

# Introduction: Interpreting YouTube Shakespeare

*The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and  
ill together.*

SHAKESPEARE, *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL* (IV.3.68)<sup>1</sup>

YouTube hardly requires any introduction. As the dominant video-sharing platform within the contemporary networked mediascape – reportedly attracting more than 1 billion views per month – using YouTube has become part of everyday activity and carries considerable cultural currency.<sup>2</sup> Some of these terms might also be applied, with varying degrees of emphasis, to Shakespeare, that most recognizable and accommodating cultural entity. Yet YouTube's surface associations with the instant gratification of the gag or the recorded prank may appear to put it at odds with Shakespeare, at least when the playwright is conceived in literary terms, or as a token of high culture. Searching Shakespeare on YouTube is something of a niche activity, while noticing the latest YouTube meme or trending video is not. Where the latter activities are habitual to YouTube culture, the former evokes a discrete subject category. As such, the scholarly pursuit of this niche might appear a self-validating enterprise, that familiar scenario of the Shakespearean finding new sites of Shakespeare's

construction particularly compelling, because by affirming the vitality of Shakespeare, they also affirm the critic's interests.<sup>3</sup> For all that, seismic shifts are afoot. As YouTube becomes a habitual element of the Shakespeare classroom, as Shakespeare theatres recognize YouTube's value as a promotional space, as cultural institutions like the Folger Shakespeare Library and Shakespeare Birthplace Trust use YouTube to disseminate their activities to the wider public, as actors upload their show reels, as Shakespeare texts are mashed with a pop music video or adapted into a meme, and as the easily embedded YouTube video is shared across media, a study melding YouTube and Shakespeare looks a less specialized and less quirky combination than we may first think. Indeed, as a dynamic hermeneutic field, the transmedia Shakespeare of YouTube marks a fascinating point of intersection for concepts such as high and popular culture. It may even prove a significant location for constructing them.

YouTube is a space where anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection can share their response to Shakespeare, participating in the social network. Users access a vast repository of Shakespeare material, while at the same time contributing new forms of do-it-yourself Shakespeare. A search under Shakespeare generally returns over 1 million results.<sup>4</sup> Within these results, we can determine what plays prove most recurrent: 'Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet' generates over 86,000 results, making it by far the most cited play on YouTube. *Hamlet* comes second, with over 68,000 results. *Othello* accounts for some 25,000 videos. YouTube thus affirms the cultural and curricular prominence of certain Shakespearean texts over others (for instance, *Timon of Athens*, the late tragedy co-authored with Thomas Middleton, generates a comparatively low 603 results, though this most likely reflects the absence of a major film adaptation of the play). As these figures attest, the small screens of YouTube grant access to an accidental archive of Shakespeareana, to user-generated Shakespeares and to such genres as the video mashup (combining one or more audio tracks with moving

images, sometimes with ironic effect), the vlog (or video diary) and the fan-made movie trailer. YouTube is now one of the dominant media through which Shakespeare is iterated, produced and received in the twenty-first century. As such, it invites a thorough investigation into the culture of online video creation, and its effect on Shakespeare's meanings and cultural value is timely.<sup>5</sup>

Irreverent or simplistic, celebratory or parodic, the YouTube Shakespeare video is many things and stretches the already pliable Bard in new directions. For instance, *Dr Seuss vs Shakespeare: Epic Rap Battles of History #12* (uploaded 17 August 2011) currently ranks the highest Shakespeare view count, with over 55 million views.<sup>6</sup> The video reworks the format of the now defunct MTV series *Celebrity Deathmatch*, one episode of which pitted the Bard against rapper Busta Rhymes to determine the title of world's best poet.<sup>7</sup> Alongside the schlock associations of Seuss Shakespeare, there are also the rare finds, including Sarah Bernhardt in the silent film *L'Duel Hamlet* (1900), believed to mark *Hamlet's* filmic debut.<sup>8</sup> YouTube also functions as a discovery space for inventive projects such as *Chicken Shop Shakespeare*.<sup>9</sup> Showcasing emerging talent, these vignettes produce a deliberately contemporary location of Shakespeare. YouTube videos can be inventive, as in Rebecca Mellor's *Ophelia RM10* (discussed in Chapter 2), and challenging, as in *Othello blacking up* (discussed in Chapter 3), which provide us with a surprising and satisfying new media edification of Shakespeare. Indeed, YouTube Shakespeareans instance the vitality and interpretative openness of Shakespeare. There is value for students of Shakespeare, since what emerges is a sense of Shakespeare as a body of knowledge that is shifting, incomplete and thus awaiting new interventions. In this way, YouTube Shakespeare not only has much to offer as archive, as a platform for vernacular expression, as a space to participate in what Shakespeare means. YouTube also has implications for scholars. It can become a space where Shakespeareans disseminate and share their work or where different roles – of

YouTuber, fan and creator – might be assumed, thus enabling scholars to bridge the gap between popular culture and Shakespeare's more institutional markings.

## YouTube Shakespeare in/as new media

YouTube is a far more complex medium than many descriptions of the video-streaming platform characterize it as. Recent work in media studies has importantly deepened our knowledge and understanding about the dynamic surrounding YouTube. Scholars have considered YouTube's commercial imperatives and their bearing on notions of community.<sup>10</sup> They have also explored YouTube's invitation to 'Broadcast Yourself' and its implications for individual agency within mass media.<sup>11</sup> Genres of YouTube video have been identified and interpreted as cultural texts.<sup>12</sup> Building on such work, this book seeks to initiate a productive dialogue between new media theory and the field of Shakespeare studies. The interplay between these subject areas and approaches gives rise to a host of questions, questions that reach to the shifting cultural significance of Shakespeare, to the affordances of the YouTube platform – and to its predations.

Several terms have already been introduced which require further elaboration, as they form the book's conceptual categories. Before turning to these, it might be helpful to pause on 'Shakespeare'. As a signifier, Shakespeare is heterogeneous and is understood throughout this study as an increasingly unbounded category, one extending beyond the corpus of the texts or the work to encompass a range of media forms and cultural stratifications (high, mass, popular). My focus on Shakespeare contributes to established notions of Shakespeare's exemplarity, which have all too often depended on a separation of Shakespearean texts from their early modern peers.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as a user-curated archive, YouTube affirms Shakespeare's prominence and reminds us that, as

nurtured through popular culture, academic research and teaching, the Bard's profile is largely inescapable.

The circulation of Shakespeare across mass media has been interestingly theorized as 'post-hermeneutic'. While this categorization is helpful, on some levels it also has certain limitations. Namely, reworkings of the Bard are interpreted as a kind of schlock or regarded as reflecting the 'eternal sameness' of the culture industry and the depthless culture of postmodernity.<sup>14</sup> Other commentators have formulated Shakespeare's mass media presence in terms of popular culture.<sup>15</sup> In both instances, however, the relation between, on the one hand, Shakespeare as an aggregate of texts by a historical figure, and, on the other, Shakespeare as an aggregate of adaptations, citations, allusions, uses, transpositions, appropriations, revisions – or any of the available metaphors to describe Shakespeare's 'appropriability' – can be productively conceptualized as mutable and dialogic.<sup>16</sup> In negotiating these interrelated Shakespeares, it is as important to 'challenge the idea that Shakespeare must always already be co-opted by the dominant culture' as it is to 'caution against the easy assumption that Shakespeare can set us free'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the issue of Shakespeare's appropriability poses questions of Shakespeare 'proper', challenging the presumed stability of the Shakespearean text that in turn functions as the measure for those subsequent iterations. As Margaret Kidnie observes of contemporary Shakespeare performance and adaptations, 'the site of adaptation keeps getting entangled in the work's ongoing development'.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, any conclusive comprehension of the texts is 'indefinitely postponed by each act of interpretation'.<sup>19</sup> This is the logic of haunting in which the text returns, often in surprising ways and in ways we cannot yet conceive.<sup>20</sup> YouTube Shakespeare videos are adaptations, in the etymology of that word as in 'to fit'.<sup>21</sup> In making and then uploading their productions, YouTubers accommodate Shakespeare to YouTubers and to its culture. At stake are various forms of recontextualization or transposition; videos involve performance and citation too.

The ‘Shakespeare’ within YouTube Shakespeare is an open, dynamic process, in which the authority of the Shakespearean work is simultaneously invoked and constructed, renewed and dispersed.

To consider YouTube Shakespeare is also to address the vocabularies of media studies. ‘Affordances’ has a specific resonance within the field, denoting the material, physical attributes of a given object and the actions that those attributes facilitate: ‘the affordances of any given object make certain actions possible, exclude others and structure the interaction between actor and object’.<sup>22</sup> To address YouTube’s affordances is to consider how the design of the interface facilitates certain uses (easy uploading, viewing, commenting, connecting through channel subscriptions), shapes user experience (the click through to more videos and the attention economy of the site) and also imposes certain limits on use (unlike a personalized web page, for instance, each YouTube channel has a uniform look). We can look not only at affordance, but affordability. For YouTube entails questions about access to technology, the leisure time involved in video production, as well as the concern that media corporations will exploit the labour of tubers.<sup>23</sup>

Interpreting YouTube’s affordances raises the question of medium specificity – a useful concept for alerting us to the platform’s formal properties, but one that can also imply a degree of medium-essentialism, where a set of attributes come to denote certain effects (it is like *this*, so it must result in *that*).<sup>24</sup> YouTube is a medium because, like other forms of communication, it mediates older media (television, film). Moreover, in the defining double logic of the process known as remediation, held by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin to be characteristic of all media, the online viewing platform simultaneously erases and also proliferates or ‘hybridizes’ earlier forms and practices into something novel or unprecedented.<sup>25</sup> For Shakespeare, this means that YouTube does not so much replace earlier media such as film and theatre, as sustain them in new guises. In this respect, as much as YouTube

Shakespeare suggests contemporaneity, a Shakespeare of and for now, it also has the potential to foster historical consciousness via its repository of Shakespearean materials. As the concept of remediation reminds us, a medium always has a history – it cannot ‘do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces’.<sup>26</sup> As such, if we insist too strongly on medium specificity, we risk overlooking the extent to which YouTube, like any other media, ‘does not pre-exist its mediation’ but ‘is itself constructed – co-ordinated, organized and integrated – in mediation, in mass movement’, and through the medium of the computer (or tablet or smart phone).<sup>27</sup> After all, YouTube is contiguous with (new) media and other Web 2.0 technologies such as Twitter, Facebook and Flickr. Therefore, this book deploys the terms ‘platform’ and ‘platform-specificity’ in order to convey the distinctive features of YouTube’s interface.<sup>28</sup>

Even as one recognizes the particular attributes of the YouTube platform, it is nonetheless important to address the focus this book grants to YouTube, as well as to reflect on the terms of the subtitle, ‘New Media Forms of the Bard’. In other words, why YouTube and why new media? YouTube emerged in 2006, so it already has a history and in that sense is not new. Yet, as with other Web 2.0 technologies, ‘a rhetoric of newness’ is still associated with it.<sup>29</sup> YouTube is new media in that it instantiates several changes in media (from production and distribution to use and storage) and contains interrelated attributes, such as the hyperlinked digital object, mass connectivity and social networking, each of which is enabled by a ‘technicist logic of computation’.<sup>30</sup> In many ways, these attributes define our contemporary media use and interactions. In the more exuberant accounts of networked culture as posited by theories of media convergence and spreadability, new media involves possibilities for the media consumer to become an active participant and to intervene in the flow of mass media.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, it is worth considering what media theorist Henry Jenkins

describes as convergence culture. This describes a set of intersections between old and new media and, most importantly for Jenkins, between 'the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer'.<sup>32</sup> Yet, in this paradigm, there is no Samson and Goliath battle between a disenfranchised media user or impassive spectator and established big media players. Rather, the media consumer is an active participant who seeks out new content, repurposes old and forges new connections with other media users. 'Convergence occurs within the brains of individual users and through their social interactions with others'.<sup>33</sup> For Michael Wesch, among the earliest critics to analyse YouTube and explore what he calls its anthropology, the platform transforms the humble webcam or mobile camera: 'anyone with a webcam now has a stronger voice and presence'.<sup>34</sup> YouTube becomes an empowering technology for democratic expression.

There has been much debate within media studies regarding the conceptual usefulness and limitations of the collective designation 'new media'. It has been critiqued for imposing linearity on media history, with 'old' media giving way to the 'new' in a narrative of 'technological progressivism'.<sup>35</sup> It can imply that as users, our interaction and entanglement with technologies is a completely new phenomenon, thus eliding the extent to which we, as humans, were always already technological. Or, as Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska argue, this profound sense of evolutionary development through media might also suggest that, today, human life itself 'becomes' through media.<sup>36</sup> As a conceptual category, I would argue that *new* media already presupposes a relation to, rather than the erasure of, the past and earlier media, while at the same time recognizing that there is something novel about our contemporary media arrangements. In reading YouTube Shakespeare through the theory of remediation, this book identifies a continuum between past and present media. As such, it argues that YouTube is not after Shakespeare film or theatre, but coincides with these media and, through its distribution function, may even sustain or disperse them. The novelty of

these current arrangements resides in what Mark Hansen calls the advance of 'many-to-many connectivity'. '[W]hat is mediated by Web 2.0', he explains, 'is less the content that users upload than the sheer connectivity, the simple capacity to reach myriad like-minded users.'<sup>37</sup>

In relation to Shakespeare, Hansen's formulation may seem familiar, recalling Terence Hawkes' argument, made over a decade ago, that citations and quotations of Shakespeare no longer possess any intrinsic value themselves, but have instead become ciphers: 'Shakespeare doesn't mean: *we* mean *by* Shakespeare.'<sup>38</sup> In relation to YouTube, Hansen's argument about the newness of new media, namely, that 'the transmission of media ... itself mediates the situation of the user in the regime of networked computation', suggests that a YouTube video (or the post on Facebook) is a cipher for connectivity and networking, for rendering a digital presence, because to be absent from this terrain is tantamount to entropy.<sup>39</sup> In our current media culture, to be online is to be alive. At the same time, however, if we interpret life and mediation as co-constitutive, to echo Kember and Zylinska, we can begin to appreciate the various pleasures – of connectivity, browsing, expression and social networking – that new media signals.<sup>40</sup>

Another implication of this argument, however, is that mediation becomes an end in itself. Here, the YouTube Shakespeare video becomes merely the vehicle enabling connectivity, in which citations appear as if on a continuous loop and where the centrifugal force of the Shakespearean text cannot be located. Again, for Shakespeare studies, these are familiar patterns, in light of the aforementioned theories regarding 'post-hermeneutic' Shakespeare. Offering us more and more videos, YouTube Shakespeare suggests such loop effects, a potential sameness within plenitude. Yet, those vehicles for connectivity nonetheless have a ground: responses to Shakespeare on YouTube variously suggest an intervention in or contribution to meaning, perhaps as an attempt either to stave off or to compensate for the homogenizing effects of mass culture.

