SHAKSPER: An Academic Discussion List

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Abstract

This essay discusses the moderator's experience of moderating and maintaining the SHAKSPER listserv since 1992. Since that time, the list's popularity has grown, and its membership has changed from a preponderance of academics to a equal mix of scholars and non-academics. As its membership became more diverse, SHAKSPER's topics and participation also changed. The remainder of the essay discusses the challenges of moderating this listserv in terms of its intellectual and social dynamics.

In the Beginning

SHAKSPER, now in its eighteenth year, was founded by Kenneth Steele, then a graduate student at the University of Toronto, in July of 1990, with about a dozen founding members, myself included (SHAKSPER 1990). SHAKSPER — modeled on HUMANIST, the progenitor of all academic electronic seminars — enables ongoing discussion of all things Shakespearean. Technically, it is an e-mail distribution list that uses L-Soft's Listserv software to deliver, archive, and manage its daily digests. The SHAKSPER web site (http://www.shaksper.net) makes all of the list's archived materials readily accessible over the Internet. On February 21, 1992, I became SHAKSPER's co-editor, at first being responsible for the file server. A month later, I took over the editing of the daily submissions into the digests. In June of that year, Ken decided to take a leave of absence from his graduate studies, and I assumed the functions of owner, editor, and moderator of SHAKSPER.

Two years after its founding, SHAKSPER's 293 members were virtually all from academia. Commercial Internet Service Providers were just getting started in the early 1990s. The January 1, 1992 membership list of 223, for example, contains only eight addresses that ended in ".COM," and none of these are from the Internet service providers with which we are familiar today. The remaining addresses, except for one with an "ORG" extension (i.e., an organization) are Bitnet or Internet addresses from academic institutions. Through the early 1990s, the number of members increased steady: to 400 in October 1993, 500 in February 1994, 700 in September 1994, and 1,000

in March 1995. Since the late 1990s, the membership has remained above the 1,200 level. On Tuesday, December 13, 2005, the SPARC 10 Unix server that had been SHAKSPER's physical home for almost ten years died. Eric Luhrs, who is responsible for all things technical regarding SHAKSPER, and I had intended to replace it; now circumstances forced us to do so. About eight weeks later, on Wednesday, February 8, 2006, we were back online with a powerful new server running Listserv under RedHat Enterprise Linux. That eight-week hiatus between the crash of the old server and the launch of the new one was the longest interruption in SHAKSPER's history. During this time, I was preparing an essay for the upcoming Shakespeare Association of America meeting and was writing about SHAKSPER. In that interim, I did a lot of thinking about SHAKSPER's past and future.

SHAKSPER's Membership: Scholarship and Inclusivity

From the beginning, SHAKSPER's target audience was scholars, and Ken and I went out of our way to make the list user-friendly for those academics who, in those early days of computing, were not necessarily comfortable with technology. However, from its roots, we also encouraged diversity and inclusiveness: "No academic qualifications are required for membership in SHAKSPER, and anyone interested in English Literature, the Renaissance, or Drama is welcome to join us" (SHAKSPER: The Global Electronic Shakespeare Conference). A cursory glance at the current membership list indicates that the e-mail addresses are about equally divided between accounts from academic accounts (such as EDU and AC.UK) and accounts from commercial internet providers (such as AOL, EARTHLINK, COMCAST, ATT, and MINDSPRING) and free Internet service providers (such as HOTMAIL, YAHOO, MSN, GMAIL, and NETSCAPE). Some of these later addresses are no doubt accounts belonging to academics, professors, and students who would rather receive their e-mail at their home addresses than their institutional ones. Nevertheless, the fact remains that one consequence of the Internet Revolution is that a significant number of SHAKSPER's present members are not academics and that the often strikingly divergent concerns of the academics and non-academics constitute the source of many of the difficulties that I, as the list's moderator, have encountered as I strive to maintain a scholarly focus in the discussions among what has become a highly diverse membership.

What is This List For?

