

"The Politics of an Academic Discussion Group"

Hardy M. Cook
Bowie State University
Bowie, Maryland 20714

It seems appropriate to begin an essay about SHAKSPER, an academic discussion group, with a digest from that conference:

Shakespeare Electronic Conference, SHK 8.0001. Thursday, 2 January 1997.

From: Hardy M. Cook <Hardy.Cook@BowieState.edu>
Date: Thursday, January 2, 1996
Subject: New Year's Greetings and More

Dear SHAKSPEReans,

I would like to offer my best wishes to all of you for a healthy and prosperous New Year and ask for your indulgence in a very long posting of my own.

SHAKSPER was founded on July 16, 1990, by Ken Steele and a group of thirteen or so interested Shakespeareans (including myself), many of whom had met at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Philadelphia. I became SHAKSPER's co-editor in February 1992 and editor in June of 1992. Despite the July founding date, our digest numbers follow the calendar year, so we are now entering our eighth year with approximately 1,250 members from thirty-one countries.

If you will allow me a few moments, I would like to describe my work in bringing SHAKSPER to you and then to ask for your assistance on my upcoming Shakespeare Association of America seminar paper.

I am currently a Professor of English and Interim Chair of the Department of English and Modern Languages at Bowie State University. Founded in 1865, Bowie State, an historically black institution, is a member of the University of Maryland System. It is a regional comprehensive university of more than 5,000 students, offering 20 undergraduate majors and 13 graduate programs with a graduate program in English that is under girded by Humanities Computing in its final stages of approval. Faculty at UMS regional comprehensives have a four course per semester teaching load; chairs have a fifty percent reduction. So I currently teach two courses per semester, chair the largest department in the School of Arts and Sciences, continue to prepare my edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* for the Internet Shakespeare Editions, produce four Table of Contents columns and the Summer Festivals List for *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, serve on a number of boards, and spend approximately one hour a day working on SHAKSPER. I also DO have a family, which includes my wife and teenage and three-year-old daughters.

Most of my work for SHAKSPER involves preparing the digests, into which I group related messages. Each digest has a header and a table of contents. The table of contents includes the name and e-mail address of the person making the submission, the date of the submission, and the subject of the submission. I also lightly edit the submissions principally to keep a consistent look and feel. This light editing includes occasionally correcting typos, deleting emoticons and Internet-speak abbreviations, reducing signatures to the barest essentials, and so on.

Many SHAKSPER files require regular updating: some daily, some weekly, some monthly, and other when needed. This updating of files is just one of the tasks of maintaining the SHAKSPER file server.

SHAKSPER is not open to automatic subscription and prospective members are requested to supply brief autobiographies of themselves. Thus, another part of my work for SHAKSPER includes adding and deleting members and maintaining the biography and membership files. I also respond to personal inquires and attend to technical problems associated with running a listserv.

One might reasonably ask why I spend so much time on these tasks. The easy answer is that I normally enjoy what I do; however, there is also the issue that the work is important to me because I have such low tolerance for un-moderated discussion groups and I am concerned with the product itself.

My moderation brings to the membership organized digests with a consistent format, yet approximately once a year someone complains of the quality of some of the submissions. One such complaint arrived a few weeks ago and I will post it as the next digest of this year, but I want to add that naive questions from non-academics have provoked some of our most memorable threads. This meta-issue about the nature of the Conference poses a dilemma for me - the works of Shakespeare are appealing in ways that perhaps no other body of literature is. Thus, as much as I want SHAKSPER to be an exclusively academic list, many non-academics compose its membership. One way that I responded to my dilemma was to announce on Friday, April 26, 1996, my intention of forming a SHAKSPER Advisory Board (SHK 7.0320). At that time, I wrote the following:

I have been slow in making any changes in the manner in which SHAKSPER operates, but circumstances are such that I now feel a change is in order.

I have encouraged diversity and inclusiveness; nevertheless, SHAKSPER was founded as an "academic" conference and I still view it as such. Our current membership of 1250 includes many Shakespearean textual scholars and bibliographers, editors and critics, but it also includes professors and high school teachers, undergraduate and graduate students, actors, poets, playwrights, theatre professionals, librarians, computer scientists, and interested bystanders. The variety of SHAKSPEReans has led to wide-ranging discussion, but many have lamented the recent infrequency of the engaging scholarly exchange that SHAKSPER was intended to cultivate.

