EEBO and Me

An Autobiographical Response to Michael Gavin, "How to Think About EEBO"

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Abstract

In this article, Peter C. Herman responds to Michael Gavin's history of EEBO by arguing that EEBO leads to greater historical specificity, to reading the books themselves, rather than dissolving the boundaries between texts and "the death of the document". Herman also suggests that we should pay greater attention to the corporate origins of EEBO-TCP.

MICHAEL GAVIN HAS WRITTEN AN EXCELLENT HISTORY OF HOW EEBO, and its successor, EEBO-TCP, came into existence, and what the future may hold.[1] With impressive detail and narrative scope, he gives us the background of the two short-title catalogues the entire system relies on (Pollard and Redgrave for the sixteenth century; Wing for the seventeenth), and how books were subsumed by microfilm, microfilm by pdfs, and now, pdfs by marked-up files allowing us to research the entire corpus.[2]

While I learned a great deal from Gavin's article, I admit that I can't go along with his sense that technological change has led to "The Death of the Document". In Gavin's telling, with each iteration, early modern texts shed more and more of their physical encumbrances:

> Catalogues took books off the shelves. Microfilm took pages out of books. Transcription and markup freed words from the page. Collection and standardization dissolved those words into data. Early print's realization as data opened a new horizon of study that we're still just beginning to survey.
>
> (2017, 102)

1. Gavin's "How to Think About EEBO" was published in *Textual Cultures* 11.1–2 (2017): 70–105. Although the date of the issue is 2017, it was not printed until 2019. All further references will be parenthetical.
2. See POLLARD and REDGRAVE 1926; see also WING 1945 [1994].

With more than a touch of techno-utopianism, Gavin proposes that with EEBO-TCP, we have finally reached the promised land where "everything [. . .] is connected to everything else" (2017, 101).

But that is not how I experienced these changes. I started graduate school in 1983, and so my career has covered the shift from microfilm to EEBO to EEBO-TCP. (As a side note, I also remember when the MLA Bibliography first came out on compact disc, and how we all crowded around a single computer station in Butler Library's reference section, oohing and ahhing as our searches yielded results. No more flipping through large blue and grey volumes!) Gavin sees these developments as a teleological movement toward the bliss of pure textuality, where the "boundaries" separating books (2017, 101) are dissolved, and "each item in the collection exists in relation to every other and is therefore available for re-formulation as data" (2017, 101). But where Gavin sees progress toward greater and greater abstraction, in my experience, the movement from print to catalogue to microfilm to EEBO and now to EEBO-TCP has allowed for greater and greater concreteness and historical specificity. So much so that professional expectations have changed, and the Renaissance Society of America now offers access to EEBO as a member benefit.

When I first started researching my dissertation on Renaissance attacks on poetry, I needed to go beyond the one or two that were available in contemporary editions to get a sense of just how wide and deep the hostility toward poetry had spread. I needed, in other words, to read as many comments about poetry as I could that were printed in the early modern period. My dissertation advisor, Anne Lake Prescott, gave me a long list of references, and told me to look them up. The list consisted of a name, a title, and an STC number. So, off I went to Butler Library's microfilm room, where a copy of Pollard and Redgrave resided with the microfilm numbers manually inserted, exactly like the example Gavin reproduces from Wing (1945 [1994], 75). Then, I had to fill out a slip, give it to the attendant, who trudged into a backroom where the microfilms were stored, and who returned bearing the relevant boxes. Sometimes this happened quickly, sometimes not. Next, I threaded the microfilm into the reader (which often resisted me) and started scrolling until I found what I was looking for.

On the one hand, this experience was about as far from the actual texts as one could imagine. But it didn't matter. As a poor graduate student, I could not afford to spend weeks, if not months, at a library where I could read all these texts. I was in New York City, not Oxford or Cambridge. While Columbia had an excellent library, it was not the Folger, let alone the British Library. And yet, using microfilms, I could read as many early

books as I needed. Consequently, I could demonstrate that an animus toward poetry was much more widespread than previously understood, and I could back up my argument with quotes from primary sources, the gold standard for evidence when making arguments about the early modern period.[3]

Using the microfilms, I read such varied and totally uncanonical books (meaning, unavailable elsewhere) as Arthur Dent, *The Plain Mans Pathway to Heaven* (1607), Sir John Ferne, *The Blazon of Gentrie* (1586), and Peter Merlin, *A Most Plaine and Profitable Exposition of ESTER* (1599), which begins by announcing that the Devil "hath not any more gainfull unto himself, hurteful unto man, than the writing publishing, and reading of idle, fruitlesse, filthie, and wicked books" (sig. A4*r*–A5*v*), by which he means Arthurian romances in particular and fictions in general. On the other hand, one Robert Gomersall starts *The Levites Revenge* (1627) by forthrightly stating that "The purpose of this poem is religious delight" (sig. A5*r*), thus distinguishing his work from idle, fruitless, and filthy secular literature.

