



Wheels of Echoes

Sean McMullen

The end of a world began this morning. I'm sitting here in a cafe, typing up what I can remember of it on my iPad. It's a cold January day, and every time I look out over the Thames I shiver, but the weather has nothing to do with this particular apocalypse.

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When Audion Sound Services asked me to come to their London studios, I thought it was just another job. I had been doing voiceover work for them for two years, so whenever they wanted a cute teenage voice it was, *Call Kirsty*. Then, at 9 A.M. on a clear, chilly January day came the big surprise. They actually wanted my opinion.

"You want my thoughts on Shakespeare?" I exclaimed while dashing through the traffic across Euston Road with the phone pressed to my ear.

“Yes, in one hour,” said the director’s PA. “Can you make it?”

“But I’m just a first-year student at London University. There’s millions of professors and PhD students who know more about Shakespeare than me.”

“Elliot wants a millennial’s take on Shakespeare for a Channel 4 doco. And you’re a millennial who’s acted in some of his plays.”

“But what do I say?”

“Whatever you like. It doesn’t have to be anything intellectual.”

I had acted in Shakespeare plays in school and at university. That meant I had a pretty solid grounding as a Shakespearean actor for a girl of eighteen, so maybe my cv really was perfect for whatever they were doing. Even better, this gave me a chance to appear on television, giving me another credit for my IMDb entry. As I made my way across London to the Audion building at Wapping, I googled *Shakespeare* with a few keywords like *Audion*, *news*, and *hot stories*. I got no hits.

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Audion’s reception area had a display about the early history of sound recording. Along with the wax cylinder and disk recorders, there were also music boxes, a paper roll piano, and even a musical clock that was over four hundred years old. The receptionist said my contact was running late, so I had a chance to look at the display cases. I did not pay any attention to the other person who was sitting there until he spoke.

“Those music boxes are sound recorders too,” he called.

“Er, sorry?”

“Music boxes don’t record original sounds, but they do perform music in the same style as Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century musicians.”

“Do they? I never thought of it like that.”

He stood up and sort of swaggered over to me, his hands behind his back. He was one of those guys who does not trim his eyebrows, and they had grown out about an inch. I thought I remembered the eyebrows from somewhere.

“Drew Wilson, and you can put Professor in front of that if you like.”

Wilson, the big-time expert on Elizabethan culture. Now I remembered seeing him interviewed on historical documentaries.

“And you are?” he asked as I struggled to think of something cool to say.

“Oh, sorry! Kirsty, Kirsty Winters.”

“I thought I’d seen your face. Kirsty Winters, who played Hermione in that student production of *The Winter’s Tale* last month. Amusing pun, promising performance.”

There was a slight curl on his lips, which could have been a smile or a sneer. I act, so I notice these things. *A promising performance*, the words had been chosen with care. Did I have the promise of stardom? He might have meant I was terrible, but had scope for improvement. Something about his manner was intensely irritating.

“Excuse me a moment, I’m expecting an important email,” I said, taking out my phone.

I had remembered a documentary from years ago. Some expert with bushy eyebrows had proved that King Richard the Third was not a hunchback because the raised shoulder on his portrait had been added later. Richard’s grave was discovered the following year, and it turned out he really did have a curved spine and a raised right shoulder. I checked IMDb and found the documentary’s entry. Professor Drew Wilson, London University, had been the expert.

For a moment I was tempted to say something seriously rude about the professor’s credibility. On the other hand, he might turn out to be one of my examiners some day, so was it worth scoring a cheap point? No way.

“Do you know why we’re here?” I asked instead.

“Not a clue. I assume it’s something to do with my latest work on word patterns in Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. Are you familiar with the article?”

Predictably, he had turned the spotlight onto himself. I decided to switch it off.

“Afraid not, Professor, but I’m studying Elizabethan Lit next semester.”

“Good choice. The Elizabethan Age is where modern English began.”

