Stephen O'Neill

# Uploading *Hamlet*: Agency, Convergence and YouTube Shakespeare

[1] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHjIj3fpR8>, 6 November 2011. I have provided the links to the uploads referred to in this essay and, where possible, have sought the permission of the various users through YouTube itself.

[2] Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2009), xviii.

[3] Alexander Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge, Ms.: MIT Press, 2011), <http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/#>, 7 November 2011.

[4] See <http://mashable.com/2010/10/05/lady-gaga-justin-bieber-youtube/>. On what constitutes a view on YouTube, see the report by Tubemogul available at <http://www.tubemogul.com/research/report/35-What-Counts-as-a-View-Updated->, 7 November 2011.

[5] See Christy Desmet, "Paying Attention in Shakespeare Parody: From Tom Stoppard to YouTube", *Shakespeare Survey*, 61 (2008), 227-238; Lauren Shohet, "YouTube, Use, and the Idea of the Archive", *Shakespeare Studies*, 38 (2010), 68-76; Ayanna Thompson, "Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on YouTube", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 61.3 (2010), 337-356, and the updated version of this essay in the same author's *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145-167; and Barbara Hogdon, "(You)Tube Travel: The 9:59 to Dover Beach, Stopping at Fair Verona and Elsinore", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28.3 (2010), 313-330.

"To Tube or not to Tube, that is the question?", or so asks YouTube user Xelanderthomas in his upload, modifying that most instantly recognizable of Shakespearean lines to address and defend online expression and vlog (video blog) especially. "Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of asinine comments | Or to take arms against a sea of idiots | And, by posting, end them".[1] There is a long history to the expropriation of Hamlet's words. "Shakespeare sampled, Shakespeare quoted without quotation marks", as Marjorie Garber reminds us, "has become the lingua franca of modern cultural exchange".[2] But our exchange with Shakespeare is increasingly experienced in and through a fluid mediascape, a mediascape that includes YouTube, the most popular video-sharing platform on the web. Most students or teachers of Shakespeare will be familiar with the Shakespeare film or theatre production reappearing in clip form on YouTube. Accessing Shakespeare through such a platform might be construed as "Shakespeare-lite", with the plays condensed to short clips, quite literally minimized by the YouTube screen, or set alongside humorous, often-ridiculous content. "What would *Hamlet* look like if it were performed by cats?" Cue *Hamlet* performed by animated talking cat-heads. This is typical of the YouTube video: "easy to get, in both senses of the word: simple-to-understand – an idea reduced to an icon or gag – while also effortless to get to: one click! … Understandable in a heartbeat, knowable without thinking, this is media already encrusted with social meaning or feeling".[3] This upload has over 2.9 million views, relatively small in comparison to the 1 billion view counts for pop stars like Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber, but a significant view count nonetheless.[4]

With such numbers alone, Shakespeare studies is entering a brave new world as it begins to explore the implications of YouTube.[5] That we can move from a YouTube user's re-working of *Hamlet* to cats to the latest stars of Pop's circuit is to get a sense of that new world, the potential matrix of connections that it enables, and the layers of meaning in play. A search under 'Shakespeare' produces 73,700 results or, in the lexicon of YouTube and its networked economy of video tags, the equivalent of 39,600 items tagged with the keyword 'Shakespeare'. "Dr Seuss vs Shakespeare: Epic Rap Battles of History #12" currently ranks the highest Shakespeare view count, with over 15 million views.[6] On YouTube, users access and interact with a living repository of Shakespeare material and, perhaps more interestingly, produce new forms of do-it-yourself Shakespeare. The platform is fast becoming one of the dominant media through which Shakespeare is iterated, produced and received in the twenty-first century. Thus far, however, scholarly forays into the world of YouTube Shakespeare have not paid sufficient attention to

questions of medium: what does it mean to access Shakespeare through an online video-sharing and participatory platform like YouTube? Furthermore, if YouTube is a space to "Broadcast Yourself", to what extent are Shakespearean materials being creatively redacted and deployed by YouTubers and to what ends? And, through these processes, what might be happening to Shakespeare's cultural authority?

In order to pursue these questions, I want to examine the sampling of *Hamlet* on YouTube and in particular the remediation of "To be or not to be" by analyzing a selection of uploads by YouTube users. My project might be regarded as a companion piece to work already undertaken by Alan R. Young on pop culture responses to Ophelia.[7] I have chosen to focus on *Hamlet* and its signature soliloquy because I am interested in exploring the extent to which the play's well-documented iconic status and considerable cultural afterlife is recycled on YouTube. In numerical terms alone, the cultural reach of *Hamlet* seems assured: for instance, there are 6,500 videos tagged under 'Shakespeare Hamlet' compared to 1,500 for 'King Lear'.[8] However, I am less concerned with quantative evaluations than with how Hamlet's questions might signify in uploads by YouTube users. In what follows, I want to explore to what extent the medium of the soliloquy, a medium that enables Hamlet's ontology, offers a template for creative expression via YouTube.

