

H-France Forum, Volume 5, Issue 4 (Fall 2010), No. ?

Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 552 pp, 47 ill. Notes, index. \$34.95/£23.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4183-9.

The Devil in the Details.

Reply by Robert Darnton, Harvard University

Anyone who has labored on a large-scale book knows the feeling: after spending years in relative isolation—what I think of as the loneliness of the long-distance writer—you arrive at the finish line and ask: Will anyone notice? I feel gratified and grateful that the four contributors to this issue of *H-France Forum* have not only paid careful attention to the arguments in *The Devil in the Holy Water* but have also developed counter-arguments of their own. I would like to group their criticism under four rubrics and use my answers to clarify what I intended to argue in my book.

Historiography. Darnton failed to take account of interpretations developed by other historians and to answer their objections to his. He places himself au-dessus de la mêlée.

True, I did not begin the book with a survey of the literature on similar subjects. Monographs, especially converted doctoral dissertations, usually begin in this manner, but I made a carefully considered decision not to do so and not to open my argument as I have done in previous books, because I was attempting to argue in a different mode. I began with visual material, four frontispieces, which I hoped would strike the reader's eye in such a way as to provoke a question—the question that Erving Goffman purportedly recommended as the starting point for any investigation: What is going on here? Goffman's capacity to decipher meanings behind appearances inspired my approach to my subject. The frontispieces lead the reader into the texts of four libels, and the libels interlock in ways that reveal a great deal about their respective authors. To make my purpose clear, I had proposed to set off this visual preface with a sub-title page, "Four Frontispieces in Search of an Author." The publisher vetoed that idea, but I think the iconography was striking enough by itself to evoke the strangeness of these works—that is, their sheer opacity from the viewpoint of a modern reader. Libels from the eighteenth century may look simple, but they need to be decoded. They draw on rhetorical conventions and cultural presuppositions that are foreign to the modern mind. I set out to capture their alien idiom, working in the manner of an anthropologist. I wanted to survey the entire corpus of libel literature, to show how the texts played on eighteenth-century sensibilities, and to tease out implications for an understanding of the mental world of the reading public.

Instead of discoursing on historiography, therefore, I chose a point of entry into my subject that was unabashedly hermeneutical. My critics generally ignored this aspect of *The Devil in the Holy Water*, although Geoffrey Turnovsky picked up on my concern with rhetoric and typography, and Darrin McMahan noted that I rely on a concept of

elective affinity rather than causality. Had I begun the book with a discourse on method, my approach could have been clearer; and had I supplied a historiographical introduction, my readers could have seen how my argument differs from that of others. My reluctance to launch a narrative by clearing a way through other narratives may be temperamental or a matter of taste or perhaps even an aversion contracted during my graduate work in Oxford. When I read my first essay on the French Revolution to my tutor, Harry Pitt of Worcester College, I began with a harangue about causality. I had spent the previous semester at Harvard studying the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and I thought I knew what a cause was. When I finally reached the events of 1787 and 1788, I sensed that Harry had been sinking deeper and deeper into his armchair. And when I finally stopped, a voice from far down in the armchair said, “Why don’t you remove the scaffolding and leave the building standing?”

By leaving theoretical and historiographical considerations implicit, I meant no disrespect to other historians. I have a high regard for the work of Keith Baker, Thomas Kaiser, Dale Van Kley, Jeremy Popkin, David Garrioch, Daniel Roche, Roger Chartier, Jacques Revel, Arlette Farge, Chantal Thomas, Olivier Ferret, and many others not mentioned by McMahon, including former students of mine such as Sarah Maza, David Bell, Charles Walton, and Will Slauter, who have dealt with subjects related to those of *The Devil in the Holy Water*. But I chose to plunge right into my subject, in Goffmanesque fashion, rather than to walk around it, surveying the surrounding literature. That task, I believe, can best be left to reviewers such as McMahon himself, who has provided a fair and valid discussion of my work and has extended it in new directions.¹

Reading. Darnton failed in the crucial task of explaining how libels were read.

All of my critics raise this objection, and I confess that I do not have a satisfactory answer to it. Not only is it impossible to get into the minds of readers today, despite the advances in the science of cognition and neurology, but there is so little evidence left behind by readers from the eighteenth century that any attempt to study reader reception may be doomed at the outset. I believe nonetheless that *The Devil in the Holy Water* makes an important contribution to the history of reading. To my surprise, my critics paid little attention to long sections of the book where I discussed reading practices under the ancien régime. Of course many kinds of reading co-existed—far more than can be accommodated in the over-simple formula of a “reading revolution” at the end of the century. But one kind was particularly relevant to the experience of libel literature under the ancient régime: reading as decoding, puzzle solving, and the detection of hidden meaning.

