

# ‘Mark the Play’: Electronic Editions of Shakespeare and Video Content

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**Abstract.** From world-wide archival film footage, to recordings of amateur and professional productions, and, of course, user-generated content uploaded to YouTube, the last decade has seen an explosion in the production and dissemination of Shakespeare in digital video form. The challenge facing researchers is no longer to acquire and amass this video data, but rather to develop the methods and tools to accurately and dynamically navigate, search, and interact with the data.

The Humanities Computing and Multimedia Centre at the University of Victoria has been developing such a tool (*Platypus*). Originally designed to present digital video footage of public lectures alongside a transcript, this proof-of-concept system has much broader research and pedagogical applications: to search a video or videos by full-text; to create, display, store, and search annotations, tags, and other metadata; and, to dynamically link this content to ancillary materials. This paper will begin with a discussion of the traditional print-based materials used in Shakespeare performance and film criticism, stressing the limitations of the print medium to adequately and accurately capture the dynamics of performance as well as the inherent value of performance reviews. This paper will also survey projects that have (or intend to) incorporate performance content into electronic scholarly editions of Shakespeare and other early modern dramatists, as well as the challenges and possibilities that such endeavors afford for scholars of Shakespearean film and television, performance studies, adaptation studies, theatre history, and pedagogy.

**Keywords:** digital media, video, application, electronic scholarly edition, representation of text, performance studies, Shakespeare, *Platypus*

## Re-View

Performance and film critics face a Sisyphean task: to take a performance on stage or screen—a rich and dynamic interplay of audio and visual stimuli, a display of motion and emotion (ephemeral in the case of theatrical performance)—and to re-present it in static text. There is lot at stake, as Irving Wardle, erstwhile theatre critic for *The Times*, reminds his readers:

You have discovered a perishable treasure, and it is imperative to share it with other people before it fades. ... You have only one chance to get it right ... and there is nothing more important in the world than finding words to fix the image that has disclosed the hidden life of the text. (79-80)

Jean-Paul Sartre, reflecting on the poet's art, called this belief in the ability to "catch living things in the trap of phrases," so passionately articulated and championed by Wardle above, his "most persistent illusion" (114). Regardless of how impressive a reviewer's or critic's command of the English language is, the medium of print will never fully "fix the image" of transient performance; never adequately capture the dynamic sensory experience of stage and screen productions; never provide the ideal "re-view" characterized by Barbara Hodgdon as "a snapshot portrait of time and space, a slice through culture" (2).

Let us put philosophical arguments about the inability of static text to adequately express and objectively represent the dynamics of performance aside for the moment, and focus instead on pragmatics. In Shakespeare studies, performance and film criticism have risen to prominence in the last few decades, coinciding with the shift away from "the idea of a single, stable text" that had traditionally held sway (Donaldson 2008: 234). In addition to a growing number of book and journal titles on the subject, undergraduate- and graduate-level university courses routinely incorporate Shakespearean performance and film as part of their syllabi, if not focus on them exclusively.

What is the value of the theatre or film review? Prior to the invention and widespread availability of film and video, written accounts offered the only window into the ways in which Shakespeare was received and perceived in performance. However, as Russell Jackson reminds us, theatre reviews (and film reviews by extension) are always partial, incomplete, and idiosyncratic:

[R]eviewers have usually seen a production once only, on its first night or press night; they are not reliable as representatives of the broader audience; they have their own preferences and agendas; and they rarely have time or space to record (even from their particular perspective) much of what was seen and heard in the theatre. (11)

Even so, such reviews are of value to scholars and historians as "witnesses of productions they did not [or could not] see," as documents reflecting the "interpretive community ... in and for which the theatre work had its existence," and "as documents in the cultural history of the theatre and its work in society at large" (Jackson 2007: 11). Thus, even though a written review cannot ever fully or objectively describe a film or stage performance—and is, in this sense, a loss in translation—there is much to be gained from their continuing production and study: they may shed light on the ways in which Shakespeare has been received and perceived, recording the various interpretations made by directors and actors that might otherwise be lost.

Much of the insights from performance reviews and criticism have been incorporated into modern editions of Shakespeare: the Oxford, Arden, and New Cambridge editions all make reference to 'canonical' performances and adaptations on stage and screen in their introductory materials and commentary. The Cambridge *Shakespeare in Production* series goes one step further, offering detailed, line-by-line commentary from major stage and film performances

alongside the New Cambridge text of the plays.<sup>1</sup> The result can be problematic both in terms of presentation and scope. Take the opening scene of *Macbeth* for example: in John Wilders' *Shakespeare in Production* edition the opening stage direction, "*Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES*" is accompanied by almost two pages of commentary drawn from theatre criticism and reviews of prominent stage and film productions from the eighteenth century to the present (78-79). The restrictions of the print medium mean that the scope of each edition in the *Shakespeare in Production* series—indeed, in all critical editions of Shakespeare in print that reference stage and screen productions—must necessarily be limited to what the editor deems to be 'important' or 'canonical' productions. The costly venture of print also means that revising the editions to include recent productions is often not a feasible option.

