

Shakespeare and language: close and distant reading.

ABSTRACTS

1. Jonathan Baldo, University of Rochester

Shylock Near and Far: Shakespeare as Close and Distant Reader

Franco Moretti, an evangelist for what he terms distant reading, has called for this new form of “reading” to supplant rather than supplement close reading, which, notwithstanding important challenges from within, has dominated the field of literary studies for more than half a century. Somewhat like the Venetian court that imposes a forced conversion upon Shylock, he would apparently have us all become miners of data. In this paper I am neither atheist nor fellow evangelist, but rather an agnostic of distant reading. I begin by examining—closely, I hope—the possible implications of the metaphors of closeness and distance, and I suggest that what Shakespeare cues us to do in a play like *The Merchant of Venice* might very well be described as a hybrid of close and distant reading.

In the main portion of my paper, I follow the fortunes of a pair of words used to designate fulfillment in *The Merchant of Venice*—namely, “contentment” and “satisfaction”—which I aim to link to changing ideas of the subject and to changing economic conditions in early modern England. Finally, I hope to show how a supplemental distant reading might help expand upon the conclusions I draw: in a word, how in this case study, at least, close and distant reading might supplement rather than seek to replace one another.

2. Anupam Basu, Washington University in St Louis

Crime and Commerce in Early Modern London:
A Machine-Learning Approach

In this paper, I will use a large selection of texts from EEBO-TCP to explore the representation of crime and commerce in Elizabethan and Jacobean London. In recent years the advent of geo-spatial computing and the availability of cultural archives in the form of large scale text-corpora have held out the promise of a truly spatial humanities where vast amounts of textual data may be harnessed to produce a nuanced sense of cultural spaces. However, the extraction of spatial references from such a vast archive presents unique difficulties on two fronts: the highly irregular orthographic conventions of early modern texts are faithfully reproduced in EEBO-TCP, making most modern approaches to search ineffective. On the other hand, even though the field of computational natural language processing has made great strides over the last decade, most such applications depend on either databases of modern place names or the availability of “training data” with tagged place names. Neither of these approaches work on early modern place names. How then, can we capture the rich sense of urban spaces, conflicted, contested and yet teeming with vitality that defines so much of the early modern literary corpus? I will argue that, as is the case with many humanities problem-domains, we need to design algorithms and tools that articulate specific humanistic arguments even as we engage with existing computational tools and approaches from other fields. Adapting techniques from machine-learning and statistical natural language processing, I will develop an algorithm that can be trained using the index of place names from John Stow’s *A Survey of London* to recognize texts from the vast EEBO-TCP corpus that are specifically about London and then to extract references to the culture of criminality that was so widely circulated in the drama, pamphlets, ballads and other popular print of the period. Such a form of technical engagement broadens our thinking about the early modern textual archive to scales that are simply impossible to approach through

conventional close-reading. More importantly however, such an approach allows us to use technology to negotiate the relationship between text and space in unique ways and to move toward a technologically mediated understanding of the ways in which early modern texts imagined and reconfigured the physical spaces of early modern London.

3. Tom Cheesman, Swansea University

Six Maps of Shakespeare Translations

Translations of Shakespeare vary, by language, by genre, over time, and subject to the multitude of factors which may determine general translation strategies and particular translation decisions. Reading these variations tells us about intertextual relations among translations (influence, innovation, plagiarism, etc); about changes in a work's 'translatability' in a particular 'target culture' context; and also, potentially, about a work's translatability in general, both as a whole text and passage by passage. In other words: we can learn from translations about the original, its language and its actual and potential significance.

This paper presents a series of six experimental 'maps' of translations corpora – visualisations of text data, metatext data, and data derived algorithmically from a corpus – which together offer various ways of shifting between reading scales. First, close reading of a crux in *Othello* through multiple translations, crowd-sourced in multiple languages. Second, medium-distant reading of translating cultures through statistics of decisions at that crux. Third, very distant reading of metadata for multiple retranslations, in a time-map. Fourth, medium-distant reading of the stylometric differences among multiple translations, in a network diagram. Fifth, medium-distant reading of structural variation among translations, in 'alignment maps'. Sixth, in an online interface, close reading of multiple translations of successive text segments, including a mapping of statistics of corpus variation onto the segments of the translated text: a visualization which shows how the intensity of variation among translations varies, along the flow of the text. Maps three to six are generated by algorithms working with a corpus of some 40 German versions of *Othello*.

