Review of *Hamlet on the Ramparts*

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Abstract

Part of the MIT Shakespeare Project, *Hamlet on the Ramparts* provides open access to a variety of materials for understanding and interpreting Hamlet's first encounter with the Ghost in Act 1 of *Hamlet*.

The Ghost's evocative appearance and call to vengeance are essential to the theatrical mystery of the *Hamlet* texts. *Hamlet on the Ramparts*, developed by Peter S. Donaldson and MIT Shakespeares, compiles a range of resources for reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focused on the appearance of the Ghost on Elsinore's battlements and Hamlet's conversation with it in Act I, Scenes 4-5. The website developers have engaged effectively with a broad range of material that provides different avenues into this scene, the playtexts, and Shakespearean drama as a whole. The site aims to "provide free access to an evolving collection of texts, images, and film relevant to Hamlet's first encounter with the Ghost" and, while the site is now out of date, it is nevertheless an interesting example of how digital resources can supplement more traditional forms of textual engagement.

Unfortunately, while the developers acknowledge both teachers and students as possible users of the site, the site itself is unclear as to which sections are appropriate for which audiences. Most material on the site seems aimed at high school students or educators, with most pages containing relatively general guides to different topics. These could be appropriate to a range of senior high school and college students in literature, film, theatre, cultural studies, or history. However, some material is specifically marked out for primary and high school teachers. Other pages seem to assume their reader to be knowledgeable about aspects of Shakespearean texts. These assumptions shift without warning throughout the site. Nevertheless, even with the limitations of an unclear intended audience and dated technology, *Ramparts* is still an engaging example of how intertextual and cultural studies might inform our readings of Shakespeare in dynamic ways.

In addition to a welcome and set of guidelines for users, *Ramparts* has eight main sections. These are the "Reading Room," "Lesson Plans," "Tutorials and Guides," "Early Editions," "Adaptations and Promptbooks," "Art," "Film," and "Electronic Texts." The most robust part

of the site is the "Reading Room," which allows viewers to compare any two resources from across the website. The "Reading Room" allows users to browse at any level to see what kinds of comparison might be valuable, embodying the comparative spirit of inquiry behind *Ramparts*. Users can compare artwork, photographs, digitized facsimiles and textual excerpts relating to the ramparts scene, and can choose to access different resources and compare them side-by-side using a split screen feature. For those interested in the text, the words of the battlement scenes can be placed alongside early modern printed material or similar. For those interested in staging or film, illustrations and still photographs can be viewed alongside one another or next to the text. However, the interface itself is often difficult to navigate. Any zoom capability on an object of interest is limited when placed alongside another object, preventing users from reading a printed text in detail, for example, while comparing it to an illustrator's rendition of an actor performing that scene. The "Reading Room" is a highly valuable part of the site because it allows for a broad range of comparison across multiple fields of inquiry, even with its interface issues.

Users can find four options under the "Lesson Plans" portion of the site. Janet Field-Pickering's lessons for late primary school students focus on helping students understand how language creates images, using descriptions of the Ghost as a way into the text. Mary Ellen Dakin's lessons for senior high school students provide some more complex points of entry via textual variants and thematic resonances in the text of the ramparts scene. None of these lesson plans offer much to those in higher education, but the impetus for these lessons could well be adapted for different classroom settings. Field-Pickering's and Dakin's lessons draw out elements of imagery through language and staging, key elements essential for any reader of Shakespeare. As such, while they are limited to their target audiences, the lessons nevertheless indicate important features of the ramparts scenes contributing to the site's intention to facilitate discussions around the scenes.

The "Tutorials and Guides" section is divided into three modules of potential interest to students ("What is a Folio?"; "Hamlet a Woman?"; and "Staging the Ghost") and two more sections to help students with appropriate vocabulary ("Film Lexicon" and "Textual Terms"). "What is a Folio?" allows users to either work through or browse different features of what makes a folio text. As well as being a good introduction to early modern print culture and bibliography, this sequence would work well for introducing literary studies students to features of early modern printed material that may not be mentioned or emphasized in scholarly editions of *Hamlet*. Out of the three, the folio module is perhaps the strongest because of its attention to detail, being of greatest assistance to someone who is not already an expert in reading early modern printed texts. It takes visual and staged elements of Shakespeare's text such as stage directions (or their absence) into account even as it discusses how to read the large codex that is the Folio. However, because

of the level of detail it could be overwhelming for students who do not already have some grasp of Shakespearean texts or elements of staging. The "Film Lexicon" and "Textual Terms" sections could nonetheless supplement some of this knowledge, as they cover terminology that students may otherwise not know. The latter is a more generally helpful overview of terms used on the site, while the former is of more use in tandem with the "Film" module. While not signalled as such, the level of detail in the folio module seems aimed at college students.

