At the beginning of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Robert Walton, the explorer whose letters to his sister in England make up the text of the novel, writes about his impending voyage to the North Pole: “It is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation, half pleasurable and half fearful, with which I am preparing to depart. I am going to unexplored regions” (15). 1 I have sometimes half-ironically thought of these lines as I prepared the novel for digital publication. For several years I have been Assistant Editor on a still-to-be-released electronic edition of *Frankenstein*, and though the team has hardly faced Walton’s dangers of starvation or frostbite, the experience of venturing into unfamiliar scholarly regions has been “half pleasurable and half fearful.” This essay offers a report on one of the unexpected discoveries of our voyage.

I

The Pennsylvania Electronic Edition may be the most extensive electronic version of any literary work ever attempted—perhaps the most extensive single edition of any work in any form. Stuart Curran is the editor of the project; he approached me and a colleague, Sam Choi, in 1994 about working together on a CD-ROM edition of the novel, in the hopes of finishing a small project in a year or two. It has now been much more than a year or two. Nearly every status report since 1996 or so includes a phrase like “due soon” or “now nearing completion,” and yet it drags on. What would have been dazzlingly new in 1996 will now be familiar, at least in kind, to many readers. Some reasons for the delay are logistical, some are bureaucratic, and some are hardly reasons at all. But one good reason is the richness and unexpectedness of the result. Victor Frankenstein watched his creation grow into something he could hardly
have imagined at the beginning. In working on our electronic edition, we discovered the same thing.

Some technical notes. The Pennsylvania Electronic *Frankenstein* is a multimedia hypertext edition of Mary Shelley’s novel, although the multimedia component is admittedly slim. In early discussions of the project I had to devote a few paragraphs to defining newfangled terms like multimedia and hypertext—now familiar to every high school student. But when we began work on this project in 1994, the World Wide Web was new and exotic. In fact, although the original plan was for a CD-ROM edition, we settled on HTML, the markup language of the Web—a risky choice but, as it turns out, the right one. We considered other options, but were determined to avoid proprietary formats owned by companies that might go bust, and we made a lucky guess that the Web just might catch on. Many of our early notes about the Web and HTML speak of it in the future tense—it promises to be a prominent player, for instance. It was necessary to be tentative: this was the age of Mosaic version 0.9 beta, running on Windows 3.1.

Many things have chanced since then, but there are still no comparable electronic editions available to the public, and there are still no models to follow. As Curran notes, “What is most stimulating about this venture is the extent to which we may ourselves do a large amount of the initial mapping of these waters” (12).

II

Why *Frankenstein*, and what might we do with it? The novel is a natural for hypertext: every page is filled with pointers to other texts, both within the novel itself and beyond Shelley’s text to a world of contemporary contexts. The result is a rich intertextual web, including science, literature, philosophy, feminist thought, naval exploration, mythology, geography. *Frankenstein* comments upon, and even incorporates into itself, books from Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* through Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, with stops along the way at Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the works of Rousseau and Goethe, the political philosophy of Godwin, the feminist thought of Wollstonecraft, the late eighteenth-century Gothic novel, and so on. The circumstances of the novel’s composition also make Shelley’s message well suited to our medium. Mary Shelley
was at the center of one of the greatest literary circles in English history, numbering among her close associates Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and William Godwin, and the relations between the members of a literary circle are a neat analogue for the hypertextual links between the fragments of text. The Shelley circle suggests an intriguingly rich network of links between *Frankenstein* and the cultural and intellectual world of the early nineteenth century. The novel begs to be put in historical context, and that sort of contextualizing begs to be done in hypertext.

III

My interest in this essay is the critical commentary that is included in the edition. I begin by relating some of the early history of the project, because it assumed its current shape largely through accident. We began assembling our materials in the spring of 1994. From the beginning, we wanted to have the full text of the novel in both its authorial versions, the first edition of 1818 and the revised third edition of 1831. We also wanted to have original editorial notes on difficult or interesting passages, brief essays on the major characters and themes in the book, as well as a series of short biographies, capsule histories of science, maps, diagrams, portraits, and so on to put *Frankenstein* in context.

