

## Diffusion and Confusion in the Study of Enlightenment

Studies of the French Enlightenment have shifted toward research on the diffusion of ideas; diffusion studies have moved into the history of books; and book history has run into a difficulty: who exactly were the booksellers, and how did they function as cultural intermediaries in eighteenth-century France?

With a few exceptions, booksellers were such obscure characters that one cannot follow their activities in detail.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, however, historians turn up documents about booksellers that seem to have important implications for the study of cultural history in general. Simon Burrows examined some archives related to the trade of Jean-Félix Charmet, a bookseller in Besançon, and reached conclusions that, in his view, “have the power to shock” and indeed to force us “to rethink our understanding of the book trade of the later enlightenment.” Instead of Enlightenment, he sees a world saturated with religious literature, and to carry his argument he contests my interpretation of Charmet’s trade.<sup>2</sup>

I find nothing shocking about the assertion that liturgical works and devotional tracts were printed in large numbers and circulated widely among readers, especially in the lower strata of French society. That view has long been held by social and cultural historians. The omnipresence of religious works is stressed in standard studies of religious history and in histories of the book.<sup>3</sup> Just what constitutes “popular” literature is a matter of dispute,<sup>4</sup> but experts on

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a somewhat expanded version of an article published in *H-France. French History and Civilization*, 7 (2017), 204-208. The best-known bookseller from eighteenth-century France was the extraordinary press baron, Charles-Joseph Panckoucke. See Suzanne Tucoo-Chala, *Charles-Joseph Panckoucke et la librairie française, 1736-1798* (Pau, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Simon Burrows, “Charmet and the Book Police: Clandestinity, Illegality and Popular Reading in Late *Ancien Régime* France,” *French History and Civilization: Papers from the George Rudé Seminar*, vol. 6 (2015), 34-55.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Jean Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris, 1971), 83-86; John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1998), vol. I, 346-348 and vol. II, 40-77 and 194-199; *Histoire de l’édition française*, Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, eds. (Paris, 1984), vol. II, 95-103, 405-408, 439-443, and 468-497; Pierre Goubert and Daniel Roche, *Les Français et l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1984), vol. II, 233-244; François Furet, ed., *Livre et société dans la France du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1965-70), 2 vols.; and the more recent work by Philippe Martin, *Une religion de livres, 1640-1850* (Paris, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See Roger Chartier, *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1987), 7-19. For my part, I agree with Chartier’s view that one cannot distinguish an autonomous popular culture under the *Ancien Régime* and that chapbooks do not express it: see “The Social History of Ideas,” in *The Kiss of Lamourette. Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), 238-245.

chapbooks have always emphasized the importance of devotional tracts.<sup>5</sup> Although some contained a hundred or more pages, most were cheap pamphlets consisting of one or two sheets and printed in huge numbers by specialized publishers in Troyes, Rouen, and other cities. Production of the chapbooks known as the “bibliothèque bleue” reached a million copies a year during the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Humble readers were also surrounded by printed ephemera tacked on walls, especially images of saints and calendars, which featured saints’ days and religious holidays. Readers at all levels of society consulted an enormous corpus of religious works, which had been available for generations. L’Imitation de Jésus-Christ, one of the bestsellers of all times, had gone through more than two thousand editions since its publication in the fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Some of the most widespread tracts transmitted an austere moral code aimed at dying a good death and gaining paradise: Le Faut mourir, Pensez-y bien, and Le Chemin du ciel. Many celebrated the Virgin Mary (Dévotion pratique pour servir et honorer la très Sainte Vierge) and invoked the protection of saints for dangers such as childbirth (Vie de sainte Marguerite). They often had an educational function (Croix de Jésus). And above all they were used in church services (Le Bon paroissien).

