The Politics of Online Reproduction of Shakespeare

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A field which traditionally easily integrates various media in cultural production and research, Shakespeare Studies has embarked upon remediating the Shakespeare canon online, within the digital culture ethos of collaboration and participation and the politics of accessibility. However, an inherent process of selection, negotiation and framing is employed when digitizing Shakespeare works. By conducting a web sphere analysis of the digital archives websites, I will argue that there are three main strategic directions used by formal institutions in publishing Shakespeare cultural heritage online: using high standards in digitization, creating digital environments and new genres, and creating a community of practice and a digital field of Shakespeare production.

Keywords: digital Shakespeare, digitization, digital humanities, cultural heritage, global Shakespeare

Digitization and cultural policies for the information society

The wide permeation of ICT into cultural policies and practices has had a profound effect on research and archival strategies within higher education and memory institutions all over the world. Initially associated with the concern for data management, i.e. digital preservation, classification and publication of cultural heritage, digitization has been a UNESCO and European Commission priority since the first meeting of the Information Society in 1995[1]. The first institutional framework to sustain mass digital preservation was the MEDICI (Multimedia for Education and employment through Integrated Cultural Initiative) Framework, founded in 1997, whose goal was to "promote the use of advanced technologies for access to, understanding, preservation, and economic promotion of culture"[2]. Later on, founding councils supporting the use of information and communications technologies for higher education and research, such as JISC (the Joint Information Systems Committee, UK) or the National Endowment for the Humanities (US), have encouraged a wider simultaneous and mutual development of computational methods and the humanities, leading to the discovery of an extremely fertile cross-examination of the methods, lines of inquiry and contributions of each field.

Consequently, from a focus on infrastructure and data management, researchers, librarians and policy-makers addressed the paradigm shift entailed by the digital affordances by redefining the political nature, role and uses of cultural heritage. Within the European Union, the most influential recommendations for policy-making in the Digital Agenda for Europe initiative and the Culture and Education General Directorate of the European Commission were comprised in a report on bringing Europe's cultural heritage online, by the Comité des Sages reflection group[3]. The fundamental mission put forward by the report is providing access to the past, present and future European "common" cultural heritage by means of digitization and preservation,

which become not only technical options, but a moral obligation: "If we don't pursue this task, we run the risk of progressively eroding and losing what has been the foundation of European countries and civilization in the last centuries." [4] Derived from stakeholder meetings and conferences held in 2010, the report put forward, early on in its title, a seducing yet challenging vision of what mass digitization of cultural heritage can or should produce: a "New Renaissance"[5]. Although the revolutionary cultural, civilizational and epistemological implications envisioned to be brought on by making the European cultural heritage accessible on the Internet might seem a bit overenthusiastic, I suggest that they should be read in conjunction with the parallel development of citizens' digital skills and literacy in contemporary societies. For this purpose, a 2010 study commissioned by the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education[6] defines the "new humanism" as an "obligatory response to the formation of a *technological civilisation* and a media culture"[7] having at its core the human being with a developed „new awareness [that] must drive *the primacy of the critical sense towards technology*."[8] Thus, making the cultural body of knowledge accessible for all, while at the same time educating users' digital and critical skills in consuming that knowledge and re-using it in order to generate new forms of knowledge, are the main challenges at the forefront of creating the New Renaissance through digital technology[9]. The two studies serve as starting points for cultural and educational policies and primarily point to the public institutions strategic funding of research, archiving and educational activities.

Each of the three pillars mentioned above poses its own set of difficulties: digitization presupposes large institutional efforts in terms of infrastructure, personnel, maintainance, selection rationale and know-how[10]. Educating citizens' digital skills involves infrastructure, addressing generational gaps between the digital natives and the digital immigrants[11], as well as overcoming the resistance to new technologies within public institutions (including educational, memory or governmental ones). Lastly, engendering critical skills in handling the digital technology and the overflow of information available online is a role both teachers and producers of digital content have. Cultural heritage is and will be used for all three purposes in the digital sphere. It is for this reason why it is essential to see what type of cultural heritage objects have been digitized, how they are used in education and what type of interpretative frameworks they generate. The case study of Shakespeare cultural heritage is ideal for such a task, some of the arguments for it being the following: a) Shakespeare is a canonical figure studied in both anglo-saxon schools and in universal and English literature classes in non-English speaking countries, his works reaching wide audiences and students; b) Shakespearean works are considered a case of world literature today[12], as they circulate globally, thus Shakespeare cultural heritage becoming a part of not only European, but global cultural memory; c) his works have been translated and adapted into a variety of media, from page to stage, film, comics and graphic novels, and lately into digital media, making for a constructivist pedagogy and transition from textual literacy to digital literacy; d) Shakespeare Studies has paid significant attention to local productions, translations and appropriations[13] of his works, making room for the inclusion of culture-specific rewritings and archives in the larger conversations on cultural globalization[14], cultural difference and similarities, as well as exchange.