I want SHAKSPER principally to be a forum for serious academic discussion (especially since electronic alternatives exist) and to that end I intend to establish a SHAKSPER Advisory Board. This board will be composed of from four to six Shakespearean scholars from within its membership.

The purpose of the SHAKSPER Advisory Board will be to advise the editor

- 1) On matters of policy affecting the entire conference,
- 2) On resolving complaints, and
- 3) On determining the appropriateness of certain posting.

A LISTSERV discussion group of its nature is different from a journal (electronic or traditional) and peer-reviewed posting is not possible or desirable; however, I do need advice from peers regarding issues that affect the conference and particular posting that are questionable.

On Tuesday, May 14, 1996, I announced the membership of the Board: Michael Best, Thomas Bishop, Edna Boris, Ralph Alan Cohen, Kurt Daw, Roy Flanagan, Phyllis Gorfain, Terence Hawkes, Dale Lyles, Cary Mazer, Michael Mullin, David Schalkwyk, and Raymond G. Siemens (SHK 7.0370). I have consulted with the Board on a number of occasions and have found the advice of the members extremely useful.

What I would like to do now is to use the meta-issue - what is SHAKSPER for? - as an opportunity to gather information for my upcoming SAA seminar paper. I will be a participant this year in the "Politics of Electronic Texts" seminar. My abstract for my intended paper follows:

"The Politics of an Academic Discussion Group"

As the owner/editor/moderator of SHAKSPER: The Global Electronic Shakespeare Conference, I am interesting in exploring some issues I have faced in the past few years in my labors with SHAKSPER and their larger implications. SHAKSPER is not open to automatic subscription, but I generally do not turn requests for membership down. SHAKSPER is moderated, but there are only a few topics that I have ruled off limits. SHAKSPER digests are formatted and lightly edited, but I often wonder if there are limits I should put on myself - in other words, is any editing an intrusion on the medium itself. These and other issues are all related to the larger issue I wish to explore: what academic currency does a listserv such as SHAKSPER have - what place do the conversations in an informal medium like a listserv have in the greater academic world?

In terms of "academic currency," I know that many have used SHAKSPER discussions in teaching, in planning performances, and in scholarly papers. At last year's World Congress, the session on Characters was in some part inspired by SHAKSPER discussions and our discussions have also led many of us to recognize our critical diversity, especially our differing cross-Atlantic orientations. However, I would like to learn more by posing four questions and encouraging members to respond either through the list or personally to me (if you wish your response to be personal, please indicate so).

What part if any has SHAKSPER had in any of your scholarly publications?
What part if any has SHAKSPER had in your teaching?
What part if any has SHAKSPER had in other areas of your professional life?
What other parts has SHAKSPER played?

I am genuinely not interested in "fan" mail, but I would like to hear from members and use those responses in preparing my paper for the SAA.

Thanks so much for putting up with such a long post, and once again Happy New Year.

Hardy

This digest (SHK 8.0001) was the first that I mailed to members of SHAKSPER – The Global Shakespeare Electronic Conference – in its eighth year of operation. In it, I provide a brief history of the conference, a summary of the work that I undertake as Editor/Moderator, a statement of my desire that SHAKSPER be “a forum for serious academic discussion,” an expression of my wish to explore the “academic currency” of such an electronic forum in the greater academic world, and a plea to the members to respond to a series of questions regarding the roles SHAKSPER plays in their lives.

SHAKSPER is a listserv, a mail distribution list. It is moderated, which means that as editor only I can send messages to the membership, and it is lightly edited, which means that as editor I strive to provide a consistent look-and-feel to the digests that I organize generally by subject. Yet even this simple description of “what SHAKSPER is” is fraught with inherent contradictions.