Our first plans also included a history of the criticism of the novel: a brief overview of the more famous and influential statements on *Frankenstein*, from Mary Shelley’s day to our own. But we soon lighted on the idea of including the criticism itself, instead of mere summaries of it. Rather than paraphrase, say, Anne Mellor or James Rieger, we resolved to let them speak for themselves by including the entire text of their essays and book chapters. As it happens, the scholarship on *Frankenstein* is copious enough to be interesting but not so voluminous as to be overwhelming. The novel was largely ignored by serious critics until the late 1960s, and even then only edged its way into the canon slowly. This meant we could aspire to be comprehensive rather than merely representative in our inclusion of scholarly writing—something that would have been impossible with, say, *King Lear* or *Paradise Lost*, for which there is no end to the criticism. It took many letters to publishers, but we eventually managed to secure reprint permission for most of what we wanted to include.\(^2\)

By the time we finished our survey of the scholia, we had assembled a
substantial collection of *Frankenstein* criticism. In fact, with 209 essays or book chapters in its current form, it constitutes nearly everything important ever written about the novel, from the first scholarly commentary in the mid-sixties through the flowering of criticism in the late nineties. Nothing here is new except the scale: it is nothing more than an extensive electronic version of one of Harold Bloom’s Chelsea House volumes. But the linking capabilities offered by hypertext let us do something more interesting. We went through all the articles, and linked the citations directly to the text of *Frankenstein*: in other words, when an author quotes page 37, we allowed the reader to jump directly into the text at that point. The curious reader can now see the quotation from the novel in its context.

Of course, in an electronic environment, the notion of “page” becomes hazy. We decided to slice the text into manageable pieces, always at least a paragraph, rarely more than a screen. Our text runs to about three hundred of these pieces. We often fretted over nomenclature as we began the project, and unhappily settled on the term “frame,” which has since come to mean something else on the Web. But these were early days, and browsers with frames in the modern sense lay a year or two in the future. So we began linking the 209 essays back to the three hundred or so “frames” of text, which resulted in a total of 5,831 links from the critical essays to the text of the novel.

None of us had considered taking the next step, which is, I think, one of the most important and interesting aspects of the project. But the technology made the choice available to us, and as is often the case, we realized the need only after we saw the possibility. It grew out of a sense of curiosity: how many critics quote this page of the novel?—which chapter is the most widely discussed? Search utilities let us answer those questions: once the links from the essays to the text were coded into the essays, we could search for the links themselves, using a simple Unix command.

Such queries initially served only to gratify our momentary curiosity, but it slowly dawned on us that others might be interested in these questions. A reader might want to know which critics have discussed a given passage. He or she could read systematically through all the commentary, but with the critical essays running to roughly 1.7 million words—more than four thousand printed pages—it is hardly the most efficient way to proceed. We therefore used hypertext to turn the articles into ad-hoc
footnotes. There are about six hundred pages of interpretive footnotes original to this edition, but there are also links from each frame of the text to all the articles that quote it—and not just to the articles, but to the paragraphs that contain the quotations. When it is complete, the reader will have at his or her fingertips a thorough critical anthology of almost everything that has been said about each page of Shelley’s novel. *Frankenstein* has ceased to be a single book, and has become the center of a devoted reference library.

IV

All of this sounds very innovative, very *au courant*. But it turns out to be surprisingly old-fashioned. Captain Walton sailed to the top of the globe only to discover someone had already gotten there before him—Victor and his Creature had made it to the Pole without the benefit of a sailing ship. In our own voyage to unexplored regions, we too discovered we were not the first ones to get there, and that our predecessors did it without the benefit of HTML. In fact, one of the most novel features that emerged from the hypertext edition recalls a critical phenomenon several centuries old. We realized we were developing a twenty-first-century version of a very old-fashioned kind of edition. The technical term from classical scholarship is the variorum edition, from the Latin phrase *editio cum notis variorum*, an edition with the notes of the various editors or commentators.5 The variorum edition has a very long history, and yet the story has never been told. So, although it involves a brief digression from the new media, it is worth a trip back a few centuries to discuss the nature and the history of the variorum edition.

