What is a ballad?

Generally, ballads are cheap, widely distributed songs that contain social lessons intended for an early modern audience. During my time at EBBA, the Houghton collection I focused on contained popular messages that advised how to behave as a King, as parents, as courting lovers, and as a married woman or man. Many of the ballads in the collection employ serious tones and end tragically in order to enforce their messages onto the audience.

Repetition

A consistent literary strategy throughout the ballads is the use of repetition that punctuates a segment. The repeated phrases seem to drive the theme into the audience’s heads and resemble an old wives’ tale that suggests a certain way of living.

Sensationalism

Despite their moralistic focus, the ballads are often filled with sexual innuendo and defamatory depictions of potentially real political figures of the time period. A few ballads even venture farther to describe graphic, sensationalist content. The ballad I chose to focus on (analyzed in the right column) is an example of one.