### **Performance Criticism and Digital Editions: Practices and Opportunities**

Just as a written theatre or film review is a poor substitute for the original performance or production, the text of the play itself, Martin Mueller has argued, "is a poor substitute for a live performance," since "plays are meant to be seen and heard in a live theatre rather than read. But however paltry a surrogate the printed text may be, for some purposes it is superior to the 'original' that it replaces" (61).

The notion of the "digital surrogate" Mueller has articulated (62) — that is, a digital surrogate of a printed text, both inferior and superior in various ways to its analog original — is a useful means of conceptualizing the work currently underway in producing and theorizing electronic scholarly editions. As Peter Shillingsburg has noted, "print editions never actually managed to be all things to all people," since "print editions were almost always faced with limitations imposed by [the] economics of publishing, and by a split desire to serve a general reading public" as well as a more demanding scholarly audience (97). Electronic scholarly editions, on the other hand, "either already can, or promise soon to be able to, offer to both editors and edition users considerably more than was possible in print editions" (Shillingsburg 2006: 97).

The inclusion of audio and video materials, impossible to accomplish in print, as well as the inclusion of full-text performance reviews, a feature too cumbersome to incorporate in print editions, are becoming more prominent features of electronic scholarly editions. For the purposes of this current paper, we will limit our discussion to electronic (web-based) scholarly editions of Shakespeare and other early modern drama.

The *Internet Shakespeare Editions* (ISE), under the general editorship of Michael Best (U of Victoria), offers a searchable database of performance materials, "Shakespeare in Performance," which currently includes 54 audio clips. While there is no video content at present, the database has been designed to easily incorporate it. The ISE has also recently launched its "Performance

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<sup>1</sup> The *Shakespeare in Performance* series, published by Manchester University Press, is worth mentioning here even though it is not an 'edition' as such. Each volume offers an expanded analysis of the performances a particular play on stage and screen, in much greater detail than is afforded by the Cambridge *Shakespeare in Production* series, often with individual chapters devoted to particular productions. Volumes in the *Shakespeare in Production* series, however, have the particular benefit of being anchored to the text of the plays themselves, which makes comparative readings in performance much easier.

Chronicle,” a searchable blog-style database of reviews of contemporary Shakespeare performances, penned and submitted by the general public (“general reviewers”) and by scholars (“invited reviewers”), as well as pre- and post-publication reviews from selected scholarly journals.<sup>2</sup> The site promises a level of dynamic interaction—searching, posting, and commenting on reviews; subscribing for email updates when a new review of a play is posted—that is simply impossible in print. Individually edited plays published by the ISE do not currently interact with or incorporate content from the Performance Database or the Performance Chronicle, but it is clear that some level of directed interaction is planned for the near future.

Like the ISE, the MIT *Shakespeare Project*, directed by Peter Donaldson (MIT), provides a system (the “Shakespeare Electronic Archive” [SEA]) whereby electronic texts of Shakespeare’s plays are linked to digital copies of primary materials. Although it is currently focused primarily on *Hamlet*, the SEA includes digitized images of the First Folio of 1623, some 1500 words of *Hamlet* art and illustration, and a limited selection of digitized *Hamlet* films, such as the Forbes-Robertson silent film (1913), the Ragnar Lyth production for Swedish TV (1982), and the filmed record of the Richard Burton theatre production directed by John Gielgud (1964). Like the editions published by the ISE, the SEA texts do not directly interact with the additional materials.

Of course, the paucity of Shakespeare video content on offer by such projects can be attributed in large to the bugbear of copyright: distributors and studios are understandably reluctant to allow open access films, given that revenue is often to be made by DVD sales and rentals long after the theatrical release. Obtaining filmed records of amateur and professional stage productions is a similarly fraught exercise, given the tricky politics of actors’ equity.

Some projects, however, have managed to procure permissions for extensive video content. *Shakespeare Performance in Asia* (SPIA), a collaborative project between the MIT *Shakespeare Project*, the National University of Singapore, and Gunma/Doho Universities (Japan), directed by Peter Donaldson (MIT), includes amongst its various offerings a collection of video clips from major Asian productions (with a choice of translated script language). Although it does not seek to publish electronic scholarly editions of Shakespeare *per se*, the project promises to “launch an innovative workspace with a suite of advanced research tools that allow users to make virtual clips of performances for replay within the system, to tag videos, to make and store annotations to visual and textual materials, and to compose multimedia essays” (“About the SPIA”; see also Donaldson 2008: 257-58).

