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# The Digital Incunable

Opening or Closing the Book  
through Digitization?

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Over the last decade, the digitization of manuscripts and early printed books has soared. Many libraries and cultural heritage institutions have engaged in and set up programs to make their historical collections available online. For researchers working with this type of material, these initiatives have been a true godsend, especially during the pandemic when digital reproductions were often the only way to consult material from special collections. Of course, digitization brings various new issues to the fore: a digital representation of a manuscript can be viewed as a virtual object in its own right, with its own affordances.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that issues of digitization – loss of the feel of the book, of the sound of a page being turned, and of the actual size of a book, to name a few instances – but also what research gains through digitization have until now been much more profoundly explored for manuscripts than for early printed books.<sup>2</sup> As a researcher who has predominantly worked with the earliest printed books – incunabula, books printed before 1 January 1501 – over the last few years, I would like to address a few issues that I have encountered when working with digitized incunabula. In all cases, the solution is relatively straightforward: treat incunabula as medieval books – or one could say as manuscripts, which is essentially what they are – and do not impose standards of the modern book on them. The fact that they are printed does not mean they are modern.

## Closing the ‘Sammelband’

Book and literary historians are increasingly paying attention to the materiality of the early printed book and to the phenomenon of the *Sammelband* (i.e. a book in which copies of various editions have been bound together, sometimes also combined with manuscript quires).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this recognition of the importance of studying – and hence viewing

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1 See e.g. Albritton, Henley, and Treharne.

2 See e.g. Porter.

3 See Knight, ‘Sammelband 15-16’ and ‘CERL.’

– incunabula within the context 15<sup>th</sup>- or 16<sup>th</sup>-century owners and readers created for them has not yet seemed to have reached digitization policies. To the frustration of those interested in the book as a whole, books that contain copies of more than one edition are often presented digitally as a set of separate records or files, one per edition. While one would never think of cutting up a manuscript into smaller sections that contain the single texts or production units, this is standard practice when it comes to *Sammelbände*. The dismembering of these books does not only disconnect texts that were once used and read together (be it in the medieval or a later period), it can also lead to a loss of information about the binding or the owner of the book.

The roots of the practice lie in the cataloguing customs that have developed over centuries: printed books are catalogued per edition, which is generally assumed to contain a single text, with separate records for each of them. Careful researchers are of course aware of the fact that additional numbers behind a shelfmark, often between brackets, indicate that what they see on the screen must be part of something bigger, if they are not already alarmed by the fact that the book in virtual form appears to have no front or back board, or no binding at all. Some digital platforms like Early European Books (EEB) conveniently provide a link to the other parts of the book in the ‘Bound with’ field but tend to omit the additional numbers behind the shelfmark in the relevant field.<sup>4</sup> This can make it difficult to retrieve the exact order in which the dissected digital copy should be read.

Examples of the digital dismemberment – and hence closing off – of *Sammelbände* are available in overwhelming numbers. A single illustration from my own research will have to suffice here. It stems from my exploration of the printing and reception history of a book that became known as the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* [Mirror of Perfection], which consists of a collection of texts that developed on the presses of the workshop

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4 See “Early European Books,” for example (restricted access): [*Tafel des Kersteliken levens*]. Add: Antonius de Rovere: Lof van den heiligen sacrament. Gouda: Gerard Leeu, 20 Aug. 1478 (ISTC it00010800). The Hague, National Library, shelfmark 169 G 94.

of the prolific printer Gerard Leeu (active 1477-1492) over the span of a nearly a decade.<sup>5</sup> In three treatises, the book transmits basic catechetical knowledge, an elucidation of what happens during Mass, and a conversation about the Eucharist between Christ and the Soul. A (partial) copy of a later edition of the book, published by the Leiden printer Hugo Janszoon van Woerden in 1499 and held at the University Library in Freiburg im Breisgau, tells an interesting story about the reception of the text (Freiburg i.Br., University Library, Ink. K 4205).<sup>6</sup>