As using Shakespeare in education for advancing both literary studies and digital skills has been discussed elsewhere[15], I will further focus on the challenges and strategies used in digitizing Shakespeare's work by institutional projects. I will argue that there are three main strategic directions used by formal institutions in publishing Shakespeare cultural heritage online: using high standards in digitization, creating digital environments and new genres, and creating a community of interest and a web sphere of resources. An awareness of these is useful and be taken into account when digitizing and publishing Shakespearean cultural heritage, for a better inclusion and access to knowledge in the Shakespeare Studies field.

The application of digital technologies to Shakespeare's works not only welcomes, but asks for the inclusive perspectives promoted within Shakespeare Studies, as all of the digital genres under which text and performance are published can technically "remediate"[16], link to and embed digitized archive material from any repositories around the world. Isolated understandings of source materials become completely obsolete, given the hypertextual[17] structure of the digital genres under which literary works are available online. This very structure, however, poses some difficulties for the digitization of cultural heritage and its reception, and for the very mission of accessibility stated by cultural policies. Digitized archives of Shakespeare work might be published online, but finding them in the information flux and within search engines algorithms can make some of them truly hidden from consultation. Moreover, the intertextual and networked relations established online between links and image results cannot be confined to relevant content-based connections, often leading to decontextualized reading and reception, as well as to a non-systematical acquisition of information. As Christian Vanderdope argues in his study on textual changes from page to hypertext, "the richer the

cognitive context, the stronger the possibilities for the production of meaning"[18]. What media scholar Henry Jenkins called the "remix culture"[19], created by the "convergence" of print material with digitally-born platforms and products, determines in memory and higher education institutions the engagement in collective, collaborative efforts to digest, organize and control authoritative scholarship and sources within a vacuum of information. The challenge faced by institutions when releasing the digital surrogates in the "remix culture" of the web is both a matter of securing their cultural and economic value as heritage once they become intangible objects, and a matter of public responsibility in providing a contextual framework for a critical understanding of these. These needs are addressed in digitizing Shakespeare by conveying institutional authority to the newly born digital surrogates and by testing out the most suitable genres through which to have not only access to archival materials, but also a contextual understanding of it.

Reproductions with an aura

The policies regarding digitization of cultural heritage have been supplemented in the last decade by comprehensive guides establishing quality standards for the digital reproductions. Usually permissive for heritage institutions owning digital photo cameras, some digitization projects aim to obtain and exhibit extremely high-quality digital surrogates of valuable cultural heritage owned in their collections. All of the digital archive projects related to Shakespeare which digitize early editions from library repositories promise to offer high-quality facsimiles, making it possible to see not only the written text, but the artifact grains and textures as well. In our view, the pervasive preoccupation for infrastructure is a measure through which institutions attempt to secure the "originality" of their own digital reproductions and editions, as well as to "anchor" the canon within non-authoritative and mixed cultural production and consumption online.

The controversy over the value of a literary or artistic work's reproduction goes a long way back to the advent of the printing press, famously posited by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Reproduction, in his view, challenges the "authority of the object"[20] by stripping it away from its historical being in time and space, from its tradition. Moreover, the desire to have cultural objects closer by reproduction clashes with the ritualistic function of the works, or their aura as Benjamin names it, placing them in the realm of transitoriness and reproducibility. Interestingly, the subversive political agenda behind the mechanical reproduction of works denounced by the cultural critics of the Frankfurt School is actually officially taken up and embraced in the realm of digital culture, which values this very issue of accessibility: bringing the works closer to the audience is one of the main objectives of the large-scale digitization projects. Distance between the work and its audience can no longer be sustained, at least not in the context of the digital culture of sharing of, and immediate access to, data.

However, the effects of reproduction upon the literary works still remain debatable. Benjamin further mentions the particular situation of the literary field, where authority is again challenged by permitting the readers to become writers and by placing the literary license under a "common property"[21]. Once more, the digital practices of archiving, storytelling and collaborative writing take the issue and turn it upside down by praising the Creative Commons license which encourages any user to reach, use or even modify literary or artistic content for the sake of "digital creativity, sharing, and innovation"[22]. Still, it is not yet safe to say that the democratization of cultural production and dissemination in the cyberspace replaces any concern for the authority of literary and artistic works, and this is visible in the academia, in publishing houses, museums and other memory institutions, both offline and online. The digital humanities preoccupation for curatorship and editing is precisely a way of sorting out what can and should be put online and especially how.

