***Libraries, Lives and Legacies***

***Split-Venue Research Festival***

University of Liverpool and Online

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## Thursday 13th April: Old Books, New Media – Digital Humanities Showcase

### Roundtable – Old Books, New Media

Chair: Professor Matthew Sangster (University of Glasgow)

#### Talk

Thanks very much for the invitation and the introduction, Matt. So, as Matt said I have a background in literary studies, but I am very much a digital humanist by practice. I suppose I could have talked about any of the digital projects that Matt so kindly mentioned, but I thought for the more informal setting of this conversation, I would pick a project that is still very much in active development and open for input and collaboration.

The project I'd like to talk about for a few minutes is the Romantic Period Poetry Archive (or RPPA for short). You can find RPPA at <https://www.romanticperiodpoetry.org/>. You're very welcome to visit the website, and you may just want to do so to see an interactive version of the fabulous map you can see behind me.

So what is RPPA? RPPA is a new, open access digital platform for global Romantic-period poetry.

Global here in the sense of Felicity Nussbaum's definition of the "Global 18th-c Century", namely as a spatially and conceptually expanded paradigm in which dialogue and exchange rather than influence and reception are the dominant categories. Of course, British and European Romanticism still play a major role in this setting and there is no attempt to downplay the role of poetry in shaping national identities, but the focus of RPPA is to conceptualise Romanticism as a global artistic phenomenon, as a period in international literary history.

Scale, scope and perspective pose a number of challenges and in RPPA I employ digital humanities methodologies to come to terms with these complexities.

So how do I approach these challenges? I take a cue here from Ben Hutchinson who reminds us [and I quote]: "To do full justice to Romanticism as a periodic category [...], one must de facto be a comparatist." [end quote] . And it turns out that comparative literature and digital humanities methodologies are a promising combination. The former as it provides us with the conceptual framework for both human- and machine-generated contextualizations, the latter as it offers us tools to conduct cross-linguistic computational literary analysis.

I'd like to spend a couple more minutes to talk more concretely about the realization of such a resource. RPPA assembles a full-text poetry database (there are currently over 600 poets in RPPA from nearly 70 countries, representing roughly 40 languages) as well as a stack of tools that allow for the open-ended contextualization of these poems.

In DH terms, the full-text collection of poems itself will be a fairly traditional TEI/XML-based corpus. All poems will be available in the original and where applicable an English translation. For the work of contextualization, I employ digital methods from the multilingual Digital Humanities and the Semantic Web and I will end just very briefly describing these.

So firstly, multilingual DH — Although there have been some breakthroughs in this area, particularly with regard to language models and translation studies, much DH work in lesser-researched and less well-funded languages and literatures remains challenging. In RPPA I have begun work on multilingual translation alignment, sequence alignment for the detection of text re-use and forms of intertextuality more generally within and across literatures, and NLP applications (among them phonemic transcription, morpho-syntactic annotation, and a formal representation of poetic form). It is however through inviting input from and seeking collaboration with domain experts from various traditions, that I hope to address some of the main challenges of "distant reading".

Secondly, Semantic Web technologies, particularly in the form of ontologically-underpinned Linked Open Data (LOD) have had a huge impact on DH over the last 15 or so years. An ontology is essentially a vocabulary that enables the representation of knowledge in a particular domain in machine-readable form. The main benefit is the improvement of interoperability, an enhanced ability to interlink heterogeneous corpora from different traditions on a semantic level. This shared framework provides the means for a cross-linguistic representation of poems while maintaining the ability to describe them adequately within their cultures and poetic traditions. In RPPA I use the well-established CIDOC-CRM ontology as a general ontology and OntoPoetry as a domain-specific ontology for the description of poems. The ontologies and LOD are stored (not in a relational) but in a graph database (or you may have heard the term triple store).

The purpose of the ontological representation of all poems in RPPA is thus to provide a unified mechanism of representing and encoding poetic phenomena; to establish docking points for contextualizations on the level of the poems, but also the poets themselves, their circles, networks (and if I don't run out of time) their papers and correspondences; and lastly it enables us to link in any of the analytical results from any of the DH tools employed in RPPA.

So to finish, if you go to the website at [romanticperiodpoetry.org](https://www.romanticperiodpoetry.org/) at the moment you will see that a map is used as a basic visual access point, but ultimately I hope to expand this type of visualization to include historical maps of poetic forms, of contacts, paths of transmission, circulation, and exchange that highlight the connectedness of Romantic poetic traditions. The hope is that through some of these DH methods, we can expand our view of national and European romanticism(s) with a networked global one. Thank you very much!

#### Bio

Alexander Huber is a digital humanist with a background in literary studies. He's worked most of his professional life as a digital librarian at the Bodleian in Oxford. Recently he has set up a consultancy for Digital Humanities to offer advice to individuals and groups of researchers who want to conduct digital research projects. Recent DH projects that he's has worked on include [CatCor](https://catcor.seh.ox.ac.uk/)—the Correspondence of Catherine the Great; the [Murray Scriptorium](https://www.murrayscriptorium.org/)—an edition of the letters and papers of Sir James Murray, first chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary; and [PRISMS](https://www.prisms.digital/)—an Open Scholarship platform for digital scholarly editions that aggregates primary source materials, and the associated scholarship, in a semantic network.