The prospects of the digital humanities are enticing: it facilitates low-cost publication and wide dissemination of scholarship that may not have been supported by traditional print mediums; it can provide access to primary and secondary sources that are difficult to acquire or search, unless one’s university is particularly well resourced; it enables alternative visual layouts and online features that print simply cannot furnish. Yet the transition from print to web is often made with little planning or critical reflection. Allowance for maintenance and development of projects beyond the term of the grant used to fund their creation is often inadequate. The permanence of online resources is frequently and mistakenly taken as a given. But most troubling, to my mind, is the uncritical assumption that a project’s merits are unequivocally enhanced if the project is digital. As scores of online projects consisting merely of keyboarded texts testify, simply posting content online does not, in itself, constitute added value. So why go digital?

The emphasis has to fall on the scholarship and the merits of the project, which may happen to be augmented by the electronic environment: after all, whilst some scholars are well-versed in highly technical matters, the majority remain early modernists first, and practitioners of digital humanities second. I certainly fall under this category. Drawing on the work of the Lost Plays Database (a research site built on wiki software and the premise of interactive exchange), this chapter explores the possibilities afforded by collective and dynamic database building, including issues of quality control and the changing perceptions of what constitutes academic publication. When Roslyn L. Knutson and I began collaboration on this project, we had no firm commitment to the online environment. The creation of the Lost Plays Database as an electronic resource was thus the product of extensive deliberation over the nature of the research task and the benefits of the various forms it might take. It was driven by need and by perceived value rather than by any ideological commitment to the digital platform (in the first instance) or by specialist knowledge of wiki-coding and web publishing. Below, I consider the factors that encouraged us to adopt the digital platform. I assess how our experiences have corresponded to our expectations and aims, focusing in particular on open-access publication and online collaboration. I do not mean to offer definitive or prescriptive statements on “best practice”; rather, I share Patrik Svensson’s recent caution over positing “one definite vision or set of strategies” for engagement with digital humanities.1 What follows is a subjective evaluation of the fit between a particular research project and its digital solution.

Online resources have associated costs: for all the enthusiasm about abandoning the ever-growing expenses of print publication, it’s worth recalling that

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web-hosting, software development, maintenance, and an academic’s labour are all costs that will be incurred in the creation of a new digital project. Charging for access is one way to recover these costs, but what is at stake in doing so? Subscription-based access makes sense for “unidirectional” resources such as *Early English Books Online*, which provides thousands of users with access to digitised texts and images, and which requires substantial revenue (garnered through subscription fees and institutional partner contributions) to produce the content it sells. The value it provides as a resource is not contingent on — indeed, does not permit — users to alter its content.\(^2\) Other projects like Ian Lancashire’s *Lexicons of Early Modern English (LEME)* offer limited “public access” but encourage users to seek out the more comprehensive subscription-based access. This has the advantage of stimulating interest by offering a taste of the product whilst also having the potential to recoup research and development costs (initially borne by various Canadian government and university funding bodies) through the fee-paying version of the site. *LEME*, like *EEBO*, does not depend on user contributions though.

In the case of the *Lost Plays Database (LPD)*, the subject matter stands to benefit from the input and unique knowledge of a vast array of individuals, and is not an appropriate research topic for one or two scholars working alone, irrespective of their expertise in theatre history. Historical records pertaining to lost plays are located in a diversity of sources, ranging from the predictable (records such as the Stationers’ Register or Henslowe’s diary), to manuscript miscellanies and commonplace books whose contents remain largely invisible in bibliographic and even online searches. No single scholar is likely to have read and retained memory of the passing references to lost plays in these documents. No single scholar is likely to have a working knowledge of the immense body of potential source texts available to the dramatist whose play is now lost. Creating a record of this disparate and obscure information thus relies on collective knowledge and the assemblage of information which has little significance on its own, but collectively makes a substantial contribution to our picture of the early modern theatre. Accordingly, to reach the greatest number of potential contributors, and thus their unique knowledge of historical references, it made little sense to raise an entry barrier (in the form of subscription fees) to *LPD* access.

