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Shakespeare and
Complexity Theory

Claire Hansen



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Introduction

Shakespeare, the System

Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away
Till I have found each letter in the letter[.]¹

[I]f this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate.²

In *King Lear*, letters not only communicate but effect action. Importantly, that action is never predictable. If Edmund's forged letter thrives, it will upset the play's systems of hierarchy and primogeniture. As his – and other – plots within *King Lear* unfold, the trajectory of written letters becomes increasingly unpredictable. A nonlinear network of letters shapes the fates of *King Lear*'s characters in unexpected and complex ways. Shakespeare's use of letters, argues Alan Stewart, 'tends to undermine stability.'³ In *King Lear*, a 'network of letters' resembles – in the words of Julia Ritter – 'an intricate web of plots and counterplots which depends precariously upon the missives' sometimes faulty and often unpredictable journeys between senders and recipients.⁴

Similarly unpredictable networks of letters are discernible in many of Shakespeare's plays (all but five of the First Folio plays, in fact⁵): Artemidorus' prophetic warning in *Julius Caesar*;⁶ the 'sweet scrolls' that 'fly about the streets of Rome' in *Titus Andronicus*;⁷ and the letter given to Antonio by Portia in the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, with her cryptic comment that he 'shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter'.⁸ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* proves one of the few plays in which letters are absent; paper and ink replaced by the supernatural fairy interventions which utilise the media of petals and the juice of the love-in-idleness flower.⁹

Letters are tangible, physical embodiments of potential: they can generate interactions between writer and recipient as well as with the mediating forces that engage with or interrupt the intended linear transmission process. Early modern letter-writing was 'a complex (often collaborative rather than solitary) activity' of 'a multi-agent nature', involving layers of input and multiple hands.¹⁰ Early modern letters emerge

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out of systems, but as a form of interaction, also work to maintain and produce those systems. Letters, of course, rely integrally on one major complex system: language. As Gary Taylor and John V. Nance remind us, languages 'are systemic'.¹¹ Further, literacies in early modern England were 'multiple, variable, subject to redefinition', with different type fonts and script forms shaping 'different experiences of literacy'.¹² Beyond language and literacies, letters also rely upon the interactions of many other systems. These include the pedagogical systems that educate (to varying extents) the writer, messenger and recipient, as well as the systems that produce the paper, penknife, ink, 'pounce for blotting' and calendar for dating, wax and seals (including the ecological and agricultural systems which provide 'the gall in ink, the goose from which the quill is plucked').¹³ The system of delivery in Shakespeare's England was more of a 'messy, *ad hoc* arrangement of messengers' than a formalised 'system', including a 'network of royal "standing posts"'.¹⁴ More broadly, we must include the vagaries of the social, political and environmental systems through which the letters must traverse; and of course, the complex systems of the writer's and recipient's brains, their histories and memories.

Shakespeare's network of letters in the fictional playworld of *King Lear* and throughout his corpus provides an apt metaphor for the integration of Shakespeare's plays in our own real world. His plays circulate like the letters within them – interrupted and altered, reinterpreted, edited, adapted, re-read, performed and re-performed – interacting with an idea (always imagined) of the letter's sender but in no sense controlled or limited by the sender's supposed intentions. Even a letter's 'reception' – a deceptively passive term – contains a dynamic process: Stewart describes the reception of a letter as 'a complex performance of which reading of the text is only one part'.¹⁵ Eve Rachele Sanders and Margaret W. Ferguson articulate how early modern readers interacted with content: arguing, emending, correcting, cutting and adding, as well as forming 'associations and at times larger social networks through their reading'.¹⁶ Daybell argues that reading – like the process of composition – was often collaborative.¹⁷ The recipients of the letters are also continually changing as different audiences engage with and reinterpret them. From these interactions emerge equally unpredictable phenomena that feed back into the letter's (or play's) network, further altering and enriching its behavioural patterns. Shakespeare's use of letters throughout his plays thus does far more than communicate information essential to the progression of the narrative – just as his plays do far more than tell a story. The letters are a microcosmic example of the macrocosmic system of Shakespeare.

