
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Fehrenbach, R. J., gen. ed. PLRE.Folger: Private Libraries in Renaissance England

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Volume 42, numéro 4, automne 2019

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068583ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068583ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stepanova, O. (2019). Compte rendu de [Fehrenbach, R. J., gen. ed. PLRE.Folger: Private Libraries in Renaissance England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 176–179. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068583ar>

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The editorial project Private Libraries in Renaissance England (PLRE) represents a collection and catalogue of Tudor and early Stuart book-lists. So far, nine volumes have been published in the Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (MRTS) series. Volume 1 was printed in 1992, and Volume 10 is planned for 2020. The editorial project exists not only in traditional printed form, but also in digital format, as the collaboration of the editors of the project with the Folger Shakespeare Library led to the appearance of the online database *PLRE.Folger*. The present review focuses on the online database, and provides minimal information regarding the printed volumes.

The contributors to the project have set ambitious goals, one of which is mentioned in the section “Purpose and Design” on the PLRE website, and states that the project strives to “provide scholars with data to help anchor generalizations about print culture within the history of particular books and

readers.” Much data is needed in order to achieve such a goal, and PLRE has successfully gathered the materials required for the catalogues. The numbers are truly remarkable: according to the website, the nine published volumes and the anticipated tenth volume contain 299 book-lists, spanning from 1507 to 1654, and documenting over eighteen thousand books. At the same time, *PLRE.Folger* compiles 380 book-lists which include over nineteen thousand books. Most of the book-lists are taken from the inventories of the University of Oxford, and are enumerated in volumes 2 through 7. Volumes 8 and 9 (and presumably volume 10) account for book-lists from all over England. With the scope of research and amount of information collected, these are truly outstanding catalogues. What is more, the project is still in development, and future volumes are envisaged.

The online database *PLRE.Folger* is an abridged version of the printed volumes. It should be noted that the information presented in the printed volumes differs from the information available online, which can be noticed by the number of book-lists available on the website compared to those presented in print. This fact is mentioned by the editors in the introduction to every published volume and repeated on the main page of the site: “The PLRE database and the PLRE volumes are different and complementary presentations of the material in PLRE. They are not substitutes one for the other.” Though the database does not contain biographical details about the book owners and, as a result, scholars interested in biographical research are invited to consult the published volumes, it is quite helpful in many ways. In addition to being a faster way of searching for the information, *PLRE.Folger* includes, for each book listed, “the dates, profession or vocation, and social status of the person associated with the book-list; the purpose of the manuscript containing the book-list (whether, for example, it was a will, an inventory or a receipt); the location in England where the manuscript was drafted and its date; the manuscript’s current location; and one or more classifications defining the subject categories of the work” (“Purpose and Design”). Therefore, if a scholar wants more detailed information than basic facts about a certain book, they are strongly recommended to use the online database.

Another component of PLRE is a “Cumulative Catalogue,” which represents a “series of indices and concordances to the complete PLRE database. The Cumulative Catalogue, which appears near the end of each volume of PLRE, is regularly enlarged and revised to incorporate newly edited book-lists”

(“Purpose and Design”). The catalogue serves to facilitate access to the database, as it provides the list of book owners in alphabetical order and all other pertinent information about entries presented in the volumes, though it does not seem to be needed in *PLRE.Folger*, as the online database is already designed to be accessed with reasonable ease.

While the fact that information in the printed volumes and *PLRE.Folger* is different makes the accomplished work even more impressive, such an ample amount may be intimidating for researchers who are not familiar with the resource or do not possess much experience with catalogues. Users have to know precisely what they strive to explore; otherwise, they risk being buried beneath the entries which appear as a result of a given search. The “Searching Books” section of the website provides a good example of such a situation: “Searching with *More* will retrieve works associated with Sir Thomas More as well as records containing the word ‘more’ anywhere in the record. Searching with *More** will retrieve Morelius and Morellus, as well as records containing the name More and the word ‘more.’”

As for the construction and functioning of the online database, it represents a complex system which is clearly organized and allows for searches to be performed rather easily. Experienced users are able to begin conducting their research immediately, whereas first-time users are invited to consult information pages to discover how data are systematized. At the same time, it would be wise to remember that *PLRE.Folger* is a specialized database, and to fully benefit from using it one has to possess a certain level of knowledge of Renaissance literature or adjacent fields of study; otherwise, one will experience difficulties in finding the necessary information and interpreting it properly.

PLRE.Folger offers one extensive searchable database with three ways of searching information. The principal searching tool is the Books option, and two secondary search options are Names and Owners. The Books option provides Basic and Advanced search possibilities, which allow the users to perform a general search as well as a more detailed and direct one, if they know all the pertinent information. An explanation of the procedure for conducting the Advanced search is provided, but a more straightforward approach would facilitate the use of this search option.

If one still experiences difficulties in finding what is needed after having consulted the Books search option, they can resort to two other options. The Names search engine is “designed to assist in a search of the Books database

for an author, editor, translator, compiler, or commentator known by different names or whose name has different spellings” (“Searching Names”). The Owners search gives access to the names of owners whose book-lists are present in the PLRE database, and also includes “the names of owners whose book-lists are undergoing editing and have neither been published in the PLRE volumes nor posted on the *PLRE.Folger* site” (“Searching Owners”). Though this amount of information can be considered as excessive and unnecessary for successful research (depending, of course, on the research goals), it certainly helps to build a multidimensional picture of the print culture of the Tudor and early Stuart periods.

The books in *PLRE.Folger* are appropriately classified and demonstrate the hard work of the editors and the efforts they put into their project. Each book is assigned a PLRE number and identified using a number of parameters, such as MS entry, STC status, owner’s identifier, stationer’s name, place of publication, date of publication, format, PLRE number, manuscript location, and language. These specifications greatly contribute to creating a compound image of printed materials.

It is also worth mentioning that PLRE is open to its reading audience in terms of editing. Scholars are free to submit proposals for editing book-lists for publications. E-mail addresses of the general editor and the volume editor are indicated on the website, which facilitates communication and can lead to further development of the project.

All in all, PLRE is a strong project and represents a highly valuable resource for all scholars studying the linguistic, historical, social, educational, and literary situation of the Tudor and early Stuart periods. Comprehensive catalogues and numerous book-lists contribute to conducting effective research and, indeed, to making generalizations about print culture.

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