



Broadside Ballads Online (Bodleian Libraries, 1999 -). Online

<<http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>>.

Review

A broadside ballad was a short, cheaply printed work, taking up no more than one side of a piece (or rather sheet) of paper. The Bodleian Library's database collection 'Broadside Ballads Online' now brings together thousands of these pieces of doggerel. In calling them doggerel I do not mean to derogate their historical interest or importance, but their literary quality is of course very slight. Instead their importance lies in the insights they convey about popular concerns and the echoes they provide of an otherwise lost oral culture.

Several features mark out the Bodleian's online sources as important. One is that the content is licensed under creative commons. This level of access is unlike other major collections that are important to early modernists such as Early English Books Online (EEBO), which is within the 'deep invisible web' or, in other words, is password and firewall protected and so expensive that institutional affiliation is essential for access. Such expense can place the resources beyond the reach of researchers, especially independent scholars or those who work at a university which is not prepared to pay for an institutional subscription. The opportunity for scholarly interaction exists with the site's blog, although, so far, few seem to have contributed to it.

Another feature is that the organisation of the metadata in the Bodleian collection is exemplary and the cataloguing is an improvement over other early modern collections, especially EEBO. The data is extensively and sensibly cross-referenced. It is possible to search through alphabetical lists for authors (not always useful given the high volume of anonymous works), title or first line, subjects, themes, the location the broadside was printed, the tunes to which they were set, the imprints they bear, and the shelf marks they have since received. Thus search

subjects include possibilities such as 'Africa' to 'Thames River' to 'Sir Patience Ward'. Unlike some other databases, the terms are meaningfully related to the documents' content. One final useful feature is the ability to search for illustrated matter, and again the search terms are precise and useful. For example, a search under the term 'religion, magic, and astrology' uncovers 303 headings as detailed as 'Christian religion (+ Holy Host (as a dove))' or 'Symbols of Christ – animals'. The cross matching and the cataloguing are significantly in advance of other early modern database collections.

The ballads originating from the early modern period will be of the greatest interest to the readers of *Ceræ*, however, the breadth of the database demonstrates that cheap one page ballads were not confined to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The content extends up to the nineteenth century, but in any case the ballads predate the emergence of any recording technology, meaning that they are a precious link to oral culture that is otherwise unrecoverable. The concerns and preoccupations, not to mention the targets of abuse, of an oral and often illiterate culture are perishable things but insights and hints are conveyed by resources such as the ballads. As short and easily transmitted mnemonics, they are a resource for anyone studying social history.

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