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Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Shakespeare Texts

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Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques¹

Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Shakespeare Texts

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Periodically, someone will ask on social media, “what online Shakespeare texts are the best?” These questions are often focused on teaching Shakespeare and usually elicit lively discussion, with participants extolling their preferred online Shakespeare text. These conversations highlight what different users value: interface, textual integrity, features, editorial apparatus, and so on. Digital texts of Shakespeare also make computer-assisted analysis possible: *Voyant Tools* (voyant-tools.org), for instance, offers Shakespeare’s plays as one of only two pre-loaded corpora; *WordSmith Tools* similarly offers a downloadable Shakespeare corpus for analysis (lexically.net/wordsmith/support/shakespeare).² For better or worse, the SHAKSPER listserv (shaksper.net) has recently been consumed with stylometric arguments, the majority of which rely on digital Shakespeare texts. But it is not just the experts who use digital Shakespeare texts. Online Shakespeare texts, as Danielle Rosvally, Molly Barger, and Rachel Aanstad describe in their reviews, can be the first texts a curious mind encounters after a quick Google search.

The plethora of online Shakespeare texts can be attributed to many factors, including his central position in the literary canon, as well as his out-of-copyright status. Likewise, the early existence of Shakespeare online in the digital Moby text led to the creation of other sites based on that resource, as Rosvally notes in her review.³ Many sites that offer access to Shakespeare’s

1. These reviews are published in collaboration with *Early Modern Digital Review*. They also appear in vol. 2, no. 3 (2019) of *EMDR* (emdr.itercommunity.org).

2. For a review of the “ShakespearePlaysPlus Text Corpus” from *WordSmith*, see Katharina Mahler, *R|I|D|E: A Review Journal for Digital Editions and Resources* 9 (2018): ride.i-d-e.de/issues/issue-9/shakespeare-plays/.

3. The Moby site is no longer active, though the texts are still available through Project Gutenberg. For more on the importance of the Moby Shakespeare in particular, see Andrew Murphy, “Shakespeare Goes Digital: Three Open Internet Editions,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010): 401–14 (online version

works (including some discussed in this special issue) are comparably old for websites, such as the *MIT Shakespeare*, which went online in 1993. Yet, as Katherine Rowe suggests, we are still living in the age of “digital incunables” for online Shakespeare texts.⁴

This special issue brings together six reviews of major sites that offer online access to Shakespeare’s works. Each of these sites is dedicated solely to Shakespeare: the full text of Shakespeare’s works is also available in other omnibus sites such as *Project Gutenberg* (gutenberg.org), and *Early English Books Online–Text Creation Partnership* (textcreationpartnership.org/tcp-eebo/), not to mention projects that digitize existing printed books such as *Google Books* (books.google.com) and *The Internet Archive* (archive.org). The sites reviewed here are all (save one) free to access: see Amanda Henrichs’s discussion of the implications of paying for Shakespeare’s texts in her review. While most of these sites offer access to what is considered a standard canon of Shakespeare’s works, some include only a subset, as the reviews describe.

Although created at different times and with different specific aims, each of the sites reviewed in this special issue was designed to facilitate access to specifically Shakespearean texts online: these are not sites that include Shakespeare alongside other literary or dramatic works. There are, of course, other online sites beyond those reviewed here that are devoted entirely to Shakespeare’s texts yet to be evaluated, including *Play Shakespeare* (playshakespeare.com) and *shakespeare online* (shakespeare-online.com). This does not even begin to factor in the burgeoning field of mobile apps. When we consider sites focused on printed versions of Shakespeare’s plays, like the *Shakespeare Quartos Archive* reviewed in this issue by Matteo Pangallo, the list extends even further to projects like *Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century* (bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook/), or, if we think bibliographically, the newly-launched *Shakespeare Census* (shakespearecensus.org). Expanding our purview to include digital projects based on performance,

for review available at mcpress.media-commons.org/ShakespeareQuarterly_NewMedia/shakespeare-remediated/murphy-shakespeare-goes-digital/). See also Eric M. Johnson, “Open Source Shakespeare: An Experiment in Literary Technology,” *Open Source Shakespeare* (2003): opensource-shakespeare.org/info/paper_toc.php.