A wider implication in the term new media is a sense of loss. Embodied communication and personalized expression give way to a 'standardized technicity'.<sup>41</sup> The computer algorithm replaces our capacity for decision-making, though as users we also contribute to the efficiency of the algorithm by feeding such metadata as titles and tags into it, thus augmenting its authority.<sup>42</sup> As Hansen observes, 'to the extent that each new medium operates by exteriorizing some function of human cognition and memory, it involves both gain and loss'.<sup>43</sup> That he makes this point in relation to Plato's discussion of the medium of writing as a *pharmakon* ('at once the poison and the antidote, a threat to memory and its extension') might remind us of the long history of anxieties about technologies of representation and the suturing of human agency with machines, anxieties that have often been played out in the popular press and popular culture.<sup>44</sup> For the so-called 'Generation M' or 'Gen V' (as YouTube's marketers prefer), the use of media has arguably become so habitual that there is very little consciousness about how individual agency is being outsourced to technologies.<sup>45</sup> YouTube instances the predations associated with new media more generally, from mediated expression and the production of identity as simulacrum, to the externalization of personal and cultural memory onto an online platform and into a YouTube playlist. To consider YouTube Shakespeare as new media is to bring such effects into critical focus and to partake in what has been called a 'recombinant new media literacy'. This is vital because such literacy 'actively pays attention to how our sense of subjectivity, individually and collectively, changes through our (inter)relationship with technology'.<sup>46</sup>

In part, then, the focus of this book on YouTube permits a case study of the challenges and affordances of new media as they pertain to Shakespeare's contemporary reception. Moreover, because of YouTube's cultural visibility, it marks the default place from which to initiate an investigation into Shakespeare online video. YouTube is the dominant video-sharing site within the contemporary mediascape. More

precisely, and despite YouTube's global pretensions, it is a predominantly Western mediascape.<sup>47</sup> Since it has created a horizon of expectation regarding how a video-sharing platform should look and operate, YouTube attains a high visibility over comparable sites.<sup>48</sup> The site has become the 'go to' space for video-sharing and is integral to the transfer of content from one platform to another.<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, my focus on a particular platform runs counter to the transmedia nature of contemporary online participation and expression, since users navigate and connect across a range of platforms. Yet, for both pragmatic reasons and because of YouTube's prominence, the book focuses its object of analysis on YouTube Shakespeare rather than range across a vast media terrain.

The emphasis on YouTube is also about recognizing that for Shakespeare studies this platform carries especially attractive properties. One of these has already been mentioned: YouTube's function as an accidental archive. The archive is accidental because there is no centrally controlled curatorship, but rather a system of user-generated titles and tags. Like other Shakespeareans, my initial interest and first use of YouTube occurred in a teaching context, as I sought out instructive clips to incorporate into presentations. My earliest searches involved using YouTube as archive. I assumed, unconsciously, that YouTube was the natural place to go to in order to seek out a performance or film clip. To use the site in this way is to avail of the convenience of the YouTube video as hyperlinked digital object, which can be easily embedded into PowerPoint, or shared via a virtual learning platform. It also involves participating in the culture of spreadable media. As I elaborate in Chapter 5, YouTube signals intriguing opportunities both for teaching and learning, enabling students to deepen their knowledge about the multi-directional nature of Shakespeare. By extending their use of YouTube beyond the illustrative clip for class, scholars can also benefit from the archive. At the same time, however, we must confront the challenges posed by inconsistent collation and annotation, as well as more complex, ethical questions regarding our use of the labour that enables the content in the first instance.<sup>50</sup>

## Broadcast yourBard: YouTube's dual culture

YouTube as archive, YouTube as spreadable or embeddable Shakespeare, YouTube as learning resource: these are just some of the reasons why YouTube Shakespeare should matter to anyone interested in Shakespeare's reception and why a critical analysis of the subject is important. YouTube Shakespeare is of further value to the field because as a platform for user-generated content, it provides access to vernacular productions. YouTube's tag line invitation to 'Broadcast Yourself' announces the site's dependence on users not to only share but also to create content. It instances the language and logic of participatory culture, in which individuals enter media production that was typically – though not universally – the preserve of commercial producers. YouTube allows everyone to perform their own 'bardic function', as John Hartley puts it, here invoking the Celtic bard as a singular teller of stories in order to capture the turn towards open, democratic and diffuse media production associated with Web 2.0.<sup>51</sup> YouTube offers new media forms of the Bard and a range of participative responses – the user as creator-viewer, who not only browses through content but also generates and comments upon it. Put another way, if other media presume minimum participation, new media constitute additional layers of intervention.<sup>52</sup> As such, YouTube has patron-like qualities, which provide both the technology for the distribution of vernacular content, as well as a social space, which encourages people towards online expression.<sup>53</sup>

For Shakespeare studies, the logic of participation and vernacular creativity means access to a range of responses to the texts, thus allowing us to build on existing knowledge about the rich history of amateur Shakespeare performance.<sup>54</sup> Participation through YouTube is similar to pop culture citations and uses of Shakespeare, affording forms of response outside of institutions like universities and theatres that shape

what Shakespeare means in culture more generally.<sup>55</sup> The culture of YouTube and Web 2.0 also signals new iterations of the Bard, however, that bring their own aesthetics – and indeed politics – to the texts. These genres suggest a bricolage of texts, of which Shakespeare might be only one referent among many. Of course, this is not an entirely new approach to the plays or their contexts: Shakespeare and early modern dramatists have long been viewed as bricoleurs who put together ‘things already produced (even used) and circulating in culture’, thus lending their plays a rich intertextuality.<sup>56</sup> If we read across genres and historically, the analogy can be pressed a little further: just as Renaissance dramatists, YouTubers also engage in a creative imitation of their predecessors and peers.

In interpreting YouTube as a patron, or a catalytic platform that enables users to upload and share content, it is crucial that we acknowledge the commercial and corporate imperatives that shape the site’s structures and uses. YouTube is ‘both industry and user-driven’.<sup>57</sup> As much as YouTube presents itself as a community-based network that encourages self-expression, the site’s function as a user-generated technology is enabled by its political economy (as evidenced by its dependence on advertising, promotion of industry content and commercial partnerships).<sup>58</sup> Thus, even though YouTube Shakespeare affords insight into what a version of Shakespeare that is by and for the people might look like, the intersection of user-generated content with commercially produced content means that such popular iterations are already inscribed by the market, by the flow of capital.<sup>59</sup> The coincidence of industry and vernacular content entails more complex relations too. For instance, it can often be the case that commercially produced content (as in the Shakespeare film) is subject to user appropriation (as in the fan-made trailer). In this case, the fan paratext has its own internal formal properties and its own effects that may involve a distancing from the industry text. Yet, in ways similar to the sharing of a movie trailer via YouTube, the fan-produced videos become indirect, free promos for the film,

potentially enhancing its cultural capital and creating new audiences. While these arrangements are not especially new – Shakespeare has long been absorbed into mass media and has proved a pliable commodity within globalization – the coincidence of YouTube’s corporate and participatory logic suggests that we regard vernacular Shakespeare production as an affordance of mass media and even inseparable from its operations. YouTube may be a patron of a do-it-yourself Shakespeare. However, the trade-off is an implicit acquiescence to YouTube branding and to the broader commodification of individual expression. This is the flip side of participatory culture, which tends to be elided by convergence theory.<sup>60</sup>

The intersection of disparate content is just one way in which YouTube culture impacts on Shakespeare’s meaning and poses challenges to the scholarly analysis of the texts. Indeed, for some critics the Internet anxiously represents the wisdom of crowds, which undermines both professionalization and specialisms.<sup>61</sup> When combined with the dilutive properties of YouTube clip culture, such as the tendency towards synecdoche, ‘highlighting’ and distracted viewing, Shakespeare’s transposition into a visual medium like YouTube can be easily framed as a narrative of loss, which reflects broader debates about the relation of digital to print culture.<sup>62</sup> At stake here are issues about the hyper-attention or the attention deficit associated with the Internet. The live, embodied performance, Shakespearean language and a sense too of reading a play in full are just some of the things that might be lost via YouTube Shakespeare. Where a video involves the diminution of language, or its effacement altogether, YouTube may be part of and even accelerate what Douglas Lanier calls ‘post-textual Shakespeare’. This phenomenon is already familiar to us on account of Shakespeare films from the 1990s and has more recently been amplified by the mediatization of our culture, in which the ‘horizon of recognition’ for Shakespeare is decidedly visual: more images, fewer words, words, words.<sup>63</sup> We might well question the claim that Shakespeare’s post-textual presences constitute a ‘paradigm shift’ – after all,

Shakespeare in performance has never been simply about the words. That said, visual, cinematic and other treatments of Shakespeare ‘without words’ prompt reflection (Is it really Shakespeare?) and encourage us to question our cultural and disciplinary investments in an ‘essential’ or ‘authentic’ (textual) Shakespeare.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted too that YouTube is not entirely post-textual. While analyses of user behaviour of the interface have suggested that text goes unnoticed, videos frequently incorporate text – in Chapter 4, I examine the interplay of text and image in those videos that respond to the *Sonnets*. YouTube videos also elicit textual commentary through viewer posts, thus realizing a cacophony of feedback – positive, critical, sometimes hateful – a ‘mass hermeneutics’.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, as Christy Desmet has persuasively suggested, YouTube Shakespeare productions enact focused performance, spotlighting specific aspects of the text in a process that is quite often ‘thoroughly rhetorical, a matter of textual give-and-take rather than a wholesale usurpation of the Bard’s words and authority’.<sup>66</sup>

This book argues that YouTube Shakespeare videos are cultural texts in themselves. Moreover, if we leave aside any sense that they are substitutions for the act of reading a play and recognize the pleasures of viewing a YouTube video *and also* of reading Shakespeare, or seeing a play in performance, we can begin to recognize them as forms of creativity and as Shakespeare interpretation, even criticism. It is a commonplace to observe that the value of Shakespeare’s latest media form resides in its contribution to the text’s field of meaning. In a teaching context, the value of Shakespeare adaptations becomes entwined with their capacity to enable a return to the text itself.<sup>67</sup> To which one might reply, why not simply begin with the text? As two critics on Shakespeare and film claim, ‘to teach Shakespeare today, we must teach today’s Shakespeare – as refigured through the distorting lens of the movie camera’.<sup>68</sup> Within this claim for a pedagogy focused on contemporary reimaginings of Shakespeare is a slightly defeatist logic. The film is envisaged as ‘distorting’

– presumably a recognition of transposing the play to that medium – when it might be more usefully considered as quite simply different, neither the thing itself nor pretending to be such, but a medium that generates interesting comparisons with Shakespearean media (drama and verse) and genres (comedy, tragedy, history), while at the same time unsettling their perceived stability. ‘When Shakespeare is reinvented in other media,’ as Anna Maria Cimitile and Katherine Rowe remind us, ‘it meets other complex textualities and forms. The encounter produces what we should learn to treat no longer as an “adapted” Shakespeare but Shakespeare in/as the present–past of new media.’<sup>69</sup> YouTube Shakespeare involves the kind of conjuncture of present and past, old and new media, envisaged here. However, recognizing the aesthetics of the YouTube video may require a conceptual readjustment, so that we accord less primacy to language as an expressive idiom and think instead of a competitive dynamic between different media and registers (text, image, word, sound).<sup>70</sup> Quite simply, YouTube Shakespeare is Shakespeare through different media.

## YouTube Shakespeare and presentism

A search on YouTube reveals Shakespeare as a network of connections between disparate digital objects. Even as these items spread to other media, they are nonetheless identifiable as YouTube videos. In this regard, YouTube Shakespeare invites interpretation as an aggregate of Shakespeare ‘in/as the present–past’, the platform enabling us to pursue the rhizomatic nature of contemporary iterations of Shakespeare.<sup>71</sup> While attending to the fragmentary nature of online Shakespeare, this book is also concerned with examining the genres and forms within the broad categories of the ‘YouTube video’, or ‘YouTube Shakespeare’. Consequently, my purpose is to consider the mutations of Shakespeare’s cultural capital

as constructed via YouTube and I aim to explore the ways in which individual iterations are possibly part of more discernible trends. Accordingly, the arguments in this book operate in tandem with the methodological premise of critical presentism as it has evolved in Shakespeare studies.

Presentism begins with the recognition that the time of the text is out of joint with the present of the critic.<sup>72</sup> As a mode of critical inquiry, explains Terence Hawkes, it ‘deliberately begins with the material present and allows that to set its interrogative agenda’, although, as he concedes, ‘perhaps this simply makes overt what covertly happened anyway’.<sup>73</sup> There are correspondences between this theory and the praxis of tubers, who often quite knowingly and deliberately style Shakespeare after the fashions of their own time and for whom the point of access into the Shakespearean text is decidedly presentist. In valuing the site of reception and interpretation over the context of the writing itself, presentism reads Shakespeare as spectral, the thing that ‘never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified form of presence’.<sup>74</sup> As such, it ‘relinquishes the fantasy of recovering the text’s previous historical reality’, Ewan Fernie argues, ‘in favour of embracing its true historicity as a changing being in time’.<sup>75</sup> If historicist criticism appears to erase the location of the critic and of the interpretative act, only for these to emerge through the proxy of the author, then critical presentism boldly engages the ‘now’ of our readings.<sup>76</sup> In fact, there is an attractive logic to the presentist claim that the present matters more than history. There is a tremendous risk, too, however, since this perspective might be said to represent something of an erosion of our ethical responsibilities to the past, especially in terms of past traumas. For all that, presentism need not be antithetical to history; it is concerned, explicitly so, with pursuing the relationship between the historical text and the present (a concern it partly inherits from cultural materialism). Presentists are ‘aware of historical difference but aware as well of the approachable but real epistemological barrier between ourselves and the past’.<sup>77</sup> Crucially,

presentism is also concerned with the *presence* of the critic in making Shakespeare present. As Fernie puts it, foregrounding ‘the presence of the text in the present ... involves a recognition of being in the presence of the text: *of being required to respond, to being responsible*’.<sup>78</sup>

In this formulation, we have moved from presentism as an unapologetic reading of Shakespeare as our contemporary – to evoke that formative presentist interpretation by Jan Kott – towards a sense of the aesthetic and of the text’s irreducibility to history.<sup>79</sup> Presentism’s interest in the affectivity of the text, and thus the efficacy of art, runs contrary to established understandings about the commodification of art, or the aestheticization of commodities under postmodernism and within mass culture. To the extent that postmodernism defines the present moment, associated with the loss of an aura, presentism seems to suggest a partial rediscovery. Consider, for instance, Fernie’s insistence that ‘It is time ... to recover the creativity and agency that blaze in the Shakespearean text as the promise of human possibility.’<sup>80</sup> For his part, Cary DiPietro wonders if presentism offers the ‘potential to liberate the aesthetic in mass culture society as a potential site of critical or counter-cultural Utopian desire’.<sup>81</sup> If presentist criticism risks overplaying Shakespeare’s singularity, its interpretative emphasis on the present and the call for ‘a reinvestment in the aesthetic’ provides for a reading of YouTube Shakespeare as a site of productive tension between the homogenizing effects of mass culture and new forms of individual vernacular expression.<sup>82</sup> By reading presently, we can examine YouTube productions not only as enactments of Shakespeare’s mediation through the cultural present, but as indices of how Shakespeare’s alterity is negotiated.

