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9 June 2022

Deciphering English Ballads

Introduction:

Before becoming a research assistant for the English Broadside Ballad Archive, I may have heard the words *transcribe* and *transcription* on few occasions, but I never thought those words would be the bulk of duties for this course. My tasks relied heavily on reading ballads from the seventeenth century and then formatting them into documents that can be read easier by modern readers. Indeed, it is critical to keep the integrity of this seventeenth century material by paying attention to grammar, punctuation, etc. Moreover, it must be understood that many of the words found in the ballads are no longer used in modern English. Therefore, knowing when to correct the spelling of a word is important. I noticed that Queen Mary and (her) death was mentioned several times and in almost all the ballads I transcribed. That led me to wonder what the fascination over Queen Mary (and possibly her death) entailed?

Discussion

Admittedly, I originally thought that transcribing English ballads would be easier, but I quickly discovered that transcription (at least in this course) is a little more involved. By easy I mean I thought the task would simply be typing what I saw on the ballad into a word document that could be easily searched on the EBBA website. However, realizing that if all one did is format a ballad so that today's readers could access easier, that would not necessarily mean the

reader would understand. Because the task would also be correcting misspelled or missing words, I felt it would be advantageous to thoroughly read each ballad before beginning transcription for a few reasons. One, and since I do have interest in material dating from the sixteenth (Shakespeare) and seventeenth century, I knew that some words made sense for that era but would not make sense in modern English. This gave me the opportunity to use the Oxford English Dictionary to define words to help me understand what the author meant by unfamiliar or archaic words. This also assisted in deciphering words that visually were hard to make out. Certain letters in “old English” look or are the same, such as “m” and “n,” or “s” and “f.” For example, *foon* would not have made sense (now or back then). However, *soon* would make sense. This would be an example of deciphering letters (“s” and “f”) so that the words make sense in the text.

Queen Mary was mentioned several times in most of the Ballads I transcribed. Yet, the authors of some of the ballads used dash symbols, hiding some of the letters in Queen Mary. The fact that dash symbols were used obviously brought “censorship” to mind. Why censor anything that people wouldn’t have any fascination with? I do not know much about Queen Mary (or her reign) but working to transcribe the ballads made me a bit curious on her life. Lastly, seeing that censorship made me think about the censorship of things in the twenty-first century and how that affects some peoples access to literature (and history for that matter).