


Radically Accessible Shakespeare: Crippling the Digital Shakespeare Canon through Universal Design and Disability Studies

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Abstract

The internet has vastly expanded access to Shakespeare resources, as well as the range of materials included in the Shakespeare canon. Online Shakespeare resources often focus on making Shakespeare more accessible to educators, students, and general audiences. Accessibility for people with disabilities, however, is not often mentioned. This article argues for making Shakespeare resources radically accessible and inclusive by incorporating both Universal Design approaches and Disability Studies perspectives. This dual approach emphasizes the importance of accessible technologies and the necessity of incorporating Disability Studies theories and methods, including contributions of Deaf and disabled artists and scholars and critical analyses of cultural representations of disability. While the overrepresentation of Shakespeare in digital space is problematic, the massive scope of Shakespeare's online presence provides opportunities for radically transforming, or crippling, the digital canon. Crippling the digital Shakespeare canon involves centering accessibility, incorporating anti-ableist content, and promoting new methods of engaging with Shakespeare and digital spaces. Due to Shakespeare's outsized presence, crippling the digital Shakespeare canon provides a significant avenue for advancing the accessibility and inclusivity of digital resources generally.

Introduction

The internet has vastly expanded access to Shakespeare resources and has led to the proliferation of born-digital Shakespeareana. Shakespeare exists online in archival materials, digital texts, apps, films, recordings of theatrical performances, YouTube videos, and other digital media. Shakespeare has enough of a digital presence to justify considering online Shakespeare a subset of the Digital Humanities field [Carson and Kirwan 2014, pp. 1–2]. Articles in *DHQ* testify to the innovations of Digital Humanities projects focused on Shakespeare and early modern studies ([Lee and Lee 2017]; [Giglio and Venecek 2009]; [Mueller 2014]; [Jenstad, McLean-Fiander, and McPherson 2017]; [Kelley 2017]; [Boyd 2021]). In addition to disseminating established forms of Shakespeare scholarship to wider audiences, online modalities allow opportunities for radically new interpretations, perspectives, and ways of interacting with Shakespeare to emerge.

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Making Shakespearean texts, performances, and scholarship more accessible to wider audiences motivates much of the online Shakespeare world. This view of Shakespeare's accessibility often focuses on making materials more engaging, comprehensible, and freely available; accessibility for people with disabilities, however, is not often mentioned. While there has been productive scholarly dialogue between Disability Studies and Shakespeare studies ([Hobgood and Wood 2013]; [Iyengar 2015]; [Row-Heyveld 2018]; [Love 2018]; [Dunn 2020]; [Loftis 2021]; [Hobgood 2021]; [Schaap Williams 2021]), between Digital Humanities and Shakespeare studies ([Hirsch and Craig 2014]; [Carson and Kirwan 2014]; [Estill, Jakacki, and Uilyot 2016]; [Jenstad, Kaethler, and Roberts-Smith 2018]; [O'Neill 2019]; [Squeo, Pennacchia, and Winckler 2021]), and between Disability Studies and Digital Humanities ([Williams 2012]; [Godden and Hsy 2018]; [Elcessor 2016]; [Elcessor 2018]; [Hamraie 2018]), it is necessary to foster further collaboration across these three interdisciplinary fields. Words like "accessible" and "democratized" are often applied in discussions of online Shakespeare. However, until the world of online Shakespeare fully includes people with

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disabilities, it will not be truly accessible or democratized. Following Carson and Kirwan, I consider “the importance of Shakespeare as a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world” [Carson and Kirwan 2014, p. 1]. In addition to providing a “case study,” the world of online Shakespeare can be a site in which interventions are implemented and shared to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of digital worlds more broadly.

Scholars have illustrated the need for more inclusivity in Digital Humanities. The #TransformDH movement has drawn attention to how “Questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability should be central to digital humanities and digital media studies” [Bailey et al. 2016]. At the same time, Shakespeare’s outsized presence in Digital Humanities projects has been interpreted as a key example of the field’s “canon problem” [Estill 2019]. Laura Estill writes: “It has been well-documented that major digital literary studies projects often focus on canonical authors. [...] yet comparatively few scholars have critiqued how digital humanities overrepresents perhaps the most canonical figure in all of English literature: Shakespeare” [Estill 2019]. While the overrepresentation of Shakespeare in digital space is problematic, the massive scope of Shakespeare’s online presence makes it a useful entry point for critically evaluating accessibility and advocating for the accessibility and inclusivity of digital resources generally. It is crucial to fund and build Digital Humanities projects that focus on marginalized authors and communities. In addition to supporting projects that decenter the canon, it is also useful to critically analyze how the Shakespeare canon is continually reimagined in digital environments, and to work toward making this expanding canon as diverse, inclusive, and accessible as possible.

Digitization has already significantly transformed the Shakespeare canon. Douglas M. Lanier writes: “The disciplinary field of ‘Shakespeare’ has expanded dramatically in recent decades. [...] ‘Shakespeare’ now includes performances, translations, transmediations, adaptations, appropriations, and even memes, not just in English but also in myriad languages from around the world” [Lanier 2017, p. 293]. Digital projects, such as the MIT Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive, highlight the diversity of Shakespearean performance and curate an ever-expanding canon [MIT Global Shakespeares]. As digital projects related to Shakespeare continue to grow, it is crucial to continually reflect upon who is included in and excluded from the digital corpus that comprises “Shakespeare.” Productions of Shakespeare’s plays by Deaf and disabled artists and Shakespearean criticism by Deaf Studies and Disability Studies scholars^[1] are an integral part of the ever-expanding Shakespeare canon; these performances and perspectives can be further highlighted in digital projects.