The original owner combined the final, dialogic text from the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* with a copy of an edition of the *Souter onser liever vrouwen* [Our Lady's Psalter], published by the same Leiden printer in 1498 (Freiburg i.Br., University Library, shelfmark Ink. K 4205). The Marian Psalter was placed before the dialogue. Even though the book no longer has its original binding, other material elements show that these texts were intentionally combined early on in their lives. For example, the same hand added initials throughout the whole book. Moreover, at the end of the book, a handwritten prayer to Mary has been added. The reader is instructed to recite this prayer while kneeling, and the psalms while standing or lying down (prostrate position) in front of an image of the Mother of God (Freiburg i.Br., University Library, Ink. K 4205, fols. 46v-47r.) (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> The reference to the Marian psalms at the start of the book confirms that the texts were brought together around 1500 and functioned as a whole – as a book – in the hands of readers.

Additionally, the position in this volume of the dialogic text taken from the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* is interesting. Here the text functions without its preface and starts in medias res with the words of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. The woodcut on the verso of the last page of *Our Lady's Psalter* forms an opening with the first page of the dialogue taken from the *Spiegel der volcomenheit*. The image of the Lamentation of Christ,

5 On the printing history of the *Spiegel der volcomenheit*, see Dlabáčová, 70-92.

6 Titles of incunabula are cited according to the ISTC.

7 'Dat ghebet salmen lesen op die knyen ende die psalmen staende of neder liggende voer dat beelt der moeder gods', handwritten text.

with John and the two Marys gazing at Christ and drawing the reader's attention to Him, functions effectively as an indicator that the words on the right page of the opening are the words of Our Savior (Fig. 2). Yet, when consulting the digital copy of the book provided by the library of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität – and I want to emphasize here that I would not have been able to conduct my research without this digital version – the reader is presented with two separate records that provide an overview of the content of the digital copy. Both overviews – and hence the PDF-files that can be downloaded – start and end with the front and back board but cut out the other part of the book. The latter is replaced by a white page that contains the pointer 'weiterer Titel vorgebunden' [additional title pre-bound] in the case of the partial copy of the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* and 'weiterer Titel angebunden' [further title attached] in the instance of *Our Lady's Psalter*. In the latter case this page has been inserted after several blank leaves right before the back board, suggesting that the dialogue taken from the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* does not immediately follow the last page of *Our Lady's Psalter* with the woodcut of the Lamentation (Fig. 3). When one looks carefully, however, one can see the tail ends of an initial added with red ink to the start of the dialogue in the scan of the page with the woodcut (Fig. 2). If one wants to view the opening as it appears in the book, one must download the images from the two records and place them next to each other, thus engaging in a reconstruction of what has been cut up and lost in the digital version of this book. In this case, this is relatively easily done and on their starting page the records provide a link to the other copy also contained in the volume. Some libraries, however, for example only provide the indication that a digitized incunable is part of a convolute, leaving the researcher to complete the puzzle and reunite what has – often for centuries – belonged together but is now digitally dismembered.

## Closing the Book

Another phenomenon, that thankfully seems to occur far less frequently and that I will touch upon only briefly, is the digital presentation of a multi-text edition – of a single edition that contains several texts – in separate files that each contain a single text. A copy of the edition of the *Croon Onser Liever Vrouwen* [Crown of Our Lady] and other texts published by the Deventer printer Richardus Pafraet in 1492 and kept at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, has been digitized by the Munich Digitization Center (MDZ) in three separate records: the first contains the *Croon Onser Liever Vrouwen*, the second the *Onser Liever Vrouwen Mantel* [Our Lady's Mantle] – which is in fact the last text in the book! – and the third record contains the *Onser Liever Vrouwen Salter* [Our Lady's Psalter] as well as the Rosary, the second and third text in the book (München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Inc.c.a. 128 m-1/3).