Aside from severely reducing the capacity to cover costs by charging a fee for access, the decision to provide open-access publication can lead to additional complications for a project like the *LPD*. There is limited value in inviting users to

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\(^2\) The minor exception is the short-lived experimental forum *EEBO Interactions*, a “social networking resource” arm of the EEBO project, which was created to allow users to annotate EEBO records. Its functionality was largely subsidiary and did not form part of the core service. Notice that the service was to be terminated in March 2013 was emailed to contributors, with an EEBO/Proquest representative offering the following explanation: “overall levels of participation have remained low throughout (despite the existence of a small, core group of contributors) and unfortunately the site is no longer sustainable” (email dated 11 March 2013, from Stephen M. Brooks, Senior Publisher, Arts & Humanities, Proquest). See [http://eebo-interactions.chadwyck.com/](http://eebo-interactions.chadwyck.com/)
browse a site for free if that site depends in turn on other resources which are not in the public domain; yet the seminal studies of theatre history are typically the most recent, and thus subject to copyright restrictions. Even if an individual entry in the LPD only cited a single sentence from R. A. Foakes’ edition of Henslowe’s diary, the cumulative effect over the span of the database would undoubtedly exceed a reasonable portion of the copyrighted work, and would certainly exceed Cambridge University Press’s explicit injunction against quoting any of its titles’ contents without written permission. To provide an open-access alternative, W. W. Greg’s superseded edition of Henslowe must be combined with links to the digitised images in Grace Ioppolo’s Henslowe-Alleyn Digitisation Project so that users can consult the historical document in instances where Greg’s older transcription may be disputed. A comparable case is N. W. Bawcutt’s edition of the Master of the Revels’ records, which must take a back seat to Joseph Quincey Adams’ 1917 edition of Sir Henry Herbert’s records, which is freely available through the Internet Archive. For such reliance on older editions to work, vigilance is required on the part of the editors. Given the current copyright laws, the limited opportunities to cite the newer editions have to be reserved for instances in which the new scholarship presents alternative readings or interpretations that constitute important advances. The contributors and editors need to pay attention to such discrepancies in the texts. Clearly, open-access has its difficulties, and these issues are unlikely to go away: by the time Foakes or Bawcutt’s works are in the public domain, they will in turn have been superseded, and the problem of currency perpetuated (unless the major presses move towards free access, which seems unlikely).

Fortunately these issues are not insurmountable: adequate substitutes exist for copyrighted records (if used discerningly), and most scholars will still be able to

3 The University of Toronto’s Records of Early English Drama (REED) project is somewhat of a publishing anomaly, in that it provides free access to its digital resources (EMLoT: Early Modern London Theatres; the Patrons and Performances website) and has an unusual agreement with its print publishers that has led to the volumes for York (1979) to Lincolnshire (2009) being freely available in digitized form through the Internet Archive (http://archive.org/search.php?query=records%20of%20early%20english%20drama%20AND%20collection%3Atoronto).


consult print or subscription-based editions via their institutional or research libraries. The gains to be made from pursuing this “gold standard” of complete open-access remain desirable. In the case of the LPD, which is predicated on the notion of interactivity and user engagement, the more open-access resources we can utilise, the better poised our site will be for encouraging contributors to create new scholarship from the various threads we bring together in the one convenient location. A quick look at our “Works Cited” page reveals a wealth of online sources available for the interested reader to follow up, and perhaps use as the basis for a new contribution to the site. What the LPD aims to offer, in essence, is not only a useful source of information about lost plays, but an easily accessible and well-equipped space in which to conduct research, draw connections, and propose tentative theories to be critiqued and refined by the contributor’s peers. It is about the creation of scholarship as much as the dissemination of scholarship, and it thus complements more unidirectional projects like the Internet Shakespeare Editions or the Digital Renaissance Editions. The ISE and DRE projects stand to significantly assist the creation of scholarship by providing researchers with easy access to the primary texts they will use as the basis of their work. The purpose of the LPD is to be a platform for that scholarship itself: to provide the tools and the canvas.

