



The Janus-Face of *Early Modern Literary Studies*: Negotiating the Boundaries of Interactivity in an Electronic Journal for the Humanities

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1. In its fourth year of publication at the time of writing, *Early Modern Literary Studies* (*EMLS*) is, by many measures, accepted as an academic resource by the community it has intended from its outset to serve. Well in excess of half a million *EMLS* "documents" -- papers, reviews, notes, announcements, and so forth -- have been accessed by a group consisting of some 3,500 regular readers and five times that number in occasional browsers; readers access the journal from its home site, at the University of Alberta, as well as its mirror site at Oxford University and its archive at the National Library of Canada. *EMLS*, also, is now indexed by the *MLA International Bibliography*, the Modern Humanities Research Association's *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, and a number of other services and databases. But, while *EMLS* enjoys the widespread recognition that follows from our accessibility, a number of those associated with the journal also find that *EMLS* now faces several questions, questions associated with introspection and self-evaluation.^[1]
2. From its beginning, *EMLS* has needed to define its role as a new and electronic publication in a field characterized by established journals and the print medium.^[2] Therein lay a dilemma. The editorial board was convinced that the electronic medium offered a radically new and powerful format for publishing, but it also recognized that *EMLS* needed to operate and seem much like a print journal in order to establish its legitimacy as a scholarly resource. The approach taken to address this dilemma was to fashion a journal with two distinct sections: the journal proper, and *interactive EMLS*.

3. The journal proper, which publishes only fully refereed material, continues now -- as it did initially -- to face questions surrounding the legitimacy of non-paper publishing. Issues that continue to influence the maintenance and development of this part of *EMLS* include the questions of academic readership that are common to all journals (how many, and who, read it; who publishes in it; who cites what is published in it; and so forth). The issues also include some pragmatics that do not affect print journals in the same way: what credit is given to those who publish in it, the accessibility of the journal, its permanence, its locatability, and so forth. (While not the focus of this paper, those interested in these matters will find them addressed more fully in the following note.)[\[3\]](#)
4. The other section, *interactive EMLS (iEMLS)*, faces a different set of questions: some longstanding, but others evolving so quickly that they are difficult to identify. All questions pertaining to *iEMLS*, though, are best understood in the context of the history of the section, which came into being with the second issue of *EMLS*, in mid-1995. Under guidance from our editorial and advisory boards, and with the input first of Stephen Matsuba and, later, Jeff Miller, it was developed as an extension of *EMLS*, with an eye to fostering an on-line environment for academic interaction within the community of readers we serve. We believe now, as we did from the outset, that the interactive section of the journal can facilitate the useful, less formal processes lying behind the products of our discipline which, ultimately, make up the refereed section.
5. From the start, in *iEMLS* we have tried to do a bit of everything: we posted electronic versions of early modern English texts; we offered scholars a place to post works-in-progress, pre-prints, and conference papers; we offered conferences a place to post calls-for-papers, programs, and registration materials; we hosted an archive for a listserv, a database of reviewed books pertinent to Milton scholarship, and various other resources. Knowing the potential of the electronic medium for this sort of interaction, but lacking a model and a clear path to follow for its development, *iEMLS* has tried a great variety of materials and methods. In retrospect, some have been successful; others have not.
6. There are a number of reasons for both the failures and successes and, while we will catalogue some of these, it is just as important to note that the role of a resource like *EMLS* (and the *iEMLS* section) -- and the way in which such a resource can best facilitate scholarly interaction -- has changed considerably during the time since *iEMLS*' inception. Whereas once it seemed possible (and even practical) to act as an umbrella for a wide variety of internet activities, today this is no longer so. While once one of the very few scholarly presences on the internet for those interested in the literature of early modern England, *EMLS* and *iEMLS* have now been joined by a host of other sites, many of which are solely dedicated to individual activities across the range listed above. As such, those looking for electronic texts can find them in many archives, and better yet, on the internet sites of electronic publishers that bring to their texts the best qualitative guarantees; many conferences post their own calls-for-papers and related materials; likewise, scholars can circulate pre- and post-prints of their work on their own web pages. Given these changes, if *iEMLS* is to serve in the spirit of its initial intention, then the role of *iEMLS* must change; rather than acting as an umbrella over a large number of areas, *iEMLS* must be re-envisioned as one of many resources, and attention must be focused on activities that *iEMLS* is in the best position to carry out.
7. A good precursor to change, though, is evaluation and reflection, and it is this precursive stage that we hope