Bishops commissioned liturgical books for their dioceses, providing a steady supply of work for local printers. Printing shops with only two or three presses turned out catechisms, prayer books, psalters, canticles, missals, mandements (episcopal decrees), and occasional sermons. Many of these publications contained only a few pages. They belonged to the ephemera that were the stock-in-trade of small bookshops. But some were fairly substantial, especially if they were intended for use in services throughout France’s 36,000 parishes. Many parishioners brought breviaries to church and gave religious works to children at their first communion. Schoolbooks, especially “abécédaires” (alphabet books such as Alphabet et instruction chrétienne), were overwhelmingly religious. Restif

---

<sup>5</sup> This emphasis goes back to the early study of Charles Nisard, Histoire des livres populaires ou de la littérature de colportage (Paris, 1854; first edition 1852), 2 vols.; see especially the chapters “Religion et morale” and “Cantiques spirituels” in volume 2. More recent studies confirm the central place of religious works in the enormous body of chapbooks known as the “bibliothèque bleue”: Robert Mandrou, De la culture populaire aux 17e et 18e siècles. La Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes (Paris, 1964); Geneviève Bollème, La Bible bleue: anthologie d’une littérature

“populaire” (Paris, 1975); and Lise Andriès, La Bibliothèque bleue au dix-huitième siècle: une tradition éditoriale (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Andriès, La Bibliothèque bleue, 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Yann Sordet, Un succès de librairie européenne, l’Imitato Christi (1470-1850) (Paris, 2012). Sordet estimates that 2.4 million copies of Pierre Corneille’s translation, first published in 1656, had been produced by 1800.

de la Bretonne's account of his childhood suggests that Bibles were widely owned and read aloud in relatively wealthy peasant households.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, literacy rates remained low, especially in rural areas of the Southwest.<sup>9</sup> But France had a large population of secular and regular clergy, who had small libraries stocked with religious books. Booksellers in Besançon must have sold many books to clergy connected with its cathedral, 2 collegial chapters, seminary, 8 parishes, 2 large abbeys for men, 2 for women, and 12 smaller convents.<sup>10</sup>

Chapbooks were hawked by peddlers who covered large regions,<sup>11</sup> but most of the liturgical and devotional works were sold by small printers and booksellers whose trade was confined to local markets. Works of the Enlightenment and all varieties of current literature belonged to another sector of the trade. They were produced by publishers ("libraires" or "libraires-imprimeurs") in urban centers, many of them located across France's border, where censorship could be avoided and bestsellers pirated with relative impunity; and they circulated through the main arteries of the trade to wholesalers and retailers everywhere in France. The smaller dealers in the capillary system tended to satisfy the demand for traditional religious literature, while the main-line booksellers concentrated on works that were marketed on a national and even an international scale.

Of course, this distinction was not absolute, because all varieties of literature seeped into all branches of the book trade. Yet it served as a rule of thumb among publishers and wholesalers. The way it operated can be understood by following a sales rep (commercial traveler or "commis voyageur") named Jean-François Favarger on a tour de France in 1778. As an agent for an important Swiss publisher and wholesaler, the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), he spent five months on a horse selling books and assessing the demand for them. He sent reports on every bookshop he encountered along an itinerary that led down the Rhône valley, across the South, up the west coast, through the valley of the Loire to Burgundy, the Franche-Comté, and back to Neuchâtel on the Swiss side of the French border.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Edme Rétif de la Bretonne, La vie de mon père (Ottawa, 1949), 216-17.

<sup>9</sup> François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, eds., Lire et écrire: l'alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry (Paris, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> For detailed information about Besançon's religious institutions and other aspects of its culture and economy, see the web page on Besançon at [robertdarnton.org](http://robertdarnton.org).

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Dominique Mellot, "Rouen et les 'libraire forains' à la fin du XVIIIe siècle: la veuve Machuel et ses correspondants (1768-1773)," Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des chartes, 147 (1989), 503-538.

