

# Shakespeare and the Players

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## Abstract

*Shakespeare and the Players* is a digital archive of Emory University professor Dr. Harry Rusche's nearly one thousand postcard collection of late Victorian to Edwardian Shakespearean actors in England and the United States, ranging from c. 1880 to 1914.

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*Shakespeare and the Players* is a digital archive of Emory University professor Dr. Harry Rusche's nearly one thousand postcard collection of late Victorian to Edwardian Shakespearean actors in England and the United States, ranging from c. 1880 to 1914. While the website has existed since the 1990s, it was updated in 2016 for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. Justin Shaw, a Ph.D. student in English at Emory University, has led the redesign and expansion of the site and collection. Digital Scholarship Consultant Dr. Erin Hecht coded, edited, and devised the site's layout with support from Digital Projects Assistant Kayla Shipp Kamibayashi. The updated archive has improved the image quality of archived objects and streamlined the website into a structure more familiar to Web 2.0 users. The archive includes essays written in a straightforward, accessible tone targeting an undergraduate audience, alongside indexed and categorized postcard galleries. In its new form, the archive aims to serve as a digital research resource for undergraduate students and researchers of Anglo-American Shakespearean theater history, and as an interdisciplinary pedagogical tool for higher education teachers. By using Shakespeare as the unifying theme and subject of the archival materials, *Shakespeare and the Players* most effectively functions as a pedagogical starting point for undergraduates using digital archives, understanding research methods and resources to examine theater history, and evaluating Shakespeare as an Anglo-American cultural and material asset.

Rusche provides users with an opening provocation that frames the archive as a pedagogical tool: "How many of us would think of postcards when we study the history of the theater at the turn of the twentieth century?" ("Preface"). The archive, he argues, evidences the value of postcards to the study of theater at the turn of the twentieth century because of the diverse modes of pedagogical and historical engagement it enables for students and researchers. The "Preface" further provides

multiple suggested frameworks for students to engage with the postcards, all of which are centered on their materiality: as artifacts of photography, theater history, the postcard industry in the United States and the United Kingdom, as art, and as a valuable Shakespearean commodity. The archive's layout maintains a fair balance between being an open resource to be perused like a dictionary, and providing guidance, suggestions, and structure for teachers and for students to develop their own research questions.

The archive is divided into eight introductory topics. Each topic is placed on a square image of a black and white postcard photograph of Shakespearean actors. A square transforms into white text on a blue background when the user rolls their cursor across it (fig. 1). The eight topics give a comprehensive picture of the archive's scope: "The Players," "The Plays," "The Characters," "Teaching and Research Opportunities," "The History of the Cards," "Project: Past and Present," "Moments of Note: The Players Onstage," and "Postcard Backs." Each section has enlarged versions of sample postcards from the collection and offers a succinct overview of its topic including definitions of terms, basic historical contexts and instructions for accessing related content in the archive.

"The Players" page introduces an overview of the 200 player-actors in the collection, listing examples such as Sir Henry Irving, Dame Ellen Terry, Lily Brayton, and Lewis Walter. It also provides links to media of actors' performances, and the archive bibliography for further resources about the players. "The Plays" introductory page explains how to navigate between plays in the archive and the resources available for each play. The page also contains explanations for the archival organization of the plays into Shakespearean genres and examples of plays corresponding to each category. "The Characters" introductory page provides named examples of Shakespearean characters and guides the reader to the bibliography for resources about Shakespearean characters, and the roles actors played in shaping scholarly understandings of Shakespearean characters. "Project: Past and Present" presents a history of the Emory-University-based project, a visual history of the website's transformation from 2003 to 2018, and a summary of the work required to create the digital archive. The page explains the archive's newest version is designed to be dynamic, interactive, and image-focused, moving away from the early aesthetic of web design which generally aimed to reproduce a printed text layout.

"The History of the Cards" page provides more in-depth historical context for the creation and dissemination of the postcards. Rusche and Shaw also argue in this section that:

These [postcards] are important historical materials in that they convey the atmosphere of photography in the period and are artifacts of communicable exchange, postal distribution, and turn-of-the-century stage performance ("The History of the Cards").

The historical contextualization includes a brief history of the postcard industry in England and the United States, as well as names of major postcard producers, photographers, and actor-players who were popular postcard subjects. The page explains how and where postcards were sold and how their popularity increased due to their high proliferation. This section is the most detailed and thorough in its historical analysis of the politics, materiality, economics, and geography of the postcards' production.

The "Teaching and Research Opportunities" section offers an overview of pedagogical applications for the archive. The collection has been used in first year writing seminars as a mode of instructing students on writing for genre, rhetoric, and audience ("Teaching and Research Opportunities"). This page notes the archive could also be used for literature, theater, and history courses; the page suggests using postcards in research as evidence of historical set design and performance aesthetic; in discussions regarding notions of race, gender, and disability in Shakespeare; in a business course as material examples of advertising; in history courses as examples of material evidence; and in art history as a mode for discussing materiality of postcards and the history of photography. Rusche and Shaw encourage educators to consider the materials dynamically, and in doing so demonstrate the broad scope of critical analysis which can be conducted on and through the postcard collection.