to reflect in our title's allusion to Janus, the Roman god and protector of entrance ways who was frequently invoked in the Renaissance; he seems appropriate today for consideration of the interactivity we seek for *EMLS*, since the journal seems to occupy and watch over a liminal space of its own. Janus^[4] looks back at what has gone before and ahead to what is to come; at *EMLS*, we are attempting to do likewise. *EMLS* continues to maintain the integrity of the printed scholarly journal and, indeed, in its presentation of articles, *EMLS*' face is shaped to resemble as closely as possible those of its well-crafted print cousins; the journal's other, interactive, face looks toward the rapidly developing field of scholarly electronic communications. This face seeks shape -- it is half-formed at best. Moreover, while it reflects excitement, it also carries marks of failure and disappointment.



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8. As Willard McCarty has observed, "electronic journals differ from print journals in their ability to connect readers to internet resources of potential interest to them, and, as well, to provide a virtual space for discussion and the exchange of ideas" (McCarty 169). Indeed, these features offer challenges both exciting and daunting, because the potential uses of interactivity are unique to the medium and could thus fill an important niche for the communities the journal serves. In an assessment of "Recent Trends in Scholarly Electronic Publishing," Ann Okerson discusses the ways in which the more "venturesome epublications" are beginning to take advantage of the medium's special interactive features, including using sound, video, and soliciting feedback. She ends by noting the following "dilemma" for journal editors and publishers: "a publication based on the print journal model cannot have real interactivity without moving away from paper process and content" ("Recent Trends"). Such has it been with *EMLS*; at the same time that *EMLS* looks to the conventions of print to gain acceptance in our community, the electronic medium offers entirely new and different ways of understanding our tasks as editors, and understanding the shape of our journal as well. As technology improves and the number of electronic resources for the study of early modern literature expands, we not only need to find ways of keeping up with the pace of growth but also to be able to guide our readers, many of them uncertain of how to use the wealth of materials out there. Our challenge, then, is the following: working within a genre of scholarly publishing that is, on the whole, still engaged in the uphill process of gaining legitimacy in the humanities, how do we take advantage of the dynamism allowed by the medium to the fullest extent, and to the best advantage of our readers?
 9. As Okerson reminds us, "the possibilities are endless" for electronic scholarly publishing ("Recent Trends"). This, however, does not mean that achieving a productive scholarly interactivity in a web journal is either easy or straightforward. Rather, another old adage also suits, that of "try, try again." Several "obvious" uses of interactivity have proven less successful than one might have guessed.
 10. An example of our first major employment of the dynamism of the medium is *iEMLS*' first virtual seminar, which was proposed and maintained by Luc Borot at Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Renaissance Anglaise, Université Paul-Valéry. The seminar's topic was Renaissance utopian literatures, focusing on More's *Utopia*. Its intended function was to allow the participation of anyone interested, thus creating a virtual seminar atmosphere

among participants from around the world. The virtual seminar was an extension of an actual seminar being given in Montpellier; every week, someone from that seminar would post a short topic-oriented report to the group for response, and discussion on that topic (or one related to it) would follow for the week, until the next posting of this kind.^[5] A range of participants was involved, from graduate students to senior faculty, and the virtual seminar offered a convenient and immediate setting for such a gathering.