* * *

Just then Elliot walked in to collect us. I already knew him from my voiceover work with Audion. He always wore a suit and tie, and came across as just another manager. That was all camouflage. People who build their careers by just talking crap and stabbing backs will try it with a manager, but not an expert. Elliot saved himself a lot of grief by hiding his skills in a suit while he assessed people.

"Sorry I'm late, meetings bloody meetings," he said, putting on quite a good show of being distracted.

"And you are?" asked Wilson.

"Elliot Carew. I'm project manager for a new documentary for Channel 4 called *Wheel of Echoes*," he said as he handed us nondisclosure forms to sign.

"Well done. It's a catchy, intriguing title," said Wilson.

They were clever words; they gave credit for the title to Elliot. If Elliot modestly gave credit where credit was due, he was flagging himself as an honest guy. Honest guys are easy to manipulate. Elliot smiled, said nothing, and beckoned us to follow him.

* * *

Audion's theatre had a screen, a stage, comfortable seats for twenty, and a very impressive control deck and speaker system. It was used for everything from raw pitches to previews of finished shows.

"I'm afraid this is the only chance I ever get to stand on a stage, so please make allowances for my performance," said Elliot as we settled into our seats. "I want to run a test before I introduce you to my mystery performer. I'll play five famous actors performing the same passage from *Hamlet*. Please, write down their names, if you can."

Wilson took out a notepad, but I just used the Notes app on my phone. Elliot pressed a remote. No prizes for guessing that the first quarter minute of Hamlet's soliloquy on Yorick's skull was the piece. I got Benedict Cumberbatch right but mixed up Lawrence Olivier and Peter O'Toole and failed completely on actors four and five.

"Cumberbatch, O'Toole, Olivier, Burton, and unknown," said Wilson.

"Splendid," Elliot replied. "What did you make of that fifth actor? Kirsty?"

"From his accent, American. Loads of hiss and crackle, so it was recorded a long time ago."

"Professor?"

"American, backwoods northeast coast, and recorded in the 1920s. The accents of that region were an acoustic time capsule from seventeenth-century England."

"Actually, the recording was made in London. Would you like to try again?"

"Maybe Welsh?" I replied.

"London?" said Wilson, frowning. "Probably someone who heard the 1920s recordings from the Appalachian Mountains and was using that accent to do a lash-up of a seventeenth-century English accent. Of course for Shakespeare it doesn't work."

"Why not?"

"Listen to Cumberbatch performing Hamlet, then go down to the corner pub and chat to one of the locals. Both are from twenty-first-century London, but they speak quite differently. The Appalachian recordings were of farmers and hunters, not Shakespeare's actors."

Have you ever met one of those people who gets his opinion accepted by sheer bluster? When Wilson gave an opinion, he left no room for doubt. *Pompos git*, I thought. *Hope you just screwed up totally.*

"Good point," said Elliot.

Wilson sat forward, probably expecting more praise.

"So I win?" he asked after a moment.

"This is not a contest, Professor. I just need a totally impartial assessment of the fifth actor. What else can you tell me about him?"

"He's experienced, with a clear, edgy voice. Sounds as if he does a lot of open air performances, where the acoustics are difficult."

"Brilliant," Elliot replied.

That was the praise that Wilson had been expecting. I thought about taking Elliot off my list for Facebook birthday greetings.

"Well, it's my job," said Wilson, with a dismissive wave.

"Kirsty?"

"He sounds sort of . . . likeable," I said, going somewhere where Wilson could not follow. "Bright, but a nice guy, you know? Like, if I had to share a dressing room with him, I'd trust him not to grope me."

The professor rolled his eyes and probably scored me two out of ten.

"Likeable," said Elliot. "That's a relief."

"So who was he?" I asked.

"Come along. I'll introduce you."

* * *

He led us to a nearby sound studio. Through the observation window I saw a massive wood-frame supporting pulleys, ropes, weights, and counterweights. Beside it was what looked like the insides of a giant clock, maybe seven feet long and four feet high. Elliot unlocked the door, and we entered.