Since digital Shakespeare resources are widely used pedagogical tools, critical reflection upon their accessibility and inclusivity is especially urgent. A recent special issue in *Research in Drama Education* examines the “diversity of pedagogical approaches to Shakespeare” borne through Shakespeare’s overrepresentation in educational and digital spaces globally [Bell and Borsuk 2020, p. 1]. The special issue “aim[s] to illustrate the cultural hegemonies present in teaching Shakespeare on a global scale, and how digital technologies potentially maintain these hegemonies, or confront them” [Bell and Borsuk 2020, p. 3]. In a similar vein, this article argues that Shakespeare pedagogy and digital technologies can maintain or confront ableism. The “canon problem” [Estill 2019] that Shakespeare’s massive online presence encapsulates also presents an opportunity to “crip the canon,” to use Ann M. Fox’s phrase [Fox 2010].^[2] Universal Design and Disability Studies can be employed to crip the digital Shakespeare canon, transforming both Shakespeare studies and digital spaces. I argue that crippling the digital Shakespeare canon includes two main components: (1) incorporating Universal Design to create digital environments that are as accessible as possible and (2) incorporating Disability Studies perspectives and disability representation to create anti-ableist content. This dual approach emphasizes both the importance of accessible technology and the necessity of incorporating Disability Studies theories and methods, including highlighting the contributions of Deaf and disabled artists and scholars and critically analyzing cultural representations of disability. Integrating Universal Design and Disability Studies approaches can improve the accessibility of Shakespeare resources, create engaging and empowering instructional technologies, and allow interpretations of Shakespeare’s works by Deaf and disabled scholars and artists to reach wider audiences.

In the following section, I provide an overview of Universal Design, review how it has been critiqued from Disability Studies perspectives, and discuss its continued importance for Digital Humanities projects. I then argue for centering disability in the digital Shakespeare canon and provide an overview of accessibility in Shakespeare studies. Following that, I analyze a key example of a digital work that expands the Shakespeare canon. I then analyze how YouTube

functions as a digital Shakespeare archive with significant accessibility failures and discuss how Shakespeare's overrepresentation in digital spaces can be utilized to improve accessibility. Finally, I discuss how crowdsourcing has been used and can continue to be used to improve accessibility. By highlighting both work that has been done to expand the canon and work that still must be done to make the expanding canon more accessible, I argue for engaging in ongoing critical reflection on the accessibility and inclusivity of the digital Shakespeare canon. Because of its canonicity, crippling online Shakespeare has the potential to impact digital archives generally by promoting increasingly accessible digital environments and anti-ableist content.

Universal Design

Originally an architectural concept, Universal Design was developed by Ronald Mace who described it as “a way of designing a building or facility, at little or no extra cost, so it is both attractive and functional for all people, disabled or not” ([Mace 1985] qtd. in [Hamraie 2013]). George H. Williams has called for Digital Humanities projects to incorporate Universal Design, which he defines as “design that involves conscious decisions about accessibility for all” [Williams 2012].

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Aimi Hamraie's critical analysis of Universal Design defines its key features in the following quote:

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1. Accessibility by design (design that prioritizes accessibility)
2. Broad accessibility (accessibility for the greatest number of people possible)
3. Added value (design that benefits disabled people also has benefits for nondisabled people)

[Hamraie 2013]

Drawing from feminist and disability theories, Hamraie critically analyzes these principles and discusses how Universal Design can be “a broad and intersectional social justice method through which designers can address more collective, overlapping, and intersectional exclusions from the built environment” [Hamraie 2013].

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The purported “universality” of Universal Design has been critiqued ([Godden and Hsy 2018]; [Hamraie 2013]; [Hamraie 2017]). Hamraie writes: “When the content of the universal is unspecified, UD can slip into vague notions of ‘all’ or ‘everyone’ that assume normate users and de-center disability” [Hamraie 2013]. Hamraie emphasizes the importance of intersectional, disability justice-oriented approaches to design and focuses on “broad accessibility,” writing: “Broad accessibility serves as a more complex notion of inclusion, showing that UD must still center disability access in order to avoid lapsing into the normate template” [Hamraie 2013].

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Richard H. Godden and Jonathan Hsy's “Universal Design and Its Discontents” is a Digital Humanities-focused critique of Universal Design. Godden writes: “Although UD arose out of a real social and political response to the disabling aspects of everyday life for People with Disabilities, I want to suggest that the ‘Universal’ in UD can carry with it some unintended and unexpected assumptions about normalcy and our physical orientation to the world” [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 92]. Godden argues “we need to move forward by balancing the Universalist and utopian aims of UD with a more local, attentive approach to individual use” [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 100]. Hsy writes: “Both UD and DH advocates often invoke an unrealized and idealized conception of collective space (physical or online) in order to challenge dominant beliefs and practices and to encourage people to join in a newly reconfigured sense of common purpose” [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 101–2].