## YouTube Shakespeare and the ethics of selection

In selecting Shakespeare videos from across YouTube, this book involves the production of a subject category, 'YouTube Shakespeare'. However, this move is not intended to place online interpretations into a single, homogeneous category. Instead, I hope to comment on the interrelated processes of search and selection, and the patterns that might become noticeable to an individual user viewing from any one location. Selection invariably entails subjective choices and while the book does undertake sampling of videos and draws on the findings of data mining undertaken by social science researchers, its approach reflects a humanities research perspective. To those ends, Chapter 1 elaborates on the relation between serendipitous search, the YouTube algorithm and IP addressee(s). Furthermore, a set of external criteria for inclusion has not been imposed on videos, even though I have sought to represent different YouTube genres, and also Shakespeare texts and genres. In this regard, the book is a product of its object of analysis, since all of the videos on YouTube are, in theory at least, of equal value. Videos with view counts into the tens of thousands are discussed alongside those that have fewer than ten. The value of a YouTube Shakespeare video cannot be determined by a pre-set of preferences. That said, evaluations of Shakespeare adaptations tend to work from traditional 'preconceptions about "what Shakespeare intended"', especially since culturally ingrained notions of the singular literary genius prove recurrent.<sup>83</sup> If YouTube Shakespeare videos and comments quite frequently valorize the author, they also invite other determinants of value that extend beyond Shakespeare, such as the accomplishment of a given mashup, the currency of the movie star who is the subject of a fan trailer, the interchange between visual and textual registers that a video achieves. Once again, the aesthetic evaluations implied here carry their own

subjective dimensions. Indeed, the videos that feature in this book are a consequence of the pleasures of browsing referred to earlier and each of them reflects the challenges of identifying patterns amidst YouTube's unbounded content.

As well as raising methodological issues, it is important that this work should focus on the ethics behind the selection of specific vernacular productions. In uploading a video, creators and/or users enter into an agreement with YouTube to publish that content.<sup>84</sup> The result is that material is immediately placed in the public domain. However, the Internet occasions complex negotiations between public and private spaces, negotiations that pose ethical dilemmas for research.<sup>85</sup> Tubers may make certain assumptions regarding the relative privacy of their video. For instance, the simple reality of a video being openly available on YouTube may belie more discrete intentions, with videos intended for a finite community, or regarded as circulating among 'videos of affiliation'.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, YouTube subscribers tend to use online aliases, but nonetheless an individual may be identifiable in a video. There are issues, too, where content is produced by, or features, minors. Furthermore, YouTube is an ephemeral archive: videos can be removed from the site, either for infringing copyright or simply because a creator elects to delete a video from their account. This reminds one that YouTubers may not necessarily be interested in preserving their work, or at least in doing so publicly. Equally, one needs to be conscious that the academic study of videos enacts a form of institutionalization, as materials from vernacular culture are drawn into the orbit of Shakespeare studies and into an academic discourse that online creation and viewing may, in part, be about avoiding in the first place. This is problematic, since one of the potential attractions of YouTube Shakespeare for its creators and users is that the site offers an alternative entry point into Shakespeare apart from academic discourse.

These are complex issues to which one response is to anonymize videos altogether (removing titles, usernames and

even video URLs).<sup>87</sup> However, omitting the provenance of one's object of study is antithetical to academic scholarship and its protocols of bibliographic citation. It also deprives tubers of credit for their work. The omission of video metadata also presents obstacles for future research. One of the key advantages of YouTube is that it uses a system of embedded codes – the capacity to share these is not simply convenient, but offers intriguing possibilities for the kinds of scholarship we undertake. With these factors in mind, it has been decided to provide metadata for videos throughout. Importantly, permission has been sought from content uploaders to discuss their videos as part of an academic study.<sup>88</sup>

The chapters that follow elaborate on the objectives of this study to examine the genres of YouTube Shakespeare and to assess what implications the platform has for Shakespeare's meanings. Chapter 1 examines the YouTube interface, taking the reader through a phenomenological overview of a single search page for *As You Like It* to consider specificities of use and the attention economy of the information age, interrelations between commercially produced and vernacular content, as well as the potential motivations behind the bardic function. The snapshot of search results discloses key genres of YouTube Shakespeare such as the fan trailer, the performance and the iconic speech. It also urges us to recognize YouTube as a site of contradictions and paradoxes, especially in terms of the serendipity of search versus the algorithmic shaping of results, a tension that illustrates the extent to which the 'technical infrastructure of media is no longer homologous with its surface appearance'.<sup>89</sup> The implications of this discrepancy between interface and machine are pursued with reference to YouTube's global pretensions and the role of regionalized search and computer IP addresses, which limit YouTube's capacity to provide us with a transnational Shakespeare.

Focusing on *Hamlet*, Chapter 2 continues the book's interest in YouTube as the site for new media genres of Shakespeare. 'To be or not to be' is examined as an exemplary text of YouTube's self-generated Shakespeares, where it is frequently

remediated as the vlog or video diary. I trace the recycling of the play's signature speech as fascinating spaces where tubers negotiate originality, derivation and the consequences of their own mediation (as with the succession of *Hamlet* videos, they seem to ask 'Are we humans also imitations?'). Questions of subjectivity and agency are further pursued through a detailed discussion of Ophelia, whose image floats among the currents of YouTube, both as motif and as metaphor in videos. As with the soliloquy, Ophelia's iconicity is recycled. However, unlike the 'To be or not to be' videos, it is predominantly young women that respond to Ophelia, in ways that suggest a negotiation of inherited constructions of gender identity, as well as a frustration with representations of women in dominant culture. The chapter also considers the issue of copyright as it emerges through the case of disputed ownership over an Ophelia film.

If, as I have been suggesting, YouTube Shakespeare offers a certain vitality to our field – even in relation to such established motifs as Hamlet and Ophelia – then Shakespeare studies has in turn a critical role to play in analysing this site of Shakespeare reception. We need to scrutinize an all too easy correlation between the volume of videos available and a meaningful heterogeneity and diversity. Chapters 3 and 4 take up this challenge with reference to race and sexuality respectively. How race is iterated within YouTube Shakespeare and to what extent racial diversity flows out of online participatory culture are among the guiding questions of Chapter 3. Drawing upon Lisa Nakamura's work about racialized aesthetics online and self-representations as raced, as well as debates regarding colour-blind casting, the chapter explores how race emerges in Shakespeare performance on YouTube. I consider the video performances by Marcus Sykes entitled *Shakespeare in the Ghetto*, attending to viewer posts as an important dimension of the reception context – the mass hermeneutics referred to earlier – that afford insight into how a performer's race emerges as semiotically (ir)relevant and, more problematically, disclose the nexus of aliases,

viewer-as-critic and racism-as-performance that mark online dialogue. The limits as well as the possibilities of YouTube's online community emerge here. The chapter turns to blackface and other racialized signifiers as deployed in responses to *Othello* (a text never far from the politics of racialized representations). Here, as in the uses of *Romeo and Juliet* that I analyse, Shakespeare emerges as a metalanguage of race in contemporary iterations, yet one that does not necessarily prove adequate for contemporary racial politics. As users and viewers of YouTube Shakespeare, I argue, we have a responsibility to critically engage race and its challenging and unpredictable consequences.

Chapter 4 reaffirms the need for a critical alertness, this time in relation to the *Sonnets*. This chapter shows how the medium of the sonnet is being adapted to YouTube's visual culture, with kinetic typography suggesting some dynamic ways of thinking about textuality that have pedagogical appeal. It is also concerned with examining how the sonnets addressed to the young man are reconfigured on YouTube: three sets of samples are examined and these cases are discussed in terms of a queer erasure or the effacement of the male object of address. Old interpretative blind spots about Shakespeare texts can re-emerge through new platforms. In noting a potential disconnect between vernacular Shakespeare productions and Shakespearean criticism, I argue that the latter has a role to play in promoting more progressive forms of online video creation on YouTube and in interpreting such activities as contributions to the hermeneutics of the *Sonnets*.

The final chapter discusses YouTube and its Shakespeare video as a learning resource, a concern throughout the book. Teachers in the field are already encouraging new forms of response and engagement with Shakespeare through the platform – as evidenced by the wealth of videos associated with a classroom assignment – or using its archive. Mapping YouTube Shakespeare onto wider issues about the affordances and limitations of e-learning, the chapter argues that the platform presents important opportunities for students,

from fostering independent learning and staking a claim to the kind of Shakespeare that emerges in their classroom to the development of digital literacy. To this end, the chapter includes detailed suggestions for assignments using YouTube. There are opportunities for teachers and researchers too. For Shakespeare studies to realize these opportunities will require not only an active engagement with the platform, but a willingness to move beyond text-based pedagogy.

YouTube Shakespeare does not just mark an efficient and convenient distribution of Shakespearean texts. It is not simply the archive we increasingly go to, or where the continuum of past–present Shakespeare unfolds. Nor is it a seemingly endless succession of vernacular-generated performance, response and interpretation. It is all of these things. Interpreting YouTube Shakespeare as amorphous and mutable, this book seeks to assess its media effects, its hermeneutics and its ideological limits. To enter YouTube Shakespeare is to encounter the circular logic of contemporary Shakespeare, where the dispersal of the texts across media, and the loss of the aura associated with the Bard, ultimately feeds into and propels the extraordinarily accommodating phenomenon we call Shakespeare. Within these loop effects and the move from one video to another, we may experience Shakespeare as repetition, and at the same time encounter innovative forms of media creation, which speak to Shakespeare's present vitality.

# 1

## Searchable Shakespeares: Attention, Genres and Value on YouTube

*We must take database watching seriously, not just  
dismiss it as ‘consuming video clips’.*

GEERT LOVINK<sup>1</sup>

*What the search engine reveals through its list of  
returns increasingly becomes equivalent to what we can  
know.*

KEN HILLIS, MICHAEL PETIT AND KYLIE JARRETT<sup>2</sup>

*After watching all these videos, I now want to read  
Shakespeare ... Any suggestions?*

POST ON THE GEEKY BLONDE’S TWELFTH NIGHT<sup>3</sup>

YouTube presents us with the exciting prospect of Shakespeare in multiples. There are thousands of videos, making up thousands upon thousands of hours of Shakespeare text, image and sound. The copiousness of content on YouTube is a function of the site’s interrelated dimensions as distribution

channel, social network and accidental archive. These create the mix of commercial and non-commercial media, which as users of YouTube we have become so accustomed to. As a video enters YouTube's databank, it is not subject to a prior set of aesthetic determinants. Nor does YouTube assume any editorial oversight in relation to content uploaded to the site, apart from the requirement that users agree to its terms and conditions.<sup>4</sup> As digital objects, all videos are equal: this is the YouTube logic of cultural relativism. Value is determined by user search and crucially by the algorithm, which maps and refines use patterns to arrive at the most relevant search results. Within the culture of video-share, then, more traditional determinants of value based on distinctions between high and popular culture come under pressure. The logic of cultural relativism also applies to YouTube's search function, at least on a superficial level. In searching for any item, we simply input or paste text into the blank white rectangular dialogue box at the top of the screen and then sift through the results that are returned. However, coupled with an automatic and unreflective use of the site as an archive, the ubiquity of the search function potentially blinds us to the computerized search working behind the interface and to the production of knowledge that is occurring.

As noted in the second epigraph, search assumes an epistemological standing, a development that has significant implications.<sup>5</sup> Value becomes a matter of what attention the user pays to the information or knowledge he/ she is presented with. In the information overload of the Internet, attention is the new economy. We can decide to direct our attention in certain ways – towards the video thumbnail that catches our eye as we scan across the interface. However, the interface not only places demands on our attention, it also shapes what we notice. While YouTube is serendipitous – part of the pleasure of the site comes from the element of surprise derived from happening upon a video through surfing – it is also a controlled-search experience, where relevance is determined algorithmically and where search preferences are increasingly

personalized (as evidenced by the ‘Recommended for you’ feature).<sup>6</sup>

In moving from a sense of the plenitude within YouTube Shakespeare towards terms like relevance and determinism, the objective of these opening remarks is not to posit a version of the YouTube algorithm as a sinister form of artificial intelligence (the ‘Halgorithm’, if you will). After all, YouTube’s content comes from its users who, in addition to uploading videos, provide YouTube’s information management system with semantic units (video title, description, tags, comments and so on), which it then processes algorithmically.<sup>7</sup> Rather, my purpose is to open up a set of questions and contradictions about YouTube, which have a bearing on the Shakespeares we find there, the forms they take and their different locations. When we look closely at YouTube, it presents a set of oppositions, which blend into continuums. These include: copiousness and limitation; chaos and control; humans and machines (or users and the algorithm); the serendipity of video surfing and algorithmic sorting; professional and amateur; consumer and producer; traditional and new media; high and popular expressive forms; global and local.

By exploring these contradictions, this chapter aims to deepen our understanding about the kinds of Shakespeare that YouTube’s culture of video-share occasions. Why do YouTubers engage with Shakespeare and how do we determine what constitutes participation? To what extent does the choice of content within YouTube Shakespeare realize a transnational Shakespeare? Close attention is paid here (and developed over subsequent chapters) to the key genres through which responses to Shakespeare occur. Some genres such as the meme are characteristic of YouTube and Internet culture. Others such as ‘vids’ or fan-made music videos, are associated with earlier forms of amateur culture, but are afforded greater visibility on YouTube. Yet more genres come to the platform via Shakespeare’s citational status, as in the example of the iconic speech.

This chapter inevitably prioritizes some videos over others in discussing these genres and, as with any act of selection, the

analysis carries its own value judgements. Recent critical work on Shakespeare adaptations and popular culture provides a useful interpretative framework for approaching the range of Shakespeare content on YouTube. I am thinking here of the move from an evaluative model based on faithfulness to the Shakespearean urtext towards an increasing recognition that those texts that variously cite, adapt, remake or repurpose Shakespeare are themselves cultural objects, with their own set of generic protocols.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the orientation is Shakespeare-eccentric rather than Shakespeare-centric. This formulation provides for a productive dialectic between those texts that seem to take us away from Shakespeare and those that draw us back towards an enigmatic Shakespearean ‘centre’.<sup>9</sup> What follows is the consequence of ranging across the unwieldy terrain of YouTube Shakespeare. The chapter seeks to complement the eccentricities and distractions of that terrain with a desire to uncover patterns of Shakespeare’s meaning in that setting.

