

# **SUTD 2020 02.137DH HASS Mid-Term Research Paper Proposal**

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## **Introduction**

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the world's greatest writer, poet and playwright in the English language.<sup>123</sup> He is often considered to be English's national poet and is often called as the "Bard of Avon".<sup>4</sup> His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwrights.<sup>5</sup> They also continue to be studied and reinterpreted, even by academic researchers and literature scholars. Even in Singapore, his works are part of the official Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education's curriculum and are included in the list of examinable texts in the official English Literature syllabus.

However, around 230 years after his death, his authorship over his works began to be questioned.<sup>6</sup> The three most popular candidates proposed as alternative authors were Sir Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere and Christopher Marlowe.<sup>7</sup> This debate has been going on for centuries. While most scholars settled on the idea that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare<sup>8</sup> and that most American Shakespeare professors considered the Shakespeare authorship question to be "a theory without convincing evidence" and "a waste of time and classroom distraction",<sup>9</sup> there is still a highly visible and diverse assortment of anti-Stratfordians, including public figures, who questioned the conventional attribution set by academic and literary professionals.<sup>10</sup> This is a non-

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<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt, S. (2005). *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. London: Pimlico. ISBN 978-0-7126-0098-9.

<sup>2</sup> Bevington, D. (2002). *Shakespeare*. Oxford: Blackwell. ISBN 978-0-631-22719-9.

<sup>3</sup> Wells, S. (1997). *Shakespeare: A Life in Drama*. New York: W.W. Norton. ISBN 978-0-393-31562-2.

<sup>4</sup> Dobson, M. (1992). *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship*. 1660-1769. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-818323-5.

<sup>5</sup> Craig, L.H. (2003). *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. ISBN 978-0-8020-8605-1.

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, J. (2010). *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*. New York: Simon & Schuster. ISBN 978-1-4165-4162-2.

<sup>7</sup> McCreia, S. (2005). *The Case for Shakespeare: The End of the Authorship Question*. Greenwood Publishing Group. ISBN 978-0-275-98527-1.

<sup>8</sup> Dobson, M. & Wells, S. (2001). *Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-811735-3.

<sup>9</sup> Niederkorn, W.S. (22 April 2007). *Shakespeare Reaffirmed*. The New York Times.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholl, C. (21 April 2010). *Yes, Shakespeare Wrote Shakespeare*. The Times Literary Supplement (5586). pp. 3-4.

exhaustive list of the reasons that they put forward when arguing that Shakespeare actually did not wrote the works allegedly attributed to him:

- Shakespeare could not have possessed the detailed scientific knowledge demonstrated in some of his works, given his education. For example, certain passages in *Coriolanus* are alleged to refer to the circulation of the blood, a theory known to Sir Francis Bacon through his friendship with William Harvey.
- There were alleged coded references and encrypted clues left in Shakespeare's works that supposedly left by the true author. This line of reasoning is used by both Baconians and Oxfordians.
- Edward de Vere's connections to the Elizabethan theatre and poetry scene suggests that he was well-versed enough with the theatre and poetry scene to actually and reasonably produce Shakespeare's works.
- Parallels of events in Edward de Vere's and Christopher Marlowe's real life with the plays, sonnets and poems allegedly created by Shakespeare seems to suggest that the works were created by either Edward de Vere or Christopher Marlowe instead. This is because there were very few parallels of events in Shakespeare's own life with the events described in his works, which seems suspicious since usually authors reflect the conditions of their real lives within their works.
- The style of Christopher Marlowe's written plays is highly similar to the style of Shakespeare's plays. In particular, there is a high degree of similarity between how Marlowe's Barabas described Abigail and how Shakespeare's Romeo described Juliet.
- Shakespeare was being used as a "front" by the real author. This argument is used by Baconians, Oxfordians and Marlovians.

Of course, each reason comes with its own possible fallacies and assumptions, some of which (such as the comparison between the alternative authors' death dates and the works' creation dates obtained from extrapolation and deduction) are quite convincing and we would not discuss them here. The fact remains clear that some parties still question Shakespeare's authorship over his own works.