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As Hamraie argues in a section entitled “Crippling Universal Design,” while disability is often elided in Universal Design discourse, subsumed by an undertheorized concept of “universality,” the term “crip” powerfully centers disability, highlighting its critical, political, and cultural resonance [Hamraie 2017, pp. 11–14]. Hamraie writes:

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in the early twenty-first century, around the time that Universal Design became a predominantly disability-neutral discourse, critical and crip theories of disability emerged to challenge the social model for overemphasizing the environmental construction of disability oppression over embodied experiences of disablement. “Crip,” a reclamation of the term “cripple” dating to the 1970s independent living movement, resists imperatives for normalization and assimilation. Crip theories contribute that disability is a valuable

cultural identity, a source of knowledge, and a basis for relationality. [Hamraie 2017, p. 12]

Following Hamraie, I use the term *cripping* in its radical reclaimed sense to address the problem of discussions of universality and accessibility frequently eliding disability. When universality and accessibility are discussed generally, in both Shakespeare studies and Digital Humanities discourse, people with disabilities are often left out. *Cripping Universal Design* centers people with disabilities in the project of building an inclusive digital Shakespeare world — or any digital or physical world.

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As Tanya Titchkosky [Titchkosky 2011] has shown, the structures and spaces of universities, and even bureaucratic attempts to create more “access,” are laden with and constitutive of conceptions about who belongs and what disability signifies. The same is true for digital spaces, and particularly academic digital spaces. As the physical and the virtual spaces of universities and knowledge circulation are increasingly blurred, attending to the digital worlds being created and analyzing who is constructed as “*essentially excludable*” [Titchkosky 2011, p. 39] is crucial. Titchkosky writes: “I am particularly interested in how disability is socially produced as something that is not yet considered an essential participant in social life. Still, including disability as excludable is a scene where the meaning of the concept of ‘all people’ is forged” [Titchkosky 2011, p. 14].

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Rather than promoting utopian fantasies of Shakespeare as “accessible to all” or design that is truly universal, I call for more attention to be paid to exclusions of disability in the world of digital Shakespeare, and in digital worlds generally. While truly Universal Design may be impossible, it is still a useful framework for pursuing increased accessibility. While truly universal access may be unattainable, we can still critique and correct inaccessibility, moving in the direction of broadened access.

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Similarly, *cripping* the digital Shakespeare canon entails critiquing, rather than reinforcing, Shakespeare’s purported “universality.” In advocating for inclusive Shakespeare programs and performances, Sonya Freeman Loftis cautions against “the failure of universal design and the way in which universal design may become bound up with notions about ‘universal’ Shakespeare” [Loftis 2021, p. 79]. The salience of “universality” and “access” in Shakespeare studies highlights the need to incorporate the Disability Studies critiques of these concepts in the interdisciplinary field.

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My argument for *cripping* the digital Shakespeare canon is founded on Shakespeare’s ubiquity, not universality. Considering the size of Shakespeare’s massive presence online and how often these resources are used for educational purposes, the world of online Shakespeare should be a driving force in advancing Universal Design approaches. When Shakespeare resources are not fully accessible, people with disabilities — scholars and non-scholars alike — are excluded from exploring and co-creating the digital Shakespeare canon. Moreover, incorporating Universal Design principles into online Shakespeare resources enhances their pedagogical potential for a broad range of users. Captions on videos of Shakespearean performances make the work accessible to Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences, while also aiding comprehension for hearing audiences. Descriptions of visual images make paintings accessible to blind users and can provide significant details to sighted audiences as well. While incorporating Universal Design increases accessibility and can deepen engagement for a broad range of users, attentiveness to Disability Studies theory is necessary to combat the tendency to reproduce notions of “universal” and “access” that exclude disability ([Hamraie 2013]; [Hamraie 2017]; [Titchkosky 2011]; [Godden and Hsy 2018]).

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Cripping the Digital Shakespeare Canon

In addition to designing digital resources that are more accessible, *cripping* the digital Shakespeare canon must also include analyzing how disability is represented in online content. Shakespeare’s plays are full of characters with disabilities that require critical analysis, as Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood discuss in their introduction to *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*:

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Shakespeare’s creative output encompasses a broad range of disabled selfhoods: it moves across a spectrum from bodily to metaphysical disfigurement, ranging from instances of blindness to limping, from alcoholism to excessive fat, from infertility to war wounds, from cognitive impairments to epilepsy, from senility to “madness,” and from feigned disability to actual. [Hobgood and Wood 2013, p. 11]

Shakespeare's representations of disability can either reinforce or challenge ableism depending on how the plays are taught in classrooms, performed on stage and in film, and — crucially — presented online. Online resources may reinforce stereotypes by presenting Shakespeare's representations of physical and mental differences without the critical awareness that Disability Studies provides. Crippling the digital Shakespeare canon entails both correcting inaccessible digital forms and confronting ableist content.