The choice for three separate records, moreover in the wrong order, for a book that was published as a single edition is baffling, and so is the result. It not only leads to confusion, but also to images that are outright misleading. The final page of the first section (*Croon Onser Liever Vrouwen*) is, for example, shown next to one of the flyleaves in the back of the book, suggesting these pages belong together as an opening and can be viewed as such in the physical book.<sup>8</sup> This is the product of imposing the standards of modern books, that usually contain one text, onto incunabula, that in many ways are still embedded in manuscript culture. The nonsensical three-tiered digitization of Pafraet's edition was likely made this way because the printer included title pages at the start of each of the three sections and because each section has its own quire sequence. This, however, is something that happens more often in early printed books and is no reason for cutting a book up. Pafraet placed and published these texts together. They are all announced on the title page (Fig. 4). On the

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8 The opening can be viewed via [www.digitale-sammlungen.de/view/bsb00035178?page=68,69](http://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/view/bsb00035178?page=68,69). München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Inc.c.a. 128 m-1/3, scan nos. 68-69.

final folio, Pafraet printed a colophon in which he states that the book was issued ‘in honour of God and Mary his blessed Mother’ (‘Ter eeren gods ende maria synre gebenedider moeder’) (München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Inc.c.a. 128 m-3, fol. K7r). This is a single edition of several texts that belong together and that should be presented as a book. There is no valid reason for chopping it up and hence closing the book for readers.

### **Stop Cutting up and Start Opening up Books**

Why not present the reader with scans of the full book and let them leaf through the book and look up the part they are interested in? This would best replicate what happens during a visit to the reading room: the whole book is handed to the reader instead of only the gatherings of the edition required. This allows for the occasional surprise that one is given a voluminous volume while intending to read a relatively short text only. The reader is then left to their own devices to look up what they came for. Presenting the book in the same way digitally – as is done with manuscripts – would further raise the awareness of the materiality of the early printed book and diminish the risk that the presence of contextual evidence is overlooked. Many researchers would be relieved to be handed the whole book, instead of snippets one must piece together – or worse: that are pieced together in a misleading manner. Cutting up books, even if only digitally, should be strictly forbidden.



## Figures and captions

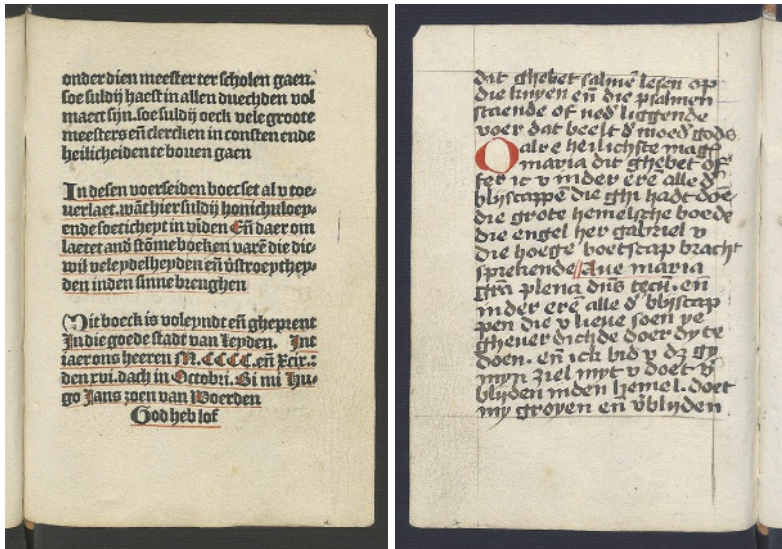
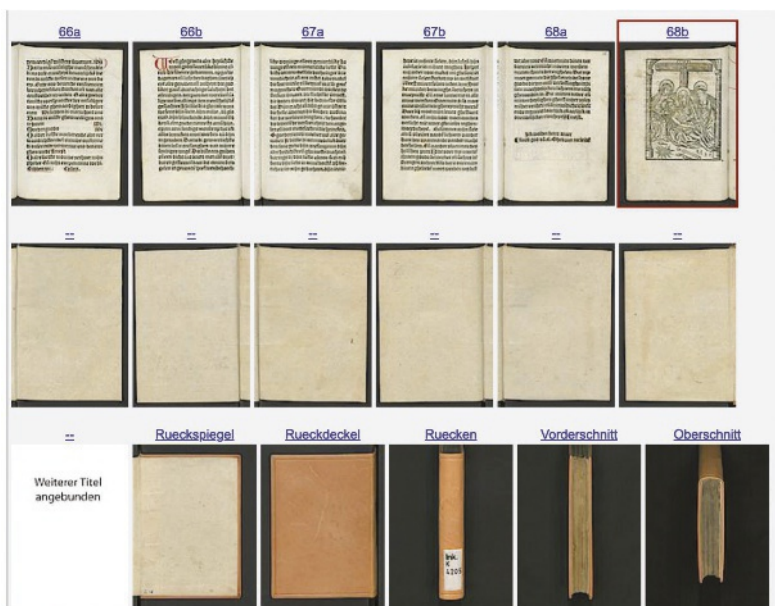


