
H-France Review Vol. 18 (September 2018), No. 196

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.

Response by Chad Denton, Independent Scholar.

First, I want to thank the editors at H-France for giving me an opportunity to respond to criticisms for my book and providing a space for this discussion.

Given the engaging conversations I have seen during my years of being a subscriber to H-France, I was apprehensive, but also eager to see the response to my book. This was especially because the book is not just an academic publication, but a revised draft of my PhD dissertation upon which I spent many years under the guidance of Linda Reeder, Ilyana Karthas, Ted Koditschek, and other faculty members at the University of Missouri. Unfortunately, I was very disappointed by Brian Sandberg's review. This is not simply because Sandberg's reception of my book was very much negative, but because I do not see how I can respond to Sandberg's piece without writing something that is less of a beneficial dialogue and more of a straightforward rebuttal.

This is not to say that I contest all of Sandberg's critiques. I do not discuss the Mazarinades and other sources on *libertinage* because I limited myself to a chronology with the exception of the first chapter, where I provide context for the history of the French nobility. However, I will gladly concede that the book could have used more discussion of the Regency, which is too often overlooked. I also claim responsibility for all the errors that made it to print. Still, while such errors may be "unfortunate," they should also be forgivable. Finally, I do admit that I perhaps play up anti-aristocratic discourse and its origins too strongly in the introduction, to a point that it does give a mistaken impression of what my thesis entails or what my emphases will be throughout the text.

That said, I do find it bewildering that Sandberg claims that my book is little more than a catalogue of courtly scandals, and that I fail to "engage" with the arguments of the authors I cite. A cornerstone of my analysis is built on the distinction between eighteenth-century libertinism and its earlier manifestations, as argued by Didier Foucault and Thomas M. Kavanagh (pp. 19-20, 48-49). Likewise, I discuss why, in my analysis of libertinism, I accept Nicholas Davidson's ideas on continuities in early modern atheism over the views of Lucien Febvre and Alan Charles Kors (p. 43) and I incorporate the views of Lynn Hunt, Gary Kates, Anna Clark, and others when examining Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI, and the Chevalier d'Eon in the context of a gender counterrevolution in the late eighteenth century (pp. 111-129). While Sandberg charges that

primary sources were used in “unproblematic” ways, I do take time to at least touch on the biases and biographical contexts of such observers as Henriette de La Tour du Pin (p. 45), the Duc de Richelieu (pp. 71-72), Anne-Marie-Louise d’Orléans (pp. 88), and, yes, Saint-Simon (p. 8).

The sources I do draw upon heavily, Sandberg argues, represent a “classic historiography” and bolster “an outdated absolutist historiographical framework.” While I would agree that Darnton’s work is classic, the book of his upon which I depended most was *The Devil in The Holy Water, Or The Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon*, which was published as recently as 2010. It appears that Sandberg’s objection over my alleged adherence to a “classic historiography” is not so much about how I utilized my sources, but *which* sources I drew on.

Further, while it is true that the works of numerous authors from decades ago are central to my arguments, Sandberg does not mention how I tie their research to the works of more recent authors or to original research. For example, Sandberg objects to my using Daniel Mornet’s 1910 essay “rather than employing more recent historical research on early modern noble culture, book collecting, and reading practices.” However, I find it unclear exactly why Mornet’s observations, such as the valuable point that books in inventories may have been ornamental objects for their owners instead of read texts, are obsolete and unreliable. Nor does Sandberg mention the original research I conducted with library inventories found in the Bibliothèque Nationale, with which I supplement Mornet’s findings. In fact, there is no acknowledgment of the archival research undertaken, giving readers of Sandberg’s review a very mistaken impression of the amount of research that went into this monograph’s production.

Overall, the impression Sandberg seeks to give is that my book is simply outmoded, dependent on a historiographical framework long discarded. While it is true I did consult older generations of scholarship, it was never outside the light of newer interpretations and primary texts. As for the myth of absolutism, it is that exact narrative that I address when I write that “noblemen continued to exercise influence through the ministries; military, administrative, and financial offices; and, outside government, the Enlightenment.” My actual claim is that “[n]onetheless, there was a strong contemporaneous opinion that France’s premier noblemen had sacrificed themselves on the altar of absolute monarchy” (p. 16). My argument is not so much about the actual decline of the nobility as a political force, something I believe would be difficult, if not impossible to adequately quantify in the context of the economic and social shifts in early modern France, but about the *perception* of decline, which undoubtedly culminated by the late eighteenth century in a debate over the utility of the nobility.

