Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Wilkinson, Hazel, principal investigator. Fleuron: A Database of Eighteenth-Century Printers' Ornaments

Andie Silva

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070179ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34091

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Wilkinson, Hazel, principal investigator.
Fleuron: A Database of Eighteenth-Century Printers' Ornaments.
Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2016. Accessed 12 July 2019.
fleuron.lib.cam.ac.uk.

Fleuron is a database of over 45,000 eighteenth-century books containing printers' ornaments. It was developed by the University of Cambridge with support from the Bibliographical Society and data from Cengage Learning (originally scanned for Eighteenth Century Collections Online). The database features images from books published in a number of locations across Europe and the Americas, which is particularly refreshing given how many digital projects still limit their scope to England. As stated on the landing page, the project is aimed at history of the book scholars, particularly those seeking to identify counterfeit imprints and pirated books. Given the variety of ornament types (fleurons, naturally, but also headpieces, decorated initials, and rules), the project should also be of use to students seeking to explore some of the early years of graphic design and those seeking to become more familiar with individual printing styles by genre or printer. There are currently few digital projects focusing on printed images, and projects focusing on printers' illustrations are rarer yet. Arkyves (arkyves.org), for instance, includes collections of printers' devices (as well as emblems, illustrations, and illuminated manuscripts), but is unfortunately paywalled. And while Roland B. McKerrow's *Printers' and Publishers' Devices in England & Scotland 1485–1640* (1913) is freely available online via archive.org, the work is limited to printers' marks and the scanned pages are not searchable. Fleuron therefore offers scholars a unique opportunity to study ornaments across a range of types, literary genres, and locations. The website allows users to search using metadata about books (such as author, publisher, or place) and ornaments (such as size and subject). Users can also browse pages by book title, author, or publication place. Curiously, although the project focuses on the work of printers, their names are not centralized in any of the browsing pages nor are they distinguished from publishers in the search page. This seems like a strange oversight, as searching by printer might have been useful for those investigating the role of particular individuals within the European or American book trade.

The program designed by the Fleuron team (Hazel Wilkinson, Dirk Gorissen, James Briggs, and Filippo Spiga) made it possible for them to extract

ornaments in a wide range of sizes and styles and effectively crop them out of full, scanned pages. As the "About" page explains, ornaments "are typically horizontally centered with the text and surrounded by whitespace or serve as capitals with clear bounds on aspect ratio," which made it relatively easy for the tool to set them apart from segments of text. This process is somewhat imperfect, and according to the site the team is still working on removing false positives such as badly scanned or degraded text. There seem to be a number (albeit small) of misfires left in the database, and as a user it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a machine error or a low-quality image, as in this example: fleuron. lib.cam.ac.uk/book/0018600100. Additionally, some titles in the database seem to have zero illustrations, which could be a result of removing mislabelled images or simply errors in the system when multiple copies of the same edition were entered. This could make counting tricky if one were to try scraping or repurposing the dataset to get a sense of the number of ornaments printed in a given year or genre, but null results could also encourage researchers to consider differences among editions with several, few, or no ornaments.

Each individual entry includes basic information about the publication including title, author, date, place, publisher, subject, ESTC number, and total number of ornaments, followed by thumbnails of each ornament in order of appearance. Each ornament has its own ID number and corresponding page number, the latter of which should give users a sense of how often ornaments tend to appear in paratextual sections and back matter (although it is not entirely clear whether these numbers correspond to pages in the scanned file or folio numbers in the original printed book). The ornament images themselves are displayed without critical commentary or label; although the site offers a small glossary of commonly used definitions, the project developers leave it up to the researcher to classify what types of ornaments appear in each given book. While this may be useful in order to avoid debates regarding taxonomy choices, a controlled vocabulary would have been productive so users could perform searches by ornament type. Searching ornaments by size is valuable in theory, but I suspect difficult to accomplish in practice. For instance, a user interested in locating all header-style ornaments might be well served by the "hint" provided in the search page that "an ornament spanning the width of a page will typically have a size of 1000 ± 100" (fleuron.lib.cam.ac.uk/ornament_search), but someone looking to search for all decorated initials might have a harder time determining standard sizes (I assume these measurements refer to pixels).

Down the line, if the project continues to expand, it would also be useful to have the book's printed size listed in the metadata page for context and scale.

Searching by book will offer researchers an opportunity to compare the range and quality of ornaments printers used to embellish and perhaps raise the prices of books. A manual search for particular date ranges and genres may also yield interesting answers. For instance: Were ornaments more common in the earlier part of the century, or later in the period? Were books aimed at professionals in law and medicine, for example, likely to feature fewer decorations than literary and religious publications? Some of these questions, however, may take time to answer, as the tables can't be sorted and information regarding genre isn't visible until the user clicks on a particular record. Yet these might be minor issues for the project's target audience which, judging by their latest Twitter posts, may be more interested in using the site to identify printers' signature moves and unique choices.

The project seems to have been originally designed with a companion blog in mind, which is still linked on the landing page and on the navigation menu. The first entry offers an interesting gathering of ornaments featuring illustrations of books, including some with decorated pages—an interestingly "meta" approach to printed ornaments which may point to how ubiquitous yet culturally significant such enhancements had become. Unfortunately, although this post promises to be "the first in a series," this space has not been updated in a few years. Judging from this blog and the copyright notice, the project appears to be in its completed, sunset phase. There is no information on the site about whether the project managers are willing to share their data, which could certainly help take the database further without requiring any more investment (in time or money) from the original developers. And while some updates to the site's design and interface could be made to improve usability, Fleuron's overall contribution to book history is undeniable, as it offers an impressive number of digitized images in searchable form, allowing for further research on graphic design and the early book trade in ways that were previously impossible. Ultimately, the site offers a productive starting point for future work in the field, encouraging book historians to venture further into decorative designs and printers' marks and their role in shaping readership and the print marketplace.

ANDIE SILVA
York College, CUNY