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Prospero and Plagiarism: Early Modern Studies and the Rise of Wikipedia

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Abstract

In recent years, Wikipedia has emerged as one of the most prominent sources, of any sort, of information and ideas relating to what one might call early modern studies. This article considers Wikipedia's troubled relationship with conventional academic authority, and also the paradox whereby Wikipedia articles are at the same time very mutable and very persistent. As case studies, it looks in detail at the evolution and dissemination of two Wikipedia articles, on The Tempest and on the minor writer Gervase Markham. Wikipedia, it will be argued, is a project whose conflicted attitudes to knowledge and authority have parallels with the early modern.

KEYWORDS / *MOTS-CLÉS*

wikipedia, shakespeare, early modern period, authority, print, knowledge, plagiarism

Contents

Introduction

In recent years, Wikipedia has emerged as one of the most prominent sources, of any sort, of information and ideas relating to what one might call early modern studies. Researchers, teachers, students, and general readers alike are all, in different ways, engaging with its content. They are using it as a first (and often last) port of call for factual and interpretive information. And yet academics working in the fields of early modern literature, culture, and history, like their colleagues in other disciplines, have an instinctive dislike both for the intellectual structures of Wikipedia and for the attitudes towards information, authority, and knowledge that such structures tend to foster. Wikipedia's relationship to early modern studies is an almost unstudied phenomenon. This article aims to fill some of that gap, offering a review of how, as of 2009, Wikipedia presents information about the early modern, and also an argument that Wikipedia presents an imaginative opportunity which is in some aspects unique to early modern scholarship. Its structures of knowledge, so counterintuitive for a twenty-first-century academic, in fact resemble (I will suggest) knowledge structures of the early modern period.

Before going any further, it should be said loudly that Wikipedia is a fabulous project, making knowledge accessible to non-specialists with remarkable speed and in astonishing depth. Whether one is looking for information on episodes of *The West Wing*, or a guide to the Martian climate, or any fact that lies outside one's narrow area of specialization, Wikipedia provides a fast and generally adequately reliable answer; an answer that will often lead you on to things you would not have thought about otherwise; and an answer that contains information that can get you started on exploring that area beyond Wikipedia. For any humanist, these qualities make Wikipedia a phenomenon to be celebrated, and one should also celebrate the enthusiasts whose work is creating it. If this article draws attention to some of Wikipedia's stranger features, it does so from a position of admiration—and fascination—for the project as a whole.

What follows is organized into three sections. The first is a brief review of Wikipedia as an entity, with particular attention to the structures of knowledge and authority that it implies. The second section examines the state of Wikipedia, in 2009, in terms of its coverage of the early modern period. This section takes, as more detailed case studies, two Wikipedia entries on matters relating to the early modern: one very busy, one very quiet. The third and final section suggests that Wikipedia might provide early modernists not merely with a resource but with an imaginative opportunity. It is, I will suggest, a fully working example of a project which provides an analogue to early modern conflicts about the idea of intellectual property.

Wikipedia and academic authority

Wikipedia, "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," is strictly speaking a set of web-based projects administered by a charitable trust, the Wikimedia Foundation ("Wikipedia").[1] The project that concerns us here (and which implicitly stands in for all the others) is the English-language Wikipedia, a vast and diverse project which recently celebrated reaching its three millionth entry.

The most notable feature of Wikipedia is its textual instability. Any user can, at any time, click on the "edit" button to add or delete content, and this is happening round the clock at a startling rate. Wikipedia itself offers various statistics attempting to illustrate the rapidity with which it changes—the encyclopedia as a whole, it claims, has now exceeded 330 million edits; in September 2008, the latest month for which statistics were available at the time of writing, over 130,000 registered users and over 520,000 unregistered users made one or more edits ("Wikipedia:Statistics"; "Wikipedia:Editing frequency"). To gain a more vivid sense of the speed at which it is moving, a reader might prefer to go to the "recent changes" page of the encyclopedia, and watch the modifications flood past in real time at the rate of fifty to a hundred per minute ("Recent changes"; Wood).

Version control is, then, a major issue, and in some respects Wikipedia's version control is excellent. Every Wikipedia article comes with two associated pages: "Discussion" and "History." The History page records every state of the article since it was created, and the date and time at which each change was made. It also identifies the source of the change. Most serious Wikipedia editors prefer to set up a User ID for themselves, usually pseudonymous, which appears in the History alongside each of their edits. More casual users can edit pages without logging in, and these edits

are identified on the History page by the IP address that they come from. The Discussion page, complementing the History page, is for contributors to discuss the process of editing the article in question: what improvements could be made to the article? Have there been recurring problems in the article's development (for instance, persistent debates about content)? Again, contributions to this page are identified by user. Taken together, and given sufficient time, the Discussion and History pages allow one to dissect the development of any Wikipedia article with great precision—much more than with any comparable print source.

However, since the very point of using Wikipedia is its speed and convenience, most users on most occasions look only at the current version. They don't see anything about who wrote it, or how often its content has been revised. They cannot, strictly speaking, be sure that the content of the article will not change in the few minutes just before or just after they consult it. What further complicates the issue is that thousands of sources have "forked" from Wikipedia: that is, they have taken a snapshot of some of Wikipedia's publically available data, and made use of it in some alternative form. Some projects have done this with Wikipedia's blessing—its Creative Commons licence permits this practice providing certain conditions are met—and created separate encyclopedia-type resources of their own. Many others, though, have simply "scraped" the data, copying it into their web pages, sometimes purely to attract search engine hits (["Wikipedia:Mirrors and forks"](#)). Forking of whatever sort, though, freezes the article at the moment when the fork is made. Thus, a fork of Wikipedia material taken on 1 May 2009 will not reflect changes to Wikipedia made on or after 2 May 2009. Indeed, it is quite useful to say that anyone who even quotes from a Wikipedia article is "forking" Wikipedia's data: taking a fixed snapshot of the content as it stands at that moment, regardless of subsequent changes.