Over the years, a number of meta-discussions concerning SHAKSPER's purpose have occurred; the following are three questions that have prompted such threads. In an October 15,

1995 post (SHAKSPER 1995), Jonathan Sawday asked, "What, exactly, does this list think it is for?" Six months later, Michael Saenger wrote,

> It occurred to me that we really have a problem. I realize this is a sensitive issue, but the proliferation of junk is making it hard to take the list seriously at times. Many valuable contributors have tuned out after reading careless and incorrect postings. The basic idea of this list is a noble one — a truly democratic forum for ideas, a way of weaving anyone with a modem into the academic community. And it is not naive questions that bring the list down so much as selfish and lazy ranting. So what's the solution? (SHAKSPER 1996)

About a year later, Gabriel Egan, in response to an oversimplified reply to a matter that involved complex textual problems, posed this question: "Are we really still a viable conversing community?" (SHAKSPER 1997). These questions are as pertinent now as they were when they were first asked. What and who is this list for?

The Art of Management

As SHAKSPER has aged and grown, the number of daily submissions has proliferated. There have been times that editing and formatting the digests for a single day has taken me three or more hours. A high level of traffic means more work for me, but it also produces an increased frustration level for many long-time SHAKSPEReans, who fondly remember when individual postings seldom took up more than a single screen, when all messages could be read in ten minutes or less, and when the vast majority of contributions were of scholarly interest. As a result, some of those for whom the list was established have quietly resigned or become inactive, while others have developed the syndrome of delete-key-itis. In response, I have made special efforts to control the number of messages and the level of discourse on the list. My principal concerns were with chatty messages, messages responding to what one member has said about another member's post that are of little, if any, interest to the list as a whole, and flames (that is, personal attacks on the poster rather than on the substance of the post, which for a long period did not seem to infect SHAKSPER as much as they do similar lists). I am not particularly troubled by naïve questions since I have found that, in some cases, questions that I have considered naïve became springboards to some of the more interesting exchanges we have had. In any case, moderating is no simple task, and I approach it with great deal of circumspection.

It may not be a coincidence that 1995 was both the year that SHAKSPER's membership broke the 1,000 mark and the year that the first "What is this list for?" question was posed. However, it would not be for another four years, on April 3, 2000, that in response to the increased traffic, the

domination of the discussion by a handful of members, and the decline in the quality of the posts that I suggested for the first time that members "count to ten" before hitting the reply key (SHAKSPER 2000a). Two days later, I clarified this statement by writing "what I had in mind [when I made the request to count to ten] was that members would initiate a kind of self-regulation: self-moderation if you will." After expressing my preference for maintaining an "elevated level of discourse" without ruling out "occasional humor or just plain silliness," I continued, "My point is that I believe that the membership has as much responsibility as I do in moderating SHAKSPER" (SHAKSPER 2000b). I issued similar pleas for self-restraint over the next eight months (SHAKSPER 2000c; SHAKSPER 2000d; and SHAKSPER 2001). In the face of a small portion of people dominating the discussions, as well as the increasing amount of mail and number of hostile, acrimonious, and downright unkind exchanges, some long-time members began unsubscribing.

I sometimes feel that moderating SHAKSPER requires the patience of Job, the judgment of Solomon, skin thick as steel (preferably Teflon-coated), and the ability to leap tall buildings at a single bound. For some time, I have made efforts to maintain control over the time I spent editing digests and over the quality of the discourse on the list. In May of 2002, after wondering aloud if the list were "still a viable venue for serious discussion of Shakespearean topics," I made a series of suggestions that "would lighten my workload and I believe improve the quality of the list as a whole"; they involved pre-formatting submissions, considering that some exchanges may be more appropriate offline than online, and picking one's fights more carefully by limiting the number of replies per day (SHAKSPER 2002a). I was frustrated that some seemed to treat this list as a "chat room" or as a venue for electronic exhibitionism (SHAKSPER 2002b). When I did intervene and refused to post a submission, I was greeted with accusations that I was stifling free speech. I could count on this happening whenever I posted an Anti-Anti-Stratfordian post, which would be followed up almost immediately by the Oxfordian spokespersons reminding me of how unfair I was being. The issue all along was that SHAKSPER is not free speech; I spend the time to make the list happen, and I pay all of the bills for delivering the service to the membership. But some still insisted that membership in the list alone gave them the entitlement to post anything they wished. To share a sense of how difficult determining the appropriateness of submission is, I ran an experiment in late May 2002. I invited members to "act as moderator" and reply whether they judged the digests of the following day appropriate or not appropriate for the list (SHAKSPER 2002c). The next day, I reported the results:

· 14 digests that were deemed appropriate;

· 6 digests that were not deemed appropriate;

· 2 digests that received virtually split decisions;

· 3 digests that were leaning toward YES; and

· 2 digests that were leaning toward NO.

