



ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

# Electronic Enlightenment

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Composite Score:

★★★★ 3/4

Reviewed by: Jennifer Dekker

University of Ottawa  
65 University Pr.  
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5  
Canada  
<jdekker@uottawa.ca>

## Abstract

This article reviews Electronic Enlightenment (EE), a subscription-based, full text database containing critical editions of eighteenth century letters from Oxford University Press. It offers an overview of the content and functionality of the database with an assessment of potential use in a research library.

## Pricing Options

Electronic Enlightenment (EE) is available by annual subscription. For unlimited access in universities, pricing is based on FTE. An annual cost of \$1,950 is available for institutions with the smallest FTE. EE offers concurrent and single user pricing for as little as \$995.

## Product Description

Electronic Enlightenment is a new-generation digital collection offered by the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. It not only functions as a repository and access point for valuable correspondence and related documentation on the eighteenth century, but it is also an interactive community project continually building new resources into its database and encouraging external users to participate in its evolution. For example, readers are invited to correct information in the EE resource base and are even welcome to add letters that have not yet been included. This level of interaction is not often seen in commercial tools, but because EE is facilitated, hosted, and marketed by a major research library in collaboration with an established group of eighteenth century scholars, this database is more innovative and flexible than a typical commercial product.

## CONTENT

EE is a database of late-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century correspondence by both European and American authors. The correspondence, widely referred to as the Republic of Letters, represents the intellectual exchanges of philosophers, scholars, and politicians of the Enlightenment period. As of the October 2010 release, there were more than 58,555 letters and 7,100 authors included in the project. The letters are manually keyed-in digital texts drawn from critical editions produced by Oxford University and other scholarly or university presses. Consequently, EE combines the convenience of digital delivery with traditional, rigorous requirements for the study of manuscripts. Scholarly features such as notes, citations, biographical tools, and historical reference works help readers unpack the contents of the letters. According to the EE Web site, the content is unique because rather than include images of texts, EE offers the “full-text [of

letters], keyed from source.” The markup languages include XSMML, XHTML, and MySQL meaning that potentially

every piece of data is separately searchable and therefore significant: from page numbers in a late 18th-century printed source, to an individual correspondent’s age or location at the time of writing a specific letter.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, EE’s metadata are themselves an important source of information and can be repurposed for future projects by virtue of the various open and interoperable markup schemas used in the database. For an example of a spin-off project, see The Visualization of the Republic of Letters project at Stanford University. The choice to render the contents of EE in an open markup schema indicates that the audience for this product includes digital humanities researchers but also other readers, such as undergraduate students using primary sources, who would also benefit from this resource. For instructors of university or college level courses there is a page on how to use EE in the classroom (under the section Readers).

While the project originally chronicled eighteenth century European thought, more American content is being added as it evolves. This makes the project quite useful for students of North American history and elucidates the links between European thought and American history. Examples of notable American letters are those written by John Adams and his wife Abigail while he was on diplomatic missions to France and the Netherlands, as well as their son John Quincy Adams and grandson John Adams Smith. Works by Benjamin Franklin (documenting a relationship with, among others, David Hume and Anne Catherine Helvéticus, a popular French ‘salonnière’ and wife of the philosopher Claude Adrien Helvéticus), Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and George Washington are also in EE. In fact, as of February 2011, there are 517 American writers included in the database. This compares with 111 Dutch, 2,107 English, 2,214 French, 217 German, 179 Italian, 50 Russian, 415 Scottish, and 575 Swiss.

## SEARCHING

The search screen is very well laid out and offers options to search the following fields:

- Content (Key word or words appearing in the letters or metadata. Words can also be excluded from the search results);

1. “Overview of EE: Creating a Digital Edition,” last modified October 2010, [http://www.e-enlightenment.com/info/overview/ee\\_edition/index.html](http://www.e-enlightenment.com/info/overview/ee_edition/index.html)

- Language of letter (Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish). Note that some translations into English are included;
- Writer (name or alias, or writer's age in whole numbers only; no ranges permitted);
- Date (Day, Month, or Year are all separately searchable or searchers can combine criteria; ranges are permitted);
- Location (of writer or recipient in the English form of the place name);
- Citation (letters cited in outside articles or books).

Results are sorted chronologically earliest to latest and are returned 15 per page. The resulting letters, if selected by the searcher, appear on screen accompanied by complete metadata for the letter on the left side of the screen. This feature makes it very easy to see who the writer and recipient are, the age of the writer, the dates and location of each letter, any information about the envelope, postmarks, annotations, editorial notes, and the published source.