11. The seminar lasted its duration, and was a great success for those who were able to participate in person but, in its electronic incarnation it suffered from symptoms common to many discussions carried out in online list format: while many people subscribed to the discussion list, relatively few actively participated. Some local seminar participants, at Montpellier, also were unwilling to interact on-line, making it impossible for the expected pattern of interaction between in-class seminar and virtual seminar to work effectively. Several of the participants also encountered technical problems, some more significant than others. Ironically, the technology that made the seminar possible -- directly (through technical problems) and indirectly (by introducing an unfamiliar communicative mode) -- resulted in a degree of disconnection. In this instance, the casual seminar atmosphere was difficult to facilitate online; what worked very well in the classroom did not translate immediately to the internet. A classroom seminar, one might conclude, relies heavily on the not virtual but real presence of its participants; the text-only communication of a listserv cannot carry the complex, multiple, and continual verbal and non-verbal signs that give a seminar its energy. Even so, this virtual seminar was a valuable experience and a solid attempt to bring the model of the seminar to the virtual world; moreover, it provided an experience on which those at *EMLS* can build.
12. Other features of *iEMLS* have seemed as obviously appropriate for the internet, but have brought similar results -- not utter failure, but not the end expected. One of these features has been that of the "Works-in-Progress" section. We have made room here for scholars either to get responses from the general readership on papers/editions/books-in-progress that have not yet been submitted to publishers or for scholars to circulate pre-print material, that accepted for publication but not yet gone to press. While this section has seemed a natural application of new technologies, and has worked very well in some fields, it has not proven popular; few pieces are posted, and feedback has been negligible.^[6] Likewise, our "Readers' Forum," a space for readers to respond to the articles *EMLS* publishes, is underused: readers rarely take the opportunity to comment in a public way; when they do comment, it is usually to the author directly, via the e-mail address given with the article. Clearly, then, the opportunity to comment does not mean that readers will do so.^[7] One reason that this result was not expected is the success of listservs at maintaining a regular stream of communication. Generosity and openness characterize lists such as *FICINO* and *SHAKSPER*, but perhaps the very permanence of the interactive journal keeps this space from being as openly used. Listservs are largely ephemeral in form, if not materially; though many are archived and searchable, there is an implicit understanding that messages to a listserv represent thought-in-progress, not final intellectual products, with a different level of culpability than a printed piece would be expected to have.^[8] Comments published in our Readers' Forum, on the other hand are precisely not listserv entries, but rather the carefully crafted pieces (like the articles they comment upon) that scholars usually entrust to the permanence of print publication. While electronic resources often face the blanket charge of being ephemeral, this resistance of scholars to comment quickly on other's work in the space of the electronic journal speaks otherwise.

13. Another function we have explored for *interactive EMLS* has been that of gathering conference materials. We advertise calls for papers, conferences announcements and programs, papers and addresses from past and forthcoming conferences, and other materials like registration information. We have found that, on the whole, conference organizers have desired this additional publicity from us, and providing access to conference programs has proved valuable for many of our readers. In addition to posting calls and programs, we have also sought to post conference papers. While several individuals have posted papers with us, our attempts to post whole panels (or beyond this, a wide range of papers from a given conference) have met with resistance.^[9] Further, it is quickly becoming standard for conferences to put up their own sites, and the more technically-minded of conference organizers often publish abstracts or complete papers.^[10] With all this in mind, we are reshaping the *iEMLS* conference section less as a platform for papers and more as a central location of links to such sites.
14. The most visited components of *interactive EMLS* so far are the sections that contain or link to various on-line resources. Our archive of the *SHAKSPER* listserv with its many articles and Shakespearian texts serves as an important contribution to on-line scholars of the period. Likewise, Romuald Lakowski's annotated bibliographies on Thomas More and his work provide a comprehensive connection to both print and on-line materials. We also keep an up-to-date listing of calls for conference papers, articles, and submissions to books. In addition to these on-site resources, we list links to resources elsewhere on the web, including on-line discussion and news groups, electronic texts of primary and secondary materials, databases, archives, and more. These link pages are edited by a number of respected figures who work in the medium -- Perry Willett, Richard Bear, and David Gants among them -- who ensure that the linked-to resources are of high quality and appropriate interest. Print journals can only do so much in listing these resources, while we can update them often and link our readers directly to the sites. Our challenge, here, is sheer volume: as in other fields, resources relating to early modern studies evolve constantly; new resources are published frequently, while others cease to exist. (The electronic journal is in a unique position to help readers negotiate this shifting landscape, since the convenience and speed with which we can do so is advantageous.) In addition to providing links to these resources, we are planning to start reviewing them in much the same way that we review books, except that the new reviews will be directly linked to the material reviewed. By doing this, we hope to help readers sort through the various resources available, both by describing the contents of the resource and by evaluating its quality.
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15. It remains, though, that interactivity in a scholarly journal can be more than a well-maintained set of links to web resources. Looking forward, we have introduced a new feature entitled "Dialogues" which, if successful will take advantage of the internet's capacity to allow quick communication between interested parties in spite of geographical distance. The challenge of this feature is to complement the prolific scholarly conversation that exists on listservs such as *SHAKSPER* and *FICINO*; and, with this project, we are asking whether the internet can sustain a highly focused and rigorous examination of a particular issue, and, if so, how. To this end, we are taking an approach different from that of the Virtual Seminar discussed above. We expect, as with the Virtual Seminar, that the number of readers will greatly exceed the number of contributors. Whether this is a problem, though, is a matter of expectation. Rather than trying to recreate the intimacy of a few people together in a room, we wish to construct an exchange native to the internet,