I explained that I was not asking members to play a version of "The Weakest Link"; instead, "I wanted members to see how difficult judgment calls are regarding accepting or rejecting messages." I went on as follows:

> What can we make from these results? Let's begin with me. I spent almost four hours editing and formatting those 27 digests (I am not counting the one that I sent because obviously it took time to compose). Let's say that I agreed completely with the results above and send out 17 to 19 messages yesterday, what would that mean? First, it would mean that I would have spent around two hours getting SHAKSPER ready yesterday. Second, it would mean that 8 to 10 people could possibly be upset that their messages were rejected while others were accepted. See my dilemma? At this point, I should also report that there were a number of people who voted YES to all or all but one or two of the digests. These people clearly represent those on the list who are perfectly happy with the way SHAKSPER is and would not have it changed in any way. Unfortunately, this really is no longer an option. The complement to this option is the option, as I have been advised by several friends, simply to let it go — to terminate SHAKSPER or to see if I can find someone willing to give up three or four hours a day to run SHAKSPER the way that I have. All of the above put me in a very difficult situation. (SHAKSPER 2002d)

Decision Time

At that time, I considered five options:

2. Leave SHAKSPER just as it is. Unfortunately, this really is not an option.

4. Develop guidelines regarding content, civility, and the responsibility of posters to do some of their own pre-editing and pre-formatting. With guidelines in place, I could return a message that I believed did not fall under the purpose of the list or that did not conform to the guidelines. Messages could be re-submitted after changes are made. The problem was that this solution might cause as many problems as it solves and might not decrease the traffic on the list to a level that I would be comfortable with.

6. Set up an un-moderated, less formal list with a behind-the scenes moderator using software that would send out to every subscriber all messages that had been sent to the listserv either individually throughout the day or in a single digest. People could choose to belong to either SHAKSPER or this un-moderated list or to both. Then when messages

arrive that for whatever reason (including purpose and guidelines as above) I did not wish to edit, format, and send out to the members of SHAKSPER, I could return to the sender and say that I believe that this message would be more appropriate for the un-moderated list — no discussion, no argument.

8. Give the list to someone else.

10. Terminate the list.

These reflections, and my more active moderation, reduced the list traffic for a while, but by September volume was as high as it had ever been. I continued to make pleas for self-moderation, noting that "many posts appear to be individual members talking with each other rather than messages that are responding to substantive issues raised in the threads" (SHAKSPER 2002e). Even though I was rejecting more messages, I felt that I did not have the time or inclination "to mini-manage every single submission that I receive" (SHAKSPER 2002f), so I began ending threads that I thought had reached what I deemed their useful conclusion. In 2003, I offered several remarks trying to encourage civility, announcing that "SHAKSPER is not a newsgroup nor was meant to be one. . . . Practices that are acceptable on less formal electronic media are not appropriate to this list" (SHAKSPER 2003a).

The personal attacks continued: "For whatever reasons — bravado, exhibitionism, misguided attempts at cleverness, or just plain malice — lately there has just been too much venom spilled" (SHAKSPER 2003b). On my part, I tried to police or moderate behind the scenes, but "[t]o an extent, ad hominem remarks are in the eye of the beholder" (SHAKSPER 2003c). My rule of thumb became "Messages addressing an individual should be sent to that individual. Messages sent to the list should have an audience greater than one or two members" (SHAKSPER 2003c). In September 2004, I pledged "to take more time reviewing submissions for appropriateness" and to "limit my editing-formatting time":

> I will begin by sending out announcements and new queries, and I will then work on as many on-going threads as I have time for before quitting for the day. In other words, I will no longer strive to post all submissions I receive the following weekday. (SHAKSPER 2004)

I kept trying to operate by having members exercise self-moderation; exercise civility toward other members; take discussions or debates that had become primarily exchanges/debates/attacks between two members off-line; and consider that exchanges, such as congratulations, thank-yous, and I-said-you-said, may be more appropriate offline. I have also made suggestions about self-government: selecting one or two threads to respond in any one day and keeping responses as brief

and to the point as possible by limiting submissions to a screen or two of text. I have even made suggestions for responding to contributions that members consider foolish, myopic, mistaken, or boring: don't bother reading them; ignore them; be indignant, but be courteous. I went so far as to compose a "Some Thoughts from SHAKSPER's Editor Regarding Netiquette" page for the Website ("Some Thoughts").

