THE AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH LIBRARY

General Editors' Preface

It is a regular undertaking of the world's university presses to produce authoritative texts of the canonized authors and to redo that task as often as it may be justified. Justifications come with the discovery of new texts, with the evolution of higher standards of textual criticism, with the canonization of new writers. A new kind of justification has been provided with the development of the technology for electronic textual encoding. Already scholarly electronic-editions of Shakespeare and Chaucer are appearing, and the canon of English literature is being lined-up for the new huge task. It is certain that the end of the twenty-first century will see the complete electronic canonization of the body of English literature along with the whole body of world literature, exactly as the twentieth century saw a completion of the job begun in the nineteenth century of providing scholarly texts of the works considered then to constitute literature.

But what was done in the nineteenth century for the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare was not done for African American literature. By the end of the nineteenth century no presses had produced scholarly editions of the works of Phillis Wheatley or of William Wells Brown . That is not surprising, but it is surprising that at the end of the twentieth century, the situation had not materially changed. African American writers were not being edited as Charles Dickens was by the Clarendon Press, Ralph Waldo Emerson by Harvard University Press or Nathaniel Hawthorne by the Ohio State University Center for Textual Studies. These are considered exemplary editions.

The African American classical texts have not been subjected to the textual editorial standards established for American texts by American scholarship of the 1950s and 60s, standards represented at their most demanding by the work of Fredson Bowers, Virginia's guardian of scholarly editing. Such editions prepare a copy-text which takes account of every rendition of a title from the first manuscript versions through all proofs and printed editions which have any degree of oversight from the author. Also included are posthumously discovered or published versions if these can make any claim to input from the author. Such editions are based upon scrupulous collation and comparison of every variant between every version. Every omitted, replaced or inserted comma is noted. That noting is usually done by including in the scholarly apparatus of the edition a "List of Textual Variants." Sometimes it is done by including every variant on the printed page coded by slashes, brackets, pipes and symbols to indicated the status of the textual variant. The scholarly apparatus is regularly more extensive than the text being edited.

Anthologies, encyclopedias, bibliographies, biographical-dictionaries, literary companions and guides of African Americana are only now being produced to the standards and comprehensiveness which have been available for close to a century for the study of English Literature and for more than fifty years for the study of American literature. So it will be a great undertaking to jump the letterpress stage and produce in

electronic form to the highest scholarly standard the works of Wheatley, Brown, and Douglass. They should not have to wait in line until Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer have been served, not forgetting that Shakespeare and company have already been very well served several times over.

It is an interesting though not very paradoxical point that the new publishing technology of the electronic text and the internet is producing some old-fashioned responses to old-fashioned questions. The terms "canon" and "canonization" have been used to speak of what has been done for Biblical and classical texts. The setting up of The African American Research Library in the way that is planned will strongly reinforce the canonical position of those African American writers already selected to appear in the encyclopedias, the bio-dictionaries, and the anthologies. In the 2000s, can a critical and textual venture be taken seriously which is using the language of the 1950s? Should not a venture as new as The African American Research Library has to be in terms of its technology also be taking the opportunity to confront the old standard of the canon?

The fact of the matter is that the twenty-first-century electronic editors of The African American Research Library are not in a much different position from that of eighteenth-century letterpress editors who set out to provide their publics with Libraries of the English Poets or the Scottish Poets or the French Poets. The African American Research Library is not addressing the publication of a single author but of a whole series of authors. Like the editors of African American anthologies, the editors of The African American Research Library have had to start with a provisional list of authors and texts to be electronically encoded. Whether or not The African American Research Library becomes a series identical to that provisional list, the final published list will look like a canon. It is difficult to see any way round that, and it might be true even had the editors chosen an arbitrary list of authors and titles from the total available list of African American authors and titles. What might "arbitrary" mean? It is a word as implicit with problems as "canonical." The list that has been created comprises titles with which it seems obvious to start such a venture, titles with which African Americanists are all familiar, titles which scholars say they would expect to see in the series, titles for which there are competent editors identifiable, titles to which research directors and students are willing to devote time and energy. There has been no dispute over this title list. More significantly, there has been no debating what it is that constitutes an African American text. Should there have been? Should there be? There is clearly a working definition: any title which has as one of its authors an American with any degree of African descent.

As the general editors of The African American Research Library, we are grateful to be supported and helped by distinguished editorial and consultative committees. Many of those supporting us in the work of The African American Research Library are themselves engaged in similar ventures, and we acknowledge their generosity in helping us do what they are doing. This spirit of co-operation identifies the mission of The African American Research Library. It aims before all to provide

scholars with access to scholarly materials, and whether that is through us or through others, that mission is accomplished wherever in the world scholars find themselves reading good quality materials on the net. To establish such authoritative texts is a truly great accomplishment, and to be doing so in our field at this point in history is to be inaugurating the twenty-first century with a full and proper recognition of the contribution of the African American to the culture of America and the World.

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AARL Mission Statement

The first aim of the African American Research Library (AARL) is to publish electronic editions of African American titles which provide accurate and full texts of all extant life-time versions of a work and, when justified, posthumous ones. The AARL edition will reproduce these original versions with at least 99.995% accuracy so that an AARL edition will be an edition of record suitable for research purposes. The African American Research Library will focus on works which, altering from one version to another, will gain most benefit from AARL's form of on-line presentation. Original page and line breaks will be preserved as well as title pages, imprints, prelims, end papers, and covers where these are extant. The AARL edition will provide a historical collation which both lists and tracks variants between versions.

The second aim of the African American Research Library is to provide line-by-line explanatory annotation to enable readers to note and understand references, allusions and obscurities in a work. Also to this end, the AARL edition will provide a general introductory commentary on the work and its author, chronologies, textual introductions to versions, source identifications, bibliographies, and support materials. An AARL edition will be fully searchable.

AARL editions are called "scholarly" following MLA usage in which "scholarly" describes editions which focus on textual accuracy and textual variation and so differ from what are popularly called "critical" editions. The African American Research Library's development of software for electronic scholarly editing will make the AARL edition a bibliographical teaching and researching instrument with applications across the whole field of literature.

In order to achieve its aims while maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and research, the African American Research Library has appointed General Editors who are responsible to an Editorial Committee and who are advised by a Consultative Committee. The Library is an enterprise sponsored by and responsible to the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR).