Printed Catalogues of Private Libraries as a Source for European Book History

MEDIATE: Middlebrow Enlightenment, Disseminating Ideas, Authors, and Texts in Europe 1665-1830
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Corpus and method

Sources
Sales/Domestic/Memorial Catalogues
The function and nature of catalogues of private libraries may evolve from their original use, being repurposed as bibliographical references or price guides.

Regions
The British Isles / The Dutch Republic / France
Metropolitan / Provincial
Colonial Networks
Transnational perspective on the circulation of books and ideas.

1665-1830
The Age of Enlightenment?
Such periodisation reflects a realistic starting date for the spread of Enlightenment ideas and an approximate date marking both the end of a political era and the start of a new printing revolution.

Big Data
With thousands of catalogues and millions of individual book copies, the data must be processed through a purpose-built database. Transcriptions of catalogues have been initially outsourced, and are curated by the research group.

Delimiting
• what, where, when & how?

Harvesting data on a large scale

Owners and Sellers
Title pages often provide facts about the owners of libraries, such as their names, addresses and professions. In sales catalogues, sought-after general/literary and precious books can figure in a predominant position alongside other commercial information. Standardised and carefully curated, these data provide a stable base for prosopographical studies on library owners and readers, as well as the study of consumerism and the book trade.

Bibliographical Data
Catalogues of private libraries list catalogues or books allegedly owned by an individual. Other data might include names of authors and translators, languages, number of volumes and format, as well as the place and year of publication. The name of the publisher is not always recorded. Additional information can relate to a unique copy such as the quality of the binding and paper, the presence of annotations and distinctive marks.

Categorising Books
Books can be listed according to their format, language, and under a theme defined by the owner or the seller. Indices are rare. One title can appear in several catalogues but never classified under different headings, revealing subtle chronological and geographical variations in its reception. Categories vary throughout the periods, some disappearing and others responding to new literary requirements.

Challenges and constraints

Handwritten Prices
Often reported in the margins of catalogues or interleaved pages in catalogues, these values present several difficulties:
• a same item in two unique copies of a single catalogue may have been assigned different prices
• due to regional diversity, prices refer to differing monetary systems.
Variations in prices could reveal long-term evolutions and trends in reading tastes and buying practices.

Missing Books and Seller Stocks
Books listed in sales catalogues might not always represent complete private collections. Not systematically mentioned, omissions were common once owners/their retained certain books. Despite repressive legislation in some European countries, it was not unusual for booksellers to incorporate parts of their own stock in sales catalogues. In the case of secret sales, titles have known to be added in manually after the catalogue was printed.

Scrawled Names
Names of buyers at auctions are sometimes reported next to the item they bought. These appear to be after booksellers or private individuals. This insight into the second-hand trade might be of particular interest for provenance studies.

Miscellaneous Books and Packets
Names of lower value can be reported as bundles or packets of unmarked titles. These data provide no discernable indication of title or quantity.

Scripts and Languages
From the long term and transnational approach of this project, typographic differences are inevitably encountered:
• If not transliterated in the text, titles in Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic or Devanagari are to be transcribed in their original alphabet.
• Gothic typeface will not warrant transcription.

Illustrations, Printer’s marks and Doodles
These will be collected but not recorded in a database.

Recording
• prices, buyers, annotations, books added & removed, scripts & typefaces, untitled books & images.

BIBLIO database
Bibliography of individually-owned Book and Library inventories online

Comparable records for all known private library (sales) catalogues in the regions, including when available:
• Bibliographical description of the catalogue and information on owners
• Sales details
• Basic description of the content (number of items, presence of preface, index, appendices)
• Location of surviving copies and links to digital ones

MEDIATE database
Understanding the real bestsellers of the 18th century

• Open-access and fully searchable text files of transcriptions and book data extracted from a corpus of 2000-3000 catalogues
• Precise and linked data on works, editions and owners allowing for statistical studies
• Interoperable with other existing bibliographic and bibliographies databases >> towards the construction of a common interface to study the “life-cycle of books”

Renewing the narrative of Enlightenment through the study of catalogues?

Revealing best-sellers: A data-driven and large-scale study can reveal the frequency of titles by now-forgotten authors on eighteenth-century readers’ bookshelves. An empirical research introducing the perspective of the reception of texts and ideas directly questions accepted theories on 18th century European cultural mainstream.

The “Middlebrow” hypothesis: Preliminary studies point out to an extensive body of commercial, pedagogical, popularising and often religiously-tinted writings (i.e. “middlebrow”). Can we assume that these texts played a key role in transmitting Enlightenment ideas among European reading audiences and that they participated in shaping new sets of cultural attitudes?