"The weights and pulleys drive the main mechanism, which is a modified clock from a church tower," he explained. "There's no escarpment, just a rotor with a brake block to regulate the speed. All this kit is to spin that wagon wheel. We had to remove a window and hoist the thing in with a crane."

"An early musical clock," said Wilson, as he folded his arms and stood back.

His attitude was starting to really annoy me. At the risk of making a fool of myself, I walked forward and examined the wagon wheel more closely. Instead of having an iron rim it was coated with pottery clay, and in this were a dozen grooves. Mounted on a frame beside the wheel was a drum with one end cut away. Stuck to the head with sealing wax was a lever that drove a reed needle resting in one of the grooves. A modern stereo microphone was held inside the drum by a boom clamp.

Suddenly it hit me.

"This is a sound recorder!" I exclaimed.

"Give that girl a prize," said Elliot, clapping.

Wilson gasped, and the bottom dropped out of my stomach. I had just scored a goal against an examiner. *Game over*, I thought. *Now I'll have to move to Australia if I want to get a literature degree.*

"Unfortunately the inventor did not include a tracking mechanism," Elliot continued. "The grooves are circles, so when the white arrow on the rim comes full circle, you have to raise the steel needle manually or overwrite what you have just recorded. You then move the needle to the next groove and continue the recording. Twelve tracks of twenty seconds provide about four minutes of recording time per wheel."

"But pottery clay is hard and brittle," exclaimed Wilson. "The needle could not possibly record sound."

"The recording was made when the clay was soft. The wheel was then left outside on a cold night, and the iron rim contracted a little, separating it from the clay. The clay circle was put into a wide oven and baked hard, then mounted on another wheel to be played back. A sharpened reed was used for a playback stylus because the steel needle would have damaged the clay."

"How old is it?" I asked. "It looks way before Edison."

"Let's just say that the wheel's weight in twenty-four carat gold would not even approach its value."

Wilson just stood with his mouth open. This was totally and absolutely outside his comfort zone.

"A recording of Napoleon saying maybe Waterloo was a bad idea might be worth that much," I managed. "But, like, it's just *Hamlet*. Even some really important historical actor isn't going to be worth . . ."

My voice trailed off, but in my mind I was screaming, *Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit! It can't be! Not possible! Don't even dare to hope!*

* * *

Elliot unclamped the brake block, and the clockwork began to turn. I had expected the huge, clumsy mechanism to clatter and rattle, but to my surprise there was just a soft whirring. He withdrew the microphone from the drum.

"Originally, you put your head inside the drum to hear the playback," he said. "Who wants to be first?"

Wilson wheeled the only chair in the room over to the drum. He liked to be stage center, and I was currently hogging the spotlight.

"All right, an American Shakespearean actor, and pre-Edison," he said. "I think I know who it is."

He probably didn't even think he was being rude, he was too used to being important. As he sat down and put his head in the drum, I remembered playing with my granddad's old turntable when I was little. You can actually hear the sound of a vinyl record by just listening to the pick-up in the groove, even with the amplifier off. As Elliot lowered the reed into the groove, I put my hands on my knees and bent down to listen.

What we had heard back in the studio had been amplified, but above the rumble and hiss, the faint voices were still distinct. This time we heard the first eight seconds as well.

"Are you ready, Master Shakespeare?" asked a softly spoken man with an accent like an educated American who had lived among people speaking cockney for a very long time.

"That I am, Grantley," declared the voice I had heard reading *Hamlet* a few minutes earlier.

"Echoed this night, as our queen liveth still. Please commence."

There is no need for me to quote the first twelve seconds of the most famous soliloquy in the English language. Elliot lifted the playback reed from the groove.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked cheerily.

I was paralyzed with shock. Elliot clamped the brake block onto the rotor. The mechanism slowed, then stopped.

"That was totally, absolutely awesome," I said as I straightened.

"I said something less repeatable when I first heard it," said Elliot.

"Is it real?"

"Of course."

"He did say Shakespeare, didn't he?"

"He did."

