

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Electronic Shakespeare

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Egan, Gabriel. 2019. "Electronic Shakespeare". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/1288>.

This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.



creative commons
COMMONS DEED

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

 **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

 **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

 **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the [Legal Code \(the full license\)](#).

[Disclaimer](#) 

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

Egan, Gabriel. 2000a. "[Electronic Shakespeare](#)." *Around the Globe*. vol. 15. pp. 28-29. ISSN 1366-2317

In 1997 I concluded a report about Shakespeare resources on the Internet with the opinion that "Nothing currently available on the web would justify the cost of buying the computer needed to access it". This remains true: a new computer costs about 1000 pounds, which could more profitably be spent on books. However, many people have a computer with Internet access anyway, so 'free' resources are for them truly free. Electronic texts of Shakespeare's works are widely available on the Internet but, like the 'complete works' sold for a couple of pounds in every Stratford-on-Avon bookshop, these are almost always based on Victorian editions with no explanatory notes. More importantly, nineteenth-century editors of Shakespeare usually felt it their duty to help readers' visualize the events of the story by adding stage directions which are meaningless from a theatrical point of view. Thus cheap editions of Shakespeare (printed and electronic) frequently include descriptive stage directions such as "in another part of the battlefield" and location-setting labels such as "Scotland. Macbeths' castle". While readers might appreciate such hints, they are antithetical to the stage-centered approach which is increasingly favoured at all levels of teaching of Shakespeare and which is central to the thinking behind the Shakespeare's Globe reconstruction.

Unwanted 'readerly' stage directions can be expunged from an electronic text by using the 'Search & Replace' function of a word-processor. Still remaining will be other artefacts of nineteenth-century scholarship such as the conflation of Shakespeare's 'history' of King Lear with his revised version, the 'tragedy', so that the mock-trial scene incongruously sits alongside the version of the madness scene which was rewritten by Shakespeare to replace it. Recent editorial scholarship is, of course, valuable copyrighted material and while the retail divisions of Oxford University Press and the Arden Shakespeare are recovering the considerable outlay of commissioning newly-edited texts made in accordance with modern principles one can hardly expect them to give the work away on the Internet. Scholarly editors, however, are not directly motivated by money but by the enhancement of their professional reputations, so might it not be possible for an Internet-only project to commission new editions made to high scholarly standards but exploiting the zero-cost distribution channel of the Internet? This is what Michael Best of the University of Victoria intends with his ambitious Internet Shakespeare Editions [1].

Shakespeare studies is big business across the world primarily because the works are compulsory learning in most English-speaking education systems. It is perhaps odd, then, that no-one has found a way to make money from Shakespeare (or indeed any aspect of English Literature) on the Internet. The Chadwyck-Healey Literature Online (LION) project [2] provides the full texts of all English literary works published before 1910 via an Internet subscription service and it gives the student or scholar a remarkable capacity to search across genres and periods. For example, having read Keats's "Endymion" and "Ode to a Nightingale", one might ask to see the full text of any other poem which uses the word 'hemlock' within, say, 10 words of 'nightingale', and so alight upon John Clare's "Bonny Dark Eyed Susan". The enormous contextualizing opportunities for reading Shakespeare alongside the works of his predecessors and successors are obvious, but Chadwyck-Healey has had difficulty selling the LION product to educational institutions. Similarly the online version of the Arden Shakespeare [3], which includes full texts of Arden play editions, with their notes and appendices, has been withdrawn from sale until the publisher

conducts research into the future commercial viability of the project.

The Internet is not the only way to deliver electronic Shakespeare and other media might be better. CD-ROM products have had considerably more success than Internet products, as witnessed in the Oxford English Dictionary [4], the World Shakespeare Bibliography [5], the Chadwyck-Healey CD-ROMs (predecessors to the LION project), and the many Shakespeare CD-ROMs aimed at school students. Before CD-ROMs were invented an equivalent density of data was provided by microfilm, and what I have to say applies equally to products such as the Early English Books 1475-1640 and 1641-1700 cabinets of film sold by University Microfilms International (now Bell & Howell) which compete with their online equivalent Early English Books Online (EEBO) [6]. The content provided by these CD-ROMs and microfilms is essentially the same as the content provided by their Internet versions, which in the cases of OED and the World Shakespeare Bibliography have just been released; the differences are only in how the reader receives the information. Are we to conclude from the relative success of CD-ROMs when compared with the Internet that, for all our supposed postmodern celebration of the intangible and the infinitely hyperlinked, readers and librarians still prefer a single solid object which can be held in the palm of the hand?

I think there is a more prosaic, but politically more interesting, explanation and it concerns the ownership of knowledge. Like books in the early modern period, CD-ROMs and microfilms, once purchased, give the user unmediated access to the knowledge encoded in them, and unless the disk or film is lost or stolen one owns that knowledge forever. An Internet-delivered product requires that an unknown, unseen, party at the end of a mysterious chain of connections continues to provide snippets of information as they are requested. No matter how firm the promises about levels of service, Internet-delivered products place readers in a situation of dependence upon mysterious intermediaries which has parallels with Christians' access to god in the early modern period. It might be only a small exaggeration to say that a twentieth-first century owner of the OED CD-ROM and a machine to read it is empowered much as a sixteenth-century Lutheran was by William Tyndale's vernacular bible, and that the Internet represents a counter-reformationary force which puts the authoritative 'word' (as opposed to the chitter-chat of most personal websites) back under transnational, institutional, control. Oddly regressive as it may seem, the wisest decision on the matter may be that taken by the National Library of Canada, which prints, binds, and shelves paper copies of the Internet journals to which it subscribes.

References

- [1] Internet Shakespeare Editions. www.uvic.ca/shakespeare/index.html
- [2] Chadwyck-Healey. www.chadwyck.co.uk and www.chadwyck.com
- [3] Arden Shakespeare. www.ardenshakespeare.co.uk and www.ardenshakespeare.com
- [4] Oxford English Dictionary. www.oed.com
- [5] World Shakespeare Bibliography. www-english.tamu.edu/wsb
- [6] Early English Books Online. wwwlib.umi.com/eebo