

Omissions and Revisions in Enlightenment Book History: A Rejoinder to Robert Darnton

Simon Burrows

On November 25, 2016, I noticed something which disturbed me in Professor Robert Darnton's online essay "Charmet" on his personal website, robertdarnton.org. The article, as published in September 2014, had concerned the Besançon printer-bookseller, Jean-Félix Charmet *l'aîné* [the elder]. Now it had been re-edited so that its main protagonist was Jean-Félix's brother, the bookseller Charles-Antoine, who now was also perplexingly styled *l'aîné*. The only way I could prove this was an amendment, rather than the original text, was due to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine. It confirmed (see the screenshots reproduced at Fig. 1a and b) that the alteration had been made between March 3 and June 20, 2016.¹ Since there is no text note, footnote or endnote to notify readers of the change, this is the only proof I have that the change was ever made.

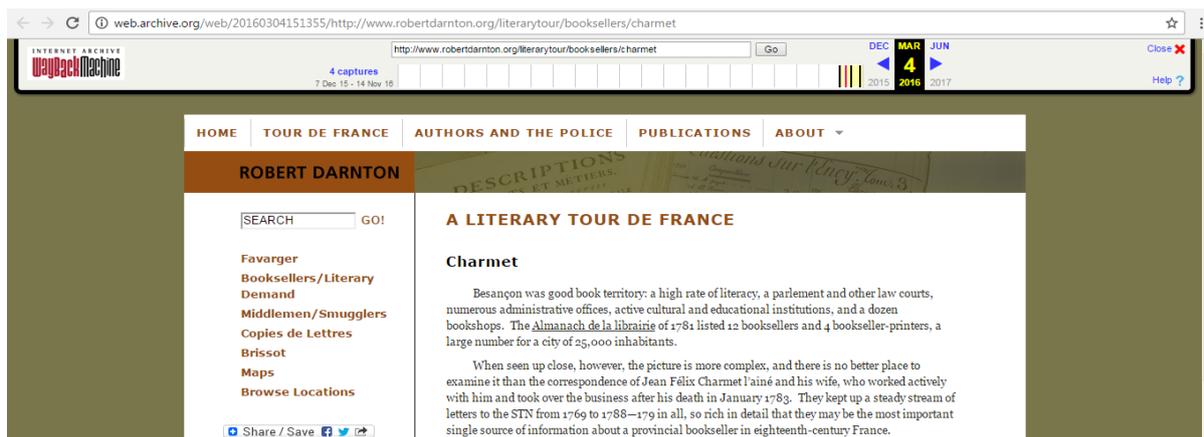


Figure 1a Robert Darnton, “Opening Paragraph of ‘Charmet’ Monograph” (March 4, 2016). © robertdarnton.org.

¹ I thank Dr Jason Ensor for researching these dates in the Wayback Machine and forwarding me screen shots. I also thank Dr Ensor and Professor Peter Hutchings for advising on earlier drafts of this essay. Responsibility for content is entirely my own.



Figure 1b Robert Darnton, “Opening Paragraph of ‘Charmet’ Monograph” (June 20, 2016). © robertdarnton.org. The opening two paragraphs of Darnton’s “monograph” on Charmet as it appeared on 4 March (Fig. 1a) and 20 June 2016 (Fig. 1b). Note the change of name in line six.

This matters to me, because in his article “Diffusion and Confusion” Robert Darnton insinuates that my identification of Charmet *l’aîné* in an article entitled “Charmet and the Book Police”, which I published in 2015, is based on dated scholarship. He states there that:

When I first published my research on Charmet in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995) and a supplementary volume, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (1995), he appeared as Jean-Félix. Burrows adopted that name in criticizing the conclusions of *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*.²

The use of the word “adopted” here is misleading: it suggests I had a choice of rival identifications available from the existing scholarly literature. However, Darnton’s essay on “Charmet” was published on September 1, 2014, and in it he once again identified *Charmet l’aîné* as Jean-Félix. He did so again in September 2015.³ Thus both when I submitted “Charmet and the Book Police” on September 12, 2014, and again when I published it in October 2015, complete with revisions necessitated by his essay “Charmet”, my identification could hardly have been more up to date. In both cases it rested on scholarship published just weeks before. Darnton’s wording obfuscated this. This obfuscation is compounded by the changes to his website, which could lead other scholars to miss this fact.

Darnton’s change caught me by surprise because it exposed other, similar omissions. It immediately reminded me that in 2014, when exploring his website, I had been startled by an unexpected peculiarity of Charmet *l’aîné*’s dossier in the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel [STN]:⁴ The dossier, which served as Darnton’s source for both his 1996 and 2014 studies, did not contain correspondence from just one brother. It actually contained letters from both Charmet brothers and the elder brother’s widow, as well as, in the early 1770s, a business partnership calling itself “Charmet frères et soeurs” or sometimes “Charmet frères et soeurs, imprimeurs” [“Charmet brothers and sisters, printers”]. This was, mysteriously, something Darnton had not mentioned in his treatment of Charmet in *Forbidden Best-Sellers* or his 2014 essay.

² Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 5.

³ Darnton, “The Demand for Literature in France,” 515.

⁴ Copies and transcripts of the original documents that formed the dossier are available from Darnton’s website “A Literary Tour de France” at <http://robertdarnton.org/literarytour/book sellers/charmet> (last accessed 17 July 2017).

Significantly, across the entire correspondence, neither brother signed with their Christian name or initials. Instead, like many printers of the era, they designated themselves Charmet *l'aîné* and Charmet *cadet* [Charmet the Younger]. The subject of Darnton's case study—who identifies himself in the correspondence as Charmet *l'aîné*, also styled himself “libraire” [bookseller]. In the original version of his essay on “Charmet”, Darnton even wrote of his man as Jean-Félix Charmet *l'aîné* (see Fig. 1). This is an odd formulation. *Ancien régime* sources tend to use relational and inherently unstable terms such as “l'aîné”, “cadet” etc. to distinguish between members of the same family in place of Christian names. For Darnton to combine the two implied he had solid evidence of Charmet's identity, or had found this formulation in his sources. It also suggested he had done due diligence to find which brother was the elder. I had every reason therefore to believe Darnton had been correct to identify Charmet *l'aîné* as Jean-Félix. It came as a rude shock to discover otherwise. Shock turned to disbelief when I learned that Darnton was exploiting *his* error as a pretext to attack *my* scholarship.

In the grand scheme of things, Charmet's precise identity hardly matters. Our debate is about my wider critique of his foundational work on the Swiss-based publisher, the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel and the French book trade in his 1996 monograph *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, and in a set of essays on his personal website, which was published in September 2014, particularly that on “Charmet”. This critique draws extensively on data from my own “French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe” (FBTEE) on-line database resource of the STN's Europe-wide trade, and further datasets currently in preparation.⁵ Charmet is important because of Darnton's insistence that by compiling statistics from the orders of Charmet to the STN “month after month, it is possible to enjoy a clear view of the demand for literature in a provincial capital”.⁶ I take issue with such claims, but Charmet is only used as an illustration.

In “Diffusion and Confusion”, Darnton adopts four critical strategies in his attempts to discredit my scholarship on Charmet and the wider book trade. None of them is remotely credible. First, there is an insinuation that my identification of Charmet is based on dated scholarship. We have dealt with that already. Darnton's second strategy is to suggest that I misrepresent his portrayal of Charmet in his 2014 article. Darnton complains:

In 2014, I published a monograph on Charmet with statistics about his orders for all varieties of books, not just illegal works In it, I described him [Charmet] as conservative and cautious, nothing remotely like the “notorious” specialist in the underground book trade conjured up by Burrows in his account of my research.⁷