In literature, it is hard to find a single authoritative "original", given the multiple critical editions which have been considered part of the canon. If we look at the case of Shakespeare's texts, the Folio and Quarto bear the value of the "original" although they are actually editions in themselves, therefore, we could easily conclude, as Sean Latham suggested in his 2004 article, that "without an original, and literally bound to the technologies of mass production, the printed text has seemingly had no aura to lose"[23]. However, the history of editing Shakespeare alone proves how each variant can become an original, while enhancing the works' aura; furthermore, stage or screen performance brings to each variant the uniqueness usually associated with the "original" work. Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe argue, in their 2010 chapter of *Switching Codes* that in assessing aesthetic, historical or cultural value, a clear delineation between the *original* and *a copy* needs to be replaced with a more integrative perspective upon the whole "trajectory"[24] of a given work along its history of reproduction. In their view, the quality of a reproduction can decide the survival of the original work, securing or sabotaging its continuous revival. If successful, the source text can gain "a new level of originality because of the amazing feat of this *faithful* (but not mimetic) reproduction"[25], as it clearly happens

in Shakespeare performances. Along the history of reproductions, the aura migrates from one copy to another and shifts from one authoritative variant to another. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the autograph manuscript gained the value of originality, and so did the printed book and the photograph in the age of digital reproduction. As it will be shown below, the digital reproductions are conceived following the history of successful Shakespeare adaptation practices: the digital archives are not simply relocated, but adapted, translated, remediated into a different culture and in new genres.

Emerging genres within new fields of production

On the one hand, digital humanities[26] scholars' focus is generally on how different methods born together with the digital technology can lead to various textual variants, proposing method-oriented genres such as digital collection, multimedia critical edition, augmented edition, animated archives, virtual learning environments, documentary databases, and more. On another hand, the main editor of one of the most cited and linked Shakespeare hubs within the Shakespeare community of practice, SHAKSPER, an academic discussion group which started in 1990, after an Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Philadelphia, classifies digital genres according to their content and purpose, listing links to a rich variety of Shakespeare online resources under blogs, life and globe sites, pedagogical sites, research sites – databases and general sites, research sites – performance oriented databases and sites, concordances, editions and facsimiles, and libraries[27]. For the purpose of the present research, I choose to classify the genres into which Shakespearean works get digitally repurposed on account of their main producers, categorized following theorist Göran Bolin's media producers distinction[28]: formal institutions (in our case, higher education and memory institutions, publishing houses) and informal institutions (created by users), of which the former is of interest here.

Formal institutions have taken on the task envisioned by the cultural policies addressing the needs to digitize and publish cultural heritage online. An empirical research of Shakespeare heritage online, further refined by indexing and describing a large sample of websites comprising a web sphere of Shakespeare cultural heritage online, shows that all of the memory institutions holding pre-1642 Quarto editions of Shakespeare have already partnered to publish high-quality facsimiles, electronic transcriptions and adnotations in Shakespeare digital collections. The British Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Bodleian Library Oxford, the National Library of Scotland, the Edinburgh University Library, and the Huntington Library partnered in bringing previously geographically distant archives into the same virtual environment[29]. Similarly, the Internet Shakespeare Editions project[30] hosted by the University of Victoria, Canada, brings together first and second folios coming from public libraries, such as the State Library of New South Wales, the Brandeis University Library[31], Boston Public Library, sometimes displaying them alongside quartos facsimiles already digitized by the British Library. Together with digital facsimiles of Shakespearean editions, the Internet Shakespeare Editions, as well as most of other digital archives and editions[32], created by either universities/ memory institutions, or by publishing houses, bring together in the same digital environment digitized facsimiles, electronic transcriptions of editions, digitized promptbooks, production materials and other available authoritative resources. Traditions of Shakespeare editing and of reading Shakespeare in performance and across media are well preserved by the institutional websites.

Creating Shakespeare digital publication environments presupposes a much closer collaboration between producers of scholarship and gatekeepers of cultural heritage. What was previously decided by archivists and librarians for analog repositories becomes now part of the scholarly decision process which establishes what should be represented online and how, integrating once separate practices into digital humanities projects. Curation, analysis, editing and modeling[33] are the most common activities conducted in a digital humanities project that aims at representing archive material in a digital format. While editing has been an obvious key practice in book history, literary studies and, particularly, in Shakespeare studies, curation and modeling draw from different intellectual traditions – museology and science. In the digital humanities, the digital representation of facsimiles needs to undergo a process similar to a curator's work employing methods of representing an argument, In this context, curation is understood as "the selection and organization of materials in an interpretive framework, argument or exhibit", seeing artifacts as "being shaped by and shaping complex networks of influence, production, dissemination, and reception".[34]

It is for this reason why traditional notions of edition or archive become remastered within the digital humanities, and the editor is replaced by interdisciplinary teams which reconnect two previously parallel institutional worlds: that of practicioners – archivists, museum curators, cataloguers, web designers – and that of professional scholars.

