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Virtual Monkeys Type "A Lover's Complaint"

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A couple of weeks ago, the news reported that a computer programmer named Jesse Anderson announced that he was close to getting virtual monkeys to randomly type Shakespeare's "A Lover's Complaint." This was supposedly an answer to the question, Would an infinite number of monkeys pounding on an infinite number of typewriters be able to produce Shakespeare's works?

Virtual monkeys are small computer programs that generate random sequences of text. For Mr. Anderson's project, according to the BBC, "Each sequence is nine characters long and each is checked to see if that string of characters appears anywhere in the works of Shakespeare. If not, it is discarded. If it does match then progress has been made towards re-creating the works of the Bard. To get a sense of the scale of the project, there are about 5.5 trillion different combinations of any nine characters from the English alphabet. Mr Anderson's monkeys are generating random nine-character strings to try to produce all these strings and thereby find those that appear in Shakespeare's works" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15060310>).

The question this supposedly answers has often been used in the creation, intelligent design, evolution, natural selection debates. So, before the evolutionists claim a victory, it is important that we understand what happened in Anderson's project.

The problem is that Anderson artificially looked for sequences of nine characters that matched nine-character strings in the poem. Once all of the nine-character strings have been matched, Anderson will claim that the virtual monkeys have typed Shakespeare's poem. Not by a long shot, Mr. Anderson.

Okay, Mr. Anderson, you created the artificial constraint of nine-character strings. I can beat you. I'll have my virtual monkeys type away and I'll simply look for one-character strings. That is, when my monkeys type all 26 letters of the alphabet—the same letters Shakespeare used—then I will claim that my monkeys have typed Shakespeare. And they will have done it in a lot less time than using nine-character strings.

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But will they really have typed Shakespeare? Of course not. They will have typed the same 26 letters that Shakespeare used, but that is not really Shakespeare's poem. And Anderson's virtual monkeys also did not type Shakespeare. They only typed the nine-letter sequences that are also found in "A Lover's Complaint."

Or let's go in the other direction and make the letter sequences longer. Stephen Shankland, in "Virtual Monkeys Recreate Shakespeare? Methinks Not" (http://news.cnet.com/8301-30685_3-20111659-264/virtual-monkeys-recreate-shakespeare-methinks-not/), chose 63 characters. He points out that for virtual monkeys to come up with a particular 63-character string from Shakespeare would be 1 chance in 26 to the power of 63. That is, he says, "1.4 billions times the number of atoms in the visible universe. Give or take."

But to really type Shakespeare's "A Lover's Complaint," they would have to have typed the 13,940 or so characters (according to Shankland; I came up with 14,880, but let's not quibble) Shakespeare used as one single set. In other words, they would have to have typed the poem right out. That would be 1 chance in 26 to the power of 13,940. There is nothing to which we can even begin to compare the enormity of that number. In fact, I believe I would be justified to quote Shakespeare and say that to do this would take, "For ever and a day" (*As You Like It*, Act IV, Scene I), and that's impossible.

Another problem with this entire argument is that, with Shakespeare, we know what letter sequences are right because we know the poem; we know where we are going. Shakespeare designed "A Lover's Complaint," and thus we know which sequences to save and which to leave out. Notice that the BBC article quoted above says, "Anderson's monkeys are generating random nine-character strings *to try to produce* all these strings and thereby *find* those that appear in Shakespeare's works" (emphases mine). But how could the blind, random chance of a godless nature do this? It could not. So the entire idea is barmy.

To be fair, I don't believe that Anderson intended that his project be used for any serious argument. But the fact remains that his virtual monkeys really didn't reproduce Shakespeare's "A Lover's Complaint." I write this to head off those who would use Anderson's results to argue that life could "easily" have come about and evolve without a Designer. Not so.

"The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool" (*As You Like It*, Act V, Scene I)

"Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him" (Proverbs 26:12)

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14:1 and 53:1)