



Shakespeare Unbound: How Digital & Social Media Have Transformed Performance & Audiences

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Shakespeare Unbound:
How Digital & Social Media Have Transformed Performance & Audiences

Edward Gazarian

A Thesis in the Field of English
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

March 2022

Abstract

Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Shakespeare's work has found new life on digital and social media. These platforms provide massive scale and new methods of audience engagement. In order to take full advantage of those methods, producers of digital and social media Shakespeare must engage in both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The performance in the content and the performance of the content both play critical roles. Using contemporary data science and established literary theory, this project articulates a taxonomy of the digital and social media Shakespeares currently online, and the platform-specific methods by which producers can employ them to engage their audience in new ways.

Dedication

For Nairi & Raphael, who have my whole heart.

Acknowledgments

While I'm immeasurably grateful to my parents and extended family, I am especially humbled by those teachers I continue to learn from. To Shakeh Kebabjian, Katherine Fitzpatrick, and Joe Pollicelli, who started me on the path that led to here. To Vincent Parrella and Marla Pascucci-Byrne, for introducing me to Shakespeare though I was young and dumb. To Nancy Kindelan and Junot Díaz, for reminding me to take another look. And to Marjorie Garber, Sue Schopf, Craig Shoemaker, Tim McCarthy, Steven Caton, Sue Lonoff, Sabrina Sadique, and Chris Barett, without whom none of these pages would have been possible.

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Introduction

Early modern theater was the social media of its day. In recent years, online platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have come to resemble those densely packed and frenetic playhouses where Shakespeare was first performed. As dynamic and varied as their counterparts on the physical stage, performances of Shakespeare on digital and social media exist on a global platform where creators and audiences are engaged in real-time. The distillation of Shakespeare into shareable quotes, the ability to beam performances around the globe, and new methods of audience interaction unique to digital and social media have created new relationships among authors and audiences. On these digital platforms, the groundlings' din becomes measurable and attributable engagement. Where vegetables were hurled to discourage performances Elizabethan audiences didn't like, digital and social media afford modern audiences with new forms of discouragement: dislike buttons, thumbs down, and abandoned video views. Just as the physical applause lent support to a production, that indulgence is offered online in likes, comments, and shares. As digital and social media platforms scale to users around the globe, productions of Shakespeare's work have blossomed in new interpretive and inspired ways. The meaning of Shakespearean performance has found new life online.

As engagement with digital and social media has increased, so has the volume of content for users to engage. The Royal Shakespeare Company maintains its one-hundred-thousand-follower Instagram account. But it recently launched on TikTok, chasing younger users engaged there (The RSC is late to the party, as a simple search for "Shakespeare" on TikTok returns content that's been viewed over 217 million times).

Pop culture is infused with wisps of Shakespeare's work in everything from film & TV to souvenir shop tchotchkes, tattoo designs, and books on doing business. Even the paper-thin world of advertising leans into the cultural capital Shakespeare commands. In an act of borrowed greatness designed to assert worth by association, promotional messaging is rife with Shakespeare-adjacent turns of phrase. A seasonal ad for camping gear proclaims, "Now is the winter of our discount tents." One for a popular libation states, "It's just whiskey like Shakespeare is just books."

We are such stuff as memes are made on.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the online scale and mobility of Shakespeare's work took on new digital and social media forms. Both a behavior (we are connected everywhere and connected to everywhere) and a device type (we carry supercomputers in our pockets that can access the entirety of humanity's canon on demand), "mobile-first" is a trend which was well on its way at the start of 2020. This was only accelerated by COVID-19. As physical theaters were forced to shut, performances and audiences moved online.

Among this diverse set of online content - those productions of Shakespeare's plays, Shakespeare-inspired media, and Shakespeare-adjacent work this thesis surveys - several narrative threads appear. They share common components (e.g., format, textual and visual elements, platforms) but are tactically different in their manifestation of Shakespeare's work. The performance in the content and the performance of the content are both critical. Platform-specific limitations (e.g., character count limits) and user behavior (e.g., whether sound is on) significantly impact the way a publisher chooses to stage content, and the way users engage with it.

The shuttering of physical theaters in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of mobile-first user habits, and the exponential growth in engagement with social media have spurred significant, lasting changes to the ways practitioners, scholars, and global audiences think.

The Three Wills

The most engaged with and creatively dynamic Shakespearean digital and social media is platform-specific content that follows the platform's best practices to quantitatively and qualitatively engage users. What have emerged as the product of analyses conducted for this thesis are three distinct classifications of Shakespeare which exist on digital and social media - what I'll refer to as The Three Wills. These three classifications manipulate aspects of quantitative and qualitative engagement in distinctly different ways. Those are:

- The Snackable Will: *Short, instantly-consumable pieces of content that distill big ideas into their most shareable and meme-able parts.*
- The Muted Will: *Physical productions published online that can be consumed at scale in perpetuity, but do little to advance connections between publisher and audience.*
- Will Locked Down: *Online productions that, in response theater-closing lockdowns, use the advancements provided by digital and social media to enhance connections between publisher and audience.*

This taxonomy forms the chapter structure used to analyze specific examples associated with each Will in the subsequent sections of this thesis.

Shakespeare on Digital & Social Media

Access to Shakespeare is more accessible than in previous generations. Geoffrey Way emphasizes the challenges of this open access, arguing that the use of “social media to provide audiences access to institutional content means that [institutions] may have to relinquish some of the control over their content” (Way 12). He further argues that though “institutions gain the ability to engage with audiences more directly and on a larger scale than they have been able to in the past” (Way 12), they must also “address how audiences are able to influence directly the sites of access and to reflect on what their institutional goals actually are when it comes to digital access” (Way 12). This focuses on the publisher of content, versus the person engaging with it. On digital and social media, that process must be inverted.

Further along this line of thinking, in ““Oh, teach me how I should forget to think”: The Pedagogical Problems of Pleasure and Rigor in Social Media and Shakespeare”” (2016), Kyle DiRoberto suggests that open access has caused a knee-jerk reaction from some traditional institutions. For those institutions, free and open access mean a shirking of traditional scholarly and critical process. DiRoberto does comment that other scholars are less skeptical and that “new media offers tools that enable a greater desire and potential for analysis and collective participation.” (DiRoberto 4) But like Way, DiRoberto doesn’t finish this line of thinking. He fails to take the step to consider Shakespeare on digital and social media from the perspective of the audience. Rather, like those traditional practices of scholarship and criticism, DiRoberto remains focused on the perspective of the institution. But digital and social media are a constant dialogue between both parties - publisher and audience. That thesis explores that dialogue.

One scholar who begins an audience-first consideration of digital and social media Shakespeare is Kirk Hendershott-Kraetzer (KHK). In his paper “Juliet, I Prosume? or Shakespeare and the Social Network”, KHK argues that the collaborative nature of digital and social media create a paradigm in which publishers of content, and the audiences who consume that content, are not mutually exclusive. He argues, “Pack production is an effect of the process called prosumption...the implosion of the spheres of production and consumption.” (KHK 17). This is an important component of understanding digital and social media, and the way in which those mediums create space for broad interpretive choice and rapid proliferation of content. KHK does an exhaustive survey of one character - Juliet Capulet - chronicling the way that character appears in various iterations across the Facebook ecosystem. But his work falls short of the analysis required to determine how audience engagement with those iterations influences the mechanisms through which audiences engage them.

Part of engaging in this thesis’ analysis is taking up the challenge issued by two scholars. Kylie Jarrett and Jeneen Naji, in their article “What Would Media Studies Do? Social Media Shakespeare as Technosocial Process” (2016), argue that digital and social platforms are not simply remediations of Shakespeare, but rather are a trilogical construct. In applying Jenny Weight’s “I, Apparatus, You: A Technosocial Introduction to Creative Practice” (2006) to their review of social media Shakespeares, Jarrett and Naji summarize this trilogical relationship by saying that it “suggests...the specificity of interactive digital media and its creative uses lies in a trilogical relationship between the user, the machine that they manipulate, and the software or code through which expressions are processed.” (Jarrett/Naji) Their article closes with a call to action:

“Human expression, such as that which can be found in examples of social media Shakespeare online, has come a great distance from the realm of traditional media, and researchers need to make that journey, too.” (Jarrett/Naji)

The idea of a continuously evolving relationship with Shakespeare is not new. The existing body of Shakespearean criticism demonstrates the multitude of ways in which Shakespeare is made, and remade, by the audience. The difference on digital and social media platforms is that Shakespeare is made, and remade, at an increasingly-rapid scale, by an increasingly-diverse set of publishers. The natural universe expands faster over time and grows into previously unavailable space. So does Shakespeare's. An aspect of this phenomenon is examined in Marjorie Garber's text, "Shakespeare and Modern Culture" (2008), in which Garber details how, like an M.C. Escher portrait of two hands drawing each other, we continuously create our own Shakespeares while simultaneously those Shakespeares are reflected back at us. This implies a continuum. Along that continuum are individual acts of interpretation and choices made by each production. The scale at which that continuum exists on digital and social media, and the fact that it is accessible in its entirety all the time, is unlike any other stage on which Shakespeare has ever been played. Jarrett and Naji's Shakespeares are everywhere all the time, and they have the potential to act as massive interpretive forces on an audience that is growing every second.

