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Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution: London's French libellistes, 1758-92*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006. xvi + 256pp. Tables, sources, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7190-6526-7.

Review by Gary Kates, Pomona College.

In 2000, Simon Burrows published an important monograph on French exiled journalists who used London as a base from which to direct counter-revolutionary propaganda across French-speaking Europe. Armed with a masterful understanding of the late eighteenth-century French press, Burrows demonstrated that the most important thirteen émigré newspapers not only enjoyed commercial success, but influenced public opinion against the policies of the French revolutionary government.[1]

Now Burrows, a historian at the University of Leeds, has written a prequel to that volume, and the result is no less successful. Instead of exploring the relationship of journalists to counter-revolution in the midst of the French Revolution, Burrows has gone back a generation to investigate the relationship between London-based French writers during the reigns of Louis XV and XVI, who wrote scandalous libels attacking the royal family, various courtiers and mistresses, as well as unpopular ministers. That the British monarchy allowed such smut to be published became itself a source of diplomatic irritation between the two countries. When the French foreign minister bitterly protested the free circulation of such literature, David Hume (then secretary to the English ambassador in Paris) responded over dinner that the English regarded the laws protecting freedom of the press as immutable, and the government would not dare intervene.[2] The French, in turn, regarded such an attitude as a deliberate provocation; Louis XV would not sit still while such horror vomited from London. French ministers, therefore, began a program of purchasing wholesale the manuscripts of authors before the works were even published, or, of buying up all the copies before they could be distributed. Often, through go-betweens that sometimes even included other *libellistes*, the government offered a grand pension or cash settlement for purchasing all extant copies and manuscripts. Hundreds of copies of these forbidden books wound up stored in the Bastille, where they sat until its liberation in 1789.

Burrows is dealing with explosive material, and he knows it. Because of the sketchy nature of this literature—much of it never read because of the government's success in its suppression—it has been shrouded in mystery and subject to various exaggerations and inaccuracies of one sort or another. It would have been fun, and perhaps more entertaining, to watch Burrows do likewise. But he does nothing of the sort. Writing with the same analytical approach that he demonstrated in the previous volume, he soberly addresses the fundamental questions that interest historians: who were the *libellistes*? What did they write? How influential were they and their writings? And what does their activities tell us about late Enlightenment political culture?

Burrows focuses on sixteen writers: Marianne-Agnès Pillement de Fauques, Charles Théveneau de Morande, Anne-Gédeon de La Fite de Pelleport, the comte and comtesse de La Motte, Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, the Chevalier d'Eon, Pierre-Henri Treysac de Vergy, Lenoir de La Bussière, Mme Campagnol, Dom Louis, the Baron de Linsing, Jean Joseph Janiau de Vignoles, Jean-Claude Jacquet de Douai, Alphonse-Joseph Serres de La Tour, and Joseph Perkyms Macmahon. This difficult attempt at

prosopography is skillfully achieved, allowing an original perspective about a group that has been much commented about, but for whom until now, we have had little empirical data.

The *libelliste* that interests Burrows the most is perhaps the one who least fits in with the rest of the group: the Chevalier d'Eon, whom I have written about at some length, because soon after he blackmailed the French government over the publication of secret diplomatic correspondence, he convinced the rest of Europe that he was really a woman, and he lived as one until his death decades later in 1810.^[3] Burrows' treatment of d'Eon is fresh and insightful. Only an historian simultaneously immersed in both British and French archives could make such good sense of what d'Eon and the other blackmailing writers were up to. To be sure, there were self-serving motives. Many of them simply wanted to get rich, and when Louis XV paid off one writer, others would try to hop on the bandwagon. But greed was only part of their motivation. Ultimately, Burrows convincingly argues, these writers were vehicles of court politics back in Versailles; they were pawns of factions who battled one another for power. Libel and blackmail were the "Hardball" of Old Regime political media. The Chevalier d'Eon, for example, was the protégé of the Broglie brothers (one a minister of foreign affairs, the other a general in the French army), who were exiled from court by a faction fiercely loyal to Madame de Pompadour. The French *libellistes* in London may have had political ideas of their own, but in Burrows's telling, their dreams of reform were subordinate to the needs of such court factional politics.

