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The Devil in the Holy Water:
Political Libel in Eighteenth-Century France

Robert Darnton

Why take slander seriously? It has infected politics and dogged politicians since antiquity, but it could be dismissed as ‘noise’—the inevitable by-product of friction in any political system. Whether directed against a Roman emperor or an American president, it seems to have a sameness that deters historical analysis. The head of state has a scandalous private life: so what? Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

I would like to argue for the historicity of slander—that is, for its character as a cultural phenomenon peculiar to a time and place, in this case eighteenth-century France. Similar arguments can be applied to seventeenth-century England¹ and to other regimes threatened with revolution. But France developed a particularly rich vein of slanderous literature, which calls for special attention.

In a previous study, I tried to determine which books actually reached readers through the vast sector of the illegal book trade during the twenty years before the French Revolution.² To my surprise, I found that along with the works of Voltaire and Rousseau, the French bought an enormous number of books known as libelles (libels), a general term for scandalous attacks on the private lives of public figures. Libels took many forms. They could be biographies (often indicated by a title that began with “Vie privée” or “Vie secrète” such as Vie privée de Louis XV (1781)), chroniques scandaleuses (journalistic compilations derived from manuscript newsletters such as

Correspondance politique, civile et littéraire pour servir à l’histoire du XVIII siècle (1783)), full-scale histories (sometimes set in exotic places so that they had the allure of a roman à clé, for example Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de Perse (1745)) or pamphlets (sometimes short enough to read like the pièces de circonstance that circulated in manuscript, thus Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette (1779) a poem about the supposed cuckolding of Louis XVI by his brother, the comte d’Artois).

Libel literature was so varied and extensive that one cannot do justice to it in a single essay.³ Instead of attempting to survey it all, I propose to discuss four representative libels. By concentrating on their textual and paratextual qualities, I hope to show how they were designed to appeal to a particular reading public. They also refer to one another; so by following their intertextual links, I will try to trace a story. The story is worth telling in itself, but it is especially important, I believe, because it illustrates the changing character of political polemics from the reign of Louis XV to the Terror. It shows how an underground literature from the Ancien Régime surfaced in the power struggles of the Revolution.

As its title announced, the first libel, Le Gazetier cuirassé, ou anecdotes scandaleuses de la cour de France (1771), contained plenty of salacious material about the behavior of the great (les grands) in Versailles.

[Figure 1: Le Gazetier cuirassé, title page, 1771]

The false address on the title page served both as a provocation and an invitation to the reader: “printed at a hundred leagues from the Bastille, at the sign of liberty.” Enough

readers responded for the book to enjoy a succès de scandale.⁴ It stood out as one of the most notorious attacks on the government during the crisis of 1771-1774, when the chancellor René Nicolas de Maupeou restructured the judicial system of the kingdom in such a way as to destroy the power of the parlements to resist the authority of the crown. A second edition appeared on the heels of the first in 1771, this time with an elaborate frontispiece, and at least three more editions followed during the next fourteen years. The edition of 1777 carried a long subtitle, which emphasized the book's character as a chronique scandaleuse by promising to regale the reader with all kinds of “news” (nouvelles)—news that would be “political” but also “apocryphal”, “secret”, “extraordinary”, and especially bawdy, for it would include plenty of anecdotes about women of small virtue.

[figure 2: Le Gazetier cuirassé, title page, 1777]

The text of the this edition remained unchanged, but its meaning had shifted, because by 1777 the context had changed. As the Maupeou government had disappeared at the accession of Louis XVI in 1774, the book now read as an indictment of despotism during the previous reign. Yet the title page of 1777 also offered new revelations about the “inquisition” that continued to threaten the French, and the new edition contained an extensive supplement about the nature of that threat: “Remarques historiques et anecdotes sur le château de la Bastille et l’Inquisition de France.” By detailed descriptions of the fetid cells and brutal treatment of the prisoners, the supplement reinforced a political myth: the Bastille stood as testimony to the growing tyranny of Versailles. Instead of

striking a note of righteous indignation, however, the subtitle maintained a strangely jocular tone. Along with the revelations about the Bastille, Le Gazetier cuirassé would offer a “confused miscellany about clear subjects” (“mélanges confuses sur des matières fort claires”) Readers could expect to be amused as well as shocked.

[figure 3: Le Gazetier cuirassé, frontispiece]

The frontispiece was stranger still. It showed how the anonymous author chose to represent himself. In conformity with the book’s title, he struck the pose of an iron-plated gazetteer, a heroic knight in armor who fired off cannonades in all directions, despite the bolts of lightning that threatened to destroy him. That much was clear, but the gazetteer was also surrounded by odd images and inscriptions, which the reader had to puzzle out and which the researcher can use to decipher some of the mysteries inherent in the history of reading. The Latin caption at the bottom reads like a riddle:

Etna provides these weapons for the stalwart man,
Etna which will defeat the mad fury of the giants.

To make sense of it, the reader would have to know the ancient myth about the titan Typhon who tried to storm the kingdom of Zeus by hurling Mount Etna at the heavens. Zeus fired back thunderbolts, which pinned Typhon under Etna, where he remains to this day, belching smoke and lava. Evidently the gazetteer identified himself with Typhon in

a battle against the giants. He was the stalwart man shooting grapeshot at les grands above.

Who were the giants? The initials at the top of the frontispiece—intricately inscribed but legible enough to be deciphered—helped to identify them, provided that the reader’s glance moved vertically to the images below. Underneath the “DB” at the upper left, a barrel served as a rebus that evoked one of the anecdotes in the text: “The equestrian statue of one of our kings was found covered with filth from a barrel, which had been overturned on top of it and covered it down to its shoulders.”⁵ In 1763 a statue of Louis XV had been erected in the center of the new Place de Louis XV (today Place de la Concorde). Baril in the eighteenth century was pronounced without enunciating the final l.⁶ So the frontispiece said that Mme du Barry had defecated all over the French monarchy.

