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# TechnoRomanticism: Creating Digital Editions in an Undergraduate Classroom

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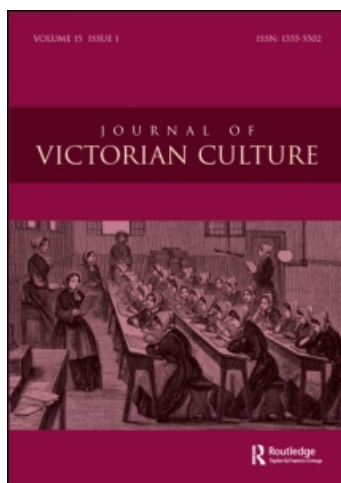
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## DIGITAL FORUM

### TechnoRomanticism: Creating Digital Editions in an Undergraduate Classroom

Katherine D. Harris

In fall 2009, English majors and a few graduate students enrolled in an experimental literature course. The generic catalogue description for this course promises students a traditional tour of British Romantic-era literature with a focus on Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and Percy Shelley. However, a survey course focused only on these ‘Big Six’ literary figures ignores the vast amount of historical and literary materials printed 1785–1837. In addition, a traditional survey course disregards the integral collaborative and creative relationships among authors, publishers, printers, reviewers and readers.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, I crafted a survey course based on textual theory, scholarly editing, and digital humanities methodologies.

The Romantic era was perhaps one of the most intellectually and technologically productive eras in all of England: the industrial revolution forced citizens to abandon agrarian life and embrace an urban existence that was full of prostitutes, raw sewage, cholera and scientific experimentation. Literature during this time reflects the anxiety caused by this shift, and it also reflects an excitement about England’s potentially terrifying future. In Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, the heroes embody all of these aspects of British life. For this reason, I created a new instantiation of the British literature survey course which centred on the themes prevalent in *Frankenstein*. Both editions of her novel (1818 and 1831) reflect the tensions between the early and later Romantics, especially with concern for authorship, education, colonial power, femininity and literary form. The variations in the two editions of Shelley’s novel also offer an opportunity to study print culture, especially where it concerns collaboration. To understand fully both the literary moment and the production of a text, students were asked to create their own digital edition of Mary Shelley’s novel for their final project. In creating this digital edition as a public website, the students gained an understanding of the cultural moment as well as participated in the same type of creativity that the Romantic authors experienced: not the isolated, creative

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1. The theoretical basis for this course relies on a methodology which assumes that the material/textual object along with its cultural domain is a ‘sociology of the text’ – a system of evaluation that links all elements of a text’s life and allows a text to remain open to new meanings instead of closed at the point of printing.

moment that is so often touted about our Romantic authors, but the collaborative, textual rendering of literature.

This course, officially titled 'Romantic Era Survey', was re-titled 'Techno-Romanticism' to indicate both the technological infusion of digital tools into our classroom as well as the focus on technology in the Romantic era. In an effort to reproduce the Romantics' cultural moment, we moved through the semester in the style of radial reading, a literary multi-tasking that we perform so well today.<sup>2</sup> Each week students were required to read only a few chapters of *Frankenstein*; at the same class meeting, however, other texts were introduced to explicate, exonerate, or complicate these chapters.<sup>3</sup> In this way, students were just as inundated with texts as Romantic audiences and had to perform what Scott Rettberg calls 'ergodic reading', where 'the reader must first puzzle over the rules of operation of the text itself, negotiate the formal "novelty" of the novel, play with the various pieces, and fiddle with the switches, before arriving at an impression of how the jigsaw puzzle might fit together, how the text-machine may run'.<sup>4</sup> In the spirit of Mark Phillipson's *Romantic Audience Project* wiki <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/innovations/rap/toc.htm>>, each student was tasked with annotating a chapter of the 1818 text with both Romantic-era and twenty-first-century materials. In order to author a truly collaborative project, students created their annotated chapters in Google Sites, an online, freely available web-authoring tool. By using materials from such online scholarly resources as the *Romantic Chronology* <<http://www.english.ucsb.edu:591/rchrono/>>, *Thomas Carlyle Letters* <<http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>> *Blake Archive* <<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>>, *Rossetti Archive* <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>>, *Poetess Archive* <<http://www.poetessarchive.com/>> as well as twenty-first-century online resources and references, students gained an understanding of literary production. By the end of the semester, students replaced the traditional ideal of a Romantic author with collaborative models that they themselves participated in: students became agents of Romanticism.

## Assignments

Since most students had never encountered the rigours of editing a scholarly edition, I broke the job into several small assignments. Because some students were trepidatious about building websites, working in online environments, or using online resources, I balanced their variant levels of technological skills by holding group workshops every two weeks. During these Digital Workshop Sessions, students

2. See Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. p. 121.

3. See the course schedule <[http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom\\_F09/Schedule.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom_F09/Schedule.htm)> [accessed online 20 September 2010].

