

Diffusion and Confusion in the Study of Enlightenment

Robert Darnton

Simon Burrows examined some archives related to the trade of Jean-Félix Charmet, a bookseller in Besançon, and reached conclusions that, in his view, “have the power to shock” and indeed to force us “to rethink our understanding of the book trade of the later enlightenment.”¹ Instead of Enlightenment, he sees a world saturated with religious literature, and to carry his argument he contests my interpretation of Charmet’s trade.

I find nothing shocking about the assertion that liturgical works and devotional tracts were printed in large numbers and circulated widely among readers, especially in the lower strata of French society. That view has long been held by social and cultural historians. The omnipresence of religious works is stressed in standard studies of religious history and in histories of the book.² Just what constitutes “popular” literature is a matter of dispute,³ but experts on chapbooks have always emphasized the importance of devotional tracts.⁴ Although some contained a hundred or more pages, most were cheap pamphlets consisting of one or two sheets and printed in huge

Robert Darnton studied at Harvard University (BA, 1960) and Oxford University (B.Phil., 1962, D.Phil, 1964). After teaching history as a professor at Princeton University from 1968 to 2007, he became Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and University Librarian at Harvard (2007-2015), and he now is an emeritus professor of Harvard. His latest book is *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (New York, 2015).

¹ Burrows, “Charmet and the Book Police,” 34-55.

² See for example Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme*, 83-86; McManners, *Church and Society*, 1:346-348 and 2:40-77 and 194-199; Chartier and Martin, *Histoire de l'édition française*, 2:95-103, 405-408, 439-443, and 468-497; Goubert and Roche, *Les Français et l'Ancien Régime*, 2:233-244; Furet, *Livre et société*; and the more recent work by Martin, *Une religion de livres*.

³ See Chartier, *Lectures et lecteurs*, 7-19. For my part, I agree with Chartier’s view that one cannot distinguish an autonomous popular culture under the Ancien Régime and that chapbooks do not express it: see “The Social History of Ideas,” in *The Kiss of Lamourette*, 238-245.

⁴ This emphasis goes back to the early study of Nisard, *Histoire des livres populaires*; see especially the chapters “Religion et morale” and “Cantiques spirituels” in vol. 2. More recent studies confirm the central place of religious works in the enormous body of chapbooks known as the “bibliothèque bleue”: Mandrou, *De la culture populaire*; Bollème, *La Bible bleue*; and Andriès, *La Bibliothèque bleue*

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

Chapbooks were hawked by peddlers who covered large regions, but most of the liturgical and devotional works were sold by small printers and booksellers whose trade was confined to local markets.⁷ Works of the Enlightenment and other varieties of current literature belonged to another sector of the trade. They were produced by publishers in urban centers, many of them located across France’s border, where censorship could be avoided and bestsellers pirated with relative impunity; and they circulated through the main arteries of the trade to wholesalers and retailers everywhere in France. The smaller dealers in the capillary system tended to satisfy the demand for traditional religious literature, while the main-line booksellers concentrated on general works that were marketed on a national and even an international scale.⁸

The distinction between the local markets for liturgical and devotional works and the general market for contemporary literature characterized the book trade in Besançon. In the survey of all the printers and booksellers in France that was conducted by the Crown in 1764, the report on Besançon identified eleven booksellers, including two who were also printers. Most of them had a very limited trade: “Des onze qui y sont établis, on en peut compter deux ou trois, au plus, de connaisseurs en librairie. Le commerce de livres n’y étant pas considérable, les facultés des libraires sont modiques.”⁹ But the few who knew their way around the “librairie” or general book trade posed a danger, because they dealt heavily in pirated and forbidden books, which they procured from foreign suppliers:

⁵ Andriès, *La Bibliothèque bleue*, 19-20.

⁶ Sordet, *Un succès de librairie européenne*. Sordet estimates that 2.4 million copies of Pierre Corneille’s translation, first published in 1656, had been produced by 1800.

⁷ Mellot, “Rouen et les ‘librairie forains,’” 503-538.

⁸ Of course, this distinction was not absolute, because different varieties of literature seeped into many branches of the book trade. Yet it was widely recognized by the professionals in the book business. For example, in a letter to the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) of September 4, 1776, its traveling sales rep, Jean-François Favarger, noted that the bookseller Besson in Bourg-en-Bresse “...ne fait que des usages [that is, religious works] qu’il imprime lui-même; lui offrant un catalogue, il m’a dit qu’il ne faisait rien en livres de littérature.” Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, papers of the STN, ms. 1150. In a five-month trip around France in 1778, Favarger assessed the trade of dozens of printers and booksellers, and he consistently distinguished between those who dealt only in “usages” for the local market and those who sold general works, “articles de librairie” and “livres de littérature” of the kind provided by the STN on a national and international scale. I have made Favarger’s correspondence and diary available on my website, robertdarnton.org, along with a great many other documents, including 179 letters by Charles-Antoine Charmet and his wife.

