



Article

Not Something, Not Nothing, Not Shakespeare: Digitized Playbooks and the Question of Access in the Undergraduate Literature Classroom

Jordan Windholz

Department of English, Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, PA 17257, USA; jrwindholz@ship.edu

Received: 24 January 2019; Accepted: 23 March 2019; Published: 27 March 2019



Abstract: The digital divide is deeply felt by undergraduate students in resource-restricted universities, but creative, if also labor-intensive, solutions exist for instructors negotiating paywalls and other institutional impediments. In this essay, I argue that teaching early modern drama outside the restraints of the Shakespearean archive and through a host of digital archives, databases, and tools not only engages students in inquiry-based, active learning but also cultivates a critical sense of how digital tools obviate and exacerbate questions of access. To make my case, I describe how I designed and taught a course on non-Shakespearean drama for English majors at Shippensburg University, one of Pennsylvania's state-funded universities. After describing the mechanics of the course, I further theorize and examine the ways centering digital archives, databases, and tools as course texts enables students to think critically about the content available through these resources as well as the information hierarchies and receptions histories they promulgate.

Keywords: digital; archive; pedagogy; drama; playbook; EEBO; access; undergraduate; facsimile

1. Introduction

The advent and proliferation of digital archives, databases, and tools have prompted many in renaissance and early modern studies to rethink their pedagogical strategies and approaches to the canon. One can find no shortage of such strategies, for instance, in a recent volume published by the *Modern Language Association*. In *Teaching Early Modern English Literature from the Archives*, one can learn how to introduce students to paleography using online tutorials, digital image collections, and web-based catalogs (Wolfe 2015); how to connect digital editions to print originals (Sanders 2015; Duran 2015); how to leverage new databases of early modern writers underrepresented by modern editions (Laroche 2015); or how to center noncanonical and even nonliterary texts in the classroom (Eckhardt 2015; Ortiz 2015; McGrane 2015). Yet, despite the depth and breadth of *Teaching Early Modern English Literature from the Archives*, the question of access plagues the volume. The editors are forthright about this. In their introduction, Hackel and Moulton acknowledge, "The main professional issue involved in teaching archival materials is that of access" and that "access to online archives is also limited, by the cost of subscribing to a database or by the unavailability of classroom technology." (Hackel and Moulton 2015, p. 5). While a few contributors tackle these problems of access in their individual essays, they remain relatively unexplored and, therefore, unresolved in the volume. Indeed, where a rare contributor may acknowledge that their institution "does not even have a subscription to *Early English Books Online*" (Eckhardt 2015, p. 145), the solution is often either to teach other material, such as verse miscellanies, or to find other databases, which may also require subscriptions fees.

The question of access raised by Hackel and Moulton is an exigent one, especially given that digital archives, databases, and tools hold the promise of radically reforming teaching strategies in the undergraduate classroom. Digital archives not only provide access to materials otherwise

inaccessible due to geographic restraints but also facilitate, as Madeline B. Gangnes has argued, modes of collaboration precluded by the space of traditional archives, special collections, and reading rooms, an affordance particularly conducive to the literature classroom (Gangnes 2018, p. 113). Instructors at institutions without subscriptions to such resources, such as my own, must thus confront how these limitations might compound those digital divides of “access” and “use” that Attewell documented some time ago that permeate our institutions, communities, and disciplines (Attewell 2001, pp. 253–54). In what follows, I propose one solution to navigating the institutional restraints through the description of a course I taught in the spring semester of 2018: “Not Shakespeare: Archives, Afterlives, and Anachronism.” As an upper-level English major course on non-Shakespearean early modern English drama, the course relied exclusively on a range of digital archives, databases, and tools for the building of the course content (a full list of these resources can be found here: shipnotshakespeare.wordpress.com). Through various means of accessing these resources, my students selected the plays we would come to read over the course of the semester. Based on my experience teaching this course, I argue that centering an early modern dramatic literature course around both freely available and paywalled digital archives, databases, and tools not only enables students to engage in self-directed research but also empowers them to analyze critical issues of access surrounding these resources with which digital humanists have long grappled. I contend that if professors are serious about introducing students to the potentials of these tools, as well as the limits of them, they must strategically decenter Shakespeare from the early modern dramatic archive and enable students to replace him with texts of their own choosing. Although I can imagine adapting the structure of this course and the strategies I used for a course centered on Shakespeare, on the whole, Shakespeare’s cultural ubiquity has consequential effects upon how undergraduate students conceptualize the archive. To make my case, I first explain the theoretical and practical reasons for the course’s design. I then go on to explain why a course like the one I taught is particularly well-suited to cultivating student research and critical analysis of digital texts and tools alike. Finally, I end with a brief reflection on the limits of the course and where further refinement may be needed.