The virtual environment can be optimised to encourage strong performances by contributors. To facilitate contributions from scholars who have limited experience or interest in computing, we chose to utilise MediaWiki software: a free, pre-packaged program already familiar to most people as the platform used by Wikipedia. In most cases, this open-source software can be tailored to an individual project’s needs, and the LPD is essentially a relatively simple configuration of this program, with a handful of customised extensions and a unique skin to give it a distinctive appearance. While a purpose-written piece of software would provide additional functionality and benefits that a generic program could not anticipate us needing, the trade off is that the generic program is already familiar to users: from either browsing or editing Wikipedia. Given that even a short sentence or reference can make a valuable contribution to an entry, it is important that the would-be contributor isn’t daunted by the prospect of complicated mark-up languages and coding. Wiki software fosters such ad hoc and piecemeal contributions to knowledge, recording and (if necessary) allowing the removal of an individual’s contribution to an entry. It does have limitations: at present, the various contents lists (users can browse entries by title, by year, by auspices and by dramatist) are compiled manually, so that if a contributor reassigned a play from 1600 to 1599 (for example), this change does not automatically trickle down to the ‘Years’ contents page. The LPD has thus far run without any funding whatsoever; should a source of

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7 For example, the Columbia University Library’s digitised volumes of the Stationers’ Register, the University of California at Santa Barbara’s English Broadside Ballad Archive, Sheffield’s Variorum Edition of John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments, or the Oxford Holinshed Project. See: “Works Cited,” Lost Plays Database, http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/WorksCited
income become available in the future, we may well instigate software changes to augment the structure of the database, but retaining the wiki software for the entries themselves would remain highly desirable for the reasons outlined above.

Overcoming the limited technical expertise of some scholars is one challenge, but an equally important task for the editor is ensuring that the technologically capable contributor receives sufficient scholarly guidance. As editors, we check the ‘Recent changes’ page of the wiki every day to monitor the creation and modification of entries. Typically the level of engagement required is high during the contributor’s first attempts at organising their content, but decreases quickly after an initial flurry of email exchanges. As part of the application process for contributing to the LPD, we now ask potential contributors to consider the following principles:

- The Lost Plays Database (LPD) operates on the understanding that titles and references to plays in documentary sources are evidence of discrete lost texts unless compelling corroborating evidence confirms identification with an extant text. The critical history of lost plays has been the opposite: scholars have identified unusual titles with surviving texts, as in the familiar identification of “Love’s Labour’s Won” with either The Taming of the Shrew or All’s Well That Ends Well. In the LPD we take documentary evidence literally until there is solid proof otherwise.

- The LPD entries are organized according to a pre-designed template. Variations on sub-categories are permissible, even often desirable, but we ask that the template headings themselves be employed without alteration.

- The integrity of the categories in the template is crucial. “Historical Records” and “Theatrical Provenance” are for documentary evidence, not scholars’ opinions however venerable the scholar and the opinion. The contributor’s judgment comes increasingly into play as the categories move from a transcribing of documents to the tracking of critical opinion to guesswork; the final category of “For What It’s Worth” is the catch-all for tangential commentary.8

We also urge contributors to consult our essay in Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England to get a fuller sense of the project’s origins and rationale, and hope that a greater degree of consistency in approaches will be adopted as a result.9

Interrogating the line between historical ‘fact’ and venerable ‘opinion’ is the most frequent cause for editorial intervention. Authorial and company attributions are sometimes made too definitively, scholarly commentary is elevated to the status

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of certainty, and critical conjecture is often repeated without consideration of the justification (if any) for such conclusions. When dealing with such ephemeral subject matter, it is simply too risky to close down alternative interpretations by privileging one set of critical opinions over another and preventing the possibility of counter-narratives emerging. It is for this reason, for example, that we insist on resisting the conflation of titles unless compelling evidence requires it: scholars have traditionally connected the titles “Two Shapes” and “Caesar’s Fall” from Henslowe’s diary, on the basis of common dramatists working on each title and on the basis of Henslowe’s payment records, but there is no self-evident reason for thinking that these quite distinct titles should refer to the same play. A key role of the editors, in maintaining consistency of scholarly approach, is asking contributors to justify seductive but hardly watertight assumptions such as the connection of names in this example. This healthy scepticism about the limits of what is knowable has fast become an important characteristic of the LPD, and is typically embraced by contributors. By bringing together in the one place the disparate threads of criticism pertaining to lost plays and their role in theatre history, we inevitably bring together critical opinions that are highly subjective and not necessarily compatible with one another. In a sense, then, our contributors are testing and revising former scholarship. Although the expectation might be that the older scholarship has been entirely superseded by now, it is often the case that Greg or Chambers, with their encyclopaedic knowledge, remain vital: “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