## ‘Load more suggestions’: Search as You/Tube like it

YouTube culture brings its own specificities of use, engagement and response to Shakespeare. In pursuing these specificities, I want to take an example of a search category and consider the results of a single search page. By attending closely to a search page, we can begin to consider the key terms or vocabularies of YouTube culture (such as tubing, user-generated content, user-circulated content, watch-page) and to reflect critically on the features and protocols of the browser, its ‘platform-specificity’ and their implications.<sup>10</sup> A search performed on ‘Shakespeare, “As You Like It”’ (with the search filter set on Relevance, geographic location to Worldwide, and language as English) returns ‘About 10,200 results’.<sup>11</sup> As viewed on a desktop computer, the search page displays 20 results per page and the

search is indicative of YouTube's mixed content. Of the first 20 videos, 17 come from traditional media (10 from theatre, 6 from film and television, 1 from music), reflecting YouTube's status as a platform where existing media are re-presented or remediated.<sup>12</sup> The videos include trailers and excerpts from an RSC production currently in the repertory; a clip from a reading of 'All the World's a Stage' for a BBC documentary; the BBC *Animated Tales* series; the full *As You Like It* (1936), starring Laurence Olivier; and a full stage production from Bangor University. We have to scroll down to the ninth video – a slide-show video of a Japanese production starring Hiroki Narimiya – before we find a video that can be classified as user-generated content, a term that has gained currency within analyses of YouTube and Internet culture.

User-generated or user-created content refers to amateur media production as distinct from commercial or professionally produced content, although it often borrows from the latter through processes of creative redaction and repurposing.<sup>13</sup> At work here is the practice of 'tubing', that is the 'act of participating and contributing material with which others will interact'.<sup>14</sup> Within YouTube studies, there has been a tendency to valorize user-generated video because it satisfies a version of YouTube as a community of grassroots users somehow at a remove from the operations of large-scale media. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue, however, 'it is not helpful to draw sharp distinctions between professional and amateur production, or between commercial and community practices'. Rather, they read YouTube as a 'continuum of cultural participation', a model that 'requires us to understand all those who upload, view, comment on, or create content for YouTube, whether they be businesses, organizations, or private individuals, as *participants*'.<sup>15</sup> The results for *As You Like It* reveal the blurring of boundaries between professional content and the activities of non-commercial users: of the six videos from film and television, for example, the *Animated Tales As You Like It* and *Shakespeare's As You Like It – Helen Mirren* have been uploaded by individual users rather than

the original producer and copyright holder (the BBC). They constitute user-copied content, where users upload and share found content from existing media, often infringing copyright in the process.<sup>16</sup>

These examples illustrate the importance of noting the basic elements of videos. Details such as the title and username constitute video metadata, which enable us to determine the type of content we are dealing with and its provenance.<sup>17</sup> YouTube imbues disparate content with uniformity – each video is presented on the search page with a thumbnail, hyperlink title, upload date and view count. Nonetheless, we should attend to a video's aesthetic, or how it is 'calling out to the viewer a specific set of rhetorical or semantic referents'.<sup>18</sup> In some instances, these are easily identifiable but in others it is necessary to look at the upload context. Thus, to return to the example of the Japanese production of *As You Like It*, the video can be interpreted as a fan homage to actor Hiroki Narimiya on the basis that he features significantly among the other videos in the uploader's channel. Each subscriber to YouTube has a channel or page, which afford some insight into a user's activities, including what videos have been uploaded and favoured, the organization of video into playlists and the production of a community through subscriptions to other channels.

The YouTube interface is dynamic and cluttered. At the same time, however, because the site is familiar, the experience of using it can be one of immediacy, with little or no awareness of its medium. Drawing on Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, however, YouTube can also be regarded as a hypermedia environment. First, in remediating older technologies of representation (such as television, theatre and film), YouTube simultaneously absorbs these different forms and also marks their presence, thus 'maintaining a sense of multiplicity and hypermediacy'.<sup>19</sup> Second, the relation between the user and the interface fosters medium-consciousness: 'the user as a subject is constantly present, clicking on buttons, choosing menu items', a level of interaction that interrupts

the ‘transparency of the technology’.<sup>20</sup> YouTube involves a number of specific features, which shape viewing experience and use. While there are visual constants to the YouTube search page (including the YouTube logo, the search dialogue box, upload button, the Filter menu, the organization into thematic categories and the advert that appears to the right of the search results), its appearance also depends on whether or not a user is logged in. For the non-subscriber, there are highlighted icons and links (‘Popular on YouTube’), subject categories (Music, Sports, Gaming) and a ‘Sign in’ icon that invites the user to subscribe. As a YouTube subscriber, the initial search page will also display Channel features on the left-hand side of the screen. These include links to ‘Watch Later’, ‘Watch History’ and ‘Playlists’, and a list of Channel subscriptions, with feeds indicating new videos that have been posted. As a YouTube subscriber, the user is afforded an added menu of viewing options, thus enabling enhanced interactivity.

Human–computer interfaces, Lev Manovich reminds us, operate according to a selection logic, whereby the user ‘navigates through a branching structure consisting of pre-defined objects’.<sup>21</sup> Thus, although users are presented with a menu of viewing options, their choices are pre-programmed by the conventions of the YouTube interface.<sup>22</sup> In one sense, the vertical arrangement of videos implies a ranking of material in descending order. YouTube also deploys various strategies such as ‘Featured Videos’ and ‘Promoted Videos’ that are designed to optimize the viewing of certain videos.<sup>23</sup> However, each video is a hyperlinked digital object; accordingly, ‘despite the rating systems, each media object on YouTube has equal weight’.<sup>24</sup> To borrow Manovich’s terms, YouTube is a ‘flat surface where individual texts are placed in no particular order’ but instead are part of a branching structure, where one object leads to another.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the viewing experience becomes a type of ‘spatial wandering’ in which there is a lessening or perhaps even an erosion of temporal consciousness as we move from one video to another

and another.<sup>26</sup> We are ‘playing the medium, rather than watching it’; the effect ‘is a partial – and somewhat unfocused – consumption’.<sup>27</sup>

This is to arrive at the consuming pleasures of YouTube – ‘the YouTube sublime’ – or the element of surprise involved in browsing its vast archive.<sup>28</sup> As with online life more generally, YouTube involves a new attention economy where the sheer quantity of information available leads to incomplete viewing and reduced concentration.<sup>29</sup> The average time for a single YouTube session has been variously placed at between 15 and 28 minutes.<sup>30</sup> In the information age, as Richard Lanham has argued, it is not information itself that holds intrinsic value, but rather the attention that it commands: ‘In an information economy, the real scarce commodity will always be human attention.’<sup>31</sup> YouTube certainly presents viewers with a breadth of content and is structured in such a way as to prompt click-throughs to new videos.

YouTube’s attention economy shapes the kinds of user-generated content found on the site, where properties such as brevity, accessibility, humour, spectacle and self-referentiality prove recurrent.<sup>32</sup> This development risks a self-perpetuating sameness and accounts for YouTube’s association with ‘numbing entertainment’ and acritical consumption.<sup>33</sup> Geert Lovink formulates this as the numbing nexus of ‘Boredom-Surprise-Boredom’ that leads to ‘digital disillusionment’.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, he argues that ‘we must take database-watching seriously, not just dismiss it as “consuming video clips”’.<sup>35</sup> While the predatory effects of online surfing certainly require ongoing critical appraisal, it is equally important to note how users adapt their mode of participation to the platform, in the process demonstrating ‘site-specific competencies’ that often signal significant levels of critical digital literacy (a point I examine in Chapter 5 with regard to YouTube Shakespeare as a learning resource).<sup>36</sup> Lanham is especially interesting here. While his concern with the new economics of attention implies a critique of Internet culture and its corrosive effect on traditional modes of information retrieval or aesthetic

appreciation, he is in fact interested in digital productions as highly competitive fields of expression where text, image and sound interact in intriguing ways that call upon us to attend to their style, indeed to relish it.

This model of the attention-savvy user involves considerable demands, envisioning as it does a viewer that sifts through the abundant flow of information with curiosity and openness. Such an ideal viewer might combat what has been regarded as the circularity many YouTube users experience as they move from euphoria (at the unanticipated discovery within 'its referential expanse') to entropy (the 'ennui of repetition', leading to a sense of a void) and back again.<sup>37</sup> In highlighting the affordances of the digital as well as the possibilities of an active viewer, Lanham's model remains valuable. It is borne out by the so-called 'long tail effect', in which the digital, with its vast storage capacities and easy distribution, has created new degrees of popularity based on niche markets and interests. In this scenario, users 'wander further from the beaten path', in the process discovering that their tastes are more complex than the dictates of a 'hit-driven culture'.<sup>38</sup> As such, assessments of YouTube as an entertainment site, or as a kind of 'postmodern TV of distraction' providing 'an endless chain of immediate but forgettable gratification', must be balanced with a recognition that there are many different types of video, audiences and patterns of attention.<sup>39</sup>

As the YouTube browser currently functions, however, it is only possible to watch one video at a time, even if the eye wanders across to other available choices.<sup>40</sup> Selecting a video on the initial search page creates a 'watch page', which is itself replaced when another video is selected.<sup>41</sup> The platform's protocols thus have important implications for Shakespeare, with the flow of videos shaping what kind of Shakespeare we notice and experience. On the one hand, the scale of the YouTube archive suggests a potentially endless depth of multimedia Shakespearean texts, thus disclosing a deep reception context and an infinite 'long tail' into niche content. On the other hand, the interface's distractions, combined with a

tendency among users to view fragments rather than complete narratives, mean that YouTube Shakespeare risks becoming diffuse, even bewildering.

The *As You Like It* search page instances these contrasting reverberations on Shakespeare's meaning. As a user selects particular functions on the hypermedia platform, he/she elects to follow certain branches: YouTube is Shakespeare as *You* like it. These selections may lead him/her further into iterations of this particular Shakespearean text. However, other videos may prove alluring, leading the user away from Shakespeare altogether. At issue here is the interface's shaping power on viewer behaviour and use. After all, interfaces present a structuring of knowledge and a representation of the world. They are enabled by algorithms, which 'prove that something is happening behind and beyond the visible'.<sup>42</sup> Through IP address(es), the YouTube algorithm identifies the individual self that undertakes a search and makes selections. Our user's search is also Shakespeare as the Tube constructs it.

Continuing a phenomenological account of YouTube search, let us imagine that our viewer selects the second video on the initial search page, *Shakespeare, 'As You Like It', Act 2, Scene 7, Jaques: 'All the world's a stage'* (uploaded 17 May 2011; 16,684 views), thus opening up a new watch page.<sup>43</sup> The accompanying description provides the context for the reading by actor Larry Lamb, filmed as a promotion for a BBC competition, *Off by Heart Shakespeare*, aimed at 13–15-year-olds. Consequently, the Suggestions menu on the right of the watch page features some of the other videos filmed as part of the competition as well as other items which, through their hyperlinked titles, allow a user to pursue yet more performances of Jacques' speech (II.7.140–68). Available videos include user-copied content in the form of a clip from TV's *Morgan Freeman – Seven Ages of Man* (uploaded 13 January 2010; 30,895 views).<sup>44</sup> There is also user-generated content such as *As You Like It: 'All the World's a Stage' by Dex Curi* (uploaded 31 December 2009; 6,526 views).<sup>45</sup> The video takes the form of a slide-show, a common genre of YouTube

amateur culture, which in this instance combines audio or voice-over by the uploader himself with a series of images that visualize – and literalize – Jaques’ melancholic reflections. The speech has also received the corporate treatment, as in the advert for the social networking space Google+.<sup>46</sup> The imprimatur of Shakespeare, or perhaps, more precisely, the voice of actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is co-opted in the interests of Google’s vision of the digital as the space where we lease out our memories.

These are just some of over 1,400 videos featuring Jaques’ speech that we could potentially click through.<sup>47</sup> As an aggregate, these can be categorized as a genre themselves: the iconic Shakespearean speech. This is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to YouTube. Rather, the iconic speech or the extracted quotation is part of a long tradition through which Shakespeare emerges ‘as inspirational sound bite, aphoristic, provocative, disseminated, and scattered far from its source’.<sup>48</sup> As grafted onto Jaques’ catalogue of human life, the *theatrum mundi* trope was already a cliché to the play’s first audiences only to subsequently become as indicatively Shakespearean as ‘To be or not to be’, ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow’ or ‘Friends, Romans, countrymen’. Operating synecdochically for Shakespeare’s literary genius and universalism, these speeches come to YouTube pre-loaded with meaning. Similar to such iconic Shakespearean scenes as Hamlet looking at Yorick’s skull or the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, these set pieces constitute ‘powerful memorial centres in popular culture ... with each repetition encapsulating for their audiences the “essence” of Shakespeare’.<sup>49</sup> Relatedly, they underwrite the curricular centrality which certain Shakespeare plays enjoy over others. At the same time, the iconic speech may reflect Shakespeare’s ‘post-hermeneutic’ status in popular culture, where citations of the texts float freely from the anchoring authority of the Shakespearean text.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, the practice of quotation is sufficiently broad to suggest that we are dealing with something approaching a

continuum between these two positions. Hamlet's soliloquy is the most frequently cited on YouTube, with over 33,700 search results; Macbeth's speech produces some 3,240 results and Brutus' 2,570.<sup>51</sup> If YouTube is facilitating anything new here, it is predominantly at the level of distribution, participation and connectivity. The platform enables the mass circulation of these quotes on a scale hitherto impossible. The effect is also viral: YouTube perpetuates the concept of the exemplary Shakespearean speech, reaffirming the iconicity of certain lines. Video compilations such as *Quotes by William Shakespeare* (uploaded 10 September 2012; 1,197 views) suggest a correlation with the early modern tradition of the commonplace book and its databank of sententiae available for the reader's use.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, while the practice of selective quotation entails forms of loss – the dramatic context of a speech or a more general neglect of other plays owing to their comparative unfamiliarity – the relational organization of videos on YouTube puts these iconic speeches into contact with their texts. The 'Seven Ages of Man' videos may instance the phenomenon of the 'disembodied quotation', but they also connect with other *As You Like It* videos, allowing the speech to be understood as a constituent part of an expansive multimedia corpus.<sup>53</sup> As such, the iconic speech video is a form of meta-Shakespeare and part of a larger web of related videos that entail at least the potential for a diachronic perspective.

Just three selections or click-throughs have been made from the original search page and we can apprehend the range of choices within 'As You Like It'. A user might be inclined to scroll down to *Star Wars As You Like It Shakespeare Project* (uploaded 5 April 2013; 83 views), the thirteenth video on the search page.<sup>54</sup> As this video has its origins in a school-based assignment, the Suggestions menu features videos that similarly modernize Shakespeare via popular culture texts like *Star Wars*. The video's inclusion of light sabre effects – used here to dramatize the wrestling match between Orlando and Charles in Act 2, Scene 1 of the play – connects to other *Star Wars* and light sabre parody videos.<sup>55</sup> Once again, the

paradoxical features of search and selection on YouTube are evident. While a user exercises choice through selection and may undertake focused viewing as close attention is paid to a single video, selection is also being determined by the available menu of options on the YouTube interface and by its busy attention economy. Thus, within YouTube's architecture resides both a useful aggregation of content through hyper-linked titles and, by virtue of the copiousness of that content, also an innate capacity for distraction.