Many believe that the Internet, over which SHAKSPER’s digests are distributed, is the last frontier for democracy and free speech, but SHAKSPER is moderated and edited. I do not send out every post that is submitted to me. Some time ago, for example, I decided that I would no longer distribute postings dealing with the so-called “authorship” question. I tried to be as patient as I could with the primarily Oxfordians, who were generally non-academics and who had begun to flood the list with posting. However, after a while, I deemed as a responsible Shakespearean firmly ensconced in academia that I could no longer tolerate the misleading, conspiracy-laden ramblings and banned further discussion on the topic. For this decision, I was roasted in private messages from Oxfordian who accused me of many things, the most polite being of stifling “free speech.” There were some resignations, and the Oxfordians went on to establish the news group humanities.lit.authors.shakespeare, on which a significant number of articles related to authorship regularly appear.

As moderator of SHAKSPER, I also do not post requests for “help with my research paper,” spams, messages directed to individuals and not of interest to the conference as a whole, and similar requests such as for someone’s e-mail address. Furthermore, I can intervene when an inadvertently mistaken forward or response comes to the list rather than to the person to whom it was intended, avoiding both the mistake and the apology for it. Finally, because I mail digests

only once a day, I can kill messages that a member may write and afterwards have second thoughts about posting to the membership. In fact, as a rule, it would appear that moderated lists such as SHAKSPER seem to have less of a problem with “flaming” than un-moderated lists, where all posts are distributed to the members as soon as they are received by listserv. However, before I leave this topic, I would like to make another observation. I am told by friends that on moderated scientific listservs editors routinely do not post messages they determine inappropriate. So why the big fuss when I banned “authorship” discussions? I believe the answer lies in the appeal that Shakespeare’s works have to the culture as a whole. The everybody’s-an-expert syndrome is far more prevalent in discussions about Shakespeare than it is in say ones about particle physics.

In my posting above, I asked for members’ responses to four questions. I received 47 responses from members: 32 from the USA, 6 from Canada, 3 from the UK, and 1 each from Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Taiwan. Most of the respondents were academics from English and Theatre departments (teachers and critics, a textual scholar and a bibliographer, directors, and theatre historians). Others who responded were deans and other academic support personnel, high school teachers, graduate and undergraduate students, and several non-academics, including a theatre critic. The responses I received were varied and instructive, ranging from general observations to detailed answers to my four questions.

Of the general observations, I enjoyed Steve Urkowitz’s comparison of SHAKSPER to “a fascinating playground. Lots of different games happen. Great surprises. Painful predictabilities. Like real playgrounds. I love the openness of the gates. And I greatly appreciate the choice that some games are just not to be played in this particular park.” Two persons who identified themselves as non-academics offer interesting commentary on the level of discourse. Michael J. Ryan, a Canadian undergraduate, commenting on the continuing debate on politics, writes, “I also appreciate the absolute contrariness of certain viewpoints, strongly and convincingly presented.” On the other hand, Mike Field, whose works at a university but regards himself neither an academic nor a theater professional, remarks, “I find that while the academicians on the list almost always have a fuller and more complete knowledge of the texts, they are often rather too ready to fall into threads of discussion that are obscure, overly theoretical and often dogmatic.” A community college teacher, Tom Hodges, on the other hand, considers SHAKSPER “the most helpful, stimulating, entertaining, and challenging experience since my grad school days in the '60's.” From the academic prospective, long-time SHAKSPERean, David Richman observes, “I find the continuing conversation by turns engrossing, stimulating, revelatory, distressing, heart sickening, annoying, enraging, boring. My reaction to *Shakespeare Quarterly* and other professional tracts is much the same, but with a higher proportion of annoyance and boredom.” In addition, SHAKSPER provides David Richman, who is blind, further benefits: “The conversation gives me immediate access to information that others, but not I, might get from a steady perusal of magazines and newspapers. I am always grateful and always make use of the notes and descriptions of books, articles, and especially productions and films.”