The practice of forking means that once a statement has been in Wikipedia for long enough, even altering it in the source will not remove it from the record, as it will still persist in quotations and forks of the earlier page. The civil-liberties campaigner Daniel Brandt describes this effect, in connection with Wikipedia's unfortunate track record on libellous statements about living people: "From Wikipedia, the material is spread like a virus by search engines and other scrapers, and the damage is amplified by orders of magnitude. There is no recourse for the victim, and no one can be held accountable. Once it's all over the web, no one has the power to put it back into the bottle" ([Brandt, "Wikipedia Watch"](#)). In response to such criticisms, Wikipedia is currently experimenting with a system of "flagged revisions" for biographies of living people: a first step towards peer review (see ["Wikipedia:Flagged protection"](#)). Our

concern is not primarily with libel, but the same point holds. For an illustration, consider a sentence from Wikipedia's plot summary of *The Tempest*—of which more later: "The play opens as Prospero, having divined that his brother, Antonio, is on a ship passing close by the island, has raised a tempest which causes the ship to run aground" ("The Tempest").

This plot summary is—I think—original to the Wikipedia entry, rather than a reproduction of a preceding source. Parts of it can be traced all the way back to the first version of the article in 2002, and other parts are newer, but by and large the plot summary has proved surprisingly stable within the article ("The Tempest"; see also Brandt, "Plagiarism", and Wikipedia Contributors, "Criticism"). This particular sentence, for instance, has undergone various mutations over time before assuming its current form, but one distinctive element—the phrase "Prospero, having divined that his brother, Antonio"— has remained constant since its introduction into the sentence in 2005 ("Revision history of The Tempest"). A Google search for "Prospero, having divined that his brother, Antonio" returns hits from forty-four different websites besides Wikipedia itself. All forty-four feature the phrase as part of more extensive reproduction of the Wikipedia plot summary, in one or another of its slightly different versions, taken at various points over the last four years (the Google search was conducted 16 September 2009). Repeating the search on other engines adds more examples, and Google searches for Prospero "divining that his brother," or for Prospero "divines that his brother" add more still; but forty-four is enough to be going on with. The sentences turn up in other online encyclopedia-type works, in theatre programmes, in school resource packs, and in all these sources they will persist as they are even if one alters the main Wikipedia entry today. Through mechanisms like these, anything stated on Wikipedia for long enough will have started to assume the status of a fact (see "Reliability of Wikipedia").

And yet, in spite of this quasi-authoritative power, Wikipedia has always had a troubled relationship with conventional ideas of authority, especially academic authority. Its origins lie in Bomis.com, a firm whose business model was to scrape content from other websites to create pages which were optimized to attract hits through search engines, and on which they could therefore sell advertising (and, although this isn't currently part of the official account, pornography) ("History of Wikipedia"; "Bomis"). Bomis funded, as a speculative project, an idea called Nupedia, an attempt to build a free-to-air online encyclopedia, using expert (though not necessarily academic) contributors and advisors, and an elaborate peer review system. As Nupedia's then-editor, Larry Sanger, later wrote, "I maintained from the start that something really could not be a credible *encyclopedia* without oversight by

experts" ("The Early History"). After a year's work, only twelve Nupedia articles had been brought to a state of completion.

Sanger's side project, Wikipedia, simply did away with the systematic oversight that was inhibiting Nupedia. It used as its platform a wiki, an interactive website which allowed any user to edit entries instantly, making it far quicker and simpler to use than Nupedia. Zeus-like, it superseded and effectively destroyed its parent: Nupedia "was left to wither" (Sanger) when Bomis hit hard times in the dot-com crash of the early twenty-first century, while Wikipedia, reorganized as an independent charitable organization, went on to enjoy runaway success founded on a principle essentially antithetical to that articulated by Sanger. Wikipedia relies on the user community to provide, in effect, a form of *ad hoc* self-regulation, and its resulting tendency to anti-elitism has been often commented upon.

The Essjay Affair

But the tension here—the sense that Wikipedia, as a collective, is still struggling with its relationship to expertise, academe, and authority—is ongoing. It is illustrated particularly usefully by the so-called "Essjay affair" of February 2007 ("Essjay controversy"; see also Brandt, "Fuzzy" and *Wikipedia Review* Contributors). A contributor with the username Essjay had been, for some time, a diligent participant in Wikipedia, and also one of the project's most prominent volunteer administrators, spending up to fourteen hours a day on the project. He was particularly active on pages with theological content, which he claimed reflected his professional credentials. Although he declined to reveal his real life identity, he stated that he was a tenured professor at a private university on the East Coast of America, possessor of a BA in Religious Studies, an MA in Religion, and doctorates in Theology and Canon Law ("User:Essjay"). In 2006 he was interviewed by the *New Yorker*, as a particularly interesting example of how Wikipedia's contributors in fact included people with conventional academic authority. In February 2007, he took a salaried job with the Wikimedia foundation.

Unfortunately, at this point it became apparent that Essjay, real name Ryan Jordan, did not possess any of these degrees, nor was he a tenured professor. Wikipedia's co-founder, Jimmy Wales, initially supported Jordan, but seeing the speed at which the scandal was growing, particularly in connection with the *New Yorker* interview, he was forced to ask for Jordan's resignation. The consequent departure of Essjay from Wikipedia caused fierce debate within and outside the community of Wikipedia activists: was it at all relevant to the quality of Essjay's work so far that he had lied about his real-life profession and qualifications? If it was an encyclopedia that anyone could edit, were academic

degrees, whether fake or not, even a factor at all? If the individual facts he had added to Wikipedia were true—and few of them were demonstrably wrong—did that not make him truly an expert anyway? (see Wikipedia Contributors, "User Talk:Essjay"; Wikipedia Watch Contributors, "User Talk:Essjay")

From a humanities standpoint, the ironies abound, especially given the survival of at least one version of Essjay's user page from before the disaster. This page is filled with the awards and achievements of his time on Wikipedia, including a set of "barnstars," Wikipedia's unofficial internal campaign medals ("Wikipedia:Barnstar"). On the page, Essjay's specific claims to academic authority mix with hints of religious vocation ("I have been asked in the past if I am a priest or a Jesuit, and although I am neither, I did belong to a monastic community before I began my graduate studies..."). Also important, in the construction of this set of attributes, is his vaunted knowledge of Latin. "I frequently use Latin phrases around the Wiki; for those who are unfamiliar with Latin, I have compiled a short glossary of frequently used terms here" ("User:Essjay"). [2] Essjay, like many a Renaissance felon, is claiming benefit of clergy.

