



An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris

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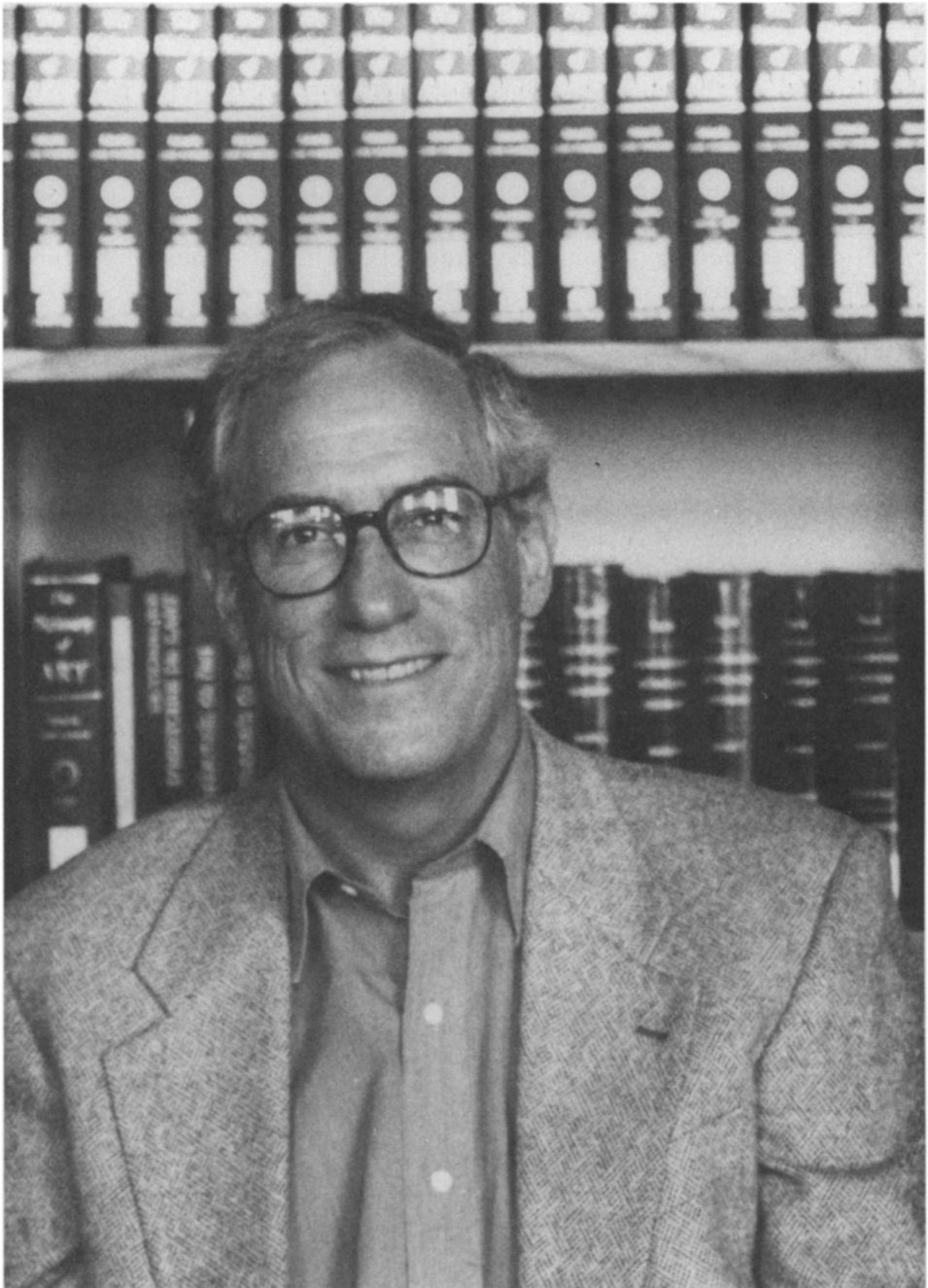
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ROBERT DARNTON

Presidential Address
An Early Information Society:
News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris

ROBERT DARNTON

STANDING HERE ON THE THRESHOLD of the year 2000, it appears that the road to the new millennium leads through Silicon Valley. We have entered the information age, and the future, it seems, will be determined by the media. In fact, some would claim that the modes of communication have replaced the modes of production as the driving force of the modern world. I would like to dispute that view. Whatever its value as prophecy, it will not work as history, because it conveys a specious sense of a break with the past. I would argue that every age was an age of information, each in its own way, and that communication systems have always shaped events.¹

That argument may sound suspiciously like common sense; but, if pushed hard enough, it could open up a fresh perspective on the past. As a starting point, I would ask a question about the media today: What is news? Most of us would reply that news is what we read in newspapers or see and hear on news broadcasts. If we considered the matter further, however, we probably would agree that news is not what happened—yesterday, or last week—but rather stories about what happened. It is a kind of narrative, transmitted by special kinds of media. That line of reasoning soon leads to entanglement in literary theory and the World Wide Web. But if projected backward, it may help to disentangle some knotty problems in the past.²

I would propose a general attack on the problem of how societies made sense of events and transmitted information about them, something that might be called the

¹ People have complained about a surfeit of information during many periods of history. An almanac of 1772 referred casually to “notre siècle de publicité à outrance,” as if the observation were self-evident: Roze de Chantoiseau, *Tablettes royales de renommée ou Almanach général d’indication*, rpt. in “Les cafés de Paris en 1772” (anonymous), *Extrait de la Revue de poche du 15 juillet 1867* (Paris, n.d.), 2. For a typical remark that illustrates the current sense of entering an unprecedented era dominated by information technology, see the pronouncement of David Puttnam quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 1998, W3: “We are on the threshold of what has come to be called the Information Society.” I should explain that this essay was written for delivery as a lecture and that I have tried to maintain the tone of the original by adopting a relatively informal style in the printed version. More related material is available in an electronic edition, the first article published in the new online edition of the *American Historical Review*, on the World Wide Web, at www.indiana.edu/~ahr, and later at www.historycooperative.org.

² I have attempted to develop this argument in an essay on my own experience as a reporter: “Journalism: All the News That Fits We Print,” in Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), chap. 5. See also Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1978); and Helen MacGill Hughes, *News and the Human Interest Story* (Chicago, 1940).

history of communication. In principle, this kind of history could provoke a reassessment of any period in the past, for every society develops its own ways of hunting and gathering information; its means of communicating what it gathers, whether or not it uses concepts such as “news” and “the media,” can reveal a great deal about its understanding of its own experience. Examples can be cited from studies of coffeehouses in Stuart England, tea houses in early republican China, marketplaces in contemporary Morocco, street poetry in seventeenth-century Rome, slave rebellions in nineteenth-century Brazil, runner networks in the Mogul Raj of India, even the bread and circuses of the Roman Empire.³

But instead of attempting to pile up examples by roaming everywhere through the historical record, I would like to examine a communication system at work in a particular time and place, the Old Regime in France. More precisely, I would ask: How did you find out what the news was in Paris around 1750? Not, I submit, by reading a newspaper, because papers with news in them—news as we understand it today, about public affairs and prominent persons—did not exist. The government did not permit them.

