



# This Rough Magic

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Bridging the gap between digital and material 'print' culture in early modern literary studies

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# Bridging the gap between digital and material 'print' culture in early modern literary studies

By Kristen Abbott Bennett

The parallel explosions of information technology at the turn of the seventeenth century and the twenty-first offer an ideal opportunity to revisit the impact early modern print technology had on its readers. By positing the Gutenberg revolution as analogous to that of the Internet, students can make meaningful connections to better understand both the conditions of literary production in early modern England, and those of today.<sup>[1]</sup> This essay discusses my experience working with undergraduates as we explored how we might bridge the gap between digital and material “print” cultures, and **built a public-access website** designed to help others navigate the same.

Although paperback editions of early modern works are indispensable in the classroom, these books conflate centuries of editorial metamorphoses. It is useful to remember Jeffrey Masten’s observation about the fate of so many early modern texts:

To attach a name to a book that did not bear one, to modernize, standardize, repunctuate, and emend in our own image the texts of another period, to elide or rewrite, often silently, the apparatus in which a text originally circulated – all of these acts relinquish and/or ignore important evidence of the culture we read. (*Textual Intercourse* 11)

The simplest way to help students understand the accrual of editorial decision-making in current editions of early modern texts is to work with electronic facsimiles available through databases and websites such as Early English Books Online (EEBO), The Folger Shakespeare Library, Project Gutenberg, or Internet Shakespeare Editions.<sup>[2]</sup>

These relatively new opportunities for widespread study of facsimile texts in the classroom raise many questions. For instance, what contrasts arise between a critical edition of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the facsimile of Richard Jones's publication on EEBO? Beyond pronounced difficulty in readability, is there a significant deviation between an EEBO text and its material counterpart in an archive? What information do we get from different kinds of media? My students and I tackled these queries and more in my Spring 2014 class at Stonehill College, "Subversion and Scandal in Early Modern Print Culture."

By studying digital facsimiles, my students quickly learned that Masten's comment about the way modern editors attach names to books that differ from earlier titles applies equally to early modern printers. These early title pages can be rich sources of information about the conditions, culture, and historical moment of their production. They are also well suited for careful study using document analysis techniques in an undergraduate classroom. Librarians and archivists have long analyzed documents by posing a somewhat standard set of questions to a given text in order to elicit socio-cultural and historical information.<sup>[3]</sup> "What is the title of the work?"

is one of the most common, if deceptively simple, questions on conventional document analysis forms.

We posed this query in the context of the EEBO facsimile of Jones's 1590 title page of *Tamburlaine*; it reads:

*Tamburlaine the Great. Who, from a Scythian Shepherde, by his rare and woonderfull Conquests, became a most puissant and migh-tye Monarques. And (for his tyranny, and terror in Warre) was tearmed, The Scourge of God. Deuided into Two Tragicall Dis-courses, as they were sundrie times shewed upon the stages in the Citie of London. By the right honorable the Lord Admyrall his Seruantes.<sup>[4]</sup>*

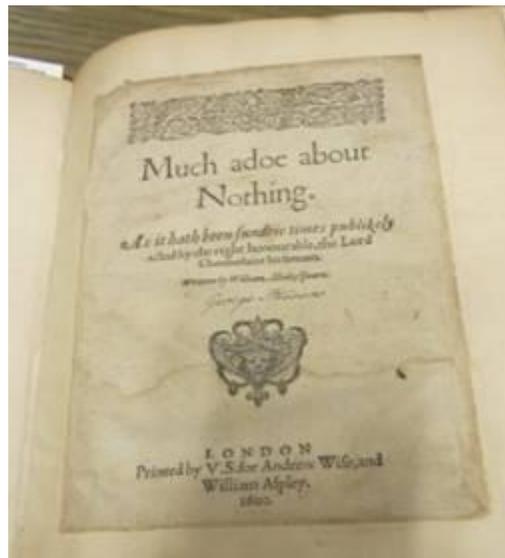
I stopped transcribing just before it continued to say “*Now first, and Newlie published*” because that last seems to be an advertisement, not a title. But following that logic, should I also cut “*as they were sundrie times shewed upon the stages in the Citie of London. By the right honorable the Lord Admyrall his Seruantes*”? Asking what constitutes a “title” and what is “advertisement” tacitly prioritizes the title and subjugates the publisher's attempt at salesmanship. Jones' treatment of *Tamburlaine* clearly posits title and advertisement as a “both/and” scenario. In the thriving book stalls surrounding St. Paul's Cathedral in Elizabethan London, apprentices might literally cry out these titles to advertise their products for sale.<sup>[5]</sup> Although it may strike some modern readers as odd that *Tamburlaine* mentions no author (in contrast to the 2003 Penguin edition of *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays* that makes no mention of *Tamburlaine* until the Table of Contents), the text reveals that commercial authority can be determined by