Regardless of the platform, the play's still the thing. Jarrett and Naji's Shakespeares are interpretive products of the text. Be it a scene or a sonnet, the Shakespeares of digital and social media are the raw material this thesis examines. As an exponentially growing body of Shakespearean content is published to digital and social

media and consumed by a global audience, the dynamic between publisher and audience demonstrates that digital and social media create new methods of performance and engagement unavailable to the physical theater. That paradigm can be manipulated to particular effect based on an understanding of the same platform-specific mechanics that define it, and a tactical plan for how to engage the audience.

Shakespearean scholarship to date has suffered from a fundamental misunderstanding of how digital and social media are functionally different than physical theater. The mechanics of performance and engagement associated with digital and social media are not unique to Shakespeare. They form a paradigm that creates distinct patterns of content creation, engagement trends, and performance of content. They are a mechanism to ensure we don't misinterpret the particular by misunderstanding the universal.

The scale of this influence is not something that traditional literary criticism has considered in a meaningful way. This is because at no point in human history have so many people been able to experience the same "Shakespeare" together when they are so far apart. Michael J. Gallagher addresses this in his article "Cloud Computing in Social Sciences and Humanities" (2018), by highlighting the lowering cost of internet connectivity, and the penetration of modern devices to a global audience. While it's immeasurably exciting to consider that an ever-growing global audience grows ever-more connected by the internet, Jarrett and Naji's call for scholarship to keep pace is a prescient one. Without an understanding of how digital and social platforms change - and are changed by - the content that is distributed on them, there is a potential for limitation, despite massive scale. How can Shakespeare continue to evolve if this is left to chance?

Rather than conscious human choice governing decisions made across the interpretive spectrum, algorithmic rankings, machine learning, and artificial intelligence form a twisted sisterhood of inhuman actors.

Bringing the Science of Social to Shakespeare

A digital native, over the past 20 years I produced, launched, and managed digital and social media campaigns across each of the platforms examined in this thesis. This includes work for globally-iconic heritage brands, startups, and Fortune-100 firms. In each campaign, user engagement was a key performance indicator (KPI) of campaign success. Using similar data collection methods and analyses, this thesis examines KPIs of digital and social media Shakespeares. This experience in data science, statistical modeling, and parsing data sets into salient points is critical to analyzing the Shakespeares tracked throughout this thesis.

Most recently I completed a certification in Digital Marketing Analytics from The Sloan School of Management at MIT. This experience lends itself to an “insider view” of how each platform values its users, tracks their habits, and provides mechanisms for them to engage with content. The “insider view” provides insight into the tactical choices made by content creators on each platform (e.g., color palette, human subjects, design conceits, etc.).

Over the past 10 years, I have spoken about “The Science of Social” at industry trade shows and conferences including the International Luxury Travel Market, Arabian Travel Market, Web Summit Dublin and Hong Kong, Digital Summit Charlotte, and Social Media Summit San Francisco. Work for several clients has won industry accolades

for innovation (Travel+Leisure SMITTY Awards) and category-leading user engagement rankings (L2 / Gartner's Luxury Hotel Digital IQ), and I have served as a judge for The Shorty Awards, honoring best-in-class uses of social media by global brands. In these "subject matter expert" roles, my charge has always been to distill large swaths of data into key insights and discernible patterns. This thesis employs industry-standard digital and social media analytics and distills them down into examples rooted in Shakespeare's text.

Data Science & Digital Humanities

Data models and platform methodologies to examine digital and social media exist. These models help us understand the ways in which relevance ranking algorithms and platform scale can lead to rapid expansion of discrete ideas. Sinan Aral's text "The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health--and How We Must Adapt" (2020) is one such resource for analysis of the digital and social media platforms considered in this thesis. Aral's text has little to do with Jarrett and Naji's Shakespeares, but provides a compelling evidence as to how those Shakespeares might be influenced or changed, by agenda or accident. Aral's data models present not only insight into how content and ideas spread across digital and social media, but also provide tools for use in examining how that spread occurs with Jarrett and Naji's Shakespeares.

In Pai-Lin Chen's paper, "Analysis of Social Media Data: An Introduction to the Characteristics and Chronological Process" (2018), Chen provides a framework for scholarly interpretation of data and trending information gathered from social media. The

paper addresses the importance of aligning data from mass communication, social science analysis, and academic theories to address scholars' specific questions. This multidisciplinary approach is a necessary component of this project. Absent a multidisciplinary analysis of Jarrett and Naji's Shakespeares, a taxonomy of those Shakespeares - and one that examines their various interpretations through a literary lens - would not be possible. Part of this thesis focuses on that taxonomy and how its mechanics remain rooted in the text while wrangling an ever-expanding canon.

A final component of this multidisciplinary approach is the incorporation of criticism which examines how "new" and "old" media iterate on, interact with, and remediate each other. In two related works "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide" and *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick in the English Classroom* (2013), Henry Jenkins approaches this topic. Jenkins reviews how new and old media should interact, rather than the former cannibalizing the latter (Jenkins 6). To accommodate the shift to a participatory relationship between publisher and audience, Jenkins also provides a framework to address connections between online & offline productions of the plays.

Evidence of this is presented in various data-focused disciplines. In "Understanding 'The User-Generated': The Construction of the 'ABC Model' and the Imagination of 'Digital Humanities.'" (2018), Hui-Wen Liu examines the "herd mentality" of social media and how the opinions, views, and sentiments of a small percentage can influence the broader population. Similarly, Krystina Madej's paper "Collaborative Authoring in a Social Media World" (2016) reviews the impact a distributed, collective audience has on narrative. These two examinations are included in

this thesis to determine how distributed, global Shakespeare audiences might contribute to Jenkins' participatory culture.

Methodology

To gather enough data on the proliferation and performance of Shakespearean digital and social media content (here, performance refers to the level of engagement with that content), artificial intelligence (AI) software was used. This AI conducted an unaided study of Shakespearean content across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In an unaided study, the AI does not ask specific questions about the content being analyzed. Rather, it gathers all data that fits into the defined parameters (e.g., content on these social media platforms related to Shakespeare) and reports trends and user engagement statistics. A subsequent aided study could ask specific questions about said content but has not been included for the purpose of this analysis.

The AI used has analyzed over 150 million posts since its inception in 2013. The more data it ingests, the more accurate and reliable the findings become. To date, the AI has ingested more data than any one industry professional would encounter throughout their career. For this project, the unaided study produced roughly 200 pages of data. This data reflects user engagement with various components of the digital and social media content examined, including image elements, color, aspect ratio, and hashtags.

General statistical information about digital and social content is currently widely available. This includes metrics such as estimated account reach (i.e., the number of unique people likely to see the content published by the account), post-level engagement (i.e., likes, comments, shares, views, etc. associated with each piece of content), as well

as sentiment data about each post (e.g., positive / neutral / negative engagement). In analyzing the AI-gathered data and the specific examples cited in subsequent chapters of this thesis, several methods were employed.