The ‘SF’ after the ‘DB’ stood for Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Saint Florentin, the minister of the king’s household who was responsible for the administration of the Bastille. He countersigned all lettres de cachet beneath the signature of the king. So the Medusa or Gorgon head (a symbol of tyranny) beneath the ‘SF’ spits out thunderbolts carrying lettres de cachet stamped with oval seals (the cachets) and bearing the formulaic inscription ‘et plus bas Phélypeaux’ (‘and, lower, Phélypeaux’). At the upper right, ‘DM’ denoted the chancellor de Maupeou, who also spits out thunderbolts (but without lettres de cachet, as they did not come under his jurisdiction) intended to foudroyer or strike down his enemies. But the iron-plated gazetteer fires back his salvos, undeterred and protected by clouds of smoke.

The imagery and allusions were aimed at readers knowledgeable enough to understand Latin, to connect the caption with the myth of Typhon, and to decipher all the other clues scattered across the frontispiece. The book's preface also indicates the kind of audience to which it was directed and the way it was meant to be read:

I must warn the public that some of the news items that I present to it as true are at most likely and that they include some that are obviously false. I have not taken it upon myself to disentangle them. It is up to people in high society who know how to distinguish truth from lies (by their frequent usage of both) to judge and choose.⁷

The preface cast the readers in the role of worldly sophisticates who could sift through gossipy news items in order to extract nuggets of truth. It operated as an inducement to play a game or to solve a puzzle—for the sheer fun of it, as in the case of the word games featured in nearly all the literary reviews of the time. Every issue of Le Mercure de France, the most widely read periodical in the kingdom, contained énigmes, charades, and logogryphes, which the reader had to puzzle out. The answers always appeared in the subsequent issue along with a new set of brain teasers. 'Find the word of the enigma' (trouver le mot de l'énigme) was a common expression, meaning to find the key to a riddle or mystery. Le Gazetier cuirassé drew on this convention in a section entitled 'enigmatic news' (nouvelles énigmatiques). One énigme challenged the reader to identify a person with the following characteristics: he was '...a little mad, very cheeky, horribly false, an absolute blackguard, a villain perfidious beyond all limits, who plays an

important role and passes himself off as an enlightened genius.’⁸ The answer, which appeared in a “key” at the end of the section—or, in some editions, in a footnote at the bottom of the page—was: Maupeou.

Reading as puzzle solving also characterized another popular genre, the roman à clé. In order to understand the hidden message of a novel, readers had to identify the real persons disguised behind the fictitious characters. If a key was not printed at the back of the volume, they made one of their own or bought one from the peddlers and book dealers who sold them separately.⁹ Le Gazetier cuirassé never named its villains. It merely gave the first letters or syllables of their names and then provided a key so that its readers could verify the accuracy of their guesses. Some identifications were so obvious that they did not require keys:

The Chancel... [Chancellor Maupeou] and the duc d’Aigui...
[d’Aiguillon, the foreign minister] have so much mastery over the k...
[king] that they only leave him the freedom to sleep with his mistress, to
pet his dogs, and to sign marriage contracts.¹⁰

But others required considerable skill and familiarity with gossip about the great. What reader would be able to identify the relatively obscure “comtesse de la Mar...”, who, ‘seeing the impossibility of making a prince, decided to make a little bishop’? Answer: the comtesse de la Marck, who took up with the archbishop of Reims in order to procure an heir to her impotent husband.¹¹

These items took the form of anecdotes, as announced in the book's subtitle, 'scandalous anecdotes from the court of France.' 'Anecdote' in the eighteenth century meant nearly the opposite of what it means today. As defined in contemporary dictionaries and the Encyclopédie, it designated a 'secret history' of the kind originally developed by Procopius in the sixth century A.D.—that is, an account of something that had actually happened but remained excluded from official versions of the past.¹² Anecdotes might be exaggerated, but they always contained a kernel of truth; so they, too, had to be deciphered. Le Gazetier cuirassé played with the reader by attaching tantalizing footnotes to its anecdotes. One footnote merely stated, 'Half of this article is true.'¹³ Which half? It was up to the reader to guess. Another read, 'This adventure may well not be true, but we can be sure that it is not completely false.'¹⁴

Anecdotes were the building blocks from which libels were composed. They usually took the form of a paragraph, which could be combined with other paragraphs and cemented together by some transitional phrasing to make a narrative. In the case of chroniques scandaleuses like the Gazetier cuirassé, the paragraphs simply followed one another without connecting links or any general structure, like the items in contemporary newspapers provided by "paragraph men"—and even the news "flashes" in some forms of journalism today.¹⁵ Libelers often lifted anecdotes from one another's texts and rearranged them to suit their own purposes. They also inflated them by making small incidents look like major scandals—a technique known as "piping" among modern reporters. But they always selected stories that had a grain of truth. The game would not work if it involved nothing more than fiction.

Where did the iron-plated gazetteer get his information? He did not reveal his sources, although he hinted that he had secret informants in Versailles. A later pamphlet identified one of them as “une dame de Courcelles”, who relayed gossip to him by means of a clandestine correspondence.¹⁶ The text that he cobbled together contained enough accurate information to horrify contemporaries. Voltaire, an expert on such matters, testified to its power as a vehicle for shocking readers: “A satanic work has just appeared where everyone, from the monarch to the last citizen, is insulted with fury, where the most atrocious and absurd calumny distills a hideous poison on everything that one respects and loves.”¹⁷

Who was this gazetteer? He identified himself, though without breaking out of his anonymity, in the dedication of the book. It provides another example of paratextual parody, in this case a lampoon of fulsome dedications to literary patrons.¹⁸

Dedicatory Epistle

to ME

My dear Person,

Enjoy your glory without concern for any danger. You will be exposed to it, of course, because of all the enemies of your fatherland. You will sharpen their fury and double their ferocity. But you should know, my dear person, that in revealing their iniquitous mysteries...you avenge the innocent....Make them tremble, those cruel monsters whose existence is so odious and so harmful to humanity....

