

**Beyond Archives: Exploring Digital Humanities in English Early Modern Scholarship<sup>1</sup>**

**Para Além dos Arquivos: Explorando as Humanidades Digitais na Investigação do Período *Early Modern* Inglês**

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**Abstract.** The study of corpora of ancient eras has always involved complex processes, essentially regarding access and handling. The digital repositories are erasing obstacles and generating a new kind of relationship between the works and the ones who deal with them, scholars or not: we can now visit libraries and museums from our computers, peruse private collections, and even spot details in texts and paintings that would otherwise remain hidden to the eye. Digital Humanities constitutes a vast, complex field which has had a remarkable development in the last years, within the broad conjuncture of computing and digital technologies. We will not focus on its definition, or on the theoretical reflection that is being produced, but rather on the most significant characteristics of Digital Humanities – its transversality and its potentialities. In a first moment, we will present a compilation of digital repositories that we consider relevant to Early Modern Studies; in a second moment, we will survey two of them, their characteristics and assets as digital tools used to expand our ability to study and undertake research in the Arts and Humanities, specifically in Early Modern Times: Primary Sources – Early Modern Resources; The Newberry – Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies.

**Keywords:** Digital Humanities; Early Modern Times; Literature; Culture

**Resumo.** O estudo de *corpora* de eras antigas tem sempre envolvido processos complexos, essencialmente no que respeita a acesso e manuseamento. Os repositórios digitais estão a eliminar obstáculos e a gerar um novo modo de relação entre as obras e os que com elas lidam, académicos ou não: podemos agora visitar bibliotecas e museus a partir dos nossos computadores, aceder a coleções privadas e, inclusive, descobrir pormenores em textos e pinturas que, de outro modo, não conseguiríamos captar. As Humanidades Digitais constituem um campo vasto e complexo, com um desenvolvimento assinalável nos últimos anos, no seio da conjuntura ampla da computação e das tecnologias digitais. Não nos focaremos na sua definição, nem na reflexão teórica em curso, mas antes nas características mais significativas das Humanidades Digitais – a sua transversalidade e as suas potencialidades. Num primeiro

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momento, apresentaremos uma compilação de repositórios digitais que consideramos relevantes para os Estudos *Early Modern*; num segundo momento, exploraremos dois deles, as suas características e as suas mais-valias como ferramentas digitais usadas para expandir a nossa capacidade de estudar e desenvolver investigação nas Artes e Humanidades, especificamente as do período *Early Modern*: Primary Sources – Early Modern Resources; The Newberry – Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies.

**Palavras-chave:** Humanidades Digitais; Período *Early Modern*; Literatura; Cultura

## Introduction

This article results from a work in progress, and stems from three main grounds: the first, our experience at Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal (UAb), a distance education university whose e-learning methodology, based on its exclusive Virtual Pedagogical Model, was implemented 16 years ago, in 2007; the second, our participation in a research project at LE@D (Laboratório de Educação a Distância e Elearning, UAb) on Digital Humanities; the third, our main scientific area, i.e. Early Modern Literature and Culture, in general, and the English Renaissance, in particular. It was the articulation of these three fields in our daily routine, intersecting theory and practice, research and teaching, always working in a virtual environment, that inevitably led us to the universe of Digital Humanities. In the present article, we do not intend to approach either its definition, or the theoretical reflection on it, a task in permanent progress, developed, until now, in many publications of various nature; well aware of such production, we will rather focus on the most significant features of the multifaceted field – its transversality and its potentialities – before examining some materials available in cyberspace, that, in the course of our research so far and in our perspective, are relevant to the study of the period labelled as 'Early Modern'. We will present a compilation of resources, seeking to highlight the available variety, and then we will survey two of them, as users, considering their characteristics, their assets and, above all, the materials on Early Modern Culture and Literature that thus are now becoming more easily reachable, according to a new kind of approach.