The work of these old masters can be supplemented with new insights and the advantages of searchable databases like EEBO-TCP, however, and their speculations can be assessed anew in light of having unprecedented access to the variety of scholarship on lost plays that has previously been buried in dusty tomes. Scholars who have grown up with Shakespeare-centric narratives of theatre history, sometimes need a gentle prodding to reassess the evidence relative to the narrative. The influence of some of the more eccentric parents of theatre history like Frederick Gard Fleay needs to be reconsidered with the benefit of advances in scholarship, and contributors sometimes need to be weaned off his legacy of ‘clumping’ play titles.

A screening process does admittedly make the editing task slightly easier: unlike Wikipedia, our contributors must apply for editing privileges and demonstrate their experience with theatre history, and this quality control measure has so far worked very well. If there is a downside, it is merely that the pool of active contributors is not yet large enough for the LPD community to self-regulate. There are currently 33 registered contributors for the site, and in the month-long

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11 Our appointment of an Advisory Board of distinguished scholars is another means of preserving the integrity of the scholarship published in the LPD. The Board is not involved with the day-to-day operation of the site and are not versed in technical matters, but by lending their names and reputations to our project they have an interest in the quality of the LPD. They are available for advice on scholarly matters, to vouch for would-be contributors who may not be known to Roslyn and I personally, and some of the Board members are also active contributors.
period spanning June 25 – July 25, 2012, 634 visits from 44 countries were recorded by Google’s analytics software. Yet so far, scholars have proved shy about editing each other’s work: only a relatively small number of entries have been revised by a scholar who wasn’t responsible for originally creating that entry. Typically, the scholars who do engage with each other’s entries are known to each other and communicate their ideas via email, sometimes seeking permission before altering or adding content. In other words, scholars appear to be approaching the possibility of collaboration in much the same way that they might enter into a print dialogue, offering a new note to Notes & Queries to follow up on another writer’s publication. Wiki software is touted as the kind of facilitator that eliminates the need for such correspondence and discreteness, but is our form of collegial collaboration such a bad thing? At the time of writing this chapter, Wikipedia had 17,189,389 registered users, but serious reservations remain about that project’s ability to guarantee reliable scholarship and to self-regulate via impersonal/anonymous engagement.© A different form of collaboration characterises the Lost Plays Database.

Collaboration sometimes takes the form of editorial contribution, if only through some interrogative questions. In the case of Simon Davies’ entry for “Black Joan” (Admiral’s, 1598), routine editorial commentary led to some interesting reconceptualising of the play’s possible subject matter. Davies’ entry was very full, and didn’t require much in the way of additional information. As his survey of scholarship revealed, “Black Jone” (or “Black Jonne,” as Henslowe variously calls it) has typically been regarded as a witchcraft play about a woman named Joan; the item in Henslowe’s property list described as “j frame for the heading in Black Jone” has often been interpreted as a piece of execution equipment designed to behead the witch in question.© The format of LPD entries, which establishes a clear hierarchy of information ranging from documentary evidence to speculative critical opinion, led us to ask two simple questions: given the variant spellings, why must the eponymous character be “Joan” rather than “John”? And why must a “heading” frame refer to “beheading”? Much is at stake in these suppressed premises: the play needn’t be about a witch at all, but could be about a man named John. “Black” isn’t associated with witchcraft in the period in the manner we might assume: “black magic” isn’t supported by the OED until 1871, and the other contemporaneous plays with “black” in their titles point to “criminality” (“The Black Dog of Newgate, Parts 1 and 2,” about a highwayman) or “ghostliness” (“Black Bateman of the North, Parts 1 and 2”; ballads about this character suggest the play concerned an unfaithful woman haunted by her jilted lover’s ghost), as more obvious connotations. Witches,

typically, were not beheaded either — they were burned at the stake, or sometimes drowned. The “heading” frame might simply have referred to “stocks,” or even to a “title board” of some kind. Davies’ entry thus raised a number of interesting questions about the interpretive decisions made by scholars, and repositions this particular lost play as no longer necessarily concerning witchcraft.

