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Teaching Digital Humanities in Romania

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Abstract: In their article "Teaching Digital Humanities in Romania" Mădălina Nicolaescu and Adriana Mihai describe a research project that sets out to promote digital humanities with an internet based platform in Shakespeare studies at the University of Bucharest. Texts have been collected and catalogued and the platform's technical construction is in construction. Based on the Shakespeare platform's content and presentation, Nicolaescu and Mihai propose participation strategies for involvement in the creation of a digital database that is both a research tool and a digital storytelling environment. The database is a collection of digitized translations of Shakespeare in Romanian followed by participants' input in the form of critical and creative work which allows users to interact in the platform, expand its metadata, and produce multilinear narratives of interpretation.

Mădălina NICOLAESCU and Adriana MIHAI

Teaching Digital Humanities in Romania

Digital literature is hardly taught in Romania. For example, there is no course whose title makes explicit reference to digital or electronic literature or digital humanities in the curricula of the various literature departments of the University of Bucharest. Both the object of study per se and the teaching approach involved in organizing such a course have been considered to depart too much from established formats which are of course focused on print-based texts, as well as from the model of teacher centered education. Further, the transnational dimension involved in the technology and dissemination of digital literature is thought to be compromising the traditional approach of the nation-based study and teaching in place in Romanian scholarship.

The trend towards the McDonaldization of higher education outlined in George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions* where university administrators are mostly interested in the cost-effectiveness of education rather than in the innovation of its content and pedagogical strategies coupled with the endemic shortage of funding and recurrent budget cuts means that a purportedly elitist area such as digital literature has slim chances of acquiring a central position among other established disciplines. And this situation has not changed to the better since the 1990s and the idea of the "corporate university" has only gained in importance not only in the U.S., but elsewhere too. However, in the case of Romania in keeping with traditions developed during the previous socialist period of bypassing and manipulating official guidelines, digital literature and digital humanities have indirectly made their way into the curricula of various humanities departments at universities. For example, in the course on global media—part of the Master of Arts program in British Cultural Studies and the University of Bucharest (see Ursa)—there is ample room for the study of digital narratives including video games or in the Department of Romanian Literature there are courses in which hypertexts are studied and aspects of online editing are offered.

As said, the teaching of digital literature is not pursued much at universities in European countries, although the field of digital humanities per se is gaining ground in Europe as much as in the U.S. (on this and related issues see, e.g., Boruszko; Hartley; López-Varela and Tötösy de Zepetnek; Martens; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Boruszko; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári; Tötösy de Zepetnek, López-Varela, Saussy, Mieszkowski; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Bibliography"). The up-to-date and cutting-edge quality of courses in digital humanities incorporates traditional and new media approaches to literary studies; however, this is not easy to do and it has partly to do with the ambivalent nature of digital literature still "in search of an academic discipline" (Simanowski 235). Teaching digital literature involves a multidisciplinary approach to literary studies including the visual arts, media studies, and information technology. The supra-departmental nature of digital literature and its institutional inbetween identity runs against the discipline based departmental model of most European academic institutions. As it does not fit neatly in any discipline, "digital literature makes us dream about a university no longer divided into several disciplines, but providing students with networks of skills" (Saemmer 330). A more practical approach has been to integrate it into a framework of cultural and media studies and provide close readings of digital literature and art as at Siegen University (see Gendolla, Schäfer, Tomaszek) or in programs of digital culture along programs of digital media, digital communication, and digital aesthetics as at the University of Jyväskylä (see Kosikmaa). One interesting way of incorporating digital literature is to include it as the last chapter in courses on literary history. Basing her findings on her work in digital literary studies in Spain where "the inclusion of digital literature as a new subject in the university curricula is still ... a rarity," María Goicoechea describes ways in which this new type of literature can be integrated in courses on Gothic literature thereby exploring continuities and transitions rather than discontinuities and disruptions (347).

Along with the difficulty of integrating digital literature within the discipline structure of literary studies departments, there is another serious political obstacle to the introduction of digital literature in university curricula. Its transnational character, as well as its preference for the use of English as a lingua franca (Simanowski 235) can clash with nationalist ideologies and with the insistence of higher education institutions on national literature written in the national language. This has been the case in Slovenia (see Strehovec) as is the case in Romania. One more obstacle emerges from the financial

and technical possibilities to teach this subject, namely the so-called digital divide, which is remains experience of Romanian students and teachers: according to *internetworldstats.com* in December 2013 internet usage in Romania was 49.8%, one of the lowest in Europe (see "Estimated" http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm).