As David M. Berry writes (Introduction 1),

Across the university the way in which we pursue research is changing, and digital technology is playing a significant part in that change. Indeed, it is becoming more and more evident that research is increasingly being mediated through digital technology. (Berry, 2012a, p. 1).

Digital Humanities, whose genesis dates back, after all, to the 1940s, has had a rapid development but in the last years, within the broad conjuncture of computing and digital technologies, while simultaneously a parallel theoretical reflection on its multiple angles is being produced in the same proportion, at a similar speed. Furthermore, Digital Humanities is a dynamic field, permanently dealing with issues of problem solving, on the one hand, and with a wide range of challenges and needs, on the other, for example (Gold, 2012; Pavlidis *et al.*, 2018; Smit *et al.*, 2021):

- the selection, reviewing and organisation of data and corpora (selection and reviewing being crucial, due to the paramount issue of reliability);
- the quantity and diversity of corpora, encompassing heterogeneous areas;
- the use of adequate technology (uninterruptedly evolving, as it is well known);
- the digitisation and subsequent preservation of corpora (bearing in mind the difference between digitisation and digitalisation);
- the role of artificial intelligence;
- the articulation between human agents and artificial agents;
- the search for efficient and feasible ways to make materials available (some of them quite fragile, like ancient manuscripts);
- creative solutions to make the most of technological innovation;
- efficient solutions from the user’s perspective: appealing design; navigability and navigation; data presentation; usability.

All these issues, primarily and essentially within the domain of praxis, are part of a broader scope that includes

- research;
- research groups and projects;
- the interchange of ideas and knowledge;
- the dissemination of scientific knowledge;
- the role of the academic community.

Yet, issues of another sort also underlie Digital Humanities, namely funding and institutional cooperation, involving universities, libraries, museums, publishers, and foundations. Besides the benefits regarding knowledge, experiences and research, the institutional agreements and protocols may prevent, or more easily solve, possible legal matters. Let us bear in mind the recent mega lawsuit, set in motion by four publishing houses (Hachette, Harper Collins, John Wiley & Sons, and Penguin Random House) against the American Internet Archive (whose motto, “Universal Access to All Knowledge”, conveys some aspects that we will refer later).

As for the second term of the equation – Humanities – it has to be understood within an inter- and transdisciplinary sphere, beyond the traditional set of Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Religion, and the Arts, once Digital Humanities comprises not only a whole

new digital reality in permanent evolution, but also a change of paradigm regarding both Human Culture (Kirsch, 2014) and the ways Human Culture is approached, researched, understood, taught and disseminated (Hughes *et al.*, 2016; Steiner, 2014; Svensson *et al.*, 2016). Through its diversified disciplines, Digital Humanities actually enables the incorporation of specific methodologies belonging to the area of digital technologies into the area of Humanities, as a whole (Alves, 2016).

## **Digital Humanities and Early Modern Scholarship**

Access and handling constitute the two major and most complex processes inherent to the study of corpora, especially and above all of corpora of ancient eras, due to matters of preservation, rarity and authenticity. A series of obstacles have been and keep being however erased, because digital repositories are offering the scholar remarkable means to access and study the works, while the virtual handling of materials is undoubtedly contributing to their preservation; in addition, digital repositories are generating a new kind of relationship between the works and everybody who deals with them, scholar or not.

One of the assets of Digital Humanities is indeed the capacity to reach large audiences (Gold 2012), on an open-access basis, as the motto "Universal Access to All Knowledge" epitomises, highlighting the broad aspect of inclusiveness. The unlimited factor, encapsulated in the term 'universal', will then depend on the factors we mentioned a while ago, directly related to the very essence of Digital Humanities. At the present time, some of the most challenging and difficult issues are the amount, complexity and reliability of data, both for the 'makers' or 'processors' (the ones who make data available) and for the 'users' (the readers; the spectators; the viewers – Pavlidis *et al.*, 2018). In fact, we can now easily visit libraries and museums from our own computers, as well as peruse private collections; we can even spot details in texts and paintings that would otherwise remain hidden to the eye. Thus, besides the aspect of inclusiveness, the processes of selection and reviewing, also accomplished by the users themselves, depending on their own needs, seem to constitute a relevant part of the whole process in the new conjuncture.