To find out what was really going on, you went to the tree of Cracow. It was a large, leafy chestnut tree, which stood at the heart of Paris in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. It probably had acquired its name from heated discussions that took place around it during the War of the Polish Succession (1733–1735), although the name also suggested rumor-mongering (*craquer*: to tell dubious stories). Like a mighty magnet, the tree attracted *nouvellistes de bouche*, or newsmongers, who spread information about current events by word of mouth. They claimed to know, from private sources (a letter, an indiscreet servant, a remark overheard in an antechamber of Versailles), what was really happening in the corridors of power—and the people in power took them seriously, because the government worried about what Parisians were saying. Foreign diplomats allegedly sent agents to pick up news or to plant it at the foot of the tree of Cracow. (See Figure 1.) There were several other nerve centers for transmitting “public noises” (*bruits publics*), as this variety of news was known: special benches in the Tuileries and Luxembourg Gardens, informal speakers’ corners on the Quai des Augustins and the Pont Neuf, cafés known for their loose talk, and boulevards where news bulletins were bawled out by peddlers of *canards* (facetious broadsides) or sung by hurdy-gurdy players. To tune in on the news, you could simply stand in the street and cock your ear.⁴

³ Brian Cowan, “The Social Life of Coffee: Commercial Culture and Metropolitan Society in Early Modern England, 1600–1720” (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2000); Qin Shao, “Tempest over Teapots: The Vilification of Teahouse Culture in Early Republican China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (November 1998): 1009–41; Lawrence Rosen, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (Chicago, 1984); Laurie Nussdorfer, *Civic Politics in the Rome of Urban VIII* (Princeton, N.J., 1992); João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, Arthur Brakel, trans. (Baltimore, Md., 1993); Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (New York, 1996); and Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁴ Planted at the beginning of the century and cut down during the remodeling of the garden in 1781, the tree of Cracow was such a well-known institution that it was celebrated in a comic opera by Charles-François Panard, *L’arbre de Cracovie*, performed at the Foire Saint-Germain in 1742. The print reproduced above probably alludes to a theme in that vaudeville production: the tree went “crack” every time someone beneath its branches told a lie. On this and other contemporary sources, see François Rosset, *L’arbre de Cracovie: Le mythe polonais dans la littérature française* (Paris, 1996), 7–11.



FIGURE 1: “L’arbre de Cracovie,” c. 1742. The Tree of Cracow as depicted in a satirical print. The figure of Truth, on the far left, pulls on a rope to make the tree go “crack” every time something false takes place beneath it. According to the caption, the falsehoods include an innkeeper who claims he does not water down his wine, a merchant who sells goods for no more than what they are worth, a truthful horse dealer, an unbiased poet, etc. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), 96A 74336.

But ordinary hearsay did not satisfy Parisians with a powerful appetite for information. They needed to sift through the public noise in order to discover what was *really* happening. Sometimes, they pooled their information and criticized it collectively by meeting in groups such as the famous salon of Mme. M.-A. L. Doublet, known as “the parish.” Twenty-nine “parishioners,” many of them well connected with the Parlement of Paris or the court and all of them famished for news, gathered once a week in Mme. Doublet’s apartment in the Enclos des Filles Saint-Thomas. When they entered the salon, they reportedly found two large registers on a desk near the door. One contained news reputed to be reliable, the other, gossip. Together, they constituted the menu for the day’s discussion, which was prepared by one of Mme. Doublet’s servants, who may qualify as the first “reporter” in the history of France. We don’t know his name, but a description of him survives in the files of the police (and I should say at the outset that police archives provide most of the evidence for this lecture—important evidence, I believe, but the kind that calls for especially critical interpretation): He was “tall and fat, a full face, round wig, and a brown outfit. Every morning he goes from

The best general account of *nouvellistes* is still in Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Les nouvellistes* (Paris, 1905), and *Figaro et ses devanciers* (Paris, 1909). As an example of how remarks made beneath the tree of Cracow spread throughout Paris and Versailles, see E. J. B. Rathery, ed., *Journal et mémoires du marquis d’Argenson* (Paris, 1862), 5: 450.

house to house asking, in the name of his mistress, ‘What’s new?’”⁵ The servant wrote the first entries for each day’s news on the registers; the “parishioners” read through them, adding whatever other information they had gathered; and, after a general vetting, the reports were copied and sent to select friends of Mme. Doublet. One of them, J.-G. Bosc du Bouchet, comtesse d’Argental, had a lackey named Gillet, who organized another copying service. When he began to make money by selling the copies—provincial subscribers gladly paid six livres a month to keep up with the latest news from Paris—some of his copyists set up shops of their own; and those shops spawned other shops, so that by 1750 multiple editions of Mme. Doublet’s newsletter were flying around Paris and the provinces. The copying operations—an efficient means of diffusion long after Gutenberg and long before Xerox—had turned into a minor industry, a news service providing subscribers with manuscript gazettes, or *nouvelles à la main*. (See Figure 2.) In 1777, publishers began putting these *nouvelles* into print, and they circulated as the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de la république des lettres en France*, a bestseller in the underground book trade.⁶

Anecdotal as they are, these examples show that news (*nouvelles*) circulated through several media and by different modes—oral, manuscript, and print. In each case, moreover, it remained outside the law. So we also should consider the political constraints on the news.

This is a rich and complicated subject, because research during the last twenty years has transformed the history of early modern journalism.⁷ Simplifying radically, I would insist on a basic point: information about the inner workings of the power system was not supposed to circulate under the Old Regime in France. Politics was the king’s business, “le secret du roi”—a notion derived from a late medieval and Renaissance view, which treated statecraft as “*arcana imperii*,” a secret art restricted to sovereigns and their advisers.⁸

⁵ Pierre Manuel, *La police de Paris dévoilée* (Paris, “l’An second de la liberté” [1790]), 1: 206. I have not been able to find the original of this spy report by the notorious Charles de Fieux, chevalier de Mouhy, in Mouhy’s dossier in the archives of the Bastille: Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal (hereafter, BA), Paris, ms. 10029.

⁶ This description relies on the work of Funck-Brentano, *Les nouvellistes*, and *Figaro et ses devanciers*, but more recent work has modified the picture of the “parish” and its connection to the *Mémoires secrets*. See Jeremy D. Popkin and Bernadette Fort, eds., *The “Mémoires secrets” and the Culture of Publicity in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1998); François Moureau, *Répertoire des nouvelles à la main: Dictionnaire de la presse manuscrite clandestine XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle* (Oxford, 1999); and Moureau, *De bonne main: La communication manuscrite au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1993). After studying the voluminous text of the *nouvelles à la main* produced by the “parish” between 1745 and 1752, I have concluded that the copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (hereafter, BNF) contains little information that could not have passed through the censorship administered by the police: BNF, ms. fr. 13701–12. The published version of the *Mémoires secrets*, which covered the period 1762–1787 and first appeared in 1777, is completely different in tone. It was highly illegal and sold widely: see Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France 1769–1789* (New York, 1995), 119–20.

⁷ In the case of France, a vast number of excellent books and articles have been published by Jean Sgard, Pierre Rézat, Gilles Feyel, François Moureau, Jack Censer, and Jeremy Popkin. For an overview of the entire subject, see Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral, and Fernand Terrou, *Histoire générale de la presse française* (Paris, 1969); and the collective works edited by Jean Sgard, *Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600–1789*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1991); and *Dictionnaire des journalistes, 1600–1789*, 2 vols. (1976; rpt. edn., Oxford, 1999).

⁸ Michael Stolleis, *Staat und Staatsräson in der frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1990); and Jochen Schlobach, “Secrètes correspondances: La fonction du secret dans les correspondances littéraires,” in Moureau, *De bonne main*.



FIGURE 2: A group of *nouvellistes* discussing the news in the Luxembourg Gardens. Courtesy of the BNF, 88C 134231.

