

Andrew James Hartley and Peter Holland, eds. 2021.
Shakespeare and Geek Culture.
London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Larisa Kocic-Zámbó
University of Szeged, Hungary

With notable exceptions, Arden's *Shakespeare and Geek Culture* edited by Andrew Hartley and Peter Holland reads as yet another volume on Shakespeare appropriations in popular culture, albeit, in Holland words, "concerned with aspects of popular culture with which much Shakespeare criticism, the main stream, has not yet concerned itself" (303). Perhaps for this reason, Hartley and Holland's introduction grapples with the definition of the geek noting their emergence from the fringes into the mainstream of entertainment culture as a figure who is no longer seen as (merely) the socially awkward, introverted nerd type, preoccupied and even obsessed with unpopular topics. This emergence of the geek and their culture as "cool" is painted in decidedly neoliberal terms, as the better part of the introduction canvases the relevance of the topic while focusing on the rising economic, and consequently social and cultural, capital of all things geeky (primarily in terms of blockbuster adaptations of Tolkien's and Rowling's fantasies, and the massive conquest of the Marvel cinematic universe and their franchises). What is missing from the introduction and the volume itself (again with notable exceptions) is the awareness of established scholarship devoted to the study of fan practices, including that of geeks. Instead, there is an aca-fan¹ attempt to posit Shakespeare scholars as geeks themselves based on "that geek/nerd quality of obsessive devotion to an unfashionable pursuit, shared fully only with like-minded obsessives" (3)—a claim highly inconsistent with the repeated assertions of Shakespeare's cultural capital, especially in academia,² and the argument about geek culture

¹ Simply put, an aca-fan is someone who proclaims themselves both a fan and an academic. For the origin of the term, dubiously credited to Henry Jenkins, and its significance, see Jenkins (2011).

² A conviction perhaps in need of revision, seeing how the critically acclaimed Netflix short series *The Chair* (2021) with its spot-on depiction of academia (humanities in general and English department in particular) does not have a single reference to a Shakespeare scholar (Melville, Gender and Postcolonial Studies, as well as Chaucer, take precedence).

no longer belonging to the fringes but actually being fashionable and popular. As such, most contributions are not so much concerned with the workings of geek culture itself but with what the authors see as being of interest to geeks and, at the same time, somehow related to Shakespeare (primarily as Foucauldian authorial function).

Another feature of the collection's tentative exploration of an unknown frontier is the abundance of chapters, eighteen in total, in a book 317 pages long (including the index).³ The book is structured into four parts "mapping the interplay between Shakespeare and geek culture in its disparate forms" (9), thematically divided into: (1) Geek Culture and Fiction, (2) Geek Culture and the Shakespeare Sandbox, (3) Pastimes, Gaming and Shakespeare, and (4) Film, Theatre and Geek Culture. In most of the cases, the forementioned interplay is fairly limited, as the chapters concentrate on how Shakespeare as a character or his evoked characters/words/influence appear and/or are appropriated in texts and media with established geek credentials, such as fantasy, sci-fi, comics, and games.

To be fair, there is some merit in showcasing aspects of popular culture hitherto neglected by Shakespeare scholars (e.g., boy scouts' culture, board and/or video games), although doing so neglecting the particular medium (e.g., comics in the case of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*) is perhaps more incredulous than writing about a particular stage play of Shakespeare's and not paying attention to the play's performance (the casting for example). Holland's last chapter recounting his own geek practice is especially revealing of the limits of what these explorations can accomplish in drawing a general audience into a more nuanced appreciation of Shakespeare. Namely, Holland readily admits his own geekish involvement in creating a T. S. Eliot concordance being without "real interest in researching Eliot's poems and plays"; the project itself is the geekish enterprise and "an end in itself" (296). The play's the thing or to be more exact, the playing and not the play/text itself.

This playful aspect of geekdom is oft evoked in chapters dealing with published popular cultural text to postulate their author is

³ In comparison with Arden's *Shakespeare and Gender: Sex and Sexuality in Shakespeare's Drama* (2020) edited by Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, with its fairly similar scope of 288 pages comprising nine chapters.