These experiments point towards new ways of understanding Shakespeare's language (and explain understandings of it, to academic and lay audiences) by means of multi-scale readings of the countless and still multiplying efforts to render his works in other languages (including modern English). The same methodological principles can apply to any much translated work.

4. Rana Choi, University of Chicago

Erich Auerbach as Distant Reader? The Case of Shakespeare

Franco Moretti once described his vision of a "beautiful" distant reading project of world literature as following a unit of formal analysis "much smaller or much larger than a text" ("a device, a trope, a limited narrative unit," or genres and "systems") through the changes it undergoes in diverse historical contexts. Offering an actual example of such a project, Moretti cites a keyword from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* as an example of such a formal unit. However, Auerbach is not only the author of this "unit," but a significant predecessor in the practice of distant reading itself. Auerbach is best known for his work *Mimesis* where he follows the "trope" of the separation of low and high styles across cultures, languages, genres, and historical eras spanning nearly three millennia. Acutely aware of the problem Moretti cites as necessitating digital methods, namely, dealing with a superabundance of material, Auerbach concedes a certain measure of effectiveness in statistical methods; but he criticizes their applicability to only limited phenomena in favor of his method of taking "random" textual samples as representative of the whole for close reading.

Auerbach's Shakespeare chapter is an interesting case study of the peculiar relation between close and distant reading featured in *Mimesis*. Auerbach defines three stylistic

“procedures” by which Shakespeare distinguishes himself from his contemporaries and predecessors, and hails Shakespeare’s work as having been a model “for all movements of revolts against the strict separation of styles in French classicism.” I discuss the specific issues and strategies related to the attempt to “distance” or “datafy” these stylistic traits in order to compare them to other Renaissance dramas, or to even map out over Shakespeare’s career a certain sense of how much mixing he engages in over the course of his career.

5. Hugh Craig, Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing, University of Newcastle, Australia

Shakespeare in context: language change in the drama, 1585-1614

Work on progressive changes in Shakespeare's style has usually concentrated on an internal, individual trajectory. Earlier scholars linked perceived shifts in language to the playwright's personal life and mental states. A later group favoured other factors, like changing attachments to genres and a personal early, mature and late style. Some very recent work points to the effects of changing relationships to his theatrical company. There has been less focus on a development in dialogue style shared with Shakespeare's peers, though many scholars now point to one particular moment of change around 1600. This paper focuses on this second aspect, aiming to estimate how much or how little of the changes in Shakespeare's style over time is shared with his contemporaries. The focus will be on concerted, progressive variation in the incidence of common words. A statistical approach like this has obvious limitations, but it does allow generalisation over a number of less familiar plays, and offers the researcher a neutral starting point, from which Shakespeare's work can be viewed as one among many sub-sets of a large group of comparable plays.

6. Bradley Greenburg, Northeastern Illinois University

The Sense of a Beginning

Following the question that closes this seminar’s description (“how to negotiate distant and close reading as this bears on Shakespeare”), I want to explore something through a close reading that needs another perspective. I am hoping that distant reading can provide further clarity.

It is obvious that the beginning of a play is important. But this does nothing to tell us *what* is important about it and how Shakespeare carefully constructs his openings to coil the dramatic spring as tight as he can. One reason he has to do this is that he only has a couple of hours of stage time to fit everything in. Time is of the essence. But this is not all there is to it. What he does in the opening acts of his plays goes beyond simply recognizing an economy of time and space. The way in which they go beyond the necessity to open, to introduce, to establish, is what I am interested in. I do not think it can be boiled down to a sentence or two, but if I had to deliver it as briefly as possible I would say that it involves creating a cell whose structure already contains the DNA for reproducing, and thus producing, the rest of the play.

In order to develop this idea I will offer a close reading of the opening act of *The Merchant of Venice*. My goal in doing so is to demonstrate how Shakespeare produces a structure that is meticulously reproduced and extended (“grown,” we might say) over the rest of the drama. I am keen to see whether the seminar can assist me in using some form of statistical analysis to show how the structure of Shakespeare’s plays differs from his contemporaries as well as how his opening acts have a distinctive structure.