I know you too well to fear any slackening of your principles. Your resolve is a guarantee that you will never deviate from them. In this opinion, I am, my dear person,

your most humble and obedient servant.

Myself

Beneath the burlesque rhetoric, the author dramatized himself as a hero who battled despotism single-handedly through the power of the press. He fired off copies of his book like the cannonballs aimed at the evil powers in the frontispiece. But who was he? The answer to that puzzle appeared in the second of the four libels I would like to discuss.

Le Diable dans un bénitier (1783) also had a complex title page that required a great deal of decoding.

[figure 4: Le Diable dans un bénitier, title page]

The main title played with a colloquial expression—to thrash about like a devil in a baptismal font—which referred to frantic and ineffective agitation.¹⁹ It enticed the reader with a hint about a book full of devilry, and it left an implicit question dangling: who was this devil? The other elements of the title page also operated as bait to attract the reader's attention, because, as a trained eye could easily see, they parodied all the

signs of legality in a book that had been cleared through the censorship. They included a fake notice of an approbation and privilege; a fake, super-legal address (the royal printing shop); a fake author (Pierre Leroux; I have not been able to identify him); a fake editor (the abbé Jean Louis Aubert, editor of the orthodox Gazette de France and censor of the unorthodox Courier de l'Europe, a journal produced by French expatriates in London); and a fake dedication (to the marquis de Castries, minister of the navy and a main target of the slander in the text.) The long subtitle summarized the book's plot. Far from being a hero, the iron-plated gazetteer had turned coat as a "mouche" or police spy, and he had sold out to an inspector who was trying to establish a secret branch of the Parisian police in London.

[figure 5: Le Diable dans un bénitier, frontispiece]

The frontispiece added new pieces to the puzzle. Using ellipsis dots to disguise the names, its caption read: "The plenipot... [plenipotentiary] receives the abjuration of Charlot and R.....r [Receveur] gives him the cross of Saint Andrew." What was this deviltry all about? By working through the text, the reader soon discovered the identity of the iron-plated gazetteer: he was "Charlot" or Charles Théveneau de Morande, the most notorious libeler in the colony of French expatriates in London. Receveur was the police inspector who had arrived in London on a secret mission to exterminate the libelers. The anonymous author of Le Diable dans un bénitier cast these two as the villains of his narrative; and in its climactic scene, he described a burlesque ritual:

Receveur inducted Morande into a Masonic-like secret society of the Parisian police. The cross on Receveur's jacket was the insignia of the order, a cross of Saint Andrew—that is, a representation of two boards attached together in the shape of an X, which the police supposedly used to hold down their victims during torture sessions in the Bastille. Around his neck, Receveur wears the order's medal, a miniature of a wheel on which prisoners were broken. He carries handcuffs in his pocket, and he dubs Morande with another symbol of despotism, tongs used to hold hot coals to prisoners' feet in order to extract confessions. By joining the secret society, Morande renounced his past as a libeler and agreed to collaborate in the repression of his former colleagues. The comte de Moustier, France's chargé d'affaires in London in 1783, presides over the scene against a background of a curtain decorated with the Bourbon fleurs de lys. On the far left, Ange Goudar, another libeler turned police spy, carries a box of opium pills, which Morande is to take in order to forget his past. Goudar accompanied Receveur to London, serving as his interpreter and guide to the literary underworld, which Goudar knew well, having inhabited it for years. The title of his best-known chronique scandaleuse, L'Espion chinois, dangles from his pocket. And with his left arm he offers Morande the medal of the society, which will seal the satanic pact being enacted through the initiation rite.²⁰

After deciphering as much as possible of the title page and frontispiece, the readers were expected to continue to play the guessing game as they made their way through the text. They had to identify the characters whose names were hidden behind ellipsis dots. One copy of the book contains a key which an eighteenth-century reader wrote on a blank sheet at the end of the volume, just as readers often did while perusing romans à clé.

[figure 6: Le Diable dans un bénitier, manuscript key by an eighteenth-century reader]

It gets most of the identifications right, but it contains a few mistakes—an indication that reading really did involve puzzle solving and that the puzzles could be difficult, even for seemingly well-informed contemporaries.²¹ But there was no mistaking the libelous character of the text. It slandered the most powerful men in France, from ministers down to their subordinates in the police force, and it treated the entire system as a noxious form of despotism, which it contrasted with England, a regime where the liberty of the press and other fundamental rights were respected. Curiously, however, this radical political message was embedded in a story that was designed to entertain its readers. Libeling in 1783 appealed to homo ludens; it had a play-element to it.

The narrative recounts Receveur's efforts, aided by Morande, to destroy the colony of French libelers, and in doing so it includes a short and slanderous biography of each man—in effect, libels within the libel. It describes Morande as the depraved son of a corrupt attorney in Burgundy, whose career combined writing with crime. After enlisting in a cavalry regiment, he deserted, drifted into the underworld of gambling dens and brothels in Paris, and landed in the infamous prison of Bicêtre. Upon his release, he emigrated to London, where he lived by pimping for homosexuals and blackmailing them. The success of Le Gazetier cuirassé convinced him that he could do better by blackmailing the greatest figures in the French court. He therefore threatened to publish a sequel to it, Mémoires secrets d'une femme publique, which would relate the inside

story of Mme du Barry's ignominious origins and her ascension from a brothel to the throne. In order to prevent such horrors from circulating in print, the French government dispatched Beaumarchais to buy Morande off: a matter of 32,000 livres and an annuity of 4,000 livres. From then on, Morande renounced libeling and collaborated with the attempts of the French authorities to repress the libelers who followed in his footsteps.