The Art of Moderation

The problem, however, was much greater than just the level of discourse; the problem, as I began to see, was that concerns of non-academics were dominating list discussion. Discussions about characters and their motivations proliferated. Pet theories, often involving Shakespeare's possession of esoteric knowledge or his communication through hidden codes, were advanced, refuted, and confidently advanced again. Interpretations of the ultimate meaning of a particular play competed with one another ad infinitum, reappearing with regularity almost anytime that play was mentioned. I considered these and their ilk essentialist and reductive claptrap and would strive to "kill" the thread when I could no longer stand it. After I called for an end to five such threads under the SUBJECT line "Dead Horses and Closing Threads" on November 15, 2005, Holger Schott Syme responded with a thoughtful "purpose-of-the-listserv" message, which offered the following:

> Hardy does a tremendous job organizing this list, investing an unfathomable amount of time and mental energy. And on occasion, his efforts pay off splendidly. But SHAKSPER is only as good as its contributors, and I can't help feel that the way the list has been going it has moved further and further away from discussions in the field it is part of — that of the academic exploration of the works and culture of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

> Unquestionably _Hamlet_ is a play worthy of much critical attention, but its exegesis takes up an excessive amount of space on this listserv (and it is of course no coincidence that it's usually the same 10-15 people driving those discussions). The list has many well-established figures as lurkers who only very occasionally participate in discussions, but that is not, I don't think, a sign of academic snobbery or indifference; rather, the kinds of arguments that keep reappearing in slightly different guises on this list are simply irrelevant to the vast majority of scholars working in the field today (witness the thankfully short-lived thread on Lear's illegitimate son). Sadly, topics of great interest, such as Richard Burt's recent questions about the state of the field, or Tom Bishop's query about studies of Shakespearean imagery, don't seem to have much traction around here anymore; typically, the more established "names" on the list make an appearance to answer bibliographical

queries, but don't stick around for extended discussions afterwards (this is emphatically not simply an effect of being "established" — cf. the Sidney-Spenser listserv, which regularly features contributions from some of the most well-known Spenserians around).

I frankly don't understand why some subjects which _should_ be allowed to develop (the recent debate over stage-railings is a case in point: to theatre historians at least that's a subject worthy of extended discussion!) are treated the same as issues that are clearly only of interest to an extremely self-selecting group (almost any thread on _Hamlet_, for instance). My main objection is that many of the latter threads incessantly go over ground covered in innumerable previous discussions, are more or less out of touch with the current state of the field, and often revolve around subjects well-treated in the existing (older) literature. On the other hand, threads such as the stage-railings one bring up issues that haven't been discussed here before, are still considered important by at least a sub-field of early modern studies, and haven't necessarily been treated in depth elsewhere. They may only be of limited interest to the SHAKSPER community at large, but at least they might potentially make a valuable contribution to the broader academic conversation about Shakespeare and Co. That seems to me the best we can strive for on this list, and a goal which would make Hardy's efforts worthwhile. (SHAKSPER 2005a)

In my response, after thanking all who supported my efforts, including those who were completely happy with the list just the way it is, I wrote that, in a desire to maintain the core academic role of SHAKSPER without sharply altering what it has evolved into, I intended to end some discussions earlier than I had done in the past (SHAKSPER 2005b). But I was still not satisfied. In fact, a few days later in my frustration, I suggested that some list members might wish to form their own lists (SHAKSPER 2005c). Ironically, the day the server crashed, I wrote in a post entitled "Various Ramblings" that "[I]n the past more than fifteen years, I have given a great deal of my life to delivering SHAKSPER to subscribers. I have explained that for the first years of its existence SHAKSPER was almost exclusively an academic list with scholars constituting 95% of its members. Then the Internet revolution got underway, and Internet access became almost universal in some parts of the world; now significant numbers of SHAKSPER members are enthusiasts. Clearly, some members are happy with SHAKSPER exactly as it is, but I am not. It hurts me every time I get notification that another young or established scholar is leaving the list. It hurts me when interesting scholarly postings are ignored and others that simply drive me crazy thrive. It bothers me that appropriate discourse for some appears to be ad hominem attacks on the

poster, especially if they disagree with his politics. . . . I have been looking for solutions to my dilemma, but nothing seems to be adequate" (SHAKSPER 2005d). None of these solutions seemed to me to curb the petty squabbles, the pet theories and interpretation (theories and interpretations that often tried the patience of the most open-minded among us), the over-blown reactions to pet theories and interpretations, and so on and so on.