Beginning with data preparation, minimal data scrubbing (e.g., to remove any erroneously-collected content, obvious bot data, etc.) was completed. Profile and post-level engagement rates were calculated using industry-standard formulas (detailed in Figure 1):

$$\text{Post Level Engagement} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Engagements}}{\text{Estimated Total Reach}}$$

Figure 1

Formula For Post-Level Engagement

A general sentiment analysis was also been conducted via natural language processing, in order to grade sentiment on a 3-point scale (detailed in Figure 2):

Positive	<i>Overt expression of positive sentiment (e.g., via comment or "Love" post reactions)</i>
Negative	<i>Overt expression of negative sentiment (e.g., via comment of "Dislike" post reactions)</i>
Neutral	<i>No overt expression of positive or negative sentiment, but use of passive reactions (e.g., Like)</i>

Figure 2

Grading Post-Level Sentiment

Profile level data was included in analysis of the specific examples cited in the subsequent chapters. This includes using a similar formula as Figure 1, replacing the individual post metrics with aggregate profile data. Statistical models using standard deviation (to plot variance in sentiment over time) and regression analysis (where engagement or sentiment are the dependent variable and time or N is the independent) were also used to analyze the data collected - both by the AI and manual tabulation.

The use of public data facilitates easier data collection from disparate sources.

Administrator-level performance data (e.g., private performance metrics, normally viewable only by the content publisher) is not readily accessible for all data sources and should not form the basis of a statistically significant data set. Data related to diversity and accessibility is not publicly available, and therefore was not included in this thesis' analysis. Public data, though somewhat limited, remains the largest and most reliable set of data available.

Chapter I.

Platforming Shakespeare for The Digital Stage

The Snackable Will is Shakespeare broken down into the most easily-consumed bits. These are the bits - interpreted or misappropriated - and attached to visually compelling material that garner user engagement across digital and social media. These bits take different forms, across a host of digital and social media platforms: vertical video sized to fit inside a smartphone's screen, motion graphics looping key moments on automatic repeat, and simple squared images designed to catch the eye. Each of these are designed to elicit an emotional reaction in under ~2 seconds, halting a user's scroll through a digital or social media feed. They must give us pause, or they will not advance the publisher's goal of engaging the end user. The most successful of this content is characterized by three key elements:

- ***Content can be consumed without context***
- ***Sound is additive, but not essential***
- ***Content adheres to platform-specific best practices***

Unpacking each of these elements is central to understanding how The Snackable Will engages users, the mechanics of how that engagement works, and what effect both factors have on the interpretive choices made by the publisher.

In being consumable without context, The Snackable Will must communicate one point and tell a complete story within the confines of a single piece of digital or social media content. Gone is the multi-act structure of Shakespeare's plays. Soliloquies are set aside; monologues rendered mute. The Snackable Will distills Shakespeare down to the

text's most salient points. Content of this type communicates something specific in the frame of something universal.

One such example is the Instagram account “Shakespeare and Mindfulness” (SAM, pictured in Figure 3). With a following of just over 10,000 users, in 2018 SAM began posting regular updates which contain brief but substantive quotes from Shakespeare’s work. Visuals are filled with vibrant colors (e.g., purple, blue, orange, etc.) - what I’ll refer to as sunset colors.

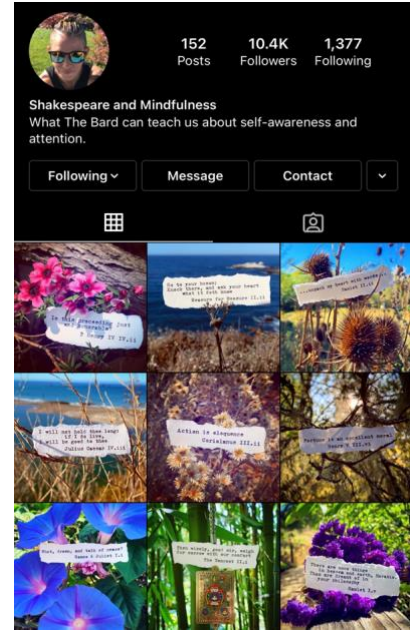


Figure 3: Shakespeare and Mindfulness Instagram Profile

Accompanying each single image is a block of text that provides a close reading of the cited text. In most cases, the close reading begins with a block of text that places the quote in context. The publisher provides several short introductory lines that explain the scene surrounding the quoted text. Note that the publisher doesn’t summarize the play or its plot. Rather, the post text operates with an assumption that the user has some underlying knowledge of Shakespeare. When quoting from Hamlet, there is no explanation of Ophelia’s relationship with the play’s titular character or her parentage. Instead, the publisher leans into an interpretation of the text that is grounded in mindfulness - the lens through which the Instagram account examines each bit of quoted text.

SAM also routinely uses static images (read: still photos, not video) which are inherently devoid of sound. In almost all cases (approximately 87% on Instagram), users engage with content without the sound turned off. For this reason, colors play an

important role in the hierarchy of user engagement. As users scroll through their Instagram feed (the default stream of content users are presented with when logging into the platform), sunset colors are those that entice users to stop scrolling because those colors have caught their eye. This is a user's first point of engagement. Only after that first point of engagement has been achieved does the post text matter. Users start with a cursory engagement based on their emotional response to the colors and then progress to a deeper engagement with the text. The former begets the latter.



Figure 3a: Shakespeare and Mindfulness Instagram Post

This algorithm of engagement - visual to text - is dependent upon the content in question negotiating the various platform-specific best practices that exist across digital and social media platforms. On Instagram, this means publishing visuals that fit into a specific size (roughly the size of a Post-It note), when rendered on a smartphone screen – see Figure 3a at right – and contain visual elements that are proven to successfully engage users. SAM does both. Each post contains a single, squared image. Each post is replete with a color scheme that offsets Instagram's black and white design. These two elements combine to produce a post-level engagement rate between 1-2% (based on a random sample of ~10 posts published by the Shakespeare and Mindfulness Instagram account). As a reference, in 2021 the benchmark organic engagement rate for organic Instagram content is ~1% (in this case organic is defined as content that is published to the platform and not promoted to users by use of paid media).

In the context of Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure, SAM makes efficient use of that structure's three elements. That structure, which "suggests that the specificity of

interactive digital media and its creative uses lies in a trilogical relationship between the user, the machine that they manipulate, and the software or code through which expressions are processed” (Jarrett/Naji 4) serves as scaffolding for SAM’s formula for user engagement. Users are stopped in their scroll by visually-arresting colors designed to capture their attention. The machine they manipulate is, in this case, a smartphone screen (a safe assumption as use of Instagram skews over 90% from mobile devices) which is vertically positioned so that the visual that halted the doomscroll claims as much of that screen as possible. Users’ engagement is then facilitated, qualitatively expressed, and algorithmically quantified by Instagram’s own engagement metrics - those likes, comments, shares, and saves which represent the app’s processes for expression of post-level engagement.



Figure 3b: Shakespeare and Mindfulness Instagram Post

In terms of interpretative choice, the lens of mindfulness that SAM employs to interrogate the quoted text is relegated to use of the visual’s accompanying text to argue its case. On Instagram that text falls beneath the published visual, and is most-often truncated when it exceeds a few short lines. In SAM’s case, this creates a multi-step process of engagement. First, the visual must stop a user from scrolling. Only after the user has stopped scrolling can they take the action required to read the full version of the accompanying text (a post with the top section of untruncated text is shown in Figure 3b, on the right). At any stage, users can engage with the content. They may simply like the image (in this case, referring to Instagram’s “like” function), or they may like and comment after reading past the auto-

truncation. This dynamic plays out at the post-level, with each individual post running through the same algorithm of engagement.

Figure 4 (at right) presents the truncated, newsfeed view of a post published by “Shakespeare and Mindfulness”. Note that the image contains a vibrant shade of purple. As previously referenced, the best practices for achieving above average post-level engagement on Instagram involve the use of vibrant colors; purple is a consistent high performer.



Figure 4: Shakespeare and Mindfulness Instagram Post (Truncated)

The visual includes a quote from Hamlet Act I, Scene V, framed by a vibrant purple designed to stop the user’s scroll and spur deeper engagement with the post. Note that the post’s text becomes truncated after ~3 lines of text. Instagram automatically truncates this text, without regard for sentence structure or style. Akin to applause calling

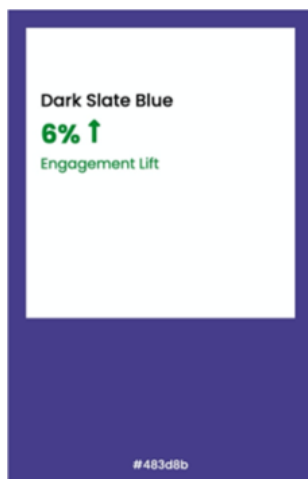


Figure 5: Dark Slate Blue Hex Code

for an encore on the physical stage, the user must click “more” to reveal the publisher’s full text. It’s worth noting that many successful Instagram accounts choose to fit their full text within the boundaries of Instagram’s auto-truncation. This is despite the fact that Instagram allows for 2,200 characters of text beneath each post. However, SAM routinely pushes outside the platform’s boundaries for auto-truncation. For many Instagram accounts, this tactic might diminish user engagement (i.e., users may not click for “more”). The post highlighted in Figure 4,

however, achieved a post-level engagement rate of ~2% (nearly double Instagram's benchmark organic post-level engagement rate).

