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Chad Denton, *Decadence, Radicalism, and the Early Modern French Nobility: The Enlightened and Depraved* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2017). xviii + 161 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4985-3726-1; \$76.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4985-3626-8.

Review by Brian Sandberg, Northern Illinois University.

Edmund Burke condemned French nobles for having “countenanced too much that licentious philosophy which has helped to bring on their ruin” (p. ix).<sup>[1]</sup> The conservative British author believed that the French nobility had “degenerated” since the reign of Henri IV, contributing to the onset of the French Revolution. Although most patriots in the French Revolution (1789-1794) would have disagreed strongly with Burke’s political views, they probably would have agreed with his narrative of the decline of the nobility. Despite the participation of some nobles in National Assembly, French revolutionary political culture quickly became virulently anti-aristocratic.

*Decadence, Radicalism, and the Early Modern French Nobility: The Enlightened and Depraved* cites Burke in the opening passage of the book’s introduction, aiming at “making the very stereotype of French noble ‘decadence’...the object of historical analysis” (p. xvii). Chad Denton finds that court nobles gradually came to be regarded as *libertins*, exploring radical ideas and flaunting moral norms—and ultimately embodying *libertinage*. His central argument is that “high noblemen in early modern France, in response to circumstances prevailing in that time and place, adopted libertinage, an open defiance that sought to ensure their freedom not to overturn existing social and moral structures, but as a means to justify their privilege as an order and to assert their defiance of behavioral norms promoted by the Church and the monarchy” (p. xi).

Well-known novels from the Enlightenment such as Voltaire’s *Candide*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile*, and the marquis de Sade’s *Philosophie dans le boudoir* all make appearances in this study, as do scandalous and erotic texts such as *Anecdotes sur la Madame du Barry* and *Thérèse Philosophe*. The book includes famous paintings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, François Boucher, and Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun. Denton employs journals and printed correspondence collections, as well as famous memoirs by Élisabeth-Charlotte von der Pfalz, duchesse d’Orléans—who was known as “Liselotte”—and Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon. The author tends to exploit these sources for anecdotes and court gossip, rather than setting these complicated and politically-charged texts into a broader context. Denton explains: “even in cases where the word *libertin* is not actually invoked, anecdotes about Versailles do frequently assume the existence of elite individuals well-known for both their ‘debauchery’ and religious skepticism” (p. 32). The book relies heavily on classic historiography on French nobles, print culture, and the Enlightenment

by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Robert Darnton, and Peter Gay. The book employs details from more recent historical works by Jonathan Dewald, Jay M. Smith, Jeffrey Merrick, Lynn Hunt, Suzanne Desan, and Didier Foucault, but fails to address their arguments or engage with their interpretations.

Denton concentrates particularly on court nobles because, he claims, “it was among the *haute noblesse* that libertinism was fostered” (p. xii). His vision of the royal court and the *grands* is fundamentally shaped by Norbert Elias’s portrayal of court society as central to a “civilizing process.”[2] The book emphasizes the splendor of the late seventeenth-century royal court at the château de Versailles, arguing that “the increased focus on refinement did serve Louis XIV’s purposes in ‘taming’ the nobility by helping to redefine the nobility’s relationship to the monarchy in terms of service to the State and competition for offices and positions through demonstrations of merit and etiquette” (p. 2). The author’s unproblematic use of polemical contemporary sources such as Saint-Simon and an outdated absolutist historiographical framework reinforces this impression of the royal court and the nobility.[3]

Despite this focus on court nobles, the book blurs distinctions between royal family members, the *grands*, and (occasionally) the provincial nobles. In the introduction, Denton examines an anti-aristocratic print of *L’hydre aristocratique* (1789), depicting a many-headed monster attacking French patriots. The author then compares the famous image with *Monsieur Le Chat* (p. 179), a satirical print mocking the comte de Provence, who was Louis XVI’s brother. As a prominent member of the royal family, he shared in the Bourbon lineage’s elevated status and royal majesty, rather than being associated with aristocracy. The author similarly employs a print entitled *L’homme du peuple, l’homme de la cour* (1791), which portrays Antoine Barnave as a two-faced hypocrite. Yet, Barnave was a Protestant lawyer from a provincial jurist’s family who could not easily be portrayed as an aristocrat, but he did face heavy criticism for his close political association with Louis XVI following the flight to Varennes.[4] The juxtaposition of such disparate examples weakens the analysis of anti-aristocratic sentiment. This confusion of royal princes and court nobility unfortunately persists throughout the book.

