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## Application for NINES Workshop in Digital Scholarship, 18-22 July 2005

### **Project Title: The Romantic Periodical Project**

Short Description: The project aims to develop an interactive web-based interpretative resource for the scholarly community around the electronic text of a Romantic periodical (the *Quarterly Review*, 1809-1822).

### **Full Project Description**

This project represents a development of my work in creating an electronic text of the *Quarterly Review*, 1809-1822, at present being posted in installments on the *Romantic Circles* website. It aims to explore the potential of electronic text for collective investigation of Romantic periodical culture, in ways that go beyond merely enhanced accessibility.

In the current situation, where large-scale non-scholarly “digitization” (ie electronic facsimile production) of nineteenth-century texts is being proposed by Gale Publishing, along the lines of their ECCO project, it is urgently necessary for the scholarly community to demonstrate the greater potential of the electronic text, because in the absence of clearly perceived benefits funding bodies will assume that all scholarly work on electronic texts is simply “redundant” in the face of Gale’s proposals (this was the response I received recently from the British Arts and Humanities Research Board to my application for funding for work on the *Quarterly Review* text). The Romantic Periodical Project will seek to show how the flexibility of electronic text can be used to enhance scholarly understanding of Romantic periodical culture, enabling forms of interactive commentary which are entirely precluded by privately-owned electronic facsimiles.

### **Scholarly Rationale**

Periodicals in the Romantic period are not simply random assemblages of material from which items, such as reviews of literary works, can be unproblematically extracted, but ideologically coherent ensembles usually put together by a single editor and a small group of collaborators. Given the absence of explicit editorial matter in Romantic periodicals, however, an understanding of the ideological bearings of particular items has to be arrived at through the interpretative work of reconstructing the textual interplay between progressively larger contexts: different articles within a single issue, articles published over several issues, and articles published in other contemporary periodicals.

The fluidity inherent in the interpretative context of Romantic periodical reviews is unsuited to the traditional scholarly monograph, which even in recent New Historicist work focussing on the literary group (eg Jeffrey Cox’s *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* CUP 1998) or the significant year (eg James Chandler, *England in 1819*, Chicago 1998) tends to be forced into a static foreground/background interpretative model in which periodical reviews are largely relegated to footnotes. The capacity of web-based presentation for endless, multiple and temporary forms of foregrounding which nevertheless preserve interpretative context through linking devices, makes possible a very different kind of study which is more appropriate to the nature of periodicals, in that it is less centred around the individual author.

As projects such as Wikipedia demonstrate, one of the essential advantages of text-based electronic publication of Romantic periodicals is the ease with which aggregation of scholarly “micro-content”

becomes possible. A web-based Romantic Periodical resource could allow pooling of the local insights about the context of periodical articles that Romantic scholars currently arrive at in the course of working on other texts, but which at the moment go largely unrecorded.

### **Technical and Theoretical Problems**

On a technical level, fluid and ongoing (re)contextualization of review articles can only be achieved through a database-driven website, a fundamental precondition for which is the formulation of a DTD designed specifically for this purpose. Romantic periodicals are mostly simple and uniform in their layout, so what is required is a severely restricted subset of TEI-lite for the purposes of textual description, but with a greatly extended and systematic set of meta-tags for contextual description (to which TEI as a whole is not really geared). Contexts need to include literary and rhetorical dimensions of periodical reviews, as well as their paraphrasable content: articles on Classical Greek in the early numbers of the *Quarterly Review*, for example, implicitly form part of a campaign against Unitarianism, but could not be identified as belonging to this context merely through a simple key-word search.

Some means by which scholarly users of the website can add contextual descriptions to the mark-up of the review articles needs to be devised. Since the capabilities of the DTD will probably determine what kinds of contextualization of review articles can be performed, its specification is not merely a technical problem, but one with many theoretical ramifications. The model supplied by NINES projects such as IVANHOE will be very useful in this respect.

### **Timescale**

The project is currently in its first phase - production of an electronic text of a significant run of numbers from a Romantic periodical is clearly a precondition for being able to do more interesting kinds of contextual mark-up. The *Quarterly Review* (1809-1822) was chosen for this purpose because, although it is a major Romantic review, it is under-studied in comparison with the *Edinburgh Review*, and is closely associated with two major Romantic writers (Scott and Southey).

The first phase of the project is being funded by the University of Central England, and is being conducted in collaboration with its Electronic Library service, one of the major centres for scholarly digitization work in the UK. At current rates of production, I anticipate completion of the 1809-1822 run by the end of the calendar year 2006.

What I wish to investigate during the NINES workshop are issues and methods relating to an envisaged second phase of the project, in which presentation of the text of the *Quarterly Review* would become manipulable by scholarly end-users in ways which would illuminate contextual linkages between the different review-articles. The experience gained would inform a bid to the British Arts and Humanities Research Board in Autumn 2005 under their Resource Enhancement scheme. If it is possible to gain funding, then the project would likely run from late 2006-2009. This second phase would hopefully act as a pilot project encouraging other institutions to undertake the production of electronic texts of Romantic periodicals such as the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*.

### **Technology**

The project aims to explore the scholarly implications of readily available existing technology (the interface between XML markup and data-base driven websites).

### **Technical Support**

The staff of the Electronic Library at the University of Central England are experienced in the use of content-management systems. The availability of specialized technical support, however, would probably depend on my ability to attract additional funding to the project.