

Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube

YouTube can help students better appreciate literary details in Shakespeare and learn more about the cultural and aesthetic value of imitation, parody, and irony.

YouTube, the video sharing website that allows viewers to upload video content ranging from cute dog tricks to rare rock videos, also supports a lively community devoted to the performance of Shakespeare and Shakespearean adaptations. Teachers can find rarities from popular culture, such as the Beatles performing the “Pyramus and Thisbe” scene from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Beatles) to an episode from *Gilligan’s Island* that involves a performance of *Hamlet* (“The Producer”). Another perennial favorite is the Hugh Laurie/Rowan Atkinson skit, in which theater manager Philip Henslowe ruthlessly edits Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy to its familiar form, outraging Shakespeare who proclaims that the revised speech we have all memorized is “gibberish” (“Shakespeare Sketch”). YouTube also offers many professional and semiprofessional adaptations. For *Othello*, the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s *Othello Rap* has been viewed by nearly 200,000 users. And then there are student videos of the same rap: an impromptu car-trip performance (“Othello Rap”) and the Locust Valley High School Jesters, plus Katy and Danny’s original rap on *Othello* (Kovacs and Wittels).

YouTube is also a popular site for student producers of Shakespeare performances, parodies, and other artistic efforts, in most cases to fulfill a class assignment. While teachers have been alert to the potential of online Shakespeare for classroom instruction and lesson plans¹ and have encouraged students to publish their Shakespeare productions on YouTube, I find teachers have yet to make You-

Tube Shakespeare videos an explicit subject of classroom analysis.

To help students apply the same kind of intellectual scrutiny to “published” videos makes sense, however, for at least three reasons. First, there is ample evidence that students are already visiting YouTube for inspiration when creating their projects. How else could one explain the fact that YouTube lists nearly 50 entries for videos of *Macbeth* using Legos?² The ability to search the site quickly, plus a capacity to subscribe to individual channels, makes it easy for anyone to review rapidly a large number of videos on similar themes. Second, YouTube is perfect for the kind of peer review that we want students to engage in as they write, create, and revise their work in different media. YouTube’s infrastructure—particularly the tagging and threading of videos and the ability to post video responses—encourages sharp comparisons and pointed revisions with each successive video that is uploaded. Finally, the ease of repetition (“Replay” is only a click away) coupled with the length limitations imposed by YouTube focus viewers’ attention sharply and thus promote close analysis. YouTube viewers regularly comment, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, on minute details in the videos they watch—anything from historical anachronisms to tiny sound effects. The urge to read closely seems positively contagious among YouTube aficionados.

I suggest that we can and should use YouTube videos in the classroom both to analyze primary Shakespearean texts—much as we currently use DVDs of commercial Shakespeare films for this purpose—and to generate topics for creating and

standards for evaluating students' productions. In this way, YouTube videos can become a locus for honing students' skills in critical reading and writing (both terms being broadly construed).

What Is YouTube Shakespeare?

YouTube in general is a hybrid genre: part video, part website, it combines the immediacy of the first with the search capacity and critical distance of the second. While YouTube harbors professional videos, such as trailers for upcoming films, the work I am talking about here belongs properly to what both admirers and detractors have called "amateur culture."

YouTube Shakespeare works rhetorically through imitation, parody, and irony.

Lawrence Lessig, the inventor of Creative Commons and a fan of the phenomenon, defines the work of amateurs on the Web as the creative appropriation and reuse of existing materials, what Claude Lévi-Strauss called the art of *bricolage*. Perhaps more important for Lessig, amateurs create their work from love, without any expectation of compensation, and thus acquire an aura of artistic purity. Lessig's principal opponent on this point is Andrew Keen, the subtitle of whose critique of amateur culture is *How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture*. Keen argues that amateur work on the Internet too often involves both the theft of others' intellectual property (e.g., Napster) and a dumbing down of knowledge (in Keen's opinion, the effect of Wikipedia). Teachers probably will want to take both positions into consideration when counseling students about their projects, but the youth culture that YouTube supports, by nature appropriative and playful, is already a powerful cultural force in the contemporary United States.