The importance of Burrows's work is not so much the narrow story about political affairs at Versailles under Louis XV and XVI, nor the increasing rivalry between England and France, nor even the role of the press in the developing public sphere—although each of these themes is important and addressed—but rather it is the relationship between a certain strand of the Enlightenment and the causes of the French Revolution. At the center of the book lay a critique of the most important historian in this field, Robert Darnton. In 1971, Darnton produced a seminal article arguing that these same *libellistes* were so effective that their scandalous writing eroded the foundations of Old Regime France, helping to pave the way towards revolution. The London-based writers, in Darnton's view, hated the monarchy, despised all privilege and aristocracy, and desired a new republican way of life. "They hated the system in itself," wrote Darnton. "They expressed that hatred by desanctifying its symbols, destroying the myths that gave it legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and perpetrating the countermyth of degenerate despotism."^[4] Seizing on the womanizing stories of Louis XV, they impregnated into their writings sexual filth that made the monarchy seem both inept and immoral.

Darnton's influence on other scholars has been immense, spurring historians (including myself) to argue that this new literature, commonly referred to as political pornography, became the undoing of the monarchy even before the fall of the Bastille.^[5] In short, it was the corpus of these scandalous writings, rather than the more formal theoretical attacks by the likes of Rousseau and Mably, that set France on a course towards revolution.

This book attempts a refutation of Darnton's key findings. Burrows argues contra Darnton that the *libelliste* writers were not at all embittered revolutionaries, but at most tame reformers inspired by the moderate wing of the Enlightenment. They despised "ministerial despotism," not the monarchy itself, and were more the disciples of Montesquieu than Rousseau. Burrows also shows that Darnton and his colleagues overplayed the sexual motif. Political pornography is a fun catch phrase, but one that did not characterize this pre-revolutionary literature as much as we have thought. Most of this literature has no sexual motif at all. In contrast to Darnton, Burrows shows us how tame *libelliste* rhetoric was with regard to sex. Following the scholarship of Vivian Gruder, Burrows also demonstrates that the sexual pamphlets attacking Marie Antoinette were mostly published after the Revolution, and therefore, political pornography may have been a result of the French Revolution, but surely did not contribute to its cause.^[6]

Despite its narrow subject, Burrows's book has large implications for the historical scholarship on the causes of the French Revolution, especially regarding the eternally interesting question regarding the relationship of the Enlightenment to the Revolution. While Burrows establishes that Darnton was dead wrong about the influence of smut, he nonetheless vindicates Darnton's larger argument that disaffected French writers from London undermined the authority of the Old Regime with literature that made the court and royal family seem wholly corrupt. Long ago, Harvard historian Crane Brinton argued that a precondition of the French Revolution involved the elite aristocracy losing faith in the legitimacy of the monarchical system.^[7] This book gives us an intimate and novel view of how that happened.

NOTES

[1] Simon Burrows, *French Exile Journalism and European Politics, 1792-1814* (Suffolk, UK, and Rochester, NY: Royal Historical Society, 2000).

[2] *Correspondance secrète du comte de Broglie avec Louis XV, 1756-1774*, eds. Didier Ozanam and Michel Antoine, 2 vols. (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1959 and 1961), 2:251.

[3] Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[4] Robert Darnton, "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past and Present* 51 (1971): 109; quoted by Burrows, p. 11.

[5] See, for example, Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in her *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 108-130; and Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 164.

[6] Vivian Gruder, "The Question of Marie-Antoinette: The Queen and Public Opinion Before the Revolution," *French History* 2002 16(3): 269-298.

[7] Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938).

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