The Shakespeare web sphere: geopolitical and archive focus

Scholarly recommendations in articles and weblogs provide value to digitization projects, acting as agents integrating the websites in the community of practice built on the common interest in Shakespeare in the web sphere. Also, by recommending valuable links in their turn, the institutional projects become hubs and act as curators of digital content concerning Shakespeare.

The academic discussion group mentioned above, SHAKSPER, is both a community formed as a mail distribution list providing digests on scholarly articles, teaching resources, performance updates to its subscribers, and meant to be a gateway to Shakespeare on the Internet, providing recommendations for further valuable resources online. SHAKSPER is recommended, in turn, by both formal institutions and users, among which we mention the Folger Shakespeare Library, The International Database of Shakespeare on Film, Television and Radio, the Shakespeare in Asia digital gallery, Internet Shakespeare Editions and many more. The general practice of guiding the readers interested in Shakespeare through the massive amount of content on the web is to curate digital content; all institutions putting up Shakespearean cultural heritage further lead the reader into exploring other institutions' websites publishing Shakespearean archives, whether they be of the same type of media (facsimiles, promptbooks, translations), or not. The Shakespearean corpus becomes truly intermedial[35] as one explores at the same time both MIT's performance archive and the Shakespeare Quartos.

Another method of legitimizing web sources and guiding the readers towards authoritative and contextualized cultural heritage is, of course, discussing them in scholarly articles. This more traditional scholarly approach of acknowledging the added value of new media cultural products leads, in our case, to giving a few points of reference to start from. In 2010 and 2011, two of the most prestigious academic publications dealing with Shakespeare Studies, namely Shakespeare Quarterly and Shakespeare Survey, paid special attention to the meeting point between Shakespeare and new media, and featured reviews of a number of digital archives, as well as of a digital-content curatorship blog, BardBox. With a similar dynamic of the reviewing process typical for the print publishing field, the field of digital publishing functions through its own cultural agents and main actors: higher education institutions, memory institutions, international conferences, Shakespeare associations, publishing houses, scholars, editors.

By looking at the paratextual content put forward on the institutional websites by their editors or interdisciplinary teams, the highest emphasis is put on the accessibility of the digitized material, but also on collaboration, inclusiveness, opening up the repository to a conversation with previously distant and disconnected ones. MIT's Global Shakespeares in welcoming performance videos from all over the world and adding up production data, Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare digitizes relevant heritage from any public libraries, the Folios and Quartos can now be joined together within the same digital repository. In terms of access, this technical possibility has completely changed how research can be done. But, looking at the Shakespeare websites, is participation in terms of cultural heritage and institutions truly balanced?

Out of all websites consulted, recommended by the SHAKSPER community, through referenced links or through scholarly review, none of the resources links to Europeana[36], the European Union cultural heritage aggregator recommended by cultural policies as a unique point of access into the European digitized heritage. European national heritage institutions make their digitized material accessible through various channels, 34% of them using their own institutional websites (more often than not retrievable only in the national language), 14% indexing them within a national aggregator, from which they normally go into Europeana[37]. If we take a look at Romanian practices of digitization, the materials are usually accessible on the library websites or on the national aggregator hosted by the National Institute for Heritage, from which they are made accessible on Europeana by metadata transfer. The few digitized Romanian translations of Shakespeare or the catalogue of theatre performances which includes 20th century Shakespeare performance data from the National Theatre of Bucharest are available online, but completely missing from the "common" cultural heritage and from the global Shakespeare web sphere. Another case of underrepresentation is the Czech Republic full digital collection of translations from Shakespeare[38], of which I was incidentally informed at a recent conference. The website is completely isolated from the web sphere of digital collections, which makes it only accessible for the national readers and scholars.

These two cases are only a sample of how public institutions can digitize cultural heritage, but fail to make it accessible and critically read. The Shakespeare web sphere does include non-anglo-saxon collections, blogs and links to international associations. The repeated mentions of and collaborations with scholars concerned with Asian performances and translations makes Asia a clear geopolitical focus in discussing global Shakespearean heritage. The only European database of translations which is mentioned is Sh:in:E -- Shakespeare in Europe[39], edited by Basel

University, to which a variety of scholars contributed with metadata. However, the lack of contextual information and of actual cultural objects makes it more of a bibliography and less a contribution to the Shakespearean cultural heritage online. The preference for high-quality reproductions and for specific genres imposes some technical demands national heritage institutions might not be able to afford yet. However, understanding the field of digital reproduction of Shakespeare can be useful in providing some methods of having local heritage included in the future global Shakespeare heritage, scholarly conversation and critical reception.

Acknowledgement:

This paper is suported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/136077.

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