Many respondents expressed a sense of being connected to a virtual, world-wide community. In addition to the conversation, they find SHAKSPER a source of general information, bibliographic citations, references, publications, conferences announcements, and calls for

papers. Lois Feuer, who teaches at a “smallish Cal State University,” comments, “I have gone from being a rather isolated faculty member whose workload was too great to allow me to read and write as much as I would have liked, to becoming a member of a community of Shakespeareans. The difference in my outlook -- and indeed my output -- is considerable.” James Helfers, who describes himself as “a generalist who enjoys Shakespeare,” is thankful that “As a member of a small department at a teaching university, I would never have the time to interact with critics of such stature [Terence Hawkes, et al.] outside of the list.” Michael Cain, an administrator at the Japan campus of a community college in Washington State, has yet another perspective: “I am in my 20th year of living and working outside of the US and maintaining my participation in US academic culture is very difficult. SHAKSPER is part of my maintaining my membership.” I found the most moving account of SHAKSPER’s providing community expressed by an Italian graduate student and aspiring Shakespearean who wishes to remain anonymous. After providing background in to the nature of Italian graduate education, this student concludes, “SHAKSPER gives me what Italian academy cannot or doesn't want to give me. A forum for discussion, a place where I can pose questions and receive answers, a giant seminar where I can sit and follow interesting debates, a virtual classroom where the connection between literature and politics is at least taken for granted (whereas in Italy after the hyperpoliticization of the sixties and seventies people are sick and tired of Gramsci and Marx).”

Several additionally commented that in response to postings they had corresponded with other members off-line. Nina Rulon-Miller shares this anecdote: “My best experience on SHAKSPER was when I responded privately to a teacher (high school, I think) asking about Shakespeare for children. I told him about my third-grade class's study and performance of *The Tempest*. He was so appreciative and sent me such a nice note that it made my day.”

Concerning my questions, the greatest number of respondents (more than twenty) mentioned that they regularly use information gleaned from SHAKSPER in their classes. Pertinent discussions are printed and distributed; cited in class; used to stimulate discussion and debate; forwarded through the class listserv; and cut, pasted, and e-mailed to students. Fran Zauhar goes into detail on how she uses SHAKSPER discussions in class: “the list has helped me see pairings/groupings of the plays, verified my own instincts about topics for discussion, pointed me in the direction of useful resource material, given me ideas for topics and projects for student work.” Many professors in English departments mentioned that they were particularly fond of reading submissions from theatre professionals: A.E.B. Coldiron, for example, writes, “I am always surprised by discussion from actors, directors--it helps keep me grounded--I do teach "performed" Shakespeare, not purely textual or literary Shakespeare (though we do plenty of that), and these discussions remind me of the Players' view.” Although no actors and few directors responded to my questions, SHAKSPER postings frequently explore practical theatrical matters – discussions of past and possible production approaches to conception, staging, and the like.

I was delighted that there were more than ten mentions of the part SHAKSPER has played in scholarly publications. Here are some of the specific responses:

- 1) Bill Godshalk published, one of his first submissions to SHAKSPER, a note in on Bottom's "cutting bowstrings" in **Notes and Queries**.

- 2) Gabriel Egan first heard about Michael Saenger's **Notes and Queries** note on Ariel's costume on SHAKSPER, read the note, and produced a related article that will be appearing in **Theatre Notebook**.
- 3) Ed Pechter made extensive mention of SHAKSPER in "Othello, SHAKSPER & the Infamous Ripley," an essay he contributed to a festschrift for Ernst Honigmann.
- 4) SHAKSPER played a major role in an essay Michael Friedman recently published on the final scene of **Two Gentlemen of Verona**, "'To be slow in words is a woman's only virtue': Silence and Satire in **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**". While writing the piece, Michael sent a query to SHAKSPER regarding Silvia's silence. Neil Novelli replied to him privately and provided useful reviews of productions Michael had not seen. From Novelli, Michael also learned of a conference paper Dolores Ringer had written about an all-female production she had directed. Michael wrote to her, read the paper, and used it extensively in his own piece.
- 5) Dave Evett explains how he uses his longer posting to SHAKSPER as a kind of publication: "SHAKSPER has repeatedly been useful to me in bringing to my attention texts, ideas, definitions, sources of information, that have had or will have had a place in my scholarly work. I think especially of information about electronic information sources--other discussion groups, electronic text depositories, etc. At the production end, I have several times used longish postings, written off-line with some care, as occasions for drafting arguments that eventually got incorporated in work to be submitted for publication. For what it's worth (probably not much as yet), I have saved these, printed them out, and submitted them along with offprints with the annual activity reports we turn in to chair and dean each year--last year, my chair commented on this body of work in his report to the dean."
- 6) From a SHAKSPER query, Laurie Osborne located a new series of animated Shakespeare tales. She wrote an essay around them, a sequel to another essay she had written on the first series, and submitted this new essay to the special issue of **PostScript on Shakespeare: The Movie**, which she heard about from a Call for Papers posted on SHAKSPER.
- 7) Ken Rothwell wrote that he has found "the list extremely valuable in my development of a **Short History of Shakespeare on Screen**". The comments about Shakespeare films from a variety of readers with a variety of perspectives have allowed me to keep my hand on the public pulse, so to speak. I can't think of any other way before electronic mail that I could've so quickly discovered what so many people were thinking about in my special line of research.
- 8) Jim Harner uses SHAKSPER in his job as editor of **The Shakespeare World Bibliography**: "there is rarely a day that goes by but that I find an important lead for a production or publication that should go into the World Shakespeare Bibliography. Frequently, I would not have know about a production had someone not mentioned it on SHAKSPER. I constantly use the list of subscribers to contact people to request offprints (or information about an obscure publication that I can't otherwise identify or track down). And, I've had decent--but not overwhelming--response to my occasional postings that ask subscribers to send along offprints. Thus, I consider SHAKSPER one of the important and essential research tools that any competent Shakespearean has to monitor."