More exciting, to my mind, are the occasions when the LPD has raised the profile of obscure records, leading directly to new knowledge about the plays in question. I don’t know how much thought Matthew Steggle had given to the former British Museum manuscript, Cotton MS. Tiberius E. X. before I began posting a series of skeleton entries drawn from the four lists of play titles contained in the manuscript. Utilising the EEBO-TCP resource, Steggle’s work on the enigmatic “Henry the una...” led to plausible identification of the play’s subject matter (Henry the Unable, impotent king of Castile, 1453-74), authorship (probably William Rowley), date (c.1619), and auspices (Prince Charles’s men).14 Similarly, by posting images and transcriptions of Folger manuscript fragments we were able to quickly propose alternative identifications, suggesting that MS.X.d.391 (“Pilades and Horestes”) is not a lost play fragment at all, but a translation of the opening of a fifteenth-century Latin dialogue: pseudo-Petrarch, De Miseria Curiae Romanae. We also identified a second ms fragment, “Eusebius, Timotheus, Theophilus” (Folger MS.X.d.390), as being a verse translation of part of Erasmus’s Colloquies; more specifically, the Convivium religiosum or The Godly Feast (1522).15 Both proposed emendations have subsequently been adopted in the Hamnet catalogue.16

It is interesting to speculate about the advantages of the digital medium in these latter cases in particular: both Folger fragments had previously been published in a Malone Society Collections volume17 and were thus technically available, but active promotion of the LPD entry through social media (the LPD uses Facebook to announce new entries) helps entries like these reach broad readership, and availability of such information online facilitates quick copying-and-pasting into searchable databases like EEBO-TCP, allowing the curious reader to spontaneously follow a lead.

15 See David McInnis and Matthew Steggle, “Folger MS X.d.390 (1-2), and Folger MS X.d.391,” Notes & Queries 58.3 (Sept 2011): 374-76.
16 The Hamnet entry for “Anon. Dramatic fragment in verse [manuscript], ca. 1630. Folger MS X.d.390 (1-2)” has been altered to “Erasmus, Desiderius, d. 1536. Verse translation of Convivium religiosum (fragment) [manuscript], ca. 1630.” (http://shakespeare.folger.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=193385); the entry for “Anon. Fragment from a play [manuscript], ca. 1620. MS. X.d.391” has been altered to “De miseria curiae Romanæ. English. Fragment. Translation of dialogue between Pilades and Horestes [manuscript], ca. 1620” (http://shakespeare.folger.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=193386).
The final form of collaboration that we've observed thus far in the LPD's brief existence is the type we had actually anticipated — or at least hoped for: the cases where even a relatively full entry is supplemented by the addition of an extra reference or allusion that the original creator of the entry had missed, but that a reader of the entry immediately recalled. When Daniel Cadman posted an entry for Thomas Kyd’s “Portia” (1594) in May 2010, he brought together a number of references to the play and proposed that “the action of the play would have taken place after the death of Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi.”

Whilst consulting W. Carew Hazlitt’s annotated copy of his own *Play-Collectors Manual* (Folger W.a.501), I noticed this comment in the marginalia: “In Shirley’s *Humorous Courtier*, 1640, is a reference under sig.C3 to Portia, evidently not Shakespeare’s heroine”. It’s not yet clear whether the line in question (“Portia swallowed fire to please her husbands ghost”) pertains to Kyd’s lost play, but it is possible that it is indeed a direct reference, and is worth considering. Collaborative contributions to Roslyn L. Knutson’s entry for “Bellendon (Belin Dun)” have led to a possible reinterpretation of an item in Henslowe’s property lists. Knutson had already established a wealth of information on this play title before I suggested the inclusion of a poem by the “Water Poet”, John Taylor, and Matthew Steggle suggested the inclusion of a story told by Sir John Hayward — both of which link the chief Belin Dun to the town of Dunstable. Could the item transcribed by Malone as “Belendon stable” suggest horse thieving (a “stable”), or could it — on the basis of the new information introduced by Matt Steggle and I — be associated with the town of Dunstable itself, much like Henslowe’s “sittie of Rome” appears to refer to a city?