As described in Le Diable dans un bénitier, Receveur outdid Morande in villainy, for he was the actual devil in the holy water. Born with a penchant for cruelty—as a child he trotted after inspectors hauling off victims to torture chambers and as an adolescent he aspired to marry the daughter of the public executioner—he became a police agent who specialized in kidnapping exiled writers and torturing them in the Bastille. In fact, as Le Diable dans un bénitier revealed, he was the last in a series of secret agents sent to murder, abduct, or buy off the libelers in London. After Beaumarchais moved on to other adventures, the government commissioned Louis Valentin Gozman, Beaumarchais's opponent in a famous court case that compromised the Maupeou judiciary in 1773-1774, to prevent the publication of a libel against Marie-Antoinette. Disguised as an Alsatian “baron de Thurne”, Gozman purchased the (purportedly) entire edition of Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette—an obscene poem-pamphlet about the supposed impotence of Louis XVI and the queen's supposed orgies with his younger brother, the comte d'Artois—for 17,400 livres. Then he warned that more books on the same subject were in press; and having run up a suspiciously high expense account, he kept repeating the same refrain: send money.

Instead, Le Diable dans un bénitier recounted, the French authorities sent another agent, Alexis d'Anouilh, a police spy attached to the naval ministry who knew nothing

about England, except that it rained a great deal there. He therefore set off for London disguised as an umbrella merchant. Gravitating to taverns and gambling dens, he, too, accumulated huge expenses. Eventually he made contact with Richard Sheridan, the playwright who had become an undersecretary for foreign affairs in 1782. With Sheridan's help, he hoped to get Parliament to pass a bill that would make it a crime to libel non-British subjects living abroad—such as the queen of France. To round up the necessary votes in the House, Sheridan would have to pay out vast sums in bribes. So d'Anouilh returned to Versailles for consultations and a bigger expense account. After hearing him out, the naval minister, the marquis de Castries, promptly sent him to the Bastille. Receveur, who delivered the lettre de cachet, eventually tortured d'Anouilh into revealing how he had misspent the king's money. But then the government needed to find another agent

At this point, *faute de mieux*, it fell back on Receveur himself. It dispatched him to London disguised as a “baron de Livermont”. Admittedly (all this according to Le Diable dans un bénitier) he had a defect: boneheadedness. He was so stupid that he could barely read and write. But at least he could be trusted. After setting up headquarters in Jermyn Street with a staff of hit men and intermediaries, he attempted to flush the libelers from their hiding places and favorite haunts, notably the French bookshop of Boissière in St. James Street. As Le Diable recounted it, Receveur's efforts at detective work turned into a comedy of errors. Unable to speak a word of English and baffled by the customs of the natives—strange prejudices like habeus corpus, trial by jury, and the liberty of the press—he tripped over his own feet and got nowhere.

At first he tried kidnapping. He had arrived with a full kit of handcuffs, chains, and all the paraphernalia of despotism, including a carriage with a secret compartment big enough to contain a trussed-up victim, who could be smuggled back to Paris and tortured in the Bastille so that the police could unravel the whole network of authors, printers, and clandestine peddlers. But force majeure failed, because the libelers got wind of the plot and exposed it in a broadside, which called upon all brave Britons to stand up against a gang of perfidious Frenchmen who were threatening British liberty.

[figure 7: A broadside alerting Londoners to Receveur's mission in 1783]

In 1783 London was still seething with the anti-French mania stirred up by the American War and memories of the Gordon Riots. A crowd had set upon an earlier contingent of police agents who had attempted to kidnap Morande in order to prevent the publication of Mémoires secrets d'une femme publique. Receveur therefore changed his strategy and attempted to revive the plan to bribe Parliament. But he lacked the skill to negotiate with Sheridan, so he finally attempted to engage in pourparlers over blackmail payments, using Boissière as a middleman. His goal was to suppress three works announced by the libelers: Les Passe-temps d'Antoinette, another exposé of the queen's sex life; Les Amours du vizir de Vergennes, an attack on the foreign minister; and Les Petits Soupers de l'Hôtel de Bouillon, an account of orgies by the princesse de Bouillon and the marquis de Castries. The bidding got up to 150 louis (3,600 livres), which Receveur was willing to pay, but the hidden libeler demanded 175 louis (4,200 livres), which was more than

Receveur had been authorized to spend. In the end, therefore, the negotiations broke down, Receveur returned to Paris, and the libeler took revenge by exposing the whole business in Le Diable dans un bénitier, a libel about libeling, which took Morande, the police, and their superiors in Versailles as its target.

The libelers, by contrast, appeared as the heroes of the story. Unlike Morande, they defied the police and continued to attack French despotism, undeterred by the danger and glorying in the freedom of the press guaranteed by the English constitution. The author did not mention them by name, of course. In fact, he hinted in places that they were a rum lot, as they resorted to blackmailing their enemies. But the narrative skirted round that awkward point by concentrating on the ineptitude of their prosecutors. Despite its denunciations of the French police state and its uninhibited radicalism, it read like a burlesque farce—an account of failed hugger-mugger on the part of a bunch of clowns decked out in absurd disguises who believed they could plant the seeds of despotism in the unfavorable climate of England. Le Diable dans un bénitier was just as irreverent as Le Gazetier cuirassé but much wittier and better written. So the question inevitably arises: who wrote it?

The answer is to be found in the third libel, La Police de Paris dévoilée.

[figure 8: La Police de Paris dévoilée, title page]

Here, however, we are faced with a work that appears to belong to another order of literature. We are in 1790, the “second year of liberty”, as the book proclaims on its title

page. It carries an honest, straightforward address, “chez J. B. Garnery, rue Serpente, no. 17”, and its title is short and clear, set off by a classical page design, which contrasts with the baroque title pages of the previous two libels and their long, satirical wording. We have moved into a new era, when the dominant metaphors take the form of unveiling and unmasking. As the epigraph makes clear and the text reiterates, “publicité”—transparency in public affairs guaranteed by the liberty of the press—is the basic condition of a healthy political system.