One particularly clever subgenre of YouTube Shakespeare is the video mashup, usually presented in the form of a movie trailer. This genre is easily imitated and demonstrates perfectly the processes of creative appropriation. Probably the best example among the Shakespeare videos on YouTube is "Hamlet Is Back," which combines clips of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Last Action Hero* with an array of shots from other films to create a lush epic in the style of James Cameron.³ The result is at once aesthetically pleasing, technically proficient, and

very funny. The swelling music and vistas of galloping horses in the trailer's opening credits contrast well with the dark shadows in which Hamlet is enshrouded and with the harsh violence that follows in his wake. The clips appropriated from different films are knitted together seamlessly and often with a refined sense of irony. And best of all are the zingers that are placed at perfect moments throughout the trailer. These are funny without being particularly original. For instance, "Hamlet Is Back" lifts directly from *The Last Action Hero* two of its best quips: Hamlet's statement to Claudius—"You killed my fadda; big mistake!"—just prior to throwing the usurper king through a stained-glass window; and Hamlet's response to an anonymous lord's plea to "Stay thy hand, fair Prince"—Schwarzenegger replies, "Who says I'm fair?"—which is followed by a blaze of gunfire as Hamlet, in gladiator dress, roams through a medieval castle wreaking carnage with an automatic weapon.

YouTube Shakespeare works rhetorically through imitation, parody, and irony. YouTube restricts the length and size of videos to ten minutes and two gigabytes of material, so the venue automatically encourages an aesthetic of brevity, which in turn is congenial to parody. YouTube parodies are constructed—as examples of this genre often are—through selection and condensation of the parent text. Sometimes YouTube authors focus on a single scene; sometimes they squeeze an entire play into a few minutes (much like the Reduced Shake-



Living Iambic Pentameter, the most popular video on the Folger's YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/FolgerLibrary>.

spere Company's *Complete Works*). But the rhetoric of brevity and its tendency toward parody and irony have long been entrenched in US schools through the example of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a staple of the school curriculum. Even more directly relevant to the structure of YouTube videos might be Stoppard's *The Fifteen Minute Hamlet*, a spoof that works entirely by excising portions of this familiar text to create absurd juxtapositions.

The tendency toward parody through condensation and judicious quoting that Stoppard models so well is evident everywhere in YouTube Shakespeare, and this tendency offers many opportunities for homing in on specific passages from the printed text of Shakespeare. Some productions—the Lego *Macbeths* among them—quote selected bits of text in ways that are reminiscent of early silent films of Shakespeare. Thus, a particular scene using Lego figures would be introduced by a slide with quoted text. A slightly different approach to the Shakespearean text would be parodies that translate Shakespeare's plays into a contemporary setting without altering the text. One of my favorite examples is "Urban Shakespeare," in which three young women, with backup from other performers, reenact scenes from *Hamlet* in an ordinary downtown setting. The appearance of the elder Hamlet's ghost, for instance, is signaled by the blinking of a car's headlights parked outside a closed store; Hamlet's highly charged interview with his mother, which includes the stabbing of Polonius, takes place in the frozen food section of Price Chopper. The setting is changed, but the text remains the same. In another variation on this theme, Shakespeare's text is set to music; see, for instance, the short *Macbeth* video "Dagger," which is part song, part rap. Its central theme is "Screw your courage to the sticking point, / And we'll not fail."

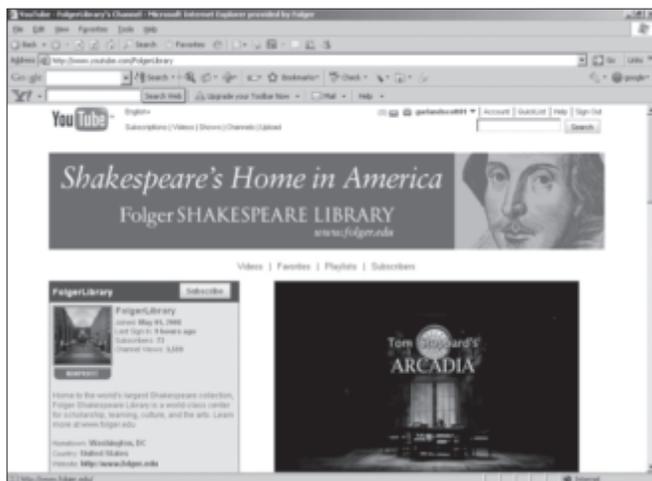
Still other Shakespeare parodies translate the Bard's language into a more contemporary idiom. In what is probably the longest and most sophisticated performance available on YouTube, future-brien's "*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (Parody)*," Claudius's pious assertion that he is Hamlet's father is transformed by a cherubic adolescent monarch ("I'm the King, boy") into a rowdy claim that "I'm your poppa!" Another example might be "*CSI: Macbeth*," which alternates Shakespeare's lines with