Although the search options above are satisfactory, searching would be improved by offering indexes for the fields (similar to the way the Brepolis databases supply spontaneous terms from indexes), especially for readers less familiar with the content of this database. A list of suggested or found terms based on an index would eliminate user trial and error such as searching for America instead of United States, or for Arouet instead of Voltaire.

A second way to retrieve content is the Browse option, which is somewhat less user friendly than searching but still adequate. The default here is to browse all letters by decade, which produces a lengthy set of results (1,845 letters are returned for 1700-1709). Scrolling through so many letters is tedious. To make it less so, there are options for Next, Previous, and Last Page to make browsing faster as well as a Jump To box. To read letters from 1708 for example, the user must guess what number to jump to. It is the same logic that often helps readers navigate through many pages of search results. The problem here is that the options of moving to the next, previous, or last page all enable readers to move forward by a page at a time, but the jump to feature actually refers to the number of individual letters. So while a reader may browse forward one page, she must jump to a specific letter. This dual navigation takes a moment to understand and execute successfully. Modifying the Jump To feature from individual letter results to pages of results would be an improvement.

A reader can also browse letters by choosing the Lives option, which allows for scanning by surname, nationality, or occupation. Occupational titles are often amusing. Women are generally referred to as X Occupation's Wife, or X Occupation's Daughter as in Watchmaker's Wife or Notary's Daughter. The exception to this nomenclature of course is the Salon Hostess, which is an exclusively female category. If a person had more than one occupation, he or she is listed under each heading such as Du Moulin, Dr. Louis—physician, university professor, and religious controversialist.

A final browsing option is by Source Edition. As expected this is a listing of the critical editions that are the foundation of the database.

## FEATURES

There are many impressive macro-level features in this database, most of which revolve around the stimulation of new scholarship within eighteenth century studies. Two such initiatives include a peer-

reviewed e-journal (forthcoming) and a series of colloquia, but this review will focus on particular features of the database itself. One such element is the Meta field within records. Clicking on this link leads to an MLA-formatted citation to an individual record or, more interestingly, a printable version of the letter itself. Immediate and portable access to the letters is incredibly helpful for students and researchers alike.

Hyperlinked references to editorial, textual, author, and language notes are also useful as they allow direct access to the content of the note without having to scroll down to the bottom of the document. Sources are cited for each text, with a link to companion volumes in the edition if applicable. Envelope information has been recorded including address, postmark, and endorsement. Dates have been transcribed with care; because European countries adopted the Gregorian calendar at different times (for example, France adopted the new calendar in the sixteenth century whereas Greece only did so in the twentieth) dates are translated to ensure accuracy. For a French writer, for example, this means that dates are available according to the Julian, Gregorian, and French Revolutionary calendars, if applicable.

Biographical information concerning letter writers is a great enhancement of this project; to have this information immediately on hand for the best known figures of the Enlightenment is useful and for lesser-known figures is practically essential. However, some of the links to external biographical tools requiring additional subscription such as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB) and the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment are simply generic; there might not be a corresponding biographical file for the letter writer though the link is provided. For example, the biographical entry for John Adams links out to the DNB, suggesting that there would be an entry for Adams, but there is not. A cynical reader might interpret these links as an encouragement to subscribe to more Oxford-generated content, but in fairness, there are also links provided to the White House Presidents site, as well as the Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress and the American National Bibliography online. Other online scholarly tools unrelated to Oxford are referred to in the Reading Room section under the tab Coffee House, such as the essential French language sources Grand Dictionnaire Historique, and Pierre Bayle's Dictionnaire Historique et Critique, both available at the ARTFL (American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language) site. Another recent enhancement is the ability to directly search the Oxford English Dictionary within the EE database, which provides a bridge for readers unfamiliar with eighteenth century English usage or spelling.

An area that has been developed in recent months is the Topics List, which currently links to a few examples of letters pertaining to a given topic. One assumes that the highlighting of said topics and letters is either for marketing or for pedagogical use given that the categories are very broad (history, philosophy, religion, science, the arts and society) and the content is very eye-catching as in this letter under the heading Music in the Enlightenment:

On 25 April 1764, French philosopher Claude Adrien Helvétius wrote to English aristocrat Francis Hastings, 10th earl of Huntington, seeking patronage for a 'delightful' little boy—called Mozart [text in French].<sup>2</sup>

2. "Topics: The Arts," Last updated October 2010. <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/info/topics/thearts>



## Electronic Enlightenment Review

### Scores Composite: ★★★★★ 3/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

<b>Content:</b>	★★★★★
Unique, scholarly editions of eighteenth century letters and open, interoperable metadata.	
<b>Searchability:</b>	★★★★★
Very good, with some indexing enhancements recommended.	
<b>Pricing:</b>	★★★★★
Realistic, with options for concurrent user pricing suitable for restricted budgets.	
<b>Contract Options:</b>	★★★★★
Flexible and tailored to an institution's or individual's requirements. Annual subscription required.	