Practically every respectable edition of every work takes earlier editions into account; only first editions of new works can dispense entirely with predecessors. Few, however, warrant the title variorum, which is concerned with presenting the critical tradition as impartially and as systematically as possible. We can find precursors as far back as ancient Alexandrian annotations on Homer and Talmudic and Midrashic glosses on the Hebrew scriptures. Some of these early commentaries were staggeringly large: as the classical scholars Reynolds and Wilson point out, Eustathius’s medieval apparatus on the *Iliad* “fills about 1,400 large pages of print in the Leipzig edition of 1827-30. . . . The scale of the commen-
taries... is enormous; the discussion of the first line of the *Iliad* runs to 10 pages” (70-71). Despite its antique pedigree, though, the variorum begins in earnest in the early modern period, and came into its own in the age of print. The golden age was the middle of the seventeenth century, largely owing to the unflagging efforts of Cornelis Schrevel, the Dutch classicist who turned out at least thirteen variorum editions of Latin classics between 1646 and 1665: the complete works of Virgil, Terence, Martial, Juvenal and Persius, Lucan, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Pomponius Mela, Justin, Lucius Annaeus Florus, Cicero, Ovid, Erasmus’s *Colloquia*, Claudian, and Quintilian. He scoured hundreds of commentaries and editions from antiquity to his own day, disassembled them, and reassembled them into footnotes. For every line of the *Aeneid* or the *Metamorphoses*, the reader could see a summary of everything that had been said. All told, his variorum editions stretch to roughly thirteen thousand pages.

Although they began with Greek and Latin texts, variorum editions were not limited to the classics. Starting in the eighteenth century, English and other vernacular works started getting classical treatment. Milton often led the way in scholarly packaging: he was the first English poet to receive a full-length scholarly commentary and the first to be analyzed in a concordance. It is therefore fitting that he was also the first English poet to be accorded a variorum in 1749, when Thomas Newton edited *Paradise Lost... with Notes of Various Authors*. The next “classic” English poet to receive a variorum edition was Shakespeare, in Samuel Johnson’s eight-volume edition of 1765 and its revision by George Steevens in 1773. Johnson recognized that after a hundred years, “the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit,” Shakespeare could “begin to assume the dignity of an ancient” (7: 61). He therefore gave Shakespeare’s works the kind of treatment reserved for the ancients by ranging the commentary of about a dozen editors from Rowe to his own day under each passage, making Shakespeare the object of serious scholarly attention in a way he had never been before.

Figure 1 shows two pages from the New Variorum Edition of *Hamlet*, edited by Horace Howard Furness in 1877. At the top of the page is the text: on this spread there is room for only three lines from the play. Then comes a thin layer of textual commentary, followed by the serious business of a variorum edition: the notes of the various editors and critics. Half-way down the left-hand page is a reference to line 67, “i’ the sun.” It
King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?  

Ham. Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun.

other work is the word ‘kind’ used so frequently and so unambiguously as in The Tragedie of Coriodyce. White and Hudson follow Steevens, Caldecott, and Singer in referring these words to the King. The former paraphrases: In marrying my mother, you have made yourself something more than my kinsman, and, at the same time, have shown yourself unworthy of our race, our kind. Coleridge: This playing on words may be attributed to many causes or motives; as, either to an exuberant activity of mind, as in the higher comedy of Sh. generally; or to an imitation of it as a mere fashion, as if it were said,—Is not this better than grieving?—or to a contemptuous exultation in minds vulgarized and overset by their success, as in the poetic instance of Milton’s Devils in the battle; or it is the language of resentment, as familiar to every one who has witnessed the quarrels of the lower orders, where is invariably a profusion of punning invective, whence, perhaps, nicknames have in a considerable degree sprung up: or it is the language of suppressed passion, and especially of a hardly-smothered personal dislike. The first and last of these combine in Hamlet’s case; and I have little doubt that Farmer is right in supposing the equivocation carried on in the expression, ‘too much i’ the sun,’ or son.