Specialist Suspicions

This fictitious identity provides something of a key to Wikipedia's collective subconscious. Wikipedia is fascinated by the idea of academic authority, even while distancing itself from it. "Real" academics, though, seem not to be avid contributors to Wikipedia (or, at least, there is little evidence that they are). One of the reasons might be the lack of any clear system of credit and reward. As Daniel Paul O'Donnell has noted:

> An article in the Wikipedia is not going to get anybody tenure. Because they are written collectively and published anonymously, Wikipedia articles do not highlight the specific intellectual contributions of individual contributors… since the Wikipedia appears unable to serve as a route to professional advancement for intrinsic reasons, perhaps we should begin to see contributions to it by professional scholars as a different type of activity altogether—as a form of community service to be performed by academics in much the same way lawyers are often expected to give back to the public through their *pro bono* work.

O'Donnell's proposal is an interesting one, but in practice, academics often find writing for Wikipedia a frustrating experience, even if they are not concerned about credit. The problem is not the anonymity, but the textual instability; there is no guarantee that what one

has written for Wikipedia will still, by next morning, be in the same shape. Sharon Howard, for instance, reports:

> [I've read] many complaints … from academics and other specialists who've contributed their knowledge to Wikipedia and then painfully seen their work trampled, chewed over (and sometimes spat out) by people with far less understanding of the subject in question…

In other words, it's not merely that there's no careerist incentive to write for Wikipedia. In addition, specialists who want to say something thought-out and well-organized about a subject find Wikipedia a frustrating place to say it because the textual instability leads to imprecision.

Wikipedia is in fact a mass of contradictions: fascinated by, yet hostile to, authority; both a textbook example of "social authorship" and also the product of competing, and sometimes fiercely individualistic, contributors; textually unstable but also textually persistent. As we shall see, these tensions apply, in particular, to Wikipedia's treatment of that area of high cultural prestige, the early modern period.

Coverage of the early modern in Wikipedia

By common consent, and as is sufficiently indicated by the fact one needs to write this article, Wikipedia is a remarkably useful tool for answering queries about what might, broadly, be called the early modern. Most people navigate into its material through searches, but there are also various top-down approaches—there are, for instance, long and well-linked entries on both "Early Modern Period" and "Renaissance," each with (unsurprisingly) different conceptions of where to go on to within Wikipedia for more information. The pages "16th century" and "17th century" offer long, detailed chronologies of, not merely European, but world events through the periods in question. Wikipedia's vast scope makes it genuinely interdisciplinary, and the synchronic pages offer a particularly clear illustration of this. The article "Early modern Britain" provides yet another way into the subject area, from which sprout a series of separate entries, including "Elizabethan era."

Most major early modern historical figures and events, and most major writers and works, have an entry. These vary in quality between the dubious and the excellent. In the "dubious" category one would put the current entry on Edmund Spenser, almost unreferenced and mixing accurate biographical information

indiscriminately with anecdotes on the edge of spuriousness. In the "excellent" category, one could point to the coverage of Caroline drama, where authors and works off the usual beaten track are given up-to-date, well-researched, well-written entries. Many of the articles in this area are single-authored. (In particular, many of them are by a pseudonymous and indefatigable contributor named Ugajin, who is thus perhaps the world's most often-consulted authority on Caroline drama.)

This emphasis on factuality—appropriate, indeed inevitable, in an encyclopedia—does mean that Wikipedia tends not to problematize the process by which those "facts" are constructed, thus sidestepping the whole trend of literary theory over the last thirty years. In spite of this, it does contain generally informative entries on a range of the topics, ideas, and theorists that are of interest to researchers and students of the early modern. For instance, in researching this article I came across a particularly long entry devoted to the work of one rising American theorist of the early modern, although close perusal of the associated "History" page suggests that it is written largely by himself. Decency compels one to refrain, for the moment, from revealing his identity.

How factually accurate is the material? Some academic work in other subject areas suggests that specific, clear-cut factual error is surprisingly rare in Wikipedia. In 2005, a news article in the science journal *Nature* compared forty-two Wikipedia entries on scientific topics against forty-two corresponding pieces from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* website, sending each (in anonymized form) for blind review to an expert in the particular field covered by the article (Giles). It concluded that, while articles taken from the *Britannica* website often seemed better organized and structured than Wikipedia articles, Wikipedia's accuracy was not much worse than that of the material on the *Britannica* website: "the average science entry in Wikipedia contained around four inaccuracies; Britannica, about three." *Encyclopedia Britannica* issued an angry rebuttal, arguing that the methods of the study were flawed, the comparisons unfair, and the conclusions simplistic; *Nature* issued a counter-rebuttal of its own (*Encyclopedia Britannica* inc., "Fatally flawed"; *Nature* Editors, "Editorial" 582). Part of the problem was caused by the difficulty of defining errors. As an illustration, one error related to whether the town associated with Pythagoras should be spelt "Crotona" or "Crotone." But the first is the classical spelling, the second the modern spelling; one's choice might depend on the overall conventions of the work within which the article fits, and the choice is not a straightforward right or wrong. Both Wikipedia and the *Britannica* at once corrected the clear-cut misstatements detected by *Nature*'s experts, so that

both, within the terms of reference of the original study, could now be regarded more or less as without errors.

