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S. E. Gontarski

Florida State University, sgontarski@fsu.edu

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Abstract

Review of Olga Beloborodova, editor. *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Play/Comédie and Film*. Bloomsbury, 2019. 352 pp.

Keywords

Beckett, digital humanities, textual studies, film, theater

Olga Beloborodova, editor. *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Play/Comédie and Film*. Bloomsbury, 2019. 352 pp.

The Making of Samuel Beckett's Play/Comédie and Film is the eighth book in a series generated by the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP) and the Centre for Manuscript Genetics based at the University of Antwerp, which is a financial supporter of the book series as well as host of the subscription digital site. This book series on Beckett's work is co-published by Bloomsbury Academic, an affiliation that allows for wider international distribution. The massive primary BDMP document project has partnered with the major repositories of Beckett papers: the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading, the Ohio State University, Trinity College, Dublin, and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, among others. These institutions hold the major share of the publicly available Beckett documents. Formal cooperation among them, each with its inherent territoriality, and the agreement of what some would call a protective Beckett estate, was the first astonishing accomplishment of this project, which quickly expanded as it gained the confidence of the principals, all the more so after the project won the MLA Prize for a Bibliography, Archive, or Digital Project in 2018. Antwerp now also hosts the Beckett Digital Library project (BDL), that is, the working library in Beckett's Paris apartment at the time of his death, and its collateral project, the accompanying monograph, *Samuel Beckett's Library* written by BDMP co-directors Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon (Cambridge UP, 2017). The Antwerp site now also hosts an extension of the Beckett Library into a virtual library as well as the long-awaited *Samuel Beckett: A Bibliography*, the first part of Breon Mitchel's extended bibliography, Part I of which covers "The Early Years: 1929-1950." *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Play/Comédie and Film* is thus the print edition of what will soon be available on-line as part of the BDMP, although as of this writing the site for this eighth volume is not yet live.

The massive Beckett undertaking is summarized as part of and integrated into another grand project, the *What Is Authorial Philology* initiative, the manual for which, translated from the Italian and edited by Paola Italia, Giulia Raboni, *et al.*, is available in open access format. Italia and Raboni, who focus attention on the Italian tradition of the study of author variants, applaud the BDMP and the BDL with their emphasis on "visualization," which they embrace as part of the larger Authorial Philological (AP) initiative. Such "visualization" is what separates these contemporary textual initiatives from those of the 1970s print-driven textual studies projects that strove to provide authoritative editions of American "classics" through a massive Modern Language Association/National Endowment for the Humanities/ University Press published series of authoritative editions. As Italia and Raboni note:

Although the focus of the BDMP lies mostly on the endogenesis (the succession of draft versions) and exogenesis (the author's use of external source texts), it also catalogues and collates different editions of Beckett's works, for which the Bibliography feature, compiled by Breon Mitchell, provides exhaustive bibliographical information. In some cases, the publication history is marked by a complex epigenesis (the continuation of the genesis and revision after the first publication).

(<https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1231>)

This eighth volume in *The Making of Samuel Beckett's . . .* book series (adjunct to the BDMP and BDL projects and the AP initiative) follows a certain continuity or pattern to what is offered, although the documents available for examination and collation in each volume differ, and so emphases on "endogenesis," "exogenesis" and "epigenesis" likewise differ even as the root of all is "genesis" and "the study of authorial variants," as Italia and Raboni have it. In this case, the project gathers all extant or known notes, drafts, manuscripts, (some) performance variations, translations and other materials that went into the composition of both Samuel Beckett's *Play* (*Comédie* in French) and *Film*, but, as Olga Beloborodova acknowledges, the absence of early, preliminary notes for *Play* complicates the reconstruction of the play's genesis (41).