Despite the stated aim to find the roots of anti-aristocratic stereotypes, the book employs problematic interpretations of early modern nobles. The book presents noble education as key to noble refinement, but spends several pages reporting Daniel Mornet’s 1910 findings on noble libraries rather than employing more recent historical research on early modern noble culture, book collecting, and reading practices.[4] Denton embraces Davis Bitton’s notion of a “crisis of nobility,” using it to construct a narrative of decline throughout the book.[5] Following Ellery Schalk, Denton argues that “the nobility’s self-definition as a warrior caste was assaulted on one last front, the decline of violence and autonomous military power among noblemen” (p. 5).[6] Yet Stuart Carroll and Hervé Drévilion have demonstrated powerfully that nobles remained involved in personal violence through feuding and dueling.[7] My own work has shown that noble culture remained deeply connected to organized armed violence through military practices and the culture of command.[8]

The analysis vacillates between constructing a history of the concept of *libertinage* and offering a history of actual *libertins* and libertine practices. Louis II de Bourbon, prince de Condé, is presented as a living, breathing *libertin*. The book argues that a new generation of court nobles embraced *libertinage* during the regency of Philippe II d’Orléans, resisting authority and “reclaiming their privilege in the face of royal absolutism and *dévo*t meddling” (p. 19). According

to Denton, “libertine literature, a tradition that culminated in Sade, had made the ties between classical and modern knowledge and sexually liberated behavior blatant by depicting narrators and protagonists who justified their behavior through philosophical discourse” (p. 47).

The book argues that *libertins* resisted French Catholicism’s insistence on pious devotion and strict morality in the seventeenth century by embracing religious skepticism and flirting with atheism. This analysis relies on a problematic depiction of the Catholic Reformation in France and a caricature of the *dévo*t movement. Denton follows Philip F. Riley in assuming that Louis XIV was the first king to pursue a Catholic Reformation policy. After a lengthy discussion of Madame de Maintenon and her alleged social control, a short passage jaunts through the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Jansenist movement, and the Unigenitus controversy. The book posits an alleged decline in religiosity in the eighteenth century, focusing on the writings of baron d’Holbach and Voltaire.

Denton considers women, gender, and masculinity at the royal court. The book presents noblewomen as wielding great influence as *salonières*, who could also shape notions of masculinity. Denton argues: “More than the erosion of the acceptance of women in positions of courtly influence, however, the late eighteenth century oversaw an attack on the foundations of the libertine nobility, including the entire culture of noble service that had been established at Versailles” (p. 106). Surprisingly, Lewis C. Seifert’s study of masculinity and literature in early modern France is not employed.[9]

The history of sexuality structures the book’s portrayal of *libertinage* as sexual freedom, equating *libertinage* with any sexual improprieties or immoral behaviors. The book provides a brief history of early modern erotica, encapsulating familiar works by James Turner, James R. Sturges, Joan de Jean, and Robert Darnton. A chapter on adultery considers married couples and extramarital sex, but only briefly considers extended separations. Denton does note that “within and outside the nobility, the use of *lettres de cachet* to regulate libertinage was fairly extensive” (p. 35). Much of the chapter on adultery is devoted to cursory survey of royal mistresses, especially those of Louis XIV and Louis XV. The author declares that “Louis XV’s sexual behavior played a role in eroding the monarchy’s prestige” (p. 102), as if this was a particularly new discovery. Instead, a strong scholarly consensus has maintained that Louis XV’s mistresses contributed to the desacralization of the monarchy in the 1760s and 1770s. The book could have benefitted from addressing important recent studies of sexuality in early modern France.[10]

The concept of *libertinage* became especially associated with homosexual relations and allegedly unnatural sex acts. The book employs the term sodomy confusingly, at times using it in the early modern sense of ostensibly unnatural and non-procreative sexual activity that was immoral and illegal, but at other points using it to refer to homosexual activity or specifically to anal sex. The author focuses on Enlightenment *philosophes* and “the secularization of the language surrounding sodomy” (p. 67). Alleged orgies scandalized the royal court in 1682 and 1722, yet Denton portrays these as activities by young noblemen who had “rationalized some resistance against moral norms” (p. 74).