Beside *Nature'*s study, a number of other small-scale pieces of research, as well as my own unsystematic observations of pages in my specialist area, have reached similar conclusions: Wikipedia, though often imperfect, contains relatively few definitively untruthful statements ("Reliability"; Rosenzweig). However, identifiable untruths are not the Achilles heel of Wikipedia. As in *The Faerie Queene*, Error is never as straightforward as it seems.

For a more detailed look, one might take two case studies which represent extremes of Wikipedia's coverage of the early modern: first, the main entry on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a first port of call for many undergraduates (and, it has been suggested, the occasional lecturer) preparing to study this highly canonical, much-taught, and culturally influential text. To look at the other extreme, one should pick a much more obscure entry. For reasons we shall come to later, this essay selects one on a contemporary of Shakespeare, the poet and encyclopedia-maker Gervase Markham.

The Tempest in the Wikipedia

The *Tempest* entry runs to around 10,000 words in its current form, and which can be represented by its opening sentences and the overall table of contents.[3]

> *The Tempest* is a play by William Shakespeare, probably written in 1610–11,[1] although some researchers have argued for an earlier dating.[2] The play's protagonist is the banished sorcerer Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan, who initially uses his magical powers to punish his enemies…

Contents

By and large, this entry is serviceable stuff, referencing its factual claims—the article has 113 footnotes—and drawing attention to topics that set an agenda for discussion of the play. It contains particularly good material regarding the play's afterlife, not merely in the theatre but in other cultural forms: once again demonstrating Wikipedia's genuinely interdisciplinary reach. As befits an encyclopedia, however, it doesn't create an overarching argument through those topics; instead it tends towards summary, rather than analysis, particularly of ongoing factual debates. Thus, the entry is particularly unsuited to being quoted as if it were critical material; regrettably, this is exactly how it is used by many beginning undergraduates. One might also note that whereas the main *Tempest* page is generally of a high standard as regards phrasing, logic, and referencing, the linked subpages devoted to individual characters are noticeably weaker. For instance, the subpage devoted to "Prospero" currently contains the unhappy sentence, "Because of his powers, some hold that Prospero represents Shakespeare, James I or God (an all controlling force).[citation needed]."

Flaws in the main piece are harder to find, a result of the assiduous work of many contributors. Like many Wikipedia articles, it does fall into sections, and this piecemeal structure lends itself to inconsistency. For instance, in its current iteration, Montaigne's *Of Cannibals* is twice announced as a source; the entry's own list of "authoritative" sources ranges from scholarly books and articles to introductory-level items such as Laurie Rozakis's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Shakespeare*.

The very minor inconsistencies, of course, only faintly reflect the article's amazing heterogeneity. A first version of the article appeared as long ago as 25 May 2002, in the earliest one per cent of Wikipedia as it now stands ("Wikipedia:Modelling"). The first version, written by Deb, was 349 words long. Since then, the article has undergone 2,741 separate revisions, and grown in the process to more than twenty-eight times its original length.

At first glance, it seems as if the brief initial article from 2002 has been entirely swept away by the changes and expansions. Surprisingly, though, several features from it still directly inform the article seven years later. For instance, the initial article offers, as the play's most quotable quotation, the "Our revels now are ended" speech, which is still the one speech quoted *in extenso* in the current version. What's more, distinctive phrasing can still be seen, particularly in the current version's plot summary. For instance, the original contains the sentence

> When Prospero discovers that his brother is on a ship passing close by the island, he raises a storm (the tempest of the title) which causes the ship to run aground. ("The Tempest")

Compare the current version already mentioned:

> The play opens as Prospero, having divined that his brother, Antonio, is on a ship passing close by the island, has raised a tempest which causes the ship to run aground.

Since 2002, the article has been revised over and over. A good proportion of these changes were vandalism, and were quickly reverted: on 10 July 2009, for instance, "Alonso, King of Naples" was briefly renamed "Botox Yomama, King of Naples." This edit only lasted for three minutes before being detected and removed ("Revision history of The Tempest"; see also Rosenzweig, and "Criticism"; "Wikipedia Vandalism"). Many others of the 2,741 edits have left no trace in the article as it currently stands. They have either been undone or overwritten in the course of other changes. In fact, much of the fabric of the article can be traced to a handful of particularly keen editors, and this is in line with what statistical study has observed of Wikipedia as a whole—that, in practice, almost half of what we actually read in Wikipedia is produced by the most active 0.1% of its contributors (Priedhorsky, et al.). At the current rate of change, at least some of the Wikipedia entry as it currently stands will be substantially altered by the time my description of it reaches readers. At the same time, as the example from the plot summary shows, islands of words in the article have survived almost unchanged for much of the life of the article.

What is more, this particular example of persistence also reveals something of Wikipedia's systematic weaknesses. In a 350-word sketch of the play, it is a forgivable approximation to say that Alonso's ship runs aground. Of course, it does not actually run aground, as Ariel's later description of the incident makes clear; despite Ariel's illusions, the ship remains undamaged and afloat (1.2.219-275). By the time the article is