As no one has ever paid attention to this variety of reading, I would like to indicate some aspects of my argument that, in my view, deserve to be debated. By 1750, every issue of the *Mercure de France*, the most widely read periodical of the eighteenth century, began with reading puzzles—*énigmes*, *logogryphes*, *charades*, and many more. By consulting the *Mercure* and similar reviews, eighteenth-century readers acquired a habit that was described at the time in the figurative phrase, “trouver le mot de l’énigme.” They learned to unscramble anagrams, to supply the missing last word of a rhyming couplet, to rearrange syllables, to decode rebuses, and in general to decipher texts for

hidden meanings. Many libels played on this practice. Readers had to fill in ellipsis dots, compose keys to fictitious names, and puzzle out allusions signaled by devices such as facetious footnotes. “Half of this article is true,” Charles Théveneau de Morande wrote teasingly in *Le Gazetier cuirassé*. Which half? It was up to the reader to decide.

The luddic character of this literature set a tone of playfulness in libels published before 1789. But in amusing readers, libels oriented their readings in a potentially dangerous direction, because to solve the puzzle, get the joke, or understand the rebus (as in the frontispiece of *Le Gazetier cuirassé*), the readers had to arrive at a specific interpretation. The hidden character behind the ellipses was usually an important public figure; and therefore the puzzle solving focused the reader’s attention on a politically sensitive target. Reading in general may have involved a process of undetermined *braconnage*, as Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier have argued², but the reading of libels—sometimes, not always—triggered responses that can be reconstructed by the historian. In one copy of *Le Diable dans un bénitier* I found a manuscript key written by a reader who was attempting to decipher the identities of the half-hidden characters in the text and succeeded in 20 out of 22 cases—a score that suggests the degree of difficulty in the puzzle solving. What readers ultimately made of the solutions to the puzzles is, I admit, a puzzle in itself. This aspect of my argument may be the most vulnerable to criticism, and I hope that others will pursue it further than I did. I argue that the ultimate *mot de l’énigme* was despotism, but that conclusion rests on my own reading of the texts reinforced by a certain amount of literary theory derived from Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and others. Having worked closely with D. F. McKenzie, I tried to apply his insights in studying the paratextual, and intertextual aspects of libels. As he argues, bibliography can blend into sociology. But McKenzie’s “sociology of texts” needs to be fleshed out with evidence from social history.³

I drew a great deal of evidence from police archives. Geoffrey Turnovsky rightly warns against the danger of taking police reports literally and cites as an example my account of inspector Pierre-Antoine-Auguste Goupil’s investigation of the demoiselle La Marche, who sold forbidden literature from a boutique in the Palais-Royal. In this case, I plead innocent. I did not quote from Goupil’s reports to prove that the fashionable crowd gathered at the book stall was a “menacing mass.” Instead, I used them to illustrate the social context of libel consumption and, in particular, what I take to be a key ingredient in the formation of public opinion—namely, the combination of reading and talking. The “couple lecture-conversation,” as Laurent Turcot points out, occupies a central place in the sociology of Gabriel Tarde, which I oppose to that of Jürgen Habermas. Tarde’s thesis, which anticipates that of Benedict Anderson, is borne out by Louis Sébastien Mercier’s descriptions of prerevolutionary Paris. Mercier emphasized the mutual reinforcement of the printed and oral means of communication in several of his works, not only in *Le Tableau de Paris* but particularly in two less familiar but more revealing tracts, *Les Entretiens du Palais-Royal de Paris* (1786) and *Les Entretiens du Jardin des Tuileries de Paris* (1788). I did not invoke Goupil’s detective work to prove that libels were fomenting sedition but rather to reveal the nature of their reception in the capillary system of the book trade. Goupil played up the potentially seditious aspect of La Marche’s business in order to ingratiate himself with his superior and to make himself look good in comparison with his predecessor as *inspecteur de la librairie*, Joseph d’Hémery. Far from giving a literal reading of the dossier, I use it to explore the

ambiguous and tendentious character of police “inspection,” thereby preparing the way for a later chapter in which I recount Goupil’s career as an underground publisher of the libels he was supposed to confiscate. I have always treated police archives as texts that must be read critically⁴, but I also believe that one can learn a great deal from them about what actually happened 250 years ago.