Of course, some information reached the reading public through journals and gazettes, but it was not supposed to deal with the inside story of politics or with politics at all, except in the form of official pronouncements on court life. All printed matter had to be cleared through a baroque bureaucracy that included nearly 200 censors, and the censors' decisions were enforced by a special branch of the police, the inspectors of the book trade. The inspectors did not merely repress heresy and sedition; they also protected privileges. Official journals—notably the *Gazette de France*, *Mercure*, and *Journal des savants*—possessed royal privileges for the coverage of certain subjects, and no new periodical could be established without paying them for a share in their turf. When the revolutionaries looked back at the history of the press, they saw nothing but newslessness before 1789. Thus Pierre Manuel on the *Gazette de France*:

A people that wants to be informed cannot be satisfied with the *Gazette de France*. Why should it care if the king has performed the ritual of foot-washing for some poor folk whose feet weren't even dirty? Or if the queen celebrated Easter in company with the comte d'Artois? Or if Monsieur deigned to accept the dedication of a book that he may never read? Or if the Parlement, dressed in ceremonial attire, harangued the baby dauphin, who was dressed in swaddling clothes? The people want to know everything that is actually done and said in the court—why and for whom the cardinal de Rohan should have taken it into his head to play games with a pearl necklace; if it is true that the comtesse Diane appoints the generals of the army and the comtesse Jule the bishops; how many Saint Louis medals the minister of war allotted to his mistress for distribution as New Year's presents. It was the sharp-witted authors of clandestine gazettes [*nouvelles à la main*] who spread the word about this kind of scandal.⁹

These remarks, written at the height of the excitement over a newly freed press, exaggerate the servility of journalism under the Old Regime. Many periodicals existed, many of them printed in French outside France, and they sometimes provided information about political events, especially during the relatively liberal reign of Louis XVI (1774–1792). But if any ventured criticism of the government, they could easily be snuffed out by the police—not simply by raids on bookshops and arrests of peddlers, which frequently occurred, but by being excluded from the mail. Distribution through the mail left their supply lines very vulnerable, as the *Gazette de Leyde* learned when it tried and failed to cover the most important political story of Louis XV's reign, the destruction of the parlements from 1771 to 1774.

So newspapers of a sort existed, but they had little news—and the reading public had little faith in them, not even in the French journals that arrived from Holland. The general skepticism was expressed clearly in a report from a police spy in 1746:

It is openly said that France pays 2,000 livres [a year] to Sieur du Breuil, author of the *Gazette d'Amsterdam*, which is vetted by the French representative at The Hague. Besides that, France gives 12,000 to 15,000 livres to Mme. Limiers, who does the *Gazette d'Utrecht*. This money comes from the revenue of the gazettes, which the postal service sells for 17 sous 6 deniers [per copy] to David, its distributor in Paris, and which he sells to the public for 20

⁹ Manuel, *La police de Paris dévoilée*, 1: 201–02.

sous. When the gazettes did not appear as usual yesterday, it was said that the minister had had them stopped.¹⁰

In short, the press was far from free; and it was also underdeveloped, if you compare it with the press in Holland, England, and Germany. The first French daily newspaper, *Le journal de Paris*, did not appear until 1777. The first German daily appeared more than a century earlier, in Leipzig in 1660. Yet a substantial reading public had existed in France since the seventeenth century; and it expanded enormously in the eighteenth century, especially in cities and in northern France, where nearly half of all adult males could read by 1789. This public was curious about public affairs and conscious of itself as a new force in politics—that is, as public opinion—even though it had no voice in the conduct of the government.¹¹

So a basic contradiction existed—between the public with its hunger for news on the one side and the state with its absolutist forms of power on the other. To understand how this contradiction played itself out, we need to take a closer look at the media that transmitted news and the messages they conveyed. What were the media in eighteenth-century Paris?

WE TEND TO THINK OF THEM BY WAY OF CONTRAST to the all-pervasive media of today. So we imagine the Old Regime as a simple, tranquil, media-free world-we-have-lost, a society with no telephones, no television, no e-mail, Internet, and all the rest. In fact, however, it was not a simple world at all. It was merely different. It had a dense communication network made up of media and genres that have been forgotten—so thoroughly forgotten that even their names are unknown today and cannot be translated into English equivalents: *mauvais propos*, *bruit public*, *on-dit*, *pasquinade*, *pont-neuf*, *canard*, *feuille volante*, *factum*, *libelle*, *chronique scandaleuse*. There were so many modes of communication, and they intersected and overlapped so intensively that we can hardly picture their operation. I have tried to make a picture, nonetheless—a schematic diagram, which illustrates how messages traveled through different media and milieus. (See Figure 3.)

Now, this model may look so complicated as to be absurd—more like a diagram for wiring a radio than the flow of information through a social system. Instead of elaborating on it, let me give you an example of the transmission process, something you might liken to a modern news flash. I quote from *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry*, a top bestseller on the eve of the French Revolution (about which, more later):

We find in the manuscript gazette that has often guided us in assembling the materials for our history, an anecdote [about Mme. du Barry] that illustrates the general opinion of the

¹⁰ A. de Boislisle, ed., *Lettres de M. de Marville, Lieutenant-Général de Police, au ministre Maurepas (1742–1747)* (Paris, 1896), 2: 262.

¹¹ On literacy, see François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: L'alphabétisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1977); on public opinion, Keith M. Baker, "Public Opinion as Political Invention," in Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990); and Mona Ozouf, "L'Opinion publique," in Keith Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, Vol. 1 of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford, 1987).

