

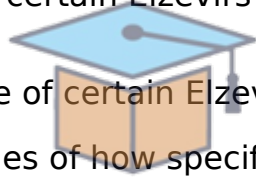
Elzevirs

Elzevirs, the collectible books printed by the Elzevir family in the Netherlands from the late 16th to early 18th centuries, hold a special place in the world of rare book collectors. The chapter opens with an anecdote that highlights the obsession with acquiring Elzevir editions, even leading a countryman to starve himself to afford these rare volumes. His particular fascination was with editions of poets printed by the Elzevirs, especially those with red letters and accurate dates. This devotion to collecting Elzevirs is presented as a reflection of the intense desire to possess these objects, with the focus primarily on their exterior quality, such as the paper and type, rather than the content inside. The chapter goes on to present a critique from a 1699 publication that challenges the idea of valuing books solely for their physical attributes, emphasizing the superficial nature of such collecting habits.

Andrew Lang, in his exploration of Elzevir collecting, delves into the historical evolution of this obsession. By the 17th century, collectors were already deeply passionate about obtaining specific editions of Elzevir books. Lang points out a common misconception among novice collectors, who often overestimate the value of any book with the Elzevir sphere on the title page, mistakenly assuming that any such book was automatically a genuine Elzevir edition. He provides valuable advice for identifying authentic Elzevirs, including the importance of avoiding misleading symbols used by other publishers and recognizing the particular pseudonyms and ornaments that were trademarks of the Elzevir family. Lang's insights provide an important guide for anyone interested in the Elzevir phenomenon, showing how to distinguish between real and fake editions, which is crucial for preserving the integrity of the collecting community.

The chapter then shifts to the history of the Elzevir family itself, exploring its origins and the evolution of its publishing empire. Louis Elzevir, who founded the family's publishing business in Leyden in 1580, laid the groundwork for what would become

one of the most respected and influential publishing houses of the era. However, it was Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, who took over the business around 1626, that expanded the family's reach and significantly contributed to the popularization of the petit format for classical texts. Lang discusses the meticulous nature of Elzevir editions and highlights how collectors are often drawn to specific aspects, such as the height of the book and its original condition, as these factors can greatly impact the book's value. This attention to detail and the careful preservation of books are essential to understanding why certain Elzevirs fetch such high prices among collectors.



Summary

The rarity and value of certain Elzevir publications are also explored in detail, with Lang giving examples of how specific books have become almost mythical within the collecting community. For instance, the book *Le Pastissier François*, despite being a cookery book, became one of the most highly sought-after Elzevir editions due to its extreme scarcity. Lang recounts anecdotes of rare Elzevir finds and the astronomical prices these editions command at auctions, showcasing the irrationality of the collector's fervor. Collectors often bid excessively for these rare works, driven by the rarity itself, rather than the content or literary value of the books. This phenomenon, where the physical rarity of a book becomes more important than its intellectual substance, underscores the eccentricities and emotional investment involved in bibliomania.

In conclusion, the chapter presents a vivid portrayal of the world of Elzevir collecting, capturing the obsessive nature of bibliophiles and the lengths to which they go to acquire these rare editions. It highlights the irony of valuing books primarily for their scarcity and physical characteristics, rather than for the literary content they contain. Through the lens of Elzevirs, the chapter offers a fascinating glimpse into the world of book collecting, where the pursuit of a prized object often transcends the book's inherent worth, revealing the complex motivations and desires that drive collectors. The Elzevir editions stand as symbols of both intellectual pursuit and social prestige, with their place in the world of rare books forever cemented by the fervor of those who sought to possess them.