4. Scott Rettberg, 'Communitizing Electronic Literature', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 3.2 (Spring 2009), paragraph 13 <<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/2/000046/000046.html>> [accessed online 20 September 2010].

worked on a particular assignment or skill after a brief tutorial. The more experienced students shared their expertise with their groups, thus creating a viral environment in which the students spread skill sets naturally.

The final project, our digital edition, was constructed of nine assignments.<sup>5</sup>

- (1) Timeline/Literary Historical Research Essay: each student performed research on a set of years to discover and reveal historical events about the Romantic era.
- (2) Links Essay: because we needed a list of relevant online resources (both scholarly and non-scholarly), students were asked to find, list and review online resources.
- (3) Explication of a Poem: students were still expected to perform traditional literary exercises to demonstrate their ability to analyse literature; students posted their explications to our online discussion forum for peer review.
- (4) Analysis of a Minor Character: similar to the explication, students were required to offer this analysis to demonstrate their ability to assess a character's role; again, students posted their essays to an online discussion forum for peer review.
- (5) Investigating Mary Shelley's Manuscripts, Letters and Journals: by using the print facsimiles of the *Frankenstein* manuscript, scholarly editions of Shelley's journals, and scholarly editions of her letters available in our library, students interrogated the collaboration, authorial intent, and cultural references of *Frankenstein*; again students posted their essays to our online discussion forum for peer review.
- (6) Review of Reviews: by searching through periodical reviews in the subscription database, *America's Historical Newspapers* and those supplied in our edition of *Frankenstein*, students discovered the reception of the novel and shared their findings in an online discussion forum post.<sup>6</sup>
- (7) Adaptations: after a discussion about the many adaptations, references and allusions to *Frankenstein*, students ventured out to find print, visual and verbal resources that replicated the novel either closely or obliquely.
- (8) *Keepsake* Authors Mystery: using a print facsimile of the 1829 *Keepsake* literary annual, students analysed a short story or poem and discovered an author's biography using the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>7</sup>
- (9) Peer Review: during the last weeks of the semester, students peer reviewed the overall digital edition with the help of a rubric.

5. Full assignment descriptions and resources can be found on the course website: <[http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom\\_F09/Assignments.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom_F09/Assignments.htm)> [accessed online 20 September 2010].

6. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson, 2nd edn (New York: Longman, 2007). For *America's Historical Newspapers* see <<http://www.newsbank.com/readex/?content=96>> [accessed online 20 September 2010].

7. Paula Feldman, ed., *The Keepsake for 1829* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006).

Essay lengths ranged from 300 to 1000 words and received up to eleven points each instead of a letter grade. After submitting an essay for comments, each student integrated the assignment into his or her own digital edition website and then began hyperlinking his or her assignments together to demonstrate a form of argument. As we progressed through peer review of the websites, students also began linking to each others' entire projects to create a continuum of chapters. In addition, they also began linking to each others' assignments in order to further a point in their own arguments. As a result, the very act of hyperlinking became a critical argument and evidence of scholarly collaboration among students. The final product was accompanied by a Rationale which synthesized not only their scholarly adventures, but also the theoretical and critical reasoning associated with the digital edition project.

The full range of digital edition projects is available online <[http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom\\_F09/StudentProjects.htm#Chps](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom_F09/StudentProjects.htm#Chps)>, but the two most successful projects are Volume II, Chap. 5 <<http://sites.google.com/site/myhideousprogenywebsite/home>> and Vol. II, Chap. 2 <<http://sites.google.com/site/frankensteinsublime/>>.

### Incubator classroom

Twenty-six students arrived on the first day of fall term 2009 to a classroom that most had never seen. The room, part of the much-lauded Academic Success Center <<http://www.sjsu.edu/asc/>>, has two independent SmartBoards, a data projector, a master control podium with DVD player, VCR, document camera, speaker system and two walls of white boards. The room is equipped with its own server, wireless Internet, ceiling-installed microphones and IT staff. Upon entering the room, each student is allocated either a MacBookPro or a Tablet PC to be used while in the classroom. Portable tables and chairs can be arranged into any configuration with data and power plugs in the floor.

During our first two weeks, we started slowly by reading and posting responses to blogs and discussion boards on *Moodle* <<http://moodle.org/>>, our open-source learning management system. They also began using Tidebreak's *ClassSpot* software, which allowed any student to control any of the three screens or share their laptop screens. This allowed me to see how the students made use of their laptops and Internet access, often with surprising results. During Week 4, for instance, we discussed botany through Erasmus Darwin and education through Mary Wollstonecraft. As I lectured, I could see them diddling their laptops, so I asked them to share. What I got was:

- looking up proper names in the *Oxford English Dictionary* database ('Frank' and 'Stein');
- YouTube video of *Grease 2* 'Reproduction' song, which discusses the unwieldy reproductive passion of flowers;
- A video on *YouTube* of a speech from the film *V for Vendetta* admonishing that the government should fear its people, not vice versa; and
- Tom Lehr's Chemistry elements song.