## "To be or not to be remixed": *Hamlet* and the Medium of YouTube

The numbers outlined above indicate the extent to which the individual viewer or interpreter is faced with a copia of Shakespeare content from which to make their selections. The unbounded nature of YouTube can be daunting. But there are already websites such as Luke McKernan's Bardbox that seek to do the job of selection for us, archiving "the best examples" of Shakespeare online videos.[9] Further, dedicated YouTube channels offer a way of curating material and of constructing categories of Shakespeare content through playlists.[10] My principle of selection here is based on what I have noticed as an individual YouTube user and on the *Hamlet* content that I have found particularly interesting. There are, then, subjective value judgments in play. But it is also important to acknowledge that the specific features of the YouTube interface – including the Suggested videos feature, video tagging, and users comment – may have shaped my selection and implicitly determined the analytical categories in what follows. At stake here is the wider issue as to how YouTube works as a video-sharing technology and also the relationship between such media platforms and individual users. YouTube functions, like the internet more generally, as a networked information economy, where digital objects can be easily distributed and manipulated. Users tag content, which allows for fast indexing and, as an organization, YouTube relies heavily on user ratings. In "An Anthropology of YouTube", Michael Wesch demonstrates how view counts for uploads can be manipulated by individual users. For Wesch, this is just one instance of a negotiation between the individual media or YouTube user and a seemingly externalized network. Wesch captures this relation in the phrase

[6] <http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=shakespeare&aq=f>, 7 November 2011.

[7] <https://sites.google.com/site/opheliaandpopularculture/home>, 7 November 2011.

[8] <http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=hamlet&search=tag> 7 November 2011.

[9] <http://bardbox.wordpress.com/>.

[10] See my YouTube channel <http://www.youtube.com/user/Shakespeareonutube?feature=mhee>.

[11] Michael Wesch, "An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU&feature=player_embedded>, 7 November 2011.

[12] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

[13] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

[14] The phrase is from Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

"the machine is us/ing us". Media platforms like YouTube are, he convincingly suggests, about "mediating human relations"; we are all individuals but we are also now networked individuals.[11]

Wesch' suggestion of a less dichotomous conceptualization of relations between users and mass media is supported by Henry Jenkins's influential concept of convergence. Jenkins proposes convergence as a paradigm for understanding our use of and relation to media and as such it is important to any analysis of YouTube as a medium. It is also a formulation that might be useful to Shakespeare studies as we seek to explore the flow of Shakespearean texts across new media. According to Jenkins, we live in "convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways".[12] In this paradigm, there is no Samson and Goliath battle between a disenfranchised media user or impassive spectator and established big-media players. For Jenkins, the media consumer is an active participant that seeks out new content, re-purposes 'old', and forges new connections with other media users. "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual users and through their social interactions with others".[13] Crucially, then, convergence culture is also a "participatory culture", signaling the connections between an increasingly accessible digital media, user-generated content and media industries.[14] It is less about a top-down or bottom up understanding of media than an attempt to frame the complex interactions between multiple media agents.

It is in this context that YouTube can be usefully described as a "convergence superconductor" (Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube*). On the platform, old or existing content in the form of television and film can be shared among users, be they individuals or commercial media players. Such content can be creatively redacted or combined with other media content, processes that simultaneously result in something recognizable as new but that also comments back on its originating media. Search on YouTube for "Hamlet" and you will experience convergence culture at first hand. There are uploads featuring clips from *Hamlet* films shared and favourited by YouTube users. Cue a ready-made archive of performances by Richard Burton, Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Ethan Hawke, and David Tennant, just one of the ways in which YouTube can function as a pedagogical resource for Shakespeareans. But freeze frame the YouTube interface on the Hamlet search and, alongside these materials, the user encounters uploads such as a Klingon "To be or not to be" as a fan homage to *Star Trek VI*, a clip from the cult film *Whitnail and I*, with Richard E. Grant's Hamlet monologue, and Second Life or Mabinogi *Hamlet*. This is a Shakespeare in mixed company. What emerges is a web of connections that might enable a user to apprehend the complex hermeneutic field that is *Hamlet* and its cultural afterlife. Yet rather than a productive dialogue between intertexts, we might be dealing with a case of saturation and the displacement of a grounding textual authority.

A comparison with films such as Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* and *Hamlet* films by Michael Almereyda (2000) and Alexander Fodor (2006) is available here. Critics have

noted how these films exhibit a consciousness of media forms and seem especially concerned with emphasizing that their own relation to a putative original is heavily filtered through a set of intertexts or the processes in culture through which a Shakespearean play is received and interpreted.[15] The use of 'old' technologies in Almereyda's *Hamlet* has been amply discussed by critics;[16] and an excellent analysis of Fodor's *Hamlet* has been provided by Maurizio Calbi.[17] These films provide one type of encounter with intertextuality and complicate any singular notion of a stable Shakespearean original. But with YouTube, a much more interactive and participant encounter with the intertexts that constitute 'Shakespeare', including the movies mentioned above, is available. As media theorist John Hartley argues, writing more generally of user-generated technologies, You Tube "allows everyone to perform their own Bardic function".[18] Suggesting the possibilities of individual agency within the culture industry, the "Bardic function" as applied to Shakespeare can denote the appropriation of a cultural token that is perceived as powerful precisely because its high culture associations coalesce so readily with its increasingly popular culture manifestations. Through You Tube, a variety of roles variously associated with the cultural reception of Shakespeare – performer, producer, auteur, editor, translator – are available everyday. If recent *Hamlet* films position us as spectators of Shakespeare's modern and postmodern manifestations, YouTube positions us as active users, free to navigate pathways through these multiple Shakespeares and even to create our own Shakespeare content. However, it is important to note here that such navigation and creation occurs through the medium-*specific* features of the YouTube interface and its protocols, such as content rating, favouriting, and commenting. Moreover, since content, however disparate, always appears "YouTube branded", a supra-consciousness in the experience of the site is also at work.[19]

