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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.

Review Essay by Simon Burrows, University of Leeds.

Like most of Robert Darnton's work, *The Devil in the Holy Water* can be seen as an addition to two distinct fields of scholarly endeavour. First, it builds on his stimulating, if controversial, contribution to the historiography of the French Enlightenment and origins of the French Revolution. This interpretation, while increasingly challenged in recent years (not least by the current reviewer), continues to have significant heuristic value even for his most vociferous critics. Second, it adds to his pioneering contribution to the development and conceptualisation of the history of the book. In this second arena, his achievement remains far less controversial and all but unassailable. From his earliest work, he has opened up this field by challenging traditional approaches to literary history and canonical texts, calling for a "book history from below." At the same time, he has explored new sources and methods by which this might be achieved, while sketching out many of the foundations and parameters of the new "book history" approach in a series of seminal thought-pieces.¹ For the purposes of the present review, it may therefore make sense to make a conceptual separation between book history on the one hand and French revolutionary and Enlightenment history on the other.

First, however, a few preliminary remarks are in order. *The Devil in the Holy Water* is a complex, subtle, and multi-layered work that brings together and advances the achievement of a life-time of distinguished and path-breaking scholarship. That scholarship has inspired many of my own publications, several of which deal with the same people, texts, and themes that occupy Darnton here. As a result, I will concentrate attention on the larger interpretative issues that divide us, particularly his continued use of desacralization theory. These concerns extend beyond interpretative and theoretical issues to his core empirical evidence.²

That said, *The Devil in the Holy Water* offers the basis for a new synthesis, as many of Darnton's most vulnerable arguments are not intrinsic to his evaluation of the place of *libelles* (a term to which we will return shortly) in revolutionary culture or the Enlightenment. Such a new synthesis might require pruning back some of Darnton's claims about the role of slander in the origins of the Revolution, but there are also many points on which we remain in fundamental agreement. These include, crucially, the

¹ The most widely cited of his thought pieces in this area is probably "What is the History of Books?," *Daedalus* 111 (Summer 1982): 65-83; see also, in particular, "What is the history of books? Revisited," *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 495-508 and his reflections on the book in the digital age in *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2009).

² See Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution: London's French Libellistes, 1758-1792* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). For earlier critiques of desacralization theory see especially *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, Haydn T. Mason, ed (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), especially the essays by Thomas Kaiser and Daniel Gordon.

evolution of discourses on despotism in the final years of the *ancien régime*. Thus, just as his existing interpretation of revolutionary origins was looking increasingly tenuous, this new book has laid the foundations of a new interpretative edifice.

As a contribution to book history, *The Devil in the Holy Water* is primarily a study of a significant genre and its wider historical implications. That genre is the scandalous political libel pamphlet or, to use the more succinct, if mildly ambiguous, French term *libelle*.³ Although Darnton's focus is on the French experience between Louis XIV and Napoleon, and primarily the years 1771 to 1794, he raises wider questions about *libelle* literature and why "some states may be able to absorb it with little disruption ... [whilst] it can inflict serious damage on others" (p. 439). The first part of his answer is predictable enough, "A state built on a cult of personality is likely to be vulnerable to personal attacks, even if it monopolises other forms of power." But he also reminds us that "Even a president of a modern republic can lose his hold on power if his campaign managers and public relations experts fail to stifle scandals about his private life" (p. 439). Of course, posing the question in this way involves some circularity: it presupposes that *libelles* did indeed play some significant role in the origins or course of the French Revolution. Yet even if we have doubts about that assumption, the question is worth posing and Darnton's answers worthy of meditation.

Darnton begins his investigation with images and texts from four interlocking *libelles*. This allows him to provide a narrative backbone against which to study the development of the *libelle*. The story begins with a return to a text Darnton has treated before: Charles Théveneau de Morande's *Gazetier cuirassé* (1771). In 1971, Darnton styled this text as the "virtual prototype of the *libelle* genre" and a classic of pre-revolutionary political pornography. It was, he suggested, a nihilistic attack on Church and state, and a venomous portrayal of "degenerate despotism," but in reproducing its raciest salacious passages, he emphasized degeneracy over despotism.⁴ In *The Devil in the Holy Water* there are subtle changes of register. His new reading is richer and more multi-faceted, albeit at the expense of sensational colour. The pamphlet remains "one of the most damaging attacks against Louis XV," but Darnton pays more attention to the "despotic" side of the equation and to issues of form, presentation and narrative strategy. Where once he presented the pamphlet as "nihilistic," he is now at pains (p. 21) to point out that while it "demeaned the symbols that had created a sacred aura around French monarchs," Morande's pamphlet "expressed no sympathy for republicanism." He might consider going further still: my own biography of Morande contends that, for all its scandalous vitriol, the *Gazetier cuirassé* shows evidence of the reformist constitutional monarchist sympathies that would characterise his later journalism. The monarchy could reform itself: it was the personnel that were the problem.⁵

However, we are dealing with enormously complex and treacherous pamphlet material here. Darnton has, in addition, to trace the publication histories of clandestine, anonymous texts through multiple editions. He must cut through the mutual and self-serving allegations of scandal-mongering pamphleteers, politicians and spies. He reconstructs careers and audience reception through piecemeal sources in far-flung archives and obscure printed sources. Finally, he offers instructive and insightful readings of complex visual sources, particularly the four frontispiece illustrations with which he begins

³ The term *libelle* is often used to indicate a libel or libellous pamphlet, but it can also mean a lampoon or pamphlet generally. The same ambiguity surrounds the word *libelliste*.

⁴ Robert Darnton, "The high Enlightenment and the low-life of literature in prerevolutionary France," *Past and Present* 51 (1971): 81-115.

⁵ Simon Burrows, *A King's Ransom: The Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger & Master-Spy* (London: Continuum, 2010), ch. 2; see also Simon Burrows, "A Literary Low Life Reassessed: Charles Théveneau de Morande in London, 1769-1791," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22 (1998): 76-94.

his book: his impressive account of the frontispiece of Pelleport's *Diable dans un bénitier* (pp. 24-5) stands as a corrective to my own.

Such is the difficulty of the material that even the most sure-footed guide will slip occasionally. A case in point is Darnton's assertion (p. 11) that the first edition of the *Gazetier cuirassé* was published on cheap paper and did not contain the celebrated and elaborate engraved frontispiece of the armour-plated gazeteer. This appears credible enough, particularly as Morande himself says that the work was rushed into print in just seventeen days.⁶ But as one purpose of such a frontispiece was to deter piracy, there are also reasons to urge caution: documentary evidence suggests we would be wise to do so. The first copies of the *Gazetier cuirassé* to come to the attention of the French authorities certainly contained the frontispiece,⁷ while the Chevalier d'Eon testifies that Morande first published the work as an "edition de luxe" to be peddled around the London residences of the British aristocracy for the astronomical price of guinea a copy.⁸ We can safely conclude, then, that Darnton's cheap edition was actually a later pirated version. But let us return to his narrative.