"Moments of Note: The Players Onstage" expands the historical work conducted in "The History of the Cards," providing specific American and British historical moments related to or including the objects and/or subjects of the collection. This includes performance events, such as the opening of Sir Henry Irving's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1893, as well as political or global events including US President William McKinley's assassination in 1901. These biographical, theatrical, and political events are listed side by side to illustrate the concurrence of historical events. The timeline spans from 1890 to 1914 and flows between American and British history, sometimes without clear demarcation.

Lastly, the "Postcard Backs" introduction explains the value of reading the postcard notes as part of the postcard-object. This section applies critical theory to the experience of reading postcards, citing Jacques Derrida who "encourages us to read the two conflicting, yet resonating scenes — in our case, the Shakespeare image and the handwriting on the back — two sides of the postcards together" ("Postcard Backs"). The juxtaposition of the banality of the notes written on the postcards and the dramatic, sophisticated compositions of the photographs on the opposite side demonstrate the proliferation of Shakespeare in mass-produced commodities, and his integration into daily commercial life (fig. 2). As such, the archive is useful for scholars interested in Victorian and Edwardian Anglo-American Shakespearean theater, materialist history praxis, economics and

cultural exchange, and the role Shakespearean theater played in emerging 20th century industries including photography.

Across the top of the homepage are also four tabs, "The Postcards," "About," "Resources," and "Contact," each with nested topics. These tabs are direct links to the archival materials; to a comprehensive overview of the website's history and a simplified guide to navigating the website; to the archive bibliography and a selection of multimedia; and to further contacts, respectively. The postcards are accessed by selecting a player from the alphabetized index under "Players," or by selecting a play from "The Plays" and either the "Comedies," "Histories," or "Tragedies" genre. The plays are categorized and ordered in accordance with the First Folio (1623). Selecting a play to browse leads the user to a page that includes a plot summary quoted from the Folger Library and a tiled list of postcards. By selecting an individual postcard, the user can see the image in larger detail as part of a slideshow, with a caption in the lower left corner describing the object. The images can be selected again to be viewed at their largest size. Not every postcard image has both a front and back, however, and the slideshow format does not allow the user to rotate images which were scanned and presented upside-down.

The archive allows users to navigate these topics in any order they choose, with each topic related to others through overlapping networks of knowledge rather than a linear chronology. When essays throughout the archive mention an actor, play, or specific event which appears elsewhere in the collection, the name is hyperlinked to take the user to the appropriate page on the website, demonstrating this web of interactivity (fig. 3). The archive's pedagogical capabilities could be expanded by strengthening its sense of time and geography. Sections such as "Moments of Note: The Players Onstage" provide summaries of historical moments in the United States and England that pertain to the collection. These summaries switch between American and British histories and individuals, however, making it difficult to identify the nationality of referenced subjects, or to establish a clear delineation between American historical and cultural contexts and British ones. The archive's emphasis on networks both in its own user interface and through its archived objects (the postcards) could be strengthened by providing a map to show the sites of postcards' origins and circulations. By providing tools for visualizing postcards' origins and movements, the archive could function as a pedagogical introduction for digital humanities projects on data visualization, mapping, and networking. *Shakespeare and the Players* demonstrates an impressive breadth of archival and pedagogical work conducted on a WordPress platform and interface through third-party plugins.

However, as an archive running on a WordPress platform, *Shakespeare and the Players* does not have the same capabilities or fundamental digital tools available in

other digital Shakespeare archives such as the Folger Library LUNA catalogue, MIT Global Shakespeare, or The Shakespeare Quartos Archive. These archives have a higher functionality for engaging with materials more rigorously through tools such as magnification and rotation buttons for closer examination, annotations functions, metadata indexes, side-by-side viewing, and the ability to create personal image portfolios. Nonetheless, *Shakespeare and the Players* effectively demonstrates that Shakespearean performance research can be conducted by examining Shakespeare ephemera, not only folio studies and recordings of performance, and that constructing archives can be done with basic tools.

Overall, Shakespeare appears throughout the archive as a subject in a historical commodity, with Shakespearean theater being the central means of engagement in a wider historical materialism. The postcards also demonstrate the role Shakespearean theater played in contemporary British and American theatrical landscapes, in set designs and performance aesthetics, and in the promotion of celebrity culture. The postcards also reveal material practices of exchange and collection that capitalize on the cards' value as "Shakespearean" items, thereby framing Shakespeare as a material asset. Finally, the archive highlights the value of Shakespeare and Shakespearean theater as potential sites of interest for students, and it provides resources for further investigation. Despite its functional limitations, *Shakespeare and the Players* offers a valuable contribution to pedagogy and a starting point for students working in varying disciplines, or in interdisciplinary modes. In the end, the archive's flexibility of use and breadth of topic render it easily adaptable into a wider array of curricula.

## References

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