2. Not Something but Not Nothing

My “Not Shakespeare” course derived from two interrelated concerns. The first was theoretical, and the second, though not unrelated to the first, was far more practical. I first began thinking about the course in relation to Alan Galey’s recent work on new media and Shakespeare. In *The Shakespearean Archive*, Galey examines how Shakespeare has been wielded as a means to institutionalize new media and how new media, including a variety of digital archives, databases, and tools, come to reify Shakespeare’s centrality in the early modern dramatic canon. Galey is interested in Shakespeare’s specific role in the development and proliferation of new media as well as how Shakespeare comes to characterize and totalize the early modern archive as such. For Galey, “the Shakespearean archive” is “the imagined totality of playbooks, documents, versions, individual variants, commentaries, sources, adaptations, and other preservable records that underwrite the transmission of Shakespeare’s texts” (Galey 2014, p. 3). As Galey observes, while such an archive is at once specific to Shakespeare, Shakespeare also “stands as an exceptional case given the degree to which his unstable textual archive is made to bear the weight of cultural heritage in the Western tradition” (Galey 2014, p. 3). That is to say, Shakespeare comes to have a metonymic relationship to the early modern archive and, thus, comes to haunt the archive with his name, influence, or history.

One does not have to look far to see present manifestations of the history that Galey documents. In their introduction to *Shakespeare and the Digital World*, for instance, Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan valorize this metonymic relationship between Shakespeare and the digital humanities; they “assert the mutual importance of the ‘digital’ as a context that influences the study of Shakespeare and, conversely, the importance of Shakespeare as a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world” (Carson and Kirwan 2014, p. 1). One might more immediately point to this special issue of *Humanities*, the very title of which posits Shakespeare—who “is now fundamentally digital,” as our

editor Stephen O'Neill asserted in the original call for papers (O'Neill 2019)—as the defining author of the new perspective and future directions of digital humanities work. As these two examples intimate, it is difficult to even comprehend—in the sense of “to understand” but also “to encompass”—the early modern dramatic archive outside of Shakespeare despite the fact that that archive is populated with far more playwrights and paratexts that are not Shakespearean. To be sure, there are scholars seeking to comprehend the early modern dramatic canon outside of Shakespeare—or rather, “before” him. Andy Kesson, for example, is clear about the epistemological stakes of such a project. Interested in the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playhouses, Kesson observes the ways Shakespeare impedes, rather than facilitates, our knowledge about the early modern past, arguing that Shakespeare has produced “an inevitable distortion” and “effaced that which made him possible” (Kesson 2016). But even Kesson’s “Before Shakespeare” project (<https://beforeshakespeare.com/>) cannot escape the gravitational pull of the Shakespearean archive that Galey historicizes. Whether we like it or not, Shakespeare has come to define and, in many ways, to legitimize the field of early modern digital humanities. Yet, despite what Carson and Kirwan claim, there is no reason outside of Shakespeare’s cultural hegemony to treat him and his work “as a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world” unless we imagine that world as having already been made in his image. They more or less concede this point when they forge a strong relationship between Shakespeare and the digital humanities upon the “the sheer volume of material that is published online or in print that refers to Shakespeare” (Carson and Kirwan 2014, p. 1). The passive voice is telling here; it is as if Shakespeare manifests himself across the digital world without the help of institutions, academics, and other cultural actors.

There is no denying that Shakespeare is important to the digital humanities. Therefore, as Kesson observes, there is great epistemological value in militating against the centrality of Shakespeare to this field in order to see and understand what he occludes. When Kesson makes his particular conclusion of Shakespeare’s distorting power over theatre history, he is following in the footsteps of a wide variety of feminists and postcolonial scholars who have long made such critiques and, in doing so, have developed digital projects—such as the Women’s Writers Project (WWP, <http://www.wwp.northeastern.edu>)—that decenter canonical texts to make room for those traditionally rendered invisible by the inherited canon. Very much in line with this critical tradition, I, too, came to the conclusion that if I wanted my students to find for themselves all that digital archives, databases, and tools made possible, I had to do my best to mitigate the gravitational force of the Shakespearean archive from the outset of my “Not Shakespeare” course. Otherwise, they might just discover and reify the Shakespearean archive all over again, and so miss the archive that is much wider and far more varied than the Shakespearean one imagines.

However, it was not just the epistemological questions about the distorting effect Shakespeare has over early modern digital humanities that led me to conclude that students might fruitfully explore the range of potentialities of digital archives, databases, and tools only if Shakespeare was strategically displaced from the course. Intuiting all the ways Shakespeare overdetermined their relationship to the early modern past, my students themselves asked for such a course. Inasmuch as my “Not Shakespeare” course derived from questions about how to think about digital archives, databases, and tools outside or against the parameters of the Shakespearean archive, it came about primarily in response to my students’ feedback to the “Shakespeare” course I taught a year prior. In a final paper and presentation, one student in particular advocated that the very form and content of a Shakespeare-centered course, such as the one I had just taught, was anti-feminist because Shakespeare took up space that might otherwise be devoted to reading women writers. I took this critique seriously. Most of my students, however, were not so polemical in their feedback, nor did they formalize their response in the same terms as that student. Instead, they expressed their reaction to the course during a field trip that my students and I took a to the Folger Shakespeare Library, where we saw a production of *As You Like It*. Before the production, the students and I wandered around the Folger’s exhibit hall. They were fascinated with the old books on display but were awed by the idea that, on the other side

of the wall, scholars spent hushed, busy hours reading early modern books like the ones displayed before them in glass cases. For many of my students, who are often the first in their family to attend college, the thought never occurred to them that people—people like them, at least—might have the opportunity to look at such things. They wanted to do it too.