7. William M. Hamlin, Washington State University.

God-Language and Skepticism in Early Modern England: A Preliminary Investigation Through Corpus Linguistics Analysis

My essay describes and reflects upon a preliminary exploration of the value of corpus analytic techniques for the study of ideological change during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, I have made an investigative foray into the evolution of “god-language” in English printed texts from this period, focusing especially on the spread of epistemological and religious skepticism in multiple discursive realms. By “god-language” I mean language which registers the ways in which people (including fictional characters) imagine, describe, and discuss their conceptions of divinity, as well as the locutions upon which they rely as they address, worship, petition, doubt, or condemn divine beings. As for early modern skepticism, this is a topic that has been extensively studied by many scholars over the past half century, so before I began my inquiry I already had a strong sense of what I was likely to learn. But because I am a literary historian rather than a computational linguist, I came to this project with methodological biases and levels of technical ignorance which have predisposed me to investigate topics and interpret results in ways that may seem peculiar, even counterintuitive, to scholars with greater expertise in digital humanities methods and computer-assisted discourse analysis.

The digital corpus with which I have primarily worked is the pared-down version of EEBO-TCP housed within the CQPweb processor at Lancaster University (UK). This corpus is currently comprised of 44,422 fully-keyed texts, just under two-thirds of the total number of documents eventually slated for complete digital transcription by EEBO-TCP. Nonetheless, the corpus is broadly representative of EEBO’s full coverage; it contains increasingly large numbers of texts within the unfolding decades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and altogether it comprises a total of more than 1.2 billion words. The CQPweb version of EEBO thus constitutes a massive digital database of English printed documents ranging from 1473 to 1700, and its query processor allows for an array of search and analysis techniques which can generate vast batches of quantitative and statistical information with astonishing speed.

As I am new to “distant reading” (and still undecided on its intellectual merits), I look forward to our seminar and hope to learn from others who know more about its practices and potential.

8. Matthias Heim, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Tracking Shakespeare’s Peculiar Words: the case of *Othello*

To date most computer-assisted analyses of early modern playtexts have focused on high frequency items, but while this has produced valuable insights into those underlying structural patterns that go unnoticed by human readers, we still do not have algorithms that allow us to explore the particularities of Shakespeare’s language in ways that feed into and enrich our close reading. This is what the analysis of low-frequency patterns promises, but it presents a new set of challenges to computers, especially when dealing with early modern editions. Indeed, since low-frequency items are especially subject to editorial changes, such as modernisation and emendation, analysing them requires that we take into account as many early modern exemplars and editions as possible, and make only sparing use of normalisation techniques such as uniformisation of spelling.

This paper springs from initial research done on a project that takes up this challenge by attempting to map Shakespeare’s ‘peculiar words’, i.e. those words that occur only once in the canon. As is well known, these ‘hapax legomena’ make up 6-7% of Shakespeare’s vocabulary in each play, yet they have received little attention since Alfred Hart noted in 1943 that they seemed “scattered haphazardly” across each play – a claim which has been vitiated by our computer-aided analysis. No attempt has, moreover, been made to take into account the considerable differences between Q and F texts with regard to these peculiar words. Using the project’s test-case, *Othello*, this paper discusses the patterns revealed by a statistical analysis of these low-frequency words and shows how they contribute to the linguistic profiles of the play’s characters, and define them at key moments of the play. It

discusses the theatrical effects of linguistically innovative moments when peculiar words cluster, and presents tentative interpretations for the uneven distribution of these words across the play. Ultimately, our claim is that understanding the patterns of low frequency items can help us develop new questions of close-reading that bear on, and add to our appreciation of moments in a play's action and features of its characters.

9. Lynne Magnusson, University of Toronto

Shakespeare and the Grammar of Possibility: Close and Distant Reading Approaches

"Thou wouldst be great," says Lady Macbeth of her husband, and her speech assessing his chances is full of *woulds*. This paper will take as its close-reading focus some instances in *Macbeth* that play with grammatical moods and tenses, especially with modal auxiliary verbs, to significant effect. As its distant-reading focus, it will first review and assess some of the criticism concerned with use of modal auxiliaries in Shakespeare and early modern drama that has made significant use of computer-assisted or quantitative methods, including Hugh Craig's ground-breaking essay, "Grammatical Modality in English Plays from the 1580s to the 1640s" and Minako Nakayasu's *The Pragmatics of Modals in Shakespeare*. Second, it will test out some of the readily available text-analysis programs, including *Voyant* and *WordHoard*, asking what questions one might frame to provide useful routes into understanding of modal auxiliary usage in *Macbeth* in comparison to other works in Shakespeare's corpus. Third, it may also inquire into how larger contexts for understanding Shakespeare's modal usage in *Macbeth* might be investigated through EEBO searching. The paper will ask whether and how close- and distant-reading approaches to grammatical mood and modal auxiliaries in *Macbeth* might be combined to fruitful effect.