other factors such as where the play was performed and by which company, or by the printer's name recognition.<sup>[6]</sup>

Marlowe's absence on *Tamburlaine's* title page obviously complicates another standard question of document analysis: "Who is the author"? Jones admits in his epistle that he had published "in the authours absence (A1). This then-conventional acknowledgment provokes conversation surrounding of the workings of the Stationer's Company, Crown censorship, and the role of the Master of Revels. Because printers, not writers, were responsible for registering works with the Crown Stationers, authorship and textual ownership were not fixed concepts. In *Tamburlaine's* case, Jones took liberties editing the play, "purposely" excising "fond and friuolous Iestures" so it might appeal to the "learned censures" of his audience (see A1-A2).<sup>[7]</sup> Jones's editorial practices are exemplary of what scholars now recognize as the essentially collaborative nature of early modern textual production.<sup>[8]</sup> To our knowledge, Marlowe neither protested Jones's involvement, nor the revisions to his play. Jones may have hijacked *Tamburlaine* for his own profit, but his actions were perfectly legal. Close study of the title and epistle alone reveal a meaningful narrative of the complications surrounding literary and commercial authority at the turn of the seventeenth century.<sup>[9]</sup>

After working closely with digital facsimiles, my students designed a document analysis form to address specific questions raised by online texts.<sup>[10]</sup> Because this activity boosted their confidence conducting research and making well-reasoned deductions,

they were initially skeptical about the necessity of multiple trips (in the dead of winter) to a material archive, in this case the Boston Public Library Rare Books and MS Room.<sup>[11]</sup> Yet during our *in situ* discussions about early modern practices of bookmaking in the cultural context of the print house, they quickly realized that material texts can divulge far more about their social, literary, and historical cultures than their digital counterparts.<sup>[12]</sup> For example, all standard document analyses query form: ottavo? quarto? folio? bound book? After having had trouble retrieving this information through digital databases, my students' hands-on work with material texts revealed its importance. The Boston Public Library's 1600 quarto of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* was especially telling.



[13]

As the above photograph suggests, this pamphlet (more likely, *two* pamphlets) was cut page by page and rebound into a small bound book. The leaves are quarto sized

and pasted on either side of rag paper, defying easy categorization. Yet my students quickly realized that, as a quarto, the text would be cheap to print, to sell, and to distribute. From this observation, they deduced the popularity of the play at the time. Further, the fact that someone clearly spent time collating and pasting each page into a book suggested to the class that the play remained popular at a later date. The marginalia offers the possibility that George Steevens, a renowned eighteenth-century editor of Shakespeare's works, may have reconstructed the quarto. Steevens's signature roused a lively discussion about the eighteenth-century's penchant for "improving" and "restoring" early modern works in the context of Shakespearean editorial practices.

Steevens's marginalia on this quarto informed many of my students' emendations to their document analysis form when they customized it for studying material works.<sup>[14]</sup> Although they ultimately felt that material texts offer more valuable cultural information than digital facsimiles, they also recognized that the works' fragility will likely prohibit future students from studying them in person. Looking at, smelling, and touching these texts made an extraordinary impression on my class; they engaged with literary history in ways they hadn't dreamed of previously (<http://earlymoderneng304.wordpress.com/reflections-post-page/>).<sup>[15]</sup> Simultaneously, they recognized that digital archives will be increasingly necessary if we are to preserve the experience of working with primary sources for future generations.