What my students desired was what most early modern English scholars desire: the “desire to speak with the dead” that Stephen Greenblatt insists “is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum” (Greenblatt 1988, p. 1). For Greenblatt, this desire to speak with the dead is the imperative of historicism, a desire not just to know but in some ways to be present with past persons, experiences, and phenomena. In seeing books that were not of their time and also not a present edition or anthology they might encounter in the classroom, my students had just such a desire kindled in them. In the Folger that day, what was dead was not Shakespeare but all the plays and playwrights they could not or did not read and could not and did not even know because Shakespeare so dominated their educational experience. Reanimated by high school curricula, modern editions, and the miasma of his cultural ubiquity, Shakespeare was too alive—or too undead—for them to desire. Instead, they asked what plays and playwrights did they not read because of Shakespeare’s overdetermined presence? I realized that day that I could not give my students the unmediated experience with books they fantasized about at the Folger, or not exactly, but that I could attempt to replicate the experience of awe and possibility that attended their encounter with an archive that was not for them Shakespearean, not yet. I could speak to their desire to speak with those playwrights who were dead to them.

Because my Shakespeare students had expressed a desire for the early modern past that exceeded the restraints Shakespeare places upon it, I decided to teach a course that explicitly negated him. And so, I conceived of my “Not Shakespeare: Archives, Afterlives, and Anachronism” course as first and foremost a negation of my Shakespeare course. Wanting to honor my students’ desires for freedom of inquiry and for the primacy of encounter, I did away with any course text that would gather non-Shakespearean drama for my students. They would be the ones to find and organize our course texts. To introduce students to non-Shakespearean drama was not enough; the course would have to thematize that negation as an epistemological value for the course as a whole. By decentering Shakespeare in relation to early modern English dramatic literature, what picture of the canon emerges and in what ways might students themselves work to make it visible? What afterlives of early modern dramatic literature might we imagine when we displace Shakespeare from the center of literary history? How might digital archives facilitate new questions about how the present lives in the past and the past in the present?

Digital archives, databases, and tools are well-positioned to answer these questions in ways Shakespeare, simply because of his canonicity, cannot—which is not to say that there is not a reason to ask other, crucial questions in a course that uses such tools in relation to Shakespeare and his work. Susan Wells, in her explorations of the uses of the archive in the composition classroom, understands the freedoms the archive affords in terms of “three gifts,” which she identifies as “resistance to closure,” “a loosening of resentment,” by which she means the salutary effect of historicizing and contemporizing present embattlements alongside past adversities, and “the possibility of reconfiguring our discipline” (Wells 2002, pp. 58–60). To give students the forms of freedom that Wells identifies as gifts of the archive, and given the lack of early modern archival material at my university, I had to turn to a variety of digital archives, databases, and tools. I listed these on our course syllabus and our course website. For many professors of early modern English literature who propose introducing the archive in the classroom, the primary database source is *Early English Books Online* (EEBO). EEBO contains a number of English texts printed between 1473 and 1700 CE. However, like so many databases, EEBO requires an institutional subscription, and because my institution lacks the funds for such a subscription, providing access to this database was impossible at the time. (I should note, however, that the *Renaissance Society of America* now offers income-adjusted memberships and that students are able to join. All memberships provide access to EEBO. For those making under 12,000 USD a

year, the dues are 35.70 USD. In the future, I would ask students to pay for an appropriate level of membership, the cost of which amounts to far less than they would normally pay for course texts). To work around the paywall problem, students would use a variety of databases to locate plays, including the *Electronic Short Title Catalogue* (ETSC), the *Database of Early English Playbooks* (DEEP), *EEBO-TCP* (Text Creation Partnership), and the Boston Public Library, which is in the process of digitizing plays from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century. Once students located the plays they wanted to assign to the class, I would use my *Renaissance Society of America* membership, and its access to EEBO, to download a facsimile edition of the play to distribute electronically to the class via *Brightspace*, the learning management software my university currently uses.

My course acknowledged the force and power of the Shakespearean archive while also seeking to evade its gravitational force. I confess the irony of its design. In centering the course around the negation of Shakespeare, I turned his bright sun into a powerful blackhole. There was no escaping the presence of the Shakespearean archive. However, rather than replicate its presence or ignore it entirely, I sought to acknowledge its presence as something like a present absence or absent presence. I wanted students to recognize Shakespeare's influence and power and, rather than seek to nullify it, to think critically about how and why they might negotiate the contours of it. To do this, I divided the course into eight modules of two week blocks. Each module would be assigned to a group of students, who, the week prior to that module, would choose the plays for us to read. Each module was organized around a thematic Shakespearean negation:

“What’s Past is Prologue”: Archaeology and the Archive

Measure for Measure: Metropolis, Merchants, Marriage, & Morality

The Merchant of Venice: Renaissance Religions & Their Others

The Tragedy of Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark: Trauma, Memory, & Revenge

Twelfth Night, or What You Will: Gender, Sex, Desire, & History

The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice: Race & Renaissance Globalisms

The Tempest: Drowning Books & Conjuring Texts

As You Like It: Revolts, Retreats, Authorship, and Authority.

The final module alluded to the moment that catalyzed this course's development. This time, however, in our final week, we would travel to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. not for a production of *As You Like It*, as we had in my Shakespeare course a year prior, but for a tour and a curated exhibition of some of the playbooks we had read over the semester.