La Police de Paris dévoilée presented itself as a manifestation of patriotism, and its author, Pierre Manuel, assumed the role of a selfless patriot. He placed his name prominently, in capital letters, on the title page. He dedicated the book to the members of the Jacobin Club, and he explained in the dedication that he wrote in his capacity as an administrator of the Paris Commune, where he had assumed the duty of overseeing the policing of the book trade. Unlike his predecessors under the Ancien Régime, he did not confiscate books but instead intervened to prevent their confiscation. He revered the liberty of the press as his highest principle. Indeed, he took advantage of his access to the papers of the police in order to expose their abuses: hence this volume, which every citizen should read as evidence of the despotism that had stifled free expression before 1789 and as a summons to be on guard against future threats to liberty.

[figure 9: La Police de Paris dévoilée, frontispiece]

The frontispiece provides an iconographic version of the theme of unveiling. It shows the Bastille in the background, where two police agents are hauling off a victim in

handcuffs. In the foreground, two figures in antique costumes convey a symbolic message: Innocence or Truth lies chained on a bed of straw as if in a cell of the Bastille, while Perfidy or Tyranny, unmasked and with a another Medusa-like head, prepares to plunge a dagger into the victim's breast. Above this scene, a winged figure, possibly meant to be Chronos, pulls back a curtain revealing these evil deeds, and at the same time he spreads light from a torch held high. Manuel seemed to identify himself with this figure, because he placed his name under it and, in the dedication, proclaimed his role as an investigator who would uncover the crimes of the police under the Ancien Régime, exposing them to the light of "publicité".

The text consisted of two volumes of extracts from the police archives recovered after the storming of the Bastille. Manuel guaranteed their accuracy and said that he had deposited them at the Parisian Lycée, a patriotic club where any citizen could inspect them in order to verify their content. But he also edited them, eliminating some things and featuring others. A great deal of the text looks like scandal published for its own sake. Whole sections were devoted to the adventures of priests in brothels (30 pages), prostitution in general (48 pages), gambling dens (14 pages), and assorted vice (144 pages, mainly about incidents involving depraved aristocrats and dancing girls.) The entire book has a sensational character reinforced by the editing, which separates the episodes into anecdotes, usually a paragraph in length. Thus a typical item about venereal disease among the great:

The prince de Conti was wounded by a young girl
known as the little f..... He is furious at Guerin, his

surgeon.²²

The unveiling, however true, reads like the scandalous “news” dished out in pre-revolutionary chroniques scandaleuses, nouvelles à la main, and manuscript police gazettes. Manuel exposed shocking behavior under the reign of Louis XVI just as the libelers from that era pulled the veil off scandal that had occurred under Louis XV.²³ Retrospective libel was an old technique, but La Police de Paris dévoilée represented a new, revolutionary version of it. The book belonged to a series of exposés, all of them drawn from the police archives and edited, at least in part, by Manuel: La Bastille dévoilée (1789), La Chasteté du clergé dévoilée (1790), and Lettres originales de Mirabeau, écrites du donjon de Vincennes (1792). It also contained material that was recycled later in a work whose title conveyed the flavor of the genre, La Chronique scandaleuse ou mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la génération présente, contenant les anecdotes & les pièces fugitives les plus piquantes que l’histoire secrète des sociétés a offertes pendant ces dernières années (Paris, “dans un coin d’où l’on voit tout”, 1791)—and that had originally appeared in 1783.²⁴

One of the principal scandals exposed in La Police de Paris dévoilée was the story behind Le Diable dans un bénitier. In fact, La Police de Paris dévoilée contained so much material about the attempts of the police to eradicate the London libelers that it can be read, at least in part, as a sequel to Le Diable dans un bénitier, which it quoted at length. Manuel confirmed the accuracy of the narrative in the earlier book; he recounted its dénouement, and he revealed the name of its author: Anne-Gédéon Lafite, marquis de Pelleport.

The entries on Pelleport in La Police dévoilée provide a brief biography of his “private life,” revealing a Grub Street existence similar to Morande’s. Pelleport was a nobleman and a déclassé who had been discharged from two regiments and imprisoned several times at the request of his family “for atrocities against honor”²⁵. He took up hack writing, drifted to Geneva and Neuchâtel, married a chambermaid, and fathered several children while working as a private teacher. In 1783 he abandoned his family in order to seek his fortune in London, where he lived by tutoring, writing libels, and using the libels to blackmail eminent people in France. The last attempt at blackmail failed, exactly as related in Le Diable dans un bénitier. After its publication, Morande captured some page proofs with corrections in Pelleport’s handwriting. He forwarded them to the Paris police; they lured Pelleport to Boulogne-sur-mer and locked him up in the Bastille on July 11, 1784. He stayed there for more than four years and was released only because his nemesis, the foreign minister Vergennes, had died and the new ministers were more concerned with the preparations for the Estates General than with a genre of polemics that went back to the reign of Louis XV. But the genre took on new life after 1789, thanks in large part to the unveiling and unmasking done by writers like Pierre Manuel. So we face a final question: who was he?

He appears on the frontispiece of the fourth and last libel in the series, La Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel (1793).

[figure 10: Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel, print serving as a frontispiece]

The image provides a straightforward view of Manuel looking out at the reader in a dignified pose, the sash of a deputy to the Convention around his shoulder. But the caption conveys the secret hidden behind the picture:

I was not born with a delicate disposition,
 My soul is sordid and vulgar,
 I have pillaged altars and betrayed the state
 In order to increase my fortune.

The contrast between the undoctored image and the tendentious caption is typical of all the “private lives” or slanderous biographies from the Old Regime and the Revolution. Here, for example, is the frontispiece of Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry (1776), one of the best-selling libels of the pre-revolutionary period.

[figure 11: Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry, frontispiece]

Despite the strong elements of continuity from the libel literature of the Ancien Régime, the revolutionary libels adopted a fundamentally new tone. As one can see at a glance from their frontispieces and title pages, they do not try to attract the reader with the prospect of games to play. They offer nothing to decipher, no jokes to get, no ambiguity, no humor. Instead, they employ a rhetoric aimed at a different audience: the common people or sans-culottes. They also utilize a popular variety of imagery, one that

did not assume any sophistication on the part of the public. To illustrate that point, I would like to make a quick detour into revolutionary iconography.