This allegation is demonstrably incorrect. In fact, pages 36-38 of “Charmet and the Book Police” both document and endorse Darnton's shifts of emphasis between his 1996 study of Charmet's commerce in illegal works and his 2014 article, which explores Charmet's trade more generally. I also assess there the extent of Charmet's “exposure” to the illegal book trade by comparing figures drawn from FBTEE to the statistics then freshly available at robertdarnton.org. I observe there that Darnton's essay “Charmet” “serves as something of a corrective to his earlier work” (p.36) and having examined both sets of evidence conclude that

⁵ For the published database see Burrows and Curran, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe Database*.

⁶ Robert Darnton, “Charmet” at Robert Darnton, “A Literary Tour de France”, <http://robertdarnton.org/literarytour/booksellers/charmet> (accessed 17 July 2017), paragraph 10. This essay is unpaginated.

⁷ Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 5.

“the FBTEE data implies that the Charmets’ trade in illegal works, particularly scandalous *libelles*, was less important to their business than hitherto believed.” It therefore “reinforces Darnton’s portrayal of the couple as cautious traders” (p.38). Thus the allegation of misrepresentation is entirely unfounded. In fact, I both accurately represent and endorse Darnton’s views in language similar to his own. Nor did I describe Charmet as “notorious”, save in the context of his historical reputation hitherto, which was based on Darnton’s 1996 case study. Close inspection of the evidence given there shows that Charmet *l’ainé*’s trade in the STN’s illegal books was not only more extensive both chronologically and by volume than that of any other dealer featured in Darnton’s case studies,⁸ but he also conspired with corrupt state officials to assist the STN’s clandestine trade.⁹ To describe someone known primarily for extensive and persistent involvement in illegal activities as “notorious” is an entirely appropriate use of English. The description was not in the least “misplaced”.¹⁰

Thirdly, Darnton attempts to exploit my replication of his own mistake. I find this breath-takingly disingenuous, not least because Darnton confesses that he cannot explain how he came to misidentify Charmet *l’ainé* as Jean-Félix. This is an important admission, so let us give it in his own words:

Unfortunately, Burrows made a fundamental mistake in his research, and I am partly responsible for it. When I first studied Charmet’s dossier in the STN archives, sometime in the 1960s, I entered his name on my index cards as Jean-Félix. Why I made this mistake, I cannot recall, but I should have known better, because no first name appears on the outside of the dossier or on the signatures of the letters.¹¹

This statement begs many questions. Why does he not know how he made his original mistake? Why is my “fundamental error” implied to be worse than his foundational “mistake”? And how, across a period of fifty years, did he manage to study repeatedly and finally publish a dossier of 179 letters from two different brothers (neither of whom gave their Christian names), yet never spot that the evidence for their identities was ambiguous? When did he first notice that there were no signatures and why did he omit to explain these ambiguities and the evidence behind his identification of Charmet *l’ainé* in a footnote? This is standard academic practice where there is grounds for doubt.¹² These questions relate to basic academic protocols and have practical implications. Because Darnton failed to alert other historians to problems with the evidence, I had every justification for accepting his identification of Charmet *l’ainé*.

Nor does Darnton disclose whose vigilance first alerted scholars to the absence of signatures, thereby raising doubts about Charmet *l’ainé*’s identity and precipitating the discovery of his error. That accolade belongs to me. The twenty-sixth footnote in “Charmet and the Book Police” observes that:

None of the correspondence in the Charmet dossier in the STN archive contains the correspondent’s Christian name or initials, and it generally identifies the long-term correspondent of the STN as ‘Charmet *libraire*,’ who gave his address as Rue St Pierre (where Charles-Antoine also had a shop). It also identifies him as Charmet *l’ainé*.¹³

⁸ See Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 24-52.

⁹ *Ibid*, 35-36 and “Charmet”.

¹⁰ See Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 5.