67. i’ the sun] JOHNSON: A probable allusion to the proverb: ‘Out of heaven’s blessing into the warm sun.’ Farmer suggested that a quibble was here intended between ‘sun’ and son. Caldecott: Adopting this suggestion of Farmer’s, the passage must mean, ‘I have too much about me of the character of expectancy, at the same time that I am torn prematurely from my sorrows, and thrown into the broad glare of the sun and day; have too much of the son and successor and public staging without possession of my rights, and without a due interval to assuage my grief.’ But a closer observer, (continues Caldecott), here says: ‘One part of Farmer’s suggestion is right, Hamlet means that he had not possession of his rights; but there was no quibble; the allusion is to the proverb referred to by Johnson, which means, ‘to be out of house and home,’ or, at least, to be in a worse temporal condition than a man was, or should be. Thus in Lear, II, ii, 168, and ‘— they were brought from the good to the bad, and from Goddes blessyng (as the proverb is) in to a warme sonne.’—Preface to Grindal’s Profitable Doctrine, 1555. And again, ‘By such art he thought to have removed him, as we say, out of God’s blessing into the warm sun.’—Raleigh’s Hist. of the World, 1677. His being deprived of his right, i.e. his succession to the kingdom, Hamlet might therefore call ‘being too much i’ the sun.’ Knight: There is no quibble. His meaning is explained by the old proverb. Staunton: Hamlet may mean, ‘I am too much in the way; a mote in the royal eye;’ but his reply is purposely enigmatical. Dyce (Gloss. s. v. heaven’s benediction, &c.): The proverbial expression alluded to by Johnson is found in various authors; from Heywood down to Swift; the former has, ‘In your running from him to me, yee runne Out of God’s blessing into the warme sunne.’—Dialogue on Proverbs, Works, sig. G 2 ver. 1598; and the latter: ‘Lord Sparkish. They say, marriages are made in heaven; but I doubt, when she was married, she had no friend there. Neverout. Well, she’s got out of God’s blessing into the warm sun.’—Polite Conversation, Dialogue i, Works, vol. ix, p. 423. Ray gives as its equivalent, Ab equis ad asinos.

Figure 1: from William Shakespeare, Hamlet, New Variorum Edition (1877), ed. Horace Howard Furness, pp. 34–35.
QUEEN. Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,

—Proverbs, p. 192, ed. 1768. HUDSON inclines to Farmer’s suggestion, and adds:

"Perhaps there is the further meaning implied, that he finds too much sunshine of jollity in the Court, considering what has lately happened." In Much Ado, II, i, 331, Beatrice says of herself, "I am sun-burned," and this phrase HUNTER (i. 250) ingeniously explains, and gives it a signification akin to the present passage. "To be in the sun," "to be in the warm sun," "to be sun-burned," were phrases, says Hunter, not uncommon in the time of Sh., and for a century later, to express the state of being without family connections, destitute of the comforts of domestic life. There must have been some reason for this association of discomfort with what is generally considered comfort, at least among northern nations, and this reason is found in the old English version of the One Hundred and Twenty-first Psalm, in which occurs the passage, "So that the sun shall not burn thee by day, nor the moon by night," and as this psalm, in the earlier Rituals of the Church, was used in the Churching of Women, it followed that the matron who was surrounded by her husband and children was one who had received the benediction that the sun should not burn her, while the unmarried woman, who had received no such benediction, came to be spoken of by those who allowed themselves to use such jocular expressions as one "still left exposed to the burning of the sun," or, as Beatrice says, "sun-burned." When the translation of the Scriptures was revised, in the reign of James I, the word "smite" was substituted in this verse for "burn," probably on account of these ludicrous associations; and for the same reason, on the last revision of the Liturgy, this psalm was left out of the service altogether. In the first and original use of this phrase, then, it denoted the state of being unmarried; thus Beatrice uses it. It then expanded so as to include the state of those who were without family connections of any kind; thus Hamlet uses it. It expanded still wider and included the state of those who have no home, and thus it is used in Lear, II, ii, 168. And it seems to have expanded still wider, and to have been sometimes used for any species of destitution, or distress, or evil. Hamlet therefore means, "I have lost father and mother; you heap upon me the terms 'cousin' and 'son,' but I find myself forlorn, with none of the comforts remaining which arise out of the charities of kindred." Ingenious as this explanation of Hunter's is, it applies with more force to the phrase used by Beatrice than to that used by Hamlet; we have no examples given on that to be in the sun was ever thus understood, and for it we must take Hunter's unsupported assertion. NICHOLSON (N. & Q. 25 May, 1867) thus paraphrases: Ham. turns off the King's query with an apparently courtly compliment,—Nay, my lord, I am too much in the sunshine of your favour, where I show but as a shadow (too much am I in that sunshine which I detest); deposed by you as heir and successor to the throne on which by God's providence I was placed, I am now gone to the world; instead of being in clouds and rain, amid sorrow and tears for my dead father and king, I find myself in the midst of marriage festivities and carousings. MODERELY thinks the proverb may have meant that a person loses all special advantages, and is reduced to light and sunshine, which are the common inheritances of all.