10,000 words long, that degree of imprecision is more irritating, especially since the statement that it does run aground is now made with apparent authority. The visual impression made by the plot summary, beautifully illustrated and sitting in a huge, heavily referenced article, only emphasizes that authority (Figure 1). Error is finding ways of creeping in through the cumulative effect of piecemeal changes.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the plot summary in the Wikipedia article for The Tempest .
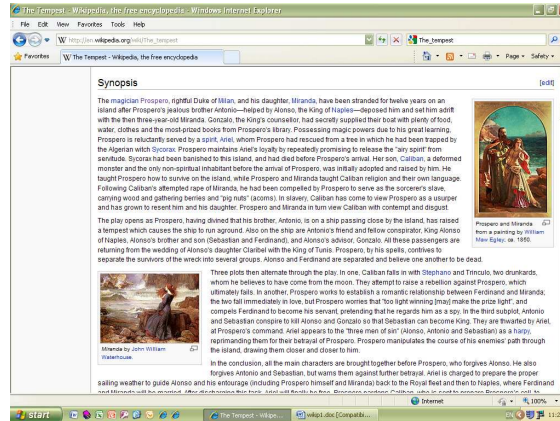
Perhaps the most striking feature of this article as it has developed is the space it affords to anti-Stratfordianism. The opening sentence of the article, quoted above, gives considerable weight to the (minority) view that *The Tempest* could have been written much earlier than 1610, and the reason it does so is to invoke the Earl of Oxford as true author. Since Oxford, whom Oxfordians believe wrote all the works of Shakespeare incognito, died in 1604, most Oxfordians are keen to rake back the composition of all Shakespeare's later plays to before that date (the exceptions being those who believe Oxford's death in 1604 was faked: see the splendidly batty Wikipedia page "Prince Tudor theory"). Hence the weight attached, right from the start of the Wikipedia article on *The Tempest*, to doubt about the dating. Indeed, footnotes two, eight, and sixteen currently cite an anti-Stratfordian article, complete with "lay summary" (lay summary! an Essjay-like assumption of priesthood). The summary is free-to-air, instantly accessible, and hosted on a website devoted to the proposition that the works of Shakespeare were written by the Earl of Oxford (Stritmatter and Kozitsky; Kozitsky and Stritmatter).

This is part of Wikipedia's chronic love affair with anti-Stratfordianism, with extensive articles on "Shakespeare authorship theory," "Chronology of Shakespeare's plays – Oxfordian," and various other dedicated topics. In addition, anti-Stratfordianism rears its head in unexpected places—articles on, for instance, Fulke Greville; Shakespeare's printer John Benson; and Catherine Willoughby, 12th Baroness Willoughby de Eresby. As an illustration of the disproportion, the entry

on "Baconian theory" has 93 footnotes, whereas the entire Wikipedia entry on the poet George Herbert only has four.

Why is Anti-Stratfordianism so strong in Wikipedia? Partly, it benefits from Wikipedia's commitment to "NPOV"—neutral point of view, neutral as measured by the weight of voices of the contributors, which means that vocal contributors can ensure that their point of view is at least represented as part of the truth (Textbook examples of the process in action can be seen on the Talk pages of those contributors attempting to keep a sense of proportion: for instance, "User Talk:Xover"). NPOV is an ideal which any humanities academic would be eager to cross-examine and unpick in Socratic analysis in a seminar (Rosenzweig offers some good starting points; a good compendium of references relating to bias in earlier versions of the *Britannica* is available at Wikipedia Contributors, "Encyclopædia Britannica"; Wikipedia itself is trying to formulate a more sophisticated idea of NPOV at "Wikipedia:Neutral point of view"). In more general terms, anti-Stratfordians, of their various hues, offer a genteel miniature of all the pressure groups—political, religious, or of any other type—who today see the importance of Wikipedia in setting an agenda and influencing the terms of debate of the public sphere. One or two such pressure groups have been foolish enough to be documented in the act of organizing infiltration of Wikipedia, although a more pressing question is why any pressure group would not be looking to organize such infiltration (See "Criticism of Wikipedia," especially the CAMERA affair of 2008). But perhaps a still more cogent explanation of Anti-Stratfordianism's strength in this project is that there is a natural affinity between it and the intellectual structures of Wikipedia. On the former, Emma Smith, building on the work of Steve Clark, has noted that anti-Stratfordianism shares with many other conspiracy theories an "individualistic view of the world which derives a perverse comfort from the apparent fact that everything is humanly controlled and ultimately knowable." On the latter, Rosenzweig observes in Wikipedia's coverage of history a natural tendency towards the concrete, the personal, and the anecdotal, at the expense of all-around analysis. Clearly, Smith and Rosenzweig are describing comparable phenomena. As a result of this intellectual kinship, Wikipedia provides something of a natural home for anti-Stratfordianism.
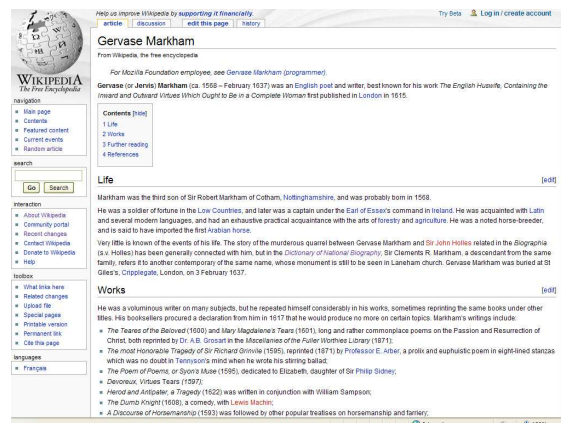
Gervase Markham

The *Tempest* article is read by tens of thousands of readers per month. The article on Shakespeare's generally neglected colleague Gervase Markham attracts approximately one reader for every hundred that the *Tempest* article does, and works, in many respects, in

quite a different way, giving a different angle on Wikipedia's representation of the early modern. Readership statistics for web pages are, in general, notoriously fallible: the figures offered here are rough generalizations based on Wikipedia User:Henrik and Domas Mituzas, *Wikipedia Article Traffic Statistics* and *Wikirank*. Note too that they don't count the readers of the forty-plus "forks" of the *Tempest* page identified in the first section of this article, nor of the translations of it forked, in various forms, into several other Wikipedia language editions. Incidentally, "William Shakespeare" attracts ten times as many readers again as "*The Tempest*," and is in Wikipedia's top five hundred most read pages.

The Markham article requires our attention here, too. In order to examine it properly, it is necessary to quote it at some length, though even lengthy quotation doesn't really do complete justice to the effect I want to explore: the "look and feel" of the article in its context of Wikipedia's page layout. The quotation below should be read in conjunction with Figure 2, a screenshot.