<sup>12</sup> Favarger's diary and his correspondence are in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, papers of the STN, ms. 1150. I have made them available on the website [robertdarnton.org](http://robertdarnton.org) along with a great many other documents, including 179 letters by Charles-

When Favarger arrived in a town, he described its booksellers according to the character of their trade and the strength of their credit. He sought out reliable dealers who could place orders for the kinds of books the STN supplied—that is, nearly everything then being sold on the general market for “articles de librairie” and “livres de littérature,” meaning all sorts of fiction and non-fiction.<sup>13</sup> After visiting the shops of “solid” booksellers like Michel Gaude in Nîmes, Jean Mossy in Marseille, Isaac-Pierre Rigaud in Montpellier, Antoine Laporte in Toulouse, Guillaume Bergeret in Bordeaux, Michel-Vincent Chevrier in Poitiers, Louis-Pierre Couret de Villeneuve in Orléans, and Jean-Baptiste Capel in Dijon, Favarger dispatched favorable reports on their businesses to the home office along with orders for books from a wide range of literature. The orders might include some general religious works, and they often contained requests for Bibles and psalters intended for France’s Huguenot population; but they never mentioned breviaries and devotional tracts. Favarger treated that kind of Catholic literature as “usages,” which were limited to local markets and sold by small booksellers and bookseller-printers. Distributors of that sort were not potential customers of the STN, and therefore he wrote them off in a few phrases:

Lons-le-Saunier: Gabriel est un pauvre homme de qui il ne faut confier que pour peu de temps. Je lui ai remis un catalogue et prospectus, mais je crois que c’est sans effet. Il ne tient que des livres de religion, à peu de chose près.

Grenoble: Faure est imprimeur du roi et ne fait que des placards... Il ne fait rien en articles de librairie.

Orange: Orange n’a qu’un nommé Jouit, perruquier de profession, mais qui vend des usages et rien d’autre.

Tarascon: Cordonnecy et veuve Tassy ne font qu’une seule maison dont le commerce est très borné. Ils ne vendent que des usages.

---

Antoine Charmet and his wife. The quotations given below come from these sources and can be consulted, both in transcriptions and in digitized versions of the manuscripts.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in a letter to the STN from Grenoble of September 4, 1776, Favarger noted that the bookseller Besson in Bourg-en-Bresse “...ne fait que des usages [that is, religious works] qu’il imprime lui-même; lui offrant un catalogue, il m’a dit qu’il ne faisait rien en livres de littérature.”

Castelnaudary: J'ai vu à Castelnaudary les prétendus libraires Annat et Sérié qui sont mal indiqués dans l'almanach, parce que Annat est un orfèvre qui n'a jamais vendu de livre et Sérié est un marchand toilier qui vend quelques usages, mais rien de plus; ainsi je n'ai rien fait là.

Castres: J'ai vu M. Robert, docteur en théologie, imprimeur et libraire. Mais il ne vend que des usages qu'il fait lui-même; ainsi il n'y a rien à faire avec lui.

Libourne: Morrin...est bon mais il ne fera pas grand'chose. Il ne tient que des usages, à peu de chose près.

Blois: Charles et Ph. Massot ne forment qu'une maison: imprimeurs et qui ne tiennent que des usages.

Orléans: Veuve Rouzeau est bien bonne; mais elle ne tient que des dévotions.

From the viewpoint of a professional salesman, devotional literature existed everywhere, but it was sold primarily by booksellers and printers who limited their business to local markets, whereas all varieties of current literature were stocked by booksellers who drew their supplies through the main channels of the trade.

The distinction between the local markets for liturgical and devotional works and the general market for contemporary literature characterized the book trade in Besançon. In the survey of all the printers and booksellers in France that was conducted by the Crown in 1764, the report on Besançon identified 11 booksellers, including 2 who were also printers. Most of them had a very limited trade: "Des onze qui y sont établis, on en peut compter deux ou trois, au plus, de connaisseurs en librairie. Le commerce de livres n'y étant pas considerable, les facultés des libraires sont modiques." But the few who knew their way around the "librairie" or general book trade posed a danger, because they dealt heavily in pirated and forbidden books, which they procured from foreign suppliers: "La facilité que les libraires de cette ville ont de tirer la plus grande partie de leurs livres de l'étranger multiplie les moyens d'en vendre de pernicious, de débiter des contrefaçons, ce qui fait un tort considerable aux imprimeurs de Besançon et notamment à ceux de Paris qui ont des privilèges." As in the other cities visited by Favarger, a

few booksellers participated in the general market for books, and the rest confined their business to the local trade.

