# DIGITAL HUMANITIES: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

## Presidential Address by Professor Nigel Wood

*Lecture delivered on 1ˢᵗ October 2018*

**It is common to claim that there are new, radical trends in research, and, indeed, each epoch has its own pretensions to the Modern, but, currently, there has arisen a situation where – especially in the humanities – the gathering of evidence is no longer simply an effect of human judgement and memory. Once texts (of whatever genre or kind) are digitised and possess an electronic existence, the researcher has to harness technological possibilities and find a new rationale for searching a vast and virtual archive. Commonly, "analogue" methods are contrasted adversely with "digital" priorities. In this equation, "analogue" might be best defined as a reliance on memory and other "human" modes of enquiry that judge the fitness of the conclusions with reference to the culture of the individual, the well-being of a collective and a contribution to a canon of the best (however defined). Conversely, the "digital" has come to signify the use of computational means to address research questions, involving an openness to empirical data freed from traditional assumptions about declared intentions and conscious motivation. Its principal value in English Studies has been to re-cast ideas of how literary history might be exploited to uncover hidden meanings and allusions by reading across to a myriad of references or echoes in other writings. Far from emphasising the supposed originality of the major works by looking within them to demonstrate striking artistic effects, these very effects are tested against any contemporary topoi or traits: is Lear's railing against the Gods as original as we once thought in its singular unity – or is it a patchwork of now-decipherable allusions?**

In order to realise these new possibilities of enquiry, we are now invited to examine anew our methods of reading; where once we had prized *linear* cognition, where the road to knowledge is via purposive, functional and therefore goal-centred accumulation, the *digital* introduces reflections on how we often read in a recursive and sometimes lateral fashion, flipping back and forward in works of reference or between instances of word-patterns. In other words, the unity of a work is challenged by the need to investigate how it might be experienced through the repetition of keywords and, in the case of Shakespeare, how its aural and phonic qualities operate on spectators. As Jerome McGann terms it, "radial reading… involves decoding one or more of the contexts that interpenetrate the scripted and physical text…The person who temporarily stops 'reading' to look up the meaning of a word is properly an emblem of radial reading because that kind of 'radial' operation is repeatedly taking place even while one remains absorbed with a text" (*The Textual Condition* [1991], p. 113). Issuing most insistently from the researches into "machine reading" initiated by the academics at the Stanford Literary Lab, we might come to know more from

a distance from the individual work, in "distant reading", placing greater emphasis – as Franco Moretti has it – on "devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (*Distant Reading* [Verso: New York, 2013], p. 57). Implicitly, in this turn to the technological, we witness a possible reduction in the need to evaluate on humanistic terms, where this might be better than that or that feeling might be a more valuable experience than this: "the unsettling implications of 'machine reading' can be construed as pointing towards a posthuman mode of scholarship in which human interpretation takes a backseat to algorithmic processes" in N. Katherine Hayles's formulation (*How We Think: digital media and contemporary technogenesis* [Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2012], p. 30). Do the facts speak for themselves?

My own consideration is that, however the moment of full evaluation might be delayed, we still require a sense of how relevant our critical views might be, and, moreover, we, at the outset, frame algorithmic questions in our own image – and are answerable for them. In order to demonstrate some of these responses to "distant reading", I am going to analyse a well-known literary example,

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, both to show how a sensitive approach to electronic searching might unearth surprising semantic riches and directions, but also how much mere electronic searching needs careful judgement.

I start with the play's conclusion:

*MALVOLIO*

I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.

*Exit*

*OLIVIA*

He hath been most notoriously abused.

*DUKE ORSINO*

Pursue him and entreat him to a peace:

He hath not told us of the captain yet:

When that is known and golden time convents,

A solemn combination shall be  made#

Of our dear souls

Meantime, sweet sister,

We will not part from hence. Cesario, come;

For so you shall be, while you are a man;

But when in other habits you are seen,

Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen…

*Exeunt all, except Clown*

…A great while ago the world begun,

With hey, ho, & c.

But that's all one, our play is done,

And we'll strive to please you every day.

