Talking digital: how has digitization changed the way I work?

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“Talking Books” in *Shakespeare Newsletter* Digital Themes Issue

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Much of my recent bibliographic and book-historical work would have been difficult or impossible to complete without access to electronic databases such as Early English Books Online (EEBO, http://eebo.chadwyck.com/), the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC, http://estc.bl.uk), and Alan Farmer and Zack Lesser’s Database of Early English Playbooks: DEEP (http://deep.sas.upenn.edu/). For *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge UP, 2013), in particular, these resources were invaluable, as they provide a range of data to which I would otherwise not have had access, short of spending a few years at the British Library or the Folger Shakespeare Library.

For this and other publications, it was in fact the mixture of old-style rare-book room visits and new-style laptop research that was key. For instance, quite a number of years ago, I first examined a slight, undated pamphlet at the Folger, an odd poetic miscellany, called *Cupids Cabinet Unlock’t*, with a title-page attribution to “William Shakespeare.” Years later, digital resources (in particular EEBO) allowed me to identify the origins of many of its poems, none by Shakespeare, but a surprising number by Milton (see “*Cupids Cabinet Unlock’t* (1662), Ostensibly ‘By W. Shakespeare’, in Fact Partly by John Milton,” in *Canonising Shakespeare: Stationers and the Book Trade, 1640–1740*, ed. Emma Depledge and Peter Kirwan (Cambridge UP, forthcoming)). Further online research, in particular with the ESTC, led me to suspect the publication to which the pamphlet at the Folger originally belonged: *The Art of Courtship* (1662). When I sat down with the only complete extant copy of *The Art of Courtship* at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, my suspicion was confirmed. At the same time, I discovered that *The Art of Courtship* contains a pamphlet that had so far
escaped digitization, and when some of it sounded strangely familiar, I realized that the book contains previously unknown adaptations of some of John Donne’s best-loved lyric poems (see “Newly Discovered Adaptations of Poems by John Donne, Printed in 1662,” The Review of English Studies, 67 (2015), 679-712). So it has taken me a mixture of hard copies in libraries and digital data online to get to the bottom of things.

A project I am currently working on is also greatly dependent on digital media: an edition of Belvedere (to be published by Cambridge UP), a printed commonplace book that first appeared in 1600 and contains many excerpts from Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, and others. It is a fascinating book, a kind of precursor of modern anthologies of English literature, giving us about the best sense we can have of Shakespeare’s place in the emerging English literary canon at the turn of the seventeenth century. The problem with it though is that its 4,482 short excerpts are all unassigned. In the early twentieth century, Charles Crawford, working on an edition that he failed to complete, managed to trace the origins of more than 2,000 passages – an amazing feat of scholarship at the time. But now, thanks to EEBO and other digital resources, we can not only check Crawford’s ascriptions (and most of them are perfectly accurate) but also trace many more quotations and thus get a much better sense of the makeup of Belvedere as a whole. I am lucky to be doing this work with Devani Singh, an exceptionally gifted post-doc with a PhD from Cambridge. Incidentally, we are using digital software to collate the fourteen extant copies of the 1600 Belvedere, and our aim is to publish the edition not only as a paper book and e-book, but also via a freely accessible online database through which users can extract from the edition exactly those passages and statistics they are interested in. So in a variety of ways, this is a project to which digitization is crucial.

Devani and I have also been working on another project, an introduction to and catalogue of the collection of early modern books at the Martin Bodmer Library in Geneva.
Martin Bodmer was a wealthy bibliophile – a kind of Swiss version of Henry Folger – who lived from 1899 to 1971. He grew up in Zurich but moved to Geneva when, at the outbreak of World War II, he started working for the International Red Cross, as whose vice-president he served from 1947 to 1964. He built an astounding collection of books around Goethe’s concept of Weltliteratur, world literature, with the idea of capturing, as he put it, ‘the mental activity of mankind by means of its most important texts’. Of the roughly 160,000 books and manuscripts he assembled (about half of which are rare or unique), only a small portion is devoted to Shakespeare, but its quality is outstanding: a set of magnificent folios, first to fourth, and lots of quartos, including first editions of Love’s Labour’s Lost (1598), Much Ado about Nothing (1600), 2 Henry IV (1600), the Sonnets (1609), Troilus and Cressida (1609 – the only uncut copy of a Shakespeare play printed during his lifetime), Othello (1622), and The Two Noble Kinsmen (1634), as well as a copy of the second quarto (the first ‘good’ quarto) of Romeo and Juliet (1599). All in all, the Bodmer Library houses close to 200 early modern English books, and since Bodmer remained fairly secretive about his collection and usually did not welcome scholars with open arms, not a lot is known about them. This is about to change, however, thanks to the Bodmer Lab (http://bodmerlab.unige.ch/), a research and digitization project based at the Bodmer Library and the University of Geneva. One of its aims is to make freely available online digitizations of a significant part of the Bodmer collection, including its early modern English books. So the aim of the work Devani and I have done is to synthesize and describe what is known about the collection of early modern English books, and to enable future research into them. The Bodmer Library will have come a long way: from limited access by select guests to free availability on the World Wide Web. It is an exciting development to be part of.