We are at a curious moment when scholars seem unsure on how to differentiate between the books, manuscripts, and material texts that have been the objects of our study, and the digital facsimiles that scholars often use to access them. On the one hand, plenty of researchers would agree that the affordances of a paper-and-ink hand-press book are different than those of pixels and bytes, and that digital surrogates cannot replicate the experience of working in a rare books library. But on the other hand, people treat facsimile images as equivalents to the original texts. Need to know what the Nuremberg Chronicle says but don’t have one handy? What were scurrilous pamphlets saying about the monarch in 1642? How did that ballad go, that one about the gallant? All of these—and more—can easily be found online for quick consultation and for repeated reading. But if we are increasingly fluent in turning to our computers to find such resources, we are less adept at thinking about what it means to use these digital facsimiles in the place of source texts. Librarians have long used the language of surrogacy to describe the relationship between primary materials and replacements for them that are better for handling and more readily available. I’ve never been fond of the word “surrogate” to describe digital facsimiles, since it obscures the ways that digitization does not simply replicate the original but creates a new iteration of it. But if digital facsimiles aren’t surrogates, are they primary sources?

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I’ll start with something that seems perhaps a fairly obvious example of how different a digital object can be from the physical object it represents. The *Great Parchment Book* is a survey
compiled in 1639 of all those estates in Derry managed by the City of London through the Irish Society and the City of London livery companies.

A fire in 1786 badly damaged the book, and the 165 surviving leaves remained unavailable to researchers for over 200 years. Through careful preservation, about half the text was recovered, but the fragile, wrinkled parchment remained a stubborn obstacle to further work.

But a few years ago, a team at the University College London’s Centre for Digital Humanities was, after detailed digital imaging, able to virtually un wrinkle the pages.
About 90% of the text of the Great Parchment Book is now readable and available for examination online. There’s no mistaking the digital Great Parchment Book for the parchment one. But what does this mean in terms of how we think of and describe the Book as a source? If we cannot read text that is on the physical leaf (if, indeed, we do not even have access to the physical leaf for preservation needs), and the digital rendering becomes our source for its information, does that mean the digital is our primary source? Can we—should we—think of the text as existing only as a digital object rather than a parchment one?

As it turns out, the Great Parchment Book site provides not only the digital book but also transcriptions of the text, so a scholar is more likely to cite their transcription than to worry about how to cite the book. And there is no question in scholarly circles that someone else’s transcription needs to be cited as a source; it’s both a matter of giving credit to the work that went into creating it and a matter of covering your butt should there be any fault with the transcription.

§ § §

That was an example of a digital object that is in many ways extraordinary. Let’s look at another digital resource, one to which early modern English scholars have become so habituated that they often no longer really question what they are looking at, let alone wonder whether they should be treating it as a simple surrogate for the printed text or a digital object that requires its own investigation as such.

Early English Books Online, or EEBO, has been much discussed recently among Renaissance scholars, thanks to the confusing kerfuffle between the Renaissance Society of America, which offers access to the resource to its members, and ProQuest, the corporation which owns EEBO, along with many other scholarly tools. EEBO is a collection of digitized microfilms of books printed between 1473 and 1700 in the British Isles and British North America or printed in English elsewhere. The microfilms that form its basis are the Early English Books collection that was begun to be filmed by University Microfilms in 1938. Those of us who studied the period after the advent of microfilm but before the rise of digitization made heavy use of those images on microfilm readers. In 1998, ProQuest—the successor to UMI—began to make the Early English Books microfilms available online as a digitized resource to subscribers, a resource that has now come to dominate the field of early modern studies to the degree that EEBO is often the first stop for scholars when teaching or doing research.