Figure 2: Wikipedia article for "Gervase Markham"

Gervase Markham

Gervase (or **Jervis**) **Markham** (ca. 1568 – February 1637) was an English poet and writer, best known for his work *The English Huswife, Containing the Inward and Outward Virtues Which Ought to Be in a Complete Woman* first published in London in 1615.

Life

Markham was the third son of Sir Robert Markham of Cotham, Nottinghamshire, and was born probably in 1568. He was a soldier of fortune in the Low Countries and later was a captain under the Earl of Essex's command in Ireland. He was acquainted with Latin and several modern languages, and had an exhaustive practical acquaintance with the arts of forestry and agriculture. He was a

noted horse-breeder, and is said to have imported the first Arabian horse.

Very little is known of the events of his life. The story of the murderous quarrel between Gervase Markham and Sir John Holles related in the *Biographia* (s.v. Holles) has been generally connected with him, but in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Sir Clements R. Markham, a descendant from the same family, refers it to another contemporary of the same name, whose monument is still to be seen in Laneham church. Gervase Markham was buried at St Giles's, Cripplegate, London, on 3 February 1637.

Works

He was a voluminous writer on many subjects, but he repeated himself considerably in his works, sometimes reprinting the same books under other titles. His booksellers procured a declaration from him in 1617 that he would produce no more on certain topics. Markham's writings include:

There follows a bulleted list of nine of Markham's publications, most of them with brief comments added.

Further reading
- Michael R. Best (editor), *The English Housewife,* McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986. ISBN 0-7735-0582-2.
- Frederick Noel Lawrence Poynter, *A bibliography of Gervase Markham, 1568? -1637,* Oxford, Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1962.

References
- *This article incorporates text from the* Encyclopædia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition, a publication now in the* public domain*.*

The first thing to say about this article is that, for most of its likely readers—indeed, for a vast majority of them—it is likely to be more than good enough. It accurately gives Markham's dates, a flavour of his cultural milieu, and a concentrated summary of the range and scope of his writings. For anyone coming to this article via the cross-references to it from Wikipedia articles such as "Beagle," "Orangery," or "History of primitive and non-Western trumpets," all of which have cause to refer to Markham's copious factual writings, this sketch will probably tell them all they might need to know. But the second thing to say about it is that it is considerably less good than it seems.

It appears, for instance, to be built on research from the not-too-distant past. Although there are no footnotes, it refers to a solid-sounding bibliography of Markham from the 1960s, and to an edition of one of his works produced by a respected university press in 1986. As for the date of its composition: it looks modern. It is generous in its use of screen space, using its four short subsections, with subsection titles and horizontal rules, to break up the text. Very short subsections seem like a modern phenomenon, and there is a particularly strong contrast between Wikipedia and comparable print reference sources, which tend, because of their very scale, to be sparing if not downright mean in their use of merely blank space, as the page image in Figure 3 illustrates. The contemporary feel is further accentuated by the bulleted list, and by the hotlinks, nearly thirty of them in all, to other Wikipedia articles, all seeming intimidatingly current and intimidatingly knowledgeable. Tiny details within the writing, such as the informal, streamlined format in which the date of "3 February 1637" is given, also sound like they belong to the last decade or two. In short: the references seem to date the research behind this piece to safely after 1986, and the layout gives the impression that the piece is far more recent than that.

Figure 3: Page image of the first part of the 1911 Britannica article on Gervase Markham (Wikisource).
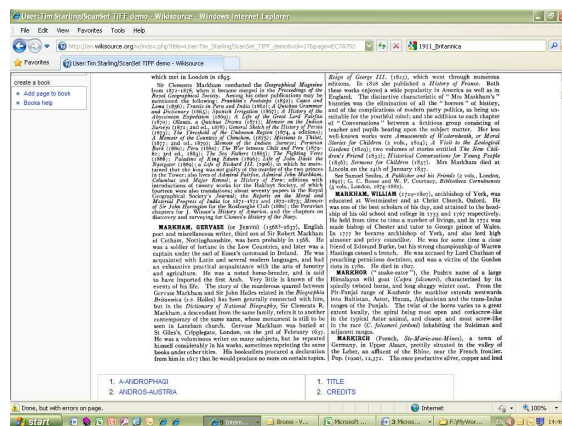
And yet—and I suspect the attentive reader will already have noticed this themselves—some of the cadences, and some of the names dropped, sound as if they come from an earlier age. In fact, they do. This whole entry is taken essentially verbatim from the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The following sample from the *Britannica* shows the closeness:

> He was a soldier of fortune in the Low Countries, and later was a captain under the earl of Essex's command in Ireland. He was acquainted with Latin and several modern languages, and had an exhaustive practical acquaintance with the arts of forestry and agriculture. He was a noted horse-breeder,

> and is said to have imported the first Arab.
> Very little is known of the events of his life…
> (from Figure 3; see also *Classic Encyclopedia*)

Around twenty-five contributors have made piecemeal alterations since the article was first posted in 2005, but these have been mainly to points of style and formatting. They have imposed, for instance, the section breaks "Life" and "Works" only implicitly present in the original; they have clarified "Arab" to "Arabian horse"; they have added the two pieces of "further reading," and one or two other small statements—for instance, the *Britannica* article lists eight of Markham's forty-odd works as a representative sample, and Wikipedia adds a ninth. The date format has been modernized, and the hotlinks have been added, but in spite of all this patching the prose survives nearly intact. These sentences are very persistent indeed: they are ten times older than Wikipedia itself.

This is particularly a pity since the Wikipedia article in fact propagates a number of errors that scholarship after 1911, such as the Introduction to Poynter's *Bibliography*, corrects. For instance:

- Sir Robert Markham was Gervase's brother, not his father.
- The feud with Holles involved, not Gervase Markham the writer, but another Gervase Markham, a cousin and namesake. The argument is long over.
- Markham did not import Britain's first Arabian horse: he writes about an Arabian horse owned by his father, but this is by no means the same thing.