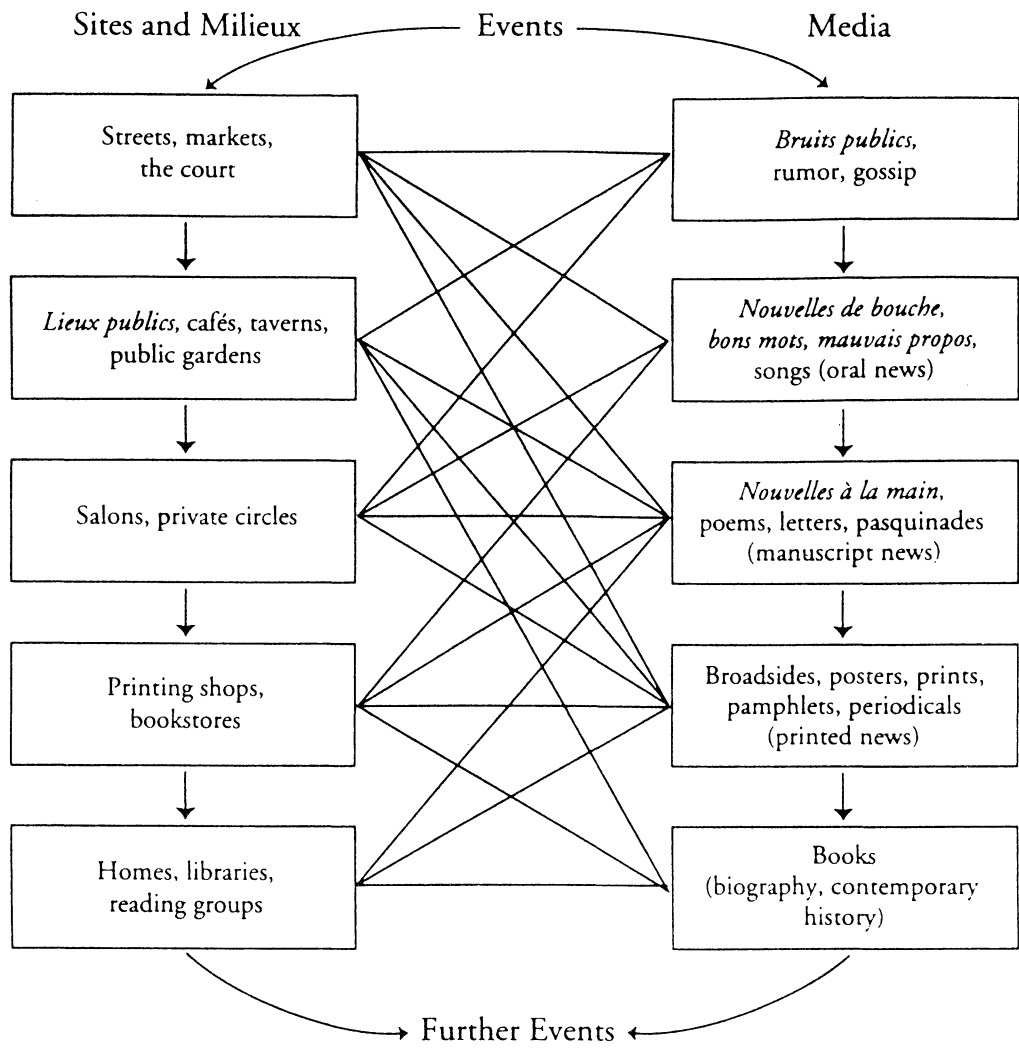


FIGURE 3: A schematic model of a communication circuit. From Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995), 189.

public about her dominance of the king. It is dated March 20, 1773: “There is a report, carefully spread about by some courtiers, which proves that Mme. du Barry has not lost any favor or familiarity with the king, as some had suspected. His Majesty likes to brew his own coffee and, by means of this innocent amusement, to get some relief from the heavy burdens of government. A few days ago, the coffeepot began to boil over while His Majesty was distracted by something else. ‘Hey France!’ called out the beautiful favorite. ‘Look out! Your coffee’s bugging off.’ [*La France, ton café fout le camp.*] We are told that ‘France’ is the familiar expression utilized by this lady in the intimacy of the king’s private chambers [*petits appartements*]. Such details should never circulate outside of them, but they escape, nonetheless, thanks to the malignity of the courtiers.”¹²

¹² [Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert], *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry* (London, 1775), 215.

The anecdote is trivial in itself, but it illustrates the way a news item moved through various media, reaching an ever-wider public. In this case, it went through four phases: First, it began as *mauvais propos*, or insider gossip at court. Second, it turned into a *bruit public*, or general rumor in Paris—and the text uses a strong expression: “the general opinion of the public.” Third, it became incorporated in *nouvelles à la main*, or manuscript news sheets, which circulated in the provinces, like Mme. Doublet’s. Fourth, it was printed in a *libelle*, or scandalous book—in this case, a bestseller, which went through many editions and reached readers everywhere.

The book *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry* is a scurrilous biography of the royal mistress pieced together from bits of gossip picked up by the greatest *nouvelliste* of the century, Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert. He went around Paris collecting tidbits of news and scribbling them on scraps of paper, which he stuffed into his pockets and sleeves. When he arrived in a café, he would pull one out and regale the company—or trade it for another item collected by another *nouvelliste*. Mairobert’s biography of du Barry is really a scrapbook of these news items strung together along a narrative line, which takes the heroine from her obscure birth as the daughter of a cook and a wandering friar to a star role in a Parisian whorehouse and finally the royal bed.¹³

Mairobert did not hesitate to vent his political opinions in telling his story, and his opinions were extremely hostile to Versailles. In 1749, a police spy reported that he had denounced the government in the following terms: “Speaking about the recent reorganization of the army, Mairobert said in the Café Procope that any soldier who had an opportunity should blast the court to hell, since its sole pleasure is in devouring the people and committing injustices.”¹⁴ A few days later, the police hauled him off to the Bastille, his pockets bulging with poems about taxes and the sex life of the king.

Mairobert’s case, and dozens like it, illustrates a point so self-evident that it has never been noticed: the media of the Old Regime were mixed. They transmitted an amalgam of overlapping, interpenetrating messages, spoken, written, printed, pictured, and sung. The most difficult ingredient in this mixture for the historian to isolate and analyze is oral communication, because it usually disappeared into the air. But, evanescent as it was, contemporaries took it seriously. They often remarked on it in letters and diaries, and some of their comments conform quite closely to the model that I just presented in the form of a flow chart. Here, for example, is a contemporary description of how news traveled by word of mouth: “A vile courtier puts these infamies [reports of royal orgies] into rhyming couplets and, through the intermediary of flunkies, distributes them all the way to the marketplace. From the markets they reach artisans, who in turn transmit them back to the noblemen who first wrought them and who, without wasting a minute, go to the royal chambers in Versailles and whisper from ear to ear in a tone of consummate

¹³ This and the following remarks about Mairobert are based on his dossier in the archives of the Bastille: BA, ms. 11683, and on his dossier in the papers of Joseph d’Hémery, inspector of the book trade: BNF, ms. acq. fr. 10783. See also the article on him in the *Dictionnaire des journalistes*, 2: 787–89.

¹⁴ “Observations de d’Hémery du 16 juin 1749,” BA, ms. 11683, fol. 52.



FIGURE 4: Conversation in a café. Courtesy of the BNF, 67B 41693. Here is an excerpt from “Mapping Café Talk” (available at www.indiana.edu/~ahr): *Café de Foy, Palais-Royal*. “Some said that they had heard the Controller General [Le Peletier de Fots, appointed on June 15, 1726, at the time of the revaluation of the currency] was teetering and might fall. Others said, ‘Come on, that’s nothing more than what you hear in the current songs. It looks very unlikely; and if he left the government, the cardinal [André Hercule Fleury, the dominant figure in the government by June 1726] would leave also. It’s nothing more than a false alarm.’”

hypocrisy, ‘Have you read them? Here they are. This is what is circulating among the common people in Paris.’”¹⁵

Fortunately for the historian, if not for the French, the Old Regime was a police state—“police” being understood in the eighteenth-century manner as municipal administration—and the police appreciated the importance of public opinion. They kept track of it by posting spies wherever people gathered to discuss public affairs—in marketplaces, shops, public gardens, taverns, and cafés. Of course, spy reports and police files should not be taken literally. They have built-in biases, which sometimes reveal more about the police themselves than the persons they were observing. But if handled with care, the archives of the police provide enough information for one to see how oral networks functioned. I would like to draw on them in order to discuss two modes of communication that functioned most effectively in eighteenth-century Paris: gossip and songs.

¹⁵ *Le portefeuille d’un talon rouge contenant des anecdotes galantes et secrètes de la cour de France*, rpt. as *Le coffret du bibliophile* (Paris, n.d.), 22.