These themes were designed to give students a foothold for starting their research as well as to engage them with relevant scholarly fields of inquiry. For example, in the module on “Race and Renaissance Globalisms,” I provided scholarly work by Arthur Little, Jr. and Kyle Grady to prompt students to ask, with Little Jr., “Is Shakespeare or the Renaissance/early modern period white property?” (Little 2016, p. 88) and to question, as Grady does, how a self-identifying “post-racial” present works to construct a “pre-racial” early modern past (Grady 2016, p. 72). To guide them even further, in each module, I provided a short encapsulation of Shakespeare's work and what it may not address. Here, for instance, is my introduction to the module, “*The Tragedy of Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark: Trauma, Memory, & Revenge*”:

“The time is out of joint”: so says Hamlet, a prince haunted by a ghost that seeks to claim his future as its own. It is tempting to think of Shakespeare's famous tragedy as a kind of allegory for this class. We, too, might ask with Hamlet what it means to be haunted and what kinds of claims the dead make upon us today. What plays will you grant an afterlife? By which should we be haunted? In choosing, you might bear in mind that *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy. While it has been conceived by modern readers as one-of-a-kind, it owes quite a bit to the revenge tragedy genre, the earliest plays of which are some of the first to grace the

stages of Elizabethan commercial theatre. You can explore plays of that genre not written by Shakespeare (there are plenty), or you can go another route entirely, choosing those that mock, cite, or otherwise respond to Shakespeare's ostensible masterpiece.

These descriptions were often derived from the scholarly questions raised by the unit; in this case, students were tasked with thinking about how queer theorists, such as Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, and Carla Freccero, engage archives in order to trouble temporal, historical, and affective normativities.

While I sought to guide students with these thematic modules, they always had the option to do whatever they wanted to do. My overarching directive was that students might think of "Not Shakespeare" in terms of two different kinds of departures: one of authorship but not genre, or one of authorship and genre. In the former, students might select a genre of a Shakespearean work—like revenge tragedy—but choose a play in this genre written by another early modern playwright; in the latter, they might choose a play that is not like anything Shakespeare wrote. In response to this prompt, the two students assigned to research this module selected John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) and John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1602), a play that has a lot in common with *Hamlet* but which students found far more campy, bloody, and, well, fun.

Every two weeks a group of students did a presentation on the plays they chose for the module they were preassigned. These presentations required students to explain why they chose the plays they did, thus forging a link between their analysis and the course's expressed goals, and how they found their plays. Student groups then had to think bibliographically by reporting on the print and performance history of the play. Following this presentation, they would also present on the company that performed the play as well as a geographical visualization of the play. Using *The Map of Early Modern London* (MoEML), student groups would locate as best they could relevant playhouses, booksellers, publishers, and printers to help us conceptualize the play's place in time and space. Most of them simply did this by using the built-in interface of MoEML that allows users to select and highlight places in London. They would then present a variety of screenshots of MoEML with color-coded highlights of various locales, some of which included additional information, such as pertinent dates or names.

In total, we read twelve dramatic texts (the spellings have been modernized to enhance online search ability): James Shirley's *The Constant Maid* (1640) and *The Witty Fair One* (1633), Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of D. Faustus* (1604) and *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta* (1633), Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Faire Queen of Jewry* (1613), John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1602), John Webster's *The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi* (1623), Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1620) and *The Characters of Two Royall Masques. The One of Blackness, the other of Beauty* (1608), Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Philaster, or Love Lies a Bleeding* (1620), John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), and Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1600). It proved to be an eclectic grouping, though a pattern did emerge. Students were drawn to the familiar. The introduction of an author (Ben Jonson or Marlowe, for example) by one group led students in another group to explore their works.

Students discovered plays using a variety of tools. Many groups simply perused those early modern playbooks digitized by the Boston Public Library and looked more closely at what intrigued them. In this respect, they behaved like early modern English patrons walking through the bookstalls of London and being drawn to title pages that caught their eye. Once they found a play of interest, they would either select that play or do further research, using that play to find others. Some groups, for instance, found a play in the Boston Public Library database and then ran its title through DEEP. They would then use the records in DEEP to do another search in terms of other categories, such as genre, playing company, or date. If they saw a play that was of interest to them in DEEP, they would either return to the Boston Public Library or crosscheck it in EEBO-TCP. They might also run a play they found through ESTC to trace its editions across time and institutions. Alternatively, they might also look for the play in one of our other databases or in some other place online.

Because the course was conceived as a negation of the Shakespearean archive, I created assignments that asked students to reflect less on what they read and more on the processes, systems,

questions, and resistances that framed their reading—including the one I established for the course itself, Shakespeare’s haunting absence. The reason I did this was practical as much as it was theoretical. Students would very likely be reading plays that lacked editorial aids and bodies of criticism. I did not want any impediments to the comprehension of the text to in turn impede their critical thinking about their experience with the text. Thus, each week, they were required to write a five-hundred word blog post on our course website. They could focus on the play, the scholarship, a specific question or statement of class discussion, or, ideally, some combination of these things. Students often wrote about the contents of the plays they read, but they also often wrote about questions of textuality and transmission, focusing on metatextual instead of textual concerns. In reading Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster* (1620), one student considered the various endings of the play as it was reprinted in 1622, 1628, 1634, and 1639. The edition students chose to read for the course is often considered the “bad quarto” (Q1), something they only discovered after we read the play, and I introduced them to the textual variances of the 1622 edition (Q2) in an in-class exercise. While we debated which is the better text, especially as we focused on the agency of Bellario at the end of each, we also came to ask, ultimately, who came to decide which edition was authoritative and, if “bad” quartos were so bad, how did some of us read digital editions based upon them?