In this proposed research project, our purpose is to ascertain whether Shakespeare is indeed the world's greatest writer, poet and playwright or not, while our objective is to create new knowledge in order to assist us in answering the research question of who actually created Shakespeare's works, or at least to either eliminate or confirm the validity of some of the proposed alternative authors. In this way, we can narrow down the possibilities of who actually created Shakespeare's works in a more directed manner. This is significant since we might have possibly misattributed some, if not all, of Shakespeare's works to a mere pseudonym or a "front man". The supposedly world's greatest writer, poet and playwright might not be who we assumed it to be. To assist us in this project, we seek for inspiration from a research work published by Eric Hoyt, Kevin Ponto and Carrie Roy, titled **"Visualizing and Analyzing the Hollywood Screenplay with ScripThreads"**.<sup>11</sup>

## Related Work

In **"Visualizing and Analyzing the Hollywood Screenplay with ScripThreads"**, the authors developed a tool called ScripThreads which enabled them to conduct both a "close reading" and a "distant reading" of Hollywood screenplays. ScripThreads would parse a given screenplay accordingly and output some scene statistics and character statistics. Scene statistics would include a scene's number of lines, number of characters, starting page, ending page and location (interior or exterior), with all of the scenes being arranged in the order they occur within the script. Character statistics would include a character's number of active scenes, number of dialogue lines and percentage of involvement across the play, with all of the characters being arranged in descending order of scene activity. The user would then be able to graph a character's presence or absence throughout the screenplay, as shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>11</sup> Hoyt, E., Ponto K., & Roy C. (August 2014). Visualizing and Analyzing the Hollywood Screenplay with ScripThreads. Digital Humanities Quarterly. Retrieved from <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhqdev/vol/8/4/000190/000190.html>