plain-style translations. A shorter video entitled "*Macbeth: Short Film Trailer*," which works variations on Banquo's claim that Macbeth has it all—"King, Cawdor, Glamis"—combines the translation of select lines into plain English with an emphasis on visual images representing some of the play's key events, images that ironically undercut the verbal assertion of Macbeth's success (such as a glimpse of blood spiraling down the sink drain); this video would reward both textual and visual analysis.

Finally, there are videos that are nearly pantomimes, focusing on action at the expense of Shakespearean language. A prime example would be the popular "Star Wars *Hamlet* Parody, Hilarious," a lightsaber duel between Hamlet and Laertes that adds Darth Vader filters to the actors' voices but adheres scrupulously to the sequence of events prescribed in Shakespeare's plot of *Hamlet*, act 5. Within this last genre are other videos that achieve a structuralist purity by miniaturization and/or transformation of the actors into animals, dolls, action figures, and cartoon characters (e.g., guinea pigs, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or bunnies). For a good example, see "*Romeo and Juliet: Acted Out with Ninja Turtles*," which appears on Metacafe.com. For another sophisticated example from a university student in my class, see the "*Romeo & Juliet Stop Motion Style*" by Christopher Ghattas.

How Can I Use YouTube Shakespeare in the Classroom?

By virtue of the site's construction, the necessarily brief YouTube videos are perfect for introducing key concepts to be used in hands-on classroom activities of both an analytic and creative nature. Anyone with an Internet connection can connect directly to YouTube. For classrooms where YouTube is blocked, RealAudio Player allows one to download videos directly onto a computer or flash drive. This allows videos to be played in the classroom without an Internet connection and is particularly attractive if an offline copy of the video is needed for future reference. (*Caveat emptor*: There is naturally a certain amount of instability on YouTube, as on the Web in general. Not only do YouTube rules affect the availability of videos over time, but individual contributors frequently remove videos; more videos are added every day.) Most YouTube videos



The Folger's YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/FolgerLibrary>.

are no more than five minutes in length, which makes them more flexible for classroom use even than DVDs that are divided by chapters.

YouTube Shakespeare videos are infinitely adaptable to classroom lesson plans that focus on interpreting the Shakespearean plot and text. To a great extent, many of the Folger Shakespeare Library's existing lesson plans in *Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth* (O'Brien) can be adapted to incorporate examples from YouTube. For instance, the *Shakespeare Set Free* lesson plan for *Romeo and Juliet* asks teachers to compare two film clips from selected scenes of the play (O'Brien 154–55). YouTube videos selected through an efficient search on the site can easily be substituted for

the movie clips. Other exercises that call for plot summaries or charts of a Shakespeare play's action (e.g., Lesson 5 for *Romeo and Juliet*, pp. 130–31) can be replaced with or introduced by the quasi-pantomimic genre of YouTube video that is represented here by "Star Wars *Hamlet* Parody, Hilarious." YouTube videos can be used to model either the selection of Shakespearean texts for further discussion or the process of translating Shake-

spearean text into a contemporary idiom. They can be offered, as films often are, as examples of visual translation of and commentary on the Shakespearean text that was their inspiration. Finally, YouTube videos can provide students raised on Tom Stoppard with examples of or inspiration for ironic and parodic translations of Shakespearean text and scenes. By far, the most prolific posters of Shakespearean videos on YouTube are high school students and young college filmmakers. They are recognizable as adolescents, albeit often talented and ambitious ones. Among the advantages that YouTube offers for classroom teachers over professional Shakespearean film is the close proximity in age between these young producers and one's students that makes the YouTube artist a suitable classroom role model.