YouTube users exercise the "bardic function" in a number of ways that are indicative to established practices on the platform and among the YouTube community. For instance, Mrx2848 gives us "To be or not to be remixed", which splices together or converges performances by Lawrence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Mel Gibson and Ethan Hawke from successive *Hamlet* films.[20] This is an instance of mash-up, a practice that is associated with the use of audio-editing software to splice and merge pop songs.[21] However, the term can be applied more generally to describe the mixing of materials from different media sources that is such a feature of content on YouTube. Mash-up culture is also evident in slittle's "hamlet: bad romance".[22] In this upload, the track of Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" is combined with edits from the RSC/BBC *Hamlet* starring David Tennant. The upload can also be understood more specifically as an example of the YouTube phenomenon of the fan-video, where users take a pop song and converge it with their own content, or modify the 'official' video itself, which in the first instance may have been posted by the artist or record company.

Hamlet mashed-up, Hamlet remixed as a "Bad Romance" video: we might well ask what there is of interest or of value for Shakespeareans, beyond noticing how such material evidences how Shakespeare is, to recall Garber's phrase, the

[15] See Peter Donaldson, "'All Which It Inherit': Shakespeare, Globes and Global Media", *Shakespeare Survey,* 52 (1999), 183-200; Rowe and Cartelli, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 55-68.

[16] See Mark Thornton Burnett, "'To Hear and See the Matter': Communicating Technology in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*", *Cinema Journal*, 42.3 (2003), 48-69; and Katherine Rowe, "'Remember me': Technologies of Memory in Michael Almeryeda's *Hamlet*", in *Shakespeare: The Move II*, ed. by Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (London: Routledge, 2003), 37-55.

[17] See Maurizio Calbi's discussion of the film's auto-reflections on the processes of recycling and adapting Shakespeare in his essay, "Shakespeare in the Extreme: Addiction, Ghosts and (Re) Mediation in Alexander Fodor's *Hamlet*", *Literature Film Quarterly*, 39.2 (2011), 85-98.

[18] John Hartley, "Uses of You Tube: Digital Literacy and the Growth of Knowledge", in Burgess and Green, *You Tube*, 133.

[19] Martin Lister et al., *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2009), 228.

[20] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Hdhrd-dPI> , 7 November 2011.

[21] See John Shiga, "Copy-and-Persist: the Logic of Mash-Up Culture", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24.2 (2007), 93-114. See also discussions of the practice in terms of its corporate uses at <http://www.deitel.com/ResourceCenters/Web20/Mashups/MashupsArticles/tabid/980/Default.aspx>, 7 November 2011.

22 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tlw6dCfk0Wo> ,7 November 2011.

23 The field of Shakespeare studies has recently proved accommodating to what might be broadly described as popular culture forms and appropriations of the Bard. See Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Stephen Purcell, *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

24 See Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theatre to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 89-129.

25 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 22.

26 Margaret Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-2.

27 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7gvq2cGA7E&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL>, 7November 2011

"lingua franca of modern exchange" or a recurring, if ultimately empty, cultural signifier. However, I would argue that YouTube content is of value to the field of Shakespeare studies because it provides a point of connection between new media forms and Shakespeare, a connection that, for the so called Generation M, may well render Shakespearean texts more accessible and relevant.[23] This connection need not be reductive nor superficial. The world of mash-up and convergence culture can be used as a segue into complex questions regarding the spectral quality of the Shakespearean 'original' and the circulation of authority, questions that have been of significant interest within the field.[24] Derrida's discussion of the "signature of the Thing 'Shakespeare'" as that which renders adaptations, translations and interpretations "possible and intelligible without ever being reducible to them" comes to mind.[25] And, more recently, Margaret Kidnie has addressed the specter of the 'original' *Hamlet* that seems to ghost its cultural afterlife: she interestingly notes that in writing about productions or adaptations of the play, critics and reviewers often turn to a "discourse of survival", as if the 'thing itself' survives the transforming capacities of a given performance or adaptation. "The idea that *Hamlet* 'survives' performance", Kidnie remarks, "seems enabled by the unspoken belief that the play exists somewhere – or rather, somewhere *else* – apart from its (or perhaps just this) production".[26] But within the logic of mash-up, a logic of media smash and grab, questions about a Shakespearean original and the implicit nostalgia for a lost aura that they carry, seem redundant. In "To be or Not to be" by Gr8bigtreehugger, CGI and artificial voice software – enabled by software programmes iclone and CrazyTalk – are combined to produce Hamlet as automaton.[27]



Fig. 1: gr8tbigtreehugger, *To Be Or Not To Be,* YouTube upload.