FIRST, GOSSIP. The papers of the Bastille are full of cases like Mairobert's: people arrested for *mauvais propos*, or insolent talk about public figures, especially the king. The sample is biased, of course, because the police did not arrest people who spoke favorably of Versailles; and a similar slant may distort the other principal source, spy reports, which sometimes concentrated on irreligion and sedition. Usually, however, the spies recounted casual discussions about all sorts of subjects among ordinary Parisians; and, during the early years of Louis XV's reign, the talk sounded favorable to the monarchy. I have studied reports on 179 conversations in 29 cafés between 1726 and 1729. (For a list, see Figure 5.) The sample is far from complete, because Paris had about 380 cafés at that time; but it indicates the topics and the tone of the talk in cafés located along the most important channels of communication, as one can see from the map in Figure 6. (For extensive excerpts from the spy reports and a detailed mapping of the cafés on segments of the Plan Turgot, see the web version of this lecture.)¹⁶

Most of the reports were written in dialogue. Here is an example:

At the Café de Foy someone said that the king had taken a mistress, that she was named Gontaut, and that she was a beautiful woman, the niece of the duc de Noailles and the comtesse de Toulouse. Others said, "If so, then there could be some big changes." And another replied, "True, a rumor is spreading, but I find it hard to believe, since the cardinal de Fleury is in charge. I don't think the king has any inclination in that direction, because he has always been kept away from women." "Nevertheless," someone else said, "it wouldn't be the greatest evil if he had a mistress." "Well, Messieurs," another added, "it may not be a passing fancy, either, and a first love could raise some danger on the sexual side and could cause more harm than good. It would be far more desirable if he liked hunting better than that kind of thing."¹⁷

As always, the royal sex life provided prime material for gossip, but the reports all indicate that the talk was friendly. In 1729, when the queen was about to give birth, the cafés rang with jubilation: "Truly, everyone is delighted, because they all hope greatly to have a dauphin . . . In the Café Dupuy, someone said, 'Parbleu, Messieurs, if God graces us with a dauphin, you will see Paris and the whole river aflame [with fireworks in celebration].' Everyone is praying for that."¹⁸ On September 4, the queen did indeed produce a dauphin, and the Parisians went wild with joy, not merely to have an heir to the throne but also to have the king in their midst; for Louis celebrated the birth with a grand feast in the Hôtel de Ville following the fireworks. Royal magnificence choreographed to perfection in the heart of the city—that was what Parisians wanted from their king, according to the

¹⁶ BA, ms. 10170. This source, the densest I have been able to find, covers the years 1726–1729. For help in locating the cafés and in mapping them, I would like to thank Sean Quinlan, Editorial Assistant at the *American Historical Review*, and Jian Liu, Reference Librarian and Collection Manager for Linguistics, Indiana University Libraries, who worked with the staff of the *AHR* in preparing the electronic version of this address. The detailed mapping, with excerpts from reports on conversations in eighteen of the cafés, can be consulted in the link entitled "Mapping Café Talk," at www.indiana.edu/~ahr.

¹⁷ BA, ms. 10170, fol. 175. For reasons of clarity, I have added quotation marks. The original had none, although it was clearly written in dialogue, as can be seen from the texts reproduced in the electronic version of this essay, at the link entitled "Spy Reports on Conversations in Cafés," www.indiana.edu/~ahr.

¹⁸ BA, ms. 10170, fol. 176.

1. Coton, rue Saint-Denis: 29 reports
2. Foy, Palais-Royal: 28 reports
3. Rousseau, rue Saint-Antoine: 27 reports
4. Veuve Joseph, Pont Notre Dame: 9 reports
5. Feret, butte Saint-Roch: 7 reports
6. Gradot, quai de l'Ecole: 7 reports
7. Dupuy, rue Saint-Honoré, près les Quinze-Vingts (?): 7 reports
8. Au prophète Elie, rue Saint-Honoré, au coin de la rue du Four: 6 reports
9. Conti, Pont Neuf, au coin de la rue Dauphine: 6 reports
10. Paul, rue des mauvaises-Paroles, contre la Grande Poste: 5 reports
11. Marchand, quai Pelletier: 5 reports
12. Régence, rue Saint-Honoré, Place du Palais-Royal: 5 reports
13. Poncelet, quai de l'Ecole: 4 reports
14. Moisy, rue Saint-Séverin: 4 reports
15. Veuve Laurent, rue Dauphine, au coin de la rue Christine: 4 reports
16. Baptiste, rue Dauphine: 4 reports
17. Ferré, Pont Saint-Michel: 3 reports
18. La Haude, rue Saint-Martin: 3 reports
19. Lescures, près de la Comédie: 3 reports
20. Marion, derrière la Barrière des Sergents: 2 reports
21. Bourbon, rue Bourtibourg: 2 reports
22. Procopé, rue de la Comédie: 2 reports
23. Clorjean, rue royale Saint-Antoine: 1 report
24. Grignon, au coin de la rue Jean Saint-Denis: 1 report
25. La Perelle, rue Saint-Honoré: 1 report
26. Maugis, rue Saint-Séverin: 1 report
27. Gantois, rue Mazarine: 1 report
28. Le Roy, rue des Arts: 1 report
29. Duture, rue Dauphine: 1 report

FIGURE 5: List of the 29 cafés.

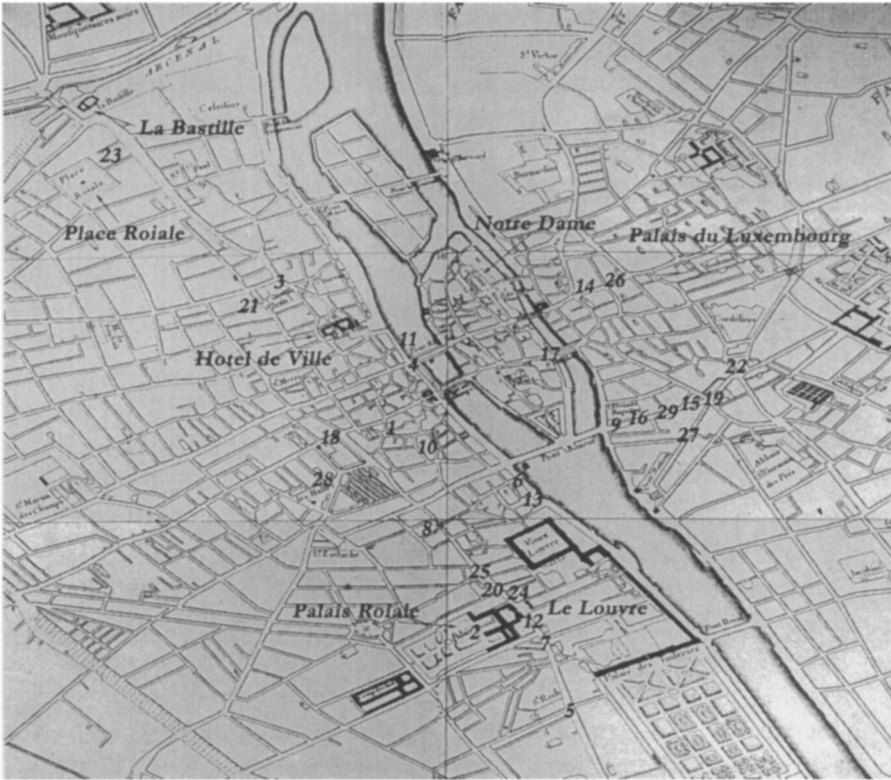


FIGURE 6: Map of Paris with cafés indicated by number. Map designed by Jian Liu and researched by Sean Quinlan.

spy reports: “One of them said [in the Café de Foy], ‘Parbleu, Messieurs, you could never see anything more beautiful than Paris yesterday evening, when the king made his joyful entry into the Hôtel de Ville, speaking to everyone with the greatest affability, dining to a concert by two dozen musicians; and they say the meal was of the utmost magnificence.’”¹⁹

Twenty years later, the tone had changed completely:

In the shop of the wigmaker Gaujoux, this individual [Jules Alexis Bernard] read aloud in the presence of Sieur Dazemar, an invalid officer, an attack on the king in which it was said that His Majesty let himself be governed by ignorant and incompetent ministers and had made a shameful, dishonorable peace [the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle], which gave up all the fortresses that had been captured . . . ; that the king, by his affair with the three sisters, scandalized his people and would bring down all sorts of misfortune on himself if he did not change his conduct; that His Majesty scorned the queen and was an adulterer; that he had not confessed for Easter communion and would bring down the curse of God upon the kingdom and that France would be overwhelmed with disasters; that the duc de Richelieu was a pimp, who would crush Mme. de Pompadour or be crushed by her. He promised to show Sieur Dazemar this book, entitled *The Three Sisters*.²⁰

¹⁹ BA, ms. 10170, fol. 93.

