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Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century. Edition

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Evans, G. Blakemore, ed.
Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century. Edition.
Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1997. Accessed 3 February 2023.
bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook.

Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century is a series of bibliographical studies conducted by G. Blakemore Evans, best known for his general editorship of the Riverside Shakespeare editions. The Shakespearean Prompt-Book project was colossal: publication of the eight-volume series spanned 36 years, from 1960 to 1996. The series was digitized in 1997, and it is this online version under review here. At the heart of Shakespearean Prompt-Books is Evans's examination, in minute detail, of 13 texts that he identifies as seventeenth-century prompt-books of Shakespeare's plays; that is, early printed texts that were marked up during the 1600s in preparation for a play's performance. Seeking what he calls "a measure of completeness," Evans also includes three texts that he concedes are not "strictly speaking" prompt-books and show no "evidence of actual use in the theatre," but which do seem to have indications at least of preliminary work for a performance.[1]

Evans refers to 10 of the texts as "Smock Alley" prompt-books, after the Dublin theatre of that name to which they had belonged; three he terms "Padua" texts, after the Italian library in which they are housed; two are "Nursery" texts, after the London theatre to which he traces them; and the final text, of unknown provenance, he simply refers to as the Folger *Twelfth Night*. Evans provides a detailed introduction to each prompt-book, examining the provenance of the individual texts, comparing various lists of actors' names, and assessing the manuscript hands that annotated the pages. The greatest bulk of the work, however, went into the collations: he logs each manuscript annotation and deletion in each text and collates all of these changes with various prompt-books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Accompanying Evans's introductions and collations, collotype facsimiles are included with the print volumes so that readers can view the annotations themselves; the digital version provides embedded GIF images of these facsimiles, which open into JPEG photographs

1. Evans nonetheless uses the term "prompt-book" to describe these texts, as do I in this review. All references are to the website under review unless otherwise stated.

when clicked.[2] The series is the largest and most detailed examination of seventeenth-century Shakespearean prompt-books to have been conducted; as such, it provides the best single collection of evidence for early textual practice when staging Shakespeare's plays.

A project of this size and scope inevitably has flaws and omissions. Madeleine Doran, for instance, asks, "Which Nursery?," distinguishing between the Nursery company founded in 1667 and the "later one in the Barbican" and censuring Evans for not differentiating between the two.[3] Most of the issues reviewers have raised, however, derive from evidence that Evans missed or which only came to light after publication. In fact, seven years after the first volume's publication, Evans himself revised his original argument on the strength of evidence that had since emerged.[4] Likewise, in 1971, Gunnar Sorelius described in great detail fragments of Smock Alley *I* and *II Henry IV* that Evans had omitted because they had not all been discovered when he started his project.[5] Nancy Lee Riffe also rather harshly criticized Evans for not sufficiently amending his introduction to the Nursery *Comedy of Errors* in light of new information he came across while his text was in page proof.[6] Notwithstanding these quibbles—and considering the scope of the work, they really are quibbles—the series represents a momentous contribution to twentieth-century Shakespearean bibliography. At its heart, it is a rigorous study that demonstrates exemplary scholarship. Reviewers contemporary to its publication noted this, and it is just as true today nearly three decades after its completion.

The digitization of the project was conducted by the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia (BSUVA), under whose aegis the original series had been published. At the top of every page the site retains detailed records of technical digital aspects, including the fact that the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center conducted the "conversion to TEI.2-conformant markup" and the "creation of [a] machine-readable version" and "digital images." This is of course useful information, but the dense chunk of

2. Evans only includes facsimiles of two pages each of the Padua *Winter's Tale* and the Nursery *Midsummer Night's Dream* and "one to three" pages of six Smock Alley texts and the Folger *Twelfth Night* because he feels they are either incomplete "cuttings" or do not "warrant separate treatment."

3. Doran, review of *Shakespearean Prompt-Books, 354.*

4. See Evans, "New Evidence."

5. Sorelius, "Smock Alley."

6. Riffe, review of *Shakespearean Prompt-Books.*

abbreviations and digital terminology at the top of each page may well prove disconcerting for users who come expecting a very different kind of jargon. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a project undertaken so early in the Internet age, the digitization attempts to retain some aspects of its origins as a printed series: the landing page has a "table of contents" with links to the General Introduction and to each play-text, divided by volume and subdivided by the separate parts of original publication into individual web pages. Each volume even contains images of the spine, cover, and title page of the original book. While page divisions have been removed, the body of the text still contains citations referring to specific page numbers of earlier volumes. Indeed, the references in the Padua *Measure for Measure* page have all been edited so that the page numbers of the citations are replaced simply with "p. oo," hinting at the possibility of developing the project further, perhaps even to provide intra-site links; unfortunately, this was as far as it went, so the redundant page references persist.