I had just heard Shakespeare himself, performing Shakespeare. My legs slowly folded beneath me until I was sitting on the floor, my hands over my head because it felt like it might explode.

"Professor, did you like it?" asked Elliot.

Wilson was sitting up straight in the chair, his hands in his lap. His eyes were so wide they were scary, like a dead body with the eyes still open. Elliot shook him by the shoulder.

"Professor, this is getting weird. Say something."

"It has to be a hoax," Wilson whispered.

"So might the Moon landings, but I like the evidence," said Elliot. "See this note on the edge of the clay?"

Wilson did not move, but I got to my feet and peered at the writing.

"The last day of 1602," I said after a moment. "Shakespeare was definitely alive then."

"After allowing for eighteenth-century calendar reforms, you get 24 March 1603," said Elliot. "It's the night Queen Elizabeth died."

"Not just Shakespeare, but genuine Elizabethan Shakespeare!" I exclaimed.

"Impossible!" snapped Wilson, the confidence suddenly returning to his voice. "That's two and a half centuries before sound recording was possible."

His opinion was plausible, but the presence of the machine was hard to explain away. It contained nothing that a competent clockmaker could not have built around 1603.

"Where was it found?" I asked.

“Under a house built after the Great Fire of London,” said Elliot. “An earlier Tudor house had a basement under a stone floor supported by arches. It was sealed off and made to look like solid ground.”

“Probably to hide it from Cromwell’s heavies,” I said. “They didn’t care much for theatre.”

“And the owner was a royalist,” said Elliot. “She was killed in the Civil War, so her secret basement became totally secret.”

He tapped a spoke of the wheel with his knuckle.

“Carbon dating of the wood gave us 1570, plus or minus. Thermoluminescence analysis of the clay came in at about 1600.”

“So, like, it’s either a brilliant fake or it’s real?” I asked.

“Every test says real.”

“Shakespeare called the other guy Grantley. Did he build it?”

“Yes, but even less is known about Robert Grantley than William Shakespeare.”

“Soon there’ll be an army of PhD students searching the archives for clues about him.”

“The clock mechanism is late medieval, so it would have been about two hundred years old by 1603. Grantley probably salvaged it after installing a new clock in a church tower. We also found some of Grantley’s notes for operating it in the basement. Would you like to hear his introduction?”

“No prizes for guessing my answer,” I replied.

Wilson said nothing.

* * *

Elliot took out his iPhone and called up the photo of a brownish page of handwriting.

“I’ll paraphrase Grantley’s text,” he began. *“It has been the work of my life to measure the passing of time, but my delight has been to fashion echoes into clay. Not one year past did I notice how drum heads vibrate in sympathy with speech and music. On the last night of the reign of Glorious Elizabeth did I prepare my first wheel of echoes, then marry it to a needle and drum. Now I may rescue echoes cast into the winds of time, that they may not be borne away and lost. One and all may stand before my wheel and speak to ages yet unborn. By my own hand, Robert Grantley, Gamekeeper of Sounds to Lady Caldecotte.”*

“Pretentious style,” muttered Wilson, his voice toneless.

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic,” said Elliot.

“It’s Shakespeare’s voice. It doesn’t sound right.”

“You mean that Shakespeare doesn’t measure up?”

“He sounds American. It has to be a hoax.”

“But I thought modern American speech is closer to Elizabethan accents than the way we Londoners speak today.”

“What would a bloody engineer know?” shouted Wilson, suddenly standing up and waving his fist at Grantley’s wheel of echoes. “That voice has too much edge to do romance or pathos.”

“The original Globe Theatre had no roof, so the actors were effectively doing open air performances,” said Elliot. “Nobody would have heard him if he had a deep, soft voice.”

All this was true; even I knew it. Wilson was boxed in, but he refused to give up.

“So you have a degree in English Literature?” he demanded.

“No, but Audion has done a lot of recordings in the rebuilt Globe Theatre, and I was production manager for most of them.”

If Elliot was auditioning Wilson for his doco, it was not going well. Wilson tried to steer the exchange back onto ground where he had an advantage.