Like most communication networks, Shakespeare is complex. Whether you examine one metaphor, one prop (like a letter), one play, or his entire oeuvre, at every level Shakespeare unfolds in surprising

and intricate ways. When we refer to Shakespeare, study his works, or watch his plays, we understand that his name refers to one individual and that individual's corpus. But it is also far more complex than this: we apply the term Shakespeare to a range of manifestations, creating 'a multiplicity' of Shakespeares.¹⁸ Shakespeare is a 'proliferating knot of times and places'.¹⁹ His presence in academia, education, performance, popular culture, history and politics comprises a dense, layered, interconnected network of parts. Within these broad fields and discourses are innumerable interactions that (re)create Shakespeare through ongoing, dynamic processes. Such interactions are impossible to quantify or exhaustively account for; they amount to 'a heterogeneous swarm of interconnecting, interdependent, complex, nonlinear relationships'.²⁰ These ceaseless interactions and countless others *are* Shakespeare – they constitute and regenerate this shape-shifting system. This identification of Shakespeare as complex recognises the complexity inherent within the subject; it does not retrospectively introduce it. Shakespeare, in all its manifestations – as play, language, performance, historical subject, individual, fictitious playworld, contemporary phenomenon, digital incarnation, field of study – is a complex system. In fact, upon closer inspection, Shakespeare comprises a nest of complex systems.

Complexity theory – the study of complex systems – is a dynamic new framework that radically reimagines the Shakespeare system and our attempts to investigate it. Complexity theory recognises the way that interactions create and sustain open, dynamic systems. Essentially, complexity theory helps us to understand how the world works. It identifies systems in our natural and social worlds that exhibit complex behavioural patterns and examines how they operate. Complexity theory is particularly useful for biological and social systems because '[l]iving systems – organisms, communities, coevolving ecosystems – are the paramount example of organised complexity'.²¹ As complexity theory centres on how parts interact, it illustrates not any one particular element or area of Shakespeare studies but, rather, is more useful for an examination of the interactions *between* aspects of Shakespeare. This approach is therefore based on a systemic, relational ontology.

My use of complexity theory has three objectives. First, I identify Shakespeare – and the many subsystems within the scope of Shakespeare studies – as a complex system. Second, I use complexity theory to explore the ongoing regeneration of Shakespeare through the interaction of parts. In doing so, complexity theory proves an enlightening lens for the analysis of Shakespeare's plays, as well as various other subsystems at work within the broader Shakespeare system: from early modern cultural practices to the structure and behavioural patterns of co-authorship in the period; and to modern-day pedagogical systems and the manifestations of Shakespeare in twenty-first century culture. Third, I seek to contribute to the field of complexity theory by refining

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its application and extending its reach into the humanities. My aim is to demonstrate how complexity theory may be of value to Shakespeare studies, and conversely, how its use might refine the implementation of complexity theory in the humanities.

This might elicit the criticism that ‘anything’ can be tried on Shakespeare, and that novel theories are applied simply for the sake of novelty. Complexity theory needs to be able to account for itself and hypothesise the benefits it may provide to Shakespeare scholarship. However, here complexity provides a challenge rather than a benefit: complexity theory interrogates how Shakespeare and his associated field of study are actually constituted. If we ask how complexity theory is relevant to Shakespeare, the answer lies in the fact that a complexivist approach seeks to know what precisely is meant by ‘Shakespeare’. If we accept that Shakespeare is a complex system (containing myriad other complex systems), then the question becomes not whether complexity theory is relevant for Shakespeare studies but how do we understand the systems his name encompasses? Complexity theory is thus relevant for Shakespeare studies because it interrogates what we mean by ‘Shakespeare’.

In each chapter of *Shakespeare and Complexity Theory*, I focus on one subsystem within the broader Shakespeare system, taking one of 13 characteristics identified in Chapter 1 as my central focus, and pairing this with a Shakespeare play and a particular method or mode of using complexity theory (see Table 1.1).

Chapter Overview

This structure is designed to interrogate the behaviour of complex systems, reconceptualise Shakespeare’s texts by examining their complex behavioural patterns, offer illuminating perspectives on narrative, pedagogical, theatrical and cultural subsystems, and explore different ways

Table 1.1 Shakespeare and Complexity Theory

Chapter	Play	System	Characteristic	Method
Two	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Fictional social system	Bounded instability	Metaphorical extension
Three	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	Play system	Self-organisation	System modelling
Four	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Educational system	Unexpected emergence	Pedagogical observation
Five	<i>Julius Caesar</i>	Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare system	Attractors	Case study

of using complexity theory in order to develop implementation strategies for the humanities.

