# "Alms for Oblivion": Bringing an Electronic New Variorum Shakespeare to the Screen

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In this paper, I describe the development of a digital interface for the *Electronic New Variorum Shakespeare (eNVS)*, and explore certain historical and technical issues that bear upon our design strategies. With the considerable burdens of content development and encoding resting on others' shoulders, *NVS* co-general editor Paul Werstine and I have been free to focus exclusively on interface design – an area of humanities computing that, I would suggest, has not kept pace with advancements in web browsers and third-party design standards. Although many computing humanists might see an *eNVS* edition as a document, however complex, we have instead approached it as a data object, where the organizing logic is that of object-oriented programming, not hypertext. The value of the *eNVS* interface lies in reinventing such fundamental scholarly mechanisms as the textual collation line, the commentary footnote, and the annotated page – three structures from which the variorum derives both its archival power and, for many print users, its aura of cognitive overload. With these issues in mind, I will argue that in order to bring electronic editing projects like the *eNVS* to the screen, humanists must also be information architects, who think past documents to embrace the principles of object-oriented and standards-compliant programming and design. Conversely, the historical section of this paper will show that the programmers must also be humanists, who understand the cultural and bibliographical histories of the interface traditions in which they work.

Scholarly opinion differs on the present value and future viability of Shakespeare variorum editions, print and electronic, but tends to agree that, in any form, they rank among the largest information-management projects in Shakespeare scholarship. On one side of the debate, Richard Knowles goes so far as to call variorums "the memories of the profession" (43), though he also stresses that variorums, like all memory, incorporate a principle of selection in their management of heterogeneous masses of data. Maurice Hunt takes issue with the traditional perception of the variorum edition as "the still point in the turning world of texts, a text which would arrest, and even reverse, the processes of textual change and corruption" (62, quoting McGann 93) – a view that consigns these editions to the "tombs/tomes" of an "obsolete modernism" (Hunt 62). Instead, Hunt contends, the variorum structure anticipates postmodernist values in the heterogeneity of its apparatus, which conveys the indeterminacy of the Shakespeare text more than any other kind of edition. Yet for some scholars on the other side, projects like the *NVS* are more about the past than the future, amounting to "admission[s] of failure" and monuments to unachieved textual stability (Rhodes and Sawday 11; Bristol 101). In one instance of pointed criticism, John Lavagnino claims that the uncategorized nature of variorum commentary renders it un-digital in advance, and "not productively open to flexibility of display" (201). He concludes with a call for improvements in display technology (203), which our project echoes and in part hopes to answer. As this range of thought indicates, the challenges facing an electronic variorum are not purely technical, and require a level of interface design that accounts for the historical issues at stake.

This paper has four sections:

1. History: the variorum interface in print
2. Possible futures: the web browser as design platform
3. Examples of the *eNVS* interface

    (a) Textual apparatus
    (b) Page/screen layout(s)
    (c) Annotations

4. Conclusion: alms for oblivion

## 1. History: the variorum interface in print

This section will provide a brief outline of the design challenges we have inherited from eighteenth-century editors. Interface issues have dominated the variorum's historical role in Shakespeare studies since Samuel Johnson first applied the format to Shakespeare in 1765. Part of our research mandate is to reinvent the complex layout of the Shakespeare variorum, which has remained largely unchanged – and unloved, many Shakespeareans would say – for over two centuries. As recent scholarship on editing's cultural history shows, the reservations expressed by Bristol and Lavagnino are as old as the Shakespeare variorum itself (see DeGrazia 209-14, and Gondris). I will confine my focus here to the historical problem of too much (Shakespearean) information, which casts a long shadow over any interface design.

# 2. Possible futures: the web browser as design platform

The *eNVS* is an interface with a 200-year history, and with an eye to the present moment of standards-friendly design in the wake of the so-called browser wars between Microsoft and Netscape. If Bristol is correct that the *NVS's* goals exceed the limits of print (101), and if Lavagnino is correct that complex digital commentary is insufficiently served by hypertext alone (198-200), we might conclude that an adequate *eNVS* interface demands advancement beyond traditional, HTML-era design. I will briefly summarize the case for advanced browser-based interfaces, with particular reference to the W3C's standardization of key web technologies such as CSS, XML, and the DOM – and, most importantly, the implementation of these and other standards in 'postwar' open-source browsers such as Mozilla and Firefox.

# 3. Examples from the eNVS interface:

## 3.a Textual apparatus

Known by such tongue-in-cheek epithets as the "band of terror" or "barbed wire" that runs beneath the text (Thomas Berger and Edmund Wilson, quoted in Rasmussen 211), the traditional collation of variants offers the most obvious candidate for a digital reconception. Where many electronic editions at best display variants by way of linked parallel texts (swapping one print interface for another), and at worst simply recode the collation line as a text string, the *eNVS* interface instead generates a properly machine-readable apparatus by means of object-oriented scripting. This allows us to expand the collation line, textually and graphically, into the textual history it compresses and encodes.

## 3.b Page/screen layout(s)

As Gondris has shown, the Shakespeare variorum page inherited from the eighteenth century constitutes a critical structure that promotes some habits of thought and suppresses others. The consequences of rearranging it will therefore reach beyond readability and convenience – important enough issues in themselves – to impact the production of meaning. This is one of the most challenging aspects of the *eNVS*, not least because of the computer screen's orientation toward vertical scrolling. Again, an object-oriented interface enables multiple layout options without generating redundant files.

## 3.c Annotations

The question of how best to display electronic annotation remains a central debate in electronic editing. It is also a central concern in our project, since the variorum's primary content is not its playtext, but its notes. But as Lavagnino has pointed out, it is difficult for digital interfaces to improve upon – or even match – the cognitive elegance of the print reader's glance from text to footnote (198-9). This section will demonstrate how our note design works with the page layouts, and with the complex archive formed by the network of *NVS* annotations.

# 4. Conclusion: alms for oblivion

The paper will conclude with a restatement of the argument for closer integration of textual studies and web programming in the practice of electronic editing, especially in projects like the *eNVS*. Much of the energy that might advance interface design in humanities computing is presently devoted to digitization and tagging, in response to the archival impulse still strong in the humanities. As an invitation to discussion, I will close by reflecting on Knowles's quotation of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, which he uses to make the point that all scholarship risks becoming "alms for oblivion, ... good deeds past, which are devoured / As fast as they are made, forgot as soon as done" (3.3.141-4, quoted in Knowles 39). Shakespeare variorums are akin to all electronic preservation formats in that they attempt, in Knowles's words, "to guard against oblivion," even as they are subject to it. The *eNVS* seeks to preserve scholarship into the future by increasing its accessibility and relevance in the present.

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