## The bardic function, or why upload Shakespeare?

Overviewing a single search also provides insight into the potential reasons why Shakespeare content appears on YouTube and the different genres that users draw upon. With videos posted by professional organizations like the RSC and the Globe (accounting for 6 of the 10 theatre-related videos in the sample search), the reasons for uploading to YouTube are readily apparent since, as with other social media, the platform provides a convenient promotional space that appeals to a key demographic.<sup>56</sup> Social media has become a way for these cultural institutions not only to engage with audiences – videos from both the RSC and the Globe feature vox pops from audience members – but also to construct and disseminate their own cultural value, and indeed Shakespeare's too.<sup>57</sup>

For user-circulated and user-generated content, the motivating factors behind Shakespeare production and posting are more varied. On the surface, amateur or vernacular Shakespeare videos reflect both the prominence of the Bard within education and also the use of YouTube and social media as learning resources. As an accessible approach to the text, teachers are encouraging their students to create performances and adaptations and then share them on YouTube.

These developments explain the emergence of the genre of the 'classroom-inspired performance video'.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, however, YouTube Shakespeare videos do not neatly coalesce around educational or school culture; rather, they intersect with youth or teen culture and their interests. For aspiring and working actors, the YouTube video proves a convenient way of sharing their show reel and, as integrated into other social media platforms, is an effective way to get noticed. For students of film, Shakespeare provides a deep repository of narratives, plots and tropes to be variously emulated, adapted or altered.

Shakespeare comes to YouTube as a well-established trans-media text that is ripe for re-use in vernacular culture, as the example of the renowned quote mentioned above demonstrates. However, in hypothesizing about the motivating factors at work in YouTube Shakespeare, it is important that we move from a Shakespeare-centric viewpoint, which privileges the texts and their cultural cachet, towards a deeper consideration of YouTube as a site of participatory culture and social networking. The YouTube strapline 'Broadcast Yourself' exemplifies the logic of participatory culture: by way of contrast with 'older notions of passive media spectatorship', media consumers are understood to have greater opportunities to intervene in media production that was typically – though not universally – the preserve of commercial and professional producers.<sup>59</sup> The term participatory culture has been associated with fan culture, in particular Henry Jenkins' concept of fans as 'textual poachers' who actively 'participate in the creation and circulation of new content'.<sup>60</sup> In this respect, participatory culture is not a consequence of YouTube. The forms it takes on the platform, from the vlog to the fan video, have antecedents in pre-digital video technologies, just as YouTube Shakespeare videos are preceded by a rich and long history of amateur performance and creative response.<sup>61</sup> However, YouTube signals a new phase of participatory culture through its provision of a 'distribution channel', where a range of vernacular productions can be

shared and engaged with.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, YouTube creates an enabling environment where media consumers habitually conceive of themselves as media producers. As such, it fosters new types of ‘vernacular creativity’, which act as a ground for social networking and community.<sup>63</sup> In accounting for the proliferation of do-it-yourself Shakespeare on YouTube, participatory culture is therefore an important explanatory reference point – such content reflects the shifting relationship between individual users and the larger mediascape.

That relationship has attracted different degrees of emphasis. For John Hartley, ‘YouTube allows everyone to perform their own “bardic function”’.<sup>64</sup> In a Shakespearean context, this is a resonant phrase. However, Hartley is using the bard of Celtic tradition as a metaphor to express what he sees as the fundamental transition from a centralized form of communal storytelling to one that is more democratic and polyphonic. The idea of online participation as a form of storytelling, with users making their own content rather than receiving it from traditional broadcast media, corresponds well with YouTube’s image as a popular platform for ‘ordinary people’, as evidenced by its now iconic videos of everyday life.<sup>65</sup> The idea of the ‘bardic function’ also provides an attractive way of thinking about YouTube Shakespeare. In turning to a Shakespearean text, character or motif, YouTubers are engaging in forms of storytelling and creative production. Their activities reflect an interest in producing their own take on the Bard, as in the example of *The Geeky Blonde* discussed below, and in ways that involve both a distancing from, as well as a dialogue with, a more institutional, professional, or otherwise culturally valorized Shakespeare. As much as it instances Shakespeare’s cultural valency, a YouTube Shakespeare video also reflects a personal investment in the texts. Through participatory culture, a variety of roles variously associated with the reception of Shakespeare, such as performer, producer, auteur, editor and translator, are available for vernacular or amateur appropriation. While this availability is contingent on material factors, including access to computer technologies, an Internet

connection, leisure time and media literacy, in theory participatory culture fosters a situation where these different forms of response to Shakespeare are possible and can be shared with similarly interested users. YouTube's existing archive of amateur performances and creative responses authorizes ongoing vernacular production in that setting.

YouTube Shakespeare videos suggest a productive attitude to the texts as open to further interpretation, especially where they transpose the Shakespearean text to new contexts or combine it with other media. However, while these videos ultimately contribute to Shakespeare's citational availability, they can also have an attenuated relationship to the Shakespearean text. For example, a remix video of a Shakespeare film might be more concerned with a particular actor than with Shakespeare. Similarly, a Shakespeare video made with movie-generator software such as Xtranormal or iClone may be addressed primarily to other users of these programmes and just happen to draw on a Shakespearean quote. The participatory culture of YouTube Shakespeare thus marks Shakespeare's interaction with an array of media texts and online cultures. It also encompasses different levels of user participation. Content production provides an overt manifestation of participatory culture and 'all users are addressed as potential content providers'; however, production is only one among a range of contributory possibilities available on YouTube, which include video commenting, 'favouriting', and channel building.<sup>66</sup> Undertaking one or more of these 'practices of audiencehood' involves contributing to YouTube's interpretative community.<sup>67</sup> These practices entail 'the evaluation, appraisal, critique, and recirculation of material'.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, we should broaden our understanding of 'what constitutes meaningful participation', so that it does not privilege 'active' user-production vis-à-vis 'passive' consumption, but rather considers production and response as interrelated and dialectical components of YouTube.<sup>69</sup>

Interpreting online video productions as bardic activities allows us to contemplate the possibilities of individual agency

within mass media. At the same time, however, liberating narratives about ‘grassroots’ or bottom-up media participation require scrutiny. Hartley’s model of participatory culture problematically assumes that everyone has access to online technologies and that individuals possess the leisure time to engage in these new forms of storytelling. It also fails to consider that seemingly individualized media interventions can have generic properties and become repetitions of familiar themes. The notion of the ‘bardic function’ comes under further pressure in light of YouTube’s proprietorial assertions over content.<sup>70</sup> We may all exercise the ‘bardic function’, but we do so on YouTube’s terms. YouTube Shakespeare is no different to other forms of content on the site. User-created content coexists, cheek-by-jowl, with the commercially produced content. YouTube Shakespeare is also imbricated by the logic of the market, often overtly so through adverts that appear on the interface, or through image-overlay advertising.<sup>71</sup>

The proximity of YouTube culture and commerce is playfully explored in the film short *Shakespeare with Fries* (uploaded 1 April 2010; 38,819 views), where a struggling theatre company finds itself forced to integrate product placements into its performances.<sup>72</sup> The actors’ performances are overlaid with placards for the fictitious ‘Booth Burger’ (‘To Booth or not to Booth?’; ‘Two burgers both alike in quality’). As one viewer comments, ‘from the first add running at the bottom of the screen, to the ads becoming more popular than the content’, the film is a commentary on YouTube as the cultural equivalent to fast food. Shakespeare’s dual identity as a cultural classic and an advertising slogan suggests that the current state of all cultural expression is a dependence on the flow of global capital.<sup>73</sup> The film may exhibit some nostalgia for a putatively authentic type of art – it ends with the demise of the sponsorship deal – but the irony of placing on YouTube a film that critiques a situation in which art condescends to the marketplace is not lost on viewers: ‘Funny that you post this on YouTube which has now been taken over by huge companies. SEND THIS TO THE BOARD OF YOUTUBE!’

The concern in *Shakespeare without Fries* – that amateur or vernacular production is on the wane, or that it is being compromised by an ever increasingly commercialized world – may have a broader resonance for YouTube Shakespeare. For instance, Christy Desmet has suggested that user-produced content is attritional, and is being sidelined by commercial and professional content producers.<sup>74</sup> The ‘As You Like It’ search page supports this point, with user-generated content accounting for only 15 per cent of the first 20 videos. YouTube’s development of Auto Generated Channels has further implications for the relative prominence of user-generated content. Created where the algorithm detects popular topics – a channel for ‘William Shakespeare’ is an example – these channels tend to feature professionally and commercially produced content.<sup>75</sup> They reflect YouTube’s efforts to organize and curate videos. However, there is a real risk here that these channels will ultimately feature sponsored-only content. In the case of the Shakespeare page, this might mean that the featured content comes exclusively from a commercial entity. These are legitimate concerns, because they speak to YouTube’s vitality – its community of users – and their capacity to make and share their own content, often in ways involving critical distance from mass media. The business logic of YouTube is such that the activities of its non-commercial users are exploited for their monetary potential: as an industry observer puts it, ‘Many of the things that YouTube users regularly do – start their experience at the home page, search for a video, visit a channel, watch a movie trailer or a music video – translate into appropriate advertising opportunities.’<sup>76</sup> At stake, therefore, in claims regarding the attrition of user-generated productions is a wider suspicion about new media whereby, in ways similar to Frederic Jameson’s understanding of the fate of creative expression within postmodernism, sites like YouTube appear less like platforms for the dissemination of the latest vernacular creations than convenient spaces where advertisers avail of eye-catching content to draw in consumers.<sup>77</sup>

We need to remain alert to the far-reaching implications of YouTube's corporate logic. Equally, however, it is important to scrutinize a potential nostalgia for the early days of the site, one that posits a notion of authentic vernacular production as somehow apart from consumer culture. It is the very nature of the site that disparate types of video circulate simultaneously. Many YouTubers have successfully monetized their content in ways that redefine their status as amateur producers. Furthermore, the provision of a free (at least for now), accessible vernacular broadcasting platform is contingent on the commercial viability of YouTube itself and the continuing capacity of the site to attract advertisers and commercial partners.<sup>78</sup> The consequences of YouTube's corporate underpinnings, never far from view in its trademarked tag line, might be the necessary trade-off we make for a free, fully functioning user-generated technology.

## What's in a meme?: From *Harlem Shake[speare]* to *Downfall*

Recognizing the compromises implicit in our engagement with YouTube culture might further an appreciation of its affordances and effects, among them the genres of online Shakespeare video. The analysis of vernacular participation becomes an especially important activity because it documents content that is not only ephemeral but may also turn out to be the condition of a particular cultural moment. Studies of YouTube have already performed this type of archival and curatorial function, identifying certain videos such as *LonelyGirl* and *Chocolate Rain* as exemplary of Internet culture more generally.<sup>79</sup> As work on YouTube Shakespeare evolves, we may begin to see similar identifications. Indeed, by highlighting and selecting material, the current discussion contributes to the creation of a canon of Shakespeare videos. The 'As You Like It' search has already revealed some of

the genres of YouTube Shakespeare (the slide-show, the classroom-inspired performance, the iconic speech) but what is the relation between the dominant modes of YouTube culture and the kinds of vernacular Shakespeare that occur in this setting? The meme offers an interesting case study here, exemplifying the language and logic of YouTube.

Borrowed from the field of genetics, the concept of the meme was first employed by Richard Dawkins as an analogy for cultural transmission. As applied to Internet culture, it captures the gene-like propagation of an image and its rapid dispersal.<sup>80</sup> Typically, memes exhibit three properties: they involve humour, they are readily understandable and they are easily replicable. These characteristics account for the popularity and 'spreadability' of memes across participatory culture.<sup>81</sup> Memes instance YouTube's distribution power, as well as its association with social connectivity and community. For instance, the *Gangnam Style* phenomenon, the music video by South Korean pop star PSY, which prompted thousands of copies, has become synonymous with YouTube. Even where memes spread to other platforms and social media such as Twitter or Facebook, they contribute towards YouTube's cultural currency. Memes are also used in the service of the YouTube brand, with the site arrogating disparate content and packaging it as a YouTube phenomenon, as in *Rewind YouTube Style 2012*.<sup>82</sup> There may be no Shakespeare memes within this retrospective and there is no Shakespeare video to rival *Gangnam Style*; nonetheless, as an available template repeated across YouTube, Shakespeare acquires meme-like properties. More intriguingly, Shakespeare has been explicitly incorporated into two YouTube memes, *Harlem Shake* and *Downfall*.

Since the first *Harlem Shake* in February 2013 when Australian teenagers posted a video of themselves dancing to a track by Baauer, there have been over 100,000 imitations (including one in an episode of *The Simpsons*).<sup>83</sup> Generally lasting no more than 30 seconds, the videos take the same simple structure: a shot of a group in a state of staged

calmness, with one member dancing in a variety of settings (including an office, a park, a bus, a classroom), is followed by a frenetic group dance or 'shake'. The short length and the addictive beat of the track account for the popularity of the videos but there are other factors at work too. The videos involve a liberating dance movement and frequently some element of bodily display and undress, all of which suggest an alluring carnival attitude that provides a temporary disruption of otherwise formal settings.

An initial search under 'Harlem Shakespeare' returns some 927 results. However, not all of the videos included in this search figure contain a Shakespearean context. This is because several YouTubers have used 'Shakespeare' in the title of their videos, even though they have no Shakespeare connection other than allowing for a word play on 'shake'.<sup>84</sup> Such uses imply a decidedly postmodern citational form, in which Shakespeare becomes an empty signifier. Yet, in several instances, the Harlem Shakespeare videos do indeed have something to say about Shakespeare. The earliest use of Shakespeare in conjunction with 'Harlem Shake' is *The Harlem Shake (Romeo + Juliet)*, uploaded on 14 February 2013 (827 views), where the meme is integrated into the fan-made music video.<sup>85</sup> Baauer's track is set to the ballroom scene from Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*. However, the two predominant contexts for the fusion of Shakespeare and the meme are classrooms or a school setting (accounting for 28 videos) and theatres (21 videos).

