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Focusing on the Details: What Each Element in an English Broadside Ballads Reveals

Introduction:

This past Spring 2022 Quarter, I was given the opportunity to contribute to the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) by working on Ballad Transcriptions. Transcribing ballads, although difficult at times, was not only fun and rewarding, in the sense that successfully transcribing a ballad felt like completing a puzzle (especially if the font used was black letter), but also a unique way to learn about print history and the culture during the time in a hands-on manner. For example, looking at a ballad's title, tune, content, and printer imprint can all reveal critical information, such as relevant topics of interest that people were concerned about during the Early Modern Era. Furthermore, when looking at the printer imprint and paying attention to the details that (re)appear on different ballads, we can take note how certain individuals and/or dates might be influencing what is being printed and circulated, given the historical, political, and cultural context during the specific year or by considering for whom the ballads are being printed. In my personal experience, most of the ballads I transcribed were printed in the year 1681, and quite a few of them covered similar religious themes, prompting me to think about the possible significance of the year 1681. Was there a particular religious movement/event during the time which would've fueled one to write ballads surrounding such a theme, or is the date actually irrelevant? Similarly, to what extent should we look into each particular detail of a ballad, and how much weight should we give to the "little details"?

Discussion:

I truly enjoyed and value my experience as a research assistant, as the process forces you to take a step back and take notice of all the "small" details and consider what each element might be suggesting. The format of the ballad, the stanza structure, the printer imprint, the title, repeated words, and references to specific individuals or places all convey significance

that one can easily overlook. As I mainly did ballad transcription work, I would take notice of specific words, especially ones that were repeated, unusual, or unfamiliar in the ballads. After the transcription process, I would then read my completed transcriptions and have a much better understanding and grasp of its content, as my special attention to the type of diction used in the ballad helped shape my expectations for the ballad. Furthermore, as I looked up words that were unfamiliar, I was able to comprehend the ballad more effectively, as I didn't merely skim past foreign or archaic words. The ballad, "The Protestant Dissenters Letany; Occasioned by a late Pamphlet falsly call'd, The Loyal Letany," is one specific ballad that especially stuck out to me due to its use of certain words, such as "Jesuit," "martyr," "Inquisition," and "saints." I was intrigued and surprised by the heavy Catholic-related terminology being used. The ballad also adopted a litany structure, including the Latin phrase "Libera Nos, Domine" (which translates to "Deliver Us, Lord") at the end of each stanza. Many Catholic prayers written in a litany structure may include invocations asking God to "deliver" one from certain evils, vices, harms, and sufferings, yet this specific ballad was calling out to be "delivered" by an array of Catholic rituals and institutional elements, clearly using the prayerful litany form to mock the Catholic faith in a twofold manner. This ballad piqued my curiosity to learn more about the Protestant Dissenters and the religious tension that existed during the Early Modern Era between "Orthodox" religions, such as Catholicism, and Protestantism, serving as a perfect example to how taking notice of and considering certain details, even smaller ones, relating to both the form and content of a ballad can allow one to delve deeper into the history and culture of the time, and understand a ballad's context better. However, despite the benefits of carefully considering such specific details and elements of a ballad, looking into other details actually resulted in mixed takeaways. For example, on one hand, we know that there were specific printers and publishers who were well-known during the time and had their own affiliations, yet on the other hand, I ran into many print imprints which mentioned names of individuals whom I could not identify or find any information about. Who are these individuals and why isn't there more information available regarding them (especially when considering how printing wasn't done for everyone and required one to be wealthy enough to afford it)? This discrepancy reveals how print history and print culture is something which we still have a lot to learn about, and how the "little details" surrounding

ballads are our jumping points to delve into bigger picture ideas and topics. Going forward, the skills I cultivated working with EBBA have shaped me to remember and always consider how something which might seem straightforward or have little information surrounding it will indeed always have something to analyze. In fact, the lack of information or lack of complexity surrounding it might be the very thing to delve into and examine the implications of such simplicity and/or ignorance surrounding it.