⁹ Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Fr. 22184, fol. 60.

La facilité que les libraires de cette ville ont de tirer la plus grande partie de leurs livres de l'étranger multiplie les moyens d'en vendre de pernicieux, de débiter des contrefaçons, ce qui fait un tort considérable aux imprimeurs de Besançon et notamment à ceux de Paris qui ont des privilèges.¹⁰

As in most French cities, a few booksellers participated in the general market for books, and the rest confined their business to the local trade.

In listing Besançon's booksellers, the report of 1764 mentioned a certain "Charmet" who had recently gone bankrupt. It provided more detail in its list of printers, which included another Charmet: "Jean-Félix Charmet, natif de Besançon, âgé de 25 ans, exerce en vertu d'arrêt du Conseil du 15 février 1762. Cet imprimeur est frère du libraire de ce nom qui vient de faire faillite."¹¹ In discussing what Jean-Félix printed, it gave him a clean bill of health. He had used his three presses to put out a "missel, graduel, antiphonaire nouveau et almanach de province"—that is, primarily religious works or "usages."¹²

The two brothers also appear in the *Almanach de la librairie* of 1781: Jean-Félix Charmet as a printer-bookseller and his brother, now given a first name, Charles-Antoine Charmet, as a bookseller.¹³ Several Charmets existed among the book professionals of Besançon. The first letters from them to the STN were signed as "Charmet frères et soeurs." A few bore the signature "Charmet cadet," but in 1773 it was replaced by "Charmet l'aîné," who by then had taken over the trade with the STN, operating a book shop from "rue Saint Pierre près la place." In later letters he signed as "Charmet libraire" or simply as "Charmet." The inconsistencies in the signatures raise the possibility of confusion. Which of the brothers operated as a printer, confining his trade to the local market, and which ordered supplies from the STN, selling all varieties of current literature?

In asserting that religious books dominated the market in Besançon and everywhere else in France, Simon Burrows based his argument on documents about the implementation of the edicts of August 30, 1777, which reorganized the book trade in a manner intended to eliminate the commerce in pirated editions.¹⁴ Because the provincial booksellers relied so heavily on pirated works supplied by publishers like the STN, they could suffer catastrophic losses if a large portion of their stock were confiscated by the state. The edicts gave them a reprieve from this fate by permitting them to sell off their pirated books (*contrefaçons*) according to a certain procedure. Officials were to inspect their stock and stamp all *contrefaçons*, which could then circulate legally while the sale of any further pirated works would be severely punished. In order to assess the trade in Besançon, Burrows consulted the inspections of the bookshops carried out there in 1778.¹⁵ He found that Charmet's stock included a "mind-blowing" number of a common devotional tract, *L'Ange conducteur dans la dévotion chrétienne* and so many similar publications that only one conclusion was possible: "Jean-Félix Charmet, a bookseller previously notorious as a dealer in scandalous literature, was in fact a major pusher of religious works."¹⁶

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Perrin, *Almanach*, 42.

¹⁴ The text of the edicts was known throughout the book trade from the version of it printed in *Almanach*, 151-189.

¹⁵ The documentation is in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 21,834.

¹⁶ Burrows, "Charmet and the Book Police: Clandestinity, Illegality and Popular Reading in Late Ancien Régime France."

According to Burrows, Charmet owed this misplaced notoriety to me. My research had miscast him as a specialist in forbidden books, and it should be taken as a warning to other historians, who suffer from the illusion that the works of the *philosophes* and most other kinds of literature, including novels and travel books, reached a large reading public. Such literature, according to Burrows, was “dwarfed” by traditional religious works.¹⁷ The Enlightenment, as he presents it, looks trivial.

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

Burrows’ own study is flawed by the fact that he picked the wrong Charmet. My man, Charmet l’aîné, was Charles-Antoine, born on December 18, 1735. His younger brother, born on June 20, 1740, was Jean-Félix, the printer-bookseller clearly identified with his first name in the survey of 1764.¹⁸ The survey showed that while Charles-Antoine had gone bankrupt as a bookseller, Jean-Félix restricted his trade to religious works. The report on the inspection of his shop in 1778 confirms the view that he concentrated heavily on devotional tracts. By that time, Charles-Antoine had developed a successful trade in the general run of current literature, drawing much of his stock from the STN.

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% of the declarations made by three more. Those nine booksellers should be classified as specialists in “usages.” Religious works made up 37.5% 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

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Archives municipales de Besançon GG189f.28 and GG194f.11. Their father was Jean-Baptiste Charmet, identified as a “marchand libraire.” I am grateful to Hervé Le Corre of Besançon for furnishing me with this information.

Charmet, drew large proportions of their stock from the STN and belonged to the class of general retailers. Of the works declared by Lépagnez, only 5% were religious. Of those declared by Charles-Antoine Charmet, none were religious. By confusing the two brothers, Burrows reached a conclusion that is the opposite of what the evidence indicates.

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