Simon Burrows correctly insists on the importance of studying the temporal as well as the social context of readers’ reactions, but he gets my argument wrong. I noted that the most extreme libels about Louis XV appeared after his death. Presenting themselves as histories—histories in the Procopian strain of secret information about the private lives of the great—they provided the most important account of the recent past that was available to French readers. Works like *Vie privée de Louis XV* (1781)—four meaty volumes covering the period 1715-1774—made the reign of Louis XV look like an age of decadence and despotism, and that message had a moral for French readers living under Louis XVI, who could apply it to their own circumstances. The theme of despotism and moral depravity reappeared in later libels, which attacked ministers like the controller general Charles-Alexandre de Calonne during the 1780s. In fact, the libelous pamphlets known as Calonniana reworked motifs from the Maupeouana aimed at chancellor René Nicolas de Maupeou in the early 1770s. When the supreme crisis paralyzed the French government in 1787-1788, the public needed to make sense of events by putting them in historical perspective, and the dominant version of contemporary history came from libels. I am tempted to say that libels provided the *only* version of the recent past, because works about current events, including biographies of living public figures, could not be published legally. To be sure, the regime tolerated funeral eulogies and some histories, such as Voltaire’s *Le siècle de Louis XV*, which presented the reign in a favorable light, and it might be possible to construct a counter-argument by more systematic study. Although much of *The Devil in the Holy Water* is an attempt to reconstruct the contemporary view of contemporary history, I admit that I may have overstated my case; and I hope that this theme will also open up possibilities for further research.

I am surprised that my four critics did not address this argument, which can be challenged in various ways. Instead of confronting it, Simon Burrows asserts that the libels against Louis XV had little political impact, because most of them circulated under Louis XVI. He goes so far as to suggest that they served as favorable propaganda for the new king, because they provided a negative foil against which he could be contrasted. But Burrows cites no evidence for that speculation, which I find unconvincing. It ignores the attempts after 1774 to stamp out every publication that maligned Louis XV, his mistresses, and his ministers. The authorities saw this literature as a retrospective form of *lèse majesté*—that is, as a threat to the monarchy, not as outmoded slander of one monarch that could have the happy effect of making another one look good.

After 1789, of course, conditions changed radically, and libels employed a different rhetoric. In place of the satire and sophisticated word-play that held public personages up to ridicule under the *ancien régime*, they adopted a tone of moral indignation. And instead of revealing secret sex lives, they tore the mask off false patriots and exposed what they construed to be a greater crime: economic corruption. The shift in tone and themes can be demonstrated, I believe, by surveying the large run of libels in a particular genre, the *vie privée*. But how to understand the way readers

reacted to it? Lacking direct evidence, I fell back on an argument about affinities: the change in rhetoric corresponded to the moralistic idiom of revolutionary politics, and it was adapted to the cultural horizon of an increasingly plebeian readership. I can think of many objections to this interpretation, but Burrows does not confront it. Instead, he advances a counter-argument, which I find more tenuous than mine. The “key” to libel literature after 1789, he claims, is the gendering of the public sphere. Whether such gendering took place is a matter of debate, but I don’t think it should be invoked as an established fact that explains the nature of libels and the way they were read.

Politics: Darnton does not do justice to the political context of libels, and he fails to sort them out into convincing categories of right vs. left.

Darrin McMahon rightly emphasizes that slander was no monopoly of writers who belonged to the left (if that category has any meaning before 1789), and he suggests that some of the sniping could be explained by the attempt of libelers to exploit a growing cult of celebrity. I find that suggestion convincing, especially if the targets among the celebrities can be traced to political rivalries. McMahon’s insight could reinforce one of my main arguments—namely, that libels capitalized on the journalistic tendency to organize stories around the principle that names make news. That tendency is especially apparent in libels connected with the personal infighting of court politics, and it did not disappear during the Revolution, when political groups coalesced around leaders and derived their identity from prominent names—Brissotins, Dantonistes, Robespierristes, although labels like Feuillants, Girondins, and Montagnards had other derivations.

I attempted to relate the libels to their political context, but I agree with McMahon’s contention that I should have done so in a systematic fashion. I, too, admire the work of Tom Kaiser and Dale Van Kley in this respect, and I am equally impressed with McMahon’s own research, especially his fine article on “The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France.” In emptying the index cards from my shoe boxes (many of them nearly a half century old), I came across a great deal of evidence about connections between pamphleteering and political intrigues. I have published some of this research elsewhere—for example, in an essay on Brissot’s financial writings, which shows how they promoted the speculations of *baissiers* on the Bourse and, at the same time, the propaganda offensive against Calonne. My last book, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century France*, gives a detailed analysis of how the information that circulated in the streets had connections with factional rivalries in Versailles during the mid-century years. But to pursue all the political ramifications of libeling from Louis XIV to Louis XVI was more than I could manage. I hope that other researchers will follow some of those leads, using techniques more effective than index cards and shoe boxes.

