that they have a fairly profound effect on the way we think. It becomes much harder to sustain attention, to think about one thing for a long period of time and to think deeply when new stimuli are pouring at you all day long. I argue that the price we pay for being constantly inundated with information is a loss of our ability to be contemplative and

to engage in the kind of deep thinking that requires you to concentrate on one thing. (Gregoire 2015).

But Shakespearean texts, being complex and serious, need whole attention on the part of the readers which is totally different from the “hyper reading” (Hayles) which is done online by scanning the texts, by skipping words and skimming the sentences. The more one is in constant touch with the internet, the more he lacks his power of analysis and reasoning. That way, he is unable to compliment a Shakespearean text fully. The easy way out leads to omission of meaning.

The digitalisation of Shakespeare leads to another problem too. Recently teachers are encouraging students to “ participatory cultures” (Jenkins et al. 2006, p.3) in which students in order to recreate Shakespeare have “created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations” (Jenkins et al. 2006, p.6). They can combine Macbeth with the Star Wars films as is shown in *Star Wars: Macbeth*, a remix made by the students of Glen Ridge High School. Learners are continuously reshaping Shakespeare with their blogs, video-shoots or audio stories. Though Jenkins welcomed such digital culture as *experimental, innovative and highly generative environments*, yet there is a certain drawback in these moves. The literary Shakespeare is gradually diminishing. The sophisticated comprehension and profound analytical interpretation that should accompany the reading of Shakespeare is lacking in the case of the digitalised Shakespeare. The adaptations often seem to have minimum relation with the text itself and the sombre seriousness of Shakespeare is completely absent there. This type of “do-it-yourself Shakespeare” (O'Neill 2014, p2) can look smart, contemporary and attractive but actually they are far from the academic dimension of Shakespearean works. The social, historical and cultural contexts are being changed, the characters are portrayed with different brush-strokes, the moral and philosophical significance of the plays are more or less lost and the distinctive features of the unique vocabulary as used by Shakespeare is no longer yearned to be understood. In short, this flood of mix and match Shakespeare is gradually stripping the great author of his magnificence.

CONCLUSION:

Technology is reigning supreme in today’s world. So, it would be foolish to think that literature will remain untouched and unmodified by it. Digitalisation of Shakespeare is unavoidable and to a great extent, advisable and welcome. The easily available materials nurture the interest for Shakespeare in the inquisitive minds of learners. The enthusiastic ones feel free to reshape Shakespeare by modification, assimilation and modernisation. Actually, the digital resources play an important part to illustrate the cultural, historical, visual, auditory and linguistic elements of the play in question.

Period maps, clear pronunciation of early modern English words, video clips of certain events, recordings of the then contemporary music, pictures of the dress and furniture are some of the digital resources extremely helpful to the learners. But one problem of using online resources is that it often disappears. The inconstancy of web-materials makes it quite undependable. Pages suddenly stop to upload new materials, blogs stop and videos disappear. Thus, it becomes problematic when one depends solely on web resources. The readily available materials sometimes damage the learner's power of critical and analytical thinking. So it is better not to depend solely and too much on digital resources in order to comprehend Shakespeare. Rather one should try to build up one's own power of critical thinking so that just out of printed pages, one can be able to enjoy the quintessence of Shakespearean genius.

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