Given his own area of interest, Sandberg understandably takes issue with my very brief discussion of dueling and the decline of violence in early modern Europe and the nobles as a military caste. He argues that I should have engaged with Stuart Carroll’s view that, under Louis XIV, there was a “privatization” of noble violence. However, contra Sandberg’s claim, I do not see Carroll’s argument as being at odds with any of my own claims, particularly Carroll’s statement that “noble violence was too deeply embedded in the social relations and world view of French nobles to be repressed entirely...vindictive responses had to be more carefully weighed, and became more discreet and contrite.” [1] Similarly, Sandberg seems to think I take issue with the latest work on noble violence, when I at least agree that the Bourbon monarchy attempted “a conscious revival [of the military vocation of the nobility] in the eighteenth century” (p. 5). Ultimately though, the aristocratic duel is a small part of my argument, just one of multiple examples I use to discuss shifts in the perceived role of nobility in early modern France.

Sandberg also finds a major flaw in how I define the categories of nobility. Sandberg wrongly asserts that I only “occasionally” differentiate the provincial nobility from the court nobility. I may not discuss the differences between the provincial and court and Parisian nobilities at great length, but these distinctions are, in fact, an important pivot in my arguments, especially with regard to intellectual trends among the nobility. Also, I am not sure how not distinguishing more between members of the royal family and the *haute noblesse* detracts from my arguments in any way. In fact, I have yet to come across either a modern or contemporaneous description of the noble hierarchy of *ancien régime* France that does not treat *filz de France* as a noble rank, albeit one that is above the *princes du sang*.

Some of Sandberg’s criticisms seem out of step with certain realities and ongoing discussions in modern academic publishing. For example, I offer a description of how young nobles became enamored with the celebrity writers of the Enlightenment: “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). Frankly, I do not see an issue with an admittedly glib (but, I still feel, wholly legitimate) comparison with a modern phenomenon. When, in the context of writing about permissive attitudes toward adultery, I mention how Louis XV’s own penchant for adultery eroded the prestige of the monarchy. Sandberg responded, “as if this is a particularly new discovery.” First, this was not a conclusion, but a facet of a broader discussion about changing attitudes to elite adultery in the eighteenth century. More importantly, I was writing to a broader audience than just my colleagues, including undergraduate students and even a wider public. It is especially unfortunate to be criticized for indulging in a brief comparison and for not assuming more knowledge from readers at a time of sober discussion about the gulf between the professional humanities and social sciences and the general public. Given that chapters of my book have already wound up on the syllabi of several undergraduate courses, it appears I was right not to assume the reader’s familiarity with the latest arguments about the relationship between early modern sexuality and political legitimacy.

While there are several more misrepresentations in Sandberg’s review, I only want to engage with the more egregious ones. Unlike what the review suggests, I do, in fact, discuss at length in an endnote the definition of sodomy and why I employ the term as I do, with reference to Katherine Crawford’s invaluable essay, “Privilege, Possibility, and Perversion: Rethinking the Study of Early Modern Sexuality.”[2] I am further puzzled why Sandberg finds the three examples of anti-aristocratic prints I use in my introduction to be “disparate.” In addition, while Sandberg wants to debate whether or not the Comte de Provence was a proper noble or not, he missed the point I make about the image of a parasitic and debauched aristocracy that was well-established by the earliest months of the Revolution. As for Antoine Barnave, the point I am making is not dependent his status as a noble (although his mother was, in fact, of the nobility, so nobility was a significant aspect of his background). Rather, it is that the reactions to his association with the court and aristocratic courtiers demonstrate how, in revolutionary discourse, the nobility had “become an outside element in the body politic” (p. x). Lastly, I feel that Sandberg mischaracterizes my description of a perceived decline in religiosity among the nobility. Again, he hints that this facet of my work is an example of uncritical scholarship. However, aside from citing material evidence accumulated by Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun and Philippe Loupès, I explicitly state that it is unclear if this evidence signifies an actual decline of religiosity or a diminishing of social pressures pushing individuals toward public displays of piety (pp. 43-44).

Of course, I admit the book has its flaws. Like any author, there are elements that, in hindsight, I would have written or done differently. While I had as much professional support from faculty and my graduate colleagues as I could ask for, since it began as a dissertation written in the current climate, I had limited financial resources that restricted the amount of archival research that I could realistically accomplish. Besides that, like many dissertations, it still bears the ugly surgical scars resulting from years of shifting research interests (in fact, originally it was going to be a cross-cultural examination of British and French attitudes toward elite sexualities). That said, I am still extremely proud of the work and feel it has something to offer, despite its weaknesses and limitations. Some of Sandberg's criticisms may be legitimate, but he also fails to address the strengths of my work or the contributions I have made to the study of libertinism and its relationship to the Enlightenment, early modern noble identity, and the beginning of the French Revolution.

NOTES

[1] Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 324–329.

[2] Katherine Crawford, "Privilege, Possibility, and Perversion: Rethinking the Study of Early Modern Sexuality," *Journal of Modern History* 78/2(2006): 412–433.

Chad Denton
Independent Scholar
csdenton@gmail.com

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ISSN 1553-9172