

A Closer Look At The Role The Sea Played Through E.B.B.'s

E.B.B. = English Broadside Ballad

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Introduction:

Despite being in the middle of a global pandemic, the UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) has continued working hard to digitize 16th and 17th-century ballads to make these incredible glimpses of history accessible to all. This spring, I have been fortunate enough to have worked with EBBA as a remote research assistant once again. Due to the extreme circumstances the world has found itself in this year, EBBA has created remote research positions dedicated to MEI editing, to incorporate the musical components of the ballads onto the website, as well as XBallading, performing TEI-XML encoding for the ballad transcriptions.

Because of various technical issues on my part, my work for EBBA this quarter has been centered upon the process of MEI editing, thus allowing me to engage with the ballads on a deeper level. While editing the MEI files this quarter I noticed a general fixation upon the themes of love, of the romantic and national persuasions, yet there were also a few ballads that spoke of the sea. These particular ballads are interesting as they offer insight into the role that the sea and maritime culture has played in influencing the English culture that I feel is worth exploring, if only briefly.

Discussion:

Throughout the editing process, I stumbled upon a ballad that warned all listeners about the ravages of the sea. The lyrics sing, “Country men of England, who live at home with ease: And little thinke what dangers, Are incident o’ the Seas: Give eare unto the Saylor who unto you will shew: His case...” (P1.420-421ejb). All dramatics aside, these lyrics suggest that while the specifics and dangers of maritime endeavors may not have been well-known among the general English population, the English were conducting obviously serious maritime business beyond the scope of fishing. The sailor’s request of an audience to listen to his stories reflects regular maritime engagement and by extension the establishment of a distinctly English manifestation of maritime culture. While the exact date of this ballad’s creation remains unknown, it is known that England was in the midst of expanding its maritime shipping efforts during the 17th century. As a result of this period of maritime growth and expansion, England would become the leading maritime power of the 18th century.

This may not seem very important, however, English presence in the sea had a big impact as their maritime exploits, like many other Western European countries, did not just deal with merchant trading but in colonization as well. So, to witness the increase of English maritime culture permeating into the more mainstreamed English culture practiced in-country is valuable as it sharpens the complex historical image we have of 17th English culture outside of the upper classes. Every person has a part in history, but not everyone is included in the story simply because they were not deemed important enough to include. This is why it is important that we can see a ballad with the narrator singing, “... seest thou not my true lover then com thorough New Castle Towne.” (P1.408ejb) because they do not want their lover to return to New Castle, quite possibly referring to New Castle upon Tyne that was home to a burgeoning export port,

since it would mean an indefinite return to the sea. Finding pieces of history that reflect the lives and feelings of those too often left out of the multi-generational human story we are all a part of can affect us in unfathomably microcosmic ways.

Encounters with things bigger than us, such as the sea, tend to do that to people, and that is why I felt the need to delve into the ways in which the subject of the sea resonated through the 17th century English broadside ballad medium.