{A quick aside: Since 1999, EEBO has begun to work with the Text Creation Partnership, a separate initiative based at University of Michigan and Oxford, to produce transcriptions of a portion of the EEBO corpus. There is a misleading tendency to refer to both EEBO and TCP simply as “EEBO,” a radical confusion that obscures what each resource is and what access users
One of the reasons that EEBO users tend to conflate the images of texts with the transcriptions is that most of them are going to the resource to read the text—what they are interested in is the words on the page, not what the words or pages look like. And EEBO can seem to work fairly seamlessly as a source of textual information. If you come across a reference to an account printed of the 1559 Westminster Conference—a disputation between Protestant and Catholic churchmen to settle some key doctrinal questions at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign—you might want to know what that text said. You probably don’t have a copy in your local library, but there it is on EEBO for you to read.

For instance, here is a key passage from our pamphlet on the Westminster Conference proceedings that describes the three propositions to be disputed, the third of which is “It cannot be proved by the word of God, that there is in the Mass offered up a Sacrifice for the quick and the dead.” If you are familiar with religious debates in this period, this should prick at your attention, for the key point is that Catholics believe that Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice—without that adjective, this passage doesn’t make much sense. And as we can see from the Folger copy of
this book (shown in a pic I took on the bottom; EEBO’s film is of the Bodleian’s copy), there is a pasted-in slip correcting the error.

In this instance, the error in the imaged text is relatively clear to a reader who is familiar with the subject, at least. And one hopes that such a reader would then seek out another copy, although ESTC does not list many copies held by the standard libraries it includes, so for North American scholars, at least, you might have to resort to that old-fashioned strategy of traveling or writing to friends abroad to see if they’ll do some checking for you.

Other textual changes, however, don’t signal their presence or absence, and make EEBO’s practice of using a copy to stand in for an edition clearly a problem. This is one of the poems included in the 1791 Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, a collection printed by Jacob Tonson after Rochester’s death. Is there any indication that we might need to look at this twice?
Since we’re interested in the text, and since it’s not long, I’ll read the poem:

Love a Woman! you’re an Ass,
’Tis a most insipid Passion;
To chuse out for your happiness
The silliest part of God’s Creation.

Let the Porter, and the Groom,
Things design’d for dirty Slaves;
Drudge in fair Aurelia’s Womb,
To get Supplies for Age and Graves.

Farewell Woman: I intend
Henceforth, every night, to sit
With my lewd well natur’d Friend:
Drinking to engender Wit.

Then give me Health, Wealth, and Wine,
And, if busie love intrenches,
There’s a soft young Page of mine,
Does the trick worth forty Wenchers.

There is not, I don’t think, any clue that something might be amiss either in the mise-en-page or in the poem’s meaning. But this is not the poem as it was to finally stand in this edition—leaf D7, the right-hand leaf, was issued in a cancel without the final verse, a slightly more decorous or, at least, slightly less overtly sexual, poem. The Huntington’s copy, the one microfilmed here, never replaced the original leaf with the cancel, and so EEBO provides the earlier state of the book, not the final one. Is this a problem? Not necessarily, if readers know what they’re reading. There is certainly an argument to be made that this is the preferred state of this poem; it’s closer to what Rochester would have intended, if not Tonson. But given the complicated textual history of Rochester’s poems, it is misleading to suggest that this state with all four verses is the edition of the 1791 Poems, a volume that marks an important first step in cleaning up Rochester’s queerness and lewdness for the poetic record and for which such emendations are central to its project.

So at the very least, in this case, if one were working from the EEBO copy of Rochester’s Poems, one would want to clarify that it was from EEBO and perhaps identify the source of EEBO’s images. On the one hand, this might seem obvious: you cite the edition you’re using, you cite the source of your text. But it’s clear from looking through footnotes in journals and to talking to scholars that most researchers do not identify when they are using EEBO. There is, in