While not among Beckett's greatest hits, in the classroom or on the stage, the two works paired in this volume, both written in English, are, nonetheless, pivotal if not transformational works of the 1960s. The generically titled *Play* fundamentally altered Beckett's perspective on and approach to theatre, whereby plot or story, even action, became of less consequence than the total, integrated visual impact and affect of the staged image with its complicated lighting machinery, which, notably, becomes a character in this play (a position of mine cited and credited on pages 35, 37, and *passim*.) With *Play*, performance became the text. The volume's companion piece, *Film*, Beckett's generically titled first venture into visual media, was initiated by his American publisher, the multimodally inclined Barney Rosset. It became Beckett's only location-shot film for which he made his one and only visit to the United States, to New York for the 1964 filming. With *Film* Beckett became what we today call a multimodal artist, but again his interest seemed to lie more in the potentialities of the medium, how the camera can express the multiplicity of ontology, than in telling a specifically located story. *Film* contains none of the immediately recognizable landmarks that would identify locale. Filmed in Brooklyn, it has no shot of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge, for instance. The issue is thus less location, but, if the gentle reader can pardon the pun, where the focus lies.

The documentation for volume eight, as it is for its seven predecessors, then, is encyclopedic as volume editors minutely reconstruct, compare, and, inevitably, interpret individual Beckett works through primary documents. Each volume, thus, traces the process of the title work's gestation, through revision, translation, and, at times, performance, since, for Beckett, the genetic, creative process often extended into the work's performative realization. The series is also a central part of the broader pattern of material scholarship developing since the 1970s, often with Beckett's encouragement during his lifetime but gaining significant momentum after his death in 1989 as more of his primary and preliminary materials, his trunk holdings, were made available to scholars and thereby to a more general readership. *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Play/Comédie and Film* will complement the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project on-line, which in turn joins the document driven research of the James Knowlson biography, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (1996), and, likewise, the *Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* (1992-1999), currently being reissued (finally) in high quality trade paperback editions at affordable prices (2019-2021).

Many of the distinctions among the series volumes are driven by the range of extant documents but also by Beckett's various creative approaches, some of which are almost free associational (*En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*], say), some the products of exhaustive outlining and near-obsessive recombination (*Play*, for instance), some a hybrid of both (*Film*, say). Volume eight, then, is divided into two parts, each devoted to one of the paired works. Within those rubrics, the material is sub-divided between Documents and Genesis. For the former the sub-rubrics are Autograph Manuscripts and Typescripts (one might quibble here that "Autograph" is redundant); Journal Publications; Editions; Performances; Adaptations; and a set of very handy Genetic Maps, one for each of the pertinent languages; those categories are then subdivided by language. The second sub-rubric is devoted to Genesis, itself separated by the two primary languages. The Making of *Film* is likewise divided between Documents and Genesis, and thereafter follows roughly the pattern above, adding Shooting Scripts and Production Notes in place of Performances. Part of the reason for detailing such a structure so completely is to emphasize just how carefully the volume editor, following the BDM model, is at pains to make access to the material as easy and direct as possible, even though each volume has its own index as well. One further distinction of the *Film* portion of this volume is that much of the preliminary work on genesis was completed as part of a University of Antwerp Ph.D. dissertation by Paul Ardoin, and volume editor Beloborodova generously credits his foundational work in the volume's Acknowledgments (13). One of the strengths of Beloborodova's editing is her ability to bring together and assimilate into a fluid narrative the disparate stands of textual scholarship and

critical discourse on these works, and such seamless assimilation is an enviable skill.

Overall, and finally, it is difficult to know what to praise more, the digital “visualization” of the on-line BDMP that offers scholars unprecedented access to primary documents or the meticulously edited book series, of which *The Making of Samuel Beckett’s Play/Comédie and Film* is exemplary. It is important to emphasize, moreover, that these text-driven volumes are not redundant but are indispensable variants and so complementary to what Italia and Raboni (*et al.*) highlight: that the BDMP uses the digital medium to the fullest. The hard copies, then, also include a high level of visualization, with the printed facsimiles often cropped to focus on and highlight selected details. In this way, the print versions tend to be more curated than the on-line BDMP, which, on the other hand, is more fully cross-integrated into a textual weave and so demonstrate Beckett’s rich intertextuality more fully. What is irrefutable is that no contemporary scholar working on Samuel Beckett today can publish without thorough reference to *The Making of Samuel Beckett’s . . .* book series and to the BDMP, but the web site and its companion volumes are not the exclusive province of Beckett scholars. They appeal more broadly to serious theatre and film scholars, theorists and practitioners and to authorial philologists—readers interested in acts of creativity, textual genesis, and book history.

S. E. Gontarski
Florida State University