68. nighed] For the general rule that participles formed from an adjective mean 'made of' (the adjective), and derived from a noun, mean 'endowed with, or like the noun), see ABBOTT, § 294.

Figure 1: continued from left.
is followed by quotations or paraphrases of ten critics, from Samuel Johnson in 1765 through C. E. Moberly in 1873—nearly a thousand words, all devoted to explaining Hamlet’s enigmatic three-word phrase. Johnson believes the reference is to an old proverb; Richard Farmer thinks the line contains a pun; Thomas Caldecott agrees, and elaborates with parallels from Lear and other contemporary works; Alexander Dyce brings us back to Johnson; and so on, through more than a century of scholarship.

What, then, would a variorum Frankenstein look like? I take as my example one of the most famous passages in the book, from the third chapter, when Victor Frankenstein is nearing the completion of his great task. In our edition, the passage is numbered 1.3.6—first volume, third chapter, sixth frame. This is the most discussed part of the book, being cited by 108 of the 209 articles in the edition. Some of Shelley’s more resonant sentences:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their’s. . . . I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter. . . . I pursued nature to her hiding-places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? . . . I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, . . . I kept my workshop of filthy creation. . . . The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation. (49-50)

Words and phrases throughout this passage are hyperlinked to footnotes written for this edition. At the bottom of this frame, however, is a link to
“Commentary,” which takes the reader to a list of commentators who have quoted any part of this passage; from there, links lead to the beginning of each critic’s paragraph that contains the reference.

In our edition, the commentators are arranged alphabetically. Other arrangements are of course possible. In most print variorums, chronology provides the ordering, and this has obvious virtues. But while this would be useful for an edition of Homer or Shakespeare, *Frankenstein’s* critical history is not long enough to make it really satisfactory. We have a flurry of reviews in the years immediately after the novel appeared, then almost nothing for a century and a half, and then a burst of commentary in just a few decades. It is also possible to arrange the commentaries by schools: we might see all the materialist critics together, another group for the feminist critics, another for the psychoanalytic critics. We considered such an approach to *Frankenstein*, but decided against it to avoid the mediation such a classification would force. This alphabetical ordering leaves much work to the reader, which has considerable disadvantages. The reader prepared to do the work, though, will discover a remarkable bustle of competing ideas swirling about the text. I shall allude to only a few of the nine dozen essays that address this passage, but they should be enough to suggest what a variorum edition can do.

*Frankenstein*’s attempt to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter” reminds many critics of Romanticism itself. Anne Mellor, for example, notes that, “In his attempt to transform human beings into deities by eliminating mortality, Victor Frankenstein is himself participating in the mythopoetic vision that inspired the first generation of Romantic poets and thinkers” (70). Zachary Leader seems to agree, but insists that the novel is not mere commentary but critique: “*Frankenstein* is an implicit attack on the Romantic writer, a type figured in Frankenstein himself, the monster’s ‘author’” (171). Fred Botting even sees the Creature as a kind of text plagued by what he calls a “duplication of romance anxieties” (180).

Some critics draw parallels between the novel and Shelley’s biography. Ellen Moers examines the passage and asks, “Who can read without shuddering, and without remembering her myth of the birth of a nameless monster, Mary’s journal entry of March 19, 1815, which records the trauma of her loss, when she was seventeen, of her first baby, the little girl who did not live long enough to be given a name” (96). Others are reminded of Shelley’s own distant father, William Godwin, in whose “disin-
terested utopianism . . . children were eliminated entirely” (Sterrenburg 149). When we invoke Godwin, the personal readings shade easily into political ones. Pamela Clemit reads the passage as “a Burkean critique of revolutionary aspiration, and a subversive rejoinder to Godwin’s early rational views” (164). Jane Blumberg also finds it an anti-Godwinian novel, in which “Shelley denies the possibility of man’s self-creation, of the success and glory to be found in the remaking of the world and the defiance of God—the essentials of a radical ideal” (56).

The details provide rich fodder for critical debates. We might start with the “workshop of filthy creation” itself. For Paul Sherwin, the “solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments” is “a masterful image of the mind that is its own place, the self as, or trying to be, a free-standing unit” (895). Most critics, though, see it in physical and sexual terms. For Fred Randel, it is “a place of total isolation from any female presence,” “a spot reserved for untouchable maleness,” which “No woman ever enters” (530). The notion of an essentially masculine space, though, is rejected by Marc Rubenstein, who notes “a remarkable resemblance to a woman’s reproductive anatomy”—the workshop is a womb, an emblem of “the enfolding, circular narratives of the novel” as a whole (178).