As we state previously, the above mentioned institutional, political, and economic obstacles are encountered in a magnified version in the Romanian educational system and we take the position that an indirect strategy of promoting digital humanities and the study of digital literature could have a strong impact on the Romanian educational environment by indirect strategies. This we do with the assistance of doctoral students by launching a project that imports techniques and elements of digital literature and digital humanities approaches centered around Shakespeare's oeuvre. His status as a hyper-canonical authority in our educational environment is expected to lend prestige to activities in digital humanities. The centrality of Shakespeare in the humanities in Romania allows for networking with departments of Romanian and other foreign language departments within the University of Bucharest, as well as with the respective departments at the universities of Clui, Timisoara, and Sibiu. Our goal is to set up a community of students and faculty involved in digital humanities, digital technologies in education, and the reconfiguration of Shakespeare studies in our universities in order to promote digital humanities to the forefront of scholarly debate and investigation as "the capacity for research practices to inform and transform teaching and vice-versa, is, at least theoretically, more readily apparent in digital humanities than in other fields" (Hirsch 16). The project sets out to provide a database functioning as a teaching tool that promotes interactive and constructivist strategies of learning and at the same time to function as a research instrument that makes possible an innovative approach to literary studies.

In the study at hand we discuss the general goals of the project and our strategy to capitalize on the convergence between hypertextual narratives and databases employed as educational and research tools. We also provide a description of the architecture of the platform and explore the possibility of enhancing its interactive potential in the context of the current needs of higher education in Romania. In the introduction to the 2008 issue of the journal Shakespeare, "Reinventing Shakespeare in the Digital Humanities," Alan Galey and Ray Siemens describe the reorganizing and reconceptualizing of material in digital terms as a way of "thinking through making" (204). We have been trying to apply this strategy not only in rethinking Shakespeare studies in Romania, but also as part of the endeavor to offer an alternative to the prevailing educational approach that favors reproductive learning. In the first place, the project involves identifying, digitizing, and researching German, Hungarian, and Romanian translations of Shakespeare's plays circulated on the territory of today's Romania in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. We postulate that there is a need to preserve these archives in a digital form because after an examination of sample documents in form of manuscripts and unpublished commissioned stage translations we have found they present problems of proper preservation, legibility, accessibility, and bibliographic classification. Further, there is no catalogue to date gathering a complete and informed collection of the translations to Romanian of Shakespeare's texts from libraries and theater archives. This pursuit calls for a collective effort of scholars from other Romanian university centers, as well as their access to materials written in Hungarian and German can help us to get a clear view of the circulation and influence among texts in this territory.

In the last decade scholars and institutions engaged in Shakespeare studies embraced digital technology for both the pedagogical tools it provides and its new methods of textual analysis (see, e.g., Huang and Ross; MIT Global Shakespeares http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu; The Shakespeare Quartos Archive http://www.quartos.org/; MIT Global Shakespeares

- http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu; Shakespeare Performance in Asia
- http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/, Shakespeare's Globe
- http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/; Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive
- http://a-s-i-a-web.org/; Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare
- http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/). These platforms not only set standards of text digitization, display both high-quality facsimiles and transcriptions with extensive metadata, but also have tools for customizing users' experiences with the material such as side-by-side displays of texts, bookmarking and annotation systems, navigational pathways and Web 2.0 social reading, and tagging. Further,

multimedia educational editions of Shakespeare's texts using application software (apps) such as *Explore Shakespeare*

http://education.cambridge.org/us/subject/english/shakespeare/explore-shakespeare>,

Shakesperience http://www.shakesperienceproductions.org, etc., promote multimodal reading by linking the texts to interviews and discussions, audio performances, analyses, glossaries, and production images. These platforms provide interactive media tools and annotation possibilities to users to share their notes via social platforms, which can be helpful for discussions and class assignments (although their input remains outside of the content delivered on the app). Considering the difficulty of introducing these apps to Romanian students given the financial costs of the computer tablets supporting them, as well as their rather fixed content which maintains the gap between the scholarly community and that of the users, Romanian teachers who want to make use of digital material are more likely to turn to databases and educational websites which are in open access.

What distinguishes the University of Bucharest platform with digitized Shakespearean material from the impressive Shakespeare sites discussed above is not only the geo-cultural focus on Central and East Europe, but the interactive and participatory focus on fluid, multilinear, and decentered digital stories. Along with our digitized material, we employ a further strategy to enrich semiotically and semantically the archive: we believe that encouraging user input and infusing the database with user-created textual, graphic, or video translations can deliver multiple multimodal paths along which users and the project team can discuss and create new interpretative narratives, overcoming the "implied story" (Stanford Friedman 7) of a text. The setup of the database with digitized material is intended to encourage by an example of a potential narrative building upon N. Katherine Hayles's argument for the relationship between database and narrative: "because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful" (Hayles 1603). Consequently, we propose a starter exhibition following the transnational circulation and hybridization of Shakespeare's translations and of their subsequent impact on national cultures and identities constituted around them. Once the user work is added to the database, further exhibits will be installed fueled by users' own interpretation of the texts.