By strategically displacing the Shakespearean archive, I sought to create space for students to exercise their own authority and agency not only over what they read but also on the terms they would read it. This meant that I also had to strategically relinquish my authority in the classroom to make way for my students’ methods, questions, arguments, and discoveries. Following the pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire, I saw in student engagement with digital archives, databases, and tools the potential to resist a “‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only so far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” of knowledge to “problem-posing education,” a pedagogy in which “people teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (Freire 2005, pp. 72, 80). For Freire, the difference is one of being in the world as opposed to with it, from being an object subjected to power to being a subject objecting to power. In the context of my class, that power took the form of the canonicity of Shakespeare as well as the prerequisites of access of the digital archives, databases, and tools themselves, in no small part because Shakespeare and the digital humanities have come to mutually define each other. I sought, in other words, to yield to students “the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge” (Rahman 1985, p. 119) within the context of Shakespeare and the digital world. The modules I designed for this course were in keeping with this ethic, as they provided a structure through which and against which students might produce knowledge. In the Freirean approach, a structure is not anathema to student agency, and the ceding of authority requires careful attendance to one’s role as a teacher in the classroom. As Peter Roberts argues, in his own reading of Freire, “to hand all decisions regarding reading material, teaching style, and curriculum content to students is not to promote freedom but to grant license” (Roberts 2000, p. 59).

Drawing on Freire’s theories of critical pedagogy made my course more and less structured than other courses I have taught. Relinquishing control over specific course texts meant I could not pre-read and preplan lessons on specific texts, but it also meant I ended up reading several plays for the first time (Shirley’s *The Witty Faire One*, for example). However, perhaps surprisingly, I found myself creating lectures and presentations in response to student questions regarding the material cultures of early modern print, especially at the beginning of the course. As a class, we also became far more attuned to forms of inquiry, and thus worked to routinize processes that might facilitate fruitful discussion. For instance, I asked students to come up with a series of three questions for any text they read: one related to the content of the text, one related to its history or reception, and one related to a cultural or theoretical concern. Much of the class would then be spent looking closely at the text in relation to some of those questions, discussing what we saw on our pages or screens, and thinking about where else we might look for answers. Sometimes, our questions and concerns came down to discrepancies about mediums. I almost always printed out facsimile reproductions of the play, but many students read a

digital copy of the facsimile and still others read digital editions—so long as one existed—that they found online. Were we reading the same play? In what ways were we? How did each text—printed facsimile, digital facsimile, or digital edition—conjure or gesture to the original playbook differently, and in what things—scanned blackletter type, misprints, digital elisions—did such conjurations inhere? In the more banal, but still worthwhile, moments, we simply ironed out what, exactly, had happened in the plays we read. Without footnotes, endnotes, and other paratextual materials and editorial interventions, many students found such questions of comprehension newly consequential.

3. Loss, Recovery, and Reciprocal Reading

Teaching a course on early modern dramatic literature organized around digital archives, databases, and tools challenges many of the received pedagogical habits of using such resources in the undergraduate classroom. It is no secret that using digital archives enriches undergraduate student learning experiences and facilitates inquiry-based learning. Yet, when it comes to the use of digital archives, databases, and tools in the English undergraduate classroom, too often pedagogical methods and recommendations focus on specialized assignments. There are good reasons for this pattern, one of which is curricular: students need or want to know canonical authors for a whole host of reasons, and not all course offerings lend themselves to a full or robust incorporation of digital archives. Another reason is that some of the most exciting scholarship on the use of archives in the undergraduate classroom comes from librarians and archivists, whose relationship to the undergraduate classroom is not that of an instructor of record. Ann Schmiesing and Deborah R. Hollis, for example, have rightly observed how the introduction of original materials cultivates a dynamic classroom environment. They argue that such materials, incorporated into classes, have the potential “to motivate students both to discuss class readings in further detail and to pursue interests that go beyond class readings” (Schmiesing and Hollis 2002, p. 466). Following the work of Schmiesing and Hollis, Barbara Rockenbach suggests that conceptualizing archives in these terms “creates an experimental space where hands-on experience in analyzing, asking questions of, and telling stories with primary source documents are possible” (Rockenbach 2011, p. 301). More recently, Jolie A. Sheffer and Stefanie Dennis Hunker advocate for English professors, especially those who feel behind on the digital curve, to introduce digital curation projects to the classrooms “by collaborating with one of the most valuable but underutilized and underappreciated resources for faculty interested in innovative teaching—the university library” (Sheffer and Hunker 2019, p. 82). As these scholars demonstrate, consulting with librarians can help students experience the aura of the unknown and the untouched that the archive figures forth. In so doing, students find the permission to speak about texts that, unlike Shakespearean ones, they imagine open and porous instead of protected by the impenetrable chitin of scholarship.