Simon Burrows castigates me for advancing an inadequate explanation of the Revolution and for trivializing the Enlightenment. I do not think those criticisms are fair. I set out to study the literature of libel, its authors, its themes, its evolution over a century, and, insofar as possible, its reception by an increasingly politicized reading public. Those subjects are related to the Enlightenment and the Revolution in various ways, which I discussed, but I tried to keep my focus on the subject of my book. For my views on the Enlightenment, I would direct the reader to *Pour les Lumières. Défense, illustration*,

méthode (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002), and for a summary of my interpretation of the Revolution, to “What Was Revolutionary About the French Revolution,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 19, 1989.

Although I did not pretend to write a history of the Revolution, I did not mean to dodge the problem of causality. Laurent Turcot correctly observes that I understand the cumulative effect of the libels as creating a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the outbreak of the Revolution, and Darrin McMahon raises the possibility that libel literature so undermined authority that it might have stifled the liberal propensity of the Revolution from the start. I would not go that far, but in studying the large libel literature after 1789, I was struck by the absence of any discussion of principles and policies. In fact, it rarely vilified its victims by exposing unsavory details about the way they participated in events. Even in denouncing conspiracies, the libels did not dig deeply into politics. Instead, they reduced political conflict to the play of personalities and tried to reinforce one faction by calumniating the leaders of its enemies.

Insofar as libelers drew on any general ideas, they invoked the concept of despotism. Montesquieu broke with the Aristotelian categories of political philosophy by describing despotism as one of the three basic varieties of government and by characterizing them according to their animating *principe* rather than by the locus of power. In doing so, he opened up an ethnographic vein of political theory, and he provided ammunition for libelers. Yet they made little use of it. A reader might detect an implicit reference to Montesquieu in the libelers’ denunciation of political abuses, and he or she might pick up echoes of the protests against despotism in the remonstrances of the parlements. But there is a pervasive, one-note theme to libel literature that raises questions. Whether they are attacking Maupeou or Lafayette, Mme de Maintenon or Robespierre, the libelers denounce despotism. That theme continues unabated from the *ancien régime* to the Terror. Although it can be explained in part by constant abuses of power, I find this continuity curious; for there were many other tendencies to denounce after 1789, and they can be found everywhere in revolutionary journalism and oratory—monopolizing food supplies, consorting with aristocrats, collaborating with the enemy. References to these issues crop up occasionally in the libels, but if one stepped back from the details and viewed the libels as a whole, the Revolution would appear in black and white as a struggle of liberty against despotism.

I would call this tendency radical simplification, and I would relate it to the question of causality as follows. If the Revolution began in 1787 with a *révolte nobiliaire*, as Georges Lefebvre and others have argued, the aristocratic surge of power appears nowhere in the pamphlet literature, including the libels, before August 1788. The anti-aristocratic motif cannot be clearly detected until the Parlement of Paris provided a rallying point for reaction on September 25, 1788 by advocating the separation of estates in the future Estates General. Even then and despite the powerful influence of Sieyès’s *Qu’est-ce que le tiers état*, the Revolution appeared primarily as a struggle against despotism. I would not minimize the bourgeois hatred of the aristocracy, the opposition of the *menu peuple* against *les grands*, the struggle for bread among the poor, the prevalence of counter-revolutionary plots, and the threat of treason in a desperate war—elements that I try to weave into my account of libel literature after 1789—yet I remain struck by the obsession with despotism in libels aligned with every political camp. What could have been less despotic than the ministries of Louis XVI, from Turgot to Brienne,

or less autocratic than the rule of Louis himself? Yet they all stood condemned in the same way. “Despotism” was a stick that could be used to beat anyone in authority, and it worked so well that it obstructed a clearer view of the revolutionary struggles. Darrin McMahon is right: I do not see abstract political discourse as a determinant of events, but I think that libels reinforced the illiberalism identified by Isser Woloch in his criticism of Furet. By its very nature, calumny encourages simplification, and simplification prevents the successful negotiation of complex conflicts. The appeal of libel literature was visceral, not cerebral. Histories of the Revolution should take account of that appeal, even though historians cannot measure and weigh the responses of revolutionary readers.

Desacralization: Darnton invokes an unproven and unlikely theory to explain the libeling of the monarch, which can be accounted for much better in other ways.