The database is designed to provide new material that calls for the rethinking of the "national Shakespeares" approach prevailing in Central and East Europe. The transnational component refers both to a factual state of affairs to be investigated and to the interpretative and cognitive framework the project employs and that counters and disarticulates the established discourses centered on the notion of "nations" as self-enclosed and self-referential constructs (on this, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Comparative Cultural"). The transnational opening advanced by the project is congruent with recent turns in narratology which "focus on the dynamic, dialogic, contrapuntal, or even dialectical interaction of the global and the local" (Stanford Friedman 5). The strategies of re-vision, recovery, circulation, and collage which can be employed in the reading of the translations "promote the expansion of narrative archives upon which theory can be based, assist in the creative rethinking of existing narrative forms, and foster attention to the interplay of in/commensurability in narrative through space and time" (Stanford Friedman 5). By providing a transnational analysis of the texts, we set up a methodological model of reading the texts which takes into consideration the entire trajectories of a text in translation and we encourage students to see the text "in motion" and in process, and to see how their input contributes to the process.

Subsequently, the narrative to be constructed in and by our database can truly be described as an "emergent" one (Ryan, *Avatars* xviii). What sets our work apart from the archival narrative Marie-Laure Ryan discusses is the fact that the quality of being emergent is constitutive of the narrative and not merely the way in which a predetermined script appears to the reader/user. The transnational world that the circulation of Shakespeare's translations and adaptations circumscribes does not simply unfold in the process of using the database. As the project is designed both a research process and an educational enterprise in facilitating constructivist learning, this world is actually constructed by the joint efforts of scholars and their students. At the same time, the interpretative narrative inscribed into the project is designed to provide a cognitive structure that can lend cohesion and coherence to students' learning and research across the multiple resources of the database. Ryan emphasizes the tension between narrativity (which imposes linearity and closure) and interactivity (which opens up the structure to create the possibility of the user's choice): "if interactivity is the property that makes

the greatest difference between old and new media, it does not facilitate storytelling, because narrative meaning presupposes the linearity and unidirectionality of time, logic, and causality, while a system of choices involves a non-linear or multilinear branching structure, such as a tree, a rhizome, or a network" (*Avatars* 99). This tension can be productive to the educational situation wherein students have to navigate across diverse resources and need to be given a sense of "control over resource selection, organization and use so that they do not feel overconstrained in what they can explore" (Mulholland, Wolff, Zdrahal, Collins 283). Interactive narratives help students to construct intra- and interperspective coherence and ensure their control over the subject matter.

The second important area of our project refers to students'/users' input. The project is designed along transdisciplinary lines and aims at setting up a research community in which (graduate) students from various departments at universities in Romania collaborate in the construction of the platform. Students' contribution is organized within a Master of Arts program of intercultural studies in which on the one hand they are given practical assignments such as transliterating texts written or printed in Cyrillic, comparing translations, and identifying important contextual elements around them and on the other hand interacting with the platform (although the latter is not a complete, finished product) and producing their own research in the form of essays designed as blog posts. A selection of the best essays is incorporated in the site alongside the research products of faculty involved in the project. Further, what we are trying to implement relates to what Megan Norcia suggests in her "Out of the Ivory Tower Endlessly Rocking: Collaborating across Disciplines and Professions to Promote Student Learning in the Digital Archive." Norcia suggests to engage, shape, and have participate students in a digital archive whereby they gain agency and the subjectivity necessary to rethink various aspects of history and in our case literature and the history of literature. The inclusion of the students' work alongside that of the established scholars bridges the gap between the communities of scholars and users. The many versions of translations put together side by side will familiarize users with the wide range of possibilities which result from the morphing of a story across various periods and regions exposing them to antiquated or modern language and engaging them in close reading through translation and adaptation. The display of multiple versions of a text is meant to educate students into domesticating a canonical work previously seen as distant in time and space leading to a comfortable attempt at "writing back" to Shakespeare.

At the same time, the expansion and possible re-writing of the "master narrative" of transnational Shakespeare as a result of the inclusion of a variety of micronarratives provided by the joint community of users reinforces the sense of production, revision, and transformation of the interactive narrative. The categories, tags, and further linkages of the archive are also subject to revision and change. The resulting stories may come close to Ann Rigney's description of the new interactive historical narratives wherein the associative connections—generated by hypertext—work against the idea that all events are part of the on-going narrative and where the platform is similar to an imaginative museum allowing all sorts of points for identification rather than a single pathway (116). This strategy allows for the continuous expansion of the database as the project addresses students from diverse departments of foreign languages.