much as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has done with its on-line "Colloquy" feature. In these "Dialogues," three or four notable scholars debate a topic, proposed by the editors, concerning the study of early modern English literature. These scholars first write brief position papers, which are read by the group. At this point, the papers and responses are posted in the interactive section of the journal. From here, the discussion is opened to the general readership (the writers of the position papers are encouraged to continue their participation). Comments from readers are moderated and posted on the site.

16. Unlike the Virtual Seminar, though, the success of the feature should not depend on the continual contribution of most readers. We expect, instead, that a small percentage of readers will make one or possibly two thoughtful contributions. After a set period, the authors of the position papers have an opportunity to make final changes to their papers, and to consider publishing them in the refereed section of the journal as a special issue. This known end-point should provide the necessary energy for the Dialogue, in that the readership will know that the final papers will have to account for what has been expressed during the general discussion.
17. There are several aspects to this that we feel are important. First, we hope to obviate the perception that interaction on the internet is trivial: limited both to a small group of devotees and to discussions of mechanical matters such as sources, availability of texts, and occasionally, the interpretation of particular texts. We attempt to counter this perception by borrowing some of the symbolic capital of print media: we invite for our primary group scholars already extensively published to discuss an issue of broad importance to the field. In addition, the continued participation of the primary group should lend focus to the discussion. Our intent here is to bridge the divide between the process and the product of scholarly activity; between the interaction that takes place in conversations either actual or virtual, and the somewhat mystified realm of publishing.
18. The nature of the topics discussed in the "Dialogues" calls for some comment. Clearly, we want the topics to be broad enough to interest a wide range of scholars working in early modern studies and to allow the dialogues' major participants some room to maneuver. Equally, we feel that some degree of specificity is necessary to focus the discussion - a particular text, genre, theme or critical aporia, perhaps. The purpose of the interactive dialogues is to create a fast-paced yet structured forum in which scholars can discuss what they feel is of importance to the field now, and so the editors hope both to be responsive to our readership and to offer topics relevant to the current state of affairs in early modern studies.[\[11\]](#)
19. These "Dialogues" come out of the philosophy that we are now taking to the relationship between the two parts of the journal, *EMLS* proper and *iEMLS*, to integrate them more closely. Their disparate styles have, in the past, almost made them appear to be two separate publications -- a sense heightened by the significantly different layout of each, and the distinct graphic logos each displayed. While, in the past, we have needed to make clear the distinction between refereed and non-refereed materials, *overemphasizing* this distinction might have been responsible for the production of one view of *EMLS*: one which sees it, on one side, a seemingly traditional print journal made electronic and, on the other, an eclectic collection of materials of varying reliability, perhaps more of a curiosity than a resource. Maintaining the refereed/non-refereed distinction is still, of course, of the utmost importance, but we are also working to develop useful connections between the two types of materials, hoping to highlight a mutually-informing relationship between the

two parts of the journal: one that will take advantage of the stability of the scholarly journal, but one that will also allow for the benefits that innovative and new manners of exchange can bring to scholarship. To this end, we are making changes both in format (our use of frames, and our redesigning of the *iEMLS* logo make moving from one section to the other almost seamless) and in content.

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20. Returning to the notion of *EMLS* occupying a liminal space, it seems that what is forward and what is backward depends chiefly on one's footing -- and, in the world of electronic publishing, that footing is always changing. For *EMLS*, this has meant being open to charges of novelty by those unsure or skeptical of new technologies in scholarship, and simultaneously being described as conservative by some specializing in electronic publishing.^[12] These contrary views are probably more a sign of success than failure though, if one allows that innovation necessarily creates discomfort, and that accepted scholarly practices are themselves the result of a long process of precisely such negotiations.

