

The 17th Century Meets the Modern Age

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An insightful look into how the individual negotiates between two different methods of transcription and ultimately chooses how to proceed.



In one instance of my work, a ballad had a torn corner, obscuring the last two lines of an entire stanza. The prescribed solution was to “fix” the corner using Photoshop, so that the entire stanza could be displayed on the page. This was a situation in which the legibility of the text was prioritized over its authenticity, a rule which followed in most of the replacements of the original ballad texts. The transcriptions themselves had a greater presence of authenticity, and generally contained letter-for-letter spellings of the original ballads, regardless of how outdated the original words would appear to a modern reader. The significance of authenticity in the transcribing process creates an insightful understanding of ballad transcription, where the “feeling” of the works merits relatively equal value to the text of the work itself.

My involvement with EBBA has introduced me to the process of preserving and archiving old documents, and the difficulties in how to best present those documents to a modern audience. There were many situations in which I would have to pause and consider whether it would be better to make the text look more authentic or legible, in addition to instances where I would need to confirm that the spelling in the transcription was intended, due to the occasionally obscure way that certain words have changed. I hope to be able to apply this level of thought and consideration into my future endeavors, both in my present studies and in the future when I enter the working world.

The English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) aims to preserve 17th century English ballads in an online archive for research purposes. My work involved updating the dated type of the ballads with modern type generated from a word processor, in order to make the often difficult to read ballads more legible. During this process, the issue of authenticity versus accessibility often came up, where in certain situations it had to be asked if it was more important to stay true to the original “style” of the text, at the cost of making the updated text more difficult to read. I aim to discuss this issue further.

