# Shakespeare in the Web. *Romeo and Juliet* on Twitter

Mudlark Company and the Royal Shakespeare Company, *Such Tweet Sorrow*, April-May 2010, <http://www.suchtweetsorrow.com/>, 22 September 2011

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'Tis true; there's magic in the web of it.
William Shakespeare, *Othello*

Maybe Shakespeare had already realized that in some way the Web would change his theatre. In fact, the Web 2.0 has modified not only the relationship between users and technologies, but also our interaction with the world of literature and theatre. The concept of "Web 2.0" came into being during a conference brainstorming session between Tim O'Reilly and his staff in 2004 ([http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html](http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html)). Mr O'Reilly is the founder of the O'Reilly Media, one of the most interesting publishers for computer technology books. The *Web 2.0* is based on the "open source", a technology that offers the possibility for everyone to create, modify, deny information circulating on the net. It is the real revolution of the Web: anyone can take part in the circulation of knowledge and culture through the use of a personal computer. William Shakespeare and his works take advantage of the Web's new face; databases and archives are just two examples of the massive contribution of the web to establishing an open diffusion model of Shakespeare's theatre: the *Internet Shakespeare Edition* ([http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/](http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/)), the *Shakespeare Electronic Archive* ([http://shea.mit.edu/shakespeare/htdocs/main/index.htm](http://shea.mit.edu/shakespeare/htdocs/main/index.htm)) and the *Interactive Shakespeare Project* ([http://college.holycross.edu/projects/isp/](http://college.holycross.edu/projects/isp/)) are some well-known digital archives of the Bard's texts, which, by including also illustrations and film clips of the plays, have helped the consolidation of multimedia pedagogy as one privileged approach to the author from Stratford-upon-Avon.

William Shakespeare has inspired countless performances, revisions and adaptations of his plays, in all media and throughout the globe. Katarzyna Williams, in *Deforming Shakespeare: Investigation in Textuality and Digital Media* (2009), has analyzed the role of play and fun in the interpretation of Shakespeare's works. In her study she identifies MUD as one site of "play" on the internet, and gives the following definition: "One of the Internet accessible, text-mediated virtual environments which set up a particular performative mode of reading (and writing) is Multi User Domain. The MUD refers to the virtual worlds designed on the Internet in which users can create narratives within which they play and interact". In the early nineties, Stuart Harris demonstrated how the multi-user text-based environment marked an important change in the perception of the textual and its relation to the performative. On 12th December 1993 there took place the first online performance of the *Hamnet Players*. It was a digital revision of *Hamlet*, created by Harris, and the whole tragedy was set in the virtual space of IRC (*Internet Relay Chat*). The actors

chosen for the project had to write their own lines in the text-based environment and, unsurprisingly enough, the play's early modern language underwent a radical change; Shakespeare's language was translated into modern colloquial English mixed up with IRC jargon and was characterized by the verbal stylization of computer writing. The actors intentionally made spelling mistakes and used obscene language, which accentuated the distance from the original play. *Hamnet Players* annoyed Shakespearean purists, but the fun and the playfulness of writing as performance on IRC started a new way of (re)writing and performing Shakespeare.

*Such Tweet Sorrow* (http://www. suchtweetsorrow.com/, 22 September 2011), a digital revision of *Romeo and Juliet*, is among the most recent web-based re-inventions of Shakespeare.[1] This project was planned and realized by Mudlark Company and the Royal Shakespeare Company from April to May 2010. Mudlark is a cross-platform production company that delivers commissions, campaigns and applications and produces mobile phone games, virtual world experiences, TV programmes, and so on. The Royal Shakespeare Company is known worldwide not only for its theatre



Fig. 1. The home page of the project *Such Tweet Sorrow*

performances, but for its extensive education projects and outreach work, the aim of which is to engage more people with Shakespeare's world. The official *Such Tweet Sorrow* website, which is still online, presents the project with these words: "Two families in the same town have loathed one another for years. But a boy from one and a girl from the other fall in love – deep, sweet and destructive. You know the tale of Romeo and Juliet but now you can see it happening live and in real time – in modern Britain and on Twitter. Six characters live the story over the five weeks of Such Tweet Sorrow and you can experience it with them". The title of the project comes from the famous line pronounced by Juliet in the second act of the original tragedy: "*Parting is such sweet sorrow*". The word "sweet" was substituted with the word "tweet", the funny name adopted to define the messages left on the social network *Twitter*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers or followers. All users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, Short Message Service (SMS) or external applications.

The 'story' began with Jess Capulet's tweet, posted one year ago, on 10th April 2010, in which she remembered her mother's death in an accident. Mr. Montague was involved in the same accident, but he survived. Out of that tragic event a strong aversion was born between the two families. Jess and Tybalt Capulet had a sister,