The same user's "Shakespeare Superheroes" operates along similar lines.[28] This upload features a CGI of the Marvel comic book and movie figure The Incredible Hulk. The by-line declares how The Hulk "gives up the tawdry world of superheroes and returns to his roots on the stage" and the ironic hyperbole continues through to the title sequence, movie-style voice over indicating "Shakespeare superheroes", and the revelation of "Hulk Hamlet". With mash-up, we encounter Hamlet as media, as data to be shared, redacted, converged, a Hamletmachine if you will.[29]

There is playfulness to this content that, like the feline *Hamlet* mentioned earlier, reminds us that YouTube is largely an entertainment platform. Content, as Alexander Juhasz points out, can be less about the meaningful, more about the immediate, and immediate laughs.[30] But from the perspective of a Shakespearean looking at these uploads, I cannot help but locate meaning in the (knowing) reduction of some of the most famous words in literature to the automated, robotic soundings of a computer-generated talking head. The upload lends itself to interpretation as postmodern parody, using the culture of mash-up to comment on Hamlet's words as endlessly recycled and clichéd. But other *Hamlet* uploads seem to use mash-up culture in ways that suggest that those words can still have a resonance. JeffMaus's "Shakespeare's Hamlet – 'To be or not to be…'"[31] combines a series of images from film and TV with a voiceover, which is the audio of Kenneth Branagh's performance from his 1996 film. The images variously suggest drug addiction, alcohol dependency and psychic disturbance. Other non-diegetic elements include Lou Reed's "Heroin" and a quote from Kurt Vonnegut on smoking as a form of delayed self-annihilation, which are cited in the detailed version of the by-line accompanying the upload. The combination of these elements is indicative of mash-up culture and user-generated content on YouTube, where existing media content is cited in a process of creative redaction. The montage of filmic images visualize rather than compete with Hamlet's words and, in the process, suggest or even assert an interpretation of them. Further, I think the effect of the images, especially the opening shot of a man injecting himself and the close-up of a needle superimposed over other images of people drinking and in states of distress, is to imbue Branagh's somewhat dispassionate performance with pathos as the viewer is prompted to reflect on suffering and psychological torment.

*Hamlet* thus functions here as one of the intertexts – along with the remediated films and the Reed and

[28] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCmcCtB1Wco>, 7 November 2011.

[29] Heiner Mueller, *Hamletmachine*, in Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000.)

[30] Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube*.

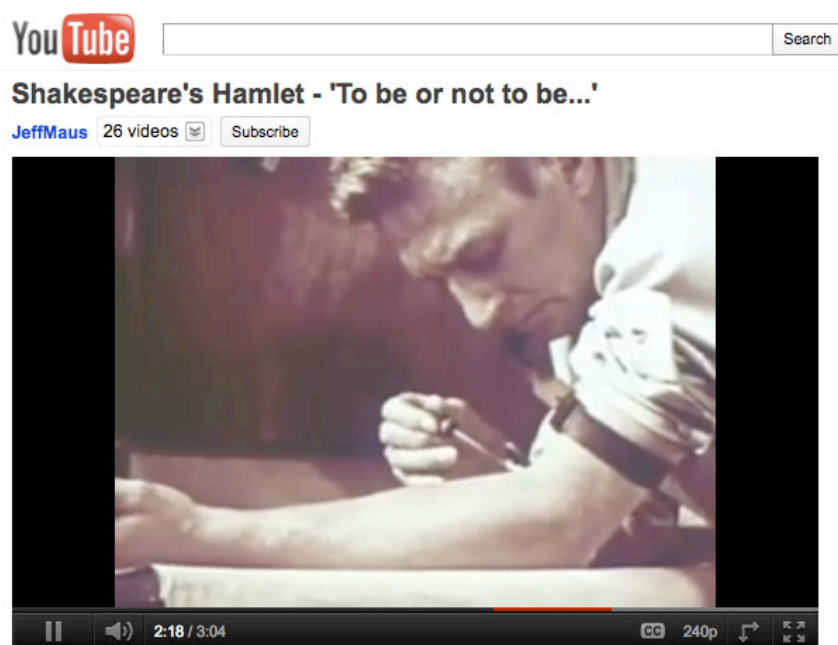[31] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecqpCnJyhbc>.

Fig. 2: JeffMaus, *Shakespeare's* Hamlet – *'To be or not to be…'*, YouTube upload.

