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Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 552 pp, 47 ill. Notes, index. \$34.95/£23.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4183-9.

Review Essay by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

I have a well-worn copy of *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* on my shelf that bears an inscription from my father. “Hope you enjoy this,” it reads in blue ink, “Christmas 1985, With much love, Dad.” My father is twenty-five years older now, and infirm, and so on the rare occasions when he takes up a pen, the writing betrays the advanced age of a hand that labors and shakes. In my copy, though, he is still in the prime of life, and the words, however few, are clear and confident and restrained, a striking contrast to the youthful marginalia of my own effusive interventions in the text, the work of an eager college freshman, replete with yellow highlights and stars and checks and exclamation points in several shades. “Ha!” “Great!” “???” “Classic!”

Evidence of an exchange, a book passed hand to hand, a few precious clues of reader reception: It is the sort of detail that would doubtless draw the eye of Robert Darnton, all the more so if such scattered remarks were to be found in some eighteenth-century text. In this case the clues are easy enough to decipher, providing clear evidence of delight in an author’s work shared across two generations. But many of the clues Darnton himself has followed in his remarkable career have been harder to detect and more difficult to assess. That he is still at it, grubbing in archives some forty years after his initial descent into the mines of the literary underground, is testimony to his own tenacious curiosity and the richness of the veins he has explored.

That curiosity continues to yield rewards. Both those intimately familiar with Darnton’s work and those coming to it for the first time will find ample material in *The Devil in the Holy Water* to enlighten and entertain. The opening chapters, in particular, which follow the interlocking stories told in four frontispieces to four *libelles* linking the Old Regime to the Revolution (including the titular *Le Diable dans le b netier*), showcase Darnton’s trademark ability to follow a scent through the archives with a discerning nose. Tracing hints and tracking down clues, he puts these together with the skill of a writer of pulp fiction or a *roman policier*, telling a tale, as he describes it, “so full of intrigue and hugger-mugger that it seems too extravagant to be true” (p. 1). It is a tale that focuses on French libelers living in London and the efforts of the French government to roust them out, buy them off, or put their services to use. And as he tells it, Darnton manages to convey his passion for the sometimes unsavory, but always pungent, smells of the Old R gime. True, this is not as condensed as some of his earlier works (at 445 pages in a comparatively small font, it is among his longest). But nearly every page gives off something of the seductive scent—the smell of ink and pages made of rags, of type and the men who set it—that so attracted Darnton to the world of eighteenth-century authors and their books many years ago and that have attracted fortunate readers ever since.

There is simply no way to summarize neatly the world of libels and libelers that he pastes together from so many snippets of text. The devil, when not in the baptismal font, is in the details, and readers will want to linger over those details themselves. So rather than re-tell the tale here, it might be more useful

to revisit a question that Darnton has posed throughout his career, and that he asks in the present volume once again: “Why devote so much labor and so many pages to such a smutty subject,” he asks in reference to the often pornographic, and always scurrilous, libels of the literary underground (p. 5)? “Why try to reconstruct [this world]?” (p.1). What is the pay-off, in other words, of focusing on the literary production of what he first described in his classic article of forty years ago, “The High Enlightenment and the Low Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” as “Grub Street”?¹

Grub Street, of course, was (and is) a real place (it is now called, rather less colorfully, “Milton Street”), which in the East London of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was home to hack writers, publishers, and pamphleteers. Borrowing the name, Darnton extended it to the world of their French counterparts (a good number of whom, it turns out, were resident in London themselves), those *Rousseau de ruisseau* who congregated in Paris and published cheap pamphlets, pornography, and libels like those that draw his focus in *The Devil in the Holy Water*. Embittered by their failure to break into the more refined circles of the Parisian *monde*, this literary rabble grew radical. The “crude pamphleteering of Grub Street was revolutionary in feeling as well as in message,” Darnton famously asserted. It was from the depths of Grub Street that the “extreme Jacobin revolution found its authentic voice.”²

Darnton has reiterated, refined, and enriched this picture in subsequent work, but his interest in Grub Street has never waned. He continues to use the term here, describing “Grub Street” sociologically with a nod to Pierre Bourdieu as a “champ littéraire” and also as a space that “existed at the level of collective representations, owing to polemics about the status of various writers” (p. 483, n. 4). And though he qualifies his earlier picture slightly, pointing out that the hierarchical nature of the Republic of Letters did not entirely exclude upward social mobility, that it was not completely polarized between top and bottom, and that writers were driven to hack work less by frustrated ambition than by poverty, he nonetheless stands by his earlier output: “I think the argument in those works is still valid” (p. 483, n. 4).