Using their findings in discussion provided students a sense of play and curiosity, something they would need as we moved into the larger digital edition project.

### Assessment

The most successful assignment that was truly collaborative and easily achieved was our timeline <[http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom\\_F09/RomanticTimeline.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/TechnoRom_F09/RomanticTimeline.htm)>. Thanks to the program published via MIT's *Simile* site and Brian Croxall's easy-to-follow tutorial <<http://www.simile-widgets.org/timeline/>>, this collaboration was referenced throughout the semester. The assignment itself asked them to tackle research, real library-bound research. Then, during a Digital Workshop session, students input their findings, including links to images and online resources, into a Google Docs spreadsheet and *voila!* During the next iteration of this course, I will ask students to add to the current timeline instead of creating a new one. In this way, we will have a continual acquisition of information that is collaborative across semesters and available online.

The best thing about these collaborative or project-based classes is that students use each other as benchmarks for improvement: writing improved, instruction on the use of digital tools was shared, intriguing design choices were lauded in group discussion. Their informal peer reviews became moments of collaboration on their larger digital edition projects. Indeed, students exhibited a sense of collaborative ownership when they balked at reviewing preliminary versions of each others' digital edition projects. To avoid uncollegial critiques, they challenged each other to offer only constructive criticism that would expand or enhance the design, writing, architecture, visuals and technology skills.

While watching the digital edition presentations at the conclusion of the semester, I noticed that students really had difficulty thinking visually in terms of constructing a hyperlinked argument. For the most part, they created digital editions that were replicas of linear print essays rather than taking advantage of digital tools to create multi-modal/media representations of Shelley's novel. Most class members who relied on alternate media, video for example, simply embedded video without really explaining the connection to a larger argument. In the end, many, but not all, relied heavily on the written *rationale* to guide the argument.

From this situation, I surmise that students cannot think visually because we have not trained them in this form of critique. Perhaps I should insert a visualization assignment that asks them to draw representations of each webpage and then draw lines linking to other pages. By creating associations and then explanations, they may be able to better articulate their arguments. Or, since we have so much whiteboard space in the classroom, I could have asked them to visualize it in class during group workshops. Many of them had interesting ideas – the most intriguing was twenty-first-century celebrity as a form of *Frankenstein* madness – but the project was weighted so heavily on contemporary celebrity that it did very little intellectual work on the novel itself. Students often found themselves so distanced from the literary text that it became secondary to the visualizations and relationships that they were attempting to demonstrate in the digital edition. Submitting assignments to an online

environment and composing a website meant that students let their writing slip; misspellings, newspaper-style paragraphs, fragments, unexplained quotes, lack of signal phrases became common. It seems that the students became so overwhelmed with the digital tools, skills and the wealth of online material that they forgot about being scholars of the novel too.

Even at the end of the semester, many students could not articulate their arguments. It became obvious, though, that they struggled with defining ‘argument’ for a multi-modal project. How could they incorporate the visual and the textual into an argument if they have only been taught to offer linear, written essays? Perhaps instead, English Departments can teach basic composition skills using the tools that students now use every day: social networking, video, text messaging, pictures, and blogging. In this way, we will offer students an opportunity to use those same tools to disseminate ideas and to critique them instead of merely being consumers.<sup>8</sup> In our literature courses, perhaps we can also offer more opportunities to explore the interaction between the literary text and, for instance, engravings or advertisements. Recently, a few instructors have not only brought these visual narratives to the classroom, but have also asked their students to create collaboratively in project-centred courses.<sup>9</sup> Much of this work demands an interdisciplinary critical apparatus, though. Textual scholars and digital humanists seem to be forging the way towards a more expanded view of literary material as well as demanding variant forms for delivering scholarship, but, we still have some work to do in English departments. Surely, we can no longer ignore that literary periods are inherently multi-modal and collaborative.

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8. Composition Studies have been creating different forms of argument and essays for some time. See Jamie Skye Bianco, ‘Composing and Compositing: Integrated Digital Writing and Academic Pedagogy’, *Fibreculture*, 10 (2007), unpaginated <[http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue10/issue10\\_bianco.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue10/issue10_bianco.html)> [accessed 20 October 2010].
  9. See Mark Sample’s course on the graphic novel <<http://www.samplereality.com/2010/04/14/fall-2010-grad-class-on-graphic-novels/>>, Jeff Drouin’s Modernist Magazines course <<http://macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/material-modernism/>>, Linda K. Hughes’s work with Victorian periodicals in a graduate course discussed in a cluster of articles, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 39.3 (2006), and Matt Gold’s ‘Looking for Whitman’ multi-institutional undergraduate course <<http://lookingforwhitman.org/>>.