The task of planning for the user or contributor’s future needs is a further conceptual challenge. Anticipating what features might conceivably be of value in five years is a tricky business, but the more options we have in place, the greater the potential for new developments to arise via associative thought processes. Although we can’t predict how users will draw connections between plays and information, we can at least create broad pathways linking similar materials together. At this stage we encourage generosity in category tagging for new entries: for example, all entries drawing on the Stationers’ Register receive an “S.R.” category tag, and the auspices (where known) are always added in tag form too (so that users can browse lost plays from, say, Strange’s repertory). It has recently become apparent that a new

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level of entries altogether may be required: in Satiromastix, Dekker has the Jonson-character (Horace) declare that he once played the part of “Zulziman” at the Bankside location of Paris Garden. What are we to do with a “lost character” like “Zulziman”, who doesn’t belong to any known play? Laura Estill has recently posted an entry for an unassigned prologue beginning “Gentlemen, y’are welcome, but not from me” (probably 1603-25), from Margaret Bellasys’s verse miscellany, BL Add. MS 10309, f. 140v, and Brian Schneider has plans to create entries for similar pieces of text that have become separated from their proper contexts. “Lost Characters” and “Lost Prologues/Epilogues” were not categories that we anticipated when we first began the project, but they seem utterly appropriate inclusions and will presumably stand to benefit from the broader exposure the LPD gives to obscure documents and records. “Untitled plays” is another category that has already been created in response to need: combing through historical records and criticism, Matthew Steggle noticed some references to plays which were not well documented on account of the plays lacking identifiable titles. How can an unnamed drama be consistently indexed across scholarship? Assigning descriptive titles like “A Huntsman in Green Apparel” or “A King with His Two Sons” will hopefully make these lost plays more visible in bibliographical searches, as will the simple fact of bringing all the known information about them together in their respective entries.

Online collaboration needs to be more than just a group exercise in indexing or a compilation of the best of current knowledge. Provision of the raw building blocks of scholarship is one feature, but encouraging new and easy ways of interacting with other scholars is essential if the sum is to be greater than its parts. It is too early yet to comment on any perceived ‘success’ of the project in terms of what administrators would call ‘impact factor’, but we are beginning to see a steady trickle of scholarship draw in passing on the LPD. Almost a dozen notes or articles arising directly from work conducted for the LPD have so far appeared in print, and at least two books are in the making, but these are all considered ‘bonuses’ in comparison to the aim of introducing lost plays to mainstream scholarly discussions more generally. Anecdotally, conference presenters are beginning to add caveats about how their conclusions might be altered by consideration of lost titles and authors of journal articles (not necessarily concerned with theatre history) are beginning to note

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22 Tucca. No Fye’st; my name’s Hamlet reuenge: thou has been at Parris garde hast not?

23 “Unassigned Prologue – “Gentlemen, y’are welcome, but not from me,” Lost Plays Database, http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Unassigned_Prologue_%22Gentlemen,_y%27are_welcome,_but_not_from_me%22

24 Other comparable titles in the LPD can be viewed at the “untitled plays” category page: http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Category:Untitled_plays
the utility of including lost plays as points of reference. These are both welcome developments and entirely accord with how we envisaged the LPD being used.

We have learnt a great deal from the three short years of playing with the LPD. The 240 entries completed or in progress (at the time this chapter was written) have made significant steps towards recovering historical records and plausible analogues that illuminate a great deal of what was previously passed over as an unknowable lost play. In the 1590s and early 1600s alone, the public theatre’s interest in voyage drama, witchcraft plays, plays about friars and numerous other identifiable trends has begun to reshape our perception of the London theatrical scene. The surprising abundance of information on some titles has, more importantly, begun to force scholars to recognise the need for greater caution when pronouncing bold statements about what we know of early modern drama. This cause for pause should be celebrated, perhaps over and beyond the specific gains made in terms of recovering narratives or other details. Raising the awareness of how incomplete our picture of early modern drama sometimes is, and how much our inherited narratives about the English stage rely on assumptions, is no easy task. The rewards, we believe, will come in the form of more responsible, evidence-based scholarship.

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