¹² Charmet is discussed in Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 32-39 with notes at 396-98, n. 13-37.

¹³ Burrows, “Charmet and the Book Police,” 40, n. 26.

It was only upon reading my work that Darnton finally realized that, over the course of fifty years and multiple publications, he might have been mistaken about Charmet *l'aîné*'s identity. Only then did he ask a friend to research the Charmet brothers' dates of baptism in the Besançon archives.¹⁴ Darnton does not mention my role in the discovery of Charmet *l'aîné*'s true identity in "Diffusion and Confusion", but in an e-mail dated 8 December 2016 (A.E.S.T.), he states candidly that it was my article that prompted him to revisit his evidence. I thank Darnton for granting permission for me to cite this e-mail to set the record straight. At his request, the e-mail is reproduced in full in my appendix.

In retrospect, both Darnton and I overlooked a give-away clue in the Charmets' STN dossier that Charmet *l'aîné* was indeed Charles-Antoine. For when Charmet *l'aîné* styled himself *libraire* (bookseller), he was not merely describing a trade, he was also indicating his legal status. He was licensed to sell but not to print books. In contrast, most printers were legally entitled to do both, and so frequently described themselves as *imprimeur-libraires* [printer-booksellers]: they would never stoop to describe themselves as *libraires*. Unfortunately, I only came to appreciate this in 2015 and 2016, when I set about identifying hundreds of printers and booksellers for FBTEE's new database resources. When I wrote my essay on Charmet, it still seemed plausible to me that an *imprimeur-libraire* might sometimes refer to himself as a book-seller. Nor did I yet have any reason to question this assumption. Darnton had positively and unambiguously identified Charmet *l'aîné* as Jean-Félix Charmet, and that implied either that he had solid evidence that Jean-Félix was the elder brother and/or that Charmet *l'aîné* was a printer. Alternatively, perhaps, he had had a secondary authority in which he placed too much faith? I now believe this last to be true.

For there is one source that implies Charmet *l'aîné* was an "*imprimeur*", and it was the first that Darnton would have encountered as he began researching the STN's clients in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel (BPUN). It is the index card relating to "Charmet"—or more accurately the various Charmet family businesses—in the BPUN's card index of STN correspondents. When Darnton cross-referenced this information with other sources such as the 1764 survey of the book trade and 1781 *Almanach de la librairie* (both of which he cites), he would have found Jean-Félix listed as the printer of the family. Hence the mistake. Apparent hints of a printshop in the file might have reinforced the error.¹⁵ I obtained a photo of Charmet's card while researching this article (see Fig. 2). The misleading data it contains was derived from client files by the BPUN archivists and presumably reflects the fact that Charmet *frères et soeurs* sometimes described themselves as "*imprimeurs*". I know of no other source for the error, which is replicated in the FBTEE database, since it too drew on the card index for information on STN clients.¹⁶ Clearly both Darnton and I misidentified Charmet *l'aîné* in good faith on the basis of the testimony of archival finding aids and, in my case, previous scholarship.

¹⁴ See Darnton, "Diffusion and Confusion," n. 12.

¹⁵ See, for example, a letter of Charmet's widow dated November 17, 1784, which refers to a catalogue being "sous presse" ["in press"]. Widow Charmet to STN, Besançon, November 17, 1784, at <http://robertdarnton.org/literarytour/ds/74-287-charmet-à-la-stn-17-novembre-1784-besançon> (accessed 17 July 2017).

¹⁶ The error is not found in the other archival aids, *viz* MS 1000A, Jean Jeanprêtre's manuscript finding list of clients by geographical location, nor on the archivist's annotations on the cover of Charmet's file (as reproduced on Darnton's website).

