

ereviews

InteLex Past Masters Online Catalogue

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■ By Cheryl LaGuardia

CONTENT Past Masters (PM) is a full-text database of selected primary source electronic editions in philosophy. Published in TEI-conformant (Text Encoding Initiative) XML and full-text searchable image formats, PM uses an enhanced version of the open source XTF platform developed by the California Digital Library. Disciplines span from American, British, classical, continental, and medieval philosophy to English letters, religious studies, social science, and women writers.

PM includes 171 separate collections, ranging from the works of French philosophers Peter Abelard, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Nicolas Malebranche to those of British naturalist Charles Darwin; German philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Friedrich Schiller; Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard; Austrian thinker Ludwig Wittgenstein, and many others, such as British novelist Mary Shelley and Greek philosopher Plato.

Thematic collections feature “Bluestocking Feminism 1738–1785”; “Chawton House Travel Writings, the Emerging Tradition 1500–1700”; “Pickering Women’s Classics, Silver Fork Novels, and Women Writing Home, 1700–1920,” to name but a few. Material here is in several languages: Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Latin, Russian, and Spanish, among others. Users can set the search language to English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, or Chinese.

USABILITY Arrayed horizontally at the top of the homepage is a graphic of author portraits. Below this image is a toolbar with links to “Titles,” “Subjects,” “Languages,” “Search,” “Contact,” and “Set Language.” On the left side of the screen is a column headed by a simple query box for searching within collections, followed by “Pithy Quotes from Past Masters.”

I began with the list of titles displayed and first retrieved “Austen: Complete Works and Letters.” In the main section of the

screen, a “Past Masters Preface” appeared, noting: “*The Complete Works and Letters of Jane Austen* contains the Oxford University Press edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen*; *Jane Austen’s Letters*, collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye; and *A Memoir of Jane Austen: And Other Family Recollections* by J.E. Austen-Leigh, edited with an introduction and notes by Kathryn Sutherland.” It is both refreshing and reassuring that an electronic resource provides chapter and verse for the editions being used.

Meanwhile, an outline on the left side of the screen lists the collection contents: “Past Masters Preface”; “Edition Information, Volume I: *Sense and Sensibility*, Volume II: *Pride and Prejudice*, Volume III: *Mansfield Park*, Volume IV: *Emma*, and Volume V: *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*,” among others. At first, I didn’t see any sign of Austen’s unfinished novel *Sanditon* in the “Works,” but a quick scan of the preface located it in “Minor Works,” along with *Juvenilia*, *Lady Susan*, and *The Watsons*.

That left-hand navigation column works wonderfully well, expanding to give the utmost information about contents (again, reassuring that nothing has been omitted in this electronic edition) as well as ready access to that content. But the real joy comes as you read through the contents.

I began by poring over the letters, the first being one from Jane to her sister Cassandra, written on the occasion of Cassandra’s birthday, January 9, 1796. Frequent annotated notes pop up as the user mouses over the missives, providing context to the writing (individuals’ full names, explanations of family jokes and word play, etc.) and adding considerably to the experience of reading and research quality of the material.

Leaving the Austen letters reluctantly, I dipped into two other collections with intriguing titles: “Female Gothic” and “Women’s Sensation Fiction.” The first collection features various gothic categories, such as “Enlightenment,” “Terror,” “Erotic,” “Historical,” and even “Street Gothic: Female Gothic Chapbooks.” Also presented are authors I encountered here for the first time, including Jane Porter and Lady Morgan.

In exploring these texts, I used the system’s book reader, which allows for highly legible PDFs that are easily turned (or “jumped to” via a special box), as well as zoomed in on, viewed larger, and printed. Patrons can view a single page at a time, or two pages, or quickly scan through thumbnail images of the entire book. These load fast and are high resolution for easy reading. “The Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, 1855–1890” included old friends such as Mrs. Oliphant, as well as the hitherto unknown (to me) writers Mary Cecil Hay, Felicia Skene, and Rhoda Broughton.

Back at the main screen, I selected the “Subjects” button and then clicked on “Religious Studies,” in which I discovered the “Francis of Assisi: Early Documents” collection. In addition to the three-volume set of the Early Documents, this provides the *Fontes Franciscani* as well as the Supplemental Latin.

Next I tried a query from the main toolbar. Options here include searching for volumes that contain all of (x and y) or any of (x or y) terms, proximity searching (within x number of words of each other), excluding terms, searching within specific collection titles, within particular subjects, limiting results to an individual author, sorting results by author, volume title, or relevance, and opening query hit links in a new window or the same window. I searched for: night terrors within the range of 0 words (next to each other) and retrieved five results; one from Samuel Coleridge’s *Collected Letters*, one from Freud’s *Das Gesamte Werk*, two hits from the *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, and one from the works of Josiah Royce.

PRICING A Past Masters collection starts at \$200, with the average price of a collection being \$2,000. For more information, please contact Justin Cober-Lake at sales@nlx.com; 434-970-2286.

VERDICT Astonishing in breadth and depth, the content in this formidable file, as well as the research material included in every one of the scholarly editions available, is superb throughout.

Users might wish for a more descriptive, revelatory database name that could convey the richness of the content more compellingly to researchers. This title should be owned by every research library serving serious scholars in the humanities.

Cheryl LaGuardia is a Research Librarian for the Widener Library at Harvard University and author of *Becoming a Library Teacher* (Neal-Schuman, 2000). Readers can contact