After the Crash

In the eight-week hiatus between the crash of the UNIX SPARC 10 and the launch of the Linux PowerEdge 1800, I tried to consider my options. When SHAKSPER went back online on February 8, 2006, it seemed to me that I had only one:

> These past eight weeks have been the longest hiatus I have had as SHAKSPER's editor in the more than fifteen years that I have held that position. I have had plenty of time to think and even some time to rest from my labors and work on other projects, like my upcoming SAA essay. While preparing this paper, I determined that the membership now appears equally divided between members with academic e-mail addresses and those with commercial ones, an indication that roughly half the members are currently academics and the other half non-academics. I welcome the diversity of members, but I want to regain the academic focus of the early days of the list. The only way that I can see that this is possible is for me to become active as moderator and only post messages that I believe are of interest to the academic community. In posting messages only of interest to the academic community, I am not proposing to restrict the membership of SHAKSPER or to eliminate significant questions and comments from actors, directors, or any member of SHAKSPER. The source of the post is not the issue; the issue will be its relevance to the broad scope of academic interests in Shakespeare studies.

> I know that there are some who feel that the list has had little genuine academic content at all. I know that many will be deeply disappointed by my decision and see it as elitist and divisive. I know that some will feel that I will not be exclusive enough; and others that I am being too draconian. I also know that I cannot please all of the people all of the time. I do not make this decision lightly nor do I even welcome the burden that it will force upon me. However, I feel compelled to make this change in order to reassert SHAKSPER's role in and service to the world-wide Shakespearean academic community. (SHAKSPER 2006a)

I knew that taking such a position would place me under great scrutiny. I knew as well that some would be second-guessing my every decision and that others would be waiting their time to test the

boundaries. Indeed, after a few weeks the traffic level began to increase, so I responded by calling for an end to a half dozen threads and making one more request: "I am now officially encouraging members to limit their submissions to a few per week and not more than one a day" (SHAKSPER 2006b).

My resolve to become a more active moderator and to post only messages that I believe were of interest to the Shakespeare academic community reflected my desire to reassert SHAKSPER's discursive role in the scholarly community. In June of 2006, believing that the changes I had initiated were beginning to have their desired effect, I proposed the possibility of adding a new feature to the conference. I explained that in the early days of the list, Shakespeareans who taught in smaller, relatively isolated institutions around the world would often seek me out at conferences to thank me for providing them a kind of virtual faculty lounge, a sense of belonging to a community of scholars with whom they could share their thoughts and explore their ideas despite the comparative dearth of actual colleagues where they lived and worked. It has occurred to me that we might be more intentional about this aspect of our community and institute periodic topics to discuss amongst ourselves — a SHAKSPER Roundtable (SHAKSPER 2006c). The reactions of the members to the proposal were positive. Over the months, I outlined possible procedures. These roundtable exchanges would differ from the everyday discussions that take place on the list. They would be organized around a focused topic of current interest to the discipline of Shakespeare or Early Modern Studies and would be under the direction of a Guest Moderator.

After the New Year, Hugh Grady, Professor of English at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, volunteered to be Guest Moderator for a Roundtable on Presentism. The Guest Moderator is responsible for initiating, moderating, directing, and concluding the discussions. To begin, the Guest Moderator suggests a Reading List of three to five items that are announced at least two weeks before discussion starts. Anyone participating is expected to be thoroughly familiar with these readings. The Guest Moderator initiates the discussion with a question or a statement. Members who wish to participate send responses that are clearly identified as belonging to the Roundtable thread to me, and I forward them to the Guest Moderator, who organizes and comments on the entire week's submissions before suggesting directions that discussions might take the following week. After calling an end to the Roundtable, the Guest Moderator provides a summary statement, and then the entire course of the Roundtable discussions is given its own page on the SHAKSPER website for public review. My hope is that my more active role as moderator and these other changes will enable SHAKSPER to regain some of the excitement of the earlier years by providing scholars around the world with an alternative venue to conferences and publications to talk and to explore ideas.

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