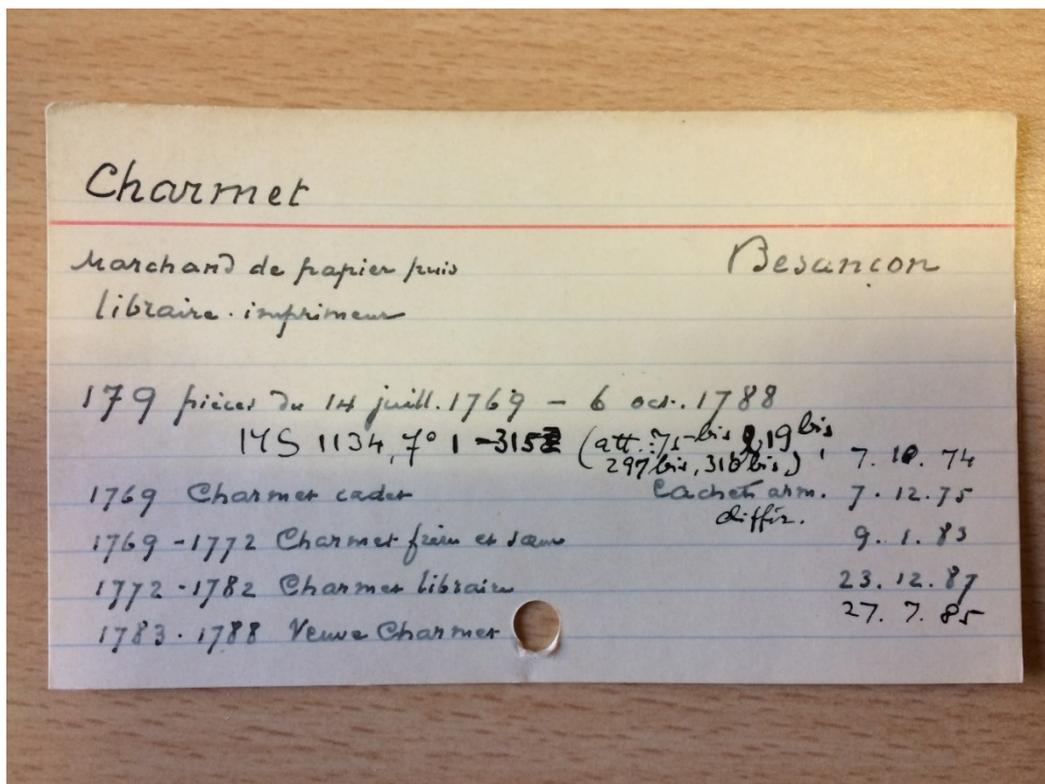


Figure 2 Martine Noirjean de Ceuninck, “Charmet’s fiche from the BPUN’s card index of the STN’s correspondents, which lists him as a printer” (DATE). © Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, Suisse.

This leaves just one final pillar in Darnton’s attempts to exploit my replication of his mistake: his suggestion that I ignored evidence that there were two separate sectors of the book trade, one comprising vendors of religious works or “usages”, the other general retailers. If I had not done so, he suggests, I would not have “confused” Jean-Félix and Charles-Antoine Charmet. Here is what he writes on this point:

In mistaking one brother for the other, Burrows showed how easy it is for the modern historian to confuse different sectors of the book market that existed in the eighteenth century. He should have noticed this danger, because the main source of his argument, the report of 1778, clearly identifies Besançon’s twelve booksellers and indicates the nature of the books that they declared to the inspectors. Religious works accounted for 100 percent of the declarations made by Jean-Félix Charmet and five other booksellers, and they accounted for 96-97 percent of the declarations made by three more. Those nine booksellers should be classified as specialists in ‘usages.’ Religious works made up 37.5 percent of the declared stock of a tenth bookseller, Etienne Métoyer, who may have carried some general works. The remaining two, Lépagnez cadet and Charles-Antoine Charmet, drew large proportions of their stock from the STN and belonged to the class of general retailers.¹⁷

¹⁷ Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 5-6.

