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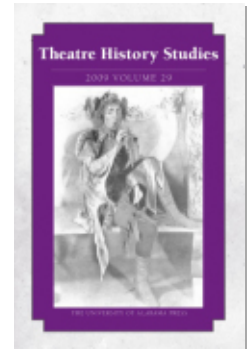
## eBay, Wikipedia, and the Future of the Footnote

Margaret M. Knapp

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# eBay, Wikipedia, and the Future of the Footnote

—MARGARET M. KNAPP

This essay began as an attempt to explore the disconnect I perceived between the theoretical innovations in historiography that have occurred in theatre scholarship over the past few decades and the traditional scholarly structures in which most of us still deliver that thinking in print or through electronic media. Although most of us have abandoned positivist approaches to researching and writing history in favor of more situated, partial, and contingent strategies, we still employ footnotes and citations, positivist vestiges of an attempt to superimpose on humanistic inquiry the traditional scientific requirements of accuracy and reproducibility. But as I began to think about that conflict between theory and practice in our scholarship, I found I could not ignore the huge impact that the Internet has had, and will increasingly have, on our scholarly research and communication, and so I decided to trouble the issue of scholarly citation further by beginning an investigation of how the Internet can render traditional scholarly usage obsolete. I will briefly survey some of these digital transformations as a means to begin a disciplinary conversation about footnotes and citations in the digital world we now inhabit.

First to the macrocosm in which our scholarship will increasingly reside. The May 14, 2006, issue of *New York Times Magazine* contained an article titled “Scan This Book!” by Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine.<sup>1</sup> Kelly writes of current efforts by Google and others to scan all existing books into a digital format. Because of the reduced cost of scanning books, especially when outsourced to China and India, Kelly believes that in the future every book; every article in a newspaper, magazine, or journal; every film; every TV or radio broadcast; every painting, photograph, or piece of music; and every one of the billions of dead

Web pages and blogs will be available on the Web. The obvious result is that billions of people worldwide who do not live in proximity to physical libraries can research in a universal, totally searchable library (assuming, of course, that they have access to computers). A further-reaching result, in Kelly's estimation, will be that, once scanned, each word in a digitized source can be "cross-linked, clustered, cited, extracted, indexed, analyzed, annotated, remixed, reassembled, and woven deeper into the culture than ever before." Kelly points out that the reader of a digitized book will be able to turn to the book's bibliography and click on a link that will lead to the entire book or article being cited, and then can click on the sources listed in that second book's bibliography, and so on through all of the links that seem useful. The reader can then assemble his or her own bibliography or virtual bookshelf of sources on the subject.

That capability may seem like Nirvana to scholars, and especially to students who can, for example, quickly discover the more important sources on a subject by using links to determine which authorities are most often cited.<sup>2</sup> But the ability to access a seemingly infinite number of sources brings with it another tool with more fundamental consequences for scholarship: as Kelly puts it, "Once text is digital, books seep out of their bindings and weave themselves together." Readers can take digitized snippets from books and remix them with other materials to create collections of reordered books, which can also exist on the Web and, in turn, be accessed and searched by other readers. When no two of these virtual copies are alike, the sources of information for a scholarly project will no longer be the physical library of stand-alone copies that we are used to dealing with but rather a universal library with seemingly infinite variations on a seemingly infinite range of materials. Every reader will be his or her own scrapbooker-archivist.

When will this world of interrelated texts come fully into being? That depends largely on whether Congress and the courts are willing to take on the inconsistencies and oppressions of the present copyright laws, which have already stifled our traditional scholarly research and publication and now threaten to deny scholars the exponentially advanced capabilities of linking and communicating their research on the Internet.

These new capabilities challenge scholars in two ways. On the one hand, the new possibilities offered to us by the Internet invite us to sample, link, argue with, "cut and paste," or otherwise make new uses of source material, much of it previously unavailable. The process of scholarship on the Internet thus brilliantly demonstrates our own historiographical beliefs about the instability and situatedness of knowledge. In fact, one could argue that without the evolution in historiographical thinking, maximum use of the Internet's capabili-

ties as a research tool would not be possible. On the other hand, observing the canons of fair use (an extremely hazy concept in legal circles) and being careful about citations are absolutely essential in avoiding litigation over the use of copyrighted material, especially because, according to current copyright laws, almost everything written in the last eighty to one hundred years is still under copyright protection.<sup>3</sup> We thus are stuck with traditional footnoting and citation systems, not because they serve either our evolving historiographical assumptions or available digital research methods, but because they (may) save us from a lawsuit we cannot afford.

The conflict between copyright law and Internet creativity is a complex legal tangle that I do not pretend to understand completely, but it does seem important for scholars to be aware of both the promises and the pitfalls of digital research and scholarly production, and I hope that our field and others will find ways to participate in the public debate about these subjects. In the meantime, I'd like to add some more microcosmic developments to the mix, developments that are already here and already disrupting the traditional ways of identifying evidence and citing sources.