“Look, the English language is overflowing with quotes from Shakespeare,” he declared, staring past us as if speaking to a television camera. “He defined English theatre, and he invented a lot of what we think of as modern English. His plays still work after four hundred years, but everything written in *our* lifetimes is dross. Can you tell me what screenplay won an Oscar even four *years* ago?”

“I think I’m missing something,” said Elliot. “He recorded a really good Hamlet.”

“Really good?” Wilson shouted. “Really good? Really good is woeful if it’s Shakespeare. He’s

the Bard of Avon, so we expect him to be the ultimate Shakespearean actor. Even brilliant is not good enough. He's expected to be divine, but he sounds like some student actor from Wales or Kentucky—and anyway, his voice has no sense of drama."

There was yet another poisonous silence. Elliot frowned. Bad sign. Elliot does not frown often.

"I've worked on black box recordings of pilots shouting into their microphones as the ground rushes up at six hundred miles per hour," he said coldly. "You don't get more intense drama than that, and I say Shakespeare does *great* drama. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

The colder Elliot became, the closer Wilson edged to hysteria.

"Trust an engineer?" he babbled. "We're talking about art! You turned Shakespeare's real voice loose on us, and it's a joke!"

To be fair, the recording may not have been typical Shakespeare. It was made at maybe 2 A.M., and the machine was probably being tried out for the very first time. Over in Richmond Palace the queen had only minutes to live, and a steel needle was making impressions in damp clay on the rim of a coach wheel in twenty-second chunks. There was no time to prepare another wheel if he screwed up. Stressed people have higher pitched voices, and Shakespeare would have been seriously stressed.

The silence stretched into discomfort. Again. *Elliot is probably wondering about getting a n- other professor of literature for his doco*, I thought.

"I think you're being a bit excitable," said Elliot, his expression blank.

"Excitable? You're talking about my life's work!" said Wilson. "Shakespeare doesn't play Hamlet as well as Olivier, O'Toole, Burton, or Cumberbatch, so what do I do? If I say he's wonderful, I'll be the laughing stock of every school of performing arts on the planet. If I roast Shakespeare for being no good at Shakespeare, everyone else will be laughing."

By now, and against my better judgment, I was feeling sorry for Wilson.

"Why not say we can never know what he was like on a proper stage?" I suggested.

He ignored me and turned on Elliot.

"You engineers, you don't understand art!" he shouted. "Shakespeare has become whatever people want him to be, and we have made him divine! Now we're hearing him as just another actor. Reputations will be ruined. *My specialty is deducing Shakespeare's acting style based on clues in the dialogue of his plays. I'll be discredited, humiliated, ridiculed!*"

A couple of romantic entanglements had taught me that there is no reasoning with someone who is determined to wallow in misery. Professor Drew Wilson's reputation had been built on plausible sounding literary theories based on tiny scraps of evidence. Now there was an engineer loose in his literary china shop, tossing hard facts around and shattering his delicate, fragile theories.

"Er, I'm not an engineer," I said, waving my hand nervously, "but like, we've just learned that Shakespeare playing Hamlet is not like a mash-up of modern actors. So what? The guy was a hit with the audiences of Elizabethan London, so the wheel of echoes has taught us what they liked to hear. Why don't you just say it's great that we finally know how Shakespeare meant Hamlet to sound?"

"Because Shakespeare sounds bloody awful!" shouted Wilson, now with tears on his cheeks.

* * *

Elliot suggested chilling out over coffee. There was still a lot to discuss, because the doco was going to raise a truckload of questions. *Have other wheels survived? I wondered. Where are they? Who was Grantley? What happened to him?* Elliot led the way out of the studio while Wilson held the door open. Suddenly a push in the back sent me crashing into Elliot.

The door slammed behind us. Elliot already had his key out as he turned back, but Wilson had jammed another key into the lock and snapped it off. Elliot banged on the door and shouted, then tried to shoulder it open. Other Audion staff came running, and Elliot sent someone to find a fire axe. Through the observation window I saw Wilson heave a fire extinguisher off its mounting and start smashing the clay rim off the wheel of echoes. What does an eighteen-year-old English literature student do when a professor flips out and goes postal with Shakespeare? I

took out my iPhone, swiped “camera,” swiped “video,” and rapped “record.”