The rhetorical effect of this body of pedagogical scholarship, however, is that the digital archive is represented as a contextualized and contextualizing space, one to be brought in to enrich the classroom environment, but not a place where course content as such dwells. In teaching my “Not Shakespeare” course, I sought to explore how far one might take the promise of the digital archives to reshape undergraduate learning. I was, in this respect, following the lead of many who had graduate training in an era in which such resources are commonplace and who see radical potential in digital archives, databases, and tools for student engagement. Concentrating on EEBO, Stefania Crowther, Ethan Jordan, Jacqueline Wernimont, and Hillary Nunn, for instance, have argued, “instructors can deploy digital archives like EEBO as tools to actively invite student participation in determining course content” (Crowther et al. 2008, para. 17). For Crowther et al., the utility of digital archives is not merely a matter of novelty; the new and the unknown in this case create room for a kind of “alienation” from a text that is the prerequisite for interpretive discoveries as well as for instigating those “fruitful misreadings” and “mistakes” that can encourage “the modern reader to attend to the importance of form and structure in all linguistic discourse” (Crowther et al. 2008, para. 1, 23). It was just this kind of attentiveness I was hoping to cultivate in my students.

My students did not have individual access to EEBO, but by combining DEEP, ETSC, and the Boston Public Library's digitization project, the students were able to control the course content in the ways Crowther, et al. envisioned. However, there were also more practical concerns for teaching my "Not Shakespeare" course in this way. Every semester, I have a student who, early in the semester, has yet to buy the books because she or he is waiting on necessary funds. I put course texts on reserve in my library to mitigate this problem, but digital archives, databases, and tools permitted me to provide a text-rich and reading-intensive course to my students without requiring them to pay for it. It was liberating. Lowering the costs of access raised the classroom expectations for engagement. All students could access the text, even those without a personal computer, as these were widely available across campus in computer labs.

The question of access regarding digital tools dovetailed with those pertaining to canon formation and textual recovery. As the semester progressed, my students understood themselves as venturing into the digital archive seeking what was, if not lost exactly, obscured by Shakespeare. So guided by a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion about Shakespeare's distortions upon their early modern dramatic archive, my students quickly began asking questions about the history and constitution of the digital archives, databases, and tools they were using to find the dramatic texts for the course. They did not need encouragement from me to do this; it was only natural that they did so. As Wendy Hayden observes, archival work foregrounds questions of recovery and loss:

Students working with archives, whether physical or digital, often ask questions about what the archive contains, how it is organized, and what is left out—questions derived from their actual research experiences. Recovery projects in undergraduate work—as in feminist research—are never only about recovery. They are also about (re)reading the archive as a source of knowledge and public memory. (Hayden 2017, p. 137)

Digital archives of early modern English dramatic literature are no exception to this rule. At the beginning of the course, I informed students that what is extant of dramatic literature is only a small picture of what was actually produced. In part because students became increasingly interested in this fact, I developed an assignment around the lacuna of the archive that asked them to consult *The Lost Plays Database* (https://lostplays.folger.edu/Main_Page). The assignment asked students to draw on an extant play to curate a web of interrelating lost and extant plays. The organization of this network was to be determined by them on the grounds of what they understood and could defend as shared content, history, or geography connected to publishing, performance, or textuality. I asked them to provide a visualization of this network—most chose to do a simple web graph—as well as a five-hundred-word narrative description of their research process.

As students actively reread the digital resources they were using alongside the texts they found using these resources, they came to perceive how the materiality of texts and histories of textual production shape what we conceive of as the past and the present. Indeed, calling attention to the materiality of texts and the often invisible modes of creation, production, and circulation of texts was one reason I developed my "Not Shakespeare" course. Perhaps counterintuitively, I found that the digital archives, databases, and tools increased student attention to materiality because my students sought to know how the "immaterial" texts they read on screens came to be and who had a hand in making them so, from coders all the way back to typesetters and playwrights themselves. The knowledge that their digital copies were produced by a network of actors and institutions made it easier for them to comprehend the ways an early modern English playbook came into existence through various modes of transcription, transmission, and censure. Digital playbooks pulled from the archive, oddly enough, put to mind the paper sixteenth- and seventeenth-century quartos more readily than the scholarly and student editions they normally read.

Student reading in the course thus shifted away from the close-reading of a text to what Alan Galey calls "the reciprocal approach to the critical reading of tools and materials alike" (Galey 2014, p. 240). This kind of reading attends to those textual emendations we see and those that our tools prevent us from seeing. Because my students and I rarely had the same edition of a play—some used

XML copies and some used facsimile scans—oftentimes during our class discussion, we turned to transcription errors and print errors, transcription emendations because of print errors, or emendations in XML texts that seemed to have no basis in the facsimile quartos. In short, we were always talking in one way or another about the textuality of the text before us and how the tools we used shaped the texts we read. When it came to what we read, there was little space between the text and the digital tool.

Often, these discussions did not result in epiphanies for students; rather, they increased that productive friction with the text's materiality that conditions a student's growing awareness that, as a reader, they, like coders, printers, or playwrights, are an interpreter of a text. However, in at least one moment, "the reciprocal approach to the critical reading of tools and materials alike" exposed invisible emendations that digital tools can produce in textual reproductions. In the course of reading Shirley's *The Constant Maid*, this kind of reading strategy exposed the biases of a tool students often rely on for clarity or for avoiding the assigned reading altogether: *Wikipedia*. This was one of the first plays students selected to read, and so many turned to *Wikipedia* to make sense of its convoluted plot. To get a sense of what students understood of the play, I began the class by asking them to take a few moments to summarize what they recalled of it. After sharing and comparing our recollections, I handed out *Wikipedia*'s summary of the play, which we then compared to our summaries, thinking about those elements of confusion or discrepancy this summary seemed to resolve. One such moment is the supposed courtship of Hartwell by Bellamy, Frances's widowed mother. *Wikipedia* summarizes that courtship—and the play's other moments of deception—in this way:

Hartwell is a gentleman who is suffering financial reverses; he is forced to dismiss his servants and shut up his house. Hartwell loves Frances; Frances's mother Bellamy, in order to test her prospective son-in-law's fidelity, pretends to be in love with him herself. Hartwell's friend Playfair advises him to accept the mother's advances—but their conversation is overheard by Frances's Nurse. The Nurse, who wishes Frances to marry a clownish suitor called Startup, arranges for Frances and Startup to eavesdrop on the conversation between Hartwell and Bellamy. The Nurse conspires with Close, a dismissed servant of Hartwell's who now works for Startup, to smuggle Startup into Frances's bedroom that night; but Close, loyal to his former employer, divulges the plan to Hartwell. ([The Constant Maid 2015](#))

Faced with that summary, students felt that they had fundamentally misread the play, for they understood Bellamy to be in earnest. When we looked at the play itself, however, students came to see how this summary flattened some crucial ambiguities in the play regarding Bellamy's intentions but also how it was produced, like their own summaries, from a reader interpreting Bellamy's motivations that they found far from clear.

The Constant Maid, in fact, does a very good job of dramatizing methods of interpreting textual emendation. Where *Wikipedia* proscriptively asserts Bellamy, "in order to test her prospective son-in-law's fidelity, pretends to be in love with [Hartwell] herself," in the play, Bellamy recasts her motivation analeptically, revising her previous pursuit of Hartwell as merely her means of testing his devotion to her daughter. When the Nurse tells Frances, "your mother did but counterfeit/the love-sick widdow all this while, to trie him," readers, like Frances, are given an assurance of intention ([Shirley 1640](#), sig. E4r). But that assurance is shortly revoked. Upon hearing the (mistaken) news that Hartwell has been contracted to and impregnated another woman, Bellamy confesses in private conversation with her daughter, "Tis in vaine/To tell thee how I loved him," a statement to which Frances, likely echoing a reader's response, exclaims, "Bless my senses! You love him?" only to further confess, awe-struck, "I heard you made pretence/Of love, to trie him for my sake; and pardon me,/If yet I dare not beleve more" ([Shirley 1640](#), sig. F4v). These quick reversals of what is true and what is not about Bellamy's intentions left my students with a bit of whiplash—and the play goes on to reverse course again. After Frances excoriates her mother, Bellamy disavows what she just insisted was true, telling her daughter, "But never procure thee one sad thought;/Now I have tried you both; assure my childe,/I loved him but for thee, dispose thy selfe/To be his Bride" ([Shirley](#)

1640, sig. G2r). Frances seems to recognize what my students came to see as Bellamy's psychological sadism, for she promises, "to spend all night/In prayers for you mother" (Shirley 1640, sig. G2r). Where *Wikipedia* provides the assurance of Bellamy's true intention, the play itself stages emendations requiring interpretive intervention. This exercise left students questioning not only Bellamy's true intentions but also the intentions of the anonymous producer or producers of the *Wikipedia* summary of the play. They realized, too, that if they had read the summary before the play—a practice they had done with other texts in other classes in order to give themselves the confidence of clarity—they would have missed the degree to which the play confronts the very questions they themselves were grappling with in finding and reading early modern plays through a number of digital archives, databases, and tools. They would have taken the text in front of them at face value, overlooking all the ways it could have been emended.

One could imagine students doing an exercise like this without using a facsimile original or digital edition and, instead, using a modern edition, comparing that edition to the summary on *Wikipedia*, but I do not think the result would be the same. My students turned to *Wikipedia* in this instance because they sought to fill the editorial gaps the facsimile or digital edition simply lacked. Any modern edition of the play would supplement these textual ambiguities with footnotes or a critical summary in an introduction to the work. In reading the digitized facsimile or transcription of *The Constant Maid*, my students had to take on an additional role. They did not just encounter the text as readers; they also encountered it as editors. The experience was not dissimilar to what Katherine Rowe describes happening in her Shakespeare course when, due to the modern economies of textbook distribution, her students found themselves without the *Norton Shakespeare* she ordered for the course, the college bookstore having failed to supply adequate copies. As Rowe explains, the various editions of digital Shakespeare texts to which she had to resort led to "heterogeneous glosses in the room." With no authoritative text in her classroom, Rowe further observes, "students' sense of independent expertise and responsibility for glossing has deepened far beyond the usual" (Rowe 2014, p. 148). Though Rowe acknowledges how using such digital texts jettisons important and longstanding editorial histories, they "also invite us to return to editorial first principles, replacing single textual authorities with ambiguous alternatives, and including the reader in the editorial process" (Rowe 2014, p. 148). My students' experiences were a difference in degree rather than kind. Without those editorial interventions common to even digitized Shakespeare editions—and of course, the longer, more deeply cited *Wikipedia* entries on Shakespeare's texts—my students came to realize their agency not only as a place of empowerment but also of bewilderment—a bewilderment that, when explored together with their peers, created new spaces for inquiry and reflection.