Other projects have not only procured permissions for their video content, but have actively created it. The AHRC-funded *Richard Brome Project*, under the general editorship of Richard Cave (Royal Holloway, U of London), will offer an electronic scholarly edition of the complete works of Richard Brome. An “innovative feature” of the edition is that it will “deploy professionally acted sequences, which will allow the editors to test their ideas through the medium of performance” and to “present these to the users of the text,” allowing them to “explore their [the texts’] theatricality visually” (“The Richard Brome Project”). These sequences, acted by actors drawn from the alumni lists of the Royal Shakespeare Company, will basically function as performance footnotes to editorial cruxes, illustrating visually the potential for multiple interpretations and staging of select passages; the plays in their entirety were not filmed.

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<sup>2</sup> At time of writing, the journals involved include *Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, and *Early Modern Literary Studies*.

The SSHRC-funded *Shakespeare and the Queen's Men* (SQM), co-directed by Alexandra Johnston (U of Toronto) and Helen Ostovich (McMaster U), will offer electronic scholarly editions of plays performed by the Queen's Men (using the ISE publication platform), and an accompanying website and DVD of performance materials ("Performing the Queen's Men"). Like the *Brome* project, SQM has commissioned the filming of live performances, this time with a mixture of professional and amateur actors. "Performing the Queen's Men," a website and DVD, offers both the research findings of the SQM and video clips of the performances. Video clips of the performances, rehearsals, and interviews with the actors, directors, and researchers involved are all integrated with a series of interactive modules on performance research—"Rehearsal Process," "Traffic on the Stage," "Doubling," "Modern Acting," and "Gender and the Queen's Men"—as well as excerpts from the scripts used in the productions ("Production Resources"). Although not yet integrated with the electronic editions of the play-texts (which are still in preparation), the video clips will serve as performance footnotes to editorial cruxes (as with the *Brome* project) as well as illustrating aspects of the performance and rehearsal processes.

In the projects heretofore described, video content has been (or is intended to be) deployed as short clips to footnote or explore editorial cruxes and the multiplicity of interpretations available in performance (*Brome*, SQM), as short clips to visually illustrate the processes of rehearsal and production (SQM), or short clips and entire filmed performances as archival material (ISE, SEA, SIA), all with varying levels of integration with the play-texts (*Brome*, SQM), scripts (SIA), and ancillary materials (ISE, SEA, SQM, SIA). Although the current discussion centers on web-based electronic scholarly editions and resources, it should be noted that similar functionality has already been developed and deployed by DVD- and CD-ROM-based projects. For example, as David Z. Saltz has noted, Larry Friedlander's *Shakespeare Project*, developed during the 1980s using Apple HyperCard and referencing media content stored on a laserdisk, offered users the ability to read the Shakespearean texts alongside video clips of the plays, "switch between film versions at any time, jump to any point in the text, and alternate between a film's original audio track and a recording of Friedlander's interpretation of the actors' 'subtext,'" as well as allowing users to "extract digital video excerpts to incorporate into their own essays" (Saltz 2004: 122).<sup>3</sup> The *Voyager Macbeth* CD-ROM (1994), incorporating A. R. Braunnmuller's New Cambridge edition of the text, similarly keyed the play-text to multiple filmed versions of select scenes of the play.

The fad seems to have ended with the *Voyager* CD-ROM: neither the *Arden Shakespeare Texts and Sources for Shakespeare Studies* CD-ROM (1996)—with Jonathan Bate as consultant editor and offering the full *Arden2* texts alongside a plethora of useful reference materials—nor the Cambridge *King Lear CD-ROM: Text and Performance Archive* (2001)—edited by Christie Carson and Jacky Bratton and offering "a multimedia edition of the play" with multiple play-texts and "a range of secondary material that could be directly referenced" (Carson 2008: 247)—incorporated any video content. However, the pendulum swung back again in 2002 with the *Cross-Media Annotation System* (XMAS), an ongoing project developed by the Shakespeare Electronic Archive research group at MIT, which offers "tools for rapidly defining and annotating video clips (from DVD or streaming files) or selecting images and for using these excerpts in online discussions, multimedia essays and presentations" (Donaldson

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the *Shakespeare Project*, see Friedlander 1987 and 1988.

2008: 251).<sup>4</sup> While it comes closest to the level of granular, time-specific annotation of video content, XMAS does not offer the functionality desired of an electronic scholarly edition: XMAS does not include (or rely upon) transcripts of the videos it supports, which means that users are not able to search it. Instead, users must assign *begin* and *end* milestones during the playback of the video, and either link to or extract these for their purposes.

