Assignment 4; Critical Reflection

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It’s interesting that one of the prompts for this reflection asks us to imagine our encoded documents as part of a larger collection, because this is something I already had in mind when creating my schema. Since the Shelley-Godwin Archive on which I based the schema around collects work from four different writers in several different genres, my theory of the artifact was one that already conceived of the artifact as part of a wider collection. That said, a core aspect of my schema is that it takes a sort of wide net approach: it can be used to encode (as far as I can tell) most kinds of English text manuscript, whether poetry or prose, and segments that work in very broad categories that can encompass all its varying aspects.

One of the ways I managed this was by starting from a strictly functional perspective. That is, I assessed the categories that seemed most necessary and nested them within each other, going from the broadest to the narrowest. So we start with the collection as a whole (which can include any number of individual works), then a particular work, then its varying segments, then blocks of text that make up the segment, and finally individual lines that make up those blocks of text. Within each level I include several attributes that might serve to define those elements, and I do this again from a functional standpoint: it seems useful to define a work as being poetry or prose for the purposes of data inclusion (as in, it would allow a work to be searched along those terms). The same goes for splitting body blocks into stanzas and paragraphs. As for lines, the various attributes help with the use of this schema as a transcription tool, allowing its users to mark text within lines as having been added, deleted, underlined or even added and then deleted in the manuscript. There is also a “?” element which I included for the benefit of transcribers who might want to work in groups to determine what a text might say, or even just those who might rather admit to not knowing what a text says.

There are several limits to my schema. First, there is no element for blank space. I thought about adding one, but decided against it because I wanted my schema to be a strictly textual transcription tool; one not necessarily based on the materiality of the manuscript, but instead on the form and structure of the work. Second, it is possible that, for categorical purposes, there would be work whose text fits into attributes which some of my elements could not at the moment contain (in this case, I am less worried about the “poetry” and “prose” attributes, which seem rather universal, than I am about the “stanza” and “paragraph” attributes, which might not include single line text structures or other ones I can’t think of at the moment). This doesn’t seem like an immediate problem considering that the schema was created based on the Shelley-Godwin Archive, whose work is rather traditional and seems to broadly fit these categories, but it is still something to keep in mind. Fortunately, the schema is formatted in such a way that adding more values as needed would be an easy process, and in this sense I would consider the schema to be not “complete” but instead in a constant process of improvement. Should it ever be used for less traditional literary work which might not currently fit its categorizations, I would welcome any change which might allow the schema to better transcribe that work as a formal object (I suppose that in such a case it might become necessary to add a “blank space” element after all).

For now, my schema seems rather bland, though I know I say that from the inside out. When first formulating it, I thought briefly about adding some kind of “figurative” element that I could then use to contain metaphors of different types, but ultimately came to the conclusion that this would both be difficult to actually use (how would a transcriber decide where a metaphor begins and ends, or even whether a text is metaphorical at all?) and also would not serve much of a purpose relative to that effort. The formalism expressed in this schema, then, is not strictly literary but instead something I suppose could be called strictly categorical, designed around capturing the textual artifact as clearly as it can within the bounds of what visually constitutes that artifact.