We place emphasis on the increase of database interactivity by which we mean a high level of archive permeability and work in progress allowing for multiple variants of installation capable of transforming perceptions about the archived materials. We build on Ryan's insight into the convergence of "top-down design" and "bottom-up input" which configures the interactive narrative in the shape of a "multilinear branching structure" (*Avatars* 99). However, when distinguishing between the different layers of interactivity in digital texts, Ryan still sees the database as a "fully predetermined" hypertext, whose only potential of interactivity lies in the program's innate configuration of variable linking and interconnectivity" ("The Interactive" 40). A bottom-up approach only allows for a limited manipulation of material—accepting, arranging, collecting, and annotation, as is evidenced in the design of the above mentioned digital Shakespeare platforms. The practice employed by these sites for allowing the user a thematical selection of the materials is categorization and tagging, which involves using keywords to derive an interpretative story from items belonging to the collection. Some of the platforms publish the users' comments, although the content of their input does not seem to affect the given narratives. The same use of keywords in determining different trajectories throughout the text is

found in Hayles's "Narrative Bits," in which she suggests to give users a stronger voice by designing a conversation between argumentation and users' comments

(http://vectors.usc.edu/narrating_bits/). Once a user chooses a tag, the interface allows for the two boxes of author and user comment to pop up simultaneously.

However, there are two issues which can be raised in relying solely on comments for user participation. The first addresses the user's lack of interest in engaging in the conversation: the option of leaving a comment on a video performance is scarce and few users respond to the invitation. For example, the Global Shakespeare Facebook https://www.facebook.com/globalshakespeare site fails to attract likes and comments. The second issue is the extent as to which users can influence the narrative in any way and actually get the satisfaction of contributing to its growth. Our project has targeted these limitations in interactivity and attempted to overcome them at least partially by incorporating students' work and developing the narrative potential of the platform. Further, we set out to expand interactivity by introducing a component of participatory culture that resembles the mechanism of fan-fiction writing. Although interactivity and participation have been considered separate features of different sources—the former being an aspect of software design and the latter sa "property of culture" (Jenkins 4) that promotes appropriation, recirculation, and production of media contentthe two can enhance one another in a dialogical digital storytelling environment such as a fan fiction forum or a social media display. One recent experiment in collective storytelling inspired by Shakespearian works is the Twitter Fiction Festival in 2012. This virtual event displayed a selection of creative writing projects among which was Shakespeare: A Retweeting, a "crowd-sourced, real-time, dramatic performance of classical works that brings Twitter into the telling"

http://books.wwnorton.com/books/shakespeare-retweeting/). In this case, as in that of most fan fiction communities, interactivity is obtained through an interconnected and participatory process of re-reading. Fan fiction writers dive even deeper into collaborative practices by also being beta readers: reviewing, commenting upon, and validating each other's writing. Thus we decided that the inclusion of the students' fan fiction productions, although transgressing the scholarly format is a welcome and natural addition to our project.

Appropriation and remixing (see Jenkins and Clinton), and the use of digital tools as methods of performance and adaptation (see Ehrlich) lead to a level of interaction which allows students to "feel in control of their own learning" (Porter 317). The various forms of students' rewriting of Shake-speare's texts are to be included in galleries through the crowd-sourced database. To attain this goal we look for guiding practices provided by several digital collections which employ the crowd-sourcing strategy in keeping their archives alive such as *A Living History of Milton Keynes and District*

http://www.livingarchive.org.uk/, John Cage Unbound: A Living Archive

http://exhibitions.nypl.org/johncage/, and Memorial Stadium 1924-1992

http://brickhouse.lib.umn.edu/). The platform *Omeka* http://omeka.org allows for multiple exhibits starting from different items gathered in the archive and thus it is particularly suited for our purpose in incorporating blog posts, start public debates, and thereby create user-generated archives. Mostly used for collecting and preserving oral history, the latter feature equips our site with a valuable technical method of gathering users' reactions to the material be they creative responses, contextual information, or related archival items, all of which are included in our collection and submitted in blog posts for public debate. It is precisely this form of interaction that digital archives can draw from digital storytelling, namely "interaction [that] takes place in a mediated form, through the collaborative construction of a metacommentary," emanating from "a dialogue between users rather than [from] the navigation or authorship of a particular text" (Page and Thomas 13).

In conclusion, the architecture of our platform URL expresses curatorial and scholarly views of the collection of digitized corpora and therefore we are looking for a non-hierarchical display of exhibits each having its own narrative about artifacts, contextual information, trajectories of influence, comparisons, data visualization, and other content and mode-specific analyses. The choice of a narrative in selecting and customizing a set of items permeates the archive and introduces exhibits with different interpretative views on items in the collection. Public debates and user-submitted content are the backbones of this model of this permeable archive.

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