

"Getting a *Life*": a collaborative project  
in the digitisation of the  
Mary Shelley manuscript biography of William Godwin.

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Abstract:

In 2001 a research and editorial project at the Department of English and Fisher Library SETIS at the University of Sydney is approaching completion. This collaborative project, funded in 1992 and in 2000 by ARC Small Grants, is an electronic edition from the manuscripts in the Abinger Collection of Shelley-Godwin papers deposited at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, of Mary Shelley's 'Life of William Godwin', a biography of her late father written between 1836 and 1840, and never published. Only the nucleus of Abinger manuscripts labelled 'Mary Shelley', 'William Godwin', or 'Miscellaneous', is in Mary Shelley's holograph, or in that of her collaborator and stepmother, Mary Jane Godwin. This indicates (a) Shelley's biographical technique of *collage*, borrowed by her with due acknowledgments, from Hazlitt's *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft* (1816), which gives the man and author Holcroft "in his own words" and in those of his contemporaries, as far as possible; and (b) the vicissitudes of the Shelley-Godwin papers since Mary Shelley's death in 1851. Letters and documents in Godwin's and other hands, copied and quoted by Mary Shelley in her holograph script, or attached to it by pins, have at some past time been removed to other Bodleian folders, often with original signatures cut off, and what the material wanderings of sheets of paper began, prevailing Victorian notions of censorship compounded.

In successive visits to Oxford from 1992 to 1998 Dr Judith Barbour transcribed the Bodleian manuscripts and from 1992 to 1995, Dr Clara Tuite, then a research assistant to the project, transcribed microfilm reels in the Duke University, Durham N.C. collection of Abinger Shelley-Godwin MSS. Until 1995, ongoing negotiations with Oxford University Press envisaged publishing a hardback printed edition of the wordprocessor script but (as the characteristics of Mary Shelley's 'Life of Godwin' outlined in our first paragraph will readily confirm) print publication of such an informal and layered text proved "uncommercial". The establishment of Fisher Library's SETIS, with its expertise in research, digital coding and scholarly editing, offered to resolve these editorial and publication difficulties at one hit.

The wordprocessor script had presented the text page by manuscript page, indicating Bodleian shelf-number in the Abinger Shelley-Godwin MS archive, and distinguishing Mary Shelley's holograph, autograph, marginalia, and numbering systems typographically, while the endnotes contained a conventional set of reference information and bibliographical data, as for a printed edition. In 2001 the editorial team proceeded to the systematic coding of data, watermarks, paper types, handwritings, reel and shelf numbers, page numbers and numbered page sequences, cancellations, interpolations, marginalia, Bodleian rubrics and cataloguing.



## I Introduction

In 2001 a research and editorial project at the Department of English and Fisher Library SETIS at the University of Sydney is approaching completion. This collaborative project is an electronic edition from the manuscripts in the Abinger Collection of Shelley-Godwin papers deposited at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, of Mary Shelley's 'Life of William Godwin'.

Mary Shelley's 'Life of William Godwin' is an incomplete biography of a major author of the Enlightenment by his daughter, a major Romantic author. The working title 'Life of William Godwin' was affixed some time ago by the Bodleian to a sheaf of papers dated 1835 to 1839, the majority in the handwriting of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, forming an 'unfinished' and 'abortive' biographical memoir of her late father. In July 1836, Godwin's widow Mary Jane signed a contract with publisher Henry Colburn<sup>1</sup> for a two-volume 'Memoirs and Correspondence of the late William Godwin', to be written by Mary Shelley, who referred to it while it was in preparation as 'my Father's Life'. At this period, she was 'Mrs Shelley', widow of the poet Shelley, mother of the heir to a baronetcy and daughter of a famous but questionable marriage — that of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to William Godwin, author of *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*.

There is no evidence that Mary Shelley worked on the Life later than May 1840. The single volume which she then announced — though she might still decide to withdraw certain letters - is an 'Early Life' of Godwin, from entering Hoxton College as a student for the dissenting ministry in 1773 to publishing his *Memoirs and a Posthumous Works* of Mary Wollstonecraft in 1798. It stops short of his second marriage, Mary's childhood, and the entry into the Godwin family of son-in-law Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary Shelley herself casts only a faint shadow on her script, occasionally speaking of 'my father' and confirming that he adhered to this or that early opinion 'to the end of his life'. It is a decorous biography, glancing from recent personal intercourse to the textually accommodated distant past which is now history.