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Digital humanists can learn from pedagogical and theatrical experiments in crippling content and increasing accessibility. In "How to Crip the Undergraduate Classroom: Lessons from Performance, Pedagogy, and Possibility," Fox outlines methods to center disability in courses and on campuses [Fox 2010]. In a section entitled "Crippling the Canon," Fox asks: "how do we make the knowledge about and creative work of disabled people (including activists, educators, artists, scholars, and thinkers) available to our students within our classrooms?" [Fox 2010, p. 39]. She poses the question: "Where could I locate the presence of disability into that which I was already teaching?" [Fox 2010, p. 39]. These questions can animate not only classrooms, but also the world of online Shakespeare and Digital Humanities projects generally. Digital humanists can "locate the presence of disability" [Fox 2010, p. 39] by making accessibility, inclusivity, and critical analysis of representations of disability integral parts of their projects. Crippling the canon involves not only giving critical attention to disability-related content, but also to expanding academic epistemologies; Fox writes: "To crip the canon might also mean crippling our rather canonical ways of reading, researching, and otherwise approaching and engaging an individual discipline, its core ideas and subject matter, introducing or framing them instead with a disability perspective" [Fox 2010, p. 40]. Crippling the digital Shakespeare canon requires going beyond making digital materials usable by people with disabilities; it entails incorporating critical Disability Studies perspectives, increasing disability representation, analyzing how digital materials are reinforcing or combatting ableism, and considering whose perspectives are represented or omitted. This can be applied to not only to digital Shakespeare resources, but also to digital projects generally. The range and volume of Shakespearean material online makes it a useful site for evaluating accessibility and inclusivity, developing practices that can be applied more widely, and, more radically, reimagining and reinventing both the canon and methods of engaging with it. Crippling Shakespeare — the center of the English literary canon — transforms our understanding not only of Shakespeare's poems and plays, but also of literary studies and digital environments more broadly.

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Sonya Freeman Loftis's recent book, *Shakespeare and Disability Studies*, makes a compelling case for "Crippling Shakespeare Studies" [Loftis 2021, p. 15]. Loftis analyzes how Shakespeare's canonicity and ubiquity have promoted a focus on accessibility, writing:

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Over the past twenty years, Shakespeare theatres have been particularly innovative in the area of accessibility. This is, in part, because modern Shakespearians have always been driven by the need for access. Shakespeare has a central place in the curriculum, and making Shakespeare accessible to students has long been a goal in the modern classroom. [...] four hundred years have already reduced the accessibility of the source text for lay readers and audiences. Indeed, popular culture often depicts Shakespeare as inherently difficult to understand. Shakespeare has become the classic symbol of that which is highbrow, and teachers and directors are charged with making his work accessible for everyone — from popular audiences to reluctant high schoolers. This means that Shakespearians are in a natural position to consider disability access; it makes sense that Shakespeare theatres would approach disability as just one more point of potential inaccessibility. [Loftis 2021, p. 11–12]

As Loftis has shown, a commitment to making Shakespeare accessible has led to Shakespeare theaters becoming leaders in inclusive performance. Loftis writes: "it is natural that an emphasis on general accessibility would lead to increased disability awareness — in the wake of the disability rights movement and in light of the growing neurodiversity movement, the endeavour to create 'access for all' must also include those with physical and mental disabilities" [Loftis 2021, p. 53]. People working on online Shakespeare projects, and indeed, digital humanists generally, should have the same goal of becoming leaders in accessibility. Access is not only a key term in Shakespeare studies, it is also a central concept in Digital Humanities discourse. Ellcessor writes: "Digital tools and services are routinely lauded for their ability to increase access to texts, resources, educational experiences, and new forms of pedagogy. Yet, merely making material available is insufficient to promote genuine access" [Ellcessor 2018, p. 108]^[3]

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In discussing inventive approaches to accessibility by Shakespeare's Globe, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Loftis writes: "Access can be artistic — it can be an integral part of the performance experience, shaping the interpretation both of the show and of Shakespeare's text" [Loftis 2021, p. 12]. The same spirit of accessibility as innovation can be foregrounded in digital Shakespeare projects, and in Digital Humanities projects generally. Loftis writes: "an understanding of disability theory is essential for scholars, teachers, and directors of Shakespeare. Statistics suggest that as many as one out of four people could potentially be considered as disabled. Since providing quality accommodations and pedagogical materials for users with disabilities requires a basic understanding of disability theory, teachers and directors of Shakespeare who wish to reach general audiences have a good reason to engage with disability studies" [Loftis 2021, p. 10]. Similarly, it is essential that creators of digital Shakespeare resources — and indeed, all digital resources — have an awareness of Disability Studies. As Loftis notes, incorporating disability theory entails valuing the knowledge that comes from lived experience, and thus including people with disabilities in projects' leadership positions [Loftis 2021, p. 11]. In her review of inclusive Shakespeare theaters, Loftis notes that "accessibility is always a work in progress, never a static end goal that can be achieved" [Loftis 2021, p. 66]. Working toward making performances as accessible as possible requires ongoing collaboration with people with disabilities and a commitment to welcoming audience members with disabilities into the theater, which often begins by highlighting access through the theater's website [Loftis 2021, pp. 70–72]. Jill Marie Bradbury [Bradbury 2022] provides a critical account of theatrical performances of Shakespeare that include ASL, written from her perspective as a deaf audience member. Bradbury writes: "I argue that hearing directors who work with deaf actors and ASL have an ethical responsibility to be inclusive of deaf audiences. This can be accomplished by centering deaf perspectives and experiences both onstage and in front-of-house practices" [Bradbury 2022, p. 45].

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What would it mean to truly welcome Deaf and disabled people into the world of online Shakespeare? How could the digital Shakespeare canon be more accessible and inclusive? I have been arguing that this process includes incorporating Universal Design to increase the accessibility of digital content and incorporating Disability Studies perspectives to confront ableism in both form and content. In the next section, I will analyze a digital work that expands the Shakespeare canon through Universal Design and Deaf studies perspectives.