After July 14, 1789, the streets of Paris were flooded with images—caricatures, broadsides, canards, posters, portraits, engravings about current events. They were churned out by craftsmen in the rue Saint Jacques, hung up for sale in book shops everywhere, and peddled through the streets. A public hungry for information of all kinds wanted to know what the new race of politicians looked like and what kind of lives they had led. A popular print went perfectly with a “private” or “secret” life.²⁶

Vie secrete de Pierre Manuel belonged to this street literature. The portrait probably was not intended as a frontispiece. It was glued like a cancel between the last two leaves of the first gathering—that is, between pages six and seven. The book or pamphlet—63 pages in length—is a crude piece of work: an octavo in half sheets, or eight gatherings of cheap, flimsy paper stitched together without any extraneous material—except the print of Manuel.

The print probably belonged to the series of engravings of deputies to the National Convention that were hawked in the streets after the collapse of the monarchy on August 10, 1792. Hundreds of these prints can be studied in the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. I have located eight of Manuel, all slightly different but apparently derived from the same source: a painting of Manuel by Joseph Ducreux now in the museum of Versailles. Ducreux belonged to the circle of David; Manuel belonged to the Jacobin Club. They made a likely pair, especially during the hottest months in 1792, when Manuel gained notoriety as the public prosecutor of the Commune and as an official active during the journée of August 10 and the massacres of September

2-6. When he took his seat in the Convention on September 21, 1792, Manuel stood out as one of the best known radicals in the Parisian delegation. Although he has been pretty well forgotten today (there is no biography of him), he was someone worthy of figuring in the Revolution's gallery of patriots and rogues.²⁷

[figure 12: Print of Manuel, 1792]

This print, a rather flattering portrait of Manuel without anything negative in its caption, probably dates from August or September, 1792. It bears an address that shows its origins in the heart of the print-making area of Paris: “chez Basset, at the rue St. Jacques at the corner of the [rue] des Mathurins.” Paul-André Basset was the most important producer and dealer of prints during the Revolution.²⁸ He made a fortune and hewed to the dominant political line, from the early enthusiasm for Louis XVI through the Terror to the Empire. In 1790, he sold this print, a bawdy commentary on the secularizing of the monasteries, which shows his shop, located at the juncture of the rue St. Jacques and the rue des Mathurins at the image of a basset hound.

[figure 13: A satirical print of 1790 showing Basset's shop]

In the background, one can see a saleswoman sitting behind the counter with prints piled in front of her and displayed outside the door. A peddler walks out of the shop, setting forth to hawk his wares in the street. On his pack one can make out one of the most

popular prints of 1789: a bent-over peasant carrying a priest and a nobleman on his back and lamenting, “One must hope that this game will finish soon.”

[figure 14: A royalist print of 1792 satirizing Manuel and other leaders of the left]

This royalist print from December 1792 shows Manuel in the company of the radical republicans who had led the attacks on Louis XVI. While a motley crew of agitators tries to save the nation—represented as an ice sculpture that is melting under rays from a Bourbon sun—he flounders ignominiously on a manure pile accompanied by a notorious open letter to the king that he had published a month after assuming the office of public prosecutor of the Commune on December 2, 1791. It began with a phrase that made him famous: “Sire, I do not like kings.”²⁹ By the time he entered the Convention, Manuel had acquired the reputation of a left-wing Jacobin and champion of the sans-culottes. The engraving in Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel was typical of the prints that proliferated in the wake of a revolutionary’s rise to power. It belonged to the imagery visible everywhere in the streets of Paris.

[Figure 15: Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel, title page]

The layout of the text also suggests a work that was meant to be hawked in the streets. The title page is the simplest in the family of four libels. It consists of nothing more than a short title plus an epigraph and an address but no author’s name. We are

back where we began, with anonymous slandering. By revealing Manuel's secret life, the libeler stripped away the mask of patriotism that disguised his sordid self-interest. In contrast to the unmasking that took place in the pre-revolutionary libels, however, the text contains no allusions to be puzzled out, no games to be played. It is deadly serious. A note at the end of the last page says that Manuel has just been arrested: "May he serve as an example for anyone audacious enough to imitate him."³⁰ The arrest occurred on August 20, 1793. Manuel was tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal on November 12 and executed on November 14.

Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel was Jacobin propaganda, a crude call for the guillotine. In order to expose the private life hidden behind Manuel's public career, it took the form of a slanderous biography. Manuel was the son of a poor haberdasher in Montargis, it explained. He did so well in school that his parents sent him to a seminary, hoping he would become a priest. Instead, he became a Voltairean, drifted to Paris, sank into poverty, and survived by expedients, including a tract on the Diamond Necklace Affair that led to a stint in the Bastille. By 1789, he had moved into a room in the printing shop of Garnery in the rue Serpente, the bookseller who later published La Police de Paris dévoilée. In exchange for his lodging, Manuel corrected proof, wrote the occasional libel, and distributed material to peddlers. Thanks to his good relations with the peddlers, who supported his campaign to be elected to the Commune as a representative of his district, he gained a foothold in local politics and wormed his way into the office under the mayor that supervised the policing of the book trade.

Once installed in power, Manuel began to make money. Instead of using his authority to confiscate libels, he wrote them. He culled through the police archives in

order to extract ‘libertine anecdotes’³¹, which he published under the pretence of revealing abuses from the Ancien Régime. In fact, his publications only had a negative effect: they corrupted the morals of revolutionary youths while fattening Manuel’s purse. He made still more money by blackmailing people such as Champion de Cicé, the archbishop of Bordeaux, who paid 3,000 livres to keep his dossier out of print. Mirabeau’s letters, which Manuel published with Garnery in January 1792, made him both rich and famous, because they led to a highly publicized trial engineered by the royalist authorities of the Department of Paris. They accused him of pilfering the letters from the archives and suspended him as the Commune’s prosecuting attorney. Manuel rebutted the charges in a burst of patriotic oratory which made him a hero to the public. Reinstalled in office, he helped himself to the property that he confiscated from counter-revolutionaries, and he reinforced his cover as a champion of the people by radical speeches in the Jacobin Club. During the overthrow of the monarchy and the September Massacres, he appeared at the side of the sans-culotte leaders. But the contradiction between his public and private lives surfaced as soon as he became embroiled in the politics of the Convention. He sat with the Girondins, voted against the death of the king, and then retired to Montargis in the hope of enjoying his ill-gotten gains in obscurity. In the end, as in the case of all false patriots, the Revolution caught up with him. His life illustrated the greatest danger facing the republic in 1793: vice disguised as virtue.