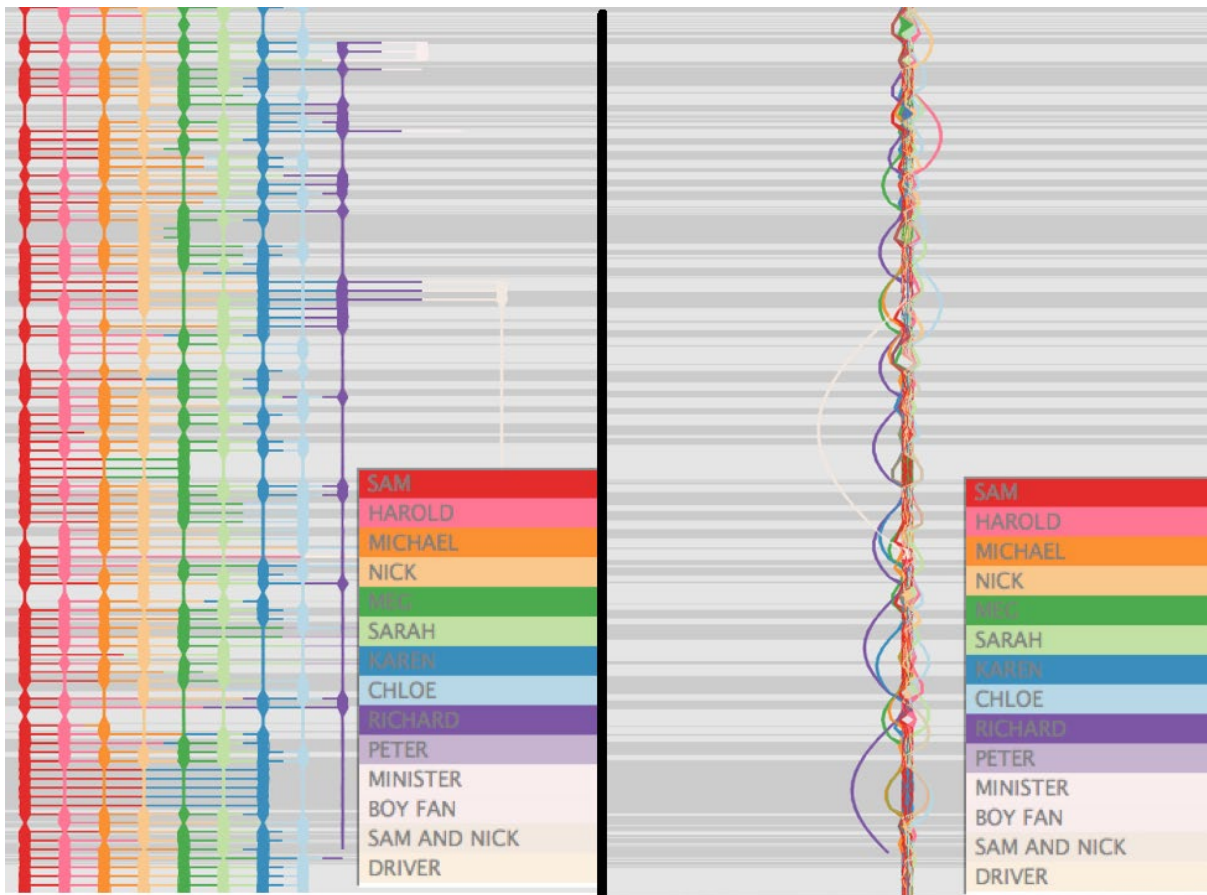


Figure 1: ScripThreads presence graph (left) and absence graph (right) of *The Big Chill* (1983), written by Lawrence Kasdan and Barbara Benedek.

There are also options to display a cumulative graph of the amount of “presence” of a character throughout the narrative, as shown in Figure 2, as well as a force directed network graph between all of the characters, as shown in Figure 3.

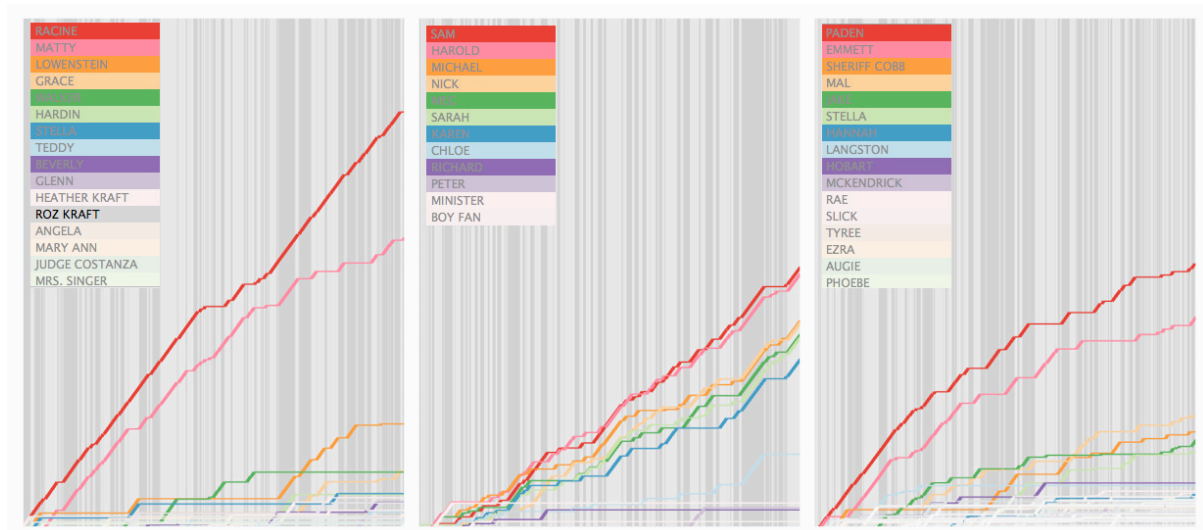


Figure 2: Increasing/cumulative graphs of three films directed and written or co-written by Lawrence Kasdan: from left to right, *Body Heat* (1981), *The Big Chill* (1983), and *Silverado* (1985).