Desacralization isn't a theory at all. The term merely serves as a way to describe a shift in attitude toward the monarchy. As Marc Bloch, Ernst Kantorowicz, and others have demonstrated, a widespread conviction existed among the French from some time far back in the Middle Ages that their kings were sacred beings. Endowed at birth with spiritual power, which was reinforced at their coronation, kings could cure disease and transform human nature by ennoblement. Had that belief died out by 1789? On June 14, 1775, following his coronation three days earlier—a religious rite of passage performed with elaborate attention to symbolic detail—Louis XVI “touched” 2,400 people afflicted with scrofula, “the king’s disease.” Between that date and the king’s execution as “Louis Capet” on January 21, 1793, it seems likely that a profound change occurred in attitudes toward royal power among the French. *Lèse-majesté* gave way to *lèse-nation*. When, how, and how deeply did this change, not just in politics but in world view, take place? Although I cannot answer that question, I believe that libels helped to spread a conviction that kings were ordinary mortals. They presented Louis XV in his youth as a feckless, clueless “roi fainéant” and in his last years as a dirty old man. They made Louis XVI out to be stupid, impotent, and incompetent. And in stripping both kings down to their deeply flawed humanity, the libels mocked the misuse of their symbolic trapping—the scepter, throne, and crown. It may be impossible to measure the effect of such symbolic desecration, but it would be a mistake to ignore it.

Although Burrows brings a healthy dose of British empiricism to this subject, he shows little tolerance for symbolic and ethnographic modes of interpretation. In criticizing my chapter on “Royal Depravity,” he concentrates on the question of dating the libels against Marie-Antoinette. I dated them correctly, and I did not claim that they circulated widely before 1789. But they used material from oral sources, pamphlets, and *nouvelles à la main* that had been available throughout the pre-revolutionary years. The most widespread attack on the queen, *Essais historiques sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette d’Autriche* (1789, ten later editions), drew on rumors about the queen’s supposed sexual depravity, which had circulated in the 1770s and became rampant after the Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785. When Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir looked back over his role as lieutenant general of police, he noted in a draft of his memoirs that violent talk about the queen had increased constantly from 1774 and came to a climax during the Diamond Necklace Affair, which he characterized as “une des causes de la Révolution.”⁵ Libels like *Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette* (1779) expressed calumnies that were already

circulating in Paris and Versailles. But the libels of the Revolution went further. While recycling material that had been produced under the *ancien régime*, they played on hatred of “l’Autrichienne” stirred up by conspiracies and war. And they added so much overheated hyperbole that they may well have desecrated whatever aura of the sacred that continued to surround Marie-Antoinette after 1789.

The slander of the queen was so violent that it seems to constitute a genre of its own, and one could argue that it did not directly damage the religious attitude toward the king, although it certainly made him look despicable. But the libels against Marie-Antoinette should be read in the context of an outpouring of slander against all the members of the royal family. The comte d’Artois, the duc d’Orléans, the prince de Conti, and the prince de Condé were dragged through the mud in lengthy *vies privées* of their own, which echoed the nastiest passages of *Essais historiques sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette*. The cumulative effect was an elaborate, anti-monarchical mythology composed of the same tropes and interlocking themes. This material can be described as part of a general process, the erosion of legitimacy. Should it also be subsumed under the category “desacralization”? I don’t put much stock in the term and use it sparingly, but I think it valid enough, especially if handled with care, as in Jeffrey Merrick’s *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*.

Grub Street. Darnton fails once again in an effort to defend his discredited thesis about the revolutionary potential of the milieu that he calls Grub Street.

I did not design *The Devil in the Holy Water* as a vindication of the argument that I published forty years ago. Grub Street characters figure in my book, which contributes, I hope, to a better understanding of authorship in an age when copyright, royalties, and a mass reading public did not exist. Were I to rewrite my first article on Brissot (1968) and the essay in *Past and Present* (1971) that provoked the debate about Grub Street, I would change much of the phrasing. I misled readers by implying unintentionally that a line of causality connected the frustrated ambitions of hack writers under the *ancien régime* to the most extreme, Jacobin politics of the Revolution. That writers suffered from their inability to get ahead in a world of letters dominated by an elite seems undeniable to me, but the frustrations existed in many camps and led in many directions. If I look back on my own writing about Grub Street, I think I began from the naïve notion that one could get inside psyches that had existed centuries ago. I was influenced by a seminar on psychobiography taught by Erik Erikson, where I gave a dubious paper on Brissot’s anti-monarchical sentiments and the oedipal complex, and also, no doubt, by some of the passions unleashed in the 1960s. I took a more sociological approach in the 1970s, when I got to know Pierre Bourdieu and began collaborating with his *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Collaboration with Clifford Geertz, which went back to 1970, has had a profounder effect on my general approach to history, and my attempts to make use of symbolic anthropology have more recently converged with a concern for textual and bibliographical analysis as illustrated by the work of Roland Barthes and Donald McKenzie. All these ingredients went into *The Devil in the Holy Water*, which is not a treatise on Grub Street.