Everything about Vie secrete de Pierre Manuel, its slipshod style as well as its crude printing, suggests that it was a hack work put out at great haste by the propaganda machine of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety. It belonged to a series of similar libels, all of them anonymous, produced in the Year II (1793-1794) with the same

address, ‘à l’Imprimerie de Franklin, rue de Cléry no. 75’. They included Vie secrète et politique de Brissot, Vie de Capet, ci-devant duc d’Orléans, Vie privée et politique de J.-R. Hébert, and Vie politique de Jérôme Pétion (this last libel actually had no address).

The Robespierrists needed to win over public opinion in 1793-1794, just as Maupeou did in 1771, but they dealt with a different public, one that responded to denunciation and moral indignation, not wit and word games.

The succession of ‘private lives’ actually extended through the entire Revolution. I have found 38 of them published between 1789 and 1800—or 42, if one counts short biographies grouped together in a single volume. Most of the revolutionary leaders were slandered in this fashion, from Lafayette and Mirabeau to Marat, Robespierre, and the top figures of the Directory. The line also extends far back into the Ancien Régime. Vie privée de Louis XV, Mémoires de Mme la marquise de Pompadour, and Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry made most of the century look like a continuous chronique scandaleuse. Moreover, those works derived from varieties of slander that went back to the Huguenot attacks on Louis XIV, the Fronde, the religious wars, and the power struggles in the Renaissance courts of Italy. Libeling of this sort still exists today. Primary Colors, an anonymous roman à clé about the private life of Bill Clinton, shows that the tradition has life in it yet.

But the long-term continuities should not obscure the differences that stand out if one examines libel literature up close during a particular era. The four works that I have discussed represent successive stages of libeling as it evolved from the France of Louis XV to that of Louis XVI, the early Revolution and the Terror. By studying the common

qualities of the libels, one can see the basic continuity in their character while distinguishing changes in their content and style.

The most important change was a shift from the seditious but playful and sophisticated slander of 1771 to the crude denunciation of 1793. Change also can be pinpointed by studying the self-referential nature of the libels. Each linked up with its predecessors to form an intertextual narrative about slander, blackmail, and political conflict. Nearly every detail in that story can be confirmed by documents in the French ministry of foreign affairs and the police archives. But instead of drawing on those sources in order to relate the story in a conventional manner, I have tried to tell it from the texts themselves, at a level that Roland Barthes has defined as ‘mythologique.’³² I also have attempted to show how the intertextual connections made by means of words, pictures, and typography expressed complex views of authorship, from Morande’s dramatization of himself as the intrepid gazetteer to Pelleport’s mockery of the police from the perspective of their enemies and Manuel’s self-glorification as the patriot who unmasked the whole business—only to be unmasked himself in the deadliest of the “private lives.” The interlinked story about literary low-life may not be edifying, but I hope it opens up the possibility of pursuing book history into Grub Streets, both in Paris and in London, and from there to the battle of books at the heart of the French Revolution.

Notes

¹ As examples of recent literature on scandal and libel in England, see Alastair Bellany, [The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660](#) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002) and John Brewer, 'Personal Scandal and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: Secrecy, Intimacy and the Interior Self in the Public Sphere' in Marie-Christine Skuncke (ed.), [Media and Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century](#) (Stockholm, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2005). For a rich corpus of texts that can be consulted on the Web, see Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae (eds.), [Early Stuart Libels: An Edition of Poetry from Manuscript Sources](#) <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>.

² Robert Darnton, [The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France](#) (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995) and the supplementary volume with statistics and bibliography: [The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France](#) (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

³ This lecture summarizes some of the material I have discussed in a forthcoming book, [Slander: the Art of Libel in Eighteenth-Century France](#).

⁴ I have identified five editions between 1771 and 1789, but there probably were more, because scandalous "nouveau-tés" were widely pirated. The French foreign ministry tried to repress a pirated edition produced in Geneva in mid-1771: see Voltaire to Gabriel Cramer, circa 25 December 1771 in Theodore Besterman (ed.), [The Complete Works of Voltaire: Correspondence and Related Documents](#), 38 (Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1975), p. 197. In sampling the demand for illegal literature among French booksellers, I found that [Le Gazetier cuirassé](#) ranked fifty-third among 720 works: Darnton, [The Corpus of Clandestine Literature](#), p. 196. For reports on the scandal produced by the book, see [Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France, depuis 1762 jusqu'à nos jours ou journal d'un observateur par feu M. de Bachaumont](#), 21 (London, 1777-1789), entries for 10 August 1771, 15 August 1771, and 1 September 1771. [author to editor: because there are so many editions of "Bachaumont", references are conventionally cited by date, not by page]

⁵ Le Gazetier cuirassé ou anecdotes scandaleuses de la cour de France (1777), p. 54. The edition of 1771 contains an “Explication du frontispiece” on the reverse side of the title page, although the explanation does not go into great detail.

⁶ “Baril” in Le Grand Vocabulaire français, 1 (Paris, 1768), p. 147: ‘Le l final est muet devant une consonne; mais il se fait sentir devant une voyelle.’ See also André Martinet and Henriette Walter, Dictionnaire de la prononciation française dans son usage réel (Paris, France Expansion, 1973), p. 129.

⁷ Le Gazetier cuirassé, p. v.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155. See also the similar enigma on p. 151.