So while Gavin is surely right when he claims that the short-title catalogues offered "a compilation of metadata already powerfully abstracted from the paper, cardboard and leather on the shelves" (2017, 75), my experience is the opposite. The microfilms, whatever their limitations, *substituted* for the shelves in two ways. First, I could read the works themselves, even though I was nowhere near where the physical objects were housed. Second, I could, and did, look at all the other books on the microfilm, and some of my best pieces of evidence came from serendipity. Plus, I got a sense of the wide range of books published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I saw sermons, poems, plays, cookbooks, more sermons, biblical commentaries, and government announcements. In addition, while looking for attacks on poetry, I was schooled in the extraordinary range of the early modern book trade, including the extraordinary range of publishing styles and fonts. Again, rather than abstraction, reading the STC microfilms gave me a vastly more concrete sense of my topic.

But as essential as they were for giving my argument a historical foundation, the microfilms were hardly perfect. Gavin notes that "microfilm reading machines developed a reputation for being difficult to learn and straining to use" (2017, 84), a reputation more than justly earned. I cannot tell you how much time I wasted fighting with the machines, and making

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3. My dissertation was eventually published as *Squitter-Wits and Muse-Haters: Sidney, Spenser, Milton And Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment*; see Herman 1996.

copies was a long, laborious process. You had to bring rolls of dimes, then the machine took its sweet time processing the copy, which inevitably covered only half a page, so you had to spend more time adjusting the focus, making another copy, slowly advancing the microfilm to the next page, and then repeating the process until you were done. Also, relatively few libraries in the United States owned the STC microfilms, and so, only a small number of people working in the field had immediate access to them. As a graduate student at Columbia University, I was one of them. But when I moved on to my various positions in Williamsburg, Atlanta, and finally, San Diego, I had to drive to the local research library to use the microfilms. Marvelous as they were, owning the STC microfilms required a significant outlay of funds, they were difficult to use, and they were restricted in their reach. In other words, for all their virtues, the STC microfilms were also massively inconvenient, which is why most people at the time either relied on printed editions or turned to theory, an approach that did not require deep reading in primary sources. A few lucky souls had access to the Folger, the Huntington, or the Newberry libraries, and their scholarship relied on extensive reading in early modern books. But they were rare, and looked at from afar with a combination of wonder and envy.

Then, EEBO arrived and everything changed. Just to be clear, EEBO stands for "Early English Books Online", and the database consists of pdf files of the STC microfilms. So in one sense, the faults and limitations of the microfilms are carried over to the EEBO files (more on this below). The reader is equally distant from the physical object, and for the most part, only a small number of printings of each book is reproduced.

But all that pales against the four major advantages that EEBO has over the microfilms. First, the database is now searchable (e.g., title, author, subject, printer, year). Second, we can access the files within seconds, as opposed to waiting for someone to deliver the microfilm box, or pawing through a giant file cabinet to find it yourself, and then scrolling through until you finally reach the book you want. Third, the files are all downloadable, so now, we can develop our own library of primary sources. Finally, *you can do all of this from your desktop at home! You don't have to be in a library!* I can't exaggerate how EEBO has changed my life, but let me give you an example of how EEBO has altered scholarship by allowing easy and nearly immediate access to early modern books.

While I was researching my chapter on Milton's God for *Destabilizing Milton:"Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude*, I decided to look at how the Book of Job was interpreted in the early modern period.[4] So I did an

4. See Herman 2005.

EEBO subject search that very quickly revealed how Job was not particularly popular among exegetes in the sixteenth century, but very popular over the course of the English Civil War. Not an insignificant fact. Then I noticed that one Joseph Caryl published a huge, twelve volume commentary on Job between 1643 and 1666. Obviously, this was something I should look at. Reading the books *in situ* was out of the question because no library in the United States had all of them, and, to state the obvious, I had neither the time nor the funds to travel from place to place. Using the microfilms would be time consuming and endlessly awkward. But with the magic of EEBO, I read and downloaded the introductions to each volume *in one hour!*