Vonnegut quotes – that enable a reflection on the human death-drive. Viewer comments, which are a key feature of YouTube as an interactive platform and online community, afford us some insight into reactions to the upload:

> A superb take on the famous soliloquy. It works perfectly; it has to be remembered just what was made when first written.Thanx for this...another view of genius.Surreal, spine-tingling and very well made.A masterpiece. X.
> PennyTraition 3 years ago

> My friend, the hurt seems like it will never go, life is tragically all the more beautiful & seemingly fragile for this. I've heard time is a great healer yet, so much of it is needed to heal a life of such Ills. A moment of peace & quiet, we beg that may it last a little longer, sadly it doesn't. For to long I was heart sick broken & weary that I in anguish opened my soul to the universe & Implored, pleaded "heal me" I was answered beyond the constraints of words. (Amsterdam, Ibogaine Oct 08) BlueEyedCelt 2 years ago

> Thank you! I appreciate your sharing your vision with the world. I feel more enriched by having experienced your work.In the info you state this being somewhat out of context; I feel the context is taken to a whole, different level.
> Five Stars and Favorite!
> forloveoffilm 2 years ago

With these comments, it is apparent that YouTube material can be meaningful for some viewers or users. But equally, the comments reveal how we have moved from Hamlet's soliloquy and the ontology that it expresses into the realm of user posts, online identities, and a sense of YouTube as an online community. The Hamletmachine can also be about mediating relations between humans.

## Hamlet, Prince of Vloggers

JeffMaus's upload could be interpreted as the video diary Hamlet might have made, if such technology was available to him. In this way, the upload recalls some of the recent *Hamlet* films already mentioned, among them Almereyda's starring Ethan Hawke, where the personal video is, as Katherine Rowe notes, "the technology of interiority among a variety of modern media, including telephones, television, photography, film, and so on".[32] The technology available to Shakespeare was of course the soliloquy, the supreme device of the early modern stage that gave audiences access to a character's motivations or thoughts and that, in the process, gave the suggestion of a deeper self, of "that within".[33] What Almereyda does is to update or overlay this earlier, Shakespearean medium with the newer medium of video, just as Shakespeare might be regarded as having updated or re-configured the direct address of medieval pageant and morality plays. This is the process of remediation, where a new form of representation authenticates itself in relation to "earlier technologies of representation", or re-purposes those technologies and their cultural functions.[34] The vlog, an established practice on YouTube but with antecedents in the 1990s such as the video diaries of Sadie Benning, might be regarded as a remediation of the soliloquy, silently harnessing the properties of

[32] Rowe, "'Remember me': Technologies of Memory in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*", 46. See also Peter Donaldson, "Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries: Video Art, Authenticity and 'Wisdom' in Almereyda's *Hamlet*", in Diana E. Henderson, ed., *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 216-237.

[33] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thompson, 2006), I.2.85.

[34] Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Ms.: MIT Press, 2000), 46.

the dramatic monologue for online performance.[35] Enabling various forms of self-expression, self-referentiality, and performance, the vlog captures much of what YouTube is about as "a platform for nonprofessional, democratic media making".[36] Typically, the video creator speaks directly into a web-cam or hand-help camera, a device that can be seen as empowering: as Michael Wesch argues, "anyone with a webcam now has a stronger voice and presence".[37] Users might also perform to a pop song and, as in the cases of "Numa Numa" or Beyonce's "All the Single Ladies", such performances can end up being emulated across the YouTube community.[38]

*Hamlet* and more specifically the form of soliloquy might be functioning in the same way as these pop songs, providing a language or template for users to fill or deploy for their own purposes. "Hamlet the video blogger" is an upload from YouTube user livingpassion. The vlog opens with titles that address the YouTube community: "*Hamlet – The Video Blogger. I'm sorry guys, I HAD to go nerdy for a minute*". And viewers respond in the language of vlogging: "What a piece of work is vlogging, how uploaded and how true? To comment, or not to comment, that is the question. To vlog, to post, perchance to be featured; there's the rub! Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished... Great job! (Kenrg 4 years ago)".[39] In Xelanderthomas's upload "To Tube or not to tube", with which I began, the metaphysical and ontological dilemmas of Hamlet's soliloquy are recast in the service of vlogging.

The video is described by its creator as "a hopefully witty and humorous nod of support and encouragement to the courage it sometimes takes for some to upload a video" and as a defence of a "barely surviving right we have ... free speech".[40] In the video itself, Xelanderthomas does not deliver the monologue direct to camera but rather adopts a sideways pose that is reminiscent of Rodin's *The Thinker*, perhaps an appropriate gesture in the context of the video's concerns.

For other users, YouTube is a platform to engage their own performance of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare more generally and can thus be seen as the latest phase of an established history of performances of Shakespeare's plays by people that are not theatrical professionals but have nonetheless "committed themselves to incorporating these plays into their own lives and those of their own immediate societies".[41] Non-professional Shakespeare performance can take different forms on YouTube, such as the "classroom-inspired

[35] On the vlog as a specific example of "vernacular creativity", see Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 25-26; on Sadie Benning, see Donaldson, "Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries", 219-221.

[36] Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube.*

[37] Wesch, "An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube".

[38] See Douglas Wolk, "The Complete and Utter History of Numa Numa", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRUy0It0wJ4>, 7 November 2011.

[39] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVYR5ktkXA8>, 7 November 2011.

[40] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHjIj3fpR8> ,7 November 2011.

[41] Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

Fig. 3: Xelanderthomas, *Hamlet Prince of YouTube*, YouTube upload.