In listing Besançon's booksellers, the report of 1764 mentioned a certain "Charmet" who had recently gone bankrupt. It provided more detail in its list of printers, which included another Charmet: "Jean-Félix Charmet, natif de Besançon, âgé de 25 ans, exerce en vertu d'arrêt du Conseil du 15 février 1762. Cet imprimeur est frère du libraire de ce nom qui vient de faire faillite." In discussing what he printed, it gave him a clean bill of health. He had used his three presses to put out a "missel, graduel, antiphonaire nouveau et almanach de province"—that is, the works that Favarger called "usages."

The two brothers also appear in the Almanach de la librairie of 1781: Jean-Félix Charmet as a printer-bookseller and his brother, now given a first name, Charles-Antoine Charmet, as a bookseller.<sup>14</sup> Several Charmets existed among the book professionals of Besançon. The first letters from them to the STN were signed as "Charmet frères et soeurs." A few bore the signature "Charmet cadet," but in 1773 it was replaced by "Charmet l'aîné," who by then had taken over the trade with the STN, operating a book shop from "rue Saint Pierre près la place." In later letters he signed as "Charmet libraire" or simply as "Charmet." The inconsistencies in the signatures raise the possibility of confusion. Which of the brothers operated as a printer, confining his trade to the local market, and which ordered supplies from the STN, selling all varieties of current literature?

In asserting that religious books dominated the market in Besançon and everywhere else in France, Simon Burrows based his argument on documents about the implementation of the edicts of August 30, 1777, which reorganized the book trade in a manner intended to eliminate the commerce in pirated editions.<sup>15</sup> Because the provincial booksellers relied so heavily on pirated works supplied by publishers like the STN, they could suffer catastrophic losses if a large portion of their stock were confiscated by the state. The edicts gave them a reprieve from this fate by permitting them to sell off their pirated books (contrefaçons) according to a certain procedure. Officials were to inspect their stock and stamp all contrefaçons, which could then circulate legally while the sale of any further pirated works would be severely punished. In order to assess the trade in Besançon, Burrows

---

<sup>14</sup> Antoine Perrin, Almanach de la librairie (reprint edited by Jerom Vercruysse; original edition, Paris, 1781), 42.

<sup>15</sup> The text of the edicts was known throughout the book trade from the version of it printed in Almanach de la librairie (Paris, 1781), 151-189.

consulted the inspections of the bookshops carried out there in 1778.<sup>16</sup> He found that Charmet's stock included a "mind-blowing" number of a common devotional tract, L'Ange conducteur dans la dévotion chrétienne and so many similar publications that only one conclusion was possible: "Jean-Félix Charmet, a bookseller previously notorious as a dealer in scandalous literature, was in fact a major pusher of religious works." According to Burrows, Charmet owed this misplaced notoriety to me. My research had miscast him as a specialist in forbidden books, and it should be taken as a warning to other historians, who suffer from the illusion that the works of the philosophes and most other kinds of literature, including novels and travel books, reached a large reading public. Such literature, according to Burrows, was "dwarfed" by traditional religious works. The Enlightenment, as he presents it, looks relatively trivial.