And what I found amazed me. In the introduction to the first volume (1643), Caryl begins by explicitly paralleling the state of England with Job's trials: "The Book of Job bears the image of these times, and presents us with a resemblance of the past, present and (much hoped for) future condition on this *Nation.* As the personal prosperity of Job, so his troubles looke like our *Nationall* troubles" (A1r). By the time he reached the final volume in 1666, even though Caryl supported Cromwell and "and was one of the delegates sent to deliver a letter from the congregational churches urging General Monk to use his powers to protect liberty of conscience and the godly in 1659", he nonetheless seemed to accommodate himself to the new regime.[5] In Caryl's telling, Job realizes that God "might do with him what he pleased; and, that God, being his absolute Soveraign, could not wrong him, whatever he was pleased to do with him" (1666, sig. B1r). An "absolute Soveraign" is a king who thinks he is above the law, and that's a novel concept for England, which has a "mixed" monarchy, one in which the monarch is subject to the law. Charles I was the first English monarch to try to rule as an absolute monarch (his father, James VI/I had the theory down, but never tried to actually put into practice), and he lost his head as a result. So for Caryl to use this phrase in relation to God indicates a 180 degree turn in his politics. It also put into stark relief what's at stake with Milton's depiction of God as a monarch and Hell as a republic.

But to bring the discussion back to EEBO, once more, the effect is not greater abstraction, but greater specificity. By making access to early modern books much easier, EEBO allows for greater and greater historical grounding in our scholarship. So much so that EEBO changed the protocols of peer review: people are now *expected* to use EEBO. Relying on contemporary editions, let alone snippets of quotations from other critical

5. See "Caryl, Joseph", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* @ https://doi-org. libproxy.sdsu.edu/10.1093/ref:odnb/4846.

works, is no longer sufficient. Speaking strictly for myself, I've dinged more than a few articles and book manuscripts for not using EEBO to substantiate the contextual sections of the argument. True, EEBO is not cheap, and it's not meant for individual subscriptions, only institutions. Independent scholars, and people working at institutions without a research library, are now at significant professional disadvantage. To remedy that, the Renaissance Society of America now offers access to EEBO as a member benefit.

In his article, Gavin poo-poos exactly why EEBO has made such a difference in scholarship: "If information technology just winds up in your hands as a printed book — if we have merely 'gone full circle' to where we started — something hasn't gone right" (2017, 85). But in my experience, something has gone exactly right when this happens. Information technology has put into our hands, and on our desktop or laptop screens, the collected holdings of the Bodleian, the Folger, the Huntington, and the Newbery libraries (to choose but a few). That is not small, and it doesn't deserve to be denigrated (as Gavin does with a little rhetorical overkill) as placing "human-shaped protein bags in direct physical contact with book-shaped rag pulp" (2017, 86).

Let me give two further, non-EEBO examples of how digital technology puts us "protein bags in direct physical contact" with books. The first remedies one of EEBO's few major drawbacks. EEBO files and the microfilms work best with smaller texts, both physically and in terms of length. Large, folio volumes can be very difficult to work through. One such volume would be *Holinshed's Chronicles*, first published in 1577, then in a revised version in 1587. These are massive books. The latter edition has 1592 pages of text, exclusive of the end matter. So working one's way through all that in microfilm would be, shall we say, a chore, and comparing the two editions a Herculean task. So, when Annabel Patterson wrote *Reading Holinshed's "Chronicles"*, she turned to the nineteenth century edition edited by Sir Henry Ellis not as the best, but as the most practical solution:

> Although the Ellis edition, which was based on 1587, gives warning of additions by paragraph markers or square brackets, it does not *always* do so, nor do such markers always indicate new material. And neither the 1587 edition nor the 1807–[18]08 edition give any indication of material deleted or rewritten in complicated ways. Yet in order to retain a system of citation that best serves the needs of today's readers, I shall continue to refer to the Ellis edition as a good *enough* source of the text of the 1587 edition.
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> (1994, 58)

However, digital technology has made possible an edition of *Holinshed's "Chronicles"* that renders Patterson's compromises unnecessary. Oxford University hosts *The Holinshed Project*, a digital edition that allows the reader to not only easily read the *Chronicles'* contents from the comfort of their home, but to compare 1577 and 1587 with the touch of a button.[6] We can now see *exactly* what was deleted or rewritten at a glance. And, thanks to the project's underwriters, it is available for free to anyone with a web connection. Far from dissolving the boundaries between books, the *Holinshed Project* affirms the importance of reading the *Chronicles* and comparing the two editions as individual units.[7]

Second, the *British Newspaper Archive*.[8] This astonishing database collects over 32 million newspaper articles from the 1700s through to the present, and, through the magic of optical recognition software, allows the reader to search the articles themselves (not just title, subject, and year) for keywords. Then, the reader can call up a digital photograph of the newspaper itself. And the British Library charges only a nominal fee to use it. How does this advance in the digitization of an archive work in practice?