That high rate of user engagement is attributable to the post's successful manipulation of the key elements highlighted as those that characterize The Snackable Will. Absent additional context, the post's visual succeeds in both stopping a user's scrolling through their Instagram newsfeed, and in spurring engagement based on the visual's content and the truncated post text. Absent sound, users can engage with the post - either via a passive like driven by affinity for the visual's color palette and quoted text, or by clicking "more" to reveal the post's full text. Bridging the two is the visual's use of vibrant colors. The artificial intelligence audit conducted as part of this thesis confirms that vibrant colors (e.g., dark state blue, green, maroon) over-index for user engagement. The specific post in Figure 4 illustrates this, as the purple used in its visual is a combination of several of those same vibrant hues (and specifically the Dark Slate Blue hex code pictured in Figure 5).

While this over-indexed rate of post-level engagement is encouraging, it does little to address the interpretive and analytical choices made by the publisher. To address these, it's necessary to consider that the publisher of "Shakespeare and Mindfulness" has appropriated the play's lines to produce arguments about modern-day mindfulness that are rooted in Shakespeare's text.

In *OuterSpheares: Shakespeare, Intermedia, and the Limits of Adaptation*, Sujata Iyengar argues that "the "ambiguity within the Shakespeare brand...allows Shakespeare to function as a creative space

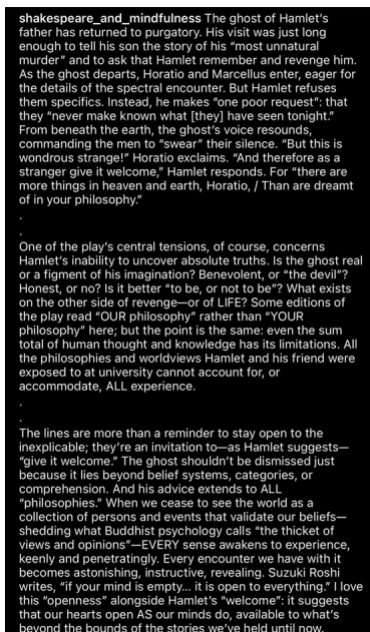


Figure 6: *Shakespeare and Mindfulness* Instagram Post (Full Text)

for artisans and artists” (Iyengar, 348). SAM’s appropriation and interrogation of the cited text operates in this functional space.

The full text of the Instagram post referenced in Figures 4 appears in Figure 6 (at right). In the post’s full text three distinct levels of interrogation are present:

- Contextualization within the play (note this is not a remediation of the play, but rather a referential nod to where the quoted dialogue occurs in the plot)
- An interpretation of that quoted dialogue, by connecting it to a central tension of the play (in this case, Hamlet’s inability to uncover absolute truths)
- An argument for that interpretation’s applicability to the themes of self-awareness and mindfulness which frame the content published by “Shakespeare and Mindfulness”

At each level of interrogation, the post’s text endeavors to use Hamlet’s line of dialogue as the mechanism to unpack a broadly utilitarian message about open-mindedness and the willingness to accept the things we don’t understand. The post argues against rigidity of thought, instead espousing that the push against such rigidity is what’s essential. We must, as Hamlet said, “give it welcome.”

The act of contextualization which begins SAM’s three-part post structure is a common element among nearly all the posts published by the account and functions as a mechanism to ground the visual’s quoted text in a particular moment of plot. In the example of the post referenced in Figure 6, SAM writes:

The ghost of Hamlet's father has returned to
purgatory. His visit was just long enough to tell
his son the story of his "most unnatural murder"
and to ask that Hamlet remember and revenge him.

SAM, 16 August 2021

In this brief introduction, SAM communicates the plot points essential to contextualizing the visual's quoted text. We are told that Hamlet's father is dead. We are told that Hamlet has been visited by his father's ghost. And we are told that the ghost relayed the fact of his murder, asking his son to revenge that "most unnatural" act. SAM continues:

As the ghost departs, Horatio and Marcellus enter,
eager for the details of the spectral encounter. But
Hamlet refuses them specifics. Instead, he makes
"one poor request": that they "never make known
what [they] have seen tonight."

SAM, 16 August 2021

Refusing to provide Horatio and Marcellus with specifics of the encounter, it is apparent that Hamlet holds some desire to keep the ghost's words a secret. Rather, SAM's recounting of this scene suggests that Hamlet is more concerned with Horatio and Marcellus' discretion. Asking only for their loyalty, Hamlet reserves the truth of the encounter for himself. Fealty trumps fact. SAM continues:

From beneath the earth, the ghost's voice resounds,

commanding the men to "swear" their silence...

...Hamlet responds. For "there are more things in heaven

and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your

philosophy."

SAM, 16 August 2021

In this contextualization's final act, SAM reminds us that despite Hamlet's reticence to share the details of his encounter with Horatio and Marcellus, the ghost itself has agency. In commanding Horatio and Marcellus to "swear," the ghost at once confirms its existence and complements Hamlet's request for their silence. The entire encounter turns on the final line of this section of post text, hearkening back to the visual's quote (shown in Figure 4).

If SAM stopped here, offering nothing more than context for the quoted text, in terms of Instagram's platform rules this post would have done everything right: visual with bright colors fit to ~the size of a Post-In note, no reliance on sound, post text that fits into the platform's character count limits, and post-level engagement commensurate with the post's adherence to those boundaries. But SAM does not stop here, opting instead to continue with an interpretation of the text through the lens of mindfulness. As Iyengar argues that Shakespeare's ambiguity is a critical component to the use of Shakespeare's text as a creative space, Shakespeare and Mindfulness puts that theory to practice.

First, SAM sets up where ambiguity operates within the scene surrounding the quoted text, writing that:

One of the play's central tensions, of course, concerns

Hamlet's inability to uncover absolute truths...

Some editions of the play read "OUR philosophy" rather

than "YOUR philosophy" here; but the point is the same:

even the sum total of human thought and knowledge has

its limitations. All the philosophies and worldviews Hamlet

and his friend were exposed...cannot account

for, or accommodate, ALL experience.

SAM, 16 August 2021

In pointing to Hamlet's inability to uncover absolute truths as one of the play's central tensions, SAM demonstrates how this single line of quoted text suggests a far-reaching, unknowable truth. Even Horatio and Hamlet's dreams lack the scope to contain what is inherently unknowable. Smacks of Socrates, abound. SAM focuses on the ambiguity of Hamlet's ghostly encounter, identifying key questions that, upon answering are to provide Hamlet with a clear mandate for decisive action. More on that later. In opening up this line of questioning, SAM illustrates how both Hamlet and the Instagram user engaged with this post must interrogate the plot through what is said and – sometimes more importantly - what is not. The use of “your” (or “our” as SAM points out is a

variation of the play's published text) is a counterweight to what SAM tells us balances Hamlet's line. "Your" implies their. "Our" necessitates all.

Again, SAM could stop here. None of Instagram's platform rules were broken, and continued adherence to those rules does not require additional work. But again, Shakespeare and Mindfulness continues its interpretation of the quoted text, adding an analysis of the line through the account's chosen lens of mindfulness. SAM writes,

The lines are more than a reminder to stay open to the
inexplicable; they're an invitation to-as Hamlet suggests-
"give it welcome." The ghost shouldn't be dismissed just
because it lies beyond belief systems, categories, or
comprehension...shedding what Buddhist psychology calls
"the thicket of views and opinions. Suzuki Roshi
writes, "if your mind is empty... it is open to everything

SAM, 16 August 2021

This final section of post text is SAM's core analysis of the quoted text. In the most direct act of interpretation taken with the play, SAM incorporates both context and close reading to argue a point about the text's utility in expressing a universal point: an open mind is the path to truth. Whether that's the absolute truth Hamlet seeks, or simply a willingness to, as the text above suggests, shed "the thicket of views and opinions" in an act of acceptance, SAM argues that Hamlet's line to Horatio about the limits of their philosophy is akin to our own daily lives. In claiming that like the ghost, what's outside

our own philosophy shouldn't be dismissed, SAM applies Suzuki Roshi's line about the value of open-mindedness. Roshi, a 20th century Zen Buddhist credited with founding the first Zen Buddhist monastery outside Asia, complements Hamlet's "welcome" with a real-world example of that same sentiment. In combining these two ideas, SAM suggests that - like the interpretations of Shakespeare's work and the interpreters themselves - one begets the other.