These disputes about the sexual suggestiveness of the workshop are repeated in debates over Victor Frankenstein himself. For some, he is a grotesque exaggeration of masculinity: William Veefer calls him an “ejaculatory Prometheus” (90), and Devon Hodges “the bearer of the qualities of god-like power and knowledge that characterize the masculine position in culture,” who “stands erect above its prone body, a position that has been called the classical spectacle of male power and female powerlessness in a patriarchal society” (159). Mellor sees a metaphorical rape in this passage, and reads it as an allegory for masculine control of women everywhere: Frankenstein and “the patriarchal society he represents use the technologies of science and the laws of the polis to manipulate, control, and repress women” (122). Victor’s pursuit of nature is for George Haggerty likewise “not an act of love; it is rape,” a violent sex act to be contrasted with the poet’s seduction of Nature (51). This violence also marks Knoepflmacher’s description of his sexuality, which is continuous with his cruelty in other respects: “Frankenstein is phallic and aggressive, capable of torturing ‘the living animal to animate the lifeless clay.’” He
contrasts Victor’s vicious machismo with the “feminine qualities” in the Creature (106). Mellor, though, while agreeing that Frankenstein embodies violent masculinity, sees the masculine Victor’s feminine counterpart not in the Creature but in Nature itself: the rape is not personal cruelty but an allegory for “uninhibited scientific penetration and technological exploitation” (115).

Others find Frankenstein’s sexuality more complicated. Paul Youngquist, for instance, writes that “If Frankenstein’s workshop is a womb-room, then his creative undertaking might not be so exclusively masculine as it first appears” (347). In the same spirit, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find Victor “curiously female, that is, Eve-like. . . . He is consumed by . . . a longing which . . . recalls the criminal female curiosity that led Psyche to lose love by gazing upon its secret face, Eve to insist upon ‘intellectual food,’ and Prometheus’s sister-in-law Pandora to open the forbidden box of fleshly ills. . . . He discovers he is not Adam but Eve, not Satan but Sin, not male but female” (234).

Some of those who see a feminine Frankenstein consider his creation as a kind of perverse pregnancy. Alan Bewell contextualizes the novel in early nineteenth-century obstetric theory, and observes that Victor “ignores the antenatal regimen proffered by midwifery handbooks.” Frankenstein’s pallor and emaciation indicate that Victor “unconsciously identifies himself with a woman in confinement” (116). Susan Winnett agrees the passage is about pregnancy, but sees just the opposite in the details, calling Victor the negative image of a woman: “Frankenstein has got things backward when, unlike a pregnant woman, he becomes increasingly pale and emaciated as his ‘creation’ nears completion” (510).

Critic indebted to Freud and his successors have found many varieties of perverse sexuality in the passage. Veeeder finds Frankenstein’s evaporation a sign of impotence. Sherwin argues that “The imagery has an unmistakably anal and masturbatory cast. At once feces and phallus, the filth [in the workshop] is also the maternal presence he is assembling from phantasmal body parts and buried wishes” (885). These “buried wishes” are the subject of Katherine Hill-Miller’s analysis: she sees the penetration of nature’s recesses as an incestuous longing for the mother: “The generation of the ‘monster’ is an act tinged with sexuality—a sexuality that has its roots in Frankenstein’s desire to possess his mother” (62). She argues that “Frankenstein’s guilt over his incestuous longing leads him to
commit [his] instinctive and irrevocable act” (64).

Mellor also uses the feminist and Freudian traditions to go in another direction. She interprets Victor’s quest as an attempt “to steal or appropriate [the] womb, . . . to usurp the power of production as such,” but then adds, “Marx identified childbirth as the primary example of pure, or unalienated, labor. Victor Frankenstein’s enterprise can be viewed from a Marxist perspective as an attempt to exploit nature or labor in the service of a ruling class. . . . His project is . . . identical with that of bourgeois capitalism: to exploit nature’s resources for both commercial profit and political control” (112). Others develop the Marxist elements without the sexual elements: Chris Baldick, for instance, gives the novel a straightforward Marxist reading: “The result of his ‘secret toil’ . . . embod[ies] the socially irresponsible logic of private production itself. The monster is the spirit of private production brought to life” (51).

