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Transitioning to E-Shakespeare:
Textual Instability and the Digital Age

In the last two decades textual scholarship on the English Renaissance has demonstrated that the Shakespearean text (like the author/s the name Shakespeare represents) is elusive. Prefaces to editions of Shakespeare's plays remind readers of the well-known fact that no manuscripts of any of his plays has survived. In her essay "Composition/ Decomposition: Singular Shakespeare and the Death of the Author" Laurie Maguire plainly states, "the editors give us all that we call Shakespeare" (142). Shakespeare is a construct: this is such a critical commonplace now that the notion that Shakespeare's editors through the centuries have participated in the "collaborative venture" that keeps producing new editions of the texts (Murphy "Introduction" 14) is accepted beyond the scholarly community. Thus, a play published under the *Third Series* of *The Arden Shakespeare*, for instance, does not carry the author's name on the spine—only the play's title. On the cover of the volume the editors' names feature under the title:

Hamlet
edited by Ann Thompson
and Neil Taylor.

The question which arises for scholars and teachers alike is who Shakespeare's next editors will be and whether they will employ practices both new and traditional to reinterpret the most canonical of authors for the shifting cultural contexts of the future. As mediators between elusive subject matter and a new generation of readers, Shakespeare's next editors need to acknowledge the instability of textual authority while producing readable text. Digital media may provide the means which will facilitate the relationship between past and present. In this essay I discuss the promise inherent in the uses of e-texts and digital technologies in the college classroom as a means of enabling new readings and of preparing future generations of textual scholars in Shakespeare studies to emerge.

When writing or teaching, scholars acknowledge that their critical interpretation depends upon the examination of one or more versions of the text

but proceed to defend their own reading through textual references to one printed edition usually. More than one editions may be consulted but eventually the editor and later the teacher must make a choice even if more than one alternatives are presented in the Notes or the Introduction to a scholarly edition. The purpose of the printed page is to fix even temporarily a text which, in the context of Renaissance drama, was open. "Renaissance dramatic textuality . . . is predicated on an understanding of the text as unbound, multiplicitous, malleable and adaptive," argues Murphy in his easy "Texts and Textualities" (196). The openness of the text is a given in the postmodern classroom but textual analysis remains bound to the need to fix the text before one can address the ideas in it.

Despite critical awareness of such limitations, print and paper are media which require concreteness. For some readers this concreteness is vital: students, both high-school and college, performers, and others involved in a theatrical production, belong to groups which seek a stable text that will allow them to enter the Shakespearean world without immediate concerns about the lexical choices that the editor made. These two reader groups also constitute the dominant categories of contemporary users of the Shakespearean text: for them a play is either an object of study or lines to be brought to life through performance.

Will the text be read and studied or performed? Shakespeare's past editors frequently favoured the former and today's teacher may do one's best to discuss performance in the classroom but the printed text remains a priority in academia. Within a culture which declares the author dead yet creates ever more powerful copyright laws to protect intellectual property, the Shakespearean text is the product of the editors (who work for Oxford, Riverside, Norton, etc) as much as it is the product of the artists involved in the latest theatrical production (the London stage, for instance, is rarely without at least one much-discussed production of a Shakespeare play). Nonetheless, "it is the printed text," Murphy concludes, "that is the final arbiter of meaning" ("Texts" 201).

Not for long. Electronic editions of Shakespeare's works are transforming the study of the particular oeuvre as hypermedia foreground intertextuality, inviting readers to 'view' texts as multilayered and 'linked' to other texts—to use diction literally appropriate to how the text can be transformed when read on a screen. Needless to add that not all websites hosting Shakespeare's texts aspire to be more than electronic versions of basic print editions. One of the better known sites and arguably the "Web's first edition" of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, simply provides "HTML versions of the plays" free of copyright restrictions (<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/>). Yet any such e-text edition which does not offer annotations or commentary is simply a copy of the editorial choices someone else made in the past without providing access to that editorial rationale. Any contemporary reader of the plays, student or thespian, needs more and will seek such information online in other sites.

