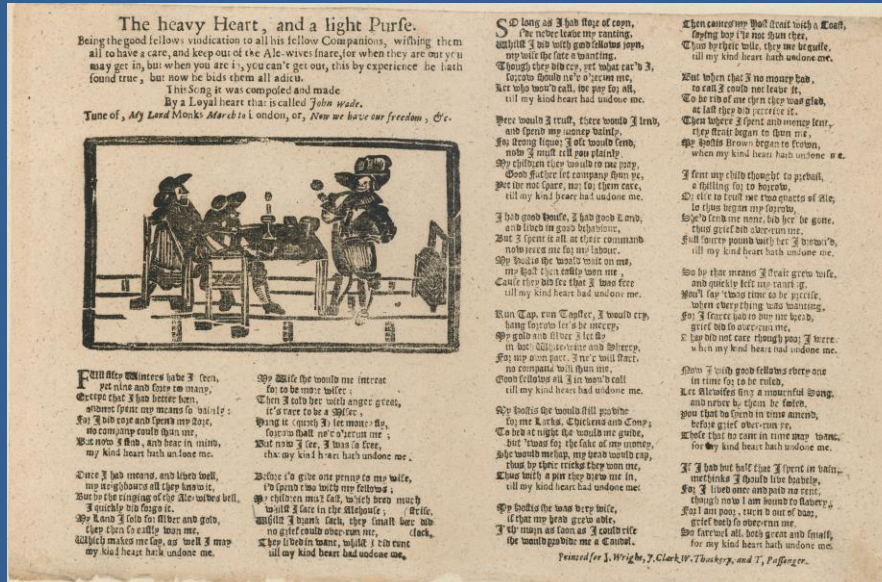


“The Ale-Wives’ Snare”: Transcribing Husbands’ Laments

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Abstract

The English Broadside Ballad Archive is a project of the Early Modern Center within the University of California at Santa Barbara's English Department. EBBA's aim is to transcribe and digitize English broadside ballads dating from the early modern period. In order to help fulfill this goal while simultaneously promoting undergraduate research, undergraduate students assist in transcribing these ballads as interns and research assistants. This quarter, I worked as a RA involved in cataloging the Houghton collection. Through my work examining and transcribing ballads, I was able to gain an understanding of the cultural mindset of the period the ballads were originally printed in through noting common themes and subject matter for the ballads.

Discussion

One common theme of the ballads I was responsible for transcribing was that of regret and repentance. In one particularly widespread ballad form, the narrator assumed the persona of a destitute man, warning the ballad's audience against the lure of ale-houses. In ballads of this variety, the narrator relates a sordid tale of his past doings, describing how, despite the entreaties of his wife and children, he would visit the alehouses on a daily (or nightly) basis, spending all of his money on rounds of alcohol for him and his friends. Invariably, the man inevitably goes bankrupt, at which point he discovers that those who welcomed him warmly when he had money to spend have no real concern for his well-being. The man's failed duty to his family, and the treachery and false friendship of the ale-wives, is always emphasized. Such ballads tend to end on a somber note, with the narrator ominously advising his audience not to follow in his footsteps, lest they too end up impoverished, cold, and hungry.