Sarah Werner, “When is a Source not a Source?” p6
Shakespeare Quarterly, not a single citation that identifies EEBO as the source for a text being quoted. And yet, in that same journal, are a plethora of quotations of early modern texts in their early modern editions, some of which defy logic in assuming that the scholar was working with the book in hand. If the 1594 first quarto of Taming of a Shrew exists in a single copy at the Huntington Library, a copy to which access is necessarily carefully restricted, and scholars are repeatedly quoting from it, where are they getting their text? Not from the physical object, but from one of its facsimiles—from EEBO, perhaps, or from the Huntington’s digitization. Perhaps they might be quoting from the Malone Society’s print facsimile, but convention has long held that print facsimiles must be cited as such. Why not digital ones? Is the assumption that digital technologies are transparent and that there is no difference between the book in hand and the book on screen? Is it not necessary to credit the work of creating that digital facsimile or to cover your ass in case it has features that affect the readings you generate with it?

§ § §

While I’ve been focusing on textual instability in EEBO and the ways in which scholars ought to be more attentive to investigating and acknowledging their assumptions that EEBO copies can serve as equivalents to editions, I need, of course, to return to what I always return to: texts always have material incarnations and the way words and pages and leaves and volumes appear affects what a text means. While most scholars might go to EEBO to read texts, what they are reading is shaped by what they are seeing, and so the question of what we are looking at in EEBO becomes part of our querying what it means to think of EEBO as a primary source.

This, I think pretty obviously, is a title page. There’s the title—Lachrymae Lachrymarum, or, The Spirit of Teares Distilled for the un-tymely Death of The incomparable prince Panaretus—and the author—by Josuah Sylvester. Is there anything about this that might give us pause? Anything that signals we should look twice, ask further questions about what we’re seeing?
The Folger happens to have multiple copies of this book and some digital images of it:

So now we know: something happened here, and we need to look at this more closely. A bit of context for this book: Sylvester’s poem is one of a flourishing of mourning poems that surround the death of Prince Henry, King James’s eldest son, in 1612. Like many of these mourning books, Sylvester’s wears its lament not only in its text, but in its mise-en-page.

That blackness extends to its xylographic title page, with white lettering cut into the inked woodblock. So what happened to the EEBO image for it to result in its negative, black letters on a white field? The microfilms—in both the copies of the Folger’s negatives and the UMI’s positives—show the book as it should be, white lettering on black. So the problem clearly lies with EEBO’s digitization of the film. And the rest of the book hasn’t been reversed; the interior
pages are as they should be, black lettering on white ground, with black facing pages and white arms.

So the problem clearly lies only with the title page. What might be the source of the error? Someone in the automated routine—a computer automatically adjusting the images as they were processed or a person spot checking the results—saw this title page and decided it didn’t look like a title page was supposed to look. Instead, the person or machine processed the image as a negative, inverting it to the result we now have, something that might look more correct but that is also demonstrably wrong.

This isn’t the only reversed-image in EEBO; we see it in the first edition of Sylvester’s poem,
and Samuel Daniel’s 1606 funeral poem is transposed as well.

But other editions of *Lachrymae Lachrymarum* are properly white-on-black, and so is this 1613 collection of mourning poems.
Just because it’s a white-line xylographic title page doesn’t mean you can take its appearance for granted, one way or the other. You have to investigate each one, and know what the hidden signs are to look for that something might not be right. If you’re familiar with mourning books, it’s not hard to spot the reversed images; if you’re not, however, and you think of EEBO as a transparent window onto the text, you will miss a key element of how these books make their meaning.

You’ll also miss a key aspect of this book’s making. If you believe that the physical traits of texts are important elements for understanding how they convey they meaning and how they circulate amongst readers, then the questions you would ask of any source—what is it, how was it made, how was it used, how did it pass through time to reach my hands—these are questions you should ask of digital sources as well. If you think of EEBO’s *Lachrymae Larchrymarum* as a transparent window onto Sylvester’s poem, then you will not only miss an important aspect of that book’s meaning, you’ll miss the opportunity to learn how EEBO’s technology shapes the books it passes on to us. (And that’s particularly important when you remember that one of the times a source is definitely not a source is when you no longer have access to it, either because you’ve been priced out of the resource or because the resource folds.)