Arriving at this point and bearing our interests in mind, as scholars dedicated to the Early Modern/the Renaissance Age, we selected some resources available in cyberspace, aiming at showing but a small portion of a very wide, open-access virtual world to be explored, and at emphasising a thriving field in permanent expansion:

1. EEBO – Early English Books Online on the ProQuest Platform  
<https://proquest.libguides.com/eebopqp>
2. PennLibraries, U of Pennsylvania  
<https://guides.library.upenn.edu/c.php?g=534530&p=4467133>

3. Illinois Library

<https://guides.library.illinois.edu/collections/europe-II>

4. Digital Bodleian

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/early-modern-manuscripts-and-archives/>

5. Early Modern England | AM – Adam Matthew Digital

<https://www.amdigital.co.uk/collection/early-modern-england>

6. Primary Sources – Early Modern Resources

<http://earlymodernweb.org/resources/primary-sources.html>

7. Folgerpedia

[https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/List\\_of\\_online\\_resources\\_for\\_early\\_modern\\_English\\_paleography](https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/List_of_online_resources_for_early_modern_English_paleography)

8. British Library

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/medieval-and-early-modern-british-literary-manuscripts>

9. M | Library

<https://guides.lib.umich.edu/c.php?g=283018&p=1885726>

10. The Newberry | Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies

<https://www.newberry.org/collection/subjects/medieval-renaissance-and-early-modern-studies>

The synopsis of EEBO discloses the complex thread of webs underlying the resources, as well as the issues here under consideration: problem solving; challenges and needs; computing and digital technologies; access and handling; selection and reviewing; cooperation and research. EEBO is thus presented:

The current size of the collection amounts to over 146,000 works comprising more than 17 million pages of rare books. Over 60,000 EEBO texts, transcribed as part of the Text Creation Partnership project, are now included. The historical documents span a wide array of different kinds, from Bibles, prayer books, royal statutes, proclamations, and military, religious and other public documents, through to almanacs, musical exercises, calendars, broadsides, periodicals and newsbooks, pamphlets and proclamations. Works by major authors such as Shakespeare, Malory, Spenser, Bacon, More, Erasmus, Boyle, Newton and Galileo can be found next to a host of less frequently studied writers.

In 2015, the University of Oxford, in cooperation with ProQuest and Jisc (the UK digital, data and technology agency), analysed the impacts of EEBO's digital collections after having been available to users for over a decade (Meyer and Eccles, 2016). The study highlighted its gradual, yet transformative, impact on academic research, as digital

collections have become fundamental to modern scholarship. Such a conclusion is confirmed by the steady rise in the usage of EEBO by distinguished universities, as well as by less research-intensive higher education institutions, both in and outside the UK, leading to a growing interdisciplinary literature that references these digital resources and the democratisation of access to valuable records. Therefore, EEBO stands as an example of the transforming nature of Digital Humanities in the modern academic landscape, reshaping scholarly practices and leading to incremental changes in research methodologies.

The Society for Renaissance Studies and the Michigan State University should be mentioned here. They provide relevant, useful resources of another kind, the former indicating a list of online databases, the latter a list of free websites.

Likewise, Project MUSE should be mentioned, once it also exemplifies the importance of research and institutional cooperation. Its mission is thus announced:

The project promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.

### **Exploring Early Modern Digital Archives**

From among the above mentioned items, we have chosen numbers 6 and 10 to observe more thoroughly in a first moment, according to a comparative approach: Primary Sources is part of Early Modern Resources, while Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies integrates The Newberry. Then, in a second moment, we will explore The Newberry, in particular.