Yet regarding the connection between Grub Street and the Revolution, Darnton is somewhat more cagey. He recognizes, to be sure, that “almost any book about eighteenth-century France is bound to bear on classic questions about ideology, politics, and the first great revolution of modern times” (p. 5). He acknowledges that his own book “has implications for those questions,” but then adds immediately that his “pursues a different purpose,” aiming to “explore a body of literature and the subculture that generated it.” “I want,” Darnton continues, “to understand the lives of libelers, the relation of their publications to their milieu, the way their texts worked ..., the interconnections of libels as a corpus of literature, and, to the extent possible, the reactions of their readers” (p. 5). Darnton is frank about the difficulties of gauging the latter, and in the end he concedes that it is not possible to know with any precision (p. 440). And yet that does not prevent him from seeking to venture some perfectly plausible speculations—speculations that, despite the qualification just cited about pursuing a different purpose, turn out to be political in a Geertzian sort of way. Expressing his intention to venture into that “problematic area where history and literature shade off into anthropology,” Darnton adds, “taken together the libels communicated an outlook on political authority that can be characterized as folklore or mythology,” which, though “tendentious and inaccurate,” “provided a way for the French to make sense of the world around them” (p. 5–6).

¹ Darnton’s article was originally published in *Past and Present* in 1971. It is reprinted in his volume of essays, *The Literary Underground of the Old Régime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), from which I cite here and in what follows.

² “High Enlightenment,” p. 40.

If we think of the political world as a stage, then Darnton is entering it from a trap door of sorts, climbing up from below. It is the sort of entrance that can make for great drama, surprise, and some hearty guffaws, but it may also distract our view from what is going on stage right, stage left, at the center, or in the wings. Darnton acknowledges, for example, that the libelers he studies also figured in political struggles and the rivalry of court factions, but he resists touching on these matters more than incidentally, indicating that he is “not attempting to rewrite that history” and stating too that he will not go over “familiar subjects,” including Jansenism and the parliamentary opposition to the crown, among others (p. 5). That is a questionable choice, given that by his own admission the libelers he studies were often closely involved in these struggles. Indeed, as Tom Kaiser has demonstrated in a series of important articles, the libelous attacks on Louis XV that originated at mid-century, or those that targeted Madame de Pompadour and later Marie Antoinette, among others, were fueled directly by vicious struggles at court that do much to contextualize the literature that Darnton seeks to relate to the libeler’s milieu.³ The excellent work of Dale Van Kley—particularly his classic study *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime* (1984)—makes a similarly compelling case for the need to put the libels in the context of court and parliamentary contestation. Moreover, as Jeremy Popkin pointed out at the bicentennial in a critique of Darnton’s work, a good many of the radical libels and pamphlets emanating from Grub Street were commissioned by “wealthy and powerful members of France’s traditional elites.”⁴ *The Devil in the Holy Water* amply confirms Popkin’s point, showing how certain courtiers put out hits on their opponents, commissioning libelers to attack them. There is, however, no mention of Popkin’s work, little of Kaiser’s and Van Kley’s, and frankly, one might multiply these sorts of omissions. Perhaps that is simply an oversight on Darnton’s part, albeit a slightly ironic one for a scholar who has made a career out of identifying with the “low” against the “high” in the republic of letters—from a position of academic eminence, no less. But in the case of the refusal to engage with the work of Simon Burrows, who in 2006 published an important study that deals with many of the very same people and networks that Darnton treats in *The Devil in the Holy Water* (and reaches very different conclusions about them), the taking up of a position *au-dessus de la mêlée* cannot be explained by mere absence of mind. In a footnote, Darnton does cite Burrow’s work, observing that “he dissents from my own interpretation of this subject” (p. 448, n. 5). But that is the extent of the engagement.