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<sup>1</sup> Bodleian, MS. Eng. lett. c. 461, fol. 153.

In this paper we discuss the editorial rationale for *Life of Godwin* (section 2), the features of the electronic edition (sections 3 & 4), and the implications of and future directions for the project (section 5).

## II Editorial Rationale for *Life of Godwin*

Only the nucleus of Abinger manuscripts labelled 'Mary Shelley', 'William Godwin', or 'Miscellaneous', is in Mary Shelley's holograph, or in that of her collaborator and stepmother, Mary Jane Godwin. This indicates (a) Shelley's biographical technique of *collage*, borrowed by her with due acknowledgments, from Hazlitt's *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft* (1816), which gives the man and author Holcroft "in his own words" and in those of his contemporaries, as far as possible; and (b) the vicissitudes of the Shelley-Godwin papers since Mary Shelley's death in 1851. Letters and documents in Godwin's and other hands, copied and quoted by Mary Shelley in her holograph script, or attached to it by pins, have at some past time been removed to other Bodleian folders, often with original signatures cut off, and what the material wanderings of sheets of paper began, prevailing Victorian notions of censorship compounded.

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This electronic edition of Mary Shelley's *Life of Godwin* affords some distinctive responses to current contexts in Shelley-Godwin criticism, biographical and historical scholarship, and cultural critique of English Romantic-era texts. Consider three representations of the *Life of Godwin* text:

- 1) a photograph of an 'original' Abinger manuscript page in Mary Shelley's holograph handwriting and numbered by her, on 1835 paper [transparency 1];
- 2) our word-processor presentation of a transcription of the same recto page as in Transparency 1 [transparency 2];<sup>2</sup>
- 3) the SGML-encoded version of the same page as in our word-processor edition Transparency 2 [transparency 3; or screen representation].

This series of three text-images is technically a linear progression, but there are both gains and losses of legibility and interpretative value when comparing a photographic replica; a printed transcription; and an electronic coded version.

The MS photographed in transparency 1) was published in 1999 to accompany an article by Professor Syndy Conger. Conger's article is so far the only publication giving a detailed account of the physical condition and literary

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<sup>2</sup> c.606/1: 53), [53v].

contents of the Abinger manuscripts of *Life of Godwin* (for other published discussions by William St Clair (1989) Graham Allen (1997) and Pamela Clemit (1999), see *Select Bibliography* attached). Conger enjoyed one advantage over our project, as she evidently had permission from the Bodleian Library to obtain and publish up-to-date photographic images. Her article offers a close scrutiny of “marks on paper” — Mary Shelley's handwritten script. Granted Conger's priority, there remain two points at which Conger stops short and our electronic edition carries the work forward (thus answering the question of why an electronic edition has been attempted; see Lavagnino 1995).

### III Electronic Edition

These two points which our edition addresses relate to, firstly, ‘Shelley's biographical technique of collage’; and, secondly, ‘the vicissitudes of the Shelley-Godwin papers since 1851’. I shall briefly elaborate on these two points:

#### *Shelley's biographical technique of collage*

During the four years 1836-1840 of her desultory composition and collation of materials, one of the constant reference points acknowledged by Mary Shelley was William Hazlitt's 2-volume *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft*, and we have followed her lead by familiarising ourselves with Hazlitt-Holcroft's ‘collage’ ‘hybrid’ text, and the signal importance to its unfolding, of Holcroft's manuscript Diary, letters to and from him, and the one-volume memoir of his early life he dictated on his deathbed to his favourite daughter Fanny. Incidentally, Hazlitt's publication was considerably delayed (till seven years after Holcroft's death), by among other factors, William Godwin's insistence on vetting and refusing permission for publication of materials about himself and Mary Wollstonecraft. One important class of documents that brings our project into the orbit of Hazlitt-Holcroft, are the originals of letters addressed to Godwin, with or without their postmarks, and drafts and/or letterpress copies of letters from Godwin to numerous correspondents, with or without his signature, that still bear the rusty pinmarks where Mary Shelley or her co-editor Mary Jane Godwin attached them to the relevant section of Mary Shelley's commentary.

By contrast, Conger bases her article on one Bodleian Deposit (c606) shelved in five folders (c.606/1-5), entirely in Mary Shelley's holograph, and labelled by the Bodleian archivists ‘Mary Shelley, Life of Godwin’. This deceptively neat ‘text corpus’ simply will not support the inferences Conger draws from it as to Mary Shelley's biographical aims, methods, and conclusions. Within these material limits Conger's discussion of Mary Shelley as biographer is perceptive and fruitful; but she tactically “forgets” that the Bodleian folders are arbitrarily assembled receptacles of paper, and do not constitute ‘a text’, lacking the practical possibility of putting marks on the Abinger papers to prevent them from straying off and perhaps turning up elsewhere, as they have done (strayed) and not done (turned up again).