Two sites which complement each other well and easily prove how useful technology can be to contemporary audiences of Shakespeare's work are created by Paul Weller and Eric Johnson. Paul Weller's site, *Shakespeare Navigators* <http://www.clicknotes.com/>, provides viewers not only with notes but also with scene summaries, annotations, even key critical texts on the major tragedies. The experience is akin to reading a scholarly edition—only better. The explanatory Notes are far more detailed than in a print edition (and can coexist

with the text as a separate window opens on the screen's right side) while the annotations are succinct and helpful to students of the text. The site offers not only the texts but also a learning experience: any viewer who reads through *Othello*, for instance, and the accompanying material receives information on the play similar to what one would learn in an introductory Shakespeare class—for free.

Another sophisticated site which is freely available is Eric Johnson's *Open Source Shakespeare* <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/>. Offering a concordance as well as lists of characters and lines, *OSS* proves invaluable to scholars, students and performers alike as its electronic features allow users to manipulate the text into segments and rearrange it in ways that are not available with printed texts. Scholars studying individual features of one or more of the texts can indulge in intriguing statistics: for example, family politics and power hierarchies in Shakespeare's society become clearer even with a superficial look at the use of relevant terms. Specifically, the word "sister" appears 180 times in Shakespeare's plays while the word "brother" three times as much; various forms of "mother" exist nearly 450 times but forms of "father" approach a record thousand times. Similarly, directors seeking insights into characters can study the lines of one character; lines become readily available by clicking on the character's name. The site is indeed, as the home page claims, so much "more than just a collection of texts" that I find myself learning something new every time I use the concordance in class or invite the students to use the focus-on-a-character function in an assignment. In his essay "Shakespeare and the Electronic Text" Michael Best comments on the "impressive array of alternative ways of searching and viewing the text" *Open Source Shakespeare* offers (155).

Both *Shakespeare Navigators* and *Open Source Shakespeare* use technology to enhance the experience of the printed text and to make full use of the potential offered by a new medium. Other sites may offer such indispensible visual aids that it becomes impossible to ignore them. Online access to the treasures of the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library promotes students' understanding of textual instability in a user-friendly manner. For instance, whenever I need to demonstrate to students in my Shakespeare's tragedies course at Deree College how significant the differences between editions of *Hamlet* are, even in the seventeenth century, I show them how to compare copies online at the *British Library*'s *Shakespeare in Quarto* site <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/homepage.html>. When they see on the screen pages from the 1603 *First Quarto* (at the British Library) next to pages from the 1604 *Second Quarto* (at the Folger Shakespeare Library) and realize that these facsimiles of Renaissance texts are housed in libraries far away from each other (and from their own college classroom in Athens, Greece), these students are aided in their understanding of the significance of editorial and printing practices.

In his "Introduction" to *Shakespeare and the Text* Andrew Murphy demonstrates (by comparing in great detail a segment of those *Hamlet* versions to Harold Jenkins's text in the 1982 *Arden* edition) how heavy the weight of tradition may fall on the shoulders of editors and how restrictive the "static format of a print edition" may prove to be (9). Making his argument in print, Murphy needs seven pages; with the print edition of the *Arden Hamlet* in their hands and the two *Quartos* juxtaposed side-by-side on the screen, my students grasp this argument in five minutes. When teaching *Hamlet*, I can also demonstrate some

of the significant differences between the *Second Quarto* and the *Folio* by acquainting them with another innovative site: *The Enfolded Hamlet* <http://www.leoyan.com/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/enhamp.php?type= EN>. Using color and brackets, Bernice Kliman creates a compound text of *Hamlet* out of Q2 and F1. Although the technicalities of textual editing are difficult to grasp for the average reader, the color-coding and typography used on the screen in the "enfolded" *Hamlet* text illustrate the differences by allowing both Q2 and F1 to be present at once. Thus, students see for themselves the originals from which their print edition derives; they recognize the decisions editors have to make; more importantly, when seeing the contradictions embedded in the versions of the Shakespearean text, they are exposed to "elements of undecidability in their reading," which, Leah Marcus suggests, should be the aim of "editing Shakespeare in a postmodern age" (142).