Here again, there is an omission, and it is a crucial one: I had an authority for assuming that Jean-Félix Charmet supplied both religious and general books. That authority was Darnton himself. His website reproduces, in his briefing paper on “Besançon”, key official documents relating to the Charmet brothers.¹⁸ One of them, a 1764 survey of booksellers across France, explicitly states that Jean-Félix Charmet “had used his three presses to put out a ‘missel, graduel, antiphonaire nouveau et almanach de province’”—that is to say primarily religious works or “usages.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, Darnton originally identified Charmet *l’aîné* as Jean-Félix Charmet in an essay on the self-same website.²⁰ Thus he, too, “should have noticed” the “danger” of confusing “different sectors of the book market that existed in the eighteenth century”.²¹

Moreover, in his essay “Charmet”, Darnton did not propound anything resembling this starkly bifurcated “separate spheres” model of the book trade. Instead he argues Charmet *l’aîné*’s orders reveal the [entire] “demand for literature in a provincial capital,” without any caveats concerning different types of books or book-dealers.²² Moreover, as Darnton shows (see above quote) the 1778 survey provides in Etienne Métoyer a clear example of a bookseller who straddled both parts of the trade. On the existence of “separate spheres”, then, Darnton himself is self-contradictory and hence liable to cause “confusion”. How, then, can he insist that I should have considered it problematic that Jean-Félix Charmet participated in both religious and general trades?

Darnton’s final strategy is to trivialize my findings about religious books. His closing remarks assert that my study is “flawed” because I “picked the wrong Charmet”, and he concludes: “By confusing the two brothers, Burrows reached a conclusion that is the opposite of what the evidence indicates.”²³ Unfortunately, Darnton omits to distinguish to which conclusion he refers, nor clarify what the correct “opposite” conclusion should be (and here I confess myself genuinely confused: I have no idea what he might have intended). His silence is significant. It implies the existence of some fundamental error of historical interpretation on my part without indicating what this might be. I contend that there is none. My case study of Charmet was illustrative rather than integral to my argument. Nothing I argued about the volume of the religious book trade in Besançon is changed one iota if we correctly identify each of the Charmet brothers. For that central argument is based upon the volume of religious works shown to be in circulation across all booksellers in 1778 and for a decade thereafter. In reciting my evidence, and how many bookdealers declared religious works in the 1778 *estampillage* exercise to legalize counterfeited works, Darnton merely underlines the strength of my argument. In total, the booksellers of Besançon declared a total of 62,068 books for stamping. Some 55,253 of these were religious titles, and so approximately 87 percent of all pirated works recorded during Besançon’s *estampillage* exercise were religious.²⁴

At this point Darnton misconstrues my argument. He takes me to be suggesting crudely that there were lots of religious books circulating in eighteenth-century France. This finding, he opines, is neither novel or surprising.²⁵ I could not agree more. As I noted myself in “Charmet and the Book Police” (p. 50), historians have known this ever since the foundational work on *Livre et société* by François Furet and his collaborators, which was published in two

¹⁸ Robert Darnton, “Besançon” in Darnton, “Literary Tour” at <http://robertdarnton.org/literarytour/locations/besancon> (accessed 17 July 2017).

¹⁹ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France [BNF], Manuscrits français 22,184, fol. 60.

²⁰ Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 3.

²¹ The cited passages are taken from the quote above, Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 5-6.

²² Darnton, “Charmet”, paragraph 10.

²³ Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion”, 6.

²⁴ See Burrows, “Charmet and the Book Police,” 45-6, Table 3.

²⁵ Darnton, “Diffusion and Confusion,” 1.

volumes in 1965 and 1970. Instead, I am suggesting that by sales volume the scale of religious publishing and bookselling dwarfed all else. This is new.