Conger's discussion uses the standard terms of textual criticism to pursue inferences and draw conclusions. She imposes sequence beyond the simple continuities of follow-on page numbers and bottom-line-of-page breaks in a sentence. ‘Her [Shelley's] first mention of their relationship occurs early in the first set of fragments ... in annotating some of her father's journal entries for the year 1791’ (Conger 1999: 316). ‘Shelley returns to the subject suddenly

when, in the fourth set of fragments, the journal she is annotating brings her to the year of her parents' marriage ... 1797' ( Conger 1999: 316). 'First set' and 'fourth set' are folders of loose leaves, numbered 1 and 4 at some stage by the Bodleian librarians , no doubt in response to just such clues as the dates 1791 and 1797 picked up by Conger. But the term 'set' is not adequately grounded in the term 'fragments', and 'Shelley returns to the subject suddenly' is not grounded at all.

Proceeding as if dealing with a legible text (however mediated by *literary* qualities like reticence, provisionality, ambivalence), Conger can assert for example that Mary Shelley does not mention the death of Mary Wollstonecraft. Conger writes: '[T]he death of the mother is not narrated by the daughter (the story is told at length in Godwin's memoirs of [Mary Wollstonecraft], but they receive no mention here' (Conger 1999: 318).

This indicates only that Conger has not opened the folder Dep. c.532/8, consisting of Mary Shelley and Mary Jane Godwin holograph, on 1839 watermark paper, in which Godwin's account of Mary Wollstonecraft's death in the 1798 *Memoirs* is the topic. The point at issue is not *literal* accuracy. Conger says quite correctly that 'they [1798 *Memoirs* on/ and death of Wollstonecraft] 'receive no mention here', here being the Dep. c.606 manila folders open before her. But the *literary* inferences she then proceeds to draw from these data are misleading--and her judgments of the material are *ultra vires*, as the lawyers say.

#### *The vicissitudes of the Shelley-Godwin papers since 1851*

Our edition consists of transcriptions of manuscripts and microfilm reels in 31 Bodleian folders<sup>3</sup> of Abinger Deposits. As well as the documents entirely in Mary Shelley's holograph, as in the MS page reproduced in Conger 1999 (Transparency 1), we include numerous documents in other hands, with or without Mary Shelley's marginal annotations, page numbers, sub-headings, and occasional editorial emendations; in seven handwritings<sup>4</sup>; written on papers watermarked with dates between 1788 and 1839 (and a myriad of undated sheets).

Our retrieval of so many documents, scattered piecemeal among so many folders in so many different hands has of course compounded our task in presenting a plethora of imperfect scripts. Many documents have been 'laid aside' (St Clair 1989: 490), removed, destroyed, blotted and defaced beyond the power of the reading eye. Sometimes this was done by Mary Shelley herself while she was composing and compiling, or after her collaborator and stepmother Mary Jane Godwin died, or after her son Percy Florence inherited his estate and title.

We do not claim to have established a canon of authorial or authorised script, contenting ourselves with typographically (font size 12) distinguishing Mary Shelley's and Mary Jane Godwin's handwritings from other handwritings, and piecing together runs and sequences of script without concealing the joins.

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<sup>3</sup> [31 Bodleian folders\* Deposits b.210/6, b.214/8, b.227/2 (a-d), b.227/8, c.516, c.532/2, c.532/8, c.606 (1-5), c.607(1-7). Some of these deposit numbers contain more than one folder. As well, material transcribed and copied from 10 Duke University, Durham NC, microfilm reels.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Shelley [MWS]; Mary Jane Godwin [MJG] [12 pt]. William Godwin [Godwin]; Thomas Wedgwood [TW]; James Marshall; Tom Abthorpe Cooper; Thomas Holcroft . [10 pt]]

We have also employ the device of hyperlinks to allows associated /relevant documents to be viewed on screen without attaching an *imprimatur* to Mary Shelley's authorial signature.