Additionally, YouTube can help students not only to generate but also to evaluate amateur Shakespearean video productions, modeling nicely the peer review processes that are often used for critical analysis of their own and of their peers' efforts. The same type of comparative exercise for analyzing filmed Shakespeare can easily be adapted for assessing amateur videos, and teachers need not be overly worried about finding videos of exactly the same scenes for purposes of comparison. Among the videos introduced in this essay, for instance, students could compare the murder of Fleance in "*Macbeth* Parody (for an English Project)," whose setting and props are simple and whose production values are less than perfect, with the more sophisticated editing and film noir ethos of "*Macbeth*: Short Film Trailer." Students might also bring in their favorite examples for critique. With the teacher's help, perhaps, students can generate criteria—or an entire rubric—for assessing videos.

YouTube as a Cultural Phenomenon

Teachers might wonder about the wisdom of reaching out to such a popular culture venue as YouTube and its adolescent contributors. But to my mind, the amateur culture nurtured by such sites as YouTube is full of high-quality as well as immature work; even more interesting, the emerging genres of amateur Shakespeare have, I think, begun to exert some back-pressure on other cultural productions. The sheer size of such sites as YouTube and

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wide circulation of its videos make matters of influence volatile and indeterminate. Sometimes, patterns of imitation between YouTube and other artistic and even pedagogical forms are so indirect as to be simply part of an evolving artistic zeitgeist. In 2005, for instance, one of my students “staged” the murder of Julius Caesar using Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures, an idea that she came up with on her own. In January 2009, by contrast, I found a number of sites involving the Turtles in quasi-puppet performances of plays ranging from *Othello* to *Romeo and Juliet*. But YouTube Shakespeare, which harbors many performances and parodies using animal and toy figures, definitely has found a high-culture companion in the performances of Shakespeare put on by the Tiny Ninja Theater (<http://www.tinyinjinatheater.com/>), which uses not the famous turtles, but other miniature characters. On May 25, 2002, for instance, the theater presented *Romeo and Juliet* at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The show returned to New York in January 2009. The Theater’s aesthetic of miniaturization resembles closely that of many YouTube Shakespearean ventures.

YouTube’s motto is “Broadcast Yourself.” Coupled with the invitation to self-display is a concomitant imperative to share videos with friends, colleagues, and family. Perhaps this combination of motives provides the best reason yet to use YouTube in the Shakespeare classroom. Participating in a virtual network of Shakespearean artists, both as producers and critics, gives students a real stake in the shaping of Shakespeare for our time. 

Notes

1. See, for instance, the Folger Shakespeare Library’s YouTube channel.
2. Thanks especially to Peter Holland for calling my attention to the Lego *Macbeth* phenomenon.
3. This clip, although periodically removed from the YouTube site for copyright violations, is then quickly re-uploaded by its many fans. Examples are often available with subtitles in several languages.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Joyce Bruett, RWT

“Constructing New Understanding through Choral Readings of Shakespeare” uses *The Tempest* as a model to compose a choral reading. This activity not only asks students to perform a section of a scene but also invites them to think about theme and character by putting together lines that do not occur chronologically in the play. Students can then produce their own version of Shakespeare, similar to the video accompanying the lesson. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1121

Shakespeare Interrupted
(or “Winter Kisseth Bye to Book”)

But soft, whose death is this?
Outside the long window
Of the classroom
Snow has fallen.
Die, Tuesday!
Die, Wednesday!
Die, Thursday!
And if Friday drinketh the poison,
So be it.
Somewhere in this sleep
What dreams have come!

(The children pause and exit,
missing their lesson—
all characters curiously
alive and well
on the neighborhood hill
with trash bags

and go-devils
sleds too old to be so new
bold black inner tubes
patient hats and mittens.)

So now the poisoned sword can wait—
The message might arrive safely.
Juliet is still awake—
Romeo can take a breath and drink easy,
And Hamlet can just relax and *be*
For one frozen moment
While days are axed
And tragedy too postponed to appear
On the final exam.

(It was the end
we all were hoping for.)

—Lisa Mitchell
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