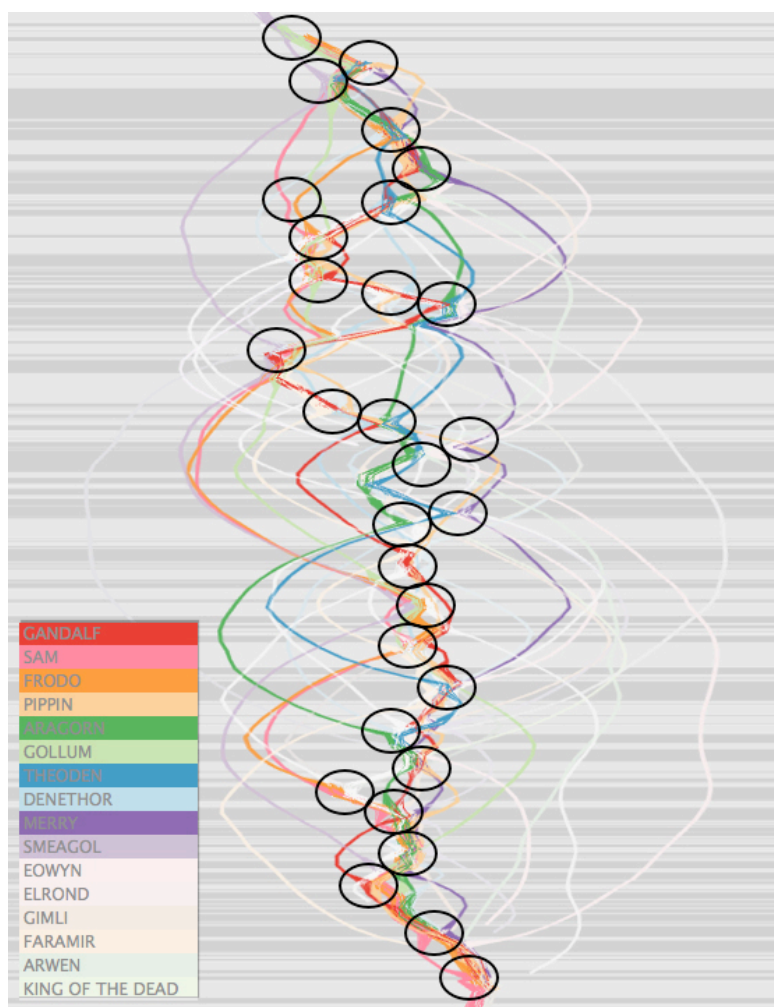


Figure 3: Parallel lines of action (their intersections circled for emphasis) revealed in the force directed graph of *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003).

As case studies, the research paper conducted a close reading on Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* film, which showed the character interactions in the film as the narrative progressed, as well as a distant reading of the corpus of Hollywood screenplays between 1930 and 2006, discovering patterns such as the hyper-present protagonist and how this style of screenplay writing differed between historical era, genre and authorship. ScripThreads had been proven by the authors to be generally useful in analyzing Hollywood screenplays, something which we could apply to Shakespeare's more traditional written plays. This way, we could attempt to gain new knowledge regarding the authorship of Shakespeare's works.

## Methodology

For this project, we would utilize textual evidence. Shakespeare's alleged works consist of about 39 plays, 154 sonnets, 2 long narrative poems and a few other verses. Since we can only compare a play with a play and a poem with a poem, we would tackle each type of work differently by using a two-pronged targeted approach.

For the plays, we would employ ScripThreads to generate a distant reading of Shakespeare's plays, as well as a distant reading of Christopher Marlowe's plays. We could also manually work through the character interactions within Sir Francis Bacon's novel *New Atlantis* and produce the presence/absence graph. We would then compare these graphs to check whether there is a high degree of similarity in terms of certain trends of the cumulative graphs of Shakespeare's plays and Christopher Marlowe's plays. We could also compare a close reading of each of Shakespeare's plays to Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*' character interaction graph to check whether it bears any resemblance in terms of character development throughout the respective narratives. The same close reading strategy could be done between Shakespeare's plays and Christopher Marlowe's plays.

