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The Social Network of Early English Drama: A Digital Humanities Lesson Plan

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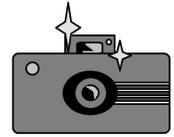Jennifer Royston

The Social Network of Early English Drama:
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ABSTRACT

The Folger Shakespeare Library's recently launched *Digital Anthology of Early Modern English Drama* (EMED) provides searchable, TEI-encoded, digital editions of 403 English plays first staged in London between1576 and 1642. A central task for participants at the Folger's 2016 summer workshop "Beyond Access: Early Modern Digital Texts in the Classroom" was to devise pedagogical uses for the *Digital Anthology*. Our team focused on the metadata that the editors of the anthology attached to each play—its chronology, author, printer, publisher, and the theater company that initially staged it—in order to foreground an aspect of these dramas that is crucial yet very difficult to teach at the undergraduate level: the social network in which they took shape as both performances and texts.

Keywords: digital humanities, active learning, Shakespeare, early modern drama

OVERVIEW

Students use metadata about plays in the EMED to construct network graphs linking the producers and performers of play texts. Students conduct research into the communities that their graphs model, and use this research to draft arguments for in interpretation of a play (whether a printed edition or a staged production) that in some way reflects the way it took shape within those communities.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- *Digital Anthology of Early Modern English Drama*
  digitalanthology.folger.edu/
- *Agas map of Early Modern London*
  mapoflondon.uvic.ca/agas
- *Virtual tour of Paul's Churchyard*
  vpcp.chass.ncsu.edu/fly-around-the-visual-model/
- *London Book Trades Database*
  lbt.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/mediawiki/index.php
- *Early Modern Theater as Collaborative Network*
  abasu.net/blog/early-modern-theater-network.html
- *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon*
  www.sixdegreesoffrancisbacon.com/

LESSON PLAN

Part 1

The syllabus should include at least 4 plays listed in the EMED. Historical time frames with many published plays better lend themselves to this assignment; we recommend not running the assignment with plays published before 1587.

Each of 4 plays is assigned to at least 2 different student groups. These groups will perform the network assignment and subsequent analysis together.

a) Designate the assigned play as the base or "home play" node. Surround the home play with edges linking it to four new nodes representing any of the individuals involved in its production and performance: the author, printer, publisher, the theater company that staged the play, etc. All of these agents can be found on the "Play Page" for each title in the EMED.
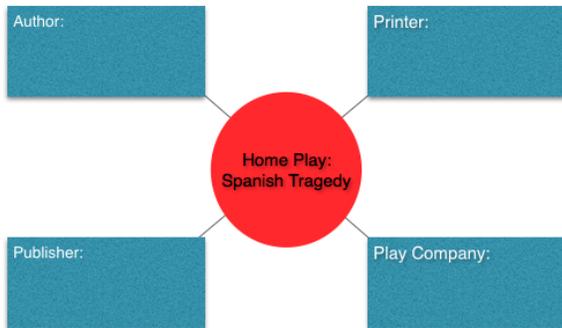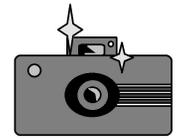
The "home play" node will be the only node representing a play. All other nodes will represent people or playing companies. Edges or links between nodes represent plays that people collaborated on in some way. Printer A, for example, may be linked to Publisher A through common involvement in Play 1. But Publisher A may also be linked to Printer B through Play 2 and, perhaps, to a different theater company through Play 3.

b) From each of these new, first-degree nodes, link to at least 2 new agents on the basis of shared work on some play. Network "density" or interconnection is essential to the outcomes of this assignment: to ensure the density of the eventual community graph, restrict the date of each new play-link to those plays performed within 3 years before or after the performance of the home play. For best results, travel clockwise around the graph while adding nodes, (1) marking links between any nodes already present in the graph when new nodes are added, and (2) keeping edges representing the same play next to each other in the graph.
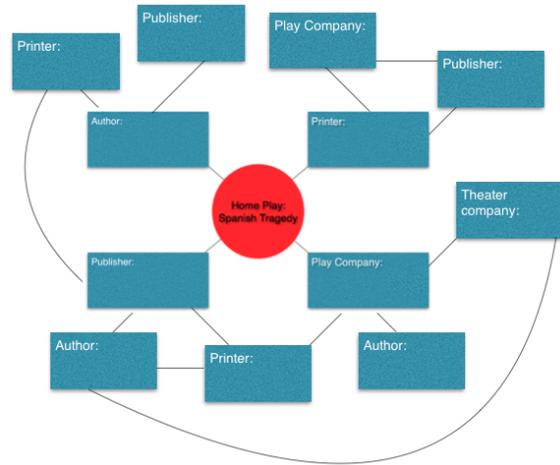

c) Stop once 20 nodes have been graphed in the network.

Part 2

Each group chooses from their network one playwright, one printer, one publisher, and one playing company to investigate further. For example: Who was this printer? What kinds of plays did he print? Do we know where he was located? Where did this playing company perform in the years you're covering? Who was their patron? What kinds of plays did they perform? How often did they work with people they are linked to? What kinds of plays did they tend to work on together? The resources listed above can be used here to lend scope and detail to the story.

During this research period, project the Agas map of early modern London in class and have students plot the members of their communities, their venues, and other associated locations. Places in London associated with researched people or groups may include the location of a playhouse, for example, a printer's shop, or the school a playwright attended. Here, to give a very simple example, are three locations associated with plays performed by the Children of the Chapel between 1586 and 1588 (Edward Allde's print shop at St. Mildred Poultry; Blackfriar's Theatre; and Paul's Churchyard, the site of Thomas Woodcock's bookshop):

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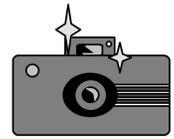
The Agas map can be saved at any stage, so that additional groups' geospatial research can be added throughout the semester. This aspect of the assignment opens further possibilities as well: students may be asked to chart a hypothetical "day in the life" of a community member, for instance.

The depth of the research students are asked to perform at this stage is flexible. It may be as minimal as a google search or as thorough as extended library research. For most courses at most institutions with, for instance, library subscriptions to Oxford Reference, online work should be sufficient.

PART 4

After students have mapped their communities geospatially and researched biographical and historical information about its members, groups should draft contextualized interpretations of their plays through the lens of the communities that produced them. Groups working on shared plays can evaluate their interpretations against each other, discussing and presenting how the different network snapshots they have built inform their interpretations in different ways.

PART 5

Finally, the class uses their collective network to justify the addition of a final play to be read together by the class. The 5 plays then constitute an edition, the constitution of which reflects the attributes of the community that produced them. Use the class network to designate 2 recycled and 2 fresh plays with which the next semester's class will begin their exploration.