In the first category, performances take place in the classroom, sometimes featuring a teacher as in *Harlem Shakespeare* (uploaded 26 February 2013; 2,992 views), which introduces its use of the meme with a title sequence: 'Harlem Shakespeare: When AP English class meets Hamlet and memes'.<sup>86</sup> The classroom versions tend to be much more conservative than others available on YouTube, most likely a result of their institutional setting and the age of the participants. The video begins with the class quietly reading, and then dancing. Apart from one Viking helmet – presumably

a comic signal to the play's Danish setting – the costumes offer no visual cues to the play. The meme is applied to the Shakespearean context more extensively in *Harlem Shake Julius Caesar Version* (uploaded 15 March 2013; 320 views). As the class read quietly, one student, dressed in a toga and wearing a gold paper crown, dances. As the hypnotic beat of Baauer's track begins, there is a jump cut to the group, now all wearing togas, attacking the Caesar figure. Other videos develop the meme as part of a theatrical performance. *Harlem Shakespeare* (uploaded 1 April 2013; 266 views) is set on a stage and frames the dance with a close-up of a Shakespeare figure writing at a desk. The video then cuts to students performing in Shakespearean costumes, with post-edit titles indicating the various groupings from the plays (Romeo and Juliet, the fairies and Nick Bottom, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Julius Caesar and Brutus) that are represented. In other school-based theatrical performances, the meme is used as part of a promotional trailer, as in *The Tempest Harlem Shake* (uploaded 26 March 2013; 281 views), or is even integrated into a performance, with the clip subsequently shared on YouTube, as in the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (uploaded 9 March 2013; 742 views).

What do these various 'memeings' of Shakespeare reveal? In relation to the classroom and school-based videos, they reflect the latest mode through which school goes approach Shakespeare. The meme is to a current cohort of students what rap or hip hop was to an earlier one. Rather than merely providing an entertaining class activity, the videos reflect the use of experiential learning, as in the example of *Julius Caesar* above, where the *Harlem Shake* is used to represent the action of the play. In relation to theatre, the meme not only has a demonstrative promotional function, but as integrated into a performance can operate on a deeper level. Its inclusion in a *Midsummer Night's Dream* production may serve to draw out the pleasures and unruly dimensions of the forest, as well as complementing the festive comedy of the play more generally. In a classroom, the temporary abandonment provided by the

meme, and its containment by an institutionalized setting, mirrors the dynamic of Shakespeare's play, where the freedoms and misrule afforded by the faery world are closed off with the return of the young courtly lovers to the relative order and decorum of Athens. The combination of *Harlem Shake* and Shakespearean comedy suggests further analogies between the two, encouraging us to see them as mutual spaces for entertainment, laughter and pleasure. As such, the meme is not just a gimmick, but can contribute to how a performance achieves meaning or enable students to find an entry-point into the play. The creators are exploiting the meme's instantaneity and cool cachet. In the process, we can see how Shakespeare's meaning is invariably filtered through and contingent on the present, on the specificities of a time, place and their cultural dominants.

Memes are indicative of YouTube's temporal immediacy. They can quickly go viral, yet their lifespan can be short lived as they are displaced by the next trend. At the same time, given the site's status as an archive, it is also possible to revisit earlier memes, even though their moment has passed. The *Downfall* meme is a case in point. Beginning in 2007, it seemed to have reached its apotheosis in late 2009 and early 2010, though derivations continue to be shared.<sup>87</sup> It is something of a YouTube classic. Adapting the German film *Der Untergang* (2004) that focuses on the last days of Hitler's regime, the meme involves the insertion of new subtitles into scenes.<sup>88</sup> This is usually with comic effect, as in *Hitler gets banned from Xbox Live* (uploaded 7 June 2007; 8,006,793 views).<sup>89</sup> Videos can be satirical too, especially where they target politicians. *Downfall* has given rise to 'meta-memes' or videos that advert their status as memes, as in *Hitler Hates "Hitler Gets Banned" Parody Videos*.<sup>90</sup> As well as its satirical properties, the meme's appeal has been framed in terms of the dissonance it creates between intensely dramatic scenes and the comical or incongruous text within the subtitles.<sup>91</sup>

Shakespeare gets the *Downfall* treatment in 5 videos. Well-established aspects of Shakespeare's image in popular

culture are exploited to comic ends. For instance, the authorship controversy provides the impetus for *Hitler Reacts to Discovering Marlowe was really Shakespeare* (uploaded 30 November 2011; 94 views).<sup>92</sup> The long history of students' aversion to Shakespeare is tackled in *Hitler Learns That He Will Be Learning about Shakespeare in School* (uploaded 30 April 2011; 191 views).<sup>93</sup> Similarly, recognizing that Shakespeare can be off-putting, the educational video *Romeo and Juliet: Brief and Naughty* (uploaded 19 February 2010; 10,738 views) prefaces its plot outline with the *Downfall* meme, with the revelation that 'the friar never told Romeo that Juliet was still alive' synced with Hitler's outburst.<sup>94</sup> The dominant tone here is irony, and both the figure of Hitler and the conventions of Shakespearean tragedy are played for laughs. However, the *Downfall* treatment becomes disquieting and problematic when, as in *Hitler Reads Shakespeare* (uploaded 29 March 2011; 2,568 views), it is applied to Shylock's monologue from Act 3, Scene 1.<sup>95</sup>

The selection of this particular speech, in which Shylock's expression of vengeance moves into an impassioned reflection on perceptions of 'a Jew' (lines 48–66) brings the video into the charged hermeneutic field that is Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. In turn, the video brings into focus the politics of the *Downfall* meme itself: at what point 'does featuring the image of Hitler go too far?'<sup>96</sup> The question might be answered with Adorno's observation that in a world where holocaust remains a possibility, 'lighthearted art is no longer conceivable'.<sup>97</sup> Relatedly, the figure of Hitler as a visual constant that can be comically replicated signals a postmodern vacuity, and even an erasure of history. The syncing of Shylock's words with the image of Hitler railing against his peers is potentially inflammatory and doubly offensive to Jewish identity, involving as it does the combination of the Nazi dictator with a representation of 'a Jew' that is itself problematic. The comments on the video afford some insight into its reception, with one viewer referring to Shakespeare as 'an early anti-Semite'.<sup>98</sup> At stake, here, is the representation of Shylock and also the politics of Shakespeare's play.

Shylock has been described as ‘an empty signifier that has been subsequently invested with historical and cultural meaning’.<sup>99</sup> Yet this description overlooks the signifying powers of the text and its representations. On these, some critics are unequivocal: ‘it would have been better for the last four centuries of the Jewish people had Shakespeare never written this play’.<sup>100</sup> In a post-Holocaust context, Shylock instantiates what Rob Conkie calls ‘aftershocks’ in the way that Shakespeare’s texts so often ‘provide an earthquake-like impact, the vibrations of which continue to echo throughout history’.<sup>101</sup> Mindful of the play’s acute reverberations for modern audiences, some directors have sought to forge a ‘sympathetic portrait’ of Shylock, often through the excision of those lines that reflect the ‘unacceptable “attitudes of the time”’.<sup>102</sup> For instance, playwright Arnold Wesker criticized David Thacker’s 1993 RSC production for altering the text and erasing those aspects that, to Wesker, evidenced the play’s work in the transmission of anti-Semitism.<sup>103</sup> In his own rewriting of the play, Wesker confronts the problematic sentiment of Shylock’s ‘Hath not a Jew eyes’, remarking: ‘Jews do not want apologies to be made for their humanity ... Their humanity is their right.’<sup>104</sup> Responses to Wesker’s Shylock suggested that it succeeded in showing the character ‘from inside the ghetto, inside the man, inside the experience of being an alien’.<sup>105</sup> However, as Barbara Hodgdon asks, ‘And Shakespeare’s play does not?’<sup>106</sup>

Arguments that Shakespeare’s play discloses the workings of stereotypes by building into the audience’s experience of the drama ‘a critical distance on the phenomenon of anti-Semitism’ run into difficulties with the ending, Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity.<sup>107</sup> Our culture has secured for Shakespeare a positive portrayal of Shylock largely by bifurcating the ‘Hath not a Jew’ speech from the play. Provocatively, the *Downfall* Shylock provides a visual reminder of that separation. By transposing into the Hitler meme a speech that has sometimes been regarded as affording empathy to the otherwise maligned Jew, sometimes seen

as indicative of the play's offensiveness, the video draws a correlation between the violence of Nazism and the prejudice that undergirds cultural representations like *The Merchant of Venice*. The *Downfall* Shylock suggests the challenges of this play, and asks us to confront its 'aftershocks'.

## Vidding, paratexts and parodies

Another indicative YouTube Shakespeare genre is the fan-made music video, part of a practice known as 'vidding', where clips from TV and movies are set to music. Among the Shakespearean iterations of this genre, *Romeo and Juliet* stands out, most likely as a consequence of the play's appeal to youth culture and the success of Luhrmann's 1996 film.<sup>108</sup> The subsequent incorporation of the film into school and college curricula as a key text to teach Shakespeare also explains its popularity in the early years of YouTube, as students responded anew through classroom-inspired projects and through forms of vernacular expression.

Of YouTube fan responses to Luhrmann's film, *Romeo and Juliet (Sacrifice)* has the highest view count (uploaded 23 September 2007; 8,453,667 views).<sup>109</sup> Applying the logic of remix, the YouTuber combines visuals from the film with the song 'Sacrifice' by Russian band tATu to produce a fan-made music video.<sup>110</sup> The accompanying description provides some insight into the motivations behind the production: 'Back in 1996, the remake of *Romeo and Juliet* was my obsession ... mainly because of Leonardo DiCaprio! After hours of editing and making 10 different versions, here is a music video I have made in honor of this wonderful film.' Fan culture – in this instance surrounding the then 21-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio – accounts for the video's relation to Shakespeare. That relation can also be understood as paratextual. As Jonathan Gray argues, fan-made trailers, TV spoilers and other texts of fandom are paratexts. Elaborating on Gerard Genette's sense

of paratexts as those properties that prepare us for entry into texts, Gray reads fan vids as critical objects through which a reader frames their relation to a text, creates an interpretative community and thus shapes the meanings and reception of the text.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, fan-created trailers often echo industry-created paratexts, retaining the aesthetic and editing of the official trailer, a tendency that might lead us to regard them as free promotion tools for a particular film or TV series.

However, as Matt Hills argues, fans are already situated within consumer culture; the difficulty is that much academic work on fandom continues to assign value to fan practices on the basis of their anti-consumerist stance, or in such terms that posits a false binary of the 'good fan' and the 'bad consumer'.<sup>112</sup> Fans undertake close readings, and their paratexts not only entail a level of commentary, but can also be understood as annotations or traces of the fan's responsiveness to the text.<sup>113</sup> As such, they should not be regarded as consumptive derivations of the commercial content that they cite. While *Romeo and Juliet (Sacrifice)* is ostensibly about DiCaprio, the video is also an indicator of the fan's responsiveness to the film. It constitutes a form of remembrance, or a reactivation of the initial pleasure of viewing the Luhrmann film (and its Hollywood star).

The video presents an interesting example of how a high view count does not always guarantee video quality. The impressive view count is most likely a result of DiCaprio, supported by the iconic status of Luhrmann's film, rather than the quality of the remix. While the song choice works particularly well with the movie, the editing undertaken is minimal. By contrast, *Paire (Peter and Claire) – Romeo and Juliet trailer* (uploaded 9 October 2007) has a lower view count (8,449), but provides a far more accomplished remix. The title alludes to two characters, Claire Bensen (played by Hayden Panettiere) and Peter Petrelli (played by Milo Ventimiglia), from the science-fiction drama *Heroes*.<sup>114</sup> The video is reflective of how cult TV fandom involves an 'emotional investment' in a TV series, amplifying or reimagining couplings that are not pursued

in the original plot, or that perhaps are not sanctioned by it.<sup>115</sup> Deftly mixing *Heroes* with Luhrmann's film, the video is especially effective where it substitutes dialogue between Peter and Claire with the voices of DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Shakespeare's 'classic love story of Romeo and Juliet' (as the description below the video puts it) is invoked as the exemplar of *amor vincit omnia*, with the star-crossed lovers at once valorizing and giving way to the fan pairing of Peter and Claire.

In these videos, the point of connection to Shakespeare is mediated. Viewed from the perspective of fandom and vidding, Shakespeare is not top ranking in terms of a hierarchy of cultural value. Within YouTube culture, Shakespearean texts are one among a diffuse set of cultural references to be remixed. In the *Heroes* video, Romeo and Juliet ultimately play a supporting role, which serves the video's celebration of the Peter and Claire coupling. This illustrates the broader paradoxical effect that vernacular productions can have on Shakespeare. On the one hand, the texts continue to circulate or resonate within popular culture through their paratexts, thus sustaining meaning in the broadest sense. On the other hand, they do so in a way that is both fragmentary and dilutive. While recognizing that YouTube Shakespeare videos result in a reduced Shakespeare, or that videos frequently involve a derivative familiarity with a text rather than a full knowledge of it, I would caution against interpreting this situation negatively, since to do so would be to rely on an overly dichotomous sense of the relationship between popular iterations of Shakespeare and a putatively stable body of original texts. Videos can more usefully be understood as paratextual contributions and interventions, which have a rhizomatic relation to Shakespeare, at once contributing to the circulation of his works, while also occupying other lines of flight.<sup>116</sup>

Videos can have an attenuated relationship to the Shakespearean text, becoming 'texts in and of their own right'; equally, they can involve a return to the urtext and

even spotlight an interpretation of it.<sup>117</sup> To take the example of a more recent Shakespeare film, the trailer for *Coriolanus* (2011), directed by Ralph Fiennes, is available on YouTube as official content posted by Lionsgate.<sup>118</sup> There is also user-circulated material and, as with other Shakespeare films, Fiennes' film has inspired fan-made trailers and music videos. Indeed, as the first filmic adaptation of *Coriolanus* and, in the assessment of Peter Holland, likely to 'be the most watched version of the play for a long time to come', it will be interesting to see what other kinds of video response it generates.<sup>119</sup> The official trailer does its work of promoting the film and preparing an audience. Distilling the film's modern-day militaristic aesthetic – while filmed in Serbia, the action is set in an unspecified military state – the trailer is largely expository. It establishes the relation of the protagonist, the Roman general Caius Martius Coriolanus (played by Fiennes), to his *agon*, the Volscian general Aufidius (Gerard Butler), and the subsequent reversal which occurs as enmity gives way to a new but volatile proximity in their mutual animus toward Rome.<sup>120</sup> Themes of betrayal and vengeance are foregrounded, with the latter dramatically outlined through a close-up of Coriolanus' sword and shots of bloodied faces. The trailer markets violence as part of this film's offering, with Shakespearean verse incorporated as soundbites, so as not to disrupt explosive images.<sup>121</sup>

Fan-created responses augment the film's visual orientation through selection and editing, but they also constitute interpretative acts. *Coriolanus Trailer – Nothing Else Matters* (uploaded 18 December 2012; 2,350 views) foregrounds the centrality of the Coriolanus–Aufidius relationship and retains the official trailer's inclusion of short excerpts of verse.<sup>122</sup> It also captures, and arguably dwells upon, the video-game quality to the violence in Fiennes' film. Yet the choice of score here, 'Nothing Else Matters' by Scala and Kolacny Brothers, brings an elegiac quality to these images that is not conveyed by the official paratext. By contrast, *Coriolanus music video* (uploaded 24 July 2012; 221 views) amplifies the film's battle

scene between Coriolanus and Aufidius, mashing it with the track 'Mutter' by German band Rammstein.<sup>123</sup> The angry lyrics and the heavy-metal beat of the track complement the selected images from the film to recreate the trailer as a music video. When we appreciate that the lyrics are addressed to a maternal figure from the perspective of a child, then their association with Coriolanus, whose relation to his own mother personalizes and deepens his tragic suffering at the hands of Rome, becomes more intriguing still. Fiennes' film is a complex text. It is at its most effective where it uses Shakespeare's play to explore the interrelations of warfare, political leadership and the media.<sup>124</sup> It also undertakes a character study, drawing out the anxieties about emasculation that lurk within Coriolanus' distinctly masculine code of *virtus* by pursuing the suggestion in the play of a homoerotic dimension to the proximity between Coriolanus and Aufidius. The casting of Vanessa Redgrave as Volumnia serves to enrich the intensity of that role, which in Shakespeare's play brings considerable power and privilege to the maternal, while also locating it as the fatal source of the son's sense of valour and thus of his manhood.<sup>125</sup> However, while conveying the intricacies of the maternal-filial bond, the star turn of Fiennes in the title role means that the tragic pathos of the warrior remains the focus and with it the masculine code of honour. *Coriolanus music video* poses further questions as to the gender politics of the Coriolanus story. By combining the battle scene with the track 'Mutter', with its figurative treatment of a child railing against its unknown maternal figure, the video positions the Coriolanus story as patriarchal wish-fulfilment, in which the threat of the feminine and the maternal are erased. However, the politics of this particular *Coriolanus* video may be an unintended consequence of fan activity: the user's channel suggests that the response to Fiennes' film is part of a wider interest and enjoyment in music video creation, rather than a concern with Shakespeare per se.