The studio door had been built pretty solidly, and it took a couple of minutes to chop out the lock and kick the door open. By then Wilson had smashed the entire clay recording off the rim of the wheel with the fire extinguisher and was pulverizing the fragments on the floor.

“It’s all a hoax!” he shouted as the Audion staff wrestled the extinguisher out of his hands and pinned him to the floor. “There’s no proof, there’s no evidence, it’s all fake news, they can do anything with special effects! You engineers, a plague on all your houses!”

Sirens blared somewhere outside, and we were soon joined by the police and paramedics. Wilson was strapped to a stretcher, injected with something, and carried out to an ambulance. I should have felt sorry for him, but I didn’t. He was in severe need of a reality check, and like Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Elliot had given him one.

* * *

By noon I was sitting in Elliot’s office, clutching my iPhone. He held up a contract.

“In return for rights to use the video on your phone in my documentary, I am prepared to offer you a thousand pounds, an introduction to a very influential agent, and the role of principal narrator in *Wheel of Echoes*.”

I’d do that for free, I thought. *This is wilder than my wildest dreams.*

“Works for me,” I replied.

“I’ve been watching you for the past two years, Kirsty. You have a great future ahead of you.” I now remembered that there was a catch.

“But the wheel of echoes was destroyed,” I said.

It was quite a while before Elliot stopped laughing.

“Kirsty, this is Shakespeare we’re talking about. The original wheel is in a steel case, bolted to the floor of a bank vault and under armed guard. Professor Wilson destroyed a copy we made to work out Grantley’s recording method. We also did scans of the original wheel with a laser pick-up head.”

A wave of relief washed over me, and I slumped back in the chair.

“So, when do we start shooting? Like, I feel a bit strung out just now.”

“Channel 4 is sending a camera crew over after lunch. Today you will only have to walk about in the wreckage. Tomorrow you stand in front of a green screen and interview me. You will also read out a list of the fourteen lost wheels that Grantley recorded.”

“He made *fourteen* more?” I gasped.

“He did. They must have been dispersed and hidden when Cromwell took over. Some may have survived.”

If I had not been sitting down I would have fainted. It was like being given a time machine and a copy of whatever passed for *What’s On In London* four centuries ago.

“I still can’t quite believe it,” I whispered. “People would have mentioned a sound recorder like that in diaries or letters.”

“They did.”

Elliot tapped the middle of his desk. After a moment I got the message, powered off my phone and placed it between us.

“You may not think it, but I’m a Shakespeare enthusiast. I don’t go in for literary theory, but I’ve assembled a database of twenty-five million words written during Shakespeare’s lifetime. Letters, journals, books, plays, parish records, lyrics of songs, even debates in parliament. Audion has been making good money, so I could afford to hire people to scan what was not already digitized.”

“That’s amazing. But why?”

His eyes drifted off me.

“When I was an undergraduate I was in love with a girl named Rosalie, and she was besotted with Shakespeare. She played the lute, came to lectures in Elizabethan costume, cooked Tudor recipes, and spoke like Shakespeare himself had taught her elocution.”

“Awesome. But, like, you never married. Did she dump you?”

“She killed herself.”

The words were like a slap across the face.

“How awful!” I gasped.

“Awful? Hideous, nauseating, obscene, none of those words even come close to describing what I found in her room. She had done a Juliet.”

“She stabbed herself?”

“Yes, but killing yourself with a dagger is not easy.”

True, and you don't get a chance to practice, I thought.

“The place looked like someone had set off a bomb in a bucket of red paint,” said Elliot, who then stopped for a moment and breathed deeply, fighting to get a grip. “Amid the mess was an examiner's report saying that she did not take literature seriously and lacked a proper appreciation of Shakespeare. She was a talented but brittle girl, born out of her time. Know anyone like her?”