Despite its successful mitigation of Instagram's platform requirements, Shakespeare and Mindfulness is limited in the interpretive choices it can make. Each post must stand alone. Each must tell a complete story. Each must communicate a single point. Hamlet's line, absent the brief context provided by SAM's post text, exists in a vacuum. The visual does not tell the play's whole story. It can't. In setting the quote in context and providing a brief interpretation of a particular scene, Shakespeare and Mindfulness has already eschewed a number of the play's themes that run concurrent to the central theme SAM does highlight (Hamlet's inability to uncover absolute truths). No mention is made of Ophelia or Polonius, of Claudius or Gertrude. In focusing on just the theme of Hamlet's inability to uncover absolute truths, SAM sets aside the play's others - among them adultery, murder, madness, mania, suicide, and Hamlet's continued indecision. Hamlet is not widely regarded as a man of action, nor a character with a clear mandate to act. In setting these aside, SAM makes an interpretive choice to ignore the broad in favor of the particular. And does so within Instagram's rigid platform requirements.

This narrow focus on one theme (Hamlet's inability to uncover absolute truths), and the interpretation of that line through a single lens (mindfulness) is not endemic to

Instagram. That is to say, refining an argument through a particular lens is not a limitation unique to the platform. But the platform does have limitations on what a content creator can publish. If each post must stand alone, then it cannot be part of a body of work reflective of a more thorough review of the play. If each post must tell a complete story, then the publisher must make efficient use of the platform's graphics standards (e.g., size, color palette, image contents, etc.) and adhere to tightly-defined character count limits for post text. If each post must communicate a single point, then exhaustive analysis would be misplaced - if possible at all.

The Snackable Will is just that, bite-sized. You can consume it in small pieces, engaging with many individual pieces of content, but each piece of content is separate and complete. These snack-sized pieces of content are inherently imitable acts of interpretation that can be consumed without context and repurposed as desired. Where Shakespeare and Mindfulness succeeds is in the manipulation of Instagram's boundaries, and within the parameters of Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure. Engagement-optimized visuals stop the user's scroll, and capture their attention with vibrant colors. Users then interact with content on multiple levels - passive likes, reading past the auto-truncated text limit, and commenting back to the publisher. Those actions are aggregated and processed by Instagram, producing post-level engagement rates well-above industry and platform benchmarks.

Chapter II.

Hot Swapping the Round for the Grid

“The Muted Will” consists of productions that rely on streaming media platforms (e.g., Zoom, and its ilk) to share their Shakespeare. These productions make specific use of a platform’s technical functionality to imitate the experience of the physical theater. Gone are special effects born of ropes, blankets, and all manner of prop. In are visual cues like stock photography, simulacrum, and mimetic device. A reaction precipitated (or at least accelerated) by the theater-shuttering COVID-19 pandemic, productions in this group seek to recreate - or imitate - the physical stage. In the technical world, hot swapping refers to swapping or replacing parts of a system without stopping or shutting that system down. In a similar way, productions in this group have swapped theater in the round for theater in the grid. The show must, indeed, go on. But there are technological limitations to recreating that experience. Productions in this Will don’t embrace new opportunities made possible by digital and social media, they endeavor to bind themselves to the production conceits of the physical theater.

The most successful of this content is characterized by three key elements:

- ***Content operates outside of real time***
- ***Sound is almost-always essential***
- ***Engagement is user-initiated***

As with The Snackable Will, these elements form a lattice to support analysis of this Will’s content. While content must still engage users, the mechanics of how that

engagement works, and the effect of that engagement on content creators' interpretive choice, plays out quite differently for The Muted Will than its snack-sized counterpart.

Foremost amongst these elements is that content operates outside of real time. This phrase carries multiple meanings. Content in The Muted Will is not live. As such, it is most often represented by pre-recorded, edited video, and sometimes paired with explanatory text about that video. This is the realm of YouTube, not TikTok (where the former hosts long-form video content indexed for querying on-demand, and the latter serves us algorithmically-selected short-form content designed to interrupt versus respond to user behavior). Though a three-hour production denotes a specific run time, the start and stop of that run time is dictated entirely by the user. Adding an additional layer of complication, that three-hour run time is not restricted to the three hours after the user starts watching. Streaming online video (OLV) is on-demand, and not tied to any timeline except the user's.

Unlike The Snackable Will, content in The Muted Will almost-always relies on sound as a core component of that content. Spoken dialogue, sound effects, and soundtracks all play critical roles in engaging users. While the scale of that sound can be self-directed by the user - do they listen in surround sound, or simply pop in a pair of AirPods - the sound itself is an essential part of the content. In this case, the phrase "almost-always" is used to account for those users who may choose to consume content with the sound off, opting instead for some other platform-specific feature to mitigate the need for that sound (subtitles, for example).

Finally, engagement is user initiated. Unlike platforms that are interruption-based (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok), The Muted Will is best represented by content that is

served up in response to a user's action. As user's search OLV platforms, content matching the user's search terms populate results. A simple Google search for "Shakespeare full performance" returns about 47 million results, of which 828 thousand are videos. The crux of this user-initiated engagement is not the scale of available content, but rather that to engage that content a user must take the first step. Unlike The Snackable Will, which can interrupt users while they are engaged in another behavior, users engaging with content from The Muted Will have already taken the action necessary to find the content they want to engage. This search might be for something specific (e.g., searching YouTube for "Folger Library 2020 productions") or following a specific body of work (e.g., #SonnetsInSolitude, from the RSC). In each case, the user already expressed interest and the platform responded with results specific to the user's query. In this chapter, we will examine content published by two different parties that illustrate this behavior.

One example is The Texas Shakespeare Festival (TSF)'s 2020 production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The on-screen text which precedes the YouTube video of that production reads:

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this production was
filmed at Odessa College's Globe of the Great Southwest
without an audience. The rehearsal and filming process
were conducted following CDC safety protocols.

TSF 2020

In this bit of text, several things are clear. First, there is no audience. The players are playing to an empty house. Second, this production was blocked, rehearsed, and produced during a time when the physical theater's doors were shut. Finally, while not explicitly stated, we can infer that what we're about to watch is the recorded version of a production intended for the physical stage. While the camera will afford us an unobstructed view, that view is fixed (see Figure 7). Our seat is wherever the camera was sitting, and the performers - all of whom are co-located – move around it.

In terms of Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure, this mimicry of the physical theater does provide several mechanisms for engagement. But that engagement is more limited than the multi-layered engagement possible with content from *The Snackable Will*, where users can engage with content in multiple ways (video views, clicks, likes, comments, shares, saves, etc.).

In the case of TSF's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, video views serve as the most important metric of the user's engagement. This particular video has received 752 views to-date. While the view count itself sounds low when compared with YouTube's more popular videos ("Baby Shark", a popular children's video, has been viewed 9.7 billion times), other data points can provide additional context, and correct for differences in audience scale.



Figure 7: Texas Shakespeare Festival

In order to account for vast quantitative differences in subscriber and view counts associated with different YouTube Channels, post-level engagement (as outlined in the Methodology) can be adapted for use (i.e., views divided by subscriber count). Texas Shakespeare Festival has 874 YouTube

subscribers. Using publicly-available data it's not possible to match the individual users who viewed the video of *Much Ado About Nothing* with their subscriber status. A calculation based on the same model as that in Figure 1 for post-level engagements, however, produces an ~86% engagement rate. For comparison, using the same method and an average view count from their 10 most-recently published videos, The Royal Shakespeare Company's YouTube Channel received an average number of post-level engagement of ~33% (based on an average of 15,000 views per video and a subscriber count of 46,000). The implication of this is that despite a seemingly low number of views (752 for TSF versus 15,000 for RSC), TSF was quantitatively more successful at engaging their audience. If nothing else, this confirms at least one thing: everything really is bigger in Texas.

