Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Dabbs, Thomas, creator and host. Speaking of Shakespeare

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas Dabbs, professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern English Literature at Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU) in Tokyo, started a casual program, *Speaking of Shakespeare*, in which he interviewed colleagues in and beyond Japan, sharing interests and news during lockdown. The first batch of six episodes (recorded between October 2020 and March 2021) was streamed in August 2021. Since that time, with support from AGU and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, *Speaking of Shakespeare* has become a regular series. Each month, one or two episodes are published as a podcast (on Buzzsprout) and a video (on YouTube), both of which retain the program's initial unpretentious flavour.

At the time of writing, *Speaking of Shakespeare* offers 41 episodes of Dabbs's conversations with early modern scholars, teachers, directors, actors, and digital developers about topics on Shakespeare and his time. Some guests are very well known, like Ben Crystal (episode 2), Tiffany Stern (episode 17), Emma Smith (episode 23), James Shapiro (episode 26), or Stephen Greenblatt (episode 34). But emerging specialists also get a chance to present their scholarly, theatrical, and digital projects in an accessible manner. Episodes are between 60 and 90 minutes in length and available on a variety of streaming platforms (Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, Amazon Music, TuneIn, Castbox, Overcast, Stitcher, Castro, Goodpods, Podfriend, and RSS) and on the YouTube channel @SpeakingofShakespeare. The series offers an easy-going and friendly atmosphere and speaks about current topics with an always unaffected tone. Host Thomas Dabbs has a warm and open personality, often mentioning his personal connection with his guests (when he met people at specific conferences or collaborated on scientific projects or even how he ate excellent salmon in Wales with the family of a colleague) and never shying away from revealing intimate stories about himself (I noticed that he likes playing golf, grew up in South Carolina where he began primary school one year before desegregation, and has taught in prisons).

Speaking of Shakespeare covers a range of topics in Shakespeare studies, Shakespeare in performance, and Shakespeare in education around the globe. It will appeal to anyone interested in Shakespeare, but, as it is advertised on the Facebook group "Shakespeare and Early Modern Friends," its target audience is specialists, practitioners, and teachers of Shakespeare and the Renaissance. The podcast offers lectures for teachers and undergraduates, such as Sarah Olive on Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (episode 3), Peggy O'Brien on the Folger Method for teaching Shakespeare (episode 30), and Lucy Munroe on early modern English theatre companies and performance spaces (episode 36). The series also often features book presentations in which guests talk about their research areas and interests; as of the writing of this review, the most recent episode (episode 43) featured Ian Smith discussing his new book *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (2022). There are also conversations about innovative and ongoing projects, such as in episode 9, where Kyoko Matsuyama talks about her analyses of Japanese adaptations of Shakespeare in manga and anime, and episode 11, in which Brett Greatley-Hirsch discusses his work as coordinating editor of *Digital Renaissance Editions* (digitalrenaissance.uvic.ca).

As a whole, the series is trying to achieve several goals at once, and this can be frustrating for the general listener, the researcher, or the teacher. So too a lack of a consistent structure makes it challenging to navigate the series and to curate the episodes' content for classroom use. If the series is easy to listen to and to access, finding the program you wish to listen to is difficult because none of the streaming platforms offer a search option, and the YouTube channel lists episode by (confusing) number rather than guest or topic. The website on Buzzsprout features guests and topics but not episode numbers, and users need to scroll down to find what they want to listen to. The lack of consistent labelling is also somewhat distracting. On both Buzzsprout and YouTube, *Speaking of Shakespeare* patrons have access to "Show Notes" that include a brief introduction to the guest and general subject of the episode as well as a list of specific conversation topics with timestamps. On YouTube and Buzzsprout, patrons may also access an auto-generated transcript. Both platform pages list segments with timestamps ("chapter markers"), which makes it easier to assign portions of video (but not audio) episodes to students. Currently, on YouTube, a few guests provide visual materials, while others treat the interview as a radio broadcast; as the series picks up, there is more consistency and more visual elements seem to be added as well, from authors showing the covers of their

books to speakers sharing PowerPoint slides. None of this visual material is linked on the podcast "Show Notes," however.