All of these advances in knowledge, recorded by Poynter and built on further by Michael Best's work in his edition of *The English Housewife*, have been written back out of Wikipedia, even though the article gives the erroneous impression of having read and digested these works. In the jargon of Wikipedia itself, the work of Poynter and Best has been "reverted."

Of course, it could be argued that none of this really matters. Anyone interested enough in Markham to really care how, precisely, he fits into the Markham family dynasty, or to what precise extent he was interested in Arabian horses, will probably follow up the suggestions for "further reading," which will put them right on all the details discussed so far. Furthermore, once someone has pointed out specific factual errors, it is an easy job—for that person or anyone else—to clean up those specific errors. But more insidious is the fact thus demonstrated that no-one has actually thought about this entry, in its entirety, since 1911. Even if one corrects the clear errors listed above, even if one also grafts in some of the new facts that have come to light, that's not the same as rethinking the content in the light of the new

intellectual frames offered by Poynter and Best. Lectures, according to the old adage, are a means by which information is transferred from the notebook of the lecturer to the notebook of the student without necessarily passing through the mind of either. The worry is that something similar could be said about this Wikipedia entry.

Wikipedia reckons that 12,522 of its articles contain text from the 1911 *Britannica*, a small number compared to the three million articles overall ("Category:Wikipedia articles"). However, it should be borne in mind that these entries tend to be concentrated in certain fields. For obvious reasons, 1911 *Britannica* articles are not a significant presence in articles on computing, television, or popular music. They are, however, a particular factor in the field of early modern studies, because of the fact that Renaissance literature—and Shakespeare in particular—was so intensively studied in the nineteenth century, and thus the voice of the *Britannica* is often to be heard in Wikipedia entries in this particular area. Previous work on digital humanities has observed that, because of copyright laws, the e-texts of Renaissance literature that can be found across the internet tend not to be current standard editions, but nineteenth-century ediitons (Steggle). Similarly, one of Wikipedia's stranger effects in this area is to reassert earlier scholarly work at the expense of its later successors: "the new technologies are, in effect, propagating the work of nineteenth-century scholars" or, in this case, scholars of the very early twentieth century.

The early modern Wikipedia

To recap the argument of this piece so far: Wikipedia's coverage of the Renaissance varies considerably from article to article and even within articles. All of it is—in principle—textually highly unstable, and parts of it change with great frequency and rapidity; at the same time elements within it prove very stable indeed. Its approach to authority is conflicted; it is caught between social authorship and individualism; and its attitude to intellectual property is much freer than is to be found in conventional sources.

All this makes it, of course, postmodern, but it might also make it a useful tool for thinking about the early modern. The grandest of the grand narratives of the Renaissance is the impact of the printing press on all aspects of culture: political, religious, and economic. One of its consequences, it is generally agreed, is the emergence of ideas of intellectual property and copyright as we now understand them, concepts largely without force in a culture of manuscript circulation. From this perspective, the Renaissance is the story of the decline of manuscript culture and the rise of print

(although often, in the details of the story, the interplay between them is much more intricate than such a reductive account would suggest). In turn, academic culture as we now understand it—the business of writing books and articles that distinguish themselves from earlier work; the business of being recognized for doing so—is predicated upon the ideas of intellectual property that started to emerge in the early modern period (see Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson*, and *Author's Due*).

Conversely, as the era of supremacy of the printed book comes towards an end, the intellectual property arrangements that have worked for centuries are coming under increasing pressure from digital technologies of all sorts. Wikipedia is one of the many battlegrounds in this process, alongside projects such as Google Books and Youtube. It is frequently suggested that the challenge to intellectual structures represented by the arrival of the digital world in general will prove to be as profound a cultural change as the arrival of the printing press itself.

Hence, an imaginative opportunity presents itself. Since even before the invention of Wikipedia, some scholars have been exploring the possibilities of using new technologies as analogies for the information technologies of the Renaissance. In 2000, for instance, Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday drew attention to analogies between the rise of the internet and the invention of the printing press, and also to analogies between manuscript circulation and the sorts of social networks then emerging in emails and discussion lists. "The experience of new technology," argued Rhodes and Sawday in the introduction to a collection of essays called *The Renaissance Computer,* "has enabled us to re-imagine the impact of new technologies in the past" (2). In particular, they saw, new technology could refigure print-conditioned assumptions about intellectual property and authorship. "How, in the case of an electronic 'discussion list' (which can be archived and revisited, just as one might shelve and then retrieve a book), can one attribute 'copyright' or ownership in the words of the ideas which emerge as different 'authors' contribute to the 'thread' of discussion?"

It is described elsewhere as a "far-reaching epistemological and ontological shift" (Berry and Tudeau-Clayton 2; see also Kinney, using an idea of linkage which draws both on ideas of hypertext and on cognitive theory). The particular example of a discussion list seems overstated now—in practice, posts to such lists are regularly cited in academic sources, and credited to their original authors without particular epistemological difficulty—but Wikipedia offers a much more vivid example of unsettled, indefinable authorship to feed into the intellectual model of Rhodes and Sawday.