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Notes

1. Ray Siemens is founder of *EMLS* and, from its inception until 1999, its editor. Paul Dyck has served as associate editor for *interactive EMLS* since 1997. Joanne Woolway Grenfell worked with *EMLS* in capacities from review editor to co-editor from its inception until 1998. Jennifer Lewin began as editorial assistant in 1996, serving later with Paul Dyck as associate editor for *interactive EMLS* until 1998. This paper reflects the combined input of everyone in this group, and that of the editorial board, at a time in early-1998, when discussions of this nature were taking

place.

An earlier version of this paper, authored by Paul Dyck, Ray Siemens, and Jennifer Lewin, was presented by Paul Dyck in the "Computing Technology and Renaissance Studies" joint sessions of the *Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies* and the *Consortium for Computers in the Humanities* at the 1998 Congress of the *Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada*, U of Ottawa, Ottawa (May 27-8, 1998); it also incorporates some material presented elsewhere by Siemens, Woolway, and Lewin.

2. Moreover, from the inception of *EMLS*, those involved with the editorship of the journal have walked a fine line between utilizing the possibilities of a new medium for scholarly publishing and responding to the misconceptions of some of our peers and more senior academics that electronic publication might not be valued in the same way that paper publication is. When *EMLS* was established in 1994, it was much more difficult to convey to people what the new, electronic medium of its publication had to offer than it is now. At the meeting in which the idea of *EMLS* was first raised, there was a rather uncertain response: "You mean it wouldn't appear on paper at all?"; "So is it like a discussion group?"; "But wouldn't people just change the things we put up there?"; "But it couldn't be permanent, could it?" Many positive things were also said -- there, and in discussion with others outside that initial meeting -- but the beginnings of *EMLS* were marked with a recognition of the misconceptions that had to be overcome (at a time, it is worth noting, when comparisons of the impending electronic publishing revolution to the time of the printer Gutenberg or the humanists Erasmus and More seemed less worn than they do today).

3. Of interest in this regard -- though divergent from the main matter of this paper -- are some of the pragmatics that do not affect print journals. These appear to emanate from the single, though slowly changing, fact that to a significant number of academics today, the internet still remains an unknown and largely misperceived entity: one without controls governing production, without precise and stable locations for information, without assurance that one's work would not be taken only to appear under someone else's name (or, worse, altered for the worse and then redistributed under the name of the original author), and so on. A problem of perception towards the medium exists, and the chief difficulty, it seems, with online publications is that they do not appear on paper -- paper being something that is universally understood, almost intuitively, with connotations of permanence and unquestioned ideas associated with the handling, storage, dissemination, duplication, and so forth, of printed materials that are taken for granted.

In an effort to assuage such concerns -- those associated quite closely with the nature of the electronic medium and its difference from print -- the response at *EMLS* has been to emulate the best that the world of the print journal has to offer and to supplement it with the best that the internet can offer to that print-oriented model: *EMLS* publishes three times a year, a decision that might seem strange, given the ease with which new material might constantly be incorporated and, thus, enabling a form of on-going publication; *EMLS* has an editorial board, as do other journals, and stringent guidelines for the refereeing of published materials in the journal section; the Readers' Forum that *EMLS* offers for reader feedback is moderated -- people can

not post whatever they want there; and *EMLS* was a pioneer in providing instructions on how to cite electronic publications in bibliographies (these follow those outlined in the most recent *MLA Handbook*, which followed shortly thereafter).

Disregarding, for the moment, that many aspects of print publication processes (especially peer review) for good reason transcend the print medium, attributes such as ISSN numbers, outlining of citation methods, editorial boards, and tri-annual publication have also been all part of many similar electronic academic resources' quests for legitimacy -- but not legitimacy for its own sake. *EMLS*, too, has sought such legitimacy by evoking many of the trappings indicating quality in the print world; aside from the obvious benefits of several of these attributes, this was carried out also so that those who would publish with *EMLS* receive the appropriate and necessary credit for their work -- both from the scholarly community at large and from more local, mechanical operations akin to those overseen by tenure and promotion committees.