Professor Burrows is contributing to this forum and undoubtedly will have something to say on the matter, and undoubtedly he will say it better than I could. But there is another writer who might legitimately feel slighted by Darnton’s less than complete attention, the eighteenth-century poet Nicolas-Joseph-Laurent Gilbert. In an uncharacteristic slip (unimportant in itself) Darnton describes him as “Nicolas Gibert” and proceeds to explain how indigent writers like him “provided a model, or at least a name, for the radical variety of activist in revolutionary Paris: the sans-culotte” (p. 210). This was originally the contention of Louis-Sébastien Mercier in the *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798). “According to Mercier,” Darnton explains, “the term was first used in reference to Nicolas Gibert, a poet so poor that he could not afford to buy breeches and became known as ‘Gibert le Sans-culotte.’ After Gibert died, destitute, in 1780, ‘Rich people adopted this denomination and used it against all authors who were not elegantly dressed.’” (p. 210) Michael Sonenscher has analyzed the story and takes pains to point out

³ Among the many relevant pieces of Thomas E. Kaiser, who has emerged as something of the David Bien of his generation—the master of the finely honed article—see his “The Drama of Charles Edward Stuart, Jacobite Propaganda, and French Political Protest, 1745–1750,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30 (1997): 365–381; “Madame de Pompadour and the Theaters of Power,” *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 1025–1044; and “Who’s Afraid of Marie Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia, and the Queen,” *French History* 14 (2000): 241–71.

⁴ Jeremy Popkin, “Pamphlet Journalism at the End of the Old Regime,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1989): 351–367.

some of the lapses in Mercier's memory.⁵ But what seems to have gone unnoticed is that Gilbert, though undoubtedly poor, was something of an apologist for throne and altar, who converted his rage against the pensioned and petted *philosophes* on high into a nice pension orchestrated by Madame Louise de France, Louis XV's pious daughter and a favorite of the *dévots*, who described Gilbert in a letter to Vergennes as a man "entirely devoted to the defense of religion."⁶ Would it not be amusing if the *sans-culottes* took their name from a counter-revolutionary *avant la lettre*?

I tell the story partly in jest, and I certainly do not fault Darnton for a rare misspelling. The sort of pedantic reviewer who would impugn an entire work of careful scholarship on the basis of an occasional slip ought to think more and then bear in mind the wisdom of the proverb concerning those who throw stones. But there is a serious point to be made, and that is that the libelous literature of Grub Street—and its manifold techniques of defamation—could be equally employed by authors we might be tempted to place on the right side of the political stage. Here again, some further attention to the work of Kaiser, Popkin, and Van Kley would have been useful, for they all show that the *dévots* were as skilled as anyone at defaming their enemies at court through the use of *mauvais discours*. And in the republic of letters, angry extremists on both sides of Grub Street—the "right" and the "left"—could sound uncomfortably alike, a similarity that carried over into the Revolution. Darnton actually makes the latter point himself in several fine pages on the way that counter-revolutionary writers used libels and the tricks of the trade to impugn the Duke of Orléans (Philippe d'Egalité) in writings published after the calling of the Estates General (pp. 354–56). But his inattention to this sort of scurrilous writing in the Old Regime—and as Olivier Ferret has shown recently, there was a good deal of it, employing *l'art de calomnier avec fruit*—tends to obscure from our view the way in which the libelous literature of Grub Street gave birth to more than just angry screeds directed at *les grands*.⁷