The criticism of the Grub Street sub-theme of my book clusters around three subjects: the economic condition of writers in the eighteenth century, the “demography” or size of the writing population, and the sociology of authorship.

I agree with Geoffrey Turnovsky’s argument about the importance of distinguishing between direct and indirect sources of support for writers and of allowing for the discursive character of the evidence. But the fact that writers discoursed about poverty does not mean that poverty should be ruled out as a fact. In combing through 500 police reports about writers in Paris from 1748 to 1752, I came upon many cases of poor devils who lived like Voltaire’s *Pauvre diable*.⁶ Although the reports conform to the conventions of police discourse,⁷ they contain plenty of evidence that writers had difficulty in clothing their families, paying the rent, and getting bread on the table. I think of J.-C. Soulas d’Allainval, who could not afford to buy paper in order to continue writing libels and retreated to the Hôtel Dieu to die as a pauper—or even Jacques-Pierre Brissot, described by Filippo Mazzei as living miserably in two rooms with a large family, his children dressed in “rags.” Brissot’s close friend Jérôme Pétion confirmed that view of his poverty on the eve of the Revolution: “Il était impossible d’être plus simple dans sa parure, d’avoir des appartements moins recherchés, d’avoir une table plus frugale et de faire enfin moins de dépenses....Souvent Brissot n’avait pas six francs dans sa poche, il était obligé de faire à chaque instant de petits emprunts à ses amis...”⁸

Having discussed Brissot’s case at length in a biographical study and an edition of his correspondence,⁹ I won’t go over it once again here. But I would like to address a point raised by Simon Burrows as well as Turnovsky. Both insist that there is no incompatibility between poverty and commitment to idealistic principles. I agree. I believe that Brissot had a genuine faith in the ideals of the Enlightenment from the beginning to the end of his career. Far from disparaging him for bad faith, I tried to show how he clung to his principles even in the Rousseauistic arguments of the pamphlets that he wrote to promote Clavière’s speculations on the Bourse. I was shocked in 1965 when I read in Lenoir’s papers that Brissot was paid to spy for the police. Although I noted that “spying” could have involved writing relatively innocent reports about other authors and their works, I produced a harsh account of Brissot’s compromises with the authorities of the *ancien régime*. Many years ago when I asked to consult his private papers in the Archives Nationales, I was refused permission. Now that I have had the opportunity to study them, I am impressed with Brissot’s steadfastness under questioning in the Bastille. And having read similar material about compromises made by authors in Communist East Germany, I feel no desire to point an accusing finger. Who am I, a well-fed, well-paid historian writing in the comfort of a Harvard office, to disparage the reputation of writers who lived centuries ago? My purpose, however, was not to pass judgment on the integrity of authors but rather to understand how they coped with the conditions of authorship.

One approach to that problem is to calculate the growth of the population of writers from 1750 to 1789. By way of illustration, I quoted Mercier’s remark that France contained an immense number of writers but only thirty persons who actually made a career of writing. Geoffrey Turnovsky rightly warns that Mercier meant to exalt the dignity of the small minority who were genuinely committed to literature as a vocation. Although I agree, I think that Mercier was also reflecting on the difficulty of living from the pen. But I did not base my argument on Mercier’s remark. I worked systematically

through several sources to calculate the growth in the number of writers. Aside from police reports and the surprisingly accurate information in Rivarol's tendentious *Le Petit Almanach de nos grands hommes* (1788), I based my estimates on successive editions of *La France littéraire*, a publication that claimed to include a notice on every existing French writer. It defined a writer as someone who has published at least one book—an arbitrary measure but one that has the advantage of eliminating those who published only some frothy poetry in the *Mercure* or *Année littéraire*. I concluded that the population grew from 1,187 in 1757 to 2,819 in 1784, although the number by 1789 was probably greater than 3,000.¹⁰ Those statistics may not qualify as a contribution to a rigorous demography, but they prove my point about the overgrowth of writers relative to the under supply of employment in occupations connected with literature. It was this demographic pressure—too many competitors, too few sources of support—that made life so hard for those who drifted downward into the milieu that I call Grub Street.