The balance of Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure is represented by the other elements that define *The Muted Will*. By virtue of how users consume online video, content is viewed only when the user chooses. The user dictates when they'll watch TSF's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and whether they'll watch it at once, stop and continue watching at a later time, or ever finish watching it at all. This temporal manipulation, and the fact that the user has complete control of it, separates this content from the interruption-based content of *The Snackable Will*. Jarrett and Naji's model continues to provide a working structure through which to quantify and analyze users' engagement.

What this timelessness disrupts is the shifting "now", splitting it into two distinctly-different parts. In Garber's triple-metered framework, Shakespeare's plays exist in three distinct times: the time of their setting, the time of their first production, and

the shifting “now.” It’s the shifter that must be re-defined to address content published on digital and social media. Unlike the physical theater, which binds productions to a specific time and place, OLV unshackles them. When we’ve shuffled off this temporal coil, the re-defining of the shifting “now” is not unlike Garber’s own commentary from “Shakespeare and Modern Culture,” which implies the continuous making and remaking of Shakespeare’s work for the modern age. The plays, and our relationship to them, evolves to meet modernity. So too must the vocabulary - the nomenclature and taxonomy we use to define that relationship - evolve with it. For the user, “now” becomes a wholly relative term that is unique to them. For the publisher, “now” becomes a fixed point, reflective of the interpretive choices made when the video was produced (I specify video and not production, because raw footage is edited before publishing to digital and social media). For the user, “now” is always now. For the publisher, “now” is always really then.

This is not unique to full-length productions of Shakespeare’s plays. In early 2020, as the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic produced a situation where large numbers of people were sheltered in place, several tracks of Shakespearean content were published to digital and social media. Among them were series of online video productions focused on Shakespeare’s shorter works - “Sonnets In Solitude” from The Royal Shakespeare Company and a series of Facebook videos published by Sir Patrick Stewart under the title “A Sonnet A Day.” Both of these were direct responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The former a way to keep a working theater troupe engaged and in public view, and the latter a salve for both publisher and audience. It’s the latter that we’ll examine in greater detail.

On March 21, 2020, Stewart published a video to his Facebook Page in which he recited Shakespeare's Sonnet 116. Viewed nearly 1.5 million times to-date and with a post-level engagement rate of ~20%, this video was not accompanied by any additional text and offered up none of the context or analysis and interpretation provided by Shakespeare and Mindfulness. Rather, like Texas Shakespeare Festival's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Sir Patrick's video was simply a performance published online.

Following this first video, on March 22, 2020 Stewart published again. This video was titled "A Sonnet A Day: Shakespeare's Sonnet 1." A brief bit of text accompanied the upload, which read:

I was delighted by the response to yesterday's
posting of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, and it has
led me to undertake what follows. When I was
a child in the 1940s, my mother would cut up
slices of fruit for me (there wasn't much) and as
she put it in front of me she would say: "An apple
a day keeps the doctor away." How about,
"A sonnet a day keeps the doctor away"?
So...here we go: Sonnet 1

Stewart, 2020

Stewart's introductory text provides a succinct description of what users can expect. These are not to be recorded performances or commentary on Shakespeare's plays. They are to be performative readings of Shakespeare's sonnets, published daily. By connecting his impetus to those users' initial response, the user-initiated engagement common to The Muted Will is more directly-correlated to the content's publication than in the case of TSF's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Here, Stewart and the end users act as the M.C. Escher drawing of hands that Garber describes - each one making the other.

What followed were 154+ videos, spread across as many days, garnering a total of over 51 million views to date, with an average post-level engagement of ~20% on Stewart's Facebook Page (based on a random sampling of 5 videos from Stewart's A Sonnet A Day series). As with other content in The Muted Will, sound is almost-always essential. Stewart's videos are principally composed of vertically-shot video (likely from an iPhone, or equivalent) uploaded to Facebook with little editing (see Figure 8).

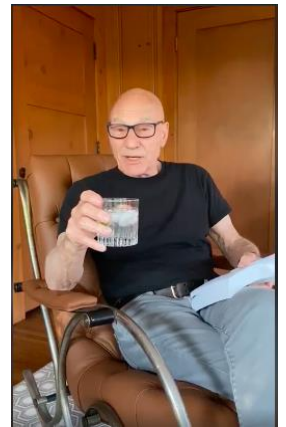


Figure 8: Patrick Stewart Facebook

But these performance metrics tell only half the story. In addition to publishing content to his Facebook Page, Stewart simultaneously posted each video to Instagram. By Sonnet 4, Stewart revised his naming convention from "A Sonnet A Day" to "#ASonnetADay." The use of the hashtag operates as an aggregator of content. Similar to Jarrett and Naji's comment about "the software or code through which expressions are processed" (Jarrett/Naji), using a hashtag provides users with a simple mechanic to follow a hashtagged topic or to pursue deeper engagement by consuming additional hashtagged content. In addition to the views and post-level engagement on Stewart's

Facebook Page, his #ASonnetADay Instagram content has received over 23 million views to date, with an average post level engagement of ~10% (based on a random sampling of 10 videos published by Stewart to his Instagram account).

But all that glisters with post-level engagement is not gold. For all their likes and views, both TSF's *Much Ado*, and Stewart's #ASonnetADay, do not push their performance beyond the boundaries of their chosen format. The Muted Will is just that...muted. With material wholly focused on replicating physical performance, what emerges is a category of digital and social media content best understood as a way to categorize and distribute that content at scale. YouTube becomes the library bookshelf, from which users selectively choose. Facebook and Instagram become platforms to distribute content, the performance of which depends largely on adherence to the key elements that define The Muted Will. The performance within that content does not.

This implies a relationship between users and content that is not entirely dissimilar from The Snackable Will, but lacks the analytical lens of that Will. Quantitatively, the best-performing content remains content that adheres to the platforms' best practices. For example, the same color palette and image formats used by "Shakespeare and Mindfulness" apply here too. Qualitatively, what's different is that where "Shakespeare and Mindfulness" adds its lens of mindfulness to texts cited, TSF and Sir Patrick simply share their performance of the text. Note that there are infrequent occasions when Stewart adds brief introductory comments to his videos but they are focused on context - as in "Shakespeare and Mindfulness" introductory post copy - and not analysis - as in SAM's subsequent post text. The Muted Will is an important and critical component of understanding how Shakespeare's work operates across digital and

social media. But The Muted Will serves mainly to tag, organize, store, and share that work - not to enhance it. For The Muted Will, which serves primarily to remediate existing modes of performance, now is always then. Both TSF & Stewart's #ASonnetADay demonstrate strong view counts and post-level engagement metrics on their respective platforms, but neither serve to advance the dynamic between the publisher and that audience by using the mechanics those platforms provide.

Chapter III.

The Show Must Go Online

For that, we must consider the third will: “Will, Locked Down”. Will, Locked Down refers to productions that employ the same digital and social media platforms we have examined in The Snackable Will, and The Muted Will. Will, Locked Down, however, focuses on content that does not seek to imitate physical theater. Rather, it endeavors to remove the suggestion that any space exists between actor and audience - especially if both are home in their living room. Physical distance is rendered irrelevant. Platforms provide one-to-one interaction, at scale. The seat is not wherever the camera sat. Everyone has the best seat in the house. Productions in this group are non-linear, and not trying to be anything else. Rather than resisting the technological parameters of digital and social media, they lean into those parameters to create new methods of engagement with the Shakespeares they produce. It’s not enough that the show go on. The show must go online. This turn of phrase serves not only to contemporize a well-known theatrical credo (and one rooted in Shakespeare’s own body of work), but also as moniker for a YouTube series examined in this chapter, and one that is very much at home with this third Will.

As with the previous two Wills, we must first define the key elements that characterize the most successful of this content:

- ***Production relies on real-time***
- ***Physical distance is irrelevant***

- *Engagement is participatory*

These elements, though distinct, combine to form a system of engagement that hinges on Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure. The relationship between user and machine exists more actively on both sides of the screen in this Will than in the previous two. Both publisher and audience are engaged in real time, manipulating digital and social media platforms that enable the performance and the audience's engagement with it. Expressions are instantaneously processed and transmitted across virtually any distance. Audiences engage on their own terms, and to whatever extent they choose.