And just what did that literature really give birth to in the end? One might argue that in its English form, at least, where literature every bit as libelous seems not to have seriously weakened Hanoverian or aristocratic power, that the relentless focus on personal lives and personal scandal nourished a growing cult of "celebrity," an eighteenth-century word and an eighteenth-century invention that scholars of history and culture from Fred Inglis to Antoine Lilti are now pursuing in exciting directions. On the unwitting principle that no news is bad news, and that notoriety is as good as celebrity, English aristocrats, artists, and heir-apparents kept themselves in the news via *mauvais discours* and the *chroniques scandaleuses* of their scandalous lives. George III's son, the Prince of Wales (the future George IV), after all, made a name for himself by whoring in Brighton and getting his claret-bloated frame caricatured by Gilray. Still, as Inglis points out, "his contribution to the formation of celebrity was central," and that celebrity derived in large part from the fact that the sordid details of his private life were public knowledge, slanderously rehearsed in print.⁸ True, things ended differently for Marie Antoinette. But she is still a star. And if she never succeeded as the people's princess, then at least she became the one they loved to hate.

The connection between libels and the limelight—celebrity and scandal—is there for other scholars to explore further. I suggest it here merely to think against the grain of Darnton's broader contention, stated boldly in his earlier work, and somewhat more warily here, that the libelous literary underground

⁵ Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), especially pp. 19–21 and 101–104.

⁶ Darrin M. McMahon, "The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past and Present* 159 (1998): 77–112.

⁷ Olivier Ferret, *La Fureur de nuire: échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et antiphilosophes (1750–1770)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007). The French phrase is that of Linguet.

⁸ Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 60.

and radical politics share, if not a direct causal relationship, then at least an elective affinity. As he puts it at one point, “To study the Grub Street element in the Revolution is not to follow a straight line of causality but rather to investigate a milieu, one that played an important part in the creation of a new political culture through its mastery of the printed word” (208). But what does that political culture look like on Darnton’s own terms? It is not, Darnton concedes, “an uplifting story” (p. 444), and in fact the description of that culture in *The Devil in the Holy Water* made me see something in Darnton’s works that I had never fully appreciated before, though it is arguably there from the start. It is there, one might contend, in “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature,” with its claim that the “visceral hatred” of Grub Street gave the “extreme Jacobin revolution” its voice. It is there in *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, with its contention that the libel literature of the reigns of Louis XV and XVI “closed off debate” and “polarized views” and “assimilated new material and new rhetorical techniques into a body of tales, a political folklore, organized around a central theme with a single moral: the monarchy had degenerated into despotism.”⁹ And it is there, even more strongly, in *The Devil in the Holy Water*, with its assertion that “libels helped mobilize an angry public,” that they helped to create a “political myth,” that they left little room “for consideration of constitutional issues and normative principles,” that they moralized instead of philosophized, that they “reduced complex questions to the play of personality,” that they demonized their targets, decrying the “evil” of the Old Régime as “systematic,” and that they offered no “political analysis” (pp. 443–44). And what is *it*? Isser Woloch provided a description some time ago, in a very different connection, calling *it* the “latent illiberalism of the French Revolution.” He was reviewing, ironically, the work of François Furet, whom Darnton mentions briefly in a note as someone with whom he once worked closely and admired, but whose reading of the Revolution differed very much from his own emphasis on social history and the “contingent character of events” (p. 490, n. 6). It is perfectly true that Darnton ventures down byways of contingency at times, stressing for example, in a comment leveled at Furet himself, and by implication Keith Baker, that “it would be inaccurate to construe the events of 1789–1800 as if they were nothing more than the working out of discourse” (p. 243). Yet in the end we return to the main thoroughfare, paved in libelous words: “There was one road that issued directly on the revolutionary upheaval: Grub Street” (p. 208). And if the literature of libel and its milieu played an important part in the creation of the new political culture, is it not fair to conclude that things had a propensity to go badly from the start?

I am fairly certain that Professor Darnton would not be comfortable with that conclusion. I press it in part because I am curious to know how he will respond. And that, in the final analysis, is the mark of the very best scholarship: it continues to generate questions and debate. That Darnton’s work has been doing so for almost as long as I’ve been on the planet, and continually delighting in the process, is something to which we all might aspire.

Darrin M. McMahon
Florida State University
dmcmahon@fsu.edu

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⁹ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 246.

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