The class “Early Modern English Resource Guide” features three “How to” sections detailing research protocols for working with digital archives, material archives, and for using WorldCat to take advantage of ordering books from libraries worldwide. Students customized standard document analysis forms to better suit the conditions of reception in the context of each medium. They also offered a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of each research avenue to assist future users. Prior to our class, my students had never worked with primary texts, they had not used any of the aforementioned resources, and neither had they practiced document analysis.<sup>[16]</sup> But these forays into the unknown paradoxically scaffolded the more conventional elements of our class, including close reading, critical analysis, and writing argumentative essays. Instead of simply reading and writing “about” early modern texts, my class’s visual, tactile, and even ritualistic experience of archival study online and in the library made them feel personally connected to the works under discussion. This sense of connection ultimately translated into their confidence asking questions and tracking down leads as they strove to understand not only the content and contexts of a work under discussion, but also the conditions of its production and reception.

My students identified themselves early in the semester as “literary detectives.” As their knowledge of what kinds of information they could find grew, their queries grew more complex. For instance: “Why does the binding on Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will* say 1610 and the title page says it was published in 1600”? I had no idea. This

question and others like it sparked productive collaborations as we worked together to develop and test hypotheses by figuring out what questions we needed to ask, where we needed to look, and what kind of corroboration would be required to make a persuasive claim. By no means is the website we created comprehensive. But we do hope that it will help students and teachers navigate multi-media archival resources and inspire them to build on our efforts.

### **Endnotes**

[1] One of the core texts on this syllabus was Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Eisenstein's book provides a comprehensive and accessible overview of the development of Gutenberg technology and early modern print culture.

[2] For more information about these resources, please see the "Early Modern English Resource Guide" my students developed online: <<http://earlymoderneng304.wordpress.com/>>.

[3] The Library of Congress's National Archives website offers many resources for studying primary texts. Our class started with the form at the following link and emended it over the course of the semester:  
<[http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written\\_document\\_analysis\\_worksheet.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf)>

[4] By necessity, my transcription corrupts the original by not faithfully duplicating the long s's, adopting our custom of italicizing titles, and using a single font to present the information.

[5] Thomas Nashe's description of the fate of Marlowe's poem "Hero and Leander" offers insight into this scene of salesmanship: "Twoo faithfull louers they were, as euerie apprentice in Paules churchyard will tell you for your loue, and sel you for your mony" (McKerrow, *Works* III.195).

[6] Gary Taylor's article, "Making Meaning Marketing Shakespeare 1623," focuses on the nuances of commercial authority in the context of, and sometimes in contrast to, literary authority.

[7] For an excellent discussion of Jones's attempt to elevate drama to the status of literature, see Kirk Melnikoff, "Jones's Pen and Marlowe's Socks."

[8] For important discussions of the role of collaboration in early modern literary production, see: Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare's Collaborators*; Diana Henderson, *Collaborations with the Past*; and Masten's *Textual Intercourse*.

[9] Early eighteenth-century copyright laws have since protected creative works, but modern legislative loopholes render strictures surrounding property distributed on the Internet impotent. To complement comparisons of early modern and Internet "book pirates," see: Lloyd Shepherd, "My parley with ebook pirates" (*Guardian Online* 16 March 2012); Nick Bilton, "Internet pirates will always win" (*New York Times Online* 4 August 2012).

[10] See the customized document analysis form for digital texts:  
<<http://earlymoderneng304.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/document-analysis-form-digital-archives.pdf>>

[11] For a short synopsis of the students' impressions of their trip to this archive, see Bennett, "Watching the Detectives: A Field Trip to the Boston Public Library Rare Book and MS Room" in *The Shakespeare Standard*  
<[http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/watching-detectives-field-trip-boston-public-library-rare-book-ms-room/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/watching-detectives-field-trip-boston-public-library-rare-book-ms-room/#disqus_thread)>.

[12] The class read Gabriel Egan's enormously helpful discussion about physical bookmaking in *The Struggle for Shakespeare's Text*. See Appendix 1 (231-236).

[13] I took this photograph with permission from the Rare Book and MS librarians at the Boston Public Library.

[14] See "How to create a document analysis form" and the customized form for Rare Books and MS: <<http://earlymoderneng304.wordpress.com/how-to-write-a-document-analysis/>>.

[15] See the students' reflection essays:  
<<http://earlymoderneng304.wordpress.com/reflections-post-page/>>.

[16] This class was also my first foray into document analysis. Many thanks to Dr. Elizabeth A. Chase (Head of Collections and User Engagement, Stonehill College) for giving me insight into the nuances of standard archival practices.

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