*Exit* (V.i.378-89, 404-7)

It is rarely noted that Viola will be – according       to Orsino – "fancy's queen", a sight the audience are not permitted to see as she is still Cesario, in her male attire. "Fancy" is a complex word to use in this context. Consulting the Oxford English Dictionary for senses current at the turn of the sixteenth century, we find these contenders for the main intended meaning at this point:

Delusive imagination; hallucination

The process, and the faculty, of forming mental representations of things not present to the senses; chiefly applied to the so-called creative or productive imagination, which frames images of objects, events, or conditions that have not occurred in actual experience

A supposition resting on no solid grounds; an arbitrary notion

Caprice, changeful mood

Capricious or arbitrary preference

The more positive sense of the word, where creativity is best captured, is only one of the available senses for Orsino, thus inviting us to speculate just how securely based for Viola Orsino's future in marriage might be, depending on how mature we may now regard him. Indeed, when we flip back to his opening speech about love and fancy – surely a sign  of  a lovesick and immature plaintiff – the sense of "fancy" thus introduced is not reassuring:

O spirit of love! how quick and fresh art thou,

That, notwithstanding thy capacity

Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,

Of what validity and pitch soe'er,

But falls into abatement and low price,

Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy

That it alone is high fantastical. (I.i.9-15)

Any word search would also throw up Sebastian's mystification at IV.i.58-63:

*SEBASTIAN*

What relish is in this? how runs the stream?

Or I am mad, or else this is a dream:

Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep;

If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!

*OLIVIA*

Nay, come, I prithee; would thou'ldst be ruled by me!

*SEBASTIAN*

Madam, I will.

The tapestry of instances where "fancy" is involved

is provided by any word search of the play plus one's availing oneself of the *OED*'s resources, but, despite its synoptic perspective, it only offers us a scenario and framework; the detail has to be supplied. The strangely provisional conclusion to the action, where marriages cannot come to pass without Malvolio's quiescence and Viola seen in her true garb, is mirrored in this ambiguous phrase, where the precision of the word choice leaves the door open to a non-comic, even unfortunate, conclusion; Viola/Cesario is either an embodiment of affection or of a fanciful construction of the moment. As suggested by the play's title, how long can these affections last?

It could be a valid conclusion to claim that word patterns might not be as evident in the texture of the play without our observing not only their distribution in the work but also their significant frequency. "Fancy" is woven into how the play comments upon transience and – to change the metaphor – its presence is almost symphonic, not immediately available at first (linear) glance, but more evident once we dwell on its "placement", how its repetitions occur at thematically significant moments. Moreover, it would be incorrect to stereotype digital researchers as post-humanists *tout*

*court*. Franco Moretti can relish more than statistics and word-flow charts and, indeed, can appreciate just what they have to contribute when coming to terms with individual texts. For example, how is Horatio used in *Hamlet*? The question is a loaded one for the regular answer is one bounded by his presence as a single *dramatis persona*. He is what he is, a friend of Hamlet's, but Moretti discovers a function that can only be realised graphically.

Though Horatio is an old fixation of mine, I had never fully understood his role in *Hamlet* until I looked at the play's network structure. The keyword, here, is "looked"; what I took from network theory was its basic form of visualization: the idea that the temporal flow of a dramatic plot can be turned into a set of two-dimensional signs – vertices (or nodes) and edges – that can be grasped at a single glance. (*Distant Reading*, p. 211).

To some the reduction of form to its rendition suitable for perusal "at a single glance" is to miss the sense of duration in a linear frame; but the radial "glance" is exactly what we are not accustomed to notice – and its pertinence should not now be ignored.

# THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS AND HEALTHY EQUITY

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The most interesting aspects of existence according to Sir Michael Marmot are Life and Death. In Sir Michael's book La Salute Disuguale (The Health Gap), he describes how the increase in life expectancy in England has almost "ground to a halt" since 2010. University College London's Institute of Health Equity of which Sir Michael Marmot is the Director has demonstrated that in the UK, life expectancy had risen by 2.4 years every year in the female and by 2.3 years every year in the male from 2006 to 2012 using statistics from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). However since 2012, it has become a flat line. Sir Michael, a leading expert on public health claimed that "the cuts in social spending and the failure of the NHS to continue to raise the spending per person is having a significant impact on health and social care for the very old. He also noted that now "we see the rise in dementia which is very troubling, and that it too will require an increase in health and care spending to tackle it and that's not happening."