## Critical Evaluation

Despite some very minor shortcomings with respect to searching and browsing, this collection of letters is an invaluable and unique resource. With EE, researchers have convenient access to a significant group of letters from the late-seventeenth, eighteenth, and early-nineteenth centuries. While some Enlightenment-era correspondence has been included in competing databases such as Intalex Past Masters, EE focuses exclusively on correspondence. That its contents originate from Oxford University Press (OUP) editions increases the value of this database because OUP editions are known to have been carefully compiled and of the highest academic standards. This saves time and effort for contemporary researchers because the philological work that went into the original Oxford editions has already been completed. EE complements other primary source databases such as Eighteenth Century Collections Online, British periodicals, Eighteenth century journals, Gallica, and Past Masters with private correspondence documenting business transactions; romance; social relationships; reflections on society, science, the arts, and religion; and commentary on the political events of the time period. Because the letters were never intended for publication, they present highly personal versions of events. Here is an excerpt from a letter written by René Descartes to Marin Mersenne on November 30, 1633, in which Descartes is realizing the social consequences of publishing scientific findings based on observation in opposition to church teachings:

I took the trouble to inquire in Leiden and Amsterdam whether Galileo's *World System* was available, for I thought I had heard that it was published in Italy last year. I was told that it had indeed been published but that all the copies had immediately been burnt at Rome, and that Galileo had been convicted and fined.\* I was so astonished at this that I almost decided to burn all my papers or at least to let no one see them. For I could not imagine that he—an Italian and, as I understand, in the good graces of the Pope—could have been made a criminal for any other reason than that he tried, as he no doubt did, to establish

that the earth moves ... I must admit that if the view is false, so too are the entire foundations of my philosophy, for it can be demonstrated from them quite clearly. And it is so closely interwoven in every part of my treatise that I could not remove it without rendering the whole work defective. But for all the world I did not want to publish a discourse in which a single word could be found that the *Church* would have disapproved of; so I preferred to suppress it rather than to publish it in a mutilated form.

\*After publishing his *Dialogue* in 1632, Galileo was sentenced on 22 June 1633 by the Inquisition in Rome to house-arrest in the Palace of the Archbishop of Sienna.<sup>3</sup>

It is notable that EE won the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies' Digital Prize in January 2010, an award based on the development, presentation, and utility of a digital resource to assist scholars in the field of eighteenth century studies. Resources that are considered for this prize are among those with the highest scholarly standards. EE was selected specifically for its breadth of coverage, full annotation, and superb presentation.<sup>4</sup>

## Contract Provisions and Authentication

The licensing agreement allows a library to occasionally fulfill Interlibrary Loan requests for limited portions of the licensed work in printed format in accordance with U.S. copyright law. Institutions previously subscribed to any Oxford online product have automatic

3. "René Descartes to Marin Mersenne, 30 November 1633." *Electronic Enlightenment*. Ed. Robert McNamee et al. Vers. 2.1. University of Oxford. 2010. Web. 14 Feb. 2011. <[http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/descreCU0030040\\_1key001cor](http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/descreCU0030040_1key001cor)>.
4. "News-sheet—January 2010," Last updated January 2010 <<http://www.e-enlightenment.com/newsheet/201001/>>.

### Contact Information

**Oxford University Press**

Phone: (800) 624-0153  
 Fax: (919) 677-8877  
 E-mail: <oxfordonline@oup.com>  
 URL: <http://www.oup.com/online/> or  
 <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/>

Oberhelman, David D. "Philosophy and religion: Electronic Enlightenment." *Reference Reviews* 23:6 (2009): 14–15.

Withers, R. "Electronic Enlightenment." *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 46:9 (2009): 1666.

### About the Author

**Jennifer Dekker** is a subject librarian at the University of Ottawa. She is also the creator of La Pensée des Lumières, a digital text portal of open eighteenth-century French philosophical works. ■

IP authentication. Free trials are available by request only to institutions. Individual subscriptions, however, are available.

### Author's References

Electronic Enlightenment Project, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. "Electronic Enlightenment." Last modified October 2010. <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/index.html>.



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