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Expanding the Digital Shakespeare Canon: Tyrone Giordano and Jill Marie Bradbury's *Digit(al) Shakespeares*

Tyrone Giordano and Jill Marie Bradbury's *Digit(al) Shakespeares* [Giordano and Bradbury 2015] is a work of digital scholarship at the intersection of Deaf studies, Digital Humanities, and Shakespeare studies. The project consists of a 10-minute film, presented in ASL with English subtitles, and without audio. Crucially, the project also consists of a transcript and description of the video, which has been provided by Giordano and Bradbury as an integral part of the digital work. This delivery of the content through multiple forms exemplifies the Universal Design approach of *Digit(al) Shakespeares*: it is designed, from the start, with accessibility built in. The high-quality transcript and description of the video makes the content accessible to screen reader users and provides rich descriptions of and contextual information for video clips included in the film, which enhances the learning experience for all users.

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The description of the project states:

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Digit(al) Shakespeares brings Deaf studies perspectives to bear on both disability studies and digital humanities. Deaf studies focuses on what the experience of deafness enables, rather than disables. Just as we can reconceptualize hearing loss as deaf gain, so we can reframe Shakespeare's works as being at heart visual rather than auditory. This can lead to a richer experience of Shakespeare for everyone, regardless of hearing status. Throughout the video, clips illustrate the power of sign language to convey the Bard's virtuosity in creating images through words. New media and technology allow Deaf people to share translations and performances of Shakespeare's works across the globe. Digital archives can collect and preserve these, so they are available for Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing people to study and appreciate. Deaf and hard of hearing people also need access to digital Shakespeare archives based on spoken language via high quality captioning. Access should be built into digital archives from the start, so that it becomes a central element of the overall project design, rather than a problem to be solved at

the end. [Giordano and Bradbury 2015]

This description highlights the pedagogical and scholarly value that a Universal Design approach adds for all users, a centerpiece of Universal Design philosophy, through the claim that “This can lead to a richer experience of Shakespeare for everyone” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015]. However, rather than tacitly endorsing an undertheorized “universal” subject, as Universal Design approaches have frequently done, the project powerfully centers Deaf perspectives, both in representational content (through curating and presenting a performance history of Shakespeare in ASL) and through digital design (by featuring built-in accessibility that centers ASL and by advocating for digital archives to be accessible to Deaf and hard of hearing people).

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The content, methodology, and design of Giordano and Bradbury’s project illuminate the scholarly, artistic, and social value of approaching Shakespeare from a Deaf perspective. The Universal Design of the project welcomes a broad range of users to engage with and respond to this significant and underrepresented approach to Shakespeare. Giordano and Bradbury highlight the need for more accessible digital archives while showcasing what is gained from studying Shakespeare from Deaf studies perspectives.

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Digit(al) Shakespeares goes beyond Universal Design to decenter the customary privileging of hearing audiences. The lack of audio in the video both highlights the methodology of centering the visual over the auditory in the project’s approach to Shakespeare and decenters audist privilege. While the content of the digital work can be accessed by a broad range of users, hearing audiences are informed: “NOTE: There is no sound throughout the video” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015].

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Hsy has explored how the *Deaf Studies Digital Journal (DSDJ)* decenters the privileging of hearing audiences by providing video of scholarship in ASL that is not always accompanied by English translations [Godden and Hsy 2018, pp. 107–109]. Hsy describes the productive tension of exploring *DSDJ* in a workshop focused on increasing the accessibility of Digital Humanities projects:

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An intriguing aspect of the group discussion of *DSDJ* in the *Accessible Future* workshop in Austin in 2014 was the sense that the lack of audio or captions in these videos make the content “inaccessible” by one set of embodied norms (that is, a set of UD principles that would call for embedded features for internet users who have visual impairments). As I reflect on this conversation afterwards, I have come to realize that the uneven media functionality of the journal suggested a discomfiting social reality for those of us who were present at that particular workshop: much of the content of this Deaf-oriented journal was at the time rendered *inaccessible to a hearing majority* (or, to put things more precisely, the online journal’s content was only partially accessible to non-ASL users). [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 108]

As Hsy analyzes, this is an instance in which a digital work’s non-adherence to Universal Design principles is revelatory: “the current user interface appropriately forces me to confront my own audiocentric (and Anglophone) privilege and I find myself navigating an online linguistic environment that is only unevenly or partially configured for my use” [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 109].

While *Digit(al) Shakespeares* is broadly accessible due to its Universal Design approach, it still powerfully decenters the privilege of non-ASL users. While English subtitles appear during experts’ statements and some ASL Shakespeare performances, many clips of actors performing Shakespeare in ASL are not subtitled. The transcript and description of the video provide information about all of the clips included in the film, cataloguing a rich archive of ASL Shakespeare performance history. This combination of providing broad accessibility while centering Deaf perspectives makes *Digit(al) Shakespeares* a strong example of a Digital Humanities work that incorporates Universal Design principles without tacitly endorsing a “universal” user and audist privilege.

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Giordano and Bradbury’s project highlights the potential of combining Digital Humanities and Deaf Studies approaches. Hsy analyzes how Giordano and Bradbury’s project “deftly exploits the manifold valence of the ‘digit’ in its pluralized title *Digit(al) Shakespeares*” [Godden and Hsy 2018, p. 107]. Viewing Shakespeare from a visual perspective fundamentally

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transforms the Shakespeare canon and opens up new modes of engagement that utilize possibilities that digital environments provide. Miako Rankin explains: “So much has happened in the last 15 years, with smartphones, touchpad technology, video-to-video interaction, Deaf people are interacting and communicating with one another more than ever before” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015, 06:33–06:48]. As Jill Bradbury discusses, this technology has a significant impact on Deaf approaches to Shakespeare: “Digital technology is fast and cheap now, enabling Deaf people the world over to experience Shakespeare’s poetry and create films and translations to share so others might enjoy that work” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015, 06:48–07:00].