In relying on real time, performances and productions categorized in Will, Locked Down amplify the physical theatrical experience. All the world's the stage, and all the world can be the audience. Garber's shifting "now" returns here as a grounding element. Though these productions can, and often do, exist online after their initial live performance, it's the real time nature of the performance that uniquely separates this Will from its counterparts.

As internet speeds increase, and connectivity becomes commonplace in even the most remote parts of the globe, the physical distance between performer and audience, even when those performers and their audience are interacting in real time, is largely irrelevant. The supercomputers we carry in our pockets, the handheld screens that serve as portals to every corner of the world, and the devices we're seated in front of provide unprecedented access to content published by anyone, anywhere. Digital and social media are the delivery system for an antidote to physical theater. An entirely new form of theatrical production is made by Will, Locked Down. One that uses technology and audience engagement to capture and amplify performance.

Productions in this Will make efficient use of digital and social media's platform-specific conceits to stage, block, and deliver their performance. Where the physical stage may call for hand-painted sets and elaborate backdrops, digital and social media have virtual backgrounds. Where false walls or trap doors may be required to move actors backstage, here the simple toggle of a performer's camera settings puts them out of sight. Where loudspeakers and sound effects could have made for shock and awe, here productions must remember that the user is largely in control of how things are seen and heard - another example of the relationship between machines and their users.

As that performance is amplified, audience engagement follows suit. Productions are staged, and the audience reacts in real time. Each digital and social media platform is unique, but many of their mechanics are similar. Likes and dislikes create a system of tacit and passive feedback. Comments capture positive and negative sentiment. Audiences no longer have to wait for a critic's commentary to lend credibility to a performance. One generation had New York Times Critics' Picks. This one has YouTube comments.

Though it can be, in this Will engagement doesn't need to be measured by post-level interaction (as it does in The Snackable Will), or as a metric-over-time (as in The Muted Will). Rather than the largely quantitative metrics of engagement that govern successful performance of content in the first two Wills, this Will's primary metrics of engagement are those qualitative choices that make use of digital and social media's platform-specific elements to enhance performance and produce new methods for audiences to engage.

As the Bubonic Plague forced the shuttering of Elizabethan playhouses, COVID-19 closed today's physical theaters by government decree. In an act of co-creation, and like Escher's drawing hands, lockdown made the need for new methods of performance, and new methods of performance were made in response. In keeping with the theme of real time relevance, perhaps the most accurate representation of this is the YouTube series "The Show Must Go Online" (SMG).

On its website, SMG is defined as "Weekly performed readings of the Complete Plays of Shakespeare by a global cast of all levels of experience, in the order they were believed to have been written. Created in less than a week in response to the global Covid 19 pandemic." (Myles) While it's tactically accurate, this definition is reflective of a fundamental change in the paradigm of engagement. SMG's audience is everyone. It's not limited by seating capacity, and it is unaffected by critical response. SMG is Shakespeare by the people, and for the people. And all people share ownership in equal measure.

One example of this co-creation and co-authorship is SMG's production of *The Tempest*. Just as Elizabethan productions grew more sophisticated in their staging of Shakespeare's plays, SMG's productions became more elaborate as the series made its way through Shakespeare's body of work. "The Tempest" being one of Shakespeare's later plays, SMG's production of that text is one of its most sophisticated manipulations of Jarrett and Naji's trilogical structure. Filter effects, speaker highlights, and nomenclature are employed as mechanisms for staging, creative force, and characterization.

The Tempest begins with thunderbolts and lightning. A frightening storm falls upon a ship at sea (note: screenshots from The Folger Shakespeare Digital Texts are used in the subsequent figures, for comparison to screen captures). On the physical stage, sound effects and rocking set pieces could convey the tumult faced by the first characters introduced. SMG produces a similar effect using Zoom’s platform technology.

The Tempest
Act 1, scene 1

Synopsis:

On board a ship carrying King Alonso of Naples and his entourage, a boatswain directs the crew to fight a great storm, but the ship appears destined to sink.

Scene 1

A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard.

Enter a Shipmaster and a Boatswain.

MASTER Boatswain!

BOATSWAIN Here, master. What cheer?

MASTER Good, speak to th’ mariners. Fall to ’t yarely,
or we run ourselves aground. Bestir, bestir!

He exits.

Figure 9: Folger Digital Text 1

Where the play’s introductory text indicates that “thunder and lightning [are] heard” (see Figure 9, above), Zoom’s filters and virtual backgrounds provide methods for the production to show, not just tell.



Figure 10: The Show Must Go Online: The Tempest: Zoom 1

In Figure 10 above, several characters are seen filtered through a watery overlay. An H₂O-soaked physical stage might prove problematic. Here that is negated by the use of Zoom’s platform features. The effect produced is one that uses both sight and sound to convey the “tempestuous noise” suggested in the text.



Figure 11: The Show Must Go Online: The Tempest: Zoom 2

Continuing along this same line, additional characters enter the scene (pictured in Figure 11, above), just as additional characters appear on the page (see Figure 12, below).

BOATSWAIN Down with the topmast! Yare! Lower, lower!
 Bring her to try wi' th' main course. (*A cry
 within.*) A plague upon this howling! They are
 louder than the weather or our office.

Enter Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo.

Yet again? What do you here? Shall we give o'er and
 drown? Have you a mind to sink?

SEBASTIAN A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous,
 incharitable dog!

BOATSWAIN Work you, then.

ANTONIO Hang, cur, hang, you whoreson, insolent
 noisemaker! We are less afraid to be drowned than
 thou art.

Figure 11: Folger Digital Text 2

The same watery filter effect is used by each cast member, playing their individual parts from their own private stage (note, the cast members are as geographically dispersed as the audience). The summary effect shares the storm's tempestuous nature. The screen is frenetic, with imbalanced lighting and dissimilar screen resolution producing a chaotic mix of sensory stimulation. The audience is left to negotiate this theater in the grid, eyes darting between the familiar same-sized frames for each actor.

As Ariel appears on screen, that character is not presented in the same way.

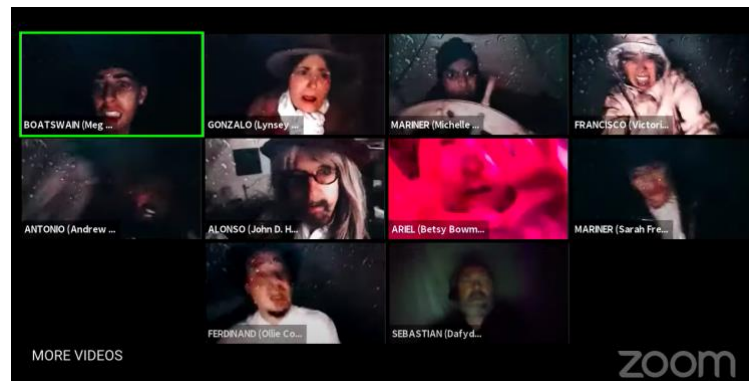


Figure 13: The Show Must Go Online: The Tempest: Zoom 3

In Figure 13 above, Ariel's frame lacks the watery filter effect applied to those characters on the ship and in the grip of the storm. In addition, the color and lighting used to frame Ariel is unique. Where the ship's crew are all framed in the same dark and gritty light, Ariel is by contrast bright, vivid, and almost otherworldly.



Figure 14: *The Show Must Go Online: The Tempest: Zoom 4*

As the scene shifts, Ariel's position on screen darts from edge to edge, with waving hand motions akin to those of a conductor - perhaps directing the "tempestuous noise" at work in this scene. Where on stage this rapid shifting in physical position might be achieved through trap doors and ropes, on Zoom it is achieved by the simple switching off and on of the actor's camera (which after toggling moves that Zoom participant's frame to a different position on the grid). This creates an Ariel - in many readings of *The Tempest* the cause of the storm itself - who moves throughout the scene, disappearing and reappearing in another place (see Figure 14).

Another such manipulation of Zoom's platform features comes as the production comes to a close. In the play's epilogue Prospero is presented full-frame (Figure 15), with all other characters disappearing from view.