For the poems and sonnets, we would employ a more traditional tool such as Word2vec, Voyant or RStylo. These tools are more suitable in analyzing poems and

sonnets since they would just analyze the poems and sonnets as a bag of words. We would then compare Shakespeare's poems and sonnets with Sir Francis Bacon's and Edward de Vere's poems. For a more concrete illustration, we could use RStylo to conduct principal component analysis and cluster analysis of Shakespeare's, Sir Francis Bacon's and Edward de Vere's poems, which might show how close Shakespeare's style is to each of the alternative authors' styles or might even show how distinct Shakespeare's style actually is compared to the rest. This tactic would be better instead of blindly applying the usage of ScripThreads on all types of Shakespeare's works, which would be detrimental due to the difference in style between genres.

## **Strengths & Limitations**

There are some strengths and limitations associated with this proposed research project. To start, a definite strength would be the fact that we are now able to execute a distant reading of all of Shakespeare's plays by using ScripThreads, without painstakingly spending time analyzing each and every single one of them. Another strength would be that we customized the approach to the different types of work that Shakespeare had allegedly produced. We employ ScripThreads to analyze only the plays, since ScripThreads is more suitable to analyze plays. Meanwhile, for the other forms of work such as the sonnets and poems, we utilized tools better at analyzing such types of work like Word2vec, Voyant or RStylo and employ certain analytical methods such as cluster analysis or principal component analysis. By using this uniquely-crafted method for each type of work, we would not be hindered by the different types of work that Shakespeare allegedly produced and thus, we would get a better representation of the true authorship of Shakespeare's works relative to the other works being considered in this project, such as Sir Francis Bacon's, Edward de Vere's and Christopher Marlowe's.

However, this project is not without its limitations. For instance, the ScripThreads tool itself has its own limitations, such as its inability to visualize act breaks, shifts in

spatial location, or a protagonist's journey toward a particular goal. Some manual work would still need to be done if we were to more accurately depict these shifts in acts or spatial location, and thus the involvement of certain characters, which would affect the overall style of a certain literary work. We are also just analyzing the one element of character interactions, since ScripThreads is not yet capable to capture other more nuanced concepts, elements and components of plays. Another limitation would be that we are comparing Shakespeare's works against only a cherry-picked subset of the alternative authors' works that are being considered and studied. For instance, we only compared Shakespeare's poems with Sir Francis Bacon's and Edward de Vere's poems, while Shakespeare's plays were compared with Christopher Marlowe's plays. Since none of the plays known as Edward de Vere's survived, we would not be able to compare Shakespeare's plays with his. In a similar vein, we could not compare Shakespeare's works with Sir Francis Bacon's more philosophical or judicial works, since they are of a different genre and thus vary greatly in terms of style, content, context and flow. Thus, we might misrepresent the overall style that the alternative authors possessed just because there is either a mismatch of the genre or the alternative authors' unique styles are represented by only a small subset of their works. As outlined in the research paper mentioned in the related work section, most screenplays also have this notion of a hyper-present protagonist, which might also be present in all of the plays that we analyzed. This trend would not indicate anything of interest since it is a general trend present across a multitude of screenplays, and it would not indicate any specific style being adopted by Shakespeare whatsoever.

## Conclusion

In this proposal, we have outlined our research objective of seeking out new methods to tackle the Shakespeare's authorship question. A combination of ScripThreads and other Digital Humanities tools able to conduct stylometric analysis could be employed to analyze the different types of works that Shakespeare allegedly wrote. We would then compare those results with the analysis results of the alternative authors' works to check for any possible similarities in terms of character interactions and style. There is the possibility that the alleged works of the great Shakespeare were not



written by Shakespeare himself. Perhaps, one of the alternative authors have written it, or maybe even several authors. Perhaps Shakespeare has collaborated with one or a few of the suggested alternative authors. If this project were to yield significant results to support the view that at least one of the alternative authors actually had a strong enough case to claim authorship over Shakespeare's works, then we might have misattributed the title of the world's greatest writer, poet and playwright to just a random person all this time.

**Word Count: 2000**

## **References**

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