The other two main modules are more accessible to a wider range of students from backgrounds beyond literary and theatre studies. They contain appropriate content for high school and early college years. "Hamlet a Woman?" shows students the long history of women actors playing the title role. This module is to be commended for its range of sources from Asta Nielsen and other early film actors to considering the impact of Laura Mulvey's work on the female gaze in relation to *Hamlet*. It makes good use of videos and screenshots of these productions to accompany its material on this history. Unfortunately, large portions of it are written entirely in capital letters, which is distracting for users. This module could also be improved and updated by including contemporary women playing this role on stage or screen for comparison (Maxine Peake's 2014 performances come to mind). Again, the level of detail seems aimed at college students, as the site makes a good starting point for a student project on other actors who have played Hamlet, though senior high school students could also engage with this material

The final module on "Staging the Ghost" has some excellent material to guide students in making theatrical decisions based on the dramatic text. Regardless of their age or ability, the material on these pages leads students to think about Shakespeare three dimensionally. While sometimes difficult to navigate, the comparative interface can also encourage users to think about and make multiple connections between sources. While not signalled as such, the content of this module seems simpler than others and therefore aimed at high school students. However, the staging activities could also be applicable in some college settings as introductory work. The basis of this section is quite flexible, and so teachers or directors could perhaps adapt it for adult theatre classes or children's programs.

The remaining sections of the *Ramparts* site display different versions of *Hamlet*, as well as ways to enter conversations about Shakespearean adaptation. They consolidate the materials available in the "Reading Room" under different categories. "Early Editions" provides introductions to the three main texts of *Hamlet* (Q1, Q2, F1) via digital facsimiles, with access provided by the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library, and the Furness Shakespeare Library at the University of Pennsylvania. This section provides clear descriptions of the different forms of the play that would be helpful to students or scholars new to early modern printing,

pairing well with the folio module mentioned above. "Electronic Texts" provides links to separate plain-text pages transcribing the ramparts scene from three editions: Harold Jenkins' Arden2 edition (1982), Bernice W. Kliman and Paul Bertram's Three-Text *Hamlet* (1991), and Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine's Folger edition (1992). Users could peruse or compare these, but more contemporary editions may be of greater use to the current reader (whether student, teacher, or practitioner).

As a contrast to the three main *Hamlet* texts, the "Adaptations and Promptbooks," "Art," and "Film" sections encourage thoughtful and curious engagement with the text in a range of performance styles and spaces. The sections are somewhat limited, but their contents can be utilized most effectively via the "Reading Room" portion of the site. "Adaptations and Promptbooks" from 1660 onwards offers interesting insight into the history of Shakespearean adaptation. However, the site offers only bibliographic details for each edition and promptbook, so users unfamiliar with these texts may miss some of the key differences unless they manually browse each individual facsimile page provided. The sections titled "Art" and "Film" showcase compilations of artwork, images, film stills, and film clips from a range of sources. These include the aforementioned material on Prince Hamlet acted by women, as well as artists' impressions of scenes or specific actors. These are fantastic resources that run adjacent to Shakespeare's text and are available literally alongside it in the "Reading Room."

The site has two main downfalls. The first is the site's interface clearly places it as created somewhere in the late-1990s/early 2000s. Online editions that discuss Shakespeare's work and context abound and have developed significantly since *Ramparts*' creation. *Ramparts* was last updated in 2008 with a few additional video clips featuring performances of the ramparts scene. Given that *Ramparts* is listed as part of the MIT Global Shakespeare Project, it is likely that the site will not be updated further, but rather remain one part of that larger group of sites. The second is that the site has minor errors and missing links throughout each section, and lacks hyperlinks and other features that would allow for more intuitive use. The dated interface is likely to be distracting or off-putting for many users, and this will almost certainly be the case if using the site in current lessons with students. The menus are not always intuitive, and different portions of the page layout function differently from one another, with scrolling and hyperlinks working to varying degrees on different pages. *Ramparts* does not support a built-in search function, which makes navigation more difficult again for users with less experience with similar interfaces. The lack of hyperlinks connecting key portions of the site can make it particularly difficult to navigate between related sections. For example, the pages on "Staging the Ghost," "Hamlet a Woman?", and "Lesson Plans" pages could be improved with direct links to one another for ease of access. The "Lesson Plans"

provide good guidance for instructors, but could be improved by highlighting clearer connections between the site's lesson plan ideas and the site's content. Providing hyperlinks at key points would also allow an instructor to browse relevant portions of the site and tailor the lessons to their own needs. This would also allow instructors at the college level to adapt the material more effectively. "Electronic Texts" and "Early Editions" contain closely related materials, and so could also be improved by being hyperlinked together. The material on "Adaptations and Promptbooks" could be logically linked with "Art" and "Film" pages as well.

As an appropriation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this site's approach of choosing a single scene is its most valuable asset. Through this choice, *Ramparts* successfully models a wide range of ways Shakespeare's text can be and has been adapted. In turn, this can lead students, instructors, and scholars to think in new ways about the malleable and exciting features of Shakespeare's text.

References

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