In terms of web design and inner structure, they are immensely different. Primary Sources displays no image at all (neither does Early Modern Resources). Data alternate between black and dark red, and between roman and bold. Everything is displayed on the same page, void of appealing elements, since the site is being rebuilt, and thus users are presented with a temporary version with limited features, namely no possibility of search. Nevertheless, Primary Sources has a clear and intuitive navigation system, allowing users to easily browse through different resources and categories related to early modern studies.

Being a comprehensive research portal, Early Modern Resources curates high-quality, freely accessible online resources, and the Primary Sources section offers a wide selection of materials, which include digitised full-text transcriptions, searchable and downloadable, as well as high-quality image libraries of texts, documents, artworks and maps. Additionally, there are databases, calendars and anthologies containing abstracts or summaries of sources.

Broadly speaking, the Primary Sources section is organised according to the following sets: Editions; Image Collections; Databases and Calendars; Artworks; Maps; Anthologies. These comprise, in their turn, diversified materials displayed according to a three-column layout, preceded by a brief explanation of each set – the column 'resource' contains the titles of the corpora, in alphabetical order; the column 'tags' contains the keyword/s for each corpus; the column 'description' presents a brief synthesis of each work.

We will now explore the 'Editions' set more closely for illustrative purposes. Considering, for example, the resource on the left-hand column entitled 'The Diplomatic Correspondence of Thomas Bodley, 1585-1597'. This entry corresponds to the tags "Britain, letters, politics" and to the following description: "digital edition of letters from Thomas Bodley's 12 years of diplomatic business in Europe, 1585-97". When we follow the link to this primary source, we access the main page of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters (CELL) project, in partnership with the Bodleian Library. CELL's webpage informs us that the project is located at University College London and that it is composed of graduate and doctoral students, researchers, teachers and writers. The Diplomatic Correspondence of Thomas Bodley (1585-1597) Project is built on open-source data, freely available and licensed under a Creative Commons License. It is based on a pioneering transcription method, as stated on the website:

The letters have been encoded in such a way as to permit readers to custom-build their own transcripts, according to their research preferences. For instance, a general reader may wish to view the letters in their complete, non-abbreviated form, while a scholar interested in orthographic and material features of the period will want to see these reproduced in the transcripts (...) Customisable transcripts enable the reader to engage with the text according to their own research needs. Users will be able to mediate the texts to their own specification.

The collection consists of 988 letters written by, or to, the founder of the Bodleian Library before he became involved in bibliographical pursuits. These letters pertain to his diplomatic assignments to various European sovereigns, between 1585 and 1588, and his service as the English representative on the Council of State in the United Provinces during the Dutch Revolt (1588 – 1597). Besides the usual browsing features, we can access the collection corpus through a web widget for visualising temporal data, scrolling along a timeline with red dots, each representing one letter. Upon clicking on a given dot, a summary with the details of the manuscript will come into view, with a link to the transcript and metadata.

Let us analyse, for instance, the red dot '1255' which can be found in the timeline concerning May 1595. The general description which appears connected to the '1255' dot informs us that this is a manuscript dated from Sunday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1595, kept in the Cotton Galba collection at the British Library (BL: MS Cotton Galba D XI f.104r-105v). It is a letter from Thomas Bodley to Queen Elizabeth I, summarised as follows: "Bodley returns to England without proper permission to secretly deliver the States' offer,

which when revealed will earn him greater sway and respect with them, and with the Queen". When we access the manuscript's link, we are provided with the letter's transcript and metadata, including a piece of relevant, helpful information when working with primary sources, namely that this is a record damaged by fire and that there is a pen mark at the end of the endorsement on the address leaf.

As we hope to have demonstrated, Primary Sources is an essential section of the public research portal Early Modern Resources, directing users to other Digital Humanities projects, like the Open Humanities awarded CELL. In their turn, these project works put into evidence the growing culture of sharing resources through Open Data/Open Source and the interdisciplinary nature of Digital Humanities research, fostering collaboration between traditionally distinct fields.

Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies is much more elaborate in terms of design, interactivity and navigation than Primary Sources. Its main page displays a detail of the 15th-century *Prayerbook of Margaret of Croy*, and then a sort of Index with three parts, all of them displaying iconographic pieces, as well: What You Can Research; Research Guides; Digital Resources. Each one of these parts corresponds to large virtual rooms containing many other rooms carefully designed, elaborated and arranged, forming a wide, quite appealing world that assembles an immensity of diversified materials. Despite the complex elaboration, navigation is easy, very interesting and appealing.

From the user's perspective, the Newberry Digital Collections offers robust search and browsing features. Users can search for specific keywords, authors, titles, or subjects to find relevant materials efficiently. Browsing options, such as exploring collections by themes or topics, also facilitate research work. Moreover, high-quality images allow users to zoom in and examine details that might be challenging to observe in physical copies. This level of detail enhances the users' experience and promotes a more in-depth analysis.

Although The Newberry Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies collection is rich in printed and manuscript sources, most of its databases are subscription databases with access limited to registered readers within the library building. It is worth observing, however, that The Newberry Digital Resources include databases such as Early English Books Online (EEBO), Iter: Middle Ages and Renaissance, JSTOR, and Project Muse, some of which were already mentioned. This feature within The Newberry Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies collection bears witness to the collaboration between institutions, projects and researchers brought by digitisation, enabling scholars from different parts of the world to work together without having to visit the library building physically.

Arriving at this stage, we propose focusing on the Digital Resources section on the collection's webpage, which offers free online research and educational tools on different subjects, including, for example, Renaissance Humanism, Politics, Poetry, and Religious



Life in Late-Medieval England after the Black Death, as well as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Utopias of the European Renaissance. Then, upon selection of the topic, users are led to a Digital Collections for the Classroom webpage, which aims at incorporating primary sources into classroom instruction and provides users with essays, a gallery of images of the digital resources under analysis, several groups of guiding questions and a list of selected sources. These resources provide valuable context, historical background and interpretation, enriching the users' understanding of the materials. The Newberry Digital Collections for the Classroom is thus announced:

Through this free platform, teachers will find high-quality resources for classroom instruction. In addition to enlivening the classroom experience, the Digital Collections for the Classroom support key history and literature learning goals in critical thinking, analysis, close reading, and visual literacy.

An example of these resources is the lesson entitled 'Contexts for the *Book of Margery Kempe*', which is crafted to suit either a seminar on British literature, where Margery Kempe is briefly studied, or a more advanced undergraduate course on Middle English literature, exploring large portions of the book. It is also possible to adapt the lesson to a secondary education class, allowing younger students to access these rare materials and introducing them to the Digital Humanities' potentialities. This educational resource connects to curriculum topics, such as "Gender, Religion, and Literature; Image and Text Analysis; Manuscript Studies; Middle English Literature", as mentioned on the webpage. The lesson plan provides students with historical context to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the *Book of Margery Kempe*; it is divided into different sections, including curriculum notes, pre-class assignments and a discussion guide. All quotations included in the class materials are from the modernised text of Margery's work published in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. The course materials are downloadable and available as PDF files, and aim at engaging students with manuscripts, specifically those from the Newberry Library. In effect, the lesson plan includes two skill-based lessons – 'Reading Middle English in Manuscript' and 'Anatomy of a Manuscript Page' – that aim at helping students to read and transcribe medieval writing and to describe a medieval manuscript page. At the end of the lesson plan, students are asked to use those skills to analyse late-medieval European images of *Pietàs* and *Arma Christi* from several books of hours and prayerbooks from the Newberry Collections. Students can download a PDF packet of the images to be examined in the 'Downloads' tab, or access high-resolution online versions by following the links provided. The lesson's authorial information is also shared on the webpage for citing purposes.