My first example is the identification and citation of sources purchased on eBay, the online auction site. While I have found eBay to be a gold mine for discovering—and in some cases purchasing—early-twentieth-century editions of Shakespeare for my own research, I have learned that in most instances the sellers on eBay have little understanding of what they're offering. Some think an edition of a Shakespeare play that predates 1970 is "rare" or "vintage"; others seem to have no idea how to discover a book's copyright date. While the latter is a minor problem that can usually be solved by a visit to the *National Union Catalogue*, a more serious difficulty arises with unpublished materials. For example, I bid on and won one of the *New York Times's* special supplements on Shakespeare that was published in the spring of 1916. Along with it came lithographic reproductions of engravings of characters from Shakespeare's plays. These pictures are pasted on heavy paper and labeled "Shakespeare" or "Shakespeare's plays" in lovely copperplate handwriting. Perhaps they had been part of a school's or library's picture collection. Some appear to have come from one of the many editions of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, while others have no provenance whatsoever. Given enough time and resources I could probably uncover the identity of the publishers and possibly the artists, but would that information get me any closer to answers to the questions raised in my mind by the way the pictures are mounted? Did these pictures hang in a classroom, library, or Shakespeare Club? Who were their intended

viewers? What did viewers think about Shakespeare and his plays as a result of seeing them? That information seems lost forever. While I could cite these in a footnote or bibliography as coming from the “Author’s Collection,” or even as “purchased on eBay,” or from a printed source I was lucky enough to track down, the engravings’ rich history as cultural artifacts would be lost to future scholars.

My second example is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. As you no doubt know, a wiki is a Web site or database whose entries are created, not by a single authority, but by the efforts of dozens, even thousands, of anonymous contributors who provide data, refine existing entries, or debate controversies within a topic. The idea is that from the sheer number of participants the entries will eventually become far more accurate and exhaustive than would be possible with a single author or small handful of authors. Wikipedia is, of course, controversial among academics at all levels of education as well as among the publishers of traditional, hard-copy encyclopedias.<sup>4</sup> My point about Wikipedia in the context of this essay is that its entries are constantly changing. To use a Wikipedia entry as a citation in an article or book that may take several months or even years to appear in print is to refer to something that may already be nonexistent, at least in the form in which the researcher originally found it. The traditional concept that a bibliography in a humanities work should enable the reader to reproduce the author’s research process, much as a scientist can reproduce another’s experiment, thus becomes meaningless. And, of course, there are myriad other Web sources that have the same or a greater degree of transience than Wikipedia and present the same problems regarding citation. Will scholars need to print out in hard copy every Web source that they may wish to use someday in order to document the source as it looked on the day it was accessed? What if the source is later changed or has information added to it? Will scholars have to keep accessing sources and then continue to update their work accordingly?

A third, more material challenge to the traditional citation system is the increasing reluctance of publishers to devote space in their books to extensive notes and bibliographies.<sup>5</sup> The footnote has already virtually disappeared, to be replaced by the notes gathered at the end of the book, where the reader has to memorize the note number and page number in order to find it among the dozens squeezed together there. For the same financial reasons, publishers are also reluctant to include extensive bibliographies, preferring shorter bibliographic essays or eliminating bibliographies entirely, leaving the reader to extract the sources from the notes. Some publishers have suggested that au-

thors initiate Web sites where interested readers can find the bibliographic information, but the creation and maintenance of such sites would be left to the author or to the author's institution. If books were published entirely on the Internet there would be no problem in including extensive documentation, but thus far the e-book has not caught on to any great degree. Perhaps Google's scanning project, by bringing so many older works into wider availability on the Internet, will make the prospect of publishing new work on the Web more enticing.

So, while our family of disciplines—theatre history, theory, performance studies, and so forth—has successfully negotiated the leap from old to new approaches to scholarship, we, like others in the humanities, have not stopped to look at the consequences of that leap for the forms in which we deliver that work to our readers. As the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *MLA Handbook* struggle to keep up with the rapidly evolving world of cyber sources, the notion that it is still possible to include meaningful citations in our scholarship has been left unchallenged. We accept the instability of knowledge as a foundational assumption in the content of our work, yet we ignore it in our scholarly apparatus.

Are there solutions to this dilemma that make sense for both the present and the not-so-distant future? The most feasible ones seem to require a thorough reformation of the U.S. copyright law. One suggestion I'd like to put forward is the virtual bookshelf that Kelly mentions in his article. Perhaps we should look upon bibliographies as journeys that have largely virtual destinations. Since sources are increasingly likely to change or disappear entirely, it may be necessary to judge a work's scholarship by the collection amassed electronically on the author's virtual bookshelf. This might include Web sources as they appeared at the particular time when the scholar accessed them; links to scanned books in their entirety; snippets of books, articles, and other items that were of interest to the researcher; annotations and comments found in other scholars' copies; redactions of resource material; and ideas, comments, and questions recorded by the researcher at each point in the research process. This virtual bookshelf could be submitted by doctoral students along with the dissertation itself in whatever form that may take. For scholars seeking to publish their work, the bookshelf could be a Web link provided along with a book or article, or, as we move more extensively into electronic publication, an appendage to the digitized book itself. And perhaps someday we will view the scholar's virtual bookshelf as having its own value as both an indicator of scholarly rigor and a historical document in its own right.

**Notes**

1. Kevin Kelly, "Scan This Book!" *New York Times Magazine*, May 14, 2006, 42–49, 65, 71. I am grateful to my Arizona State University colleague Tamara Underiner for alerting me to this article.
2. For a brief analysis of the pros and cons of digitization of books, see Katie Hafner, "History, Digitized (and Abridged)," *New York Times*, March 10, 2007, sec. 3:1.
3. For an eloquent analysis of the current copyright situation and its stifling effect on creativity, see Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
4. A brief summary of the controversy may be found in Eric Rauchway's article "Source Wars," *TNR Online*, March 21, 2007, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070319&s=rauchway032107>.
5. For a fuller treatment of the decline of the footnote, see Chuck Zerby, *The Devil's Details: A History of Footnotes* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 2002); and Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Both authors are primarily concerned with the future of the "content" footnote, in which an author makes a point not directly germane to the main argument or gives additional information or additional sources for the subject of the main text.