Having besmirched Louis XV, Morande himself was the victim of Darnton's second and third *libelles*, Anne-Gédeon La Fite de Pelleport's *Le Diable dans un bénitier* (loosely translated by Darnton as *The Devil in the Holy Water*)⁹ and Pierre-Louis Manuel's *La Police de Paris dévoilée*. The first of these was a sensational exposé of French government-backed espionage and attempts to close down London's *libelle* industry at the close of the American War of Independence. It focused on the secret mission of a police agent called Receveur to prevent a gang of blackmailer-*libellistes* publishing a series of *libelles* against the monarchy.

This tale was largely based on fact. In early 1783, Receveur was sent to London to try to negotiate the suppression of *libelles* against Marie-Antoinette and the Duchesse de Bouillon with a London bookseller called David Boissière. Both *libelles* were almost certainly the products of Pelleport's imagination. To aid him in this task, Receveur hired Morande, who was by now a veteran blackmailer himself: in 1774 he was paid a king's ransom to suppress a *libelle* against Louis XV's plebeian mistress Madame du Barry. The negotiation with Boissière eventually failed, and the pamphlet against the Duchesse de Bouillon appeared. However, Pelleport's other *libelle*, which was directed against the Queen, never saw the light of day. Nor for several years, once Morande advised the French court to stop paying the blackmailers hush-money, did any other anti-Bourbon *libelles* surface. This was perhaps surprising, as Receveur had reported that the *libellistes* had a large number of such works in preparation. This ceasefire only broke down in February 1789, on the very eve of the French Revolution, when having attempted and failed to extort a suppression fee, the Comtesse de La Motte published her influential, scandalous, and

⁶ Charles-Claude Théveneau de Morande, *Réplique de Charles Théveneau Morande à Jacques-Pierre Brissot: sur les erreurs, les infidélités et les calomnies de sa réponse* (Paris: Froullé, 1791), p. 19.

⁷ Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance politique, Angleterre [C. P. Angleterre], vol. 497, fos 111-13, Marin to d'Aiguillon, 3 August 1771. The correspondence of Morande and the Chevalier d'Eon dates the publication of the *Gazetier Cuirassé* to on or just before 15 July 1771, since on learning of its publication d'Eon declared Morande his enemy. See Archives nationales (Paris), 277AP/1 (d'Eon papers, dossier Morande), fos 331-2, Morande to d'Eon, 15 July 1771; fo. 333, d'Eon to Morande, 16 July 1771.

⁸ C. P. Angleterre vol. 502, fos 182-3, d'Eon to Broglie, London, 15 July 1773.

⁹ Darnton's translation involves a certain poetic licence, since a *bénitier* according to the fourth and fifth editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (dating from 1762 and 1798 respectively) is a "Vase à mettre de l'eau-bénite." This is a bit of a mouthful. When translating the same title in my work, I have rendered the same word as "font," which is perhaps more poetic but considerably more licentious.

mendacious memoirs of the Diamond Necklace Affair. This was undoubtedly one of the foundational works of revolutionary anti-Marie-Antoinette mythology – yet remarkably neither the Countess or her book appear in Darnton’s index or discussions of the Affair (pp. 112, 210-15, 402-3, 413).

The submergence of the threatened *libelles* is an issue worthy of reflection, and we will return to it in due course. For now, we need merely note that a year later, Pelleport was tricked into travelling to France by Morande and other royalist agents, seized at Boulogne, and thrown into the Bastille. This was Morande’s revenge for *Le Diable dans un bénitier*. In this pamphlet, Pelleport portrayed Morande as a Mephistophilian villain and demonic double-agent, who ran rings round Receveur and made a fortune during the American Revolutionary War betraying French and British shipping with the connivance of his patron, the French agent and playwright, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Pelleport also alleged that Morande had betrayed the French spy François-Henry de La Motte, who was hanged, drawn and quartered by the British in July 1781. This apparently groundless charge was repeated by Manuel in *La Police dévoilée*, the third of Darnton’s interlocking *libelles*.¹⁰

La Police dévoilée was a sensational exposé of the *ancien régime* police apparatus, based on documents Manuel had appropriated while working for the revolutionary municipality of Paris. Contrary to Darnton’s assertion (p. 39), it did not appear in 1790 but June 1791.¹¹ *La Police dévoilée* revealed the extent to which the police were implicated in the Parisian vice and gambling industries and in attempts to control French subjects even when living overseas. There were entertaining chapters on vice-girls and the priests and monks who visited them. Manuel revealed that the police licenced and encouraged brothels and gambling as centres for their intelligence gathering. However, pride of place went to chapters on policing the London *libellistes* and to further accounts of Receveur’s mission and Morande’s monstrosity. Darnton reveals that Manuel was aided and abetted in his labours by two of Morande’s most inveterate enemies: the emerging Girondin leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who had been arrested after Morande falsely implicated him in the production of Pelleport’s *libelles*,¹² and the corrupt agent of the book police, Jacquet de Douai, whose *libelle* operations had been betrayed by Morande. The story of all these machinations, and many others beside, is (re)treated at greater length in the second part of Darnton’s book.

Darnton tells this second part of his tale from a fresh angle, to a new purpose, often drawing on novel archival and printed sources. Nevertheless, thus far the narrative history of the *libellistes* and the sources which expose their activities is reasonably well known. It has been told briefly, mostly on the basis of printed sources, in several studies, from Manuel to the present.¹³ It was told in depth using the rich

¹⁰ Burrows, *A King’s Ransom*, pp. 104-5.

¹¹ A letter of Manuel to Brissot in the Archives nationales, 446AP/7 (Brissot papers) pièce 6, dated “juin 1791” announces that his “police” will be published the following Wednesday. This dating is correct as the letter talks of Morande’s new journal, *L’Argus patriote*, which published its first number on 9 June 1791.

¹² For evidence of Brissot’s innocence and the long debate about his involvement in police espionage and politically pornographic *libelles*, see Simon Burrows, “The Innocence of Jacques-Pierre Brissot,” *Historical Journal* 46 (2003): 843-71. Darnton insinuated that Brissot was “probably” involved in producing and peddling *libelles* in “The Grub Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot Police Spy,” *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968): 301-27 at p. 325. As I explain below, he has now changed his position.

¹³ See, for example, Paul Robiquet, *Théveneau de Morande: étude sur le XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Quantin, 1882); Henri d’Alméras, *Marie-Antoinette et les pamphlets royalistes et révolutionnaires* (Paris: Librairie Mondiale, 1907); Hector Fleischmann, *Les Pamphlets libertins contre Marie-Antoinette* (Paris, 1908; republished

archival sources of the French foreign ministry archives, Bastille archives, Beaumarchais family papers, Lenoir papers, and sundry other British and French sources in my 2006 study *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution: London's French Libellistes, 1758-1792*, which offers a radical reassessment of Darnton's argument. Chunks of the tale are also familiar from Darnton's own *oeuvre*, notably his treatments of Morande, Brissot, and more recently Pelleport. Somewhat implausibly, Darnton considers Pelleport an unrecognised literary genius whose *chef d'oeuvre* was an obscene and hitherto [justly?] ignored allegorical novel, *Les Bohémiens*.¹⁴ Fortunately, at this stage, Darnton takes us into exciting new territory, by extending his narrative into the Revolution, particularly the Terror.