Bradbury continues: “It is paramount that we collect those films and experiences, essentially forming a digital archive for us, not only to preserve this work for future generations, but also to create a space where deaf and hearing people both can study and appreciate the work” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015, 07:16–07:34]. Ethan Sinnott explains the enormous potential of digital archives: “All this becomes a library, one that the Deaf community can access regardless of their background: whether their interests lie in theatre, education, English, or if they are interested in improving bilingual ASL-English access” [Giordano and Bradbury 2015, 07:00–07:16].

Online spaces provide significant opportunities to present and preserve ASL translations of Shakespeare. The ASL Shakespeare Project’s website [ASL Shakespeare], which documents the process of translating Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* into ASL, is “the first bilingual and bicultural website on Shakespeare on the internet” [Novak 2008, p. 74]. The ASL Shakespeare Project, like Giordano and Bradbury’s *Digit(al) Shakespeares* project, employs digital technologies to expand the Shakespeare canon.

The Inaccessible Shakespeare Archive on YouTube

The world of online Shakespeare includes spaces that encourage productive exchange between humanities scholars and the broader public. This traffic is not one-way: while scholars can reach wider audiences online, scholars and students routinely use online content created by non-academics. The Shakespeare canon is curated, adapted, and expanded in these digital spaces. For the evolving Shakespeare canon to be inclusive, these sites of exchange and engagement must be fully accessible.

YouTube is a key platform on which this exchange occurs. Christy Desmet refers to YouTube as “what for the past decade has been one of the most popular, most prevalent, and most innovative sources for teaching Shakespearean drama” [Desmet 2016, p. 223]. Indeed, YouTube has transformed Shakespeare performance studies, as John Lavagnino writes: “YouTube was not founded for the purpose of transforming the study of Shakespeare in performance by providing a vastly larger range of material to see than had ever been available before, but that was one of its effects. In this as in other areas of study, digital approaches became prominent because they had vast numbers of people outside the academy behind them” [Lavagnino 2014, p. 21]. YouTube users are producing a seemingly-democratized Shakespearean archive, as Stephen O’Neill describes: “the small screens of YouTube grant access to an accidental archive of Shakespeareana, to user-generated Shakespeares and to such genres as the video mashup (combining one or more audio tracks with moving images, sometimes with ironic effect), the vlog (or video diary) and the fan-made movie trailer” [O’Neill 2014, pp. 2–3].

YouTube’s seemingly-democratized Shakespeare archive, however, is failing miserably when it comes to accessibility. Many Shakespeare videos do not have captions or use automatically generated captions that are grossly inaccurate when attempting to capture Shakespeare’s verse.^[4] It is crucial that these videos are captioned accurately, especially since they are often used as educational resources. Accurate captions are both an essential accessibility feature and an aid to all users’ comprehension of Shakespearean language.

Williams has surveyed ways in which the accessibility of Digital Humanities projects could be improved and offered suggestions, including crowdsourcing the captioning and transcriptions of video content [Williams 2012]. Shakespeare’s texts are freely available in Open Access digital formats,^[5] which can aid the captioning of Shakespeare videos. Crowdsourcing the captioning and transcriptions of digital Shakespeare videos could make use of the abundance of Shakespeare material online to significantly improve accessibility. This is an example of how Shakespeare’s

overrepresentation in digital spaces (in both text and video) can be utilized to improve accessibility and model best practices for digital archives.

YouTube's community captions feature had the potential to be used to crowdsource captions in this way and radically improve the accessibility of the digital Shakespeare archive, yet this feature was discontinued on September 28, 2020 [Lyons 2020]. Deaf YouTuber and advocate for captions Rikki Poynter has discussed the importance of this feature in Deaf, hard of hearing, and disability communities and critiqued YouTube's failure to promote the feature, make it accessible on mobile devices, or improve the feature rather than dismantling it [Poynter 2020]. While more YouTube users are now submitting their own captions due to increased awareness [O'Dell 2021], much more remains to be done. Especially since YouTube has been transformative in Shakespeare studies, it is imperative that Shakespeareans raise awareness about accurately captioning the Shakespeare performance archive on YouTube. Doing so will not only improve the accessibility of the ever-growing Shakespeare canon, but will also increase awareness about the importance of captioning videos generally.

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In addition to captions, audio descriptions are needed to make the Shakespeare archive on YouTube accessible. Hamraie writes: "Miele's crowdsourcing technology, YouDescribe.org, enlists sighted people to audio-describe YouTube videos, creating a database of integrated narrative tracks, providing information not included in YouTube's automatic textual captions" [Hamraie 2018, p. 476]. At the time of this writing, two audio-described videos were available when "Shakespeare" was searched on *YouDescribe* [YouDescribe]. Especially since Shakespeare videos on YouTube are often used as educational resources, crowdsourcing audio descriptions for more Shakespeare content would be a valuable digital accessibility project.