The various parts of the work each contains a transcription of Evans's introduction and collations, with hyperlinks leading to relevant images of the facsimiles. The main page states that the "University of Virginia Electronic Text Center has created a searchable database of the editor's Introduction and Collations for each play." A modern user may well spend some time looking for the digital magnifying glass icon in order to access this database before realizing that the claim actually refers to the project itself: the "searchable database" is the online version of Evans's series. It is searchable in the sense that a browser's built-in functions allow users to search on a specific page, but there is no centralized function whereby users can bring up results from the whole project.

The site shows its age through a number of other technical and design issues. Some are merely nuisances, while others present very real problems. The former category includes several typographical errors. In addition to dozens of spacing and paragraphing problems, the General Introduction contains at least four transcription mistakes and the rest of the site at least eight. These are probably the result of 1990s digitization technology, and for the most part they do little to hinder comprehension, though it is feasible that the collations include errors that are harder to spot. Realistically, at worst these typographical issues will probably just irritate pedants, though it is hard to understand why the BSUVA relied on machine-reading technology to transcribe physical books for the project when they presumably had access to soft copies, at least of the newer volumes. Most obvious among the website's other minor problems is the

fact that the books' footnotes have been converted to links that do not work; clicking on one does nothing, and opening it into a new tab or window simply leads to the same page being opened again. Thankfully, the footnotes are still available to view at the bottom of each page. Another inconvenience is that it is impossible to navigate to other sections of the project from anywhere except the table of contents page. There is not even a way to get to the contents page from individual pages: the only way to do so is by using the browser's back button or manually searching for the main page. Similarly, any time a picture is clicked, the browser opens a separate page with no means of returning, again leaving users to navigate their way back manually. The site is also improperly formatted for use on a mobile device.

While these are minor inconveniences that can be explained by the website's age, there are other issues that pose more serious problems. All of the navigation links in the General Introduction page are broken, as are, more pressingly, the links to the images of Smock Alley *Macbeth* act 1, scenes 6 and 7—the project's only pictures of that text. By far the worst problem with the project, however, comes in the form of its images. These are black and white or sepia scans of the print volumes' collotype facsimiles of the source texts. This double mediation could be seen as some kind of inter-medial palimpsest or as a cyclical encounter with the material past; it gives rise to interesting questions about materiality and transmission in the online sphere as well as questions of physical reproduction and digital representation of source materials. More prosaically, the images are too blurry. The resolution is such that zooming in or enlarging them does little to aid legibility, especially for the bigger images. It is true that most of the smaller pictures are perfectly clear, but the bigger ones present no opportunity for close examination or for a wider survey of the page: the printed text itself is hard enough to read, let alone the manuscript annotations. These larger pictures are the most valuable for giving a sense of how the prompt-books worked, so their poor quality is a real weakness. With enough effort, users can still technically recreate the text using the collations, but it is almost impossible to get a full understanding of the prompt-books without seeing them.

Nonetheless, the project as it stands is clearly useful, digitally disseminating a project that would otherwise be available only in large institutional or specialist libraries. While the print series may be within easy reach for many scholars in the West, not all libraries are so well stocked; certainly, my own

university does not have a copy. Evans's insightful introductions provide scholars of seventeenth-century Shakespearean performance with an abundance of material, not to mention an exemplary display of meticulous bibliography. Directors and dramaturges seeking to consult early prompt-books or replicate past performances, or even to market their own productions as "authentic" or "original practice" could do no better than to consult Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century. This project would have delighted William Poel, and his dramaturgical descendants of today will surely be glad to avail themselves of it. How many theatre professionals actually know of this project, however, is a separate question.

As a late twentieth-century example of early digital humanities, the website is in itself a historical document—a testament to the priorities of the 1990s and the early drive to make scholarly learning more widely available. By the standards both of its time and of now, it is a careful and valuable resource. It is easy to understand that the BSUVA's priorities today may well lie elsewhere, and it is hard to fault them for not updating such a niche website. Yet if the institution were to do so, they would only need to make a few changes: replace the low-resolution photographs of facsimiles with high-quality reproductions of the originals, fix the links, and make it easier to navigate between images and pages. Even without these changes, scholars and theatre practitioners can continue to use this valuable resource as a tool for research into seventeenth-century text and performance.

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