[1] For a presentation of the project, see also the Mudlark website (http://www.wearemudlark.com/projects/sts/) and the Royal Shakespeare Company website (http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/projects/such-tweet-sorrow.aspx).
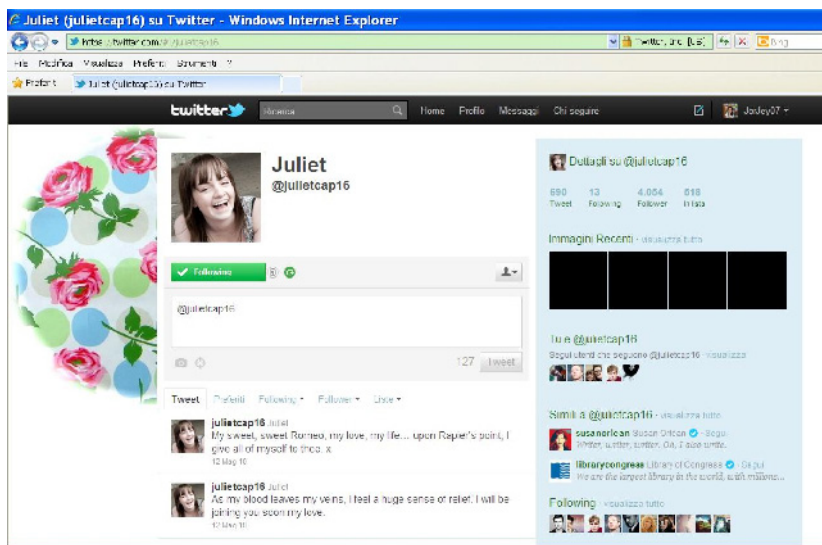
Fig. 2. Julietcap16's Twitter page

Juliet, who decided to organize a party for her sixteenth birthday. During that party she met Romeo and after a few days they fell in love and got married against their families' will. Laurence Friar, the owner of a pub, tried to help the lovers to go away from their town and live happily together but, despite the detailed plan for their escape and due to a misunderstanding, they killed themselves with drugs.

Roxana Silbert, *Such Tweet Sorrow*'s director, said: "Throughout the five weeks of this performance, you will see and read the 'tweets' – Twitter updates which may be thoughts, messages, links or confessions – of Romeo, Juliet and four other characters". *Romeo and Juliet* has been represented in many ways: stage versions, film, opera, ballet and musical forms. But this was the first time the tragedy was performed on a social network. The six actors, chosen from the Royal Shakespeare Company, had a script, written by Mudlark's writing team and they composed their tweets as if they were the real Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet, etc. In their digital public diary they talked about their feelings, who they were with, who they wanted to talk about. The biggest highlight was the huge level of active participation from the public. For example, during Juliet's birthday party, to which her Twitter followers were invited for virtual participation, the fancy-dressed guests uploaded their own masks, their favourite music or photos on the Facebook Event Page. Another evidence of active participation of the followers was the "Save Mercutio" campaign: fans started their own campaign to save Mercutio ahead of his impending death. This was not instigated by the production team and it was a hugely exciting, because unexpected, development.

As a product of Web 2.0, *Such Tweet Sorrow* is the perfect example of media convergence, which, by bringing together "the three C's" – computing, communication, content – means the capability of generating information through shared resources and the convergence of different interacting media. In order to get a clear idea about movements, feelings, events referred to in the characters' tweets, you have to visit *Such Tweet Sorrow*'s blogs, YouTube channels and Facebook pages. Information in the Web 2.0 is decentralized, because it is controlled by both the webmaster and the Internet surfers; what is especially interesting in the case of *Such Tweet Sorrow* is that the acting there consists in surfing the Internet and using it the way the public to the story does, and that the story is made in the combination of the actions performed by the actors and the followers alike as they are online.

The language of *Such Tweet Sorrow* is its other interesting aspect. The Shakespearean plot was modified to make it suitable for the 21st century. In fact, Romeo and Juliet,

and the other four characters, weren't different from our teenagers: they played with the Playstation, or they shared their love for music; they went to the stadium and supported their football team. Their language had to be translated to contemporary English. Unlike the Shakespearean tragedy, where there are long monologues, the tweets are very short, as is the typical communication among young people today and because of the maximum 140 characters for each message. Romeo_mo and julietcap16 (these are the nicknames on Twitter of the leading actors) and their friends didn't respect English grammatical rules during their twittings, they cut the words, used acronyms or spelt words the way they were pronounced: "OMG" (Oh my God), "Oz" (for Australia), "4" (for the preposition "for"). They used swearwords, as in one of the tweets by Mercutio: «@romeo_mo @Tybalt_Cap May both your families rot in hell! Fuck #teammontague from now on its only #teammercutio».

What was possibly the aim of *Such Tweet Sorrow*? I do not think that the Royal Shakespeare Company and Mudlark wanted to create a new Shakespearean canon: although they completely changed the set, the time and the language of the tragedy, their goal was still to engage a new kind of public with the world of *theatre*, and in particular with the world of Shakespeare's theatre. The youth generation is used to computers and "html" language, so it appreciated this new form of theatre. In the process, however, theatre became something else. In their case study the Mudlark Company verified that during the twittings of *Such Tweet Sorrow* there were a lot of visitors. These are the statistics until 10 May 2010:

94,910 Visits
4,519.52 Visits / Day
65,097 Absolute Unique Visitors
299,710 Page views

Character: #Followers
Juliet: 5834
Jess: 3847
Tybalt: 3941
Mercutio: 3814
Laurence: 3723
Romeo: 3699[2]

At the end of the event, the Mudlark Company analyzed the final results of the project: media coverage went global, spreading across all platforms including US newspapers, 500 international websites, 4 national BBC Radio stations, Japanese TV, Indian national press e Sao Paulo radio. Within the first week, *Such Tweet Sorrow* obtained 30,000 followers and it became a Twitter trending topic. I like to imagine that, as Shakespeare was a great experimenter of language in his own times, today he would have written his works using the Web 2.0.

[2] <http://www.figarodigital.co.uk/case-study/Mudlark.aspx>