Extending the narrative helps to dispose of one criticism of Darnton's previous work on forbidden books – that he took 1789 as an end point and never satisfactorily explained what he considers the Revolution to be.¹⁵ For his fourth “inter-locking” *libelle* takes us to the very heart of the Terror. It has a simple link to the previous *libelles*: its victim was Manuel himself. *La Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel* appeared some time in the summer of 1793 in Paris. As Darnton notes, its appearance was cheap: it was undated and crudely printed with a stark typeface, suggesting it was aimed at a poorly educated *sans-culotte* readership. Its content and message was also simple – certainly in comparison with the textual complexity, richness and variety of targets to be found in *Le Gazetier cuirassé*. It offered a simplistic account of Manuel's alleged corruption and crimes, as was evident from the slightly incongruous Latin epigraph from the *Aeniad* on the front page: “Criminé ab uno, Disce omnes” (“From a single crime, learn the wickedness of all”) (pp. 50-51). Produced at the very moment that Manuel was being targeted by the Jacobin authorities on account of his (somewhat loose) association with the Girondins, particularly Brissot, the pamphlet ends with a triumphant note: “We have learned a moment ago that Manuel has been arrested at Fontainebleau and taken to the Abbaye.... May he serve as an example for anyone audacious enough to imitate him.” This dates the pamphlet more or less exactly to the moment of Manuel's arrest, suggesting that he was already targeted for proscription and on the run as it was being written. As Darnton says, *La Vie secrète* was “a crude call for the guillotine,” whose blade duly cut short Manuel's life on 14 November 1793 (p. 52). This, too, is worthy of reflection.

Darnton's account of the evolution of *libelles* here and in the fourth and final part of *The Devil in the Holy Water* offers some important insights. As we have noted, over time he presents them as getting cheaper and cruder in content, suggesting a wider but less sophisticated – or perhaps more partisan and politicised – audience. He also notes a shift in focus – with the exception of pamphlets against Marie-Antoinette – from sexual scandal to financial impropriety. As the Revolution approached, sex and politics, in the form of an increasingly strident critique of despotism, were increasingly fused together in the *libelles*, but this connection was broken during the Revolution (p. 377). It is possible to make too much of this shift, which is perhaps related primarily to the structure of politics under two contrasting regimes. *Ancien régime* politics, strongly concentrated in the court and on the person of the king, revolved around physical access to the king's body. Personal relationships—whether social, sexual or political—yielded the substance of power. It was natural therefore to draw distinctions between legitimate power, gained and yielded publicly in the interests of the monarch and his kingdom (twin

Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1976); and Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers. The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

¹⁴ For my judgements on Pelleport's failed career as a blackmailer-*libelliste* and the quality and reception of his literary works see Burrows, *A Kings Ransom*, p. 134, 207-8; and *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, pp. 175-7. Readers can judge between Darnton's view and my own by consulting the new French edition of *Les Bohémiens* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2010) or Vivian Folkenflik's 2009 English translation. The editor's introduction is by Darnton.

¹⁵ See especially Daniel Gordon, “The Great Enlightenment Massacre” in *The Darnton Debate*, pp. 129-56, at pp.146-7.

concepts which were difficult to separate under the *ancien régime*), and illegitimate power, exercised by subverting the king's will behind closed doors or between the sheets. Moreover, it was rational for ambitious men and women to dabble in royal sexual politics as a route to long term favour, wealth, and power.

Revolutionary politics offered fewer obvious sexual routes to fortune, as there was no such concentration or stability in power as under the *ancien régime*. Multiple leaders and factions competed for moral authority in a fast-changing public arena where power was always open to dispute by demagogues, rivals, and competing authorities. In such an environment, it was hard to determine where real power lay or to cling to it long when grasped. Moreover, the characters, proclivities, and life-histories of most prominent revolutionaries were shrouded in mystery, and putting oneself forward as a leader was frowned on as unpatriotic. While some revolutionary leaders undoubtedly proved charismatic and highly attractive to women—as Peter McPhee has reminded us in a recent conference paper provocatively called “Robespierre in Love,” even “the Incorruptible” had hordes of female admirers—power was neither stable or public enough to warrant the calculated sexual intrigues that had taken place at the Bourbon court.¹⁶ On the other hand, it was all too easy to accuse enemies of financial corruption or attempting to enrich themselves rapidly at public expense.

Moreover, revolutionary pamphleteers did use sex as a weapon where it was likely to prove most effective: in their attacks on women prominent in the public sphere. Marie-Antoinette was the most conspicuous victim, not least because she was conceived as a genuine threat to the Revolution. But there were plenty of others. The Queen's closest confidantes Madame de Polignac and the Princesse de Lamballe both inspired violent pornographic revolutionary pamphlets in their own right, though this literature has been little explored.¹⁷ Nor were salon politicians such as Madame Roland or prominent revolutionary feminists such as Théroigne de Méricourt spared sexual slander. In this sense, it is fair to suggest that the revolutionary public sphere between 1789 and 1794 had indeed become more gendered, just as feminist scholarship has argued. There appears, then, to be a *prima facie* case for seeing the gendering of the public sphere, rather than a shift from sexual to financial scandal *per se*, as the key development in the *libelle* literature of the early Revolution.

Darnton's suggestion that financial corruption replaced sex as the main focus of *libelles* may derive in part from his source base. His discussion of revolutionary slander focuses his attention on a particular sub-genre of *libelle*, the *vies privées*. These biographical pamphlets claimed to reveal the private individual behind the public figure. Darnton tells us that he has identified forty-three revolutionary era pamphlets in this genre, which, as he notes, is currently the focus of attention of an *équipe* based in Lyon led by Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas.¹⁸ The only female subject of such *vies privées*, he tells us, is Marie-Antoinette. All the rest were about men.

¹⁶ Peter McPhee delivered this paper in June 2010 at the Society for the Study of French History conference in Newcastle, England, and again several weeks later in Sydney Australia at the Rudé Seminar.

¹⁷ Alexandra Anderson, a M.A. student at Leeds, is currently undertaking dissertation work on the topic.

¹⁸ The Lyon team's findings have just been published under the title *Dictionnaire des vies privées et politiques (1770-1830)*, ed. Olivier Ferret, Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre, and Chantal Thomas (Oxford: SVEC 2011:02). Several contributors to this volume, including the present author, will explore their ideas further in a colloquium on “Biographie et politique” in Lyon on 17-18 March 2011.