10. Kris McAbee, University of Arkansas, Little Rock

Sonnetearing at a Distance: Sonnet Culture in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare's plays draw from the cultural impact created by the explosion of erotic sonnet sequences in the late sixteenth century. Plays ranging from the early comedy of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the patriotic spectacle of *Henry V* to the high tragedy of *Hamlet* all mock melancholic poses, poetic production, and Petrarchan conventions. Indeed, the characters in Shakespeare's plays are frequent discussants of both sonnets and poetry more broadly. Yet, perhaps the most salient way in which Shakespeare's plays engage sonnet culture is through the sonnets embedded in the plays themselves. Through using actual sonnets in the dramatic mode, Shakespeare provides a lens for thinking about how his works envision the role of sonnets, sonnetearing, and poetic acts. In other words, Shakespeare's language about poetry considered alongside the embedded sonnets allows for the examination of sonnet culture in Shakespeare's plays in the context of mention versus use. In order to uncover how Shakespeare's dramatic works engage sonnet culture as a function of performance, this essay uses techniques associated with distant reading to examine simultaneously the way Shakespeare's characters talk *about* sonnets and the way they talk *in* sonnets. Using the generic and theatrical distinctions exposed by charts about sonnet mention and sonnet use in Shakespeare's plays, this essay posits that the plays call attention to the notion of speaking in sonnets as an act of performance. These plays demonstrate the theatrical nature of sonnet culture. The second part of the essay close reads *Love's Labor's Lost*, the play most intensely engaged with sonnets, as an explicit dramatization of the sonneteer persona as performance and role playing.

11. Russ McDonald, Goldsmiths, University of London

Close Reading Then and Now

New interest in close reading having surfaced in the past decade—and with some force, thanks to some challenges to the tyranny of context—it seems appropriate and timely to scrutinize the practice critically, to consider what we do when we engage in close reading and to identify as concretely as possible its potential means and ends. Especially in light of Franco Moretti's assault on the practice in *Distant Reading* (Verso, 2013) and the rise of data-mining using large quantities of text, critical analysis of poetic and of verbal detail generally requires fresh justification and explicit articulation of its hermeneutic value. Whatever the nature of the data collected, the information must be studied with a critical eye and evaluated by the human interpreter—etymologically the 'go between'—who can understand and develop its implications for the attractions of the verbal object.

My aim in this paper is to articulate more specifically than we have done to date the aims and the products of close reading or, as it is sometimes described in recent critical work, "slow reading." To this end I employ a neglected early modern document of poetic theory, William Scott's *The Model of Poesy* (1599), a treatise until now available only in manuscript but recently published in Gavin Alexander's exemplary edition (Cambridge, 2013). The first half of paper considers Scott's efforts at close reading as he articulates the role of the poet and the ends of poetry. He gives detailed attention to such features as prosody, figuration, genre, and tone, asserting the value of these properties in moving the reader to right action. The second half of my essay differentiates modern close reading from early modern, studying how the Shakespearean text moves (or "stirs") a reader less in an ethical than in an emotional or sensory way. Taking as my primary text a single scene from *Macbeth*, Act Three, scene two, I examine those various poetic tactics, particularly repetition, metaphor, and wordplay, that contribute to what can loosely be called *texture*.

