STSM Oxford – 12-20 March
Report: Expanding the Republic of Letters through the addition of English letter collections (Working Group 4, COST Action IS1310)
Celine Frohn

Abstract

During the duration of a one-week STSM to Oxford in March 2017, I added over 200 new titles to the EROL Zotero database. The biographical metadata of epistolaries published in England in the early modern period has thus been saved in an online database. These titles have been found using keyword searches in the English Short Title Catalogue, a union catalogue by the British Library. Though the ESTC contains a few thousand relevant records that are as of yet unexplored, the limitations of the website might make it impossible to explore it much further.

Introduction

The Short Term Scientific Mission "Expanding the Republic of Letters through the addition of English letter collections" aimed to contribute to the goals of Working Group 4 of COST Action IS1310, "Reassembling the Republic of Letters." As early modern letters have been scattered across numerous archives and libraries in Europe, the COST Action endeavors to create a digital infrastructure that allows researchers to access the considerable number of early modern letters. Working Group 4 is dedicated to mapping which letters are kept where.

I contributed to this aim by doing a short explorative investigation into how printed collections of letters in England might be found. Because there is no comprehensive bibliography that can be used, the chosen methodology was to find letter collections in union catalogues, most notably the English Short Title Catalogue,[1] by using keywords. During this investigation I found over two hundred epistolaries, the biographical data of which were added to the Zotero database started by Lara Berger in 2016 – the upside to using Zotero being that metadata can be saved with one single click.

Methods & English Short Title Catalogue

Finding epistolaries in the ESTC proved to be not the straightforward task it might seem at first. Within ESTC there is no direct way of searching for epistolaries – instead, one has to rely on related keywords such as "letters", "epistolae", or "correspondence". However, these

---

[1] The English Short Title Catalogue can be accessed online at http://estc.bl.uk

keywords sometimes bring up a whole onslaught of entries. As time was limited, I decided to tackle smaller categories first – "small" in this case denoting searches that yielded less than a few hundred. This allowed me to get an idea of the sort of entries that could be expected when searching the ESTC, and experimenting with different keywords in finding epistolaries.

In my proposal for the STSM, two expected difficulties were identified. The first, the issue of defining a letter, become more pertinent as I started adding entries into Zotero. Because many entries in ESTC carry very little metadata, it is often difficult to discern whether a record concerns a letter, a fictional text, or a pamphlet. Most of these "border cases" are not easily accessible in digitized form for further scrutiny. As the goal was to find print epistolaries, I could often exclude entries based on their length (often only a handful of pages). Occasionally searching for the author in the CERL Thesaurus[2] could shed some light on the nature of the letter collections. The toughest border cases were those in which it was not clear whether the book collected essays or letters; and books that collected letters in addition to a plethora of other writings. In these cases I generally added the title to EROL, making a note in Zotero.[3] Another difficulty for me personally was a relative lack of knowledge of Latin, which necessitated me to use Google Translate to judge Latin titles. As I am not thoroughly convinced of the translation skills of this website, the Latin entries probably require a second look-through.

The second difficulty I identified in my proposal was the issue of duplicate entries through inconsistent or idiosyncratic titling. There was a large amount of duplicate entries in the ESTC – some books might be listed over twenty times, especially if the title contained unusual punctuation. In these cases I strove to only add the title of the epistolary to EROL once. Some duplicates might have slipped through nevertheless.

Further use of ESTC

Overall I searched through the most obvious keywords: variations on *responsoria* and *responsa*, *epistolae*, *opus posthumum*, philosophical letters, correspondence, select letters. The downside of the ESTC is that many keywords bring up the same results, and as far as I have found, there is no way to exclude results that may have been shown before. This is especially pertinent because the largest obvious search input, the genre and/or title "letters",

---

[2] A website by the Consortium of European Research Libraries containing a huge collection of personal name records, printers, bibliographical information, etcetera: http://thesaurus.cerl.cgi-bin/search.pl

[3] All notes by me start with my initials to distinguish them from notes imported from the ESTC, and look for example like: "CF: not sure if this contains letters."

has not yet been sorted through. Most epistolaries I found so far will probably be included in this bulk of entries. On the upside, it *is* possible to continue looking through entries where you left off at an earlier date. Though there is no guarantee, the database seems to be quite stable, and one can for example fill in "385" to go to the 385th record a certain search might have brought up. This makes sure one does not have to repeat yesterday's work once the site has been closed. A critical issue here, however, is that it seems to be impossible to get the website to show more than 1000 records. Although the genre "letters" contains over 5600 entries, only a thousand can be accessed. Titles containing the word "letters" includes almost 12.000 entries. So far I have not found a way around the 1000-record limit – which severely limits the usefulness of the ESTC for finding epistolaries.

In a short random sample in the genre "letters", I browsed through 60 randomly selected entries.[4] This sample resulted in three titles to be added to Zotero. Following this, one might estimate that about 250 more epistolaries can be found in the "letters" genre. However, this is only if the 1000 record cap can be somehow circumvented. If this is not possible, only about 50 more will probably be added. Finding these will approximately take six hours.[5] This would mean that should work on English epistolaries be continued, and EROL be expanded, new avenues for finding titles probably need to be found.

Early English Books Online

One such other avenue for finding biographical data of epistolaries is Early English Books Online (EEBO). Containing over a hundred thousand entries, EEBO's searchable digital database contains images of early modern print books. Though at this stage my mission was to collect metadata, EEBO is a promising avenue when the content of the books become relevant as well. Sadly, EEBO is only available through institutions, and its catalogue cannot be accessed in the public domain.

While EEBO, unlike the ESTC, does actually contain a subject category "Epistolaries" (Epistolaries – Early works to 1800), this only yielded a rather disappointing single result (tragically, this single result fell outside of the scope of my project and therefore was not added to EROL). Repeating generic keywords such as "letters", "epistolae", and "correspondence" yielded comparable results – though less in quantity – as the keywords did

---

[4] To ensure randomness, I looked at the 1st, 21st, 46th, 51st, 71st, 96th (etcetera) entries. This took me roughly 30 minutes.

[5] It has to be noted though that this should not be underestimated. In my experience it is very tiring to have to look through records. I tend to take breaks every half hour, even if just for a few minutes, or a headache will develop.

in ESTC. To test whether EEBO presented similar or different results, I worked through all entries containing "correspondence" in their subject, 91 records in total.[6] The same query resulted in 880 records in the ESTC. Out of these 91, four records were suitable and had not yet been added to EROL. Over a dozen were suitable, but had already been found through the ESTC, and were therefore omitted. Following this sample, I would say that although EEBO contains some alternative records, the vast majority is identical to the records found in the ESTC. If building a large database of epistolary metadata is the goal, EEBO probably should not be the focus of investigation – once, however, the content of books becomes more important, EEBO will be more interesting.

Personal experience

Though overwhelming at first, I found the work of the STSM very rewarding. As I have generally worked with quite easily accessible modern literary sources, it was a challenge to work with more unwieldy early modern material. As more and more archives are being digitized, it is becoming more important to think about how to manipulate databases in such a way that users can find the information they need. I enjoyed gaining practical experience exploring union catalogues with a certain goal in mind, which will certainly help me finding materials in later stages of my career. Finally, everyone I met in Oxford was incredibly helpful, and I thoroughly value their expertise and the interesting discussions we had, providing many insights I would not have had on my own.

---

[6] Reading through all entries took about twenty minutes of my time. As many titles were already familiar to me, I could easily skip over them.