This gives rise to a series of questions that Darnton might explore further. How important were these *libelles* in a revolutionary political culture that was churning out several thousand pamphlets per year and selling around 300,000 newspapers each day?¹⁹ Can we measure their reception in any way? Do we have any indications of their circulation figures? Were they widely reviewed in newspapers?²⁰ How many went through multiple editions? Were any translated? And were the pamphlets about male political figures as widely and avidly read as the scandalous pamphlets concerning Marie-Antoinette? The answer to the final question is probably “no”. The *Essai historique sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette d’Autriche, Reine de France* – surely the best-selling pamphlet in the genre – went through so many editions that Henry d’Almeras estimated its total sales at 20,000 to 30,000 in 1789 alone.²¹ Madame de La Motte’s memoirs in all their French versions probably sold 15,000 to 20,000 more.²² Moreover, both these works – suitably stripped of their most offensive or Austrophobic passages to suit local sensibilities – went through more than one English edition. In contrast, until the rise of Bonaparte, no English publisher thought it worthwhile to translate any revolutionary era *vie privée* concerning male politicians.²³ Such observations imply a need for further research on the dissemination and reception of *vies privées* and the practice of libel in other printed genres, particularly newspapers (possibly the forum where *libelles* were most dangerous) to validate or refine Darnton’s conclusions.

It must also be acknowledged that once more enduring, stable forms of political power reasserted themselves, sexually scandalous *libelles* re-emerged. The extent to which this development was home-grown in France is open to dispute. Emigré pamphleteers such as Jean-Gabriel Peltier, Jacques Regnier and Jean-Baptiste Couchery certainly helped to demystify Bonaparte’s regime with their pornographic accounts of the sexual proclivities of Napoleon’s sisters, ministers, and eventually Napoleon himself.²⁴ So did British propagandists from Gillray, who depicted Josephine de Beauharnais and Madame Tallien dancing nude in front of the Director Barras, to Lewis Goldsmith and Stewarton, who wrote secret histories of the Napoleonic court. However, on the restoration a flurry of domestic anti-Napoleonic pamphlets carried such tales back to France. In the process, as Jean Tulard long-ago noted, they created a “Black Legend” that lacked long-term domestic appeal.²⁵ If Napoleon’s ideological *cordon sanitaire* – largely an extension of Bourbon policies and technologies – long prevented such materials from circulating in France, that, too, is worthy of reflection.

¹⁹ Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News. The Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 82.

²⁰ This question is currently being explored by the Lyon *équipe*.

²¹ D’Alméras, *Marie-Antoinette*, p. 403.

²² Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, pp. 73-4, records a total of 10,000 copies of the Countess’ own editions, and there were besides several pirated versions.

²³ My bibliographic survey of the translations of *vies privées* appears under the title “Les traductions: éditions anglaises des Vies privées françaises (1718-1838)” in the SVEC volume mentioned in note 17. One slight caveat to this statement is the English edition of the pre-revolutionary *Vie privée du Duc de Chartres* first published in French in 1783 and usually attributed to Morande. Darnton and I concur in the view that Pelleport was the more likely author of this pamphlet.

²⁴ On this topic see Simon Burrows, *French Exile Journalism and European Politics, 1792-1814* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society, 2000), ch. 5.

²⁵ Jean Tulard, *L’Anti-Napoléon: la légende noire de l’Empereur* (Paris, 1965).

Darnton is on less controversial ground in his path-breaking treatment of the structure of *libelles* in part III of the book. In good Cartesian fashion he breaks the pamphlets down into their smallest building blocks – the *anecdotes*. Self-contained stories or parcels of information, the *anecdotes* were, Darnton argues, the basic components from which *libelles* were built. They were recycled, often verbatim and on a large scale, from one *libelle* to another, as shown in Darnton’s authoritative excavation of the source passages for a section of Mouffle d’Angerville’s *Vie privée de Louis XV* (pp. 291-8).

To modern readers, Darnton suggests, the term “anecdote” suggests a casual, unreliable story, as summed up in the term “anecdotal evidence”. But to Old Regime readers, steeped in a culture of official secrecy, the anecdote was the opposite – a nugget of solid evidence, rescued from a marsh of uncertainty. And unlike other information, it had the allure not only of secrecy, but of scandal (p. 269). This meant that even well-informed and sophisticated readers often took them seriously. To prove his point, Darnton cites the ambiguous reaction of the compiler of the *Correspondance littéraire secrète* to a pamphlet entitled *Les Joueurs et M. Dusaulx*, which appeared in 1780 and centred on an improbable narrative told by a well-meaning prostitute: “It is . . . a jumble of wickedness that surpasses the imagination. Swindlers, lackeys, spies, pimps, and brothel keepers are the lovers and backers of these ladies. Men in power are also involved with it all” (p. 273).

Darnton takes this passage to imply an uncritical acceptance of the pamphlet’s content: we might equally take the author’s ambiguous first sentence to represent incredulous rejection. Be that as it may, this case highlights one of Darnton’s central and acknowledged problems, that of audience response. My own reading of the scanty evidence on audience reception of *libelles* is that it is ambiguous. Before the Revolution most readers were disgusted by those rare and sordid pamphlets that attacked the monarch or his consort. Nevertheless, Darnton is correct in his suggestions that they also sought eagerly to find anecdotes they adjudged to be true. In this respect, Voltaire’s comment on Marianne-Agnès Fauques de Vaucluse’s pamphlet *Histoire de Madame la Marquise de Pompadour* is instructive: “La moitié de l’ouvrage est un tissu de calomnies, mais ce qu’il y a de vrai fera passer ce qu’il y a de faux à la posterité” (“Half the work is a tissue of calumnies, but the truth it contains will ensure that the falsehoods are passed down to posterity”).²⁶ Darnton considers the evidence sufficient to suggest that *libelles* mattered: they were taken seriously, and they sold well. On this he builds the further case that plagiarism between texts did not much matter, for it provided mutual reinforcement and amplification, as “later anecdotes built on earlier ones.” (p. 299). As a result, he repeats his insistence, familiar from his earlier work, that by the power of continuous suggestion, *libelles* succeeded in desacralizing the monarchy. Hence, he asserts (p. 299):

Unhomerical and unheroic as they were, the *libelles* perpetuated a mythology of their own, a negative mythology, which undercut the monarchy of the *Ancien régime* at its most vulnerable points.

As we will see, this position is open to attack from multiple directions. Nevertheless, Darnton’s deconstruction of the *libelle* form is a valuable contribution in its own right. It extends his earlier work on circuits of information in prerevolutionary Paris and, particularly when taken together with William Slauter’s recent groundbreaking work on the circulation of newspaper paragraphs, adds a new dimension to our understanding of the generation and reception of news information under the Old Regime.²⁷ This alone must rate as a significant contribution to the field of book history.

²⁶ Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, p. 78. For my discussion of evidence on audience reception, pp. 77-9.

²⁷ William Slauter, “Forward Looking Statements: News and Speculation in the Age of the American Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009): 759–792.