The Newberry Digital Collections for the Classroom is, therefore, a valuable pedagogical resource that, as Battershill and Ross (2022) observe, can also help us guide our students towards the selection of carefully curated, reliable sources, teaching them how to evaluate these materials:

After all, evaluating the quality of existing texts and archives is not merely what a good instructor does when selecting course readings but indeed, we would argue,

part of being a good scholarly citizen in general. If you ask your students questions about these resources – including interrogations about what is or is not available and why – digital resources become an object as well as a mode of inquiry. Using and discussing electronic texts with your students can, in other words, provoke important conversations about scholarly values and the commercialization of knowledge if you consciously reflect on the digital nature and provenance of your resources. When you actively critique the resources you use and when you participate in the creation of the resources you recommend to students, you ensure that the texts your students encounter conform to your scholarly standards of completeness and representativeness. (p. 17).

Underpinning this point of view are two crucial concepts of Digital Humanities: digital literacy and metaliteracy. On the one hand, and drawing on the *Digital Literacies* report published by the London Knowledge Lab in 2010, it emphasises the importance of applying traditional critical thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, to the realm of digital literacy, which involves using these skills to navigate and understand the vast range of digital resources and tools available today. On the other hand, it also relates to the concept of metaliteracy, which re-examines information literacy in the context of digital transformations in teaching and learning, acknowledging the evolving nature of information in the digital age and proposing a broader set of competencies to address this shift. Resources like The Newberry Digital Collections for the Classroom can, therefore, be instrumental in teaching students how to apply critical thinking skills in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Independently from the characteristics and differences, in form and content, between the two repositories we have analysed, there is a common, quite relevant asset, bearing in mind the considerable amount of manuscript corpora, and that is paleography. Early Modern Resources, for instance, features an early modern paleography tutorial and an online course on English Handwriting 1550-1700. The Newberry Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies collection presents the users with an extensive list of digital resources on paleography, specifically on English paleography, with several online courses and tutorials. Such materials promote the researchers' skill of deciphering and interpreting handwritten materials from the past, while also enabling a wider audience to engage directly with fragile and rare primary sources. In this context, it is worth emphasising the transformative power of digital collections in reshaping scholarly research.

## **Conclusion**

We will now present our conclusions, based on the aspects inherent to Digital Humanities and on the digital worlds comprising Early Modern corpora.

1. Regardless of their organisation, structure, contents, characteristics and assets, we believe that the principles of reliability and reviewing do prevail, even because their maintenance is anchored in such principles. Moreover, we

also believe that the user is a key element in the processes of selection and assessment of reliability.

2. The variety and number of digital repositories guarantee access to countless materials of heterogeneous areas and eras, that otherwise would remain unavailable, as it is testified by the two we have surveyed, especially the second one.
3. From the user's perspective, the web design and the inner structure, together with navigation, speed and lack of errors undoubtedly constitute essential elements; they may also function as valuable clues regarding the selection criteria.
4. Usability is mainly related to each user, as well as to each user's needs and research; concomitantly, the wide range of available materials, in permanent development, is closely related to usability itself.
5. Accessibility is beyond digitisation, navigation and speed. It encompasses, for example, the issues of preservation and readability; in the case of manuscripts, readability involves the transcription to Modern English, hence, it involves paleography.
6. Virtual access and handling include the users' freedom and self-organisation, without limitations of place or time; they contribute to the preservation of corpora, as we have mentioned, promote equity among users, disclose works that would never be known, due to several reasons, and save a huge quantity of resources. Hence the reason why research projects and institutional cooperation are crucial.

The transversality and the potentialities inherent to the broad field of Digital Humanities seem thus to be evident and irrefutable. Furthermore, all the possibilities made available must be understood within the paradigm generated by the permanent advancements in computing and digital technologies: it is not a matter of substitution or of competition; it is rather a different way of working and researching that does not exclude the articulation with, or the complementarity to, traditional methodologies.

We believe that Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies exhibits such articulation and complementarity in an original, challenging way. At the bottom of its main page, we find four interesting assets – Use the Collection in Person, and Order Digital Files; Artists in Residence and Group and Class Visits. In other words, it exhibits the symbiosis between the physical and the digital, the material and the virtual.

Quoting an old Chinese proverb, "When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills".

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