Fig. 1 Colophon and prayer written on the verso of the folio in the 1499 Leiden edition of the *Spiegel der volcomenheit*. Freiburg i.Br., University Library, shelfmark Ink. K 4205, fols 46r and 46v.



Fig. 2 Final page of the *Our Lady's Psalter* with a woodcut of the Lamentation and the start of the dialogic text from the *Spiegel der volcomenheit* that form one opening in the Freiburg copy. Freiburg i.Br., University Library, shelfmark Ink. K 4205, fols 68v-1r.



**Fig. 3** Screenshot of the overview presentation of the digital copy of *Our Lady's Psalter*, Freiburg University Library, [www.dl.uib.uni-freiburg.de/diglit/bernardus1498/0001](http://www.dl.uib.uni-freiburg.de/diglit/bernardus1498/0001).

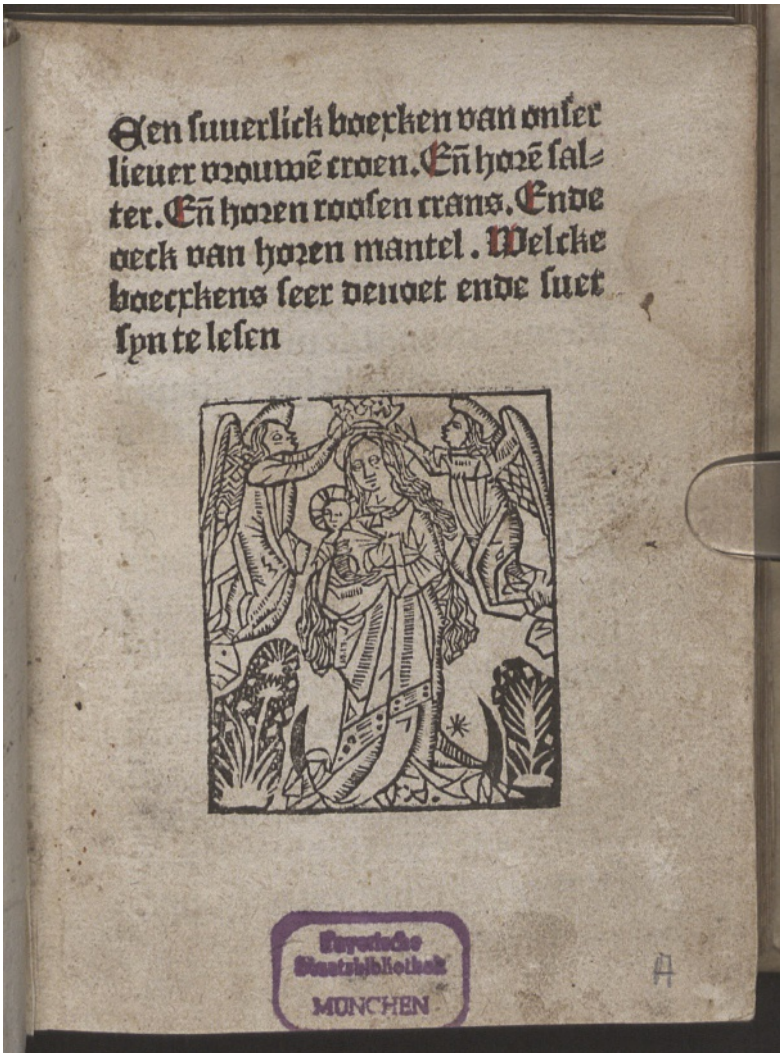


Fig. 4 Title page presenting the full content of the book in Pafraet's 1492 edition of the *Crown of Our Lady* and other Marian texts. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, shelfmark Inc.c.a. 128 m-1/3, fol.1r.

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