Can we make similar claims for his contribution to our understanding of the Revolution? Certainly Darnton uses *The Devil in the Holy Water* to fuse three of his favourite themes into a more coherent explanation for the Revolution and much of its trajectory. Two of those themes, the so-called Grub Street theory and the concept of desacralization, have been developed at length in his earlier work. The third element is what Darnton calls the history of political libel. In *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1996) he identified the need for a detailed study of this topic to buttress his other theories. *The Devil in the Holy Water* should be seen, therefore, as his attempt to address that need, and a continuation of his long-term project of writing a literary history of late eighteenth-century France “from below.”

While Darnton’s new “history of political libel” has not rescued his existing interpretation of revolutionary origins from some significant criticisms, several of its elements stand together in their own right. This is perhaps best explained by taking each of the three themes identified above individually. Let us begin with the “Grub Street theory.”

Darnton’s resurrection of this theory may come as a surprise to some readers, for it has come under sustained and heavy attack. Indeed, there was some reason to suspect that Darnton himself considered it past its use-by date. First enunciated in articles written in 1968 and 1971 – the latter of which, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,”²⁸ is surely one of the most influential historical articles ever written – Darnton all but abandoned it in 1996, when he shifted his focus from authors to texts in *Forbidden Bestsellers*.

“The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature” made the clarion call for Darnton’s new literary history from below, proclaiming that literature looked very different from the perspective of “Grub Street.” Moreover, it linked Grub Street to the outbreak of the Revolution by suggesting that by the 1770s and 1780s, in an overstocked literary marketplace dominated by the (relative) non-entities of the “high Enlightenment,” most budding writers were forced into poverty and desperate expedients. In the process they were radicalized, turning against a literary and political elite that had degraded them, before overthrowing them in the Revolution of 1789. This radicalized literary proletariat included Morande and Brissot, who, to keep the wolf from the door, turned to producing pornographic *libelles* and spying for the police.

This notion proved vulnerable on several fronts. The idea that Paris housed a vast underemployed literary proletariat was questioned by John Lough, while Elizabeth Eisenstein remarked upon the openness of the French cultural elite at the end of the ancien régime. It has also been objected that Darnton’s approach trivialises and marginalises the influence and role of the complex thinkers of the Enlightenment.²⁹ Harvey Chisick has gone so far as to suggest that what was most notable about Grub Street discourses, other than their existence, was their “marginality.”³⁰ Likewise, it has been observed that many writers who fitted the Grub Street model did not follow a revolutionary trajectory. Indeed, the three case studies which underpinned Darnton’s “Grub Street” argument have all been called into question. Hence my own work portrays Morande as a reformist *patriote*, while the reputation of Jean-Baptiste Suard, who Darnton portrayed as a “high Enlightenment” non-entity, has been convincingly

²⁸ *Past and Present* 51 (1971): 81-115.

²⁹ Gordon, “The Great Enlightenment Massacre;” Jeremy Popkin, “Darnton’s Alternative (to the) Enlightenment” and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, “Bypassing the Enlightenment: Taking an Underground Route to Revolution,” in *The Darnton Debate*; John Lough, “The French Literary Underground Reconsidered,” *SVEC* 329 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation 1995), 471-82.

³⁰ Harvey Chisick, “Introduction,” in *The Press in the French Revolution*, ed. Harvey Chisick, *SVEC* 287 (Oxford; Voltaire Foundation, 1991), p. 8.

rehabilitated.³¹ Finally, Brissot, whom Darnton saw as the archetype of the failed *philosophe*, radicalised by failure to make it in the literary monde, is now widely seen as a highly regarded *philosophe*.³² He held radical political views long before he was imprisoned in the Bastille, the event which Darnton supposed to have radicalized him. His supposed involvement in Grub Street and espionage has also been fiercely contested.³³

Darnton's harshest critics tend to argue that Brissot was a high-minded young *philosophe* and therefore could not have been involved in pornography or spying, a position that appears to involve both a *non-sequitur* and rather one-dimensional view of human nature.³⁴ However, in 2003, I re-examined Darnton's original evidence together with the transcripts of Brissot's long-lost Bastille interrogations, which were only acquired by the Archives Nationales in 1982. While acquitting Brissot on the charge of producing scandalous *libelles*, I presented new evidence supporting Darnton's charge that Brissot had worked for the police, though more as a propagandist than a spy.³⁵ Darnton, having also consulted the Brissot papers, now appears to endorse both these contentions.³⁶

Drawing together all these streams of criticism, in *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution* I offered a reappraisal of the very same London blackmailer-*libellistes* who feature so strongly in *The Devil in the Holy Water*. Arguing that if anyone fitted the model of the alienated proto-revolutionary hack it would be them, I conducted a detailed survey of their careers which showed that the London *libellistes* bore little resemblance to Darnton's archetype. Rather than failed writers, frustrated hacks, hate-filled nihilists, and Jacobins *avant la lettre*, those whose ideological preferences can be determined tended to write as reformist patriots. The most successful of them necessarily had good contacts in the establishment, and most were either fallen nobles or members of France's professional elites. These lowest of literary low-lives lived in parasitic symbiosis with the monarchy, practicing an extreme form of the traditional noble art of prising favours and rewards from the Bourbon regime. When the Revolution arrived they tended to side with royalism.

The sample of blackmailer-*libellistes* treated in *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution* is small but significant because London was unique as a safe-haven and base of operations. As Darnton's own narrative indicates, when *libelle* operations were set up on the continent, French agents were able to trace them and close them down with the connivance of local authorities.³⁷ Moreover, as I showed, even in London

³¹ See Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³² Darnton, "Grub Street Style of Revolution."

³³ See particularly Frederick A. De Luna, "The Dean Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot, *jeune philosophe*," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1991): 158-90; Leonore Loft, *Passion, Politics and Philosophie: Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002). Loft finds Brissot comparable "as a reformer" to "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela" (despite the fact that Brissot's warmongering helped to unleash the French revolutionary wars!) and dismisses Darnton's charges against Brissot as "calumny." Other prominent critics of Darnton's position on Brissot include Dena Goodman and Elizabeth Eisenstein.

³⁴ See especially De Luna, "Dean Street Style of Revolution;" and Loft, *Passion, Politics and Philosophie*.

³⁵ Burrows, "The Innocence of Jacques-Pierre Brissot."

³⁶ Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water*, pp. 184, 217, 477 n. 185.

³⁷ *The Devil in the Holy Water*, part II, particularly his treatments of the networks of Goupil and Jacquet. These incidents were also treated in *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, chs. 3-4.

the newspaper press, at least, could not indulge in free-for-all attacks on the French monarchy. Darnton, however, implies the opposite (p. 324). He recounts how, in December 1784, the *Morning Post* insinuated that Marie-Antoinette and the Duchesse de Polignac were involved in secret trysts with British officers and other lovers. The story, he suggests, shows that “The English press had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of mud to throw at the French monarchy” and

demonstrates that London newspapers were publishing slander about the sex life of Marie-Antoinette eight months before the Diamond Necklace Affair broke. It also suggests that the French libelers may have picked up some of the tricks of their trade from English journalists.

