



This Rough Magic

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Shakespeare in Bits, by MindConnex Learning Company.

Reviewer(s): Ema Vyroubalová

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While virtually everyone educated in an English-speaking country will be expected to have read some Shakespeare by the time he or she completes secondary school, for many of these younger readers and spectators Shakespeare's language presents a major stumbling block to understanding and appreciation. The combination of Shakespeare's resilience in school and college curricula and the challenges his plays pose to the typical student has given rise to an industry devoted to offering the plays in more accessible formats. *Shakespeare in Bits*, a collection of interactive multimedia editions of Shakespeare's plays produced by the Irish MindConnex Learning Company, comes out of this larger trend and aims to make Shakespeare's works more readily appealing to readers who have grown up in the digital age. The "bits" in *Shakespeare in Bits* is of course a pun: the editions present a digital Shakespeare made up of bits and bytes and they break up the plays into manageable bits for easier comprehension and greater enjoyment.

The *Shakespeare in Bits* editions are centered around an animated version of each play with a soundtrack, presented in a carefully designed interface side-by-side with

the complete play-text. The text is accompanied by the digital equivalent of footnotes and endnotes, adjusted in their scope and content for an audience of students rather than a mixed audience of students and scholars as would be the case with most hard copy editions. In a separate section of the software package there is also an extensive background apparatus, comparable to what one would expect to find either in the introduction or appendix of a traditional paper edition. This includes an overview of the characters and a map of relationships between them; mini essays on topics such as Shakespeare's language, Shakespeare's life, the play's themes, or the play's historical background; and a selection of the most often cited quotations from the play. The soundtracks for the animated versions of the plays are adopted from Naxos Audiobooks, which are in turn based on the New Cambridge Shakespeare series. This means that the text that accompanies the animation is an unabridged scholarly edition of Shakespeare's original text.

Because the prospect of wading through an entire Shakespeare play, or even through a single scene, can be daunting to many students, the play-text is divided up into smaller "bits." Each "bit" is approximately twenty lines long and represents the longest unit of the play's text that will appear on the screen at any given time. The "bits" correspond to segments of the accompanying animated soundtrack so that the viewer can easily move back and forth through both the textual and audiovisual "bits" using an interface similar to multimedia players such as Youtube. And even within each

“bit” of the text, an unobtrusive color change of the font informs the user which specific lines are being played by the soundtrack at a given moment.

The text is integrated with the multimedia features in a smooth and imaginative manner. The user can choose to view the corresponding lines in a sidebar while watching or pausing the animated play. The text alerts the reader to obsolete or otherwise potentially problematic words and phrases by highlighting them and a click reveals the word’s contemporary meaning. Selected sets of lines also come accompanied with clickable letters which link to useful explanatory notes about the historical background, language, and themes. Instead of always viewing the play-text itself along the animation, it is possible to opt for a summary of the plot covered in that particular passage or for an overview of the themes relevant to it. At the same time, the text does remain at the centre of the interactive experience: wherever the user is in the various multimedia features, she or he is generally never farther than two clicks away from calling up a portion of the text on the screen.

The animation is simple but functional, in a style reminiscent of Japanese manga comics. The schematic figures importantly still include enough detail for the user to be easily able to tell them apart from one another. The simplicity allows for only a limited range of facial expressions and, aside from the quality of the voice actors, the edition does not give much sense of the power of the play in performance. But this very limitation does work to redirect the viewer’s attention to the play’s text and educators

can always show actual performances from other sources to students. The inanimate backdrop against which the action is set changes according to the location of each scene. As with the figures, the backdrops are highly simplified and schematic but distinct enough to readily indicate a particular location or time of day, thus aiding the viewer's orientation in the plot.

The costumes, objects, and the scenes' backgrounds featured in the animation correspond to the historical period in which each play is ostensibly set. In the edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, the Athenian characters wear outfits roughly appropriate for ancient Greece and the settings of the urban scenes likewise evoke Mediterranean antiquity. This is most prominent in the revels of the final Act, which take place in a Greco-Roman amphitheatre. The characters who inhabit the supernatural world of the forest sport translucent wings, which usefully sets them apart from the human figures. The four lovers are "color-coded" through distinct hair colors and differently colored outfits. This choice makes it easier to follow them through their adventures in the forest but it does detract from the play's emphasis on their interchangeability. One way that educators might usefully supplement the multimedia edition is by asking students to consider other ways in which the play has been and might be staged.

Although *Shakespeare in Bits* has been conceived primarily for secondary school students, it has a great potential for use at the tertiary level as well. The comprehensive

integration of the unabridged original text, which facilitates a user-friendly presentation of the plays without compromising their textual integrity, means that university students can benefit from the editions too. Shakespeare in Bits can reintroduce the plays as lively versatile works that lend themselves to multimedia approaches to undergraduate students whose earlier encounters with the Bard proved uninspiring, More advanced students, particularly those with an interest in the growing fields of digital humanities and media studies, can engage more critically with the multimedia features or use them as an inspiration for their own projects. Students in education programs can incorporate the editions into their lesson plans and teaching practice. Finally, the extensive paratextual apparatus combined with the intuitive user-friendly navigation make the editions suitable for anyone interested in an accessible immersive self-study of the available plays. The number of ways in which the diverse information provided by the software can be put together to experience a particular play is virtually infinite, making Shakespeare in Bits into an incredibly rich pedagogical tool with an endless array of uses both in and outside of the classroom across multiple educational levels.

Five plays are available as of July 2013: *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Othello* is currently in production and *The Merchant of Venice* is in preliminary planning stages. The individual plays are available in desktop (both PC and Mac compatible), iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch versions and

can be purchased directly from the company website or from iTunes. Each play costs \$14.99. The MindConnex website offers a free trial version of each play, which includes a limited selection of the features from the full edition and gives the user a good preview of what working with the editions is like; there is also a separate trial offer for educators, providing full access to one play of his or her choice over a period of two weeks.