Inasmuch as centralizing the digital archive in an undergraduate classroom creates exciting new pathways for student engagement, inquiry, and research, it can raise important questions about the forms of power such archives render invisible. Reading the history of EEBO, Bonnie Mak has pointed out that "the elision of the contingencies that are always entangled in processes of production generates the illusion that the digitizations have not only been protected from editorial intervention, but may even function outside traditional infrastructures of productions" (Make 2014, p. 1520). That is, in advertising their lack of editorial intervention, digitized early modern playbooks like those in EEBO risk leading readers to believe wrongly that their existence is free from histories of intervention. It is true that digitized early modern English playbooks suggest a lack of such intervention—there are no modernizations and no notes in these editions—but they also conspicuously exhibit their having been made present. In other words, digitized texts may, in fact, hide their processes of production, but they also perform the fact of their historical novelty, of their having to have been produced as digital artifacts. We might think of this as a kind of anachronism: old plays have been made available by new technologies that are invested in representing them as newly old plays—that is, plays realized anew as old and even forgotten and, thus, worthy of interventions of archiving and recovery. In fact, it was that very kind of question that continually engaged my students, especially as it related to the Shakespearean archive. What might it mean to engage early modern drama not through

a canon organized around Shakespeare but one far more expansive, decentered, and networked? Who established these rules of textual reception, and by what means? This was not a marginal question for my students. It was the central one, and one enabled, not elided, by the fact of digitized playbooks.

4. Conclusions

I end this essay by briefly reflecting on the limits of and possible refinements for my “Not Shakespeare” course. At the end of the semester, students reported the “class [. . .] puts the power in the hands of the students to determine what we read and discuss” and that they were “allowed to basically say anything in the class—any theory, question, etc.” (Spring 2018 Individual Report 2018). However, positive feedback such as this was met with a counterpoint. The openness of the class was perhaps too daunting for some students. One student reported, not inaccurately or unfairly, that it seemed that I “expected graduate work as opposed to undergraduate” work (Spring 2018 Individual Report 2018). Insofar as much of the course required student-guided discussion and individual initiative, this is a true and fair critique. The class required an investment of time and energy that was not conducive to many students. Yet, this critique perhaps reflects less upon my course and more on the ways we tend to teach undergraduates. In her survey and study on “Personal Epistemology Research”—a term used to categorize various theories of “individual conceptions of knowledge and knowing”—Barbara K. Hofer observes that graduate school tends to develop reflective judgment, that is, attention to the processes of knowing and reasoning (Hofer 2001, pp. 355, 369). If, for instance, this student has been acculturated to transmission-based models of learning in other courses, where information is distributed by a professor to be recorded and applied by students, then this particular course, which is far more constructivist, inquiry-based, participatory, and open-ended, might feel like one an undergraduate student imagines only graduate students should take.

A course like “Not Shakespeare” works best for students who can devote their time to living the life of a researcher for a semester, and not all of my students could. There was also a sharp divide in my class between students who did the weekly work of writing blog posts and those who did not. A course designed around an inquiry-based model of education rises or falls based on the work students put into inquiry. After teaching the course, I felt unsure of its successes in part because it exposed a fault line in the classroom between those students who saw opportunity and freedom in finding and reading early modern playbooks and those who found this work a burden. These divides exist in any undergraduate classroom, but a course like “Not Shakespeare” risks foundering due to student disengagement, and thus, it works best with a critical mass of students excited about putting in the work week-to-week and day-to-day.

In teaching the course again in the future, I would make a few adjustments. Because of the new membership fee model of the *Renaissance Society of America*, I would require students to pay for a membership so that they could access EEBO themselves. This is a feasible solution to the access question that many of us who teach at institutions without subscriptions to this database currently face. I would also require fewer theoretical contexts and, instead, introduce pertinent theories in class with supplemental handouts and bibliographies for further reading. Reading digitized early modern playbooks without the aid of critical editorial introductions and notes is a formidable task for undergraduate students; I was overzealous in my assigning of scholarship and theoretical material, and my students let me know that loud and clear. I would also like to work more closely with my institution’s librarians, perhaps asking one or two of them to discuss what the relationship of the library to digital archives, databases, and tools looks like from their end. It is a perspective students do not often hear but one from which I believe they would benefit. In this case, they might ask how and why the library comes to procure the digital archives, databases, and tools they have. To enhance students’ sense of the breadth of the early modern archive, I also think I would have asked students to include a list of five plays they considered choosing but did not when they presented their work to the class. In this way, even the plays we read would have been put into relief by all the plays we did not or have yet to read.

One of the great benefits of organizing a course around what can be found using digital archives, databases, and tools is that the course always holds the possibility of being new. Another is the foregrounding of textual mediation, emendation, elision, and manipulation that students encounter across the internet at large. In the context of their daily use of social media and other digital tools, future students will bring new questions to a course like “Not Shakespeare.” As Joanne T. Diaz observes, “Now more than ever, our students need to critically assess how books are selected, edited, published, and promoted, who makes those editorial decisions, and how cultural artifacts are released into the world” (Diaz 2012, p. 442). Students are in the best position to do this kind of thinking when they experience the power of selecting, editing, publishing, and promoting the course content. In this respect, the revolutionary power of the digital humanities may not lie in the computational force big data brings to humanistic research nor to the new methods it facilitates but to the agency it affords undergraduate students to select and to research texts they could not, until now, access on their own.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Sharon Harrow for reading a draft of this essay and providing her suggestions for revision, and Shari Horner who gave me the opportunity and freedom to teach a course like “Not Shakespeare”.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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