In reality, the so-called Captain Conway libels were unique, and with good reason. Far from giving up their complaints, as Darnton suggests, the French government persisted. The British ministry took little persuading to launch successful *ex-officio* prosecutions of the editors of both the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Herald*, which had repeated the allegations. The British press, particularly the *Morning Post*, was indeed full of scandal, but the royal families of Europe and their diplomatic representatives were out of bounds. Those who transgressed this taboo were punished by *ex-officio* proceedings brought by government on the grounds that they disturbed the peace of the realm. This was a lesson learned the hard way in the 1780s also by John Bew, who accused the Russian ambassador of being a spy; and by the rabble-rousing peer Lord George Gordon, who accused Marie-Antoinette and the French ambassador of conspiring against the Count de Cagliostro.³⁸ There were, then, *post facto* limits to legitimate freedom of expression even in London, and these specifically involved press attacks on foreign rulers, their families, and their diplomatic representatives. Likewise, even the *libellistes* were drawn to self-censorship through fear of kidnap and assassination. This helps explain why they preferred to sell their silence than to chance their works on the open market.

Despite these criticisms, Darnton’s new and enriched account of Grub Street has much to recommend it. Yet the extent to which his thinking has evolved takes time to emerge: indeed, his seventeenth chapter, entitled “The Grub Street Route to Revolution,” begins with an explicit assertion (p. 208):

In retrospect, it looks as though all roads from the *Ancien régime* led to the Revolution. That, of course, is an illusion. ... But there was one road that issued directly onto the revolutionary upheaval: Grub Street. Over it passed a solid segment of the Revolution’s leaders...

Nevertheless, Darnton’s model of causal relationship is complex. He follows this assertion by reminding us – in a nod to the work of Darrin MacMahon – that some Grub Street figures ended up on the counter-revolutionary right (a group which arguably included the arch-*libellistes* Pelleport and Morande).³⁹ Still, he sees the Grub Street *milieu* as worthy of investigation because it “played an important part in the creation of a new political culture through its mastery of the printed word” (p. 208). And that word, as he rightly indicates, exploded with the Revolution. The market for and supply of newsprint mushroomed in 1789; pamphleteering likewise. The insatiable new demand for political

³⁸ These cases are discussed in *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, ch. 5.

³⁹ Darrin P. MacMahon, “The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past and Present* 159 (1998): 77-112; see also my analysis in *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, ch. 1.

news was largely satisfied by shadowy figures from Grub Street, some of whom emerged to lead important political careers.

To examine this *milieu* afresh, Darnton offers a new and extensive case study of the career of Pierre Manuel. It tells how he evolved from a marginal underground colporteur-author-publisher dealing in shady books and conducting occasional literary speculations under the *ancien régime* into a publisher of sensational exposés of the Bourbon regime and a politician under the Revolution. Along the way, Manuel was perhaps more deeply involved than anyone in (re)defining the *ancien régime* as a tyrannical despotism, particularly in its persecution of authors and other cultural intermediaries who dealt in the written word. Among those it persecuted were Manuel himself, who was briefly embastilled for publishing and printing a rather innocuous pamphlet relating to the Diamond Necklace Affair (pp. 210-16).⁴⁰ And though Manuel would probably never have amounted to much but for the Revolution, his *embastillement* was a political asset he could use to portray himself as a victim of despotism. This gave him a *cachet* among fellow revolutionaries that, as Darnton shows, he exploited to the maximum.

If Manuel's example is typical, then, Grub Street's vital contribution was in forming the cadre of those who would rise to prominence in the wake of July 1789, rather than providing the Revolution with its shock troops. A roll call of individuals who, before the Revolution, lived life-styles similar to Pelleport, Morande, Linguet, Manuel, and the other scoundrels who populate Darnton's pages reminds us just how plentiful and prominent they were. Darnton lists Mirabeau, Carra, Gorsas, Prudhomme, Bonneville, Louvet de Couvray, Fabre d'Eglantine, Hébert, Chaumette, Collot d'Herbois. And that, he points out, is not to include professionals of a literary bent who later became leading revolutionaries, such as Robespierre, St Just, and Marat. He could, if he chose, broaden the dragnet further to include those who passed to celebrity via revolutionary journalism such as Camille Desmoulins or Roederer. This would seem to fully justify Darnton's preoccupation with this *milieu* he calls Grub Street or *Bohème littéraire*.

But how far did this metaphorical Grub Street extend? Darnton's description of Grub Street as a *milieu* is certainly evocative, but does not define who dwelt there or how they acquired so unsavoury an address. However, in a suggestive and playful passage that is worthy of further elaboration, Darnton asks, "Can Voltaire, too, be considered a libeller?" (pp. 22-3). As he points out, the great *philosophe* and scourge of the *pauvres diables* in Grub Street proved an accomplished slanderer in his polemical battles. Indeed, he was not above resorting to outright insult, labelling enemies "buggers" and such like. Voltaire "used the same tactics" as the *libellistes*, and his libels "expressed a pervasive polemical style." It would be fascinating to see how Darnton might develop this insight. Grub Street, it appears, is no longer to be considered merely the chosen habitat of literary low-life such as Morande and Pelleport. It was broad enough to accommodate Voltaire and his ilk as well. The High Enlightenment and Grub Street were conjoined after all in the practice of libel. Darnton's argument has come full circle.

Let us now turn our attention to desacralization. According to Darnton, pre-revolutionary *libelle* attacks on Crown and aristocracy helped to cause and shape the Revolution due to their role in desacralizing the monarchy. The problematic link in this argument, as Darnton has repeatedly acknowledged, is that we do not know how eighteenth-century readers responded to what they read. Indeed, we have a pretty poor understanding of how modern readers assimilate texts into their worldview. What insight we have for eighteenth-century readers is yet more limited. Darnton has found more evidence on this subject than anyone, yet is willing to admit that he has a problem. So before we ask what people read, perhaps

⁴⁰ This contrasts starkly with Darnton's sensational assertion in "The Grub Street Style of Revolution," pp. 319-20, that Manuel was arrested for peddling pornography. I pointed out that this was not the case in *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, p. 91 n. 85. There were, as both I and Darnton note, copies of a pornographic pamphlet by Mirabeau found in his apartment, but this was not what the police were chasing.

we ought to ask another question: when did they read it? On this question there is a growing body of evidence, and it calls desacralization theory into question.