For the number of copies of best-selling religious works selling in and around Besançon in the late 1770s and 1780s was truly “mind-blowing”—a phrase whose use in my article Darnton seeks to deride.²⁶ To be able to trace in sources which are far from complete, over 50,000 copies of the *Ange conducteur* circulating among the booksellers of the Franche-Comté in a single decade is truly remarkable.²⁷ With a population of less than 800,000, mostly peasants, these figures alone imply a social penetration of around one copy per sixteen people, or perhaps one household in three across the province. This in turn suggests that the *Ange conducteur* alone was owned by far more people than the one in twenty peasants who left evidence of owning religious books in their wills.²⁸ If results similar to those for Besançon can be replicated across other provincial centers, and for other leading religious titles, they represent a major challenge to the current historiography. They may call for us to rewrite simultaneously our histories of publishing, reading and popular religiosity under the late *ancien régime*. If my readers are clear and unconfused on this point, this essay will have achieved its purpose.

References

- Burrows, Simon, and Mark Curran. 2012. *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe Database, 1769-1794* at fbtee.uws.edu.au/stn/interface/.
- Burrows, Simon. 2015. “Charmet and the Book Police: Clandestinity, Illegality and Popular Reading in Late Ancien Régime France”, *French History and Civilisation: Papers from the George Rudé Seminar* 6: 32-55.
- Darnton, Robert. 1996. *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. New York.
- . 2012. “Review no. 1355.” Review of *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794*, by Simon Burrows, Mark Curran, Sarah Kattau, Vincent Hiribarren and Amyas Merivale, www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1355 (accessed on October 14, 2016)
- . 2014. “Charmet,” robertdarnton.org, <http://robertdarnton.org/literarytour/booksellers/charmet> (accessed on 26 April 2017)
- . 2015. “The Demand for Literature in France, 1769-1789, and the Launching of a Digital Archive.” *Journal of Modern History* 87: 509–31.
- Furet, François, et al, eds. 1965-70. *Livre et Société dans la France du XVIII^e Siècle*, 2 vols. Paris.
- Vernus, Michel. 1989. “A Provincial Perspective”. In *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800*, edited by Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, 124-38. Berkeley, Los Angeles.

²⁶ Ibid, 4.

²⁷ See Burrows, “Charmet and the Book Police,” 46-50.

²⁸ See Vernus, “A Provincial Perspective,” 125, 127.

Appendix

*E-mail of Robert Darnton to the author of this article, dated 8 December 2016 (A.E.S.T.) and copied to the editor of this journal.*²⁹

Dear Simon

After receiving the text of “Charmet and the Book Police,” which you kindly sent to me, I went back over the documents and found that you had the wrong Charmet. The fault was partly mine, because I had originally referred to him as Jean-Felix, whereas in fact the STN's correspondent was the older brother, Charles-Antoine or “Charmet l’aine.” A close reading of the documents, including those you cite, makes the mistake clear. Therefore, I wrote a reply to your article, which took forever to be reviewed by French History and Civilization: Papers from the George Rude Seminar. They now plan to publish a much shortened version of it and to give you room to reply.

I don't believe we disagree about the widespread nature of religious works, almanacs, and ephemera, the main fare of printers such as Jean-Felix who concentrated on local markets. But I think you have been unfair in presenting my early work as an interpretation of the book trade in general. In *The Forbidden Best-Sellers* and other publications, I tried to demonstrate what the forbidden works were and to measure the demand for them within the corpus of highly illegal literature. I did not calculate their importance relative to that of books in general, and I did not present Charmet as a “notorious” specialist in forbidden books. On the contrary, I always considered him to be cautious and moderate, as you can clearly see from his letters, which I published on my website: robertdarnton.org.

This disagreement aside, I hope you are prospering in your ventures into the digital humanities.

Cordial wishes

Bob

Robert Darnton

Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and University Librarian, Emeritus

²⁹ Author's note: I wish to thank Professor Darnton for granting permission to cite this e-mail, on condition that it is reproduced in full. I am happy to comply with his request.