There are unfortunate errors of French language and misspellings of *grands seigneurs* (p. xiii), the Salpêtrière hospital (p. 33), and *salonières* (p. 88). The book suffers from frequent misspellings of names: the famous author of *Les liaisons dangereuses* is cited throughout the book as “Choderlos de Lacos,” instead of Choderlos de Laclos; the court artist known for her portraits of Marie

Antoinette is referred to as “Elisabeth Vigée-Librun,” rather than Vigée-Le Brun; the historian of Louis XIV’s France is misspelled as “William Biek”; and the gender historian Carolyn Lougee is cited as “Lugee.”

The analysis of political culture and print culture could have been expanded by bringing in recent research on political pamphlets and polemical texts.[11] The regencies of Marie de’ Medici, Anne d’Autriche, and Philippe II, duc d’Orléans, fueled the publication political pamphlets and prints that often included sexually-charged satire.[12] Satirical pamphlets such as the *Mazarinades* published during the Fronde Civil War often condemned political and military enemies as sodomites.[13] Recent studies of pre-revolutionary *causes célèbres*, *libelles*, and anti-revolutionary polemics could have enhanced the analysis of political culture and attacks on Marie Antoinette [14]

Odd anachronisms suggest the author’s underlying interest in presenting *libertinage* as social rebellion. Denton observes that “libertine resistance was not directed toward the reform of any system, which may be the expectation of individuals operating from ‘radical knowledge’ today, but rather a perpetual skeptical rejection” (p. 19). His example of such libertine resistance is drawn from Giacomo Casanova’s memoirs in order to associate *libertinage* with “elite *chic*” (pp. 19-20). Elsewhere, Denton exclaims: “While there had to have been those who treated books as mere objects to be acquired, there are testimonies toward the influence of cutting-edge intellectual writings on young noblemen that bring to mind the influence of rock stars and young radicals over an entire generation in the 1960s United States” (p. 13).

The book’s narrative arc traces the roots of the anti-aristocratic sentiment that became so pronounced during the maelstrom of the French Revolution. The analysis assumes that nobles declined during the French Revolution. “Nobility would return to France alongside monarchy under Napoleon, but it would be a transformed and diminished institution,” Denton argues (p. 139). The book does not consider Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous thesis on social and political continuities through the French Revolution and the persistence of the nobility into the nineteenth century. Denton claims that *libertinage* survived the revolutionary period: “Breaking loose from its association with a caste that had been stripped of its power and significance by the forces set loose by the French Revolution, libertinism had suddenly moved from a nobility of class to a nobility of the mind” (p. 141). The figure of the marquis de Sade appears throughout the book and, by the end of the book, is confirmed as quintessential French noble *libertin*. The book unfortunately does not effectively synthesize the historical and literary work on *libertinage*, nor does it contribute new evidence or arguments to the field.

## NOTES

[1] Edmund Burke, quoted from, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Connor Cruise O’Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 242-245.

[2] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[3] François Bluche, *La vie quotidienne de la noblesse française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1973).

- [4] Timoth Tackett, *When the King took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- [5] Daniel Mornet, "Les Enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750-1780)," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 13/3 (1910): pp. 449-496.
- [6] Davis Bitton, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560-1640* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969).
- [7] Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- [8] Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Pascal Brioiist, Hervé Drévilion, and Pierre Serna, *Croiser le fer. Violence et culture de l'épée dans la France moderne (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2002).
- [9] Brian Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits: Noble Culture and Civil Conflict in Early Modern France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
- [10] Lewis Carl Seifert, *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).
- [11] Katherine Crawford, *The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Nina Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges: The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).
- [12] Jeffrey K. Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- [13] Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- [14] Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des Mots* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1985).
- [15] Sarah C. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Fontana Press, 1996); Lynn Hunt, *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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