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In addition to improving the accessibility of YouTube materials, it is important to critically analyze how disability is represented and performed in YouTube content. Ayanna Thompson has demonstrated that YouTube's "large and complex archive of classroom-inspired Shakespeare performances" provides "a window onto production and reception that highlights uncomfortable aspects of the texts [...] specifically, the dynamics of race and gender" [Thompson 2010, p. 338]. Scholars have critically analyzed representations of race, gender, and sexuality in YouTubers' Shakespeare adaptations ([Thompson 2010]; [O'Neill 2014]; [Iyengar and Desmet 2012]). More scholarship is needed on how physical and mental disability is represented and metatheatrically performed in Shakespeare-related YouTube videos. As the user-generated Shakespeare archive of YouTube continues to evolve, ongoing research into how intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and disability are represented is essential.

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Crowdsourcing Shakespearean Accessibility

In addition to improving the accessibility of YouTube videos, crowdsourcing can be used to make a wide range of digital content more accessible. Melissa Terras, in an introduction to "Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities," writes:

42

Alongside the widespread success of collaboratively produced resources such as *Wikipedia* came a movement in the cultural and heritage sectors to trial crowdsourcing – the harnessing of online activities and behavior to aid in large-scale ventures such as tagging, commenting, rating, reviewing, text correcting, and the creation and uploading of content in a methodical, task-based fashion (Holley, 2010)–to improve the quality of, and widen access to, online collections. [Terras 2016]

While a general view of "access" is highlighted here, crowdsourcing methods can be used to improve accessibility for people with disabilities [Williams 2012].

Victoria Van Hying [Van Hying 2019] has discussed how crowdsourcing can increase the accessibility of digital archives, particularly for archives of early books and manuscripts that cannot be rendered accurately through OCR. Van Hying writes: "Virtual volunteers all around the world are eager to learn and contribute to the vast project of making the world's textual records more widely accessible, not only for search, but for those, such as blind and partially sighted people, who use screen readers" [Van Hying 2019, p. 1].

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Van Hying discusses her work on the *Shakespeare's World* project, a collaboration between Zooniverse (at which she was Humanities Principal Investigator), the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The project used crowdsourcing to transcribe early modern handwritten recipes and letters, which increases the accessibility of these texts for all users, expands the searchable digital archive, and provides early modern manuscript sources to be considered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which can increase the representation of women writers [Van Hying 2019, p. 8]. Van Hying writes:

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The primary goal of *Shakespeare's World* is to create base transcriptions for *Early Modern Manuscripts Online* (<https://emmo.folger.edu/>) at the Folger Library, which provides manuscript images and word searchable diplomatic, semi-diplomatic, and regularized transcriptions. Manuscript curator Heather Wolfe and the creators of *EMMO* intend for it to democratize access to manuscripts and to give manuscripts parity with print: the name is a deliberate homage to *EEBO* and *ECCO*. [Van Hying 2019, pp. 7–8]

Whitney Sperrazza's review of *Early Modern Manuscripts Online* notes "its unprecedented ability to bring together early modern scholars, students, and wider public audiences around a digital resource" [Sperrazza 2020, p. 335]. Sperrazza discusses the project's implications in relation to the democratization of paleography and accessibility of manuscripts.

The success of the *Shakespeare's World* project, and its media coverage, including Roberta Kwok's "Crowdsourcing for Shakespeare" article in *The New Yorker* [Kwok 2017], demonstrate how Shakespeare can motivate volunteers to participate in significant crowdsourcing projects, such as the transcription of non-Shakespearean materials produced during Shakespeare's era. Building upon this, it is crucial to ensure that ever-growing online Shakespeare archives are fully accessible to people with disabilities. What would it look like to apply the crowdsourcing techniques of the *Shakespeare's World* project to make the entire world of Shakespeare online more accessible? From manuscripts to YouTube, centering accessibility will expand access for people with disabilities and benefit all users. Centering accessibility is essential to recognizing the goal of democratizing access so often seen in online Shakespeare discourse, and in Digital Humanities discourse generally.

45

Tyrone Giordano's thesis, "Toward a Crowdsourced Model for ASL Translations of Shakespeare's Works" [Giordano 2013], explores the possibilities that current digital technologies offer for sharing and preserving ASL translations of Shakespeare. The thesis "attempts to address the problem of lack of translation material by proposing an internet-based crowdsourcing model to create and allow for a multiplicity of and successive generations of ASL translations of Shakespeare's plays to exist" [Giordano 2013, p. viii]. Giordano writes:

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The increasing digitization of Shakespeare, and the market for localization of Shakespeare's texts, illustrates the need for an online resource utilizing ASL in connection with Shakespeare. This leads to the not-yet-realized vision of what I believe is the next level in ASL translation: an open source internet-based project where anybody can input his or her own translations of Shakespeare's works, and those seeking a translated body of work can pick and choose from among these translations, making the translations their own. [Giordano 2013, pp. 5–6]

Giordano's proposal balances collaboration and sharing of content with respect for translators' intellectual property and attentiveness to the exploitation Deaf communities have faced [Giordano 2013, pp. 73–80].

Hamraie describes bringing a disability justice perspective to crowdsourcing in a Digital Humanities project mapping campus accessibility, writing: "Critical accessibility mapping yields new modes of subjectification around accessibility, reconceptualizing the labor of critical publics and participants such that marginalized users retain leadership as experts who devise accessibility *criteria*, while allies collaborate on data collection" [Hamraie 2018, p. 469]. While Hamraie [Hamraie 2018] focuses on mapping the accessibility of physical spaces, a similar approach could be applied to make online spaces more accessible. Iranowska [Iranowska 2019] has analyzed users' experiences with platforms used for crowdsourcing projects, such as *Shakespeare's World*. It would be useful to include perspectives of users with disabilities in reviews of digital projects and platforms, for Shakespeare resources and for digital projects generally.