The term is metaphorical or, if one prefers, metonymical. It does not express a theory, as Simon Burrows claims, any more than “desacralization” conveys theoretical reflection. But it does describe a subject of research that can be considered sociological—or, more properly, prosopographical. I understand the milieu of Grub Street to be a sector in the “field” of literature (to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology) that was constituted by power relations in the eighteenth century. The writers who belonged to it did not come from a specific social group. They were not exclusively provincial bourgeois who sought fame and fortune in Paris, only to sink to the bottom of the literary world, seething with frustration. Some of their careers fit into that pattern—Pierre Manuel's, for example, which I discuss at length in *The Devil in the Holy Water*. But Grub Street included writers who came from many different backgrounds—doctors and lawyers, defrocked priests, déclassé aristocrats, and adventurers of all stripes. Anne Gédéon Lafitte, marquis de Pelleport, exemplifies the latter. I do not consider him a genius, but I think his *Bohémiens* warrants careful study, not only for its literary brio, but also for its revelations about the experience of literary life at the bottom of “literature” in the sociological sense of the word. My early attempts to write literary history from the bottom up, inspired in part by the social history of the 1960s, did not take adequate account of the middle ranks of writers, men (rarely women) who made a decent living as tutors, secretaries, and *abbés*. Were I to rewrite those publications today, I would make use of the concepts and methods developed in subaltern studies. But I would not revise my basic argument that, at bottom, the literary world was composed of impoverished hacks, who took on all sorts of odd jobs, notably libeling, in a struggle to survive.

How to make sociological sense of all this disparate human material? I never attempted to write a full-scale social history of Grub Street, Paris, although I believe it could be done by taking cues from Pat Rogers's admirable study of Grub Street, London. The London milieu of French expatriate writers affords an opportunity to experiment with some comparative analysis on a microscopic scale: hence my focus on the libelers of London in the first two parts of *The Devil in the Holy Water*. After many years of research in police archives and the papers of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I thought I had gathered enough material to portray that milieu. I did not think it adequate, however, to attempt anything like a prosopography or collective biography.

Simon Burrows did not feel inhibited by such doubts. Thanks to painstaking research, he turned up some new documentation and extended the story further than the

fundamental work of Gunnar and Mavis von Proschwitz.¹¹ But the most original aspect of his *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution. London's French libellistes, 1758-92* is its claim to provide a rigorous, prosopographical analysis of the London libelers as a group. While developing this argument, Burrows disparaged my work as misconceived, teleological, and exemplary of the flaws inherent in a supposed “Darntonesque, ‘pornographic school.’”¹² I could not recognize any of my own ideas in his remarks about a “Darntonian model,” a “Darntonian assumption”, and “classic Grub Street theory.”¹³ Nor did I consider it fair to attribute arguments to me through the use of phrases such as: “Certainly Darnton would argue...” and “As Darnton would have it...”¹⁴ Because I had never taken those positions and would never have argued in the ways he invents, I concluded that Burrows was tilting at a straw man of his own making.

The anti-“Darntonian” rhetoric may not be important, but Burrows’s attempt to reconstruct the world of the London libelers deserves serious consideration. Although he gives an accurate picture of their activities as far as they can be known, he does not produce enough evidence about their backgrounds to support any general conclusions. He identifies sixteen libelers. Of them, he has virtually no information about three: Lenoir de La Bussière, Campagnol, and Dom Louis. He fails to identify any writing by two others, Linsing and Vignoles, who may never have written anything. Of the remaining eleven, Jacquet de la Douai, the police agent, must be eliminated, although he was deeply involved in libeling, because he made only a few forays into London from his home base in Paris. Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet might at a stretch be considered a libeler, owing to his constant polemics and his vitriolic *Théorie du libelle*. But he was primarily a journalist and a pamphleteer, who unlike true libelers did not hide in anonymity, and during his relatively short stay in London he had little contact with the hack writers who clustered around *Le Courier de l’Europe*. To classify the chevalier d’Eon as a libeler is more of a stretch, because his involvement in the *secret du roi* did not involve slandering, and his *Lettres, mémoires, et négociations particulières du chevalier d’Eon* is an idiosyncratic account of his baroque imbroglios, not a libel, despite its nasty remarks about the comte de Guerchy. It is a great stretch indeed to include the comte and comtesse de La Motte among the libelers, because they were not writers. The libels that appeared under their names were written for them by others and were published in 1789—that is, after the literary world of the ancien régime had been transformed and writers worked under new conditions. The ghost writers of the La Motte couple, Joseph Parkyns (or Perkins) MacMahon and Antoine Joseph de Serres de La Tour, occupied key positions in the expatriate colony, but there is no evidence that they wrote any libels before 1789. Of those that remain from Burrows’s survey, Morande, Pelleport, and Pillement de Fauques certainly qualify as libelers, and Treysac de Vergy might be considered as a would-be libeler, although he seems never to have actually published anything. Therefore, if examined closely, Burrows’s population of sixteen, can be reduced to three or four. And even if the ambiguous or undocumented cases are classified with the well-known libelers, the statistical base of Burrows’s argument remains trivial.