⁹ On romans à clé and political attacks on Louis XV, his mistresses, and ministers, see my ‘Mlle Bonafon et la vie privée de Louis XV’, Dix-huitième siècle, no. 35 (2003), pp. 369-91.

¹⁰ Le Gazetier cuirassé, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹² See, for example, ‘Anecdote’ in Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1762 edition): ‘Particularité secrète d’histoire, qui avait été omise ou supprimée par les historiens précédents. Anecdote curieuse. Les anecdotes sont ordinairement satyriques. Il s’emploie aussi adjectivement. L’Histoire anecdote de Procope’. In contrast to the negative connotations of the word today, as in ‘anecdotal evidence’ meaning something of dubious veracity, the article ‘Anecdotes’ in the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert also conveyed the notion of something true but hidden: ‘Anecdotes, nom que les Grecs donnaient aux choses qu’on faisait connaître pour la première fois au public....Ce mot est en usage dans la littérature pour signifier des histoires secrètes de faits qui se sont passées dans l’intérieur du cabinet ou des cours des princes et dans les mystères de leur politique....Procope a intitulé Anecdotes un livre dans lequel il peint avec des couleurs odieuses l’Empereur Justinien et Théodore, épouse de ce prince.’

¹³ Le Gazetier cuirassé, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵ The Rev. Henry Bate (Dudley), known as ‘the Reverend Bruiser’, and the Rev. William Jackson, known as ‘Doctor Viper’, exemplified the scandalmongering developed by ‘paragraph men’ in the London press of the 1770s. A contemporary described Jackson, editor of the Morning Post, as follows: ‘His great forte discovered itself in that species of writing known by the name of paragraphs, which he had the happy knack

of giving more point to than any of his cotemporaries. The acrimony of his pen soon rendered him conspicuous to the public, but the extreme and unexampled virulence of his invectives...only served to expose him to the resentment of Government': quoted in Lucyle Werkmeister, The London Daily Press 1772-1792 (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 80. See also John Brewer, A Sentimental Murder. Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 40-42. Most of the items in clandestine newsletters such as the Mémoires secrets consisted of a single paragraph and often were designated as anecdotes.

¹⁶ Le Diable dans un bénitier, et la métamorphose du Gazetier cuirassé en mouche, ou tentative du sieur Receveur, inspecteur de la police de Paris, chevalier de St. Louis, pour établir à Londres une police à l'instar de celle de Paris, (1784), pp. 36 and 79.

¹⁷ Voltaire, 'Quisquis' in his Questions sur l'Encyclopédie par des amateurs, 6 (no place of publication, 1775), p. 278.

¹⁸ Le Gazetier cuirassé, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁹ According to the Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle (Paris, Larousse, 1866-70), the expression was picked up and popularized by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset in Ver-Vert (1734): 'Bien vite il sut jurer et maugréer / Mieux qu'un vieux diable au fond d'un bénitier.'

²⁰ This scene is described in the text: Le Diable dans un bénitier, pp. 84-5. It was not meant to be taken literally but rather to express Morande's defection to the police.

²¹ On the left side of the page, the key gives the number of the page on which a name first appears. The next column gives the disguised versions of the names as they were printed, with dashes to conceal their full identity. The column on the right gives the identifications worked out by the reader. He or she wrongly identified 'le Gazetier cuirassé' as Beamarchais and 'M. De la F—' as a 'M. de la Fare'. In fact, De la F— stood for la Fite de Pelleport—or so I have concluded after a close reading of the text and a study of Pelleport's career. The key is in a copy that I possess.

²² Pierre Manuel, La Police de Paris dévoilée 1 (Paris, 1790), p. 91.

²³ Although a great deal of 'Maupeouana' (pamphlets against the Maupeou government) circulated under the cloak in 1771-1774, some of the most widely diffused attacks on Louis XV and his ministers appeared after the king's death on May 10, 1774. They include Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry (1775),

Mémoires de l'abbé Terray, contrôleur général, contenant sa vie, son administration, ses intrigues et sa chute (1776), and L'Observateur anglais, ou correspondance secrète entre Milord All'Eye et Milord All'Ear also known as L'Espion anglais (1777-78).

²⁴ La Chronique scandaleuse originally appeared in one volume in 1783. By 1791, it had grown to five volumes, which included a great deal of material lifted from other sources. In volume I, pp. 29-31 it recounted Receveur's mission in a manner close to that in Le Diable dans un bénitier, and it reworked material from La Police de Paris dévoilée in volume V, pp. 143-175. See also the preface and introduction to volume V. Plagiarism of this kind was typical of libel literature.

²⁵ La Police de Paris dévoilée, II, p. 235. See also II, p. 28.

²⁶ On popular prints and the French Revolution, see Antoine de Baecq, La Caricature révolutionnaire (Paris, Presses du CNRS, 1988); Klaus Harding and Rolf Reichardt, Die Bildpublizistik der Französischen Revolution (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989); and French Caricature and the French Revolution (Los Angeles, University of California Press), a catalogue of an exhibition held in 1988 at the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, Wright Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁷ Much of Manuel's biography can be pieced together from his numerous publications, his speeches in the Jacobin Club and in the Convention, and the dossier of his arrest in 1786 for involvement with a pamphlet on the Diamond Necklace Affair: Archives Nationales W 295, no. 246. Brief biographical sketches of Manuel appear under his name in Auguste Kuscinski, Dictionnaire des conventionnels (Paris, Librairie F. Rieder, 1916-1919) and Louis Gabriel Michaud, Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne (Paris, Mme C. Desplaces, 1843-65).

²⁸ Maxime Préaud, Pierre Casselle, Marianne Grivel, Cormine Le Bitouzé, Dictionnaire des éditeurs d'estampes sous l'Ancien Régime (Paris, 1987).

²⁹ Kuscinski, Dictionnaire des Conventionnels, article "Manuel".

³⁰ Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel, p. 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³² Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1957). My forthcoming Slander: the Art of Libel in Eighteenth-Century France includes an account of the attempts to repress libels as seen from the archives in the Quai d'Orsay and the papers of the Bastille.