²⁰ BNF, ms. nouv. acq. fr. 1891, fol. 419.

What had happened between those two dates, 1729 and 1749? A great deal, of course: a flare-up of the Jansenist religious controversy, a running battle between the parlements and the crown, a major war, some disastrous harvests, and the imposition of unpopular taxes. But I would like to stress another factor: the end of the royal touch.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY. Call it "The Three Sisters." Once upon a time, there was a nobleman, the marquis de Nesle, who had three daughters, one more beautiful than the other—or, if not exactly beautiful, at least ready and eager for sexual adventure. But that is a delicate subject, so I had better disguise their names and set the story in Africa.

So: Once upon a time, in the African kingdom of the Kofirans, a young monarch, Zeokinizul, began to eye the ladies in his court. (If you choose to unscramble the names—Kofirans/Français, Zeokinizul/Louis Quinze—that is up to you.) The king was a timid soul, interested in nothing except sex, and he was pretty timid at that, too. But the first sister, Mme. de Liamil (Maily) overcame his awkwardness and dragged him to bed. She had been coached by the chief minister, a mullah (prelate) named Jeflur (Fleury), who used her influence to fortify his own. But then the second sister, Mme. de Leutinemil (Vintimille), decided to play the same game; and she succeeded even better, thanks to tutoring from a still more wicked courtier, the kam de Kelirieu (duc de Richelieu). She died, however, after giving birth to a child.

So the king took up the third sister, Mme. de Lenertoula (La Tournelle, later the duchesse de Châteauroux), the most beautiful and ambitious of them all. She, too, accepted counsel from the wicked Kelirieu, and she conquered the king so completely that soon she was ruling the kingdom. Blinded by passion, Zeokinizul took her with him to the front, when he set off to repulse an invasion of the Maregins (Germans). His subjects grumbled that kings should leave their mistresses at home when they did battle. In fact, the attempt to make love as well as war proved to be more than Zeokinizul's constitution could bear. He fell ill, so deathly ill, that the doctors gave him up for lost, and the mullahs prepared to give him the last rites. But it looked as though the king might die unshriven, because Mme. de Lenertoula and Kelirieu refused to allow anyone near the royal bedside. Finally, one mullah broke into the bedroom. He warned Zeokinizul of the danger of damnation. As the price for administering confession and extreme unction, he demanded that the king renounce his mistress. Lenertoula departed under a volley of insults, the king received the sacraments, and then—miracle!—he recovered.

His people rejoiced. His enemies retreated. He returned to his palace . . . and began to think it over. The mullah had been awfully insistent about hellfire. Mme. de Lenertoula was awfully beautiful . . . So the king called her back. And then she promptly died. End of story.

What is the moral of this tale? For Parisians, it meant that the king's sins would bring down the punishment of God; and everyone would suffer, as Bernard proclaimed during the discussion of *The Three Sisters*, the version of the story that he declaimed in the shop of the wigmaker Gaujoux.

For historians, the story can be taken as a symptom of a rupture in the moral ties that bound the king to his people. After the death of Mme. de Châteauroux on December 8, 1744, Louis never again set foot in Paris, except for a few unavoidable ceremonies. In 1750, he built a road around the city so that he could travel from Versailles to Compiègne without exposing himself to the Parisians. He had also ceased to touch the sick who lined up in the Great Gallery of the Louvre in order to be cured of the King's Evil, or scrofula. This breakdown in ritual signaled the end—or at least the beginning of the end—of the *roi-mage*, the sacred, thaumaturgic king known to us through the work of Marc Bloch. By mid-century, Louis XV had lost touch with his people, and he had lost the royal touch.²¹

That conclusion, I admit, is much too dramatic. Desacralization or delegitimation was a complex process, which did not occur all at once but rather by fits and starts over a long time span. In recounting this tale about Louis's love life, I did not mean to argue that he suddenly lost his legitimacy in 1744, although I believe he badly damaged it. My purpose was to suggest the way stories struck the consciousness of Parisians by the middle of the century.

To modern Americans, the story of the three sisters may read like an unconvincing blend of folklore and soap opera. But to eighteenth-century Parisians, it served as a gloss on current events—Louis XV's brush with death at Metz in August 1744, the disgrace of Mme. de Châteauroux, the general rejoicing at the king's recovery, and the general consternation at his decision to recall his mistress. The story also conveyed a prophecy of doom. Louis XV had compounded adultery with incest, because fornicating with sisters had an incestuous character in eighteenth-century eyes. Thus the report of a spy who warned the police about the public's consternation at the king's affair with Mme. de Châteauroux in 1744: "Businessmen, retired officers, the common people are all complaining, speaking ill of the government and predicting that this war will have disastrous consequences. Clergymen, especially the Jansenists, take that view and dare to think and to say aloud that the evils that will soon overwhelm the kingdom come from above, as punishment for the incest and irreligion of the king. They cite passages from Scripture, which they apply [to the present circumstances]. The government should pay attention to this class of subjects. They are dangerous."²²

Sin on such a scale would call down punishment from heaven, not merely on the king but on the entire kingdom. Having been anointed with the holy oil preserved since the conversion of Clovis in the cathedral of Reims, Louis XV had sacred power. He could cure subjects afflicted with scrofula, simply by touching them. After his coronation in 1722, he had touched more than 2,000, and he continued to touch the diseased for the next seventeen years, particularly after taking Communion on Easter. In order to exercise that power, however, he had to cleanse himself

²¹ Marc Bloch, *Rois thaumaturges: Etude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale* (Paris, 1924). On contemporary indignation about the route around Paris, see BNF, ms. fr. 13710, fol. 66. For a sober account of Louis XV's relations with the Nesle sisters (there were actually five of them, but contemporary *libelles* usually mentioned only three or sometimes four), see Michel Antoine, *Louis XV* (Paris, 1989), 484–92. My interpretation of political and diplomatic history in these years owes a good deal to Antoine's definitive study.

²² BA, ms. 10029, fol. 129. The incest theme appears in some of the most violent poems and songs attacking Louis XV in 1748–1751. One in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, ms. 649, p. 50, begins, "Incestueux tyran, traître inhumain, faussaire . . ."

from sin by confession and Communion. But his confessors would not admit him to the Eucharist unless he renounced his mistresses, and he refused to renounce them after 1738, when he began openly to exhibit his adultery with Mme. de Mailly. From that time on, Louis never again took Easter Communion and never again touched the sick. The Metz crisis revived hope that he would recover his spiritual potency, but its denouement, the death of Mme. de Châteauroux, and the succession of mistresses that began with the installation of Mme. de Pompadour in 1745 signaled the end of Louis's effectiveness as a mediator between his people and their angry God. That was the conclusion reached by Bernard after declaiming *The Three Sisters* to his audience in the wigmaker's shop.

At this point, I should pause to deal with an objection. You may concede that the police reports provide evidence about the public's fear of divine retribution for the king's sins, but you also might protest that my version of "The Three Sisters" does not necessarily coincide with the story recounted in the 1740s by Parisians. Perhaps in a fit of postmodern permissiveness, I simply made it up.