Chapter 1 functions as a standalone introduction to complexity theory, interweaving Shakespeare studies, literary studies and the humanities with this new theory. The list of complex characteristics is designed for extension into areas of inquiry beyond the boundaries of this book. This chapter also identifies latent or implicit complexivism in early modern scholarship. In Chapter 2, early modern dance – which is often under-theorised within the study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – is given renewed vitality through complexity's concept of 'bounded instability' or 'the edge of chaos'. Likewise, this vague and under-researched concept is interrogated and refined through this implementation, which also embraces metaphorical extension as valid and essential for literary studies. In the third chapter, I investigate a play-text's self-organising nature and critique how we conceptualise co-authorship in *Titus Andronicus*. The focus of the book expands from the internal world of the play's narrative to the construction of the play itself as a complex system. Chapter 4 tackles the unrealised learning potential latent in a classroom's unexpected or unpredictable moments and in *The Merchant of Venice*. It embeds the complex system of a play within a contemporary educational system, and uses data drawn from class observations and interviews to explore the role of the unpredictable in Shakespeare education. The final chapter identifies and traces the behavioural patterns of 'attractors' in two systems: the Shakespeare system as it localises in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, and the political system of *Julius Caesar*.

The systems of interest in this book move gradually from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, and include: the internal systems of the fictional playworld; the entire play as a system in its own right; the early modern theatrical system; the educational systems that teach Shakespeare's plays; and the global cultural system that creates and perpetuates the concept of Shakespeare. This can also be seen as different levels nested within each other: the narrative level; meta-narrative and historical level; pedagogical level; and finally the cultural level. Always the macrocosmic is in dialogue (either directly or through mediated interactions) with other system levels, scales and parts, because the macrocosmic is a product of the interactions of the lower levels.

These nested levels work much the same way as the letters that populate Shakespeare's plays. Letters, like the systems and subsystems that comprise the phenomena of Shakespeare, emerge as 'multifaceted and layered forms'.²² The smallest unit of a letter might be an alphabetical letter – as Julia says in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we can find 'each letter in the letter' – while a written letter is itself one unit of a play's broader communication network, and one prop within the theatre company's arsenal, and one infinitesimally small part of early modern England's complex, shifting, dynamic culture. The value of complexity

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theory in Shakespeare studies resides in its ability to tackle each of these levels; it offers a remarkably adaptive and dynamic framework applicable to the wildly diverse agents of Shakespeare, the system.

Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William C. Carroll, Third Series ed., (London: Methuen Drama, 2004), 1.2.118–19.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes, Third Series ed., (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), 1.2.19–21.
- 3 Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.
- 4 Julia Ritter, "'Know'st Thou This Paper?': *King Lear's* Tragic Letters', *The Upstart Crow* 21, (2001): 48.
- 5 Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, 4.
- 6 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell, Third Series ed., (London: Cengage Learning, 1998), 3.1.7n. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from this edition of the play.
- 7 William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Third Series ed., (London: Methuen Drama, 1995), 4.4.16. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from this edition of the play.
- 8 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Drakakis, Third Series ed., (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 5.1.278–9. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from this edition of the play.
- 9 Lisa Hopkins makes a similar manoeuvre in considering the function of certain props as 'analogous to those' of letters, such as the handkerchief in *Othello*. Lisa Hopkins, 'Reading Between the Sheets: Letters in Shakespearean Tragedy', *Critical Survey* 14, no. 3 (2002): 10.
- 10 James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter Writing, 1512–1635*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9–10, 13.
- 11 Gary Taylor and John V. Nance, 'Imitation or Collaboration? Marlowe and the Early Shakespeare Canon', *Shakespeare Survey* 68, (2015): 33.
- 12 Eve Rachele Sanders and Margaret W. Ferguson, 'Literacies in Early Modern England', *Critical Survey* 14, no. 1 (2002): 1–3.
- 13 Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 2; Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, 8.
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- 15 Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, 8.
- 16 Sanders and Ferguson, 'Literacies in early modern England', 6.
- 17 Daybell, *Material Letters*, 24.
- 18 Robert Shaughnessy, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.
- 19 Julian Yates, 'Accidental Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Studies* 34, no. 1 (2006): 91.
- 20 Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos: Complexity Theory, Deleuze/Guattari and Psychoanalysis for a Climate in Crisis*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 15.
- 21 Stuart Kauffman, *The Origins of Order: Self-Organisation and Selection in Evolution*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 173.
- 22 Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 12.