The English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) is a project at the University of California at Santa Barbara to transcribe and digitize English broadside ballads from the 17th century. The ballads are gathered from all over the world and I was involved in transcribing ballads from the Houghton Library’s collection. Not only are the ballad facsimiles available for viewing and the transcriptions as well, but most ballads are recorded and available on the EBBA site.

As a Research Assistant for EBBA I have been exposed to a wide variety of ballads and whilst transcribing ballads I came across two prints of “The Catholick Ballad: OR AN INVITATION TO POPERY” to the tune of 88 (also known as Jog On) from the Houghton collection. I was intrigued by the printing of the tune notation on only one of the ballads and wondered if the tune was the correct tune.

After speaking with the singing team manager at EBBA, Eric Bell, I learned that a majority of the tunes printed on ballads (a good amount not by music printers) were only for decoration. The tune notation printed on the ballad I transcribed (EBBA 34993) is not a usable tune – it is only decoration. There are 5 other prints of this ballad with a tune notation, one being from Roxburghe collection (this tune also being decoration) and another from the Euing collection (whilst this tune does make sense musically it does not fit with the lyrics).

The Ballad’s tune is what separates the ballad from any other kind of literature in the early modern period and allowed them to be disseminated to such a wide audience.

Working with EBBA showed me the many aspects of the broadside ballad and how even the tune notation can give insight into the history and popularity of each ballad.