[42] Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 167.

[43] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYXFFhP7aq8 >, 7 November 2011.

[44] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa-cfEncd6Y >, 7 November 2011.

[45] See Adam Hansen, *Shakespeare and Popular Music* (London: Continuum, 2010), 66-74.

[46] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjMKBCyf2pQ>, 7 November 2011.

[47] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDlK-4N0aFE> , 7 November 2011.

performance video", which Ayanna Thompson discusses as "a genre in and of itself".[42] For others again, there are less defined or institutionalised motivations but they do seem to combine the user's interest in Shakespeare with a desire to display or publicize the performance as a means of self-publication and presentation. "This is something I was compelled to do", explains YouTube user Navajo Poet Rutherford Ashley in the by-line to his performance of "To be". "It is a creepy monologue, but I find the drama of it a real challenge".[43] In "Hamlet on the Street", Craig Bazan's performs the Hecuba speech against some derelict buildings in Camden, New Jersey.[44] Alongside these instances of what might be described as naturalistic presentations, there are uploads that consciously draw on other forms of expression, such as rap and Hip-hop, both well established practices in remediating Shakespeare, to perform the soliloquy.[45] In "'To be or Not to be' Hamlet Rap", the text of the soliloquy is retained and the style of rap converges with Shakespearean verse.[46] But in "Robbie Hamlet rap", by dmcm720, the soliloquy is performed solely through the idiom of hip-hop and translated: "Is it better to be alive or dead? "To be or not to be" is how it was said".[47]

A consciousness of the Shakespeare form of soliloquy is present even as it is overwritten by the comparatively new medium of the rap. And, in the process, the user loses nothing of the dilemma that is expressed in that soliloquy: "What choice do I have but to keep going on | I'll do nothing about it and keep being the pawn".
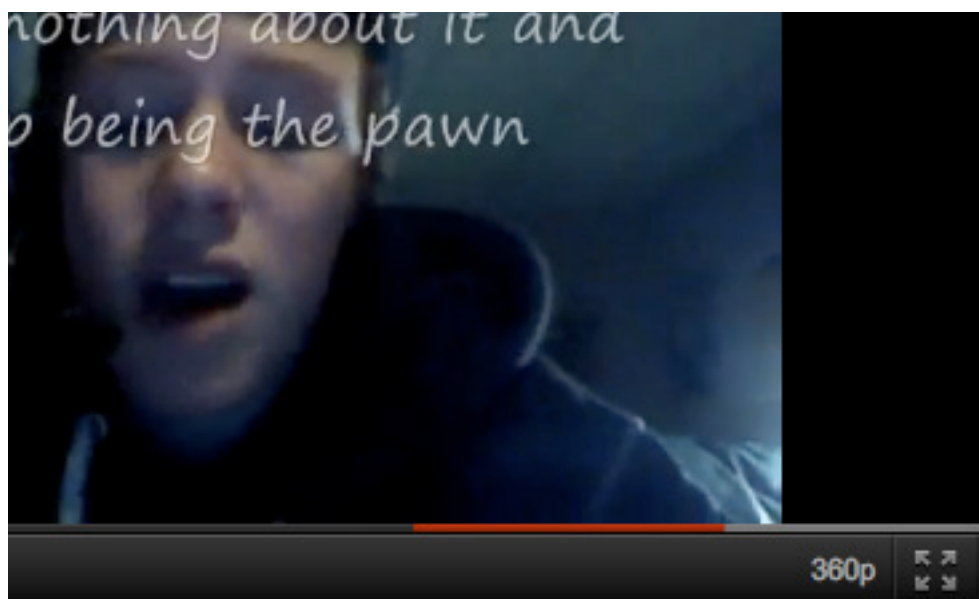


Fig. 4: dmcm720, *Robbie Hamlet rap*, YouTube upload.

For the creator of these video performances, it as if they are operating within a private space, yet it is an extraordinarily public one. For the viewer, looking at the vlog on a small-screen within the YouTube interface, the effect can be one of immediacy and liveness: it is as if the person within the screen has opened a window on to their life or allowed us to eavesdrop on their performance. But as the

reference to the YouTube interface reminds us, the vlog is shared and experienced through a medium, with its specific features and busy, disparate, commercial and non-commercial content; it is a mediated event even though it appears to suggest immediacy. What is occurring here might be usefully framed in terms of what Philip Auslander describes more generally as a blurring of distinctions between the live and the mediatized, which he regards as a feature of contemporary cultural production.[48] YouTube vloggers have been especially adept at negotiating and blurring such boundaries as well as those between public and private selves, the authentic and inauthentic. The case of LonelyGirl15, whose emotive vlogs turned out to be a project by two independent film makers, is an extreme example of this.[49]

Watching *Hamlet* uploads, I think we also encounter a blurring of categories, and our notions of the amateur and professional actor begin to shift. For some users, such as Shaktim, the self-styled "Hamlet of YouTube", YouTube is a platform to display and archive their skills as an actor.[50] Shaktim or actor Tim Maloney has uploaded 365 takes of "To be", conveying what he describes elsewhere as the "agonies and the ecstasies of playing the Bard". In "Hamlet 285 – The Only Living Boy", a reference to the Simon and Garfunkel track used in the upload, we are given insight into how an actor prepares for a role. But the performance itself is preceded by a disclosure of the processes of filming as, web cam on, our actor tries to find his frame. The sense of an authentic, immersive performance is thus unsettled. YouTube is also a platform of mixed content and, as we have already seen, it is also used by non-professional actors or by users who, like Rutherford, want to meet the challenge of iterating the soliloquy. But performances within the vlog culture of YouTube can also be playful and ironic: where Hamlet's dilemma has him speak of a "pause" (III.1.67), in uploads such as "One Minute To be or not to be" by Dionfly[51] or DaveMcDevitt's "Fast Hamlet",[52] YouTube users speed up the thought process to the point of parody. We are in the company of a Reduced Shakespeare. Irony and playfulness are also at work in "Hamlets vlog" by vasniltere, where "To be" is delivered direct to camera in what the user admits was a state of inebriation.[53] This is "one of my spurts of random creativity", the user states in the description but I think the upload works as a parody of Received Pronunciation and the Standard English associated with an older style of Shakespeare performance.

These latter examples are a reminder that YouTube is primarily an entertainment platform and leisure activity. But this need not suggest that such performances are insignificant: they may well carry, however unconsciously, a politics. In relation to the home-dance video, for instance, Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier argue that posting performances on YouTube is not only a strategy of self-expression but also one of "self-distantiation beyond the exhaustive, hierarchical procedures of traditional media institutions".[54] And, perhaps something similar is at work when YouTube users turn to *Hamlet* and remediate the soliloquy. It is as if there is some symbolic affinity between Hamlet's anxious desire to determine an identity for himself and the invitation of the You Tube platform: "Broadcast Yourself". The key point here is about the possibilities of the Bardic function or, more precisely,

[48] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

[49] See Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 27-30.

[50] <http://www.youtube.com/user/shaktim>, 7 November 2011.

[51] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eetJxqiR11w>,7 November 2011.

[52] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEPVEZ2m6Ok>,7 November 2011.

[53] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB4VGDtnytU>,7 November 2011.

[54] Kathrin Peter and Andrea Seier, "Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on You Tube", in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 201.

55 See Kylie Jarrett, "Beyond Broadcast Yourself™: The Future of You Tube", *Media International Australia*, 126 (2008), 132-144; and Meeyoung Cha et al, "I Tube, You Tube, Everybody Tubes: Analysing the World's Largest User Generated Content Video System", *Proceedings of the 7th ACM SIGCOMM Conference on Internet Measurement* (2007), 1-14.

56 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.

57 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

58 Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 2.

59 The phrase is Thomas Healy's. See "Past and Present Shakespeares", in John J. Joughin, ed., *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 214.

60 Margreta de Grazia, *'Hamlet' without Hamlet* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

61 Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations", in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 174.

62 Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains*, 1-24.

the kinds of agency afforded to the individual media user by convergence culture. That call captures the extent to which YouTube is a participatory platform. Yet as commentators have recognized, the strap line and trademark simultaneously signify the site's connections to corporate mass media.[55] With the purchase of YouTube by Google in 2006, the coincidence of the "two You Tubes" or the commercial imperatives of the site with those of the community, has become more pronounced, not least in the way that advertisement pop-ups and banners are now a notable feature of the browsing and viewing experience. Viewed in such terms, YouTube becomes another example of the ways in which our (online) lives bear traces of mass media, the marks of the corporate in the form of adverts and sponsored features, the sense that our social identities and even modes of expression are conditioned by media images. There is a form of agency, one determined by the coordinates of the internet and the digital, which, as Lisa Nakamura argues, "puts pressure on the formerly solid and anchoring notion of identity" to create "images of identity and after-images".[56] Such cyber-effects could be seen as an accentuation of what some critics have interpreted as the fate of creative production within the seemingly depthless culture of postmodernity.[57] In this culture, creativity is forced to reconcile itself to "the world as an endless hall of mirrors, as a place where images constitute what we *are* … and where images constitute all of what we *know*".[58] Thus, while enabling a "participatory culture", allowing everyone to perform the "Bardic function", YouTube can also denote at best a limited agency, at worst an imagined agency within mass media consumer culture. We might say that this tension is crystallized in Hamlet's "To be", which at once constitutes *the* words or speech to perform, yet also the words that can potentially signify anything and everything, such is their reduction to cliché or to postmodern parody.