4. Katherine Rowe, “Living with Digital Incunables, or a ‘Good-Enough’ Shakespeare Text,” in *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, ed. Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 144–59.

reception, adaptation, sources, biography, and so forth, includes ever-increasing numbers of sites, many of which Shakespeareans use regularly for teaching, research, and performance. There is much critical work to be done evaluating this abundance of existing digital Shakespeare resources.⁵ Reviewing and revisiting each of these sites can help us to select which ones will be of most use, to navigate and use them wisely and critically, and also to situate and imagine the role of future digital Shakespeare projects.

Rowe contends that when evaluating digital Shakespeare texts, we must ask ourselves, what makes these online texts “*good enough according to what principles and what purposes?*” (144, emphasis in the original). In that spirit, this special issue showcases work by reviewers with expertise in a range of areas, including teaching Shakespeare from primary school through graduate school, researching and publishing about Shakespeare, editing early modern texts, and performing Shakespeare. The ideal text for teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates is not necessarily the ideal text for creating a promptbook for performance. As Henrichs describes in her review of *Shakespeare’s Words*, researchers at different levels will have different needs and expectations. Every digital project offers an argument about the importance of the material it presents and how that material should be navigated and understood. These reviews unpack these arguments, both explicit and implicit in multiple Shakespeare projects. Both Pangallo’s and Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich’s reviews underscore the likelihood that one of the arguments emerging from some of these sites was not anticipated by the site creators: digital projects need to be constantly maintained and updated or they risk falling into oblivion.

In assembling these reviews, I was struck by the willingness of many users to forgo the critical apparatus I hold so dear. Both Barger and Aanstad, for instance, privilege reading Shakespeare with text in hand, often while moving. This is not how I personally interact with Shakespeare’s texts, either in print or digitally. Indeed, Barger demonstrates how the *Folger Digital Texts* are just one element of the Folger Shakespeare Library’s array of educational materials, which emphasizes the importance of moving beyond the solo reading model. Furthermore, many of these reviews challenged my assumption that editorial interventions such as footnotes, glosses, and scholarly introductions were

5. For a discussion of the fraught position of Shakespeare online, see Laura Estill, “Digital Humanities’ Shakespeare Problem,” in “Shakespeare and Digital Humanities: New Perspectives and Future Directions,” ed. Stephen O’Neill, special issue of *Humanities* 8 (2019): article 45, doi:10.3390/h8010045.

necessities. These reviews highlight the range of existing digital Shakespeare texts from “feature-lite” (*MIT Shakespeare*, reviewed by Rosvally) to a “dizzying array” of features (*Internet Shakespeare Editions*, reviewed by Kolkovich).

As editors, scholars, and students learn to use and navigate online Shakespeare editions, these editions will certainly change and new editions will appear. And, indeed, technological advances, such as the rise of mobile computing, also facilitate and in some cases necessitate change. The projects reviewed here have, in some cases, already undergone rebuilds, which signals the importance of evaluating and re-evaluating digital projects as they evolve and as the online landscape also changes.⁶ Just as multiple reviews of monographs and critical editions benefit the scholarly community, multiple reviews of digital editions at different stages in their life-cycles can help scholars assess existing resources. *Early Modern Digital Review* will continue to offer a space for the important work of evaluating digital projects related to Shakespeare—and beyond.

Enniss, Stephen C., Neil Fraistat, Richard Kuhta, and Richard Ovenden, project dirs.

Shakespeare Quartos Archive. Image Collection.

Oxford: Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford / Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library / College Park, MD: Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities of the University of Maryland, 2009. Accessed 12 February 2019.

quartos.org.

When, ten years ago, the *Shakespeare Quartos Archive* (SQA) was launched, its creators described it as an extension of the 2004 *Shakespeare in Quarto* website hosted by the British Library (BL, bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare). The BL’s older site allows users to view, side-by-side, a page from two unique copies out of 107 copies of all twenty-one Shakespeare plays printed in quarto before 1642. In its design and interface, the BL’s site is cumbersome and awkward, though

6. For additional examples of reviews of online Shakespeare texts, see, for instance, Mahler (note 2, above); Murphy (note 3, above); and Michael Ulliot, “The Raw and the Cooked: A Review of The New Oxford Shakespeare,” *Spenser Review* 48.2.18 (Spring–Summer 2018): english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/48.2.18-1.