This list of critical perspectives and controversies regarding this single page of text could be extended tenfold, making the example from Hamlet look cursory by contrast. Notice, though, that the critical questions are not resolved: they are instead left hanging. This may be frustrating, but it is what a variorum edition does best.

VI

I conclude by making a case for the value of this sort of thing—for the value of surrounding a two-hundred-page novel with two hundred full-length scholarly essays, and nestling the whole thing in twenty thousand pages of context. It’s a glorious kind of overkill, but is it really worthwhile?

I think so. The value of the variorum edition to professional researchers is obvious enough, but it may be even more useful and instructive for students. This is not because the extensive commentary settles any questions, but because it leaves everything open. There is a valuable lesson in that openness. The conventional annotated edition for students devotes its footnotes to the questions that were answered long ago. The variorum edition, on the other hand, by its very nature devotes the most attention to the questions that remain unanswered. It allows, or even forces, students to see criticism not as a set of definitive pronouncements from authoritative experts, but as a complicated and often boisterous argument among
many partisans. They divide into schools. They argue with one another over points of fact and over methods. They try to make cases from the available evidence. In other words, they engage in just the sort of activities we try to teach our students.

One of the very few critics who have given serious attention to the variorum edition is Stanley Fish, who praises the form precisely for never reaching any final answers. He devotes two essays to the variorum commentary on Milton, and he finds its refusal to settle questions provides a more valuable kind of information than any simple footnote could. “What if that controversy,” he asks, “is itself regarded as evidence, not of an ambiguity that must be removed, but of an ambiguity that readers have always experienced?” (150). This is consistent with his long-term hobby-horse that “It is the structure of the reader’s experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description” (152). It is therefore a virtue that the variorum edition presents criticism not as a statement but as a debate. It sees novels and poems as battle-grounds. It conceives of texts and traditions as engaged in perpetual conversation, never at rest but always in motion.

My ostensible journey to unexplored regions took me from the twenty-first century back to the seventeenth. And although one flowering of scholarship is long since passed, I have hopes for a new golden age of variorum scholarship in the electronic age. The variorum edition came of age in a culture of print, but printed editions have their limitations. They are inevitably confronted with limitations of space, and critical comments are necessarily reduced to mere extracts. Notes usually cannot be repeated when they are relevant in more than one place. Electronic media, on the other hand, are especially well suited to this format. This is because the variorum edition turns text into hypertext, or, perhaps more accurately, realizes the hypertextual potential in any critical commentary. It only makes sense, then, to let hypertext turn text into a variorum edition: the medium and the message were made for each other. I hope, therefore, that we will be able to learn some seventeenth-century lessons as we develop the twenty-first-century media.

Notes

1. *Frankenstein* is cited from the Pennsylvania Electronic Edition. For consis-
tency of reference, though, I provide page numbers from what has long been
the standard edition by James Rieger.

2. The final list of publications to be included is still pending. The works of
criticism cited in this essay are provisional; some may be omitted and others
added.

3. The term *lexia* is often used in the scholarship of hypertext to refer to such a
unit. However accurate, it is unfamiliar to most common readers, and therefore
inappropriate for use in the edition itself.

4. For those familiar with Unix, “grep -c fl306 Articles/*.html” will show how many
times each essay cites volume one, chapter three, frame six. By running a shell
script nightly, we were able to produce a daily index to the references to the
criticism as new essays and links were added.

5. Some variorum editions focus strictly on textual variants: see, for instance,
Mays’s edition of Coleridge’s poems, of which the two-part second volume
offers a “variorum text.” Here I focus on those variorum editions with multiple
commentaries, whatever they may do with the text itself.

6. The commentary was *Annotations on Paradise Lost*, bound with most copies
of the sixth edition of *Paradise Lost* (London, 1695). The work of 321 pages is
attributed to “P.H., Philopoietes,” usually assumed to be Patrick Hume, about
whom little is known (see Walsh). The first concordance was Alexander Cruden,
*A Verbal Index to Milton’s Paradise Lost* (London, 1741).

7. The Johnson-Steevens edition is often called the “first variorum,” although
the difference between Johnson’s original edition and the later revision is only
one of scale. Johnson included substantial extracts from all the commentators
who came before him.

**Works Cited**

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