

***Clotel*: An Electronic Scholarly Edition**

Matthew Gibson (mgibson@virginia.edu)
University of Virginia

Background

In the fall of 2001, Christopher Mulvey, Professor of English at the University of Winchester, came to the Electronic Text Center (Etext) at the University of Virginia Library to collaborate on creating a scholarly electronic edition of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*. In the spring of 2005, Adam Matthew Publishers (UK) and the University of Virginia Electronic Imprint (US) will jointly publish the product of this collaboration: *Clotel: An Electronic Scholarly Edition*. This collaborative opportunity proved intriguing for a number of cultural, technical, and theoretical reasons.

The Technical Challenges of History

Of cultural and historical interest, *Clotel* was the first African-American novel ever published and its content proves particularly germane to the University of Virginia since the institution's "father", Thomas Jefferson, is the father of *Clotel*, the mulatto fugitive slave and heroine of Brown's novel. In addition, the novel's publication history spans an incredibly dynamic period of United States history (slavery, Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction) and the substantive changes among the four editions of the novel between 1853 and 1867 are certainly reflective of that political environment.

Technically, the *Clotel Electronic Edition* pushes the bar on past electronic scholarship that the Electronic Text Center has engaged specifically, as well as developments in the creation of electronic scholarly editions generally. The innovative visualizations that *Clotel* forced Etext to explore are due, in large part, to the milieu of cultural events in which the novel was published. The historical events, which directly affected William Wells Brown as he went from a fugitive slave to a free man, engendered a large number of substantive variations between the different editions of *Clotel*. Because the editions are so different from one another, because, in most cases, they are different artistic "works", the task of aggregating them into a single project for scholarly comparison, analysis, and discovery provided a sizeable challenge.

Using Early American Fiction's¹ first American edition of William Wells Brown's novel, *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States* (1864), as a starting point, Mulvey outsourced the digitization of three more editions: the 1853 first edition published in London, the 1860 version serialized in the *Weekly Anglo-African*, and the 1867 second American edition. Mulvey's idea was to take each of the editions, mark up regions of contextual similarity, and then provide tools for the user to approach the electronic edition in a number of ways without necessarily privileging any one version. Utilizing the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) as the markup standard for the project, Etext had to take Mulvey's ideal requirements and visually try to understand how that markup should function in the context of publication.

Emphasis upon visualizing the changes between the editions was particularly important for Mulvey. He wanted to compare the texts in different visual environments: one, for instance, that was heavy on exposing emendation and another that privileged the act of reading with optional tools for comparison. A dominant conceptual view that he maintained actually came from Microsoft. Having often used the "track" tool in Microsoft Word to compare version changes in his own documents, Mulvey wanted to develop a similar tool (or use a tool that already existed) to emulate that functionality so that users could see the changes that occur between each edition at any given time. Privileging that act of uninterrupted reading but giving the option for comparison, under Mulvey's direction Etext placed the four "witness" versions of *Clotel* in a parallel reading view in which a user could link to comparable passages in any of the other three editions at any point in any version of the text. The edition also gives users attendant "reading" copies of each text along with links to annotations.

Theoretical Implications

Within the larger environment of scholarly publishing and the framework of debate over its future, the *Clotel* project brings to light several speculative issues that may offer an option to that environment and the role that libraries could have and are beginning to have in what has historically been unfamiliar territory. While the Electronic Text Center has always theoretically aligned itself as being an electronic "publisher", it has never had the ancillary apparatuses of the traditional publishing environment: it has no "publicity office" and, more important, no real mechanism for peer review. However, the stakeholders that the *Clotel* project has brought together—an ambitious scholar, two scholarly presses (Adam Matthew in the UK and the University of Virginia's Electronic Imprint) and a digital library unit with expertise in content creation—have made themselves into an ad-hoc publishing force. While the crisis in scholarly publishing continues, a collaboration of this sort which brings together these types of players with typically

varying interests and priorities is certainly a stab in a direction, albeit experimental and unknown.

Although the Electronic Text Center has been, for lack of a better word, "publishing" content for well over a decade using the web and other non-web electronic formats, its line-straddling between library and publishing culture has never been as apparent or important as it is now. One might posit that this position is not one of happenchance or exception, but one necessarily born by the realities, limits, and failures in the domain of print culture.

1. Funded by two grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, *Early American Fiction (1789-1875)* is a recently completed collection of digitized early first American editions and primary source materials. The on-line collection includes 886 volumes from 136 different authors. There are 199 transcribed manuscript items (525 pages of drafts, letters, and miscellaneous items) and 124 non-text items (photos, engravings, etc.) included in the collection. See <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/eaf/>>. [Ed. note: *Clotel* is not among the online texts available for external access. PL]