I did not. Like many of you, I deplore the current tendency to mix fiction with fact, and I disagree with those who take liberties with evidence on the grounds that history requires unavoidable doses of tropes.²³ I therefore looked far and wide for a book entitled *Les trois soeurs*. I failed to find it, but I did come up with four other books published between 1745 and 1750 that tell the story of Louis' love affairs. They are all *romans à clef*, or novels in which real persons appear as fictitious characters. The story may be set in Africa (*Les amours de Zeokinizul, roi des Kofirans*, 1747), Asia (*Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de Perse*, 1745), fairyland (*Tanastès, conte allégorique*, 1745), or an exotic island (*Voyage à Amatonthe*, 1750). But they all read like a commentary on current events, and they all condemn the king. The story of "The Three Sisters" as I recounted it is a faithful synopsis of *Les amours de Zeokinizul*, and it fits the narrative line of all the others.²⁴

The meaning of those novels for their readers can be ascertained with some accuracy, because they all have keys. A collection of keys is available in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 7067, and many of the copies of the novels have keys printed at the end, entered in handwriting, or inserted in the binding. (See Figure 7.) Decoding with a key, however, turns out to be a less mechanistic process than you might expect. If you work through a novel with a key in hand, you find yourself reading simultaneously at different levels and reading between the lines. A stilted story can come alive, once it is found to conceal another, naughtier story; and the inside stories proliferate as you penetrate deeper and deeper into the text. Some

²³ These issues have been dramatized most recently in the controversy aroused by the duplicitous mixture of fact and fiction in Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1999); see Kate Masur, "Edmund Morris's *Dutch*: Reconstructing Reagan or Deconstructing History?" *Perspectives* 37 (December 1999): 3–5. For my part, I would not deny the literary quality of history writing, but I think the invention of anything that is passed off as factual violates an implicit contract between the historian and the reader: whether or not we are certified as professionals by the award of a PhD, we historians should never fabricate evidence.

²⁴ Four editions of *Les amours de Zeokinizul, roi des Kofirans: Ouvrage traduit de l'Arabe du voyageur Krinelbol* (Amsterdam, 1747, 1747, 1748, and 1770) can be consulted in the BNF, Lb38.554.A-D. All but the first have elaborate keys, usually inserted into the binding from a separate copy, sometimes with manuscript notes. Some notes also appear in the margins of this and the other three works, which also have keys.

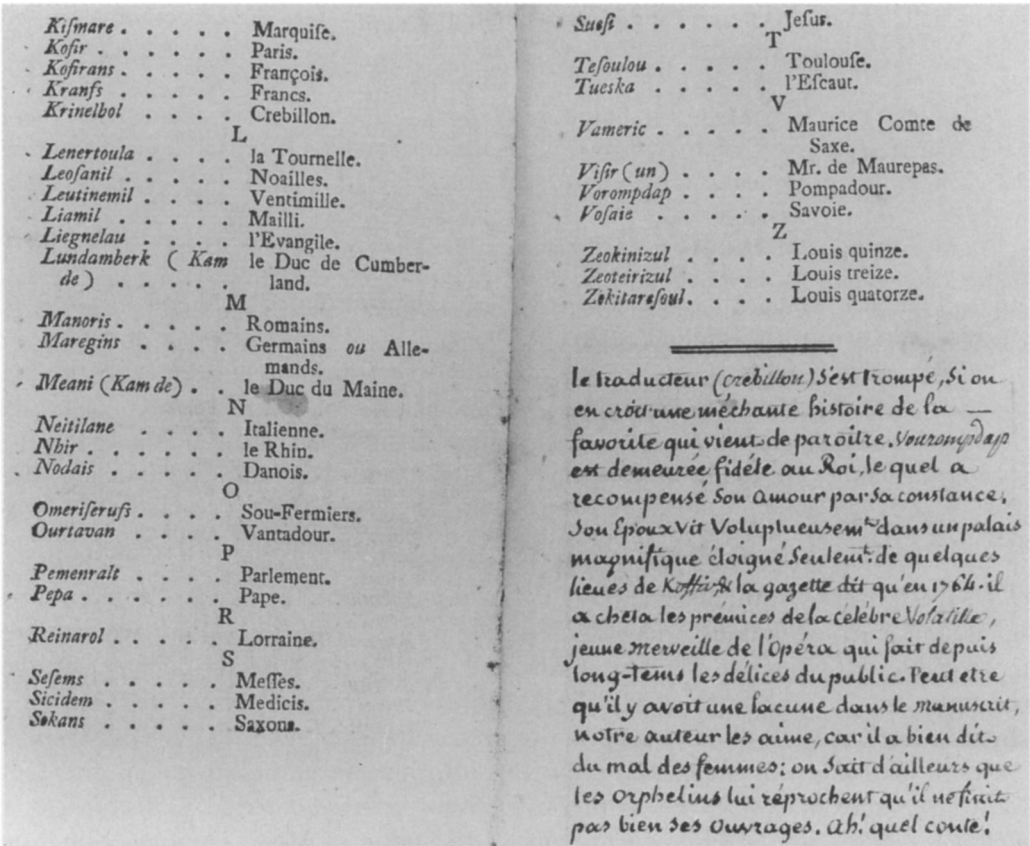


FIGURE 7: Part of a key to the anagrams in *Les amours de Zeokinizul, roi des Kofrans: Ouvrage traduit de l'Arabe du voyageur Krinelbol* (Amsterdam, 1746), attributed to Laurent Angliviel de La Beaumelle and to Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crebillon, fils. Photo courtesy of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

references are obvious, but others are ambiguous, and some are unexplained. In fact, the keys occasionally contradict each other or contain manuscript corrections. So reading with a key becomes a kind of puzzle-solving; and the heart of the mystery turns out in the end to be “le secret du roi”—the private life of the king, which is the ultimate mainspring of power. The *Vie privée de Louis XV*, a best-selling *libelle* of the 1780s, incorporated all this literature from the 1740s, often word for word, in a four-volume history of the entire reign.

Sophisticated literature of this sort might seem to be far removed from the raw gossip that coursed through the cafés, but by 1750 these “public noises” conveyed the same themes: the ignominy of the king, the degradation of him by his mistresses, and the manipulation of the mistresses by vile courtiers. Consider a few examples taken from police reports on what Parisians were saying about Mme. de Pompadour in 1749:²⁵

Le Bret: After running down Mme. de Pompadour by loose talk in various locales, he said that she had driven the king crazy by putting all sorts of notions in his head. The bitch is

²⁵ The following quotations come from BNF, ms. nouv. acq. fr. 1891, fols. 421, 431, 433, 437.

raising hell, he said, because of some poems that attack her. Does she expect to be praised while she is wallowing in crime?

Jean-Louis Le Clerc: Made the following remarks in the Café de Procope: That there never has been a worse king; that the court, the ministers and the Pompadour make the king do shameful things, which utterly disgust his people.

François Philippe Merlet: Accused of having said in the tennis court of Veuve Gosseume that Richelieu and the Pompadour were destroying the reputation of the king; that he was not well regarded by his people, since he was driving them to ruin; and that he had better beware, because the twentieth tax could cause some mischief to befall him.

Fleur de Montagne: Among other things, he said that the king's extravagant expenditures showed that he didn't give a f— for his people; that he knows they are destitute and yet he is piling on another tax, as if to thank them for all the services they have rendered him. They must be crazy in France, he added, to put up with . . . He whispered the rest into someone's ear.