More importantly, we have attempted to think through bibliographical assumptions regarding inclusion, exclusion, identification of hands at work, discrimination of early and late drafts, copies, cancelled passages and emendations, to allow our next reader-viewer access to the data for deciding to place documents other than where and as what we have placed them. In this way, what the Bodleian librarians could not do as curators of the original papers, marking up relevant information and identifications on the originals, we are enabled to do electronically, letting the screened page 'speak for itself' as far as that can be.

#### **IV Technical Features of *Life of Godwin***

There has been a number of high-quality, innovative electronic editions of Romantic-era texts. The Blake Archive is perhaps the most ambitious and impressive of these (Eaves 1997; Blake Archive). There are a number of other projects more comparable with our own in terms of objectives and resources available, each dealing with specific textual and editorial concerns. Electronic editing of Romantic-era texts was the subject of a special panel of the 1996 conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (Graver 1996).

We considered these electronic editions in the early stages of determining our own approach. For instance, part of the web-based Romantic Circles project (Jones 1996) is the Electronic Editions collection, whichh seeks to offer a lasting, secure, and scholarly rigorous framework for Romantic-era texts to be edited and placed on-line: 'Electronic Editions is a searchable archive of carefully-chosen texts based on the highest scholarly standards' (*Romantic Circles Electronic Editions*). It provides something of a consistent approach and 'house'-style, which allows a number of loosely-linked researchers and editors to place their work on-line, and to gather these texts together as something of a collection. The texts are thus accessible through Romantic Circles as the 'portal', and signal certain shared reading conventions to the more or less initiated reader of electronic texts.

The contributor's guidelines for *Romantic Circles Electronic Editions* explains that: 'We are committed to two parallel objectives for the archive: using the Web in its current incarnation as a distribution medium that provides students, scholars, and other readers with carefully edited and well-crafted hypertexts of Romantic period literature, and also planning for a future in which Romantic Circles electronic texts will have sustainable, long-term archival value.' *Romantic Circles* has recently formalized a relationship with the University of Virginia Library's Electronic Text Center, which will assume responsibility for archiving all Romantic Circles Electronic Editions in TEI-conformant SGML as part of its Modern English Collection. ('Contributors' Guidelines', *Romantic Circles Electronic Editions*). Thus it appears that *Romantic Circles Electronic Editions* is in transition between a HTML-based approach to electronic encoding, with issues of presentation and hypertext linking paramount, to a TEI-conformant SGML approach in which matters of long-term archiving, classification and searchability of text are emphasised.

In the case our edition, we decided to code the edition in SGML, in accordance with the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) guidelines. For presentation purposes, the SGML-text is then converted 'on the fly' to HTML. The tag set used thus far has been TEI Lite. There were a number of reasons why the editorial team decided upon this approach.

The use of SGML was important in order to use a more general markup language than HTML to make the coding as 'future-proof' as possible, in order to accommodate later developments (Sperberg-McQueen 1994). The editorial team wished to adopt the TEI guidelines in order to provide a basis for more extensive coding of the text in later redactions. One possible extension of coding is in relation to the coding of 'hands', in order to be able to collate and search text in the hands of particular authors, especially Mary Shelley or William Godwin.

The edition comprises six chapters: One of the reasons why an electronic edition was chosen was also for the electronic medium's ability to encompass later additions of associated documents, either as part of the six chapter divisions, or, alternatively, as hypertext links.

Interestingly, as the project developed, it was realised that the edition itself as developed by Barbour, Tuite and Harris, was itself highly innovative. The editors have chosen an innovative mode of organising the documents, based on their archival, textual and interpretive research. In the first instance, we have chosen to present this in electronic form with, in many ways, a minimum of mark-up and transformation using different features of the online environment. It may well be the case that the unusual nature of this edition could quite interesting questions for the use of TEI-SGML, adding to the body of appropriations and challenges posed by other humanities' textual endeavours (see: Barnard, Hayter, Karababa, Logan, and McFadden 1998; Barnard, Fraser, and Logan 1998; McGann 1998 & 2000; Renear *et al* 1993).

## **V Getting a Life: Future Directions**

The editorial team has now finished the first coding of the entire edition. We will proceed to proof the edition, add further limited codes as required, and address any further technical issues. One of these issues arising from the use of SGML which we will address in a limited way only is what Andrew W. Stauffer in a discussion of the methods of the Rossetti Archives identifies as the 'competing claims of formal structures and typographic rendering' (Stauffer 1998).

The edition will be launched in early December 2001. We hope that this edition will make a contribution to Shelley-Godwin-Wollstonecraft scholarship, and also to the evolving practices of electronic scholarly editing.

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