Since technology not only allows but also promotes the juxtaposition of versions, the contemporary scholar can travel virtually to examine those few existing copies that only a select minority could access in the past. This online journey begins in the classroom: for the current generations of college students, for whom e-media and the screen of their mobile phone, laptop, or e-Reader feature more prominently in their lives than the printed word, understanding that the text must be un-edited, to allude to Marcus's editorial practices, to be edited is an easier task than ever before. The most significant trait of the printed page, the linearity in the presentation of information, is not only absent from the digital world but nearly impossible to achieve as readers work their way through menus and links, constantly making choices. The interactive element inherent in digital connectivity empowers these new generations of readers and enables a faster understanding of textual practices because they can approach the Shakespearean text through technological means they already embrace in their daily lives.

From the scanned pages of *Quarto* copies to the public-domain 1914 Oxford edition of the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, which is available through Bartleby.com, online sites satisfy sophisticated scholarly needs and encourage new readers to engage with the textual properties of the works also as viewers. This aspect of the web, namely that readers function first as viewers, requires that sites pay attention to presentation. On the screen first impressions become almost as important as the content; therefore, a site such as *Internet Shakespeare Editions* <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/index.html> is doubly appealing due to its visual layout and the use of burgundy and cream as contrasting colors which create an aesthetically pleasing background to the texts. Beyond the pleasing aesthetics of the site, viewers/readers discover that this is one of the richest online resources, providing access, for example, to copies of later *Folios* that do not exist in other sites. Founded in 1996, *ISE* is still developing its material constantly as the online reality and user needs become more sophisticated. As Michael Best, the coordinating editor of *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, clarifies, the development of an edition "native to the electronic medium" is no simple matter: it requires "time, money, and a tenacious combination of experiment and imagination" (158). Arguably the most scholarly of online resources, the *ISE* is committed to producing freely available, peer-reviewed editions and a plethora of supplementary material, which make it the website I unfailingly recommend to my students at present.

My essay's starting point has been that the Shakespearean text is a construct and the ones constructing it are the editors. In his paper "Notes on a New Editorial Ecology" Eric Johnson expresses the paradox of the instability of the Shakespearean text by noting that "Shakespeare was likely to have been Shakespeare's first editor." I have not made the point so eloquently myself but this instability should constitute the basis of any discussion of Shakespeare in our time, in and out of the college classroom. Whether the editors of *Hamlet* mark Hamlet's first lines in the play as asides (or not) produces the same effect: readers have to wonder whether Claudius hears Hamlet's insults and why he does not respond. No matter how factual the content of any gloss or critical note, it still marks the beginning of an act of interpretation. Today's students of Shakespeare have digital access to manuscripts and they do not possess the innocence or security of past readers. After they see the differences in the Quartos and Folios produced in the seventeenth century, how can they trust the printed page or the assurance of any teacher, editor, or web scholar that we are not in the business of offering opinions? Or, that opinions are not indicative of culturally constructed beliefs and bias?

I do not mean to imply that sound editorial practices do not exist, or that constructs cannot be convincing, or to appear to adopt an extreme postmodern distrust towards the text, printed or electronic. In the classroom there can never be "too much" interpretation. I like to expose students to as many critical opinions as possible in the hope that they will appreciate the value of polyphony and be encouraged to add their voice (which is inevitably their interpretation, not mine) to ongoing critical debates by recognizing the theoretical positions and editorial practices adopted. Encouraging students to find their voice in the first place becomes easier when they are exposed to the editor's interpretation (as it is presented in an Introduction to a critical edition, for instance). Asking students how they "see the text" is enabled through "picking quarrels," as Philip Weller calls them, with today's editors, thus allowing students to develop their own awareness of the intricacies of the act of interpretation. How else can Shakespeare's next editors become the radical re-interpreters of the canon we as educators expect them to become? How else will they be able to negotiate the challenges of the hybrid media culture emerging in the digital world? Allow me to end by expressing the hope that the students we are currently introducing to the intricacies of textuality will use the intellectual, technological, and institutional resources at their disposal to offer novel insights as Shakespeare's next editors.

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Shakespeare Websites Discussed

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