The relevant historiography is short but powerful: it is not discussed in *The Devil in the Holy Water*. In 2002, Vivian Gruder published an article questioning whether printed scandalous pamphlets against Marie-Antoinette circulated widely before the Revolution. These attacks had become the subject of an extensive historical literature. It suggests that they both undermined the Old Regime monarchy and helped to underpin the Revolution's masculinism and exclusion of women from the public sphere, as well as making questions of gender central to the Queen's trial in 1793. This literature was so extensive and influential that Gruder suggested it amounted to a veritable "pornographic interpretation" of the French Revolution. Such an interpretation, she felt, was flawed, at least in so far as it concerned the Revolution's origins, because pamphlet attacks on Marie-Antoinette were rare before 1789. Indeed, such attacks were more a result than a cause of the French Revolution.⁴¹

In *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, I went a stage further, having added my own research to Gruder's data-set. After a comprehensive review of the evidence, I concluded that sexually salacious anti-Marie-Antoinette pamphlet literature had been systematically suppressed. It was probably unavailable to the general public before February 1789, when Madame de La Motte published her scandalous and mendacious memoirs of the Diamond Necklace Affair. Five months later the revolutionaries found a stash of suppressed *libelles* still stored in the Bastille, which they rapidly reprinted, some of them many times over. While salacious gossip and manuscript *libelles* circulated in *ancien régime* courtly circles, where they could do the Queen real political harm, there was little reason to believe that scandalous printed works about her were widely disseminated before the Revolution. *Libellistes* and publishers preferred to sell their silence – relatively cheaply – than to chance their works in the literary marketplace. Booksellers and newsmongers who tried to acquire them were unable to do so. This only changed once the monarchy was losing its grip on power: the *libelles* did not cause the Revolution because until 1789 they were unread: most copies were either destroyed by the Crown or impounded in the Bastille. Instead *libelles* lashed out at the Queen from 1789, when she was already on her way down. Some continued to demonise her once she was deposed or even dead. A key link in the causal chain linking desacralization to the outbreak of Revolution appeared to have snapped.

Darnton himself was not the author of any of the literature on the Marie-Antoinette *libelles*. Indeed, he said so little about her that *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution* attempted (perhaps not always successfully) to draw a distinction between a "pornographic interpretation," which was Darntonian in so far as it drew on his ideas, and a genuinely Darntonian interpretation centred on desacralization. In *The Devil in the Holy Water*, Darnton at last deals at length with Marie-Antoinette. But he neither discusses the debate over whether pamphlets on Marie-Antoinette actually circulated before the Revolution, nor presents compelling evidence to suggest that they did so in significant numbers. To be sure, he acknowledges the success of the French secret police in suppressing *libelles* against the Queen, but in a colourful chapter on "Royal Depravity" he explicitly repeats the tired old line that pamphlet literature against the Queen proliferated from 1778 (p. 398). It is not necessary to his overall thesis that he should do so. Indeed, he recognises that the monstrous revolutionary literature against the Queen bore little resemblance to that which preceded it. Nor does the desacralization argument absolutely depend on Marie-Antoinette. It does, however, require that some oppositional, scandalous attacks on the monarchy were read in a hostile light.

Here the question of when *libelles* were read becomes particularly illuminating. *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution* went on to argue that the timing of the circulation of the anti-Marie-Antoinette pamphlets fitted into a wider pattern. Its examination of the pamphlets against Pompadour and du Barry

⁴¹ Vivian R. Gruder, "The Question of Marie-Antoinette: The Queen and Public Opinion before the Revolution," *French History* 16 (2002): 169-98.

highlighted that very few of them were published while the mistresses were in full enjoyment of their power. As we have noted, similar observations could be made about the timing of some of the revolutionary *libelles* that Darnton describes: several, at least, including the *Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel*, were issued during the fall or after the execution of their subjects. The same is true of pamphlet attacks on Louis XV, who was maligned primarily by pamphlets produced after his death. Occasional allegorical *romans à clef* that appeared in his lifetime, notably Crebillon's *Amours du Zeokinizul, Roi des Kofirans*, were, I argued, all but impenetrable even to insiders. Darnton's own evidence indicated that readers argued incessantly about their meaning. As a result, I suggested that we needed to reconceptualise how *libelles* were read. If they were histories of past regimes, not critiques of those holding power, might not readers find in them alternative meanings to those traditionally assumed. I tentatively suggested four possibilities. Far from serving as weapons against sitting governments, their political roles seem to have included denouncing the abuses of a superseded administration; providing an ethical standard for the new government; defaming the surviving personnel of an outgoing ministry; and, by way of contrast, providing a moral underpinning for the incoming regime.⁴²

There were caveats to this argument – the *Gazetier cuirassé* contained scabrous material about Madame du Barry and even Morande's prospectus for a scandalous biography that the Court later agreed to suppress. Yet equally, the *Gazetier cuirassé* was considered a uniquely iniquitous pamphlet and was the target of sustained diplomatic, police, and customs campaigns to prevent copies getting into France. Even a publisher like the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, which enjoyed the protection afforded by Prussian overlordship, chose not to handle it.⁴³ Equally, Marianne Agnès de Fauques de Vacluse produced her biography of Pompadour while the favourite was alive, but at a moment when she appeared vulnerable due to the end of her sexual relationship with the king and the disastrous military defeats flowing from the unpopular Austrian alliance that she had championed. We should also note that new evidence provided in *The Devil in the Holy Water* opens a narrow chink in my armour, indicating (pp. 372-3) that the *Amours de Zeokinizul* was more widely understood than perhaps suggested in Darnton's previous accounts.

In other ways, however, the evidence against desacralization continues to mount. New work undertaken in the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) has reinforced the extent to which *libelles* against the monarchy circulated according to the pattern just outlined. For the past three and an half years, I have been leading a team preparing a database of the entire book trade of the STN, looking at both the sources and destinations of the books they sold. As I write, the project has plotted the movement of 413,000 copies of 4,000 editions traded by the STN across a network of 2,900 clients in over 500 different European towns. We have mapping software in place to represent this trade visually and have so far categorised over 80% of titles representing 95% of STN sales using two complex taxonomic systems.⁴⁴

⁴² Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, p. 221.

⁴³ This insight is drawn from the findings of the AHRC-University of Leeds "French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe" project, which I head. Louise Seaward, who is currently studying French policing of overseas publishing, intends to publish her research into the French pursuit of the *Gazetier cuirassé* shortly.

⁴⁴ This mammoth undertaking, supported by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, is scheduled for on-line publication later in 2011. Early indications of the information it contains and the new ways in which it can be examined can be found on our project website at <http://chop.leeds.ac.uk/stn/>. In the next eighteen months, my colleague Dr Mark Curran and I will jointly and individually be publishing a number of articles and books based on our research.

Ironically, our project drew inspiration from Darnton's own use of the STN archives in *Forbidden Bestsellers*. But its potential is far greater because it harnesses the full potential of a state-of-the-art relational database. It is far larger in scale (413,000 sales as opposed to Darnton's 28,000 orders); in geographical range (embracing all Europe instead of France); and in scope (tracing every sector of the trade, not just highly illegal works). Our database also allows for patterns of demand to be broken down geographically, thematically, and chronologically in a far more systematic and flexible manner than was possible in Darnton's volume of appendices.⁴⁵ But the most essential difference is that we have used the STN's surviving account books to study the actual physical movement of books,⁴⁶ whereas *Forbidden Bestsellers* and most of the studies that followed it have been based on booksellers' correspondence and occasional forays into the STN's *Livres de Commissions*.⁴⁷ The two methods give significantly different results – not least because many works were difficult or impossible for the STN to source.