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Conclusion

Incorporating Disability Studies perspectives and methodologies into the wide-ranging and ever-expanding digital Shakespeare archive will ensure that this critical awareness reaches a larger audience. Shakespeare has a massive audience, as Sylvia Morris notes:

48

It's been estimated that his work is studied by 50 per cent of schoolchildren worldwide, and at all educational levels. He's read and performed in translation [...] and his plays are constantly re-invented by groups from all over the world. There is huge potential for digitised versions of his work, for images and video of plays in performance, to be enjoyed as they are, or to be reinterpreted by creative artists and users of social media, not just by an academic audience. [Morris 2014, p. 180]

Shakespeare's immense audience highlights both the "canon problem" [Estill 2019] and the urgency of creating a more accessible and inclusive digital Shakespeare canon. Because of Shakespeare's wide-ranging impact in education, the arts, and popular culture, it is crucial to increase the accessibility and inclusivity of online Shakespeare resources. Crippling the digital Shakespeare canon can impact how Shakespeare is taught, engaged with, and performed. Due to Shakespeare's outsized influence, it will also impact how other digital environments are constructed.

Disability Studies and other cultural studies approaches to Shakespeare must reach beyond academic subfields to general readers who engage with Shakespeare's texts and to the actors, artists, and educators who mediate and re-create these texts for future generations. Online environments are ideal for this type of outreach. Alan Liu [Liu 2012] has argued that advocating for the humanities can be a key contribution of the Digital Humanities field. He writes: "The digital humanities [...] can create, adapt, and disseminate new tools and methods for reestablishing communication between the humanities and the public" [Liu 2012]. Liu calls for digital humanists to "move seamlessly between text analysis and cultural analysis"; he writes: "Truly to partner with the mainstream humanities, digital humanists now need to incorporate cultural criticism in a way that shows leadership in the humanities" [Liu 2012]. Incorporating Universal Design approaches and Disability Studies awareness in Digital Humanities projects can create truly accessible and inclusive resources and further projects' public humanities impact.

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Godden and Hsy [Godden and Hsy 2018] have discussed how Universal Design was not intended to be limited to adding accessibility features; it is far more radical. As Hsy puts it:

50

I wonder if a general discursive tendency to conflate UD with narrower discourses of "accessibility" risks enacting the reverse of what UD initially envisions. Rather than attending to embodied variance as a way to multiply and sustain diverse modes of interaction with physical or digital environments, a narrowly conceived notion of UD as a set of separate (or supplemental) "accessibility features" conceives the challenge of UD as one of integrating disabled people into an existing set of nondisabled norms. [Godden and Hsy 2018, pp. 103]

Rather than merely adding accessibility features to Shakespeare resources, crippling the digital Shakespeare canon requires designing accessible and inclusive resources from the start, bringing critical attention to characters with disabilities, and centering performances, scholarship, and resources created by and for Deaf and disability communities. It entails promoting diverse ways of reading Shakespeare, performing Shakespeare, and responding to Shakespeare. It demands continually evaluating and expanding the Shakespeare canon as it evolves online.

Conversations about Shakespeare's accessibility in online spaces, and digital access in general, will always be insufficient if accessibility for people with disabilities is overlooked. As Shakespeare continues to be reinvented in digital space, as streamed videos and remixes inspire educators and filmmakers of the future, let's ensure that these spaces are not only fully accessible, but also incorporate perspectives from Disability Studies. Doing so will not only benefit Shakespeare studies, but will also promote the creation of more accessible and inclusive digital environments more widely.

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Notes

[1] For a discussion of intersections and tensions between Deaf Studies and Disability Studies, see [Burch and Kafer 2010]. I follow the convention of capitalizing Deaf, which “distinguish[es] *deaf* (signifying an auditory condition) from *Deaf* (signifying a coherent culture based on shared language, identity, and history)” [Burch and Kafer 2010, p. xxi]. Bradbury [Bradbury 2022] has critiqued distinctions between Deaf and deaf that align the former with using ASL and the latter with not using ASL, writing: “As someone who grew up oral (speaking and using assistive listening devices) but is now fluent in ASL and immersed in the deaf community professionally and personally, I find this nomenclature reductive and exclusionary in its oppositional binaries” [Bradbury 2022, pp. 49–50].

[2] Fox explains the use of “crip” as a reclaimed term that expresses pride, and as a verb that has been used, like “queer,” to deconstruct binaries, writing: “‘to queer’ or ‘to crip’ the known is to twist our expectations of it, defamiliarize it, and render it anew in ways that open up new kinds of possibility. That promise is built on denying the very binarism that would establish queer and crip identities as that against which, respectively, ‘norms’ of sexuality and ability can be defined” [Fox 2010, p. 39].

[3] In *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation*, Ellcessor provides an “access kit” to facilitate studying media access [Ellcessor 2016, pp. 17–19].

[4] Rikki Poynter began the #NoMoreCRAPtions campaign to raise awareness about rampant problems with automatically-generated captions and the need for high-quality captions ([Besner 2019]; [Virdi 2021, p. 31]. For discussion of the importance of captioning Shakespeare resources, see [Giordano and Bradbury 2015].

[5] For a discussion of open source Shakespeare texts, see [Murphy 2010]. For a discussion of teaching with digital Shakespeare texts, see [Rowe 2014].

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