**DABBS — Nothing**

<0 figures>

**‘Nothing That Is Not There and the Nothing That Is’: Tracking the Digital Echoes between Churchyard and Theatre in Shakespeare’s London**

Dabbs, T.

This talk considers one of the ways in which various digital tools can be used in an integrated fashion to map the public reception of new print and drama during the Elizabethan period. Using the final line from Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Snow Man’ as a prompt, the paper extolls the virtue of using digital technology to make new assumptions about human consciousness in historic times and places that were once ‘there’ even if they are currently or ostensibly ‘not there’. This paper also acknowledges the limits of digital reconstruction and its use in interrogating the past. Indeed, finding nothing may mean that there is nothing to be found.

The thesis forwarded here is that the stage plays that were performed in Elizabethan public amphitheatres were inundated with formally crafted echoes, not only of recent print, but also the public reception of recent print. This public reception is most immediately apparent within the St Paul’s precinct in the City of London and would be next to impossible to re-create without the search capabilities of *EEBO-TCP*, *ESTC*, *Lost Plays Database*, and other digital platforms. When reconstructing the relationship between stage performances and the public reception of printed work, we are able to see how a publicly performed play—say, one about the tragic outcomes of Romeo and Juliet—echoed recent public discourse and action in early modern London, discourse and action that was fueled by new print.

In particular, the cultural environment of Paul’s Cross Churchyard, at that time located on the northeast side of St Paul’s cathedral, is ground zero for this public discourse community. This area of the cathedral is lost to history, not there anymore, but with the digital reconstructions of the *Virtual Paul’s Cross Project*, it can now be visualized again. The churchyard featured the Paul’s Cross pulpit, and this unique public space echoed with Reformed church sermons from the beginning of the Elizabethan period. Bookshops increasingly flanked this area during the Elizabethan period, making the churchyard the center of the book-selling industry before and during Shakespeare’s time. Controversial and often dramatic sermons from Paul’s Cross echoed religious print held by these enclosing bookshops and, in turn, were at times formed into print editions and sold from the same stores.

Decades ago, it was speculated that Paul’s Cross, with its surrounding bookshops, was a physical prototype for the Elizabethan public amphitheatres that appeared nearby before and during Shakespeare’s time. The challenge of this particular project is to examine another prototype—that is, the prototype of consciousness that developed in the churchyard and that made popular amphitheatre performances possible and indeed helped to sustain the public theatre for a period. The key to drawing the public to the theatre was to stage plays that echoed popular print and public discourse, specifically in the Paul’s Cross Churchyard and in the cathedral nave, Paul’s Walk.

From the records that remain of lost Elizabethan plays before Shakespeare, those plays that are not there but that in some ways are, we can find clues to indicate the relationship between churchyard culture and public theatres. From information that can quickly be accessed at *Lost Plays Database*, it is abundantly clear that Elizabethan dramatists before Shakespeare drew from popular stories and themes that were on sale in courtyard bookshops in order to craft plays for the early public amphitheatres. From the 1590s onward, an increasing number of plays were preserved in print, and of course from these editions we can link specific references echoed within amphitheatre performances more acutely to courtyard culture. For instance, through *EEBO-TCP* and *ESTC* searches, the relationship between churchyard and public stage can be established quickly and with more certainty.

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* follows from the set formula for drawing dramatic titles from popular print editions in Paul’s Cross Churchyard. Looking more closely at the text, in Shakespeare’s version, Mercutio in particular makes a number of seemingly haphazard references that have kept textual scholars busy and sometimes vexed for ages. With digital searches, Mercutio’s references, for instance, to the names of classical and romantic heroines in lyric poems, the further references to sword fighting and to Tybalt’s continental pretentions, can all be directly linked to print editions held in churchyard bookshops and to the presumed reception of these editions among young gallants even within the church precinct. These links occur in many cases no more than two or three years before the performance of the play, first at the Theatre playhouse and then at the Globe. The there-ness of such relationships become uncertain when we attempt to link Mercutio’s description of Tybalt to what we know about the behavior of young gallants in the St Paul’s precinct, although such considerations are intriguing. Digital searches also tempt us to hear the echoes of Thomas Nashe’s satiric attacks on Robert Green in Mercutio’s character. The attempt to use digital searches and re-creations to determine the extent that Tybalt might be a caricature of an actual person, though, might quickly lead us into the nothing that is really not there.

Current search methodologies and visual re-creations could be supplemented by small digital platforms that mine and input information and that eventually give us the ability to access bookstore and other information quickly. Among several suggestions for a small data digital effort that would not require the enormous amount of data input that burdens larger efforts would be a project that makes a searchable database of the ownerships, leases, and primary holdings of select courtyard bookshops specifically during the 1590s. This type of resource would be enormously helpful to scholars and editors, particularly if the database could be corroborated with references to popular discourse and to stage plays that were performed during or close to that decade.