So what does our data show? To begin with, it suggests that Darnton's emphasis on illegal books has, in a statistical sense, been fully justified. No less than 28% of the books that the STN sold to France belonged to Darnton's *Corpus of Clandestine Literature*. Moreover, this figure understates the export of illegal texts to France because there were many shades of illegality. These range from pirated copies of legally circulated texts, through to the highly illegal and carefully policed libertine (i.e., freethinking) works that comprise Darnton's *Corpus*. But they also confirm that the STN were not selling *libelles* against Louis XV and Madame du Barry before Louis XV's death in May 1774. Though they sold heavily thereafter, there were no sales of works with the keyword "du Barry" prior to that date. Likewise sales to France of works with the keyword "Marie-Antoinette" are lacking before 1789.

Besides these empirical objections to the desacralization theory, there are well-established theoretical problems. Dan Gordon is particularly sceptical, arguing that the Bourbon monarchy had many means of legitimising itself besides its claims to divine right. The loss of sacral aura was not enough in itself to bring it into disrepute. But Gordon and some other American critics also consider Darnton's concept of desacralization to be under-theorised, particularly with regard to how "public opinion" actually operates. Rather than presenting public opinion as an ever-fluctuating barometer, Darnton described a process of constant and apparently irreversible ideological erosion, comparing desacralization to the effect of constant drips of water wearing away a rock.⁴⁸ *The Devil in the Holy Water* does not meet such objections head on.

Yet much of Darnton's argument has little need of desacralization theory. For example, it is not intrinsic to his claim that after 1770 heavy-weight political tracts began to portray the Bourbon regime as systemically despotic. Many of these were produced by denizens of his Grub Street, including Mirabeau's *Des lettres de cachet et des prisons d'état* (1782) and Linguet's *Mémoires sur la Bastille* (1783).

⁴⁵ See Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (New York: Norton, 1995).

⁴⁶ It should be acknowledged here that there are small gaps in the STNs accounting record, but until 30 May 1787 most of these concern the STN's trade with their partner houses in Switzerland, counter sales to clients in Neuchâtel, and purchases of books from other publishers. For the period 1769 to 1787 as a whole we estimate that we can trace around 95% of all sales.

⁴⁷ See Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996); and the various conference papers published in *Le Rayonnement d'une maison d'édition dans l'Europe des Lumières: la Société typographique de Neuchâtel, 1769-1789*, Robert Darnton and Michel Schlup, eds. (Neuchâtel: Bibliothèque publique et universitaire / Hauterive: Editions Gilles Attinger, 2005).

⁴⁸ Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, p. 216.

Darnton argues that Mirabeau's tracts, as well as his persecution by the authorities, brought him the celebrity and moral authority that allowed him to seize the political initiative from the monarchy in the National Assembly in June 1789. These arguments reinforce and extend Rolf Reichardt and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink's account of the development of anti-Bastille literature from the mid-1770s.⁴⁹ They also dovetail with my description of how secret police missions to kidnap or suborn the London *libellistes* helped shape a new discourse about the despotic nature of the French monarchy, which was invariably juxtaposed against the liberties of the British. Such tales circulated widely in public space and were a key ingredient in the development of the more strident, self-confident discourses on French despotism perceived by Darnton.⁵⁰ Darnton observes (pp. 378-9) that these discourses drew on respected Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu for their theoretical insights, while offering new practical examples of monarchic or ministerial despotism. Once again, Enlightenment and Grub Street appear to be conjoined. As we have noted, in the "High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature" Darnton argued that *libelles* portrayed the monarchy as a "degenerate despotism," but his work has sometimes seemed to concentrate more on "degeneracy" than "despotism". In redressing the balance, *The Devil in the Holy Water* both reduces the dependency on desacralization theory and restores an important role for the great *philosophes*.

At the same time, *The Devil in the Holy Water* adds a third pillar to Darnton's overall edifice: the history of political libel. There can be little doubt that this buttresses his older arguments. Tracing how Old Regime slanderous discourse developed into the murderous denunciatory rhetoric of revolutionary writers sheds much new light on the political cultures of both periods, as well as the failure of the Revolution to achieve political stability. As we have seen, Darnton suggests that slander was prevalent across the social spectrum of writers operating under the Revolution, from the Manuels, Morandes, and Pelleports up to Voltaire. But in the hothouse of continual revolutionary crisis, famine and invasion plots, fears of royal counter-coups and growing conspiracy phobia, slander transmuted into denunciation; humour and nuance disappeared.⁵¹ Political life increasingly seemed a protean struggle between absolute patriotic good and lurking counter-revolutionary evil. In such an environment, slander became central to political polarization and the development of murderous internecine feuds.

One angle that Darnton might like to explore further here is the interaction of *libelles* with other forms of *ancien régime* biographical writing. He argues (p. 391) that until the Revolution readers were forced to take their political news from *libelles* because "contemporary history and biography were not permitted under the old system for controlling the press." This is a slightly misleading statement, however, for even if we ignore the sensationalist trial briefs studied so brilliantly by Sarah Maza,⁵² and indeed by Darnton himself, there were certain authorized forms of biography, notably the panegyric and the funeral oration. The STN sold these genres in broadly similar quantities to personal *libelles*, despite its relative bias towards the illegal sector. These sorts of works offered a one-dimensional positive view of their subjects, in much the same way as the *libelles* offered negative perspectives. Perhaps we might broaden Darnton's argument here and suggest that secular biographical texts pre-figured the Revolution not merely in establishing a culture of slander, but also in inculcating the habitual division of

⁴⁹ Hans Jürgen Lüsebrink and Rolf Reichardt, *The Bastille: A History of a Symbol of Despotism and Freedom* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution*, ch. 7.

⁵¹ On p. 352 of *The Devil in the Holy Water*, Darnton rightly warns historians that they need to take such public fears and fantasies seriously.

⁵² Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

political actors into heroes and villains, good and evil, patriots and traitors. But already, when taken together with recent scholarship, most notably the work of his former student, Charles Walton, Darnton's reading would seem to place slander alongside conspiracy phobia at the heart of the revolutionary narrative.⁵³ This is a challenging new twist to his argument and offers an interpretative tool of considerable explanatory power in its own right.

In conclusion, this review finishes on a high note. Beyond its significance to the history of books, *The Devil in the Holy Water* reinvigorates Darnton's contribution to the revolutionary historiography. Even were it to be stripped of the desacralization theory, the book would retain significant interpretative power in its rejuvenated account of the impact of Grub Street and a powerful fresh, multi-layered and provocative account of the history of political libel. We will be debating it for a long time to come.

Simon Burrows
University of Leeds
s.f.burrows@leeds.ac.uk

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⁵³ Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).