Wikipedia's predecessors in the late medieval and Renaissance periods, the encyclopedias exemplified by the work of Gervase Markham and his colleagues, shared with Wikipedia the belief that the text out of which they were made was "public domain," and therefore entirely fair game for what we would consider plagiarism. The best-known manifestation of this idea is the principle of *materia medica*, but the same applied to many other domains of knowledge ("Materia medica"). For instance, among the print publications usually credited to Markham is *The Gentleman's Academy*, a guide to hawking, hunting, and related subjects. And yet some of its sentences were more than a century old by the time they got to Markham. They were part of a collection known as *The Book of St Albans*, existing in earlier print forms and in a sizeable family of manuscripts. Markham's redaction is merely one of a centuries-long series of versions of the material it contains, freely combined, added to, and pruned at each iteration (Hands; see also Best). Similarly, despite its heavily authorial-sounding title, *Markham's Masterpiece* (1610) is a compendium, assembling material from many previous print and manuscript resources to create an encyclopedia of remedies for horse-diseases. The result uses a bewildering array of ingredients and techniques. Asserting, in effect, NPOV, Markham refuses to exclude even utterly far-fetched and superstitious remedies which he finds in his sources. This very comprehensiveness made it a runaway success, and *Markham's Masterpiece* went on through twenty-two English editions and at least three American ones, many of them freely expanding and altering (but mainly expanding) the material from version to version. In addition, numerous manuscript sources "forked" treatments from it. A hundred and eighty years later, the writer John Lawrence was still lamenting the difficulty of getting rid of the influence of *Markham's Masterpiece* and the awful prescriptions it disseminated. The book, he complained, was "for more than a century, the oracle of sapient grooms, the fiddle of old wives, and the glory of booksellers," and was still used by "the elder sages of the stable" (1.11). He advised gentlemen to buy up and destroy individual copies when they found them, but, Wikipedia-like, the text appeared impossible to controvert or suppress (Poynter 112-14).

Markham's career exemplifies the collision between a world where intellectual property has no commercial value, the world of manuscript circulation, and a world where it is commodified with the rise of printing as a business. Markham's tendency to republish much the same material in subtly different forms caused him trouble with booksellers increasingly concerned to have publications clearly marked out as different and unique (Poynter 22-23). The printing industry, in turn, was the spur for the development of ideas of copyright through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When the 1911 *Britannica* complains that Markham's works are often

close to self-plagiarism, it is viewing him through the lens of a period much more completely invested in ideas of intellectual property than the one in which Markham was writing. Conversely, when those words reappear on Wikipedia, they are in a publication which is, in this one respect, much closer to Markham's world than to that of the *Britannica*'s original publication.

Early modern drama, too, had ideas of intellectual property which can be explained by analogy with Wikipedia. It is one thing to know that, in principle, Renaissance drama is at home with co-authored, repatched plays; with plays that plagiarize pieces of earlier plays; and with plays that change radically from version to version. But to realize that we happily use Wikipedia articles whose status is comparable helps us to see how well that might work in practice. (Of course, this analogy should not be pushed too far. Input into early modern theatrical texts, even as witnessed in particularly complex cases such as *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, was still far more structured than Wikipedia.) And perhaps, too, it is helpful to re-engage with *The Tempest* itself in the light of these shifts in ideas of culture and intellectual property. *The Tempest* is obsessed with Prospero's books: with the "volumes that / I prize above my Dukedom" (1.2.194-95) that form the basis of his magical knowledge of the world around him. It is fascinated by the idea of power gained through reading. In the film *Prospero's Books*, Peter Greenaway connects those books to encyclopedias, and that is a perfectly reasonable gloss on the play, and its fascination with ascendancy gained merely through a reference work. One might suggest that the play has a fantasy of the ultimately powerful book which can be related to the secret fantasies of Wikipedians. Equally, *The Tempest* is at the same time strongly invested in the idea of the sovereign author. This idea is evident in the original plot, allegedly autobiographical, and the fascination with Prospero, a writer himself, as a figure of magical uniqueness and power. One of the very things that makes it fresh, in its time and in its collaborative theatre, is this fascination with the emerging concept of the Author, that idea which—as Wikipedia shows—is still problematic today. Fittingly, *The Tempest* was the first play in Shakespeare's First Folio of 1623, a publication which, over time, helped to establish that a vernacular dramatist could be an Author, ultimately secured Shakespeare's pre-eminence as National Poet, and created the basis of the scholarly industry in which many of us work and with which Wikipedia has such a conflicted relationship (see Kewes). Perhaps, when Wikipedia describes Prospero as "Shakespeare, James I or God" ("Prospero"), it contains an unexpected form of truth.

Conclusion

Despite Wikipedia's homogeneous look and feel, its coverage of the early modern varies unpredictably from weak to excellent. It contains relatively few absolutely untruthful statements, but problems instead of emphasis and interpretation. Major local oddities include anti-Stratfordianism, and persistence of material, especially from the 1911 *Britannica*; but these are both symptoms of Wikipedia's wider structures of unproblematized NPOV and of piecemeal revision. Conversely, Wikipedia's greatest intellectual asset, enabled by those very structures, is its true interdisciplinarity.

For good or ill (and, in fact, overwhelmingly for good rather than for ill), Wikipedia seems unlikely to go away, and it will be interesting to see how the work develops, particularly in respect of its ongoing challenges to ideas of textual authority and intellectual property. Those working in early modern studies, like their colleagues in other fields, will doubtless continue to engage with this fascinating, maddening resource. While they will struggle both with its huge power and its unexpected weaknesses, they will have at least one particular satisfaction: they are witnessing the action of a project with an attitude towards intellectual property and information technology which is so various and complicated as to be almost early modern.

Postscript

It took around eighteen months for this paper to be researched, written up, peer-reviewed, and copy-edited for publication. In that same period, the Wikipedia entries taken as exemplary have, of course, continued to change: around five hundred separate edits have since been made to the *Tempest* article, and ten to the Gervase Markham. As a result, some of the details in this article are necessarily out of date. Fortunately—at the moment of copy-editing, at least!—the underlying features of the two entries described remain, so far, more or less unchanged.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise attributed, references to encyclopedia articles can be found under Wikipedia Contributors in the Works Cited list.

[2] This link pointed to http://fen.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_Essjay/Latin, a file that has been since removed (404 Error).

[3] Due to the dynamic nature of the Wikipedia itself, Wikipedia-internal links in the quoted text have been disabled in this and other quotations unless they are the subject of explicit discussion.

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