Me? No way!

“I, like, appreciate the warning, Mr. Carew, but acting is my big passion. I'm just doing my degree for creds. I work out what bullshit the examiners want to read and feed it back to them.”

“Wise of you.”

“Did Professor Wilson write that report about your lady?”

“No, it was just some academic hack with an attitude problem. There was an inquiry, and a board of examiners rechecked Rosalie's work and gave her honors.”

“So what happened to the jerk who failed her?”

“He's still out there somewhere, teaching Shakespeare.”

* * *

Elliot drew up cue cards, and we practiced some Q&A for the doco. He did a toned down introduction to the bio material on Rosalie, then we moved onto the machine.

“What set you looking for the wheel of echoes?” I asked as he held up the next card.

“After Rosalie died I decided to do something Shakespearean in her memory, something based on hard evidence. I created the world's largest relational database of Elizabethan and Stuart history and culture. Any discoveries that researchers made would have to credit the Rosalie Database, and that would keep her alive for me. Then one of my assistants came across a letter with some words that mentioned binding Shakespeare into Grantley's “wheel of echoes.” He showed it to me. I was intrigued, so I did keyword searches. Do you know how many times the word echo appears in my twenty-five million word database?”

“Hundreds?” I asked.

“Thousands, but I checked them all and found two more relevant references. John Dowland wrote that Grantley ‘trapped poor, faint echoes of my song like birds in a net,’ and Sir Walter Raleigh ‘gave echoes to a wheel.’ Finally I was forced to admit the impossible: some Elizabethan inventor had worked out how to record sound.”

“But surely people would have made a big fuss about something like that,” I read from the cue card, even though it would have been my question anyway.

“Not at all. Remember Dowland's words, ‘poor, faint echoes’? Why bother with a faint, scratchy, and very expensive recording when you could hear Dowland or Shakespeare performing live? Many other breakthroughs have been forgotten. The English astronomer Harriot sketched the moon through a telescope months before Galileo, but who has heard of him today? Albertus Magnus had a theory of gravity four hundred years before Newton. Everyone knows about Newton and the apple, but do you know anything about Albertus Magnus?”

All that was a surprise, but it kind of made sense. I read the next cue.

“I suppose you got out the champagne when you realized what Grantley had built.”

“No, I actually went barking mad, it's a very Elizabethan thing to do,” Elliot confessed, sitting back, closing his eyes and smiling. “I made a tinfoil crown, attached a cushion to my shoulder with duct tape and ran out into the night shouting ‘An echo, an echo, my kingdom for an echo!’”

“That's just so cool!”

“The next morning, after the police finished testing me for drugs, I began a two-year search

for Grantley's hardware. One of the houses that his patroness owned was destroyed in the Great Fire of London, but I used an archaeologist's radar unit to establish that there was a hidden basement under the house that replaced it."

* * *

I finally managed to dash out for lunch, and found a place that advertised genuine Cornish pasties and genuine Melbourne coffee. Now I'm sitting at a table, looking out over the Thames. Different water, different buildings, but still the same Thames that Shakespeare knew.

Everything looks absolutely normal, but Elliot's revenge on the Shakespeare industry is swooping down like an owl that has spotted a mouse. In universities around the world, academic dinosaurs are still giving their lectures about Shakespeare, but the wheel of echoes has already been loosed upon them and claimed its first victim.

I can't warn anyone—I've signed a nondisclosure agreement with Channel 4. Should I bother doing Elizabethan Literature next semester? I don't think so; it's bound to be obsolete by then.

Sean McMullen lives in Melbourne and worked for three decades in scientific computing while running a parallel career as a science fiction author. He has had 120 books and stories published and has won over a dozen awards, as well as having Hugo and BSFA award nominations. A collection of his recent stories, Dreams of the Technarion, was published by Reanimus Press in November 2017. His daughter is the award winning SF and horror screenwriter, Catherine S. McMullen. Online Sean is at <https://seanmcmullen.net.au>.