When I was researching the nineteenth century chapter of my book on the literature of terrorism, I wanted to see how the popular press responded to the various bombings around London.[9] The thesis of the book is that terrorism is defined by a paradox. On the one hand, it's violence for a particular purpose or meant to carry a particular message. It's never merely senseless carnage. But because the terrorist act often breaks all the unspoken rules limiting the scope and range of political violence, the victims don't have the language to talk about it. Terrorism thus becomes quite literally unspeakable. You find this rhetoric first used after the Gunpowder Plot, and I wanted to see if it returned with the Fenian bombing campaign of the late nineteenth century. Thanks to the *British Newspaper Archive*, I could definitively say yes! It did return! For example, an editorial in the *Shields Daily Gazette* denounced "The Outrages in London" as senseless ("the object of the perpetrators — if they have any object"), and called on Ireland's leaders to dissociate themselves from "a course of scoundrelism for which barbarism has no parallel, and the English tongue no words strong enough to describe. This is no ordinary sort of criminality" (26 January

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6. See http://www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/index.shtml.
7. For an example of how *The Holinshed Project* can be used in teaching, see HERMAN 2017, 42–8.
8. See https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/.
9. See HERMAN 2019.

1885, 2). I cannot imagine that I would have found this wondrous quote on my own, as it would have required paging through hundreds of newspapers. It would have been like searching for a miniscule needle in a field of hay. But thanks to advances in digital searching, I found multiple examples from contemporary newspapers proving my point. Again, the effect is the opposite of the one Gavin proposes: in place of dissolving the boundaries between discrete texts, the *British Newspaper Archive* allows for a finer-grained understanding of the past by allowing me to find phrases used in newspaper articles long buried in obscurity. But I'm not looking at the entire corpus. Instead, what's important is *this* phrase from *this* newspaper published on *this* date.

None of which is to denigrate EEBO-TCP. A searchable database encompassing marked up early modern texts will allow us, for example, to trace the development of words or phrases over time as well as allowing for new avenues of research that, due to "age and sullens" (as Shakespeare's Richard II puts it) are beyond my capabilities. But EEBO-TCP will not *supplant* EEBO any more than the rise of music streaming services has supplanted CDs and vinyl. Rather, EEBO-TCP will take its place *beside* EEBO and the other digital archives, offering its own unique opportunities alongside its own unique drawbacks.

What are they? There are three. First, there's the question of just how complete the EEBO-TCP corpus will be. Gavin writes that "the goal was to provide as comprehensive a sample of EEBO as possible, covering all major periods and genres" (2017, 99), yet he also admits that since "the vendors charged by the page, not by the title, there was a consistent bias towards documents that were comparatively short, as well as toward documents that were in English" (2017, 99n56). I'm not sure that length is the best criterion for inclusion, especially since the example Gavin gives for "very long books with less obvious research value to historians — like long legal dictionaries" (2017, 99n56) happen to be something that I've used in my own research, and found extremely useful.[10] Second, you are not looking at an early modern page, but a transcription of an early modern page in which the different elements of the page are marked by symbols (e.g., "Major division in the text would be marked with numbered <div> elements" [Gavin

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10. When I was trying to understand the resonances of Egeus claiming the "ancient privilege of Athens", I looked up "privilege" in John Rastell's *An Exposition of Certaine Difficult and Obscure Words, and Terms of the Lawe* (1579 edition); for further commentary on these resonances, see Herman 2014, 10.

2017, 99]). That may be easier to read, but I think most early modern scholars would want to check the original.

The third is a much larger issue, and I freely admit I don't quite know how to respond. Toward the essay's end, Gavin tells us how EEBO-TCP came into existence. Starting in 2000, "EEBO files were sent in monthly batches to two third-party vendors, Apex CoVantage and SPi Global, whose employees performed the actual transcription and markup" (2017, 99). Although both multinational companies have offices in the United States (Apex has its headquarters in a Virginia suburb just outside Washington, D.C. SPi Global's head office is in the Philippines), the actual work is done elsewhere, as Gavin admits when he drops this bomb: "Transcriptions were performed by anonymous coders *working in India*" (2017, 99n54; my emphasis). And not only India. On their website, SPi Global proudly announces that it has employees China, Nicaragua, Vietnam, and of course, Philippines. These are not countries known for high wages and worker benefits. EEBO-TCP, in other words, is made possible by the same global economy that grants the first world cheap clothing and affordable electronics. We rely, in other words, on outsourced, cheap labor for our comforts and now, it seems, for our sometimes recondite scholarship. I'm not suggesting that we boycott EEBO-TCP (although some hard data about the labor conditions and wages of those "anonymous coders" would be nice). But we ought to keep in mind that EEBO-TCP does not magically appear on our screens fully formed, like Venus arising from the ocean. EEBO-TCP is implicated in the world, with all that implies, and we should never forget that.

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