One might, in response to this, point out that organizations such as the Modern Language Association, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the American Association for Research Libraries, and the Canadian Association for Research Libraries, among others, have made some significant statements on the value of work published in the electronic medium and how it should be treated equally with that published in print; but these policies, at this point in time, appear to do very little for those being evaluated by others who choose to fashion electronic scholarly publication in terms of what we might call the 'negative mythology' of the internet: that is, those whose view of electronic scholarly publishing -- even with the expert guidance of the groups named above -- is focused on ideas of impermanence, a lack of enforceable standards, and, worse, metaphors of chat lines and bulletin boards. Moreover, academic reputation is also at stake; if one's peers at other institutions don't respect material published electronically, then they will not read that material.

Such a state of affairs have fueled our own concerns that the legitimacy of *EMLS* as a place of publication be recognized. Electronic publication of a journal, as with print publication of such a resource, is an act of service to the profession. Because of the positive benefits of electronic publication and dissemination -- less cost, speed of publication (even with rigorous quality control), ease of access (assuming one has access to a computer), and greater cost-efficiency and management and retrieval of information -- a scholarly journal in electronic form has a greater potential to serve the profession than one in print form. Service to a profession, of course, requires that one serves the needs of that community, pragmatic and otherwise, but if the profession as a whole refuses to recognize the legitimacy of work published in electronic journals (and thus, in essence, penalizes those who choose for many good reasons to publish in this way), then the electronic journal is not serving its profession properly.

If we look at the progression of ideas associated with electronic scholarly publication from the late 1980s -- when questions such as "can such publication exist?" were asked -- to the early and mid 1990s -- when we encountered the challenge of the subversive proposal -- to today, where those publishing in the

electronic medium have the support of some very influential groups, we can see a pattern emerging, and a positive one at that. That said, we should not discount the fact that today such publication is still difficult, still considered by the larger academic community (in slowly shrinking numbers) as a marginal activity.

4. The image is taken from Alciato (#18), and is here used with permission of the editors of its electronic edition.
5. The course's electronic text of *Utopia* was edited and graciously provided for the seminar by Lou Burnard of the Oxford Text Archive.
6. For areas in which such an approach has been successful, see the e-print exchange for high-energy physics (and other fields) at Los Alamos (Ginsparg).

One complicating factor for this type of section is the recent trend by publishers to consider submitted work that has also been posted on a web site as previously published and therefore ineligible for consideration. (See the *Chronicle of Higher Education* Colloquy on "[Requiring Theses in Digital Form: the First Year at Virginia Tech](#)" [Young].)

7. This pattern is observable in other humanities e-journals such as [\(Re\) Soundings](#), and resources such as [Ardenet](#), whose reader comment areas remain largely empty.
8. This is not to say that listserv archives are not used -- in fact, the *EMLS* SHAKSPER archive is one of the most frequently accessed parts of our site -- but, rather, to note that there is an important difference between the conversational, informal note of the listserv and the more formal comments usually submitted to journals, in whatever form.
9. On one occasion, editors Joanne Woolway and Jennifer Lewin encouraged the ten members of a workshop they led on Edmund Spenser's works to post, or pre-circulate, their papers through *interactive EMLS* in order to facilitate pre- and post-conference discussion amongst themselves and with those unable to attend the conference. However, only a few people responded favorably. It remained unclear to a number of people what the benefits and responsibilities would be -- for example, would the paper-writers be accountable for responding to queries on-line, or at the conference, or in both forums? Would we limit access to the site or leave it open for anyone to post questions? How would the immediacy of this kind of feedback work with the conventional sort that the conference itself set up? The conventional forums for discussion were familiar and proven, and the venture proposed by *iEMLS* raised more questions than it could readily answer.
10. Notably, conferences dedicated to computing and literature have succeeded in posting relatively full conference proceedings, though even some of these suffer some marks of inattention. Two examples are "[Cultural Frictions](#)" and "[The Electronic Scriptorium](#)."
11. Thanks specifically to Mathew Martin (Assistant Editor, Dialogues) for his articulation of the approach we are taking with the Dialogues.
12. The "Report of the Committee on Electronic Publishing and Tenure" at

Rutgers described EMLS as "a peer-reviewed electronic journal which if converted to paper looks indistinguishable from a print counterpart."

Responses to this piece intended for the Readers' Forum may be sent to the Editor at L.M.Hopkins@shu.ac.uk.



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