When I wrote the abstract for this paper I wonder aloud about the place of moderation and editing in the informal medium of an Internet listserv. Consistently, however, my moderation and editing were cited as the strengths of the conference – no one complained—and I have thus decided that moderation and editing are not issues at all.

My greater concern in my abstract was with SHAKSPER's "academic currency." The responses I received would appear to support the contention that an academic listserv such as SHAKSPER does have academic value. It provides a sense of a virtual, world-wide community. It is a forum for a wide variety of discussions that range from the trivial to the profound. It is a place that theatre professionals can explore production possibilities and teachers can obtain ideas for the classroom, and it has clearly played a role in many members' scholarship. All this notwithstanding, what I consider the most interesting response to my queries reveals another aspect to SHAKSPER I had not fully considered – SHAKSPER as a site of cultural contestation.

In her SAA "President's Letter: 1993-94," Phyllis Rackin mentioned the heated discussion that followed the announcement that Sam Wanamaker had been awarded a CBE for his work on the *Bankside Globe*: "Outraged responses from the UK provoked a series of exchanges that exposed profound differences between the political and cultural locations occupied by 'Shakespeare' on the two sides of the Atlantic." This exchange led Phyllis Rackin to reflect on the North American "cultural location" of the SAA and to invite members to send thoughts about "the new directions the organization should take and /or features you think it most important to preserve." This exchange was also particularly enlightening to me – I learned a great deal about North American and European cultural differences in a direct, immediate way.

For months now, there has been on SHAKSPER on-going debate about "ideology" – a debate that has appeared again and again over the years. One of the frequent contributors to the debate, Bill Godshalk, remarks, "SHAKSPER certainly allows me to see where I stand in the current debates, and who I tend to stand with." Yet it was the comments of a contributor who stands in opposition to Bill Godshalk, Terry Hawkes, that opened my eyes to academic currency that SHAKSPER has as a site of cultural contestation: "[SHAKSPER] helps to sharpen my perception of what scholars in the USA and elsewhere think and believe - not just about Shakespeare, often about politics, economics, philosophy etc. - and this is frequently and interestingly at odds with the 'official' view you get from reading the journals. An unguarded blurt can be very revelatory - particularly to someone who's interested in how Shakespeare is used/processed by societies." Terry Hawkes identifies a academic role an electronic conference such as SHAKSPER plays as a result of its being a less formal medium than a print journal. SHAKSPER because of its diversity and its relative informality may, in fact, represent more accurately than **Shakespeare Quarterly**, than **Shakespeare Survey**, than **Shakespeare Studies**, than **PMLA**, or than **The Shakespeare Newsletter** what members of the Shakespeare industry and interested bystanders are actually thinking and what Shakespeare teachers are actually teaching. This is a possibility I had not contemplated before I began this paper.