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
 And what strength I have 's mine own,
 Which is most faint. Now 'tis true
 I must be here confined by you,
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got
 And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island by your spell,
 But release me from my bands
 With the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,

The Tempest, Act 5, Epilogue

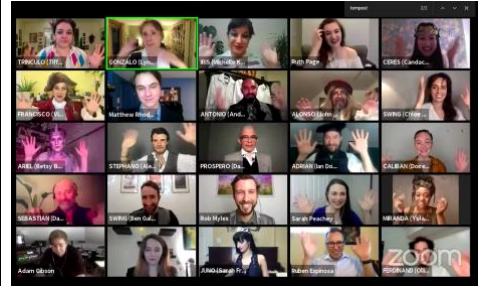


Figure 15: The Show Must Go Online: The Tempest: Zoom 5

On the physical stage, monologues and soliloquies may be highlighted by spotlight or by physical distance from set pieces of action. On Zoom manipulation of the sign on / sign off function, and the switching on / off of actors' cameras achieves a similar effect.

Prospero is the only character on screen. There is no grid. No apparatus. There is only Prospero, full-frame. The actor appears physically larger on screen. Zoom's grid view shrinks individual participant's frames based on the number of participants on camera and increases frame size when fewer participants are on (see Figure 15 above, for comparison).

Where on the physical stage the actor's monologue would remain surrounded by the set, other performers, and any on-stage props, TSM uses Zoom to convey a sense of

importance, focusing the audience's full attention on the lines being delivered by eliminating anything else from view. In Jarrett and Naji's terms, both sides of the relationship between user and machine have been manipulated to particular effect - the performance forces all other distractions off-screen, and the audience is forced to focus solely on Prospero.

At time of writing SMG's production of *The Tempest* has received a post-level engagement rate of ~84%. Over time, as additional views and interactions are recorded or as the channel's subscriber count changes, this post-level engagement rate will change. Note that SMG uses other social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) to share and publicize its work. The performance metrics associated with SMG's Twitter content about this production of *The Tempest* were negligible and have not been considered in this project's analysis. Unlike in the other two Wills, in which analysis relies on performance metrics and post-level engagement, Will Locked Down is measured equally by quantitative performance metrics and the qualitative elements of the performance itself. The digital and social platforms used to publish and share content may be the same, but the criteria for evaluating performance of that content are not.

Will Locked Down represents the next evolution of the relationship between a new three-part structure: Shakespeare's work, the people who perform it, and the audience who share an active role in that performance.

Conclusion.

Producing Shakespeare for Digital & Social Media

Digital and social media will continue to evolve. In the span of crafting this thesis, platform trends have reacted to cultural shifts. Audience engagement have flexed in new and intriguing ways, made possible by changing platform-specific features (e.g., longer time limits for TikTok) and technological advancements (5G upgrades around the globe, the advent of Facebook's "Metaverse"). Shakespeare must follow suit. The following are considerations and industry best practices to produce Shakespeare for digital and social media. Rather than seeking to identify best-in-class profile-level examples, where appropriate individual posts published by Shakespearean social media profiles have been noted.

Think Audience First.

With a user base that spans the globe and representation across a diverse set of demographics, digital and social media's global audience grows larger and more complex each day. What pocket of it represents yours?

One such example is The Royal Shakespeare Company's aforementioned TikTok account. With 391 followers (at time of publication), The RSC's TikTok regularly publishes content tailored to that platform's uniquely mobile audience. One such post, a musical summary of *Romeo and Juliet* published on 14 December 2021, has generated a post-level engagement of 432% (including auto-play video views and other post-level engagement). In this example, The RSC has made efficient use of the platform-specific

requirements of TikTok, in order to produce an above-average post-level engagement rate (e.g., vertically-oriented video sized to fit a smartphone screen, see Figure 16 below).



Figure 16: RSC TikTok

Mobile is a Behavior.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trends that were already in play. As the global audience continues to shift to mobile-first behavior, productions of Shakespeare's work must shift as well. For example, consider mixing short and long form content and publishing across multiple platforms to create engagement with snackable content (e.g., video loops, memes, etc.) that teases longer work (full productions).

Pictured below (Figure 17) is an Instagram post published by Shakespeare's Globe. The post features landmark scenery (of the London theater venue), and makes efficient use of vibrant images to tease their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The post copy provides a direct call to action (soliciting ticket purchase). And

recognizing that some 86% of mobile viewers engage with content without the sound turned off, the post includes on-screen text to replace otherwise-invisible audio. The result is a post-level engagement rate of 5% (well above Instagram's average).

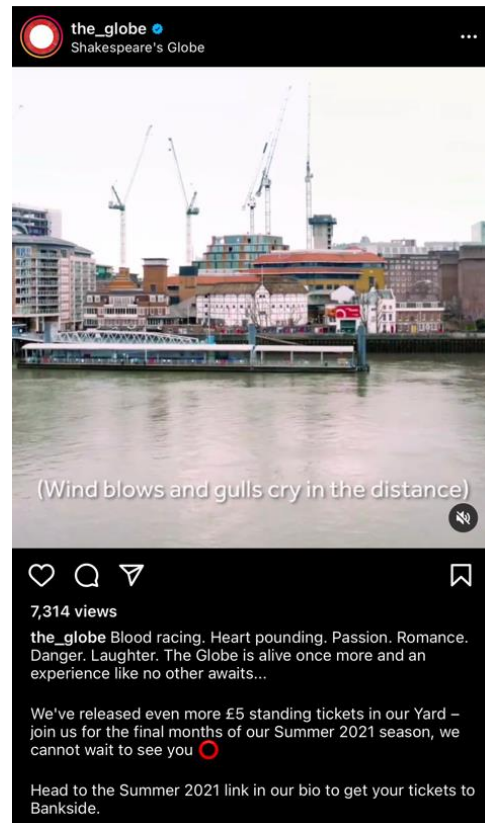


Figure 17: Shakespeare's Globe Instagram

Mobile is a Device Type.

Remember that the audience is likely to first engage with you on a handheld device (e.g., iPhone). Photos, videos, and text must capture user attention in a space roughly the size of a Post-It note.



Figure 18: Hawaii Shakespeare Festival Instagram

In another example from Instagram, Hawaii Shakespeare Festival (with just 633 Followers) published a short clip to close their 20th season. The post, which achieved a post-level engagement rate of 30%, makes use of a similar color palette to that of SAM (see Figure 18, above). Similar to the example cited from TSF, follower count is not the most important metric to track, or the primary indicator of success. Rather, it's how efficiently – through the use of color palette, image/video format, and copy length – the Instagram account engages its audience.

Online, the Show is Always On.

The mobile-first, global audience is online 24/7. Content published to digital and social media is available on-demand and based largely on users' decisions about how and when they choose to consume content. All the world's indeed a stage.

In an example from an individual versus an institution, a TikTok published by user Jeff Athey presents a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. The post, which achieves a post-level engagement rate of 7.3% (see Figure 19 below), mixes TikTok’s platform-specific elements (e.g., Green Screen) and mixes the play’s dialogue with the publisher’s own performance and commentary on the scene presented (e.g., commenting on the Apothecary’s role in the play, and surmising that “Sometimes, Shakespeare is stupid”).



Figure 19: Jeff Athey TikTok

Stopping the Scroll.

Color palette and image selection play critical roles in engaging people online. On platforms where user experience is interrupted thousands of times per day, how will your production employ the tactics reviewed in this thesis to capture attention?

In a Facebook Post published by Shakespeare Memes, the publisher shared an update originally posted by a Facebook Group (Shakespeare A Midsummer Night's Meme). With a post-level engagement rate of 1.3%, the post effectively stops the scroll by using a recognizable meme/image selection ("Jason Momoa Sneaks Up On Henry Cavill"). Note that the original post in the Facebook Group achieved a post-level engagement rate of 7% (see Figure 20, below).



Figure 20: Shakespeare Memes Facebook

This list is not exhaustive. The examples above represent successful manipulation of platform best practices (e.g., adjusting for users with sound switched off) and mitigation of each platforms' limitations (e.g., short form content that teases long-form material published elsewhere). Digital and social media are replete with published

content which ignores these practices, and content published fails to engage users as a result. Like the productions of Shakespeare's work that preceded them, digital and social media must continue to ground these new expressions of Shakespeare's work in the text, making new Shakespeares in the process. Digital and social media platforms continue to change, devices become more technologically advanced, and the methods of engagement evolve. A brave new world, that has such data in it. This thesis takes up the challenge issued to scholars by Jarrett and Naji. Practitioners must do the same with *The Three Wills*. Nothing ends. Nothing ever ends.

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