12. Goran Stanivukovic, Department of English Saint Mary's University Halifax, Nova Scotia

Earliest Shakespeare: bombast and authenticity

My paper reconsiders bombast as a stylistic strategy, which Shakespeare uses to craft thought in drama before 1594. The year 1594 represented a watershed moment in Shakespeare's writing career when he joined the The Lord Chamberlaine's Men as a sharer and ceased to be essentially a freelance poet. My approach to bombast as one of the key stylistic properties of 'earliest' Shakespeare and a stylistic instrument with which Shakespeare carved out his literary voice, counters criticism that regards bombast as fault. I argue that what appears to modern critics as faulty style was not always so. Modern critics have interpreted the bombast of 'earliest' Shakespeare in isolation from linguistic, literary and socio-cultural factors that conditioned it as a historical instance of Elizabethan aesthetics in the early 1590s. At a time when semantic potential of the English language was expanding bombast and hyperbole (a trope through which bombast is achieved) Shakespeare seized the opportunity to mold the cognitive space of language, distinguishing his grand style from that of his models. In a fresh return to formalist criticism and close analysis of language as a materialist practice, this paper will argue that Shakespeare, that Johannes Factotum from Robert Greene's (or Chettle's or Nashe's?) 1592 vitriolic attack is indeed "well able to bombast a blank verse", though not as unpolished and uneducated diction, as the author of the *Greene's Groatesworth of Wit* pamphlet asserts, but as a writer who achieves more in his bombast than his contemporaries. I will also demonstrate that, by paying attention to the sound and meaning of Shakespeare's bombast we arrive to knowing the style of earliest Shakespeare, not only as imitative and rhetorically formulaic, but—authentic. The way in which Shakespeare uses bombast as a stylistically pliable instrument of expression helps us see how he achieved an authentic voice as a playwright by exploiting to different purposes the linguistic strategy for which he was attacked in the *Greene's-groats* pamphlet. Kyd, Greene, Marlowe, who influenced

Shakespeare's bombast, also gave rise to a different quality and sound of excess in earliest Shakespeare.

13. Andrea F. Van Nort, USAF Academy

Reading Closely: Matter and the Sublime in Shakespeare

When reading Shakespeare from a distance, one is struck by the efficacy of the parabolic, in structure as well as in the imaginary. A character experiences the world as Fortune will allow, and that trajectory, charted by the individual, traces a rise to the ideal as well as a fall, even if the latter is only implied. Likewise, close readings afford the distance to discern parabola – here akin to parables – in the mimetic analogies characters draw from the realm of nature to read action and the world they inhabit. Although human endeavor – the subject of Shakespeare's plays – often falls shy of greatness, the reassuring perennity of the non-human, of matter, of its irrepressible forces and transcendent qualities, becomes visible in emotional passages, especially in critical moments of peripeteia or anagnorisis. This paper will discuss matter, substance, and the realm of nature as explored in Shakespeare's works. We understand by "matter" those elements by which we are composed, more specifically as understood in the Lucretian sense and represented in Shakespeare as dust, clay, and earth; "substance" represents our corporeal shell, and in Greek of course, *ousia* suggests as well one's being; and finally, "nature" combines the natural world, of which humans are a part, with the cosmos. We will first explore the human bonds with matter and substance within the larger realm of nature itself. How characters perceive their humanity, their mortality, will guide this examination. We then pursue analogies – some proverbial, others not – linked to the natural world, a world to which a speaker often turns in order to express or comprehend a crisis. In this section we will focus on images related to dust and water as matter, as these are the most prolific sources for our study. Finally, we will consider the embracing of the natural world in the face of death, when a character forfeits earthly victory to Fortune.

14. Denis Yarow, University of Toronto

Close Reading Practices and the Rhetoric of Religion in *Othello*

In a brief moment of calm before the agonies of Iago's temptation, Othello ruminates on the meaning of Desdemona to his life: "Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again." This paper considers the efficacies and limitations of close reading as a practice through an extended analysis of these famous lines. I argue that what they reveal is an adherence by Othello to a conception of the world enabled by the Christian rhetoric that he adopts as part of his attachment to Venice, which is explicitly articulated through his devotion to Desdemona, but which does not inhere in her. The doubt that Iago activates in Othello's belief in the certitude of his own and Desdemona's beings repositions him within the worldview as conceived through his religiously-inflected language in such a way as to necessitate his eventual self-annihilation.

The play's ending, with its heavy and complex association between Othello and the devil figure, exposes the historical contingency of the language deployed to account for him, in contrast to his own idiom with its tendency towards estrangement and the ineffably divine. Such contingency highlights the limits of close reading, and I argue that distant reading may be a possible mode of extension that reconciles the practice of close reading with the necessity to account for the historical impulses that permeate the play text's lexicon. The aim will be to investigate ways of contextualizing *Othello* within the matrix of extant early modern literature, in the hope of discovering new insights into the precise operations of religious rhetoric in the play.