a geek and therefore their work is the production of geek culture (e.g., Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman, Conor McCreery, and Anthony Del Col). However, the authors of these chapters, with the exception of Johnathan H. Pope, fail to acknowledge that the status of the discussed works “as paid work” effectively “removes them from the realm of fan fiction” and fan production as amateur activity, done out of love, as opposed to professional activity, done for filthy lucre. This alignment of playful/transformational engagement with geek culture has another problematic aspect as recent scholarship on fandom studies has drawn attention to the gendered bias shaping the corporate perception of fandom: male fans, styled as geeks, are predominantly seen as affirmative of convergence culture and, therefore, aligning with the official readings of (popular) cultural texts and not engaged in transformational practices attributed predominantly to female fans who are seen as resisting incorporation with their irreverent appropriations of source texts in meaning-making fan practices like fan fiction writing. Male fans themselves perceive female fans’ activities as encroachment on their geek territory and practice, the later exemplified with acquisition and accumulation of data/artifacts and not play per se.⁴ It is mostly the girls who just wanna have fun.⁵

Notwithstanding the aforementioned shortcomings, the volume is a great contribution to Shakespeare scholarship, especially those chapters which present informative, inspiring, and transformational ways fandom culture could be of use to Shakespeare studies. Of these I would like to draw attention to three in particular.

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the best chapters in the volume is penned by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes, both having an established history of Shakespeare and fandom related publications. In “‘There Lies the Substance’: *Richard II* and the Adorkable Paratext” (chapter 9), the authors build on Gerárd Genette’s suggestion to “look past a definition of paratext as primarily producer-generated ancillary material” (157) and propose the reading of fan practices of meaning-making as paratextual engagement explaining the recent popularity

⁴ Holland himself offers a good example of this gendered stereotype of male fan collecting without using/playing (297).

⁵ For more on this see Suzan Scott’s excellent monograph *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (2019), especially chapter 1.

of *Richard II* and the interpretative shift its titular character undergoes (while also highlighting its problematic aspects).

James D. Mardock's very succinct "Worst. Lear. Ever. Early Modern Drama and Geek Hermeneutics" (chapter 17) suggests the investigation of a contemporary "geek-curation dynamic with regard to early modern English drama" (288) in light of which he offers thoughtful and witty reinterpretations of Shakespeare's reception history (*King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida*).

Jennifer Flaherty's "Whedonesque Shakespeare and Hyperdiegetic Casting" (chapter 16) is somewhat similar to Geddes and Fazel's chapter, as she too showcases fans' "geeky knowledge of the casting history of the Whedonverse" (271) informing their interpretation of Shakespeare characters in Whedon's adaptations, although I would argue that this is not necessarily something Joss Whedon consciously utilizes by way of hyperdiegetic casting (i.e., the intertextuality of casting).

In all three chapters highlighted, the most prominent feature of fandom is its participation in meaning-making, not merely on an individual level (as a solitary reader of a book) but on a communal, collective level of fan/audience engagement.

Finally, let me add two honorable mentions, for the following chapters stick out in a different, yet decidedly geeky way.

Andrew Tumminia's "Not Now: The Present in Shakespeare's Past and Ooo's Future" (chapter 5) explores "the opposite ways in which Shakespeare and science fiction tend to displace the problems of the present" (82), the science fiction in this case study being the animated series *Adventure Time*. The unlikely juxtaposition is surprisingly inspiring, though done primarily out of playfulness and not necessary argument and as such a sure sign of geekiness.

Last but not least, Matt Kozusko's "On Eating Paper and Drinking Ink" (chapter 10) strictly speaking is not concerned with the interplay of Shakespeare and geek culture as it is a poignant exposition of the perception of humanities within our contemporary society as odious for engaging in things requiring *otium*. However, as the "leisure and idleness of *otium* are requisite conditions for geeks" (171) Kozusko draws a parallel between humanities scholars and geeks not in their

obsessive pursuits but in how they are perceived by society at large. In his words:

The humanities and the obsessive, particular pursuit of geeks and nerds become, in this context, examples of each other. This is nowhere more evident than in the enduring perception that academics, and especially humanities professors, are idle, and that their pursuits and obsessions are frivolous and effete, wasteful and impractical. (171)

Resisting this perception, Kazusko's sets up a reading of *Holofernes* and his exit line in *Love's Labor's Lost* as a subtle validation and preservation of "the value of academic whimsy" (181).

References

- Jenkins, Henry, ed. 2011. "Acafandom and Beyond: Week Two, Part One (Henry Jenkins, Erica Rand and Karen Hellekson)." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (June 20). Accessed 18 July 2022. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/06/acafandom_and_beyond_week_two.html
- Scott, Suzanne. 2019. *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. New York: New York University Press.

How to cite this review:

Kocic-Zámbó, Larisa. Review of Andrew James Hartley and Peter Holland, eds., *Shakespeare and Geek Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). *SEDERI* 32 (2022): 128-132.

Author's contact: larisa@ieas-szeged.hu

Postal address: Institute of English and American Studies, English Department. Egyetem u. 2, Szeged, 6722, Hungary.