## The fan performance

Yet, as I have been arguing, even where fan videos appear to have a tangential concern with Shakespeare, or quote Shakespeare texts and film as they would other popular culture elements, they nonetheless contribute towards the meaning of Shakespeare. Other YouTube videos reveal a level of Shakespeare fandom, in that they focus their attention on the texts or some proxy for the author. Considering that the phenomenon of Shakespeare sampled and enmeshed within popular culture is now held to be the normative condition of the Bard as he is consumed in global culture, it is these videos rather than mashups that might strike us as the truly radical texts. Whereas the channel for the creator of *Coriolanus music video* reveals a minimal interest in Shakespeare, the series of one-woman performances by The Geeky Blonde indicate a sustained emphasis on things Shakespearean and a construction of online community through the plays.<sup>126</sup>

The Geeky Blonde evidences a dynamic and evolving vernacular Shakespeare production on YouTube. The first video in the series, *The Merchant of Venice*, was posted in April 2011, and the most recent is *Romeo and Juliet*, posted in February 2013. While moving across Shakespearean genres, with comedy (*The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*), tragedy (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*) and romance (*Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*), the videos are nonetheless consistent in terms of their overall approach and aesthetic, although some developments are evident when more recent videos are compared with earlier ones. Her productions are noteworthy not only because they each involve one-person performances of the major – and indeed minor – parts by the creator, but also because they range beyond Shakespeare's most prominent plays.<sup>127</sup> With the shortest of the videos lasting 10 minutes, they also challenge YouTube's reduced attention economy. There is a striking variety to The Geeky Blonde's performances, with characters

differentiated through vocal modulation, facial and other non-verbal expressions, an extensive wardrobe (especially of hats) and well-paced editing.

With the exception of the first video, each production features 'Sockspeare', a Shakespeare sock-puppet, and the shared conceit throughout the series is that The Geeky Blonde has been tricked by this proxy for the Bard to undertake solo-performances of the plays. As part of the conceit, The Geeky Blonde is given, or finds, a copy of the Shakespearean text. The device is sent up, as in the preamble to the *Macbeth* (uploaded 31 October 2012; 2,867 views) performance, where The Geeky Blonde berates the puppet for suggesting the Scottish play, calling him 'an anthropomorphic codpiece'.<sup>128</sup> The inclusion of the sock puppet establishes the tone of the performances, which tend towards parody, irony and the incongruous. It might denote a *Sesame Street* Shakespeare, but precedents for reincarnating the Bard indicate that seemingly juvenile absurdities often carry deeper effects.<sup>129</sup> There may also be echoes of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, as well as more recent pop culture treatments of Shakespeare available on YouTube such as *Sassy Gay Friend* (their *Hamlet* is included in Geeky Blonde's channel as a favourite video), although Geeky Blonde's performances incorporate a greater degree of Shakespearean verse than either of these texts.

The productions support the argument for regarding parody as the predominant mode of YouTube Shakespeare, in the tradition of such classic parodies as Tom Stoppard's *Fifteen Minute Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.<sup>130</sup> The Geeky Blonde videos share certain attributes with these Shakespeare parodies: anachronisms and plot absurdities are foregrounded, aspects of the text are amplified with ridiculous effects, and an incongruous style is chosen. While recognizing such patterns to Shakespeare parody, we must be careful to avoid totalizing assessments of YouTube Shakespeare. The Geeky Blonde's videos engage in parody, but do so from the perspective of a fan concerned with addressing troubling and implausible aspects of Shakespearean texts.

Significantly, her productions entail a meta-commentary on the text and performance that reflect on the distance between the Shakespearean texts and contemporary culture in terms of attitudes to gender and sexuality. In *Cymbeline* (uploaded 1 October 2011; 1,547 views), for example, the exposition is interrupted by the persona of The Geeky Blonde, who notes of the play's Queen, 'just pause here – everyone calls her the Queen, a brilliantly dehumanizing technique since she is essentially the villain'.<sup>131</sup> In the *Hamlet* production (uploaded 27 May 2012; 4,085 views), what seems like an earnest rendition of the first soliloquy, 'O that this too too sallied flesh would melt' (I.2.129) breaks off into a comically mundane expression of Oedipal frustrations: 'Oh, my mother has so much sex.'<sup>132</sup> Hamlet's latent desire for his mother is coupled with recurring comic allusions to a homoerotic subtext – of the first appearance of the ghost, Marcellus says to Horatio 'that's really going to upset your boyfriend', and after the death of Hamlet, The Geeky Blond interjects with 'Hamatio forever.' The comedies provide further scope for mocking such proximities between men – indeed Shakespeare texts are construed as forms of Slash fiction (the classic example in fan culture is the imagined pairing of Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*).<sup>133</sup> In The Geeky Blonde's *Merchant of Venice* (uploaded 3 April 2011; 821 views), for instance, Antonio jealously contemplates destroying the marriage of Bassanio and Portia.<sup>134</sup> *Twelfth Night* (uploaded 2 January 2013; 1,859 views) similarly provides for a comic sense of suppressed male–male relations: a title head for the character Antonio reads, 'Sebastian's (cuddle) buddy (seriously read the play and pay attention to this pair)'.<sup>135</sup>

The use of the parodic mode here to disclose subtexts prompts a broader consideration of the effect and politics of parody. Simon Dentith defines parody as 'any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice'.<sup>136</sup> His qualifying terms are deliberate here, with the polemical characterized as 'relatively' in order to allow for the degrees of critique that the

hypertext (or the text doing the parodying) performs on the hypotext (the text being parodied). The qualifications also steer a line between the influential theorizations of parody as offered by Frederic Jameson on the one hand and Linda Hutcheon on the other.<sup>137</sup> In Jameson's formulation, meaningful forms of allusiveness and imitation once associated with parody have, in the contemporary 'cultural dominant' of postmodernism, given way to pastiche, or parody 'amputated of the satiric impulse'.<sup>138</sup> At work here is Jameson's broader argument about postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, a logic which sees aesthetic production as inseparable from commodity production, where the collapse of modernist distinctions between high and popular culture signal 'a new kind of flatness or depthlessness', as exemplified in Andy Warhol's art, or postmodern architecture.<sup>139</sup> For Hutcheon, however, postmodern productions – and she too takes the example of architecture – do not involve the meaningless recycling of existing or dead styles. Rather, they involve 'imitation characterized by ironic inversion' or 'repetition with critical distance', at once exploiting the cultural significance of the older style, while also pointing to its distance from the contemporary world.<sup>140</sup> Hutcheon reminds us of the dual and paradoxical possibilities inherent within parody, that is its deferential and critical registers, as captured in the prefix 'para', as 'close to' and yet 'counter' to the original.<sup>141</sup> Thus, instead of interpreting parody as *either* depthless *or* critically efficacious, we might note that it can have a range of effects – it can be 'more or less playful, critical, ironic, or empty' – depending on the specific dimensions of its use.<sup>142</sup>

The Geeky Blonde videos reveal these various forms parody takes. They exploit what is already comic in Shakespeare's plot (as in the interchange in *Twelfth Night* between Orsino and Viola disguised as the boy Cesario), but they do so with a critical edge. The performances allude to the transvestism of Shakespearean theatre, as The Geeky Blonde cross-dresses and plays both female and male roles. They also involve a critique of the one-directional nature of female

impersonation in Shakespeare.<sup>143</sup> Thus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (uploaded 3 August 2012; 1,881 views), Peter Quince complains to his fellow players about the gender restrictions imposed on casting Thisbe: 'because of some stupid laws, women aren't allowed to act yet ... you think I want some scrawny chicken boy playing the part of my tragic heroine?'<sup>144</sup> This is just one of the ways that The Geeky Blonde's performances suggest the generic and ideological limitations of Shakespearean comedy.<sup>145</sup> Elsewhere, by making explicit what is often implied or contained within the plot, The Geeky Blonde highlights the distance and conservatism of Shakespearean drama in terms of its attitude to same-sex relations. As such, she achieves the kind of critical distance Hutcheon identifies as the hallmark of parody. In another sense, however, playing homoeroticism for laughs might not be the most productive way to unsettle heteronormativity and its cultural expressions.

The treatment of Shakespearean verse is also revealing in terms of the status of the videos as Shakespeare parodies. Each features culturally familiar nuggets of quotes, such as Lady Macbeth's 'Out, out damned spot! Out, I say!' (V.1.33), or Malvolio's 'Some are born great' (III.2.39–43), as well as ones comparatively less familiar, such as Iachimo's 'Let me my service tender on your lips' (I.6.140) to Imogen from *Cymbeline*. As the series has developed, the proportion of Shakespeare lines has increased: the most recent video of *Romeo and Juliet* includes over four lines from Mercutio's Queen Mab speech (I.4.53–94), to which Polonius, making a cameo, replies 'This is too long.' Through such intertextual cues, The Geeky Blonde self-referentially addresses the supplementing of verse with a colloquial idiom, thus pushing at the constraints of her condensed Shakespeare. What the videos are doing in these moments is establishing a set of protocols for their reception, and constructing a Shakespeare that is funny, concise and accessible to an audience. Crucial to this process is the persona of the 'Geeky Blonde', with its gesture towards two recognizable types of femininity within

contemporary (teen) culture. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena's unrequited love for Lysander is summed up by her claim, 'My life is a Taylor Swift song.' In *Hamlet*, Ophelia listens to Justin Bieber's track 'Baby' in order to avoid hearing her father's advice. 'I'm ADDICTED to these bad boys. This counts as revision right?' posts one viewer.<sup>146</sup> As another viewer comments, 'After watching all these videos, I now want to read Shakespeare.'<sup>147</sup> By drawing Shakespeare within the orbit of popular and, more specifically, teen culture, and peppering the exposition of plot with contemporary allusions, The Geeky Blonde makes Shakespeare seem less intimidating and pretentious.

The pop music references not only suggest that teenage girls constitute the target audience for the video, but also signal The Geeky Blonde's interest in sending up the traditional patriarchal Bard. Her act of parody might be interpreted as 'an empowering, even subversive, act of transgression', one that disrupts boundaries between high and popular culture.<sup>148</sup> At the same time, however, because parody presumes an audience 'with enough knowledge of the parodied texts to understand its references', it can reinstate those boundaries and appear 'culturally elitist in itself'.<sup>149</sup> Some of these terms are applicable to The Geeky Blonde series, in which the self-styled 'geek' assumes the role of interpreter, not only mediating the texts to her YouTube audience, but also determining which ones to perform. This is especially evident in her vlog-style video *I Fell for Hamlet* (uploaded 16 September 2012; 1,175 views), which parodies Michelle Ray's novel *Falling for Hamlet*.<sup>150</sup> Of further significance is the inclusion in each video of a copy of the play being performed, a signifier of textual authority from which the ensuing performance is derived. A potential effect is the production of a hierarchy of knowledge between the creator and the audience, a hierarchy that risks invoking an inflexible idea of the Shakespeare text, situating it in opposition to popular culture.

Yet, for the parody to work, and the gags to be effective, The Geeky Blonde's audience needs to appreciate both Shakespeare

and popular culture. The videos rely on both of these vocabularies. The pop culture references, while self-evident and more accessible than Shakespeare, are carefully matched to the Shakespearean context, so they only really work where the viewer appreciates how they relate back to the play. A familiarity with plot and character is therefore necessary – the cuts are so quick and the parts sometimes subtly differentiated that the performances would not make much sense otherwise. Fast-paced and ironic, current and accessible, ultimately *The Geeky Blonde* offers an unashamedly pop culture Shakespeare. Yet, in placing demands on the viewer, referring back to the text, or inserting an additional Shakespeare intertext into a performance, her series suggests a more literary, canonical Shakespeare in contradistinction to its ‘Sockspeare’. There are glimpses too of earnest performance, especially in those moments where Shakespearean verse is allowed to be heard or where the quick edits give way to a close-up of a character. Within this condensed Shakespeare, it is as if a fuller account of the plays is awaiting iteration.

## Mr Shakespeare reads

The *Geeky Blonde*’s Shakespeare reflects a wider tension regarding what Shakespeare means and how the plays are experienced in contemporary popular culture. The unease that sometimes attaches to the imbrication of Shakespeare in popular culture is bound up with a nostalgia for the lost aura of the Shakespearean text, as if to say that pop culture operates on a destructive logic that ultimately kills a putative textual origin (seeing the movie replaces reading or seeing the play, or watching a video clip replaces the movie). Critics writing on Shakespeare and film have noted that nostalgia is a recurring trope of filmic adaptations of the plays.<sup>151</sup> It can take different forms, as in a visual cue to an older medium. Invoking a surrogate or proxy for the author

constitutes another form of symbolic compensation for a lost aura. YouTube contains several Shakespeare surrogates. These invocations of the author represent one of the more curious aspects of pop culture responses. They also controvert one of the central tenets of literary theory: that the meaning of a text is not reducible to its author's life, experiences or attitudes. However, on some level, they reflect a desire to connect the individual literary imagination to the works. The mythic quality accorded to Shakespearean authorship in popular culture reflects a return to a Romantic period conception of the individual artist and his creative genius, one that is taken up by pop culture as an 'alternative to the dehumanizing effects of mass production and the profit-driven imperatives of advanced capitalism'.<sup>152</sup> YouTubers have taken to performing in the likeness of Shakespeare, quite literally enacting the 'bardic function', dovetailing their own creative intervention into mass media with the iconic image of Shakespeare or with a Shakespearean alias.