Unfortunately, Burrows made a fundamental mistake in his research, and I am partly responsible for it. When I first studied Charmet's dossier in the STN archives, sometime in the 1960s, I entered his name on my index cards as Jean-Félix. Why I made this mistake, I cannot recall, but I should have known better, because no first name appears on the outside of the dossier or on the signatures of the letters. When I first published my research on Charmet in The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France (1995) and a supplementary volume, The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789 (1995), he appeared as Jean-Félix. Burrows adopted that name in criticizing the conclusions of The Forbidden Best-Sellers. The criticism misconstrued the book's central argument, which concerned the highly illegal corpus of works that circulated in France during the two decades before the Revolution. I did not pretend to discuss the book trade in general or to measure the importance of forbidden books relative to other kinds of literature. I certainly did not claim to have discovered a short cut to understanding the causes of the Revolution. Having learned to be wary of our ignorance about how books were read 250 years ago, I merely set out to discover what the forbidden books were and which ones were most in demand within the corpus of illegal literature. I analyzed Charmet's orders along with those of many other booksellers for that purpose, but I did not claim that he specialized in the forbidden sector. In 2014, I published a monograph on Charmet with statistics about his orders for all varieties of books, not just illegal works, on my open-access website, [www.robertdarnton.org](http://www.robertdarnton.org). In it, I described him as conservative and cautious,

---

<sup>16</sup> The documentation is in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 21,834.

nothing remotely like the “notorious” specialist in the underground book trade conjured up by Burrows in his account of my research.

Burrows’s own study is flawed by the fact that he picked the wrong Charmet. My man, Charmet l’ainé, was Charles-Antoine, born on December 18, 1735. His younger brother, born on June 20, 1740, was Jean-Félix, the printer-bookseller clearly identified with his first name in the survey of 1764.<sup>17</sup> The survey showed that while Charles-Antoine had gone bankrupt as a bookseller, Jean-Félix restricted his trade to religious works. The report on the inspection of his shop in 1778 confirms the view that he concentrated heavily on devotional tracts. By that time, Charles-Antoine had developed a successful trade in the general run of current literature, drawing much of his stock from the STN. The two brothers represented the two kinds of booksellers that Favarger described during his travels throughout France: specialists in “usages” who restricted their business to the local market and general retailers who carried all kinds of books, which they procured through the main channels of the book trade.

In mistaking one brother for the other, Burrows showed how easy it is to confuse different sectors of the book market. He should have noticed this danger, because the main source of his argument, the report of 1778, clearly identifies Besançon’s twelve booksellers and indicates the nature of the books that they declared to the inspectors. Religious works accounted for 100 percent of the declarations made by Jean-Félix Charmet and five other booksellers, and they accounted for 96-97 percent of the declarations made by three more. Those nine booksellers should be classified as specialists in “usages.” Religious works made up 37.5 percent of the declared stock of a tenth bookseller, Etienne Métoyer, who may have carried some general works. The remaining two, Lépagnez cadet and Charles-Antoine Charmet, drew large proportions of their stock from the STN and belonged to the class of general retailers. Of the works declared by Lépagnez, only five percent were religious. Of those declared by Charles-Antoine Charmet, none were religious. By confusing the two brothers, Burrows reached a conclusion that is the opposite of what the evidence indicates.

An argument between two historians about the trade of an obscure, eighteenth-century bookseller may hold little interest for anyone concerned with broad historical questions. Historians make mistakes, and history continues, revised and reinterpreted here and there, but generally unaffected

---

<sup>17</sup> Archives municipales de Besançon GG189f.28 and GG194f.11. Their father was Jean-Baptiste Charmet, identified as a “marchand libraire.” I am grateful to Hervé Le Corre of Besançon for furnishing me with this information.

by errors committed at the micro-historical level. Burrows's mistakes do not invalidate the attempt to apply quantitative techniques to cultural history. They illustrate the danger of jumping to conclusions. Far from demonstrating "shocking" and "mind-boggling" results, Burrows's research fails to challenge well-established interpretations. It certainly does not force historians to abandon "many narratives of enlightenment and its concomitant secularizing process," as he put it. It leaves things where they were: the ideas of the philosophes were diffused by works that circulated through the main channels of the book trade, while traditional religious literature continued to reach a broad public through the trade confined primarily to local markets.

Robert Darnton