§ § §

Let’s look at one more set of digital resources, because I trained as a Shakespearean and these are as fundamental to current history of digital Shakespeare as they are to the history of understanding printing.

Shakespeare’s First Folio. There are, as we speak, 13 different copies of the First Folio that are available as digital facsimiles from 9 different institutions. {There will soon be more, up to 19 more, as far as I know. I keep a descriptive catalog of these on my site if you feel compelled to follow along.} You can take my word for it that they cover pretty much all aspects of usability,
from the great to the hair-pulling. There are lots of things that they do differently from each other: some let you navigate by signature mark, others don’t provide any navigation tools at all other than browsing thumbnails; some make it easy for you to reuse images under Creative Commons licensing (or, in the case of Miami of Ohio, by making it public domain), while others throw up hoops for you to jump through or don’t let you reuse at all.

But there’s one thing that these different digital First Folios have in common: they don’t share information about their technical specifications, funding mechanisms, and project history. There are some exceptions: the Bodleian conducted a recent and public fundraising campaign to digitize their First Folio, and their publicity apparatus is still visible in their Sprint for Shakespeare blog; Leeds includes text about the process used to digitize theirs on their site. Sometimes you catch a glimpse of a granting agency’s logo or an acknowledgment of a funder. But that’s it. That’s all that is captured about these projects. We don’t know how these digitizations were made, when they or their platforms were created, or who paid for them. The digital equivalents of watermarks and imprints and broken type—think image resolution and production teams and camera and software specs—are missing from these First Folios.

Compare this to the sort of work that has been done on the First Folio itself. Thanks to the high survival rate of this book, and to Henry Folger’s insistence on collecting 82 copies of it, scholars have been able to study minute details of the book. By noting the appearance of broken type, among other features, Charlton Hinman was able to work out how the First Folio was printed in Jaggard’s shop, including identifying other works that were printed concurrently. That, in turn, has helped scholars understand the economics of early modern printing. We know an astonishing amount about the First Folio, thanks to studying the physical evidence of surviving copies of the book.

Why might we want to know these things about digital First Folios? Keep in mind that the vast majority of people who find themselves wanting to consult a First Folio will turn to a digitized copy of it. The Norton Facsimile is wonderful and will continue to be used, but it’s not free and the quality of the images is not as high as what you’ll now find online. It’s not far-fetched to say that mise-en-web of these First Folios shapes how most users, including scholars, encounter and use and understand Shakespeare’s book. Just as we believe that the printed marginalia in 16th-century English bibles offers insight into the wrestling over authority after the Reformation, so do the choices made by these digital First Folios create a glimpse into how libraries and scholars are imagining public audiences for their books and for Shakespeare.

What are we losing by not treating these First Folios as objects that are sources of study? Why are we undervaluing our own work in creating them by not crediting the labor that has gone into them? Why is Shakespeare’s First Folio worth poring over on paper but not on screen? Despite the large amount of funds that have collectively gone into producing these 13 books, there is a
strangle belittling of the investment that has gone into them by their creators, and a corresponding lack of interest from scholars that use them.

§ § §

So, when is a source not a source? If we go by what we see evidenced in how researchers treat the materials they use and how they create digital resources, digitized facsimiles are not source material. But if we look again at the structures and affordances of digitized facsimiles, we see that treating them as transparent windows onto source material is inadequate. Ignoring the ways in which digital facsimiles are themselves primary sources keeps us from asking the questions we need to of how they are shaping our research. We all use digital facsimiles. We should all be asking the same questions of those works that we do of the paper and parchment works that we handle: what do we see, how did it get there, who made it, what does this object want to tell me, and what does it want to keep secret? By asking those questions, we can only improve the research that we are already doing, and we can improve the quality of resources we have to work with.