That character and play can be said to express such a contemporary, postmodern understanding of the relation between individual identities and their cultural expressions or that the play's ubiquity and endless repeatability has rendered it a "fetishised cipher", an empty signifier, will be a scenario familiar to Shakespeareans.[59] The character has always suggested a futurity, "proleptically in tune with the latest present", and it is *we* who make him so.[60] The multiplicity of Hamlets on YouTube, the extent to which one upload leads to another and another, combined with the multiplicity of uses and forms that *Hamlet* takes on the platform, potentially points towards the realm of the simulacra and a dispersal of a Shakespearean aura. Thus those YouTube users that seek to expropriate the Shakespeare referent might be seen as engaging in a nostalgia for a lost aura – "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" – and a nostalgia for a point of 'origin' or the 'authentic' Shakespeare.[61] And yet, Shakespeare, a set of texts and intertexts, "remains" in popular culture.[62] On YouTube too, Hamlet never dies. The examples I have discussed suggest that Hamlet is used in multiple and meaningful ways: a technology of narrative; as matter for online creative production and entertainment; as a ready-made template onto which a user might fashion an identity; and as a small window on the YouTube interface and within the hypermedia spaces of contemporary culture.

I would argue that it is precisely this multiplicity of content, form and function that makes YouTube *Hamlet* valuable, especially when this material is approached and understood in terms of the logic of convergence culture, a logic that holds that every text or digital object within a media landscape is up for grabs. The value of convergence culture for Shakespeare studies is less about extending to Shakespeare a cool cache or injecting it with the capital of cultural currency, though this might be a natural consequence. Rather, the value resides in the capacity of convergence to realise a fluid, unpredictable, and unbounded mediascape where the "Bardic function" can be exercised. This can result in a bite-size Shakespeare or the parodic and comically absurd, as in the plot of *Hamlet* re-imagined as an episode of the American serial comedy *Scrubs* or as the formulaic crime show *CSI* ("CSI members try to figure out how Ophelia really died!").[63] But as with vlog-style performance of "To be", these creative mash-ups of Shakespeare and TV shows by YouTube users constitute an appropriately post-modern disruption of grand narratives, a freeing-up of the text from its master author and from associations with high culture, associations that potentially foster exclusion or fear. The creative, vernacular productions on YouTube are thus indices of the mutable hermeneutic field that is *Hamlet* and its cultural afterlife. They also evidence a popular and not simply pop culture Shakespeare and, as such, serve as reminders that Shakespeare's plays are themselves forms of entertainment. YouTube Shakespeare should be harnessed as one of the ways to ensure the continuing circulation and relevance of Shakespearean texts and perhaps in the interests of a less institutionalised and valorised Shakespeare too.

More specifically, the YouTube uploads such as those that I have discussed can serve the interests of Shakespeare pedagogy, especially for those learners more at home with the hypermediacy of the internet and the digital than the printed text.[64] Through the disparate Hamlet content on the platform, there are real opportunities to, for instance, compare and contrast performances across different time and media. As an ever expanding archive, YouTube means access to a range of worldwide films and other productions that otherwise might not come to our attention. There is, for example, the *Hamlet* short "To Fight or not to fight" from Poland or the Derry Film Initiative *Hamlet* in Irish (with English subtitles).[65] YouTube is also a good space for engaging students in current iterations of Shakespeare by looking at the practices and vocabulary of online life such as the vlog or the mash-up. These practices present opportunities to examine questions of genre, forms of address and linguistic register, and modes of representation that, through comparison and contrast, might further illuminate these aspects in the Shakespearean text. In this regard, I think YouTube Shakespeare will shortly displace the Shakespeare movie as a teaching resource, not least because the former enables a much more immersive experience in Shakespearean intertexts than the latter.[66]

The question I opened with – "To tube or not to tube" – has taken us beyond the specifics of one YouTube user's expropriation of Hamlet's words and into the intangible co-ordinates of Shakespeare's cultural meaning, significance and currency in relation to a new, exciting medium. In tracing some instances of the remediation

[63] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVIrhPi_QhU>, 7 November 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiUpFnKWDpg&feature=related>, 7 November 2011.

[64] For an endorsement of YouTube as a teaching tool, see Christy Desmet, "Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube", *English Journal*, 99. 1 (2009), 65-70; and also Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 165-167.

[65] "Hamlet – To fight or not to fight", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sN6NVLWQI>, 7 November 2011. The Derry Film Initiative Irish language production <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIe7VTLojI8 >, 7 November 2011.

[66] On the use of the film clip in Shakespeare pedagogy, see Laurie E. Osborne, "Clip Art: Theorizing the Shakespeare Film Clip", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 53. 2 (2002), 227-240. And, on the move from "Shakespeare on film" to "Shakespeare on screens", see the essay by the same author, "iShakespeare: Digital Art/Games, Intermediality, and the Future of Shakespearean Film", *Shakespeare Studies*, 38 (2010), 48-57.

[67] Sonia Massai, ed., *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.

[68] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39.

of *Hamlet* on YouTube, this article has sought to consider the forms, potential uses and also implications of Shakespeare content on YouTube more generally. Sonia Massai has commented on the "Shakespearean field", which she notes "determines what it is possible to say about or do with Shakespeare at any particular moment in time".[67] My purpose here has been, in part, to bring productions of Shakespeare on YouTube to the attention of the field but also to address the cultural politics of these interventions. YouTube suggests that individuals do indeed have something to *say about* and *do with* Shakespeare, perhaps by building on what has been described as the plays own "fundamental commitment to expression".[68] Thus, YouTube Shakespeare suggests a new, legitimate and meaningful form of Shakespearean, cultural and media activity.