
Making Manuscripts Searchable: *DEx*, a Database of Dramatic Extracts, Digital Publication, and Boutique Projects

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Too often, people lament that we have no evidence of what Shakespeare's readers thought. In reality, we have quite a bit of evidence, but it has been difficult to access because of the cost of travel and the barrier to access caused by early modern handwriting. This paper describes how *DEx: A Database of Dramatic Extracts* ([beta version](#)) contributes to the changing landscape of digital projects that help us better understand the early modern period. Rather than focusing on one person (too often, a canonical male literary figure), *DEx* instead makes a wide range of reader responses to early modern drama searchable, bringing together resources that are held in geographically distant archives, from Oxford's Bodleian Library to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

Dramatic extracts (those parts from plays that people copied into their notebooks) are important evidence because they tell what early modern audiences and readers took, literally and figuratively, from plays. Right now, this important evidence of reader response is difficult to access for multiple reasons: firstly, these extracts are often uncatalogued and therefore hard to locate. Secondly, they are dispersed across multiple archives and require travel funding to reach (see Ioppolo 2004). Finally, they are written in early handwriting, and so require paleographical training to read. This paper examines the ways in which *DEx*, a comparatively small project, links to existing resources and draws on community to ultimately provide people access to evidence of what Shakespeare's readers thought. (Spoiler: it turns out they thought about other playwrights more than Shakespeare in his lifetime!) *DEx* complements the Folger [Union First Line Index](#) and the [Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts](#) by making the full text of dramatic extracts searchable and by not being constrained to selections

written in verse (like the former) or by canonical authors (like the latter). *DEx* includes materials that are not catalogued in *CELM* or repository catalogues, and invites scholars to contribute relevant citations, transcriptions, or leads they have.

DEx's transcriptions are part of what makes it so valuable. Despite advances in OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technologies, there is no adequate program to automatically recognize handwritten text: particularly when it comes to historical documents written in scripts that we no longer use today, such as chancery hand or secretary hand. While digital paleography is an ongoing area of research, it tends to focus now on transcribing and describing texts by hand or on teaching paleography with digital tools (Stokes, 2014, 2015; Rehbein et al 2009, esp. 110-338; Fischer et al 2010; Hassner et al, 2013). Many digital projects that focus on early modern English texts are hand-transcribed and encoded: consider, for instance, the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Early Modern Manuscripts Online* and [Shakespeare's World, The Recipes Project](#) or [Bess of Hardwick's Letters](#). Transcriptions in *DEx* are undertaken by a small community of scholars: this paper explains how our community currently works and the future collaborations we hope to undertake, as well as the possible avenues for extending the project after its forthcoming full launch.

In 2010, Paul Conway argued that "We are at the end of 'boutique' digital scanning projects for which the principal goal is ... extraordinary attention to the unique properties of each artifact" (76). This paper contends that with early modern manuscripts, "boutique" projects are one of the best ways forward. Compared to massive manuscript digitization projects like *British Literary Manuscripts Online*, *DEx* is a "boutique" project actually make texts searchable with transcription, which is always the result of paying attention to each manuscript as a "unique artifact." This paper discusses the challenges that come with curating a boutique project and the ultimate benefits of having a small site that emerges from a specific set of research questions.

Although small digitization or transcription projects can open up a vast field of research, they need to be findable and peer-reviewed in order to do so. I examine the obstacles to having *DEx* published by a traditional publisher, while questioning how to define publication for digital projects and the costs associated with creating and maintaining an open access site. Furthermore, I discuss how digital publishing must address the peer review needs of emerging scholars and provide an imprimatur and guarantee of

quality for users. The final section of this paper discuss the role of Iter: Gateway to the Middle Ages and Renaissance and ReKN: Renaissance Knowledge Network in publication and peer review for *DEX: A Database of Dramatic Extracts*. This is an appropriate short paper for DH 2017 because it discusses a project that is in beta and active development, it engages the larger questions of how and why boutique digital projects can flourish and provide value to humanities scholarship, and it engages the theme of “Access/accès” by focusing on collaboration, public-facing scholarship, and digital humanities publication. The paper focuses on a single case study: *DEX: A Database of Dramatic Extracts* and its community, which addresses a much-needed gap in scholarship by transcribing manuscripts that tell us what Shakespeare’s audience and readers actually read.

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