The channel *billyharper11* features 4 videos, each of which involves the user dressed as Shakespeare and lip-syncing to well-known tracks by Vanilla Ice, Snoop Dog and Barry White. In *Shakespeare does Barry White* (uploaded 28 August 2007; 1,032 views), we see Shakespeare, dressed in a doublet, and sporting large earphones, lip sync to 'Can't Get Enough of Your Love' while on a public bus in an American city.<sup>153</sup> A similarly playful investment in the human face behind the texts – or at least a simulacrum of the author drawn from popular culture representations – is offered in *Mr Shakespeare Reads*.<sup>154</sup> By adding the visual gimmick of Shakespearean disguise and hairstyle, these videos develop the established genre of the vernacular Shakespeare performance. What we have is an embodied performance of the Droeshout image from the First Folio, a curious animation of an authorial and textual corpus. Through the paratexts that accompany the videos, such as the channel description ('William Shakespeare reads "The Complete Works of Me". Sonnets, speeches, and prose, in full Elizabethan regalia') and the description below

each video ('William Shakespeare reading from ...'), we are encouraged to view the performances as the Bard taking up YouTube's invitation to 'Broadcast Yourself'. Holding his book, with a copy of the Folio image on the front, Shakespeare reads a sonnet, occasionally looking to the camera. It is no accident that thus far the series has focused on the *Sonnets*, for it is these texts that have proved most accommodating to the idea of the singular author as literary genius.

*Mr Shakespeare Reads* may signify little beyond the obvious visual gag. In part, the undertaking may be about acquiring the username 'Mr Shakespeare Reads' on YouTube and being the first to do so. Yet, as visual registers of the mythic author, the videos posit a Stratfordian Shakespeare, thus indirectly engaging with the authorship controversy, itself a space where the primacy of individual genius finds ongoing expression in the popular imagination.<sup>155</sup> The videos are contiguous with a theme-park Shakespeare, or those street performers who don Shakespeare disguises for the entertainment of visitors to Stratford-upon-Avon and other locations of the Shakespeare industry.<sup>156</sup> As in those instances, the simulacrum of 'the man himself' in *Mr Shakespeare Reads* reflects a desire for a grounding authenticity, which permits the illusion of unmediated access to the texts.

That desire is comically sent up in *Shakespeare Reborn*, a series of sketches that parody educational documentaries, especially their use of the expert talking to camera.<sup>157</sup> In the final sketch (uploaded 6 July 2012; 26 views), a Shakespeare doll talks from behind *The Complete Works*, expressing some bemusement about 'his' posthumous achievement.<sup>158</sup> The camera angle serves to minimize the doll in relation to the book, perhaps conveying how the work ultimately subsumes the writer, a phenomenon that has been traced back to the First Folio itself.<sup>159</sup> *Shakespeare Reborn* pushes the idea of the author to an absurdity, and its use of a Shakespeare doll (sold in tourist shops, galleries and online) enacts a distinctly postmodern sense of the author as fetishized commodity. This is taken a step further in *7 Ages of Man.wmv* (uploaded 16

February 2010; 4,884 views), a video that, when first opened, looks to be a simple still of the Chandos portrait combined with audio of the ‘Seven Ages of Man’ speech.<sup>160</sup> However, when we hit play, Shakespeare’s eyes and mouth move, in sync with the audio. What we have in this Shakespeare cyborg is no more than the product of computer software, of a YouTuber’s deft use of movie-generator software. Yet, there is also a sense here of the uncanny and of quotation as itself ghostly and disconcerting – the ‘return of the expressed’, to borrow Marjorie Garber’s adroit phrasing.<sup>161</sup> The video captures the state of Shakespeare in contemporary culture – as always already remediated through technologies of representation.

## Is YouTube Shakespeare global Shakespeare?

Refracted in these YouTube videos are some of the wider issues marking contemporary popular culture’s relation to Shakespeare. However, in exploring YouTube as one of the spaces where that relation occurs, we need to address how contemporary culture is being understood, especially in the context of the increasingly globalized sphere of cultural production. As Burgess and Green note, ‘YouTube is “global” in the sense that the Internet is – it is accessible from (almost) anywhere in the world.’ They also point out that it is ‘*globalizing* in that it allows virtual border-crossings between the geographical location of producers, distributors and consumers’.<sup>162</sup> Shakespeare is also understood as global to the extent that the transnational travels of Shakespearean texts and adaptations seem unremarkable. At the same time, we have become attentive to the specific localities of contributions to the ever accommodating, expanding reach of the Bard.<sup>163</sup> Sonia Massai has sought to complicate the relation of these global and local Shakespeares.<sup>164</sup> Others have argued for continuing reflection about our use of these terms. Mark

Houlahan wonders whether critics sometimes take ‘the global to be the multinational and the corporate, blandly disseminating sameness through the world, and the local to be the heroic, small scale attempts to sustain ... difference’.<sup>165</sup> Shakespeare may have become a global icon, but the operations of his cultural capital remain contingent on the local field of reception. For instance, within Shakespeare studies itself, differential values have applied to Anglophone and non-Anglophone materials, perhaps as a function of ‘Anglophone cultural globalization’ more generally.<sup>166</sup> However, Mark Thornton Burnett’s recent work on non-Anglophone Shakespeare films has importantly broadened understandings about Shakespeare and world cinema.<sup>167</sup> In relation to YouTube, the plenitude of the platform should signal access to vernacular Shakespeare productions from across the globe. For instance, the evolving ‘Global Shakespeares’ database has a YouTube channel that might draw users to the database and its video-archive of world performances.<sup>168</sup> However, despite these developments and YouTube’s own self-image as a global network, factors such as the site’s search function and the user’s IP address(es) limit the possibility of experiencing truly transnational content.<sup>169</sup> As one critic puts it, ‘assertions about the YouTube utopia breaking down geography are overstated’.<sup>170</sup>

As I have been arguing, the protocols of the site have implications for the kinds of Shakespeare that a user encounters there. YouTube content is a product of its users and in certain respects is subject to the wisdom of crowds. The search function may appear to require no further thought, but each search presumes a set of hidden arrangements regarding geographic location and language. Search defaults to the location of the user’s IP address and to the primary language of that location. There is an option enabling users to select the language in which they want to view the interface. A user can also change YouTube’s location by selecting one of the 57 countries or regions listed. The United States is not an option on this location menu, since it constitutes the unnamed home of the site and its presumptive ‘Worldwide’ default setting.

This raises the issue of YouTube's contributory role in the Americanization of global culture. YouTube is keen to position itself as global, stating '70 per cent of YouTube traffic comes from outside the US'.<sup>171</sup> Yet, localization or regionalized search, as well as the role of IP addresses in pinpointing a user's search location, complicate claims about YouTube's global reach.<sup>172</sup> As Burgess and Green argue, 'Localization ... may have the effect of filtering out non-US and non-English speaking content for US viewers, and make it decreasingly unnecessary for Western, English-speaking users to encounter cultural difference in their experience of the website.'<sup>173</sup> Sampling of YouTube content suggests that approximately '15 per cent of the videos were in any language other than English'.<sup>174</sup> The case study of the *As You Like It* search bears out perceptions as to the Anglophonic predominance of content on YouTube: 14 of the 20 items on the first search page are from the US or UK; one is Japanese; and the others are unspecified.

The risk here is that a user might be inclined to accept these results – admittedly only a snapshot – as requiring no critical reflection, since they are after all determined by algorithmic relevance. As discussed earlier, recent critical work on algorithms has sought to examine why they are 'being looked to as a credible knowledge logic' and to address the implications of this self-affirming perception for epistemology.<sup>175</sup> The Google algorithm is the most obvious example here, having assumed a symbolic role as a producer of 'how we come to know' and relatedly 'what we *can* know'.<sup>176</sup> There are instructive parallels for YouTube, not simply because it is owned by Google and is integrated into its algorithm, but also because search results on YouTube similarly come to be regarded as objective truths.

The objectivity and validity of search results is only intensified through the operation of 'personalization algorithms', which map and predict a user's searches to form an aggregate of pre-stated preferences that tell the user what they mean and what they want.<sup>177</sup> The personalization of search is evident through the predictive search (as a user begins to type in a

search) and also the videos that appear alongside a search with the message 'Recommended for you'. By viewing the site from an IP address in Ireland, for example, results are localized and weighted in favour of Anglophone content, even when the search filter is set to 'Worldwide'. A consequence of this arrangement for YouTube Shakespeare is that while a search appears to offer a genuinely diverse global picture, in reality the displayed results involve a certain complexion of the global. Moreover, since algorithms need users and their searches, it is also the case that, as searchers, we are becoming habituated to a kind of search parochialism.<sup>178</sup>

For all of its apparent newness, then, YouTube Shakespeare may involve a structural privileging of Anglophone content and, by extension, a positioning of the English language as a world language through which other cultures are filtered or made comprehensible. This has a bearing on understandings of YouTube's clip culture that generates an archive of Shakespeare materials. The accidental nature of that archive has already been recognized. It might now be necessary to recognize its potential to create a cultural memory of Shakespeare that is skewed towards the English-language centres of Shakespeare's performance and adaptation histories. As such, we may need to consider complementing our use of YouTube as a Shakespeare archive with curated sites like the 'Global Shakespeares' performance archive or the international database of Shakespeare on film and TV.<sup>179</sup> Rather than a blind acceptance of a first set of results, purposeful and active searching becomes crucial. After all, our searches as users are always legible to algorithms and are fed back into their computational provision of knowledge: 'Algorithms are made and remade in every instance of their use because every click, every query, changes the tool incrementally.'<sup>180</sup> In this regard, users play a role in determining what matters in the new knowledge economy.

However, while Anglophone Shakespeare film is well represented in the archive, indeed repetitively so, it would be misguided to dismiss YouTube Shakespeare as purely Anglophone, or as an Americanized Shakespeare. The

filmography of Shakespeare and world cinema compiled by Mark Burnett provides a useful case study for exploring the global potentiality of YouTube Shakespeare. By analysing films from Latin America, China, India and several European locations, Burnett's work importantly reorients understandings of Shakespeare from the traditional 'US-UK axis'.<sup>181</sup> The filmography includes 75 titles. By undertaking a search of each title on YouTube, I was able to determine that 56 of the films are available on the site as official trailers or excerpted clips.<sup>182</sup> In the case of 8 of the titles, the entire film is available, though it is sometimes divided into parts. On the one hand, the availability of non-Anglophone Shakespeare films suggests the depth of YouTube's archive, which the language used in searching and the genericism of the search function itself may obscure.<sup>183</sup> YouTube is a potential discovery space for filmic adaptations of Shakespeare outside of an established canon – consider the example of *Gedebe*, a Malaysian film adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, which is available in full and with English subtitles.<sup>184</sup> On the other hand, YouTube instances and accentuates the differential value that has attached to Anglophone and non-Anglophone Shakespeare films. For example, the Mexican film *Amar te Duele* is available in full, but this adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* does not have the recursive frequency on YouTube that Luhrmann's film enjoys. Furthermore, non-Anglophone films do not generate anything approaching the culture of vernacular remix and amateur performance associated with their Anglophone peers.<sup>185</sup>

Of course, this differential value extends beyond the particularities of YouTube's search function to encompass the fortunes of a particular film, as well as the vicissitudes of the global cinematic marketplace.<sup>186</sup> Just as some Anglophone Shakespeare films have greater appeal than others, so it is the case with non-Anglophone ones. The relative profile of Shakespeare films 'suggests fundamental variations in the universal cultural imprimatur with which Shakespeare is invariably associated'.<sup>187</sup> While the concept of the global may privilege certain perspectives at the expense of others, or lead

to certain films being prized over others, we need to avoid positing too stark a binary of Anglophone/non-Anglophone Shakespeare films. To do so is to obscure the inter-citational dimensions of these films. For instance, *Chicken Rice War*, Chee Kong Cheah's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, ironically references *Shakespeare in Love* and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.<sup>188</sup> Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* may make much of its Manhattan location, but its cultural referents are thoroughly intercultural, encompassing a Vietnamese Buddhist monk as well as Irish subtexts.<sup>189</sup> The Tibetan *Hamlet* film, *Prince of the Himalayas*, contains a visual cue to Julie Taymor's *Titus*, referencing that film's treatment of Lavinia in its own treatment of Ophelia's drowning.<sup>190</sup> Additionally, too stark a distinction obscures the workings of 'transnationalizing strategies' where, as in other Asian Shakespeare films such as *The Banquet*, film-makers endeavour to appeal to an international as well as local constituency.<sup>191</sup>

YouTube signals opportunities to pursue such connections further, with the playlist function within a channel allowing for compilations of Shakespeare and film organized thematically or by play title rather than by geographic or national designations. Yet the availability of these films raises issues regarding copyright infringement, as well as the exploitation of the costs and labour that have been incurred in their making. This is a problem for all commercial content producers, but it becomes especially acute in relation to independent film-makers working from small budgets. We need to acknowledge the evolving culture of openly available content – sometimes posted without permission of the copyright holder, sometimes made available by the studio or director – and its bearing on which examples of Shakespeare and world cinema get noticed (and by implication get watched, analysed and taught) over others. YouTube's embedded codes make it extremely easy to share content across platforms, which suggests that even those films available as clips or trailers can be showcased for teaching or research purposes. Teachers and researchers can thus play a role in bringing these films to the attention of the

field and creating new audiences for them, yet they also have a responsibility to use the available content within the terms of fair use.

Sometimes used to emphasize the constituent elements within the global, sometimes invoked as an idealized alternative to the forces of globalization, localization has become an attractive concept in Shakespeare studies. There is something desirable in a future imagined for Shakespeare studies, where 'qualifying adjectives as Asian, European, African or even global' are no longer necessary, not least in its positing of a diffuse, dispersed Shakespearean 'home' and the disruption of a normative centre.<sup>192</sup> Yet there is a risk too that by dropping such culturally specific designations, we lose sight of the different histories of Shakespeare's global reception and, more worryingly, allow new forms of cultural imperialism to emerge (as in YouTube's worldwide setting that could signal North American cultural hegemony passing itself off as global). The present inquiry into the availability of non-Anglophone Shakespeare films highlights just some of the dilemmas posed by the global in YouTube Shakespeare, where search is located or regionalized. If YouTube is to be used as a teaching and learning resource, rather than automatically accepting the validity of predictive search, critical reflection about its status as archive will be necessary. Careful, deep and targeted searches are required in order to broaden what YouTube Shakespeare encompasses.

Non-English performances do appear in generic searches: under 'Hamlet', for example, though productions by the RSC, the Globe and American companies predominate, a user will also encounter a promotional trailer for Tomaz Pandur's visually inventive 2009 production at the Teatro Español.<sup>193</sup> However, for YouTube Shakespeare to become a discovery space requires an active user, one who is willing to defamiliarize their sense of Shakespeare. Among the numerous examples of the kind of discoveries possible is the case of the Thai film *Shakespeare Must Die*.<sup>194</sup> Set in a country resembling contemporary Thailand, the plot features an internalized