Serious prosopography, the kind developed by Ronald Syme and Lewis Namier, requires enough of a quantitative foundation for the historian to sustain an argument about the social composition of the group under study. Burrows’s interpretation, as far as it goes, seems valid to me. Scattered and scarce as they are, the sources suggest that the

expatriate libelers in London came from different backgrounds but had two things in common: they needed to make money, and they were adventurers. Some of them also had principles—even Pelleport, whose literary projects included an attempt to translate the radical works of Catherine Macaulay. I have doubts about the high-mindedness of Morande, whom Burrows treats as a “patriot.” Although Morande’s attacks on “despotism” could seem to align him with the opponents of Maupeou in the 1770s and of Calonne and Brienne in the 1780s, I find it hard to credit him with any idealism. Instead, I view him as the self-styled “Philosophe Cynique,” who appears on the title page of *Le Gazetier cuirassé* and who would do anything for money—gambling, pimping, libeling, blackmailing, and spying for the police. My assessment may be wrong, but it is compatible with one of Burrows’s basic points: Morande was above all an adventurer, and in that respect he epitomized the way of life of the libelers in London.

It could be, therefore, that Burrows and I do not differ fundamentally in our views of the London libelers. But my view should not be misconstrued. I never characterized the inhabitants of Grub Street, either in London or in Paris, as a population composed exclusively of young writers who had failed to make it to the top of the literary world and vented their frustrations from positions at the bottom. Nor did I describe their passions as a cause of Jacobinism. Whatever unfortunate terms I employed nearly fifty years ago—and I would happily sacrifice “nihilistic”—I did not base my argument on psychological reductionism or simple-minded causality.

Having devoted so much of *The Devil in the Holy Water* to rhetoric, I can see in retrospect that the rhetorical thrust of my own writings has led to misreadings. But misreadings occupy an important place in the history of books, and they are often constructive, especially if they provoke debate. I want to thank H-France Forum for arranging this debate; and far from wanting to have the last word, I hope it will continue.

Robert Darnton

Copyright © 2010 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Forum, Volume 5, Issue 4 (Fall 2010), No. ?

¹ See especially his fine article, “The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past and Present*, 159 (1998): 77–112.

² See Michel de Certeau, “Lire: un braconnage,” in his *L’Invention du quotidien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 279-96 and Roger Chartier, “Labourers and Voyagers. From the Text to the Reader,” in *The Book History Reader*, David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 47-58.

³ D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴ See especially “A Police Inspector Sorts His Files,” ch. 4 in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁵ See Robert Darnton, “The Memoirs of Lenoir, lieutenant de police of Paris, 1774-1785,” *English Historical Review* 85 (1970): 532-59, at pp. 541 and 546.

⁶ See, for example, “The Life of a ‘Poor Devil’ in the Republic of Letters,” in Jean Macary, ed., *Essays on the Age of Enlightenment in Honor of Ira O. Wade* (Geneva and Paris: Droz, 1977).

⁷ I discuss this point at length in chapter four of *The Great Cat Massacre*.

⁸ Filippo Mazzei, *Memoirs*, trans. H. R. Narrari (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 229 and “Notice sur Brissot par Pétion” published by Claude Perroud as an appendix to his edition of Brissot’s memoirs: *J.-P. Brissot. Mémoires (1754-1793)* (Paris: Picard, 1910), vol. 2, p. 365.

⁹ *J.-P. Brissot, His Career and Correspondence* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001), available online through the web page of the Voltaire Foundation).

¹⁰ “The Facts of Literary Life in Eighteenth-Century France” in Keith Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), pp. 261-91.

¹¹ Gunnar and Mavis von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l’Europe. Documents inédits ou peu connus*, 2 vols (Oxford: Alden Press, 1990).

¹² Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution. London’s French libellistes, 1758-92* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 12. See the similar remarks on pp. 17, 25, 49, 52, 62, 171, 180-81, and 219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 49, and 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 180 and 51.