### **Enter Platypus**

*Platypus*, a proof of concept system developed by the Humanities Computing and Multimedia Centre at the University of Victoria, offers a new model of web-based electronic scholarly edition in which video(s) of stage and screen performances can be directly anchored to the play-text or script, searchable by full-text, linked to pertinent ancillary materials, and capable of Web 2.0 functionality such as user-generated annotations, commentaries, tags, bookmarks, and ratings, all accessible via a web browser.

Initially developed as a means of displaying archival footage of high-profile guest lectures given at the University of Victoria, with simultaneous transcription and simple value-added features—ancillary information in the form of links to other sites, documents, and images germane to the current utterance—the wider applications of such a system became quickly apparent. The initial vision was to create a general-purpose tool (or adapt an existing one) for video content that assisted with the “scholarly primitives” of humanities research as outlined by John Unsworth, namely, the processes of discovering, annotating, comparing, referring, sampling, illustrating, and representing (Unsworth 2000).

A number of existing technologies for marking up and presenting videos online were considered, but the paucity of existing software with an inclusive playback mechanism meant that the project would need to create its own. Our initial specification was rather short: XML would provide the natural structure that such texts (that is, the lecture transcripts or Shakespeare play-texts) demand, and a TEI schema for encoding the texts could be easily produced, specifically using the Transcriptions of Speech module; multi-modal data streams would remain separate both in terms of storage and delivery, allowing us to abstract code such that we could remove any dependence upon a single media player; and users should also be able to bookmark, and therefore cite, specific points in the video.

In implementation, each timeline (transcript, events, commentary, etc.) consists of a list of *when* elements; each *when* element identifies timestamps in the video and relates them to xml elements in the file. The XML files are stored in an XML database (eXist), which allows for highly sophisticated xqueries if necessary. Identifying the elements in the video stream and marking up the support documents are currently done manually with commercial video playback and XML editors (QuickTime and Oxygen, respectively).

The proof-of-concept system was constructed using PHP and relying on the QuickTime player, due to its rich JavaScript API. As QuickTime announces its play head position, the page determines which utterance in each timeline is current and displays a quickly digestible block of text to the viewer for each timeline. Any given utterance can be bookmarked and stored for later retrieval, providing a pinpoint-accurate citation. In addition, when the user hovers over the bookmark, the text of the utterance appears. The entire corpus or a single

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history and development of XMAS, see Donaldson 2003.

video are searchable by full-text, with the results displayed as direct links into the video(s). The same interface conventions are used for the search feature. Alternative views of the transcript(s) are also available, including viewing the entire text on-screen, or as an XHTML or XML (P5 TEI) download.

The next phase of development will see the *Platypus* codebase move from PHP to Cocoon in order to improve the portability and modularity of the system. Other refinements will include an online system for writing transcriptions and reducing our dependency on media players by utilizing new features in HTML5. This functionality can also be used to provide an annotative channel that is accessible to all users. Storage and “playback” of annotative snippets can provide a rich layer of added value without incurring large investments of development time because it recycles the immensely useful transcription code. This Wiki-like feature has obvious value in both teaching and research contexts.<sup>5</sup>

### **Exit, Pursued by a Platypus**

In conclusion, I wish to offer a thought-experiment describing the (albeit ideal but nonetheless potential) implementation of *Platypus* as an electronic scholarly edition of Shakespeare with video content. Imagine a corpus of videos of stage and screen performances of Shakespeare. Imagine that the script/play-text of each of these videos has been transcribed and is fully searchable, such that a user searching for “love” is able to quickly navigate between instances of the word across the entire corpus, and thereby able to quickly compare different film and stage interpretations. Imagine the inclusion of additional layers of metadata—bibliographical information, as well as details and observations on technical aspects of the performances, such as lighting; music and sound; set design and location; costuming; camera angle; special effects; etc—all tied to the videos in time-specific, fully searchable utterances. Imagine the ability to add and search through user-generated annotations, commentary, tags, and ratings, or to create and share bookmarks and incorporate them in student assignments and scholarly articles. Imagine linking primary, secondary, and ancillary materials to the video(s) and text(s), again in time-specific, fully searchable utterances. Imagine the integration of film and theatre reviews, transcribed and fully searchable, keyed to the play(s) and performance(s) discussed—users given the opportunity to critically assess and compare review(s), available as subjects for study in and of themselves. Such an electronic scholarly edition would offer an invaluable resource for students and scholars of Shakespearean film and television, performance studies and criticism, adaptation studies, and theatre history.

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<sup>5</sup> See Arneil & Newton 2009 for a more detailed discussion of the development of *Platypus*.

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