

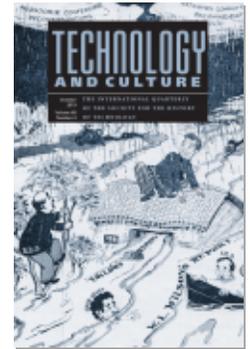


PROJECT MUSE®

Passwords: Philology, Security, Authentication by Brian
Lennon (review)

Samuel J. Huskey

Technology and Culture, Volume 60, Number 4, October 2019, pp. 1126-1127
(Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2019.0116>

➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741405>

the possibilities of network design, helping fuel readers' curiosity about what might have been and might yet be a very different Internet. While it was not written specifically for historians of technology, it will be an important source for any number of research programs, and no doubt its insider's perspective will make it engaging and useful for teaching both undergraduate and graduate students.

OCTOBER

2019

VOL. 60

DOUGLAS O'REAGAN

Douglas O'Reagan is the author of *Taking Nazi Technology: Allied Exploitation of German Science after the Second World War*. He earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Berkeley, and has held academic appointments at UC Berkeley, Washington State University, and MIT.

Passwords: Philology, Security, Authentication.

By Brian Lennon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.
Pp. 232. Hardcover \$39.95.

This book is ostensibly about the many intersections of the humanities and technology, primarily in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In truth, it is a sustained attack on the digital humanities as the latest form of "cryptophilology," Lennon's term for humanities scholarship in service to, or in collusion with, military and national security interests.

In the preface, Lennon observes (p. xvi) that "the historical braid joining modern cryptology as a state security practice with modern philology as its literary other has never completely unraveled." That would have been a marvelous premise for a history of the relationship between technology and the humanities. Unfortunately, Lennon uses it as a platform for delivering a philippic against computational philology and, by extension, the larger field of digital humanities. The thunderous conclusion to one paragraph in particular, makes this clear: "That even after more than a decade of energetic speculation, the phrase and the concept 'digital humanities' still frustrates attempts at provisional definition, let alone precision, is a liability and a predicament for anyone who has come to realize that sustained shouting about novelty only deafens" (pp. xiii–xiv). Nevertheless, Lennon does attempt a provisional definition by equating computational philology, a sub-field of digital humanities, with digital humanities itself throughout his work. Because of their technical and experimental nature, subjects such as stylometry, machine translation, natural language processing, and the like are convenient targets for someone wanting to portray digital humanities in broad strokes as a soulless field populated by gullible and naive nerds incapable of appreciating truth and beauty.

The first full chapter ("Passwords: Philology, Security, Authentication") is a temporary reprieve from Lennon's fulminations against the digital humanities. Here, he presents a thoughtful and sensitive meditation on

the nature of authenticity and security. In a far-ranging discussion, Lennon moves from the thought of Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard to the history of computer technology to a survey of scholarship on the shibboleth incident in Judges 12:6 and the meaning of “Open, Sesame!” in *Thousand Nights*. More than just a *tour de force* demonstration of Lennon’s *bona fides* as a humanist, this chapter challenges our notions of the historical aims of philology and probes the potential uses and abuses of its methods and techniques in the digital realm.

Unfortunately, the next three chapters (“Cryptophilology, I,” “Machine Translation: A Tale of Two Cultures,” “Cryptophilology II”) are not as thoughtful or provocative as the first. Rather, they feature a parade of scholars and enthusiasts who, in hindsight, appear to have been gullible and/or naive about the application of computational methods to linguistic and literary subjects. But most fields have some embarrassing moments in their infancy, and their pioneering scholars can look silly in retrospect. Those are not reasons to discount their work altogether.

Yet that is what Lennon gears up to do in the last chapter (“The Digital Humanities and National Security”). Never venturing outside of his own field of English and always hewing to his narrow definition of digital humanities, Lennon surveys selected articles from popular and academic press coverage of the digital humanities in the twenty-first century to support his argument that digital humanities is not only a worthless field of study, but also a betrayal of humanistic ideals, especially when its practitioners wittingly or unwittingly aid the advancement of technology that might have military and/or intelligence applications.

In summary, *Passwords* is not so much a monograph on philology, security, and authentication as it is three separate works that share the common objective of attacking the field of the digital humanities, narrowly construed. The opening and concluding chapters (more the former than the latter) are the most original and thought-provoking sections of the book, and they should have been published independently as essays. They bookend three chapters that survey and summarize previous work on the nexus of humanities scholarship, computer technology, and national security interests in the twentieth century. Readers interested in those subjects would be better served by studying the works cited in the notes. Nevertheless, despite its clear bias, the work should be required reading for anyone interested in the ramifications of the intersection of technology and the humanities.

SAMUEL J. HUSKEY

Samuel J. Huskey is associate professor and chair in the department of classics and letters at the University of Oklahoma.