The series provides guests with a platform to inform the audience about their projects, like the conversation with Pip Willcox about the much-used Early English Books Online (quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup) and its origin (episode 7). It also casts light on lesser-known initiatives, but the series' approach remains piecemeal. The series seems to be missing opportunities to connect specialists directly with one another and sometimes fails to direct audiences to similar episodes in which they might be interested. For instance, I would have found it helpful if the descriptions mentioned the connections between Roze Hentschell's discussion of her book, *St. Paul's Cathedral Precinct in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Spatial Practices* (2020), in episode 20 and John Wall's discussion of the completion of two digital projects, the Virtual St. Paul's Cathedral Project (vpcathedral.chass.ncsu.edu) and the Virtual Paul's Cross Project (vpcp.chass.ncsu.edu), in episode 25.[7] Although the YouTube channel offers suggestions for further viewing/listening, these "playlists" mix content from the series with other material that is not precisely sourced.

During the interviews, researchers share their methodologies and give interesting tips in a casual manner. Adding connections among episodes and resources could be a means to showcase additional open-access resources for scholarship and teaching. For example, Tiffany Stern (episode 17) mentions how she regularly mines the rich (free) online English Broadside Ballad Archive (ebba.english.ucsb.edu), while Stephen Wittek (episode 35), speaking of the recent volume *Performing Conversion: Cities, Theatre and Early Modern Transformations* (2021) that he co-edited with José R. Jouve Martin, notes the foundational utility of Paul Yachnin and Marie-Claude Felton's (free) online project Early Modern Conversions (earlymodernconversions.com). Wittek also vividly describes his inspiring Shakespeare-VR project, which "uses virtual reality technologies to enrich students' understanding of Shakespearean drama and the conditions of performance in the early modern theater" with the example of "Sweet Sorrow: Romeo & Juliet in Virtual Reality" (shakespeare-vr. library.cmu.edu). Listening to the series, I also discovered that episode 12 of *Speaking of Shakespeare* hosts David McInnis talking about *Taming of the Shrew in VR* (cmu-lib.github.io/dhlg/project-videos/wittek). Curating the *Speaking of*

7. For a review of the latter resource, see Nelson, review of *Virtual Paul's Cross Project*.

Shakespeare resource more extensively would definitely make it a valuable tool to see how online archives are actively put to use in various methodologies.

Finally, the series showcases initiatives that decentre Shakespeare, such as Andy Kesson's projects Before Shakespeare (beforeshakespeare.com), which "explores the beginnings of playhouses and theatrical culture in England," and A Bit Lit (abitlit.co), "a new forum for scholarship and creativity" that provides an irreverent outlet for "researchers, performers and makers of all sorts, about literature, culture, history and what on earth is going on" (see episode 19). Non-English-language projects are also given airtime, like Dobbs's conversation with director, playwright, translator, and scholar Shoichiro Kawai about the Kawai Project (kawaiproject.com), which is devoted to his adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for the Japanese stage (see episode 21).

There are some powerful and savvy moments in the conversations, as guests offer anecdotes about sensitive topics, which serve to create a sense of a scholarly community and is probably what stuck me the most: how in a trying time, teachers collectively share their fears, interests, or their pasts and memories. James Shapiro explains how the storming of the US Capitol inspired him to write *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020); Sarah Olive discusses how much it meant to her to be invited to Kobe University and getting her visa for a long-distance destination in a COVID-ridden atmosphere; and Jane Hwang Degenhardt, discussing her recent book *Globalizing Fortune on the Early Modern Stage* (2022), reveals her own past history as a lucky adopted child (episodes 26, 32, and 41). In this respect, the series' promise to humanize Shakespeare studies for general audiences and student listeners is totally fulfilled.

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Work Cited

Nelson, Brent. Review of *Virtual Paul's Cross Project: A Digital Recreation of John Donne's Gunpowder Day Sermon*, by John N. Wall, project dir. *Renaissance and Reformation* 42, no. 2 (2019): 189–94. doi.org/10.7202/1065134ar.