The congruence of themes from the *mauvais propos* and the *libelles* should not be surprising, because talking and reading about private lives and public affairs were inseparable activities. It was a public reading of a *libelle* that touched off the seditious talk in the wigmaker's shop. Moreover, "public noises" fed into the confection of the texts. According to the police, the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de Perse* was generated from the information gathered in the circle of Mme. de Vieuxmaison, much as the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France* came out of the salon of Mme. Doublet. Mme. de Vieuxmaison appears in the police files as "small, very white, blond, with a perfidious physiognomy . . . She is very clever and being [also] very wicked, she writes poems and couplets against everyone . . . Her circle . . . is the most dangerous in Paris and is strongly suspected of having produced the *Anecdotes de Perse*."²⁶

The most remarkable example of talk translated into text was *Tanastès*, a *roman à clef* about the king and the three sisters by Marie Madeleine Joseph Bonafon, a twenty-eight-year-old chambermaid in Versailles. The police could not believe that a female domestic servant could compose such a work. Having traced it back to her, locked her into the Bastille, and summoned her for cross-examination, they found themselves faced with an enigma: a working-woman author—could it be true? They kept returning to this question in the interrogations. Had Mlle. Bonafon really written books? they asked. Yes, she replied, and she named them: *Tanastès*, the beginning of another novel entitled *Le baron de XXX*, several poems, and three unpublished plays. Baffled, the police continued questioning:

Asked what it was that gave her a taste for writing? Hadn't she consulted someone who was familiar with the composition of books in order to learn how to go about organizing the ones she intended to write?

Answered that she did not consult anyone; that since she reads a great deal, this had given her a desire to write; that she had imagined, moreover, that she could make a little money by writing . . .

²⁶ BNF, ms. nouv. acq. fr. 10783.

Had she written the book out of her own imagination? Hadn't someone supplied her with written material to work over? Who was it that had given [that material] to her?

Replied that no memoirs had been given to her, that she had composed her book by herself, that in fact she had fashioned it in her imagination. Agreed, however, that having her head full of what people were saying in public about what had happened during and after the king's illness, she had tried to make some use of it in her book.²⁷

Once it began to circulate, the book—and especially the key, which was printed and sold separately—reinforced the “public noises.” From talk to print to talk, the process built on itself dialectically, accumulating force and spreading ever wider. It is difficult to follow, owing to the sparseness of evidence about oral exchanges that occurred 250 years ago. But enough documentation has survived to suggest that by 1750 the talk of the town had turned decisively against the king.

NOW LET'S CONSIDER SONGS. They, too, were an important medium for communicating news. Parisians commonly composed verse about current events and set it to popular tunes such as “Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre” (“The Bear Went Over the Mountain” in America, “For He's a Jolly Good Fellow” in England). Songs served as mnemonic devices. In a society that remained largely illiterate, they provided a powerful means of transmitting messages, one that probably functioned more effectively in eighteenth-century Paris than commercial jingles do in America today. Parisians of all stripes, from sophisticated salon lions to simple apprentices, shared a common repertory of tunes, and anyone with a bit of wit could improvise couplets, or the standard French ballad made up of eight-syllable lines with interlocking rhymes, to melodies carried in the head. As Louis-Sébastien Mercier remarked, “No event takes place that is not duly registered in the form of a *vaudeville* [popular song] by the irreverent populace.”²⁸

Some songs originated in the court, but they reached the common people, and the common people sang back. Artisans composed songs and sang them at work, adding new verses to old tunes as the occasion arose. Charles Simon Favart, the greatest librettist of the century, got his start as a boy by putting words to popular melodies while rhythmically kneading the dough in his father's bakery. He and his friends—Charles Collé, Pierre Gallet, Alexis Piron, Charles-François Panard, Jean-Joseph Vadé, Toussaint-Gaspard Taconnet, Nicolas Fromaget, Christophe-Barthélemy Fagan, Gabriel Charles Lattaignant, François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif—

²⁷ BA, ms. 11582, fols. 55–57. See also Mlle. Bonafons' remarks in her second interrogation, fols. 79–80: “A elle représenté qu'il y a dans cet ouvrage des faits particuliers dont son état ne lui permettait pas naturellement d'avoir connaissance. Interpellée de nous déclarer par qui elle en a été instruite. A dit qu'il ne lui a été fourni aucuns mémoires ni donné aucuns conseils, et que c'est les bruits publics et le hazard qui l'ont déterminée à insérer dans l'ouvrage ce qui s'y trouve.”

²⁸ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, new edn. (Neuchâtel, 1788), 1: 282. Mercier also remarked (6: 40): “Ainsi à Paris tout est matière à chanson; et quiconque, maréchal de France ou pendu, n'a pas été chansonné a beau faire, il demeurera inconnu au peuple.” Among the many historical studies of French songs, see especially Emile Raunié, *Chansonnier historique du XVIII^e siècle*, 10 vols. (Paris, 1879–84); Patrice Coirault, *Formation de nos chansons folkloriques*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1953); Rolf Reichardt and Herbert Schneider, “Chanson et musique populaire devant l'histoire à la fin de l'Ancien Régime,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 18 (1986): 117–44; and Giles Barber, “‘Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre’ or, How History Reaches the Nursery,” in Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs, eds., *Children and Their Books: A Collection of Essays to Celebrate the Work of Iona and Peter Opie* (Oxford, 1989), 135–63.

outdid each other at improvising bawdy ballads and drinking songs at first in Gallet's grocery store, later in the Café du Caveau. Their songs made the rounds of taverns, echoed in the streets, and found their way into popular theaters—at the Foire Saint-Germain, along the vaudeville shows of the boulevards, and ultimately in the Opéra Comique. At a more plebeian level, ragged street-singers, playing fiddles and hurdy-gurdies, entertained crowds at the Pont Neuf, the Quai des Augustins, and other strategic locations. Paris was suffused with songs. In fact, as the saying went, the entire kingdom could be described as “an absolute monarchy tempered by songs.”²⁹

In such an environment, a catchy song could spread like wildfire; and, as it spread, it grew—inevitably, because it acquired new phrasing in the course of oral transmission and because everyone could join in the game of grafting new stanzas onto the old. The new verses were scribbled on scraps of paper and traded in cafés just like the poems and anecdotes diffused by the *nouvellistes*. When the police frisked prisoners in the Bastille, they confiscated large quantities of this material, which can still be inspected in boxes at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal—tiny bits of paper covered with scribbling and carried about triumphantly, until the fatal moment when a police inspector, armed with a *lettre de cachet*, commanded, “Empty your pockets.”³⁰ A typical scrap of verse, the latest stanzas to “Qu'une bâtarde de catin”—one of the most popular songs attacking Mme. de Pompadour, the king, and court—was seized from the upper left vest pocket of Pidansat de Mairobert during his interrogation in the Bastille.³¹

Mairobert lived like a literary hack—“rue des Cordeliers, at a laundrywoman's place on the third floor,” according to his police dossier—and described himself as “without fortune, reduced to what he could provide by his talent.”³² But he frequented the elegant company in Mme. Doublet's salon, and other song collectors belonged to the highest ranks of the court. The greatest of them all was the comte de Maurepas, minister of the navy and the king's household, one of the most powerful men in Versailles. Maurepas epitomized the court style of politics under Louis XV. Witty, canny, and unscrupulous, he covered his maneuvering with an air of gaiety that endeared him to the king. He also held on to Louis'

²⁹ This bon mot may have been coined by Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort: see Raunié, *Chansonnier historique*, 1: i.

³⁰ One box in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 10319, contains dozens of these snippets, thrown together helter-skelter, which comment in rhyme on all sorts of current events: the amorous adventures of the regent, Law's fiscal system, the battles of the Jansenists and Jesuits, the tax reforms of the abbé Terray, the judicial reforms of the chancellor Maupeou—set to all kinds of popular tunes: “La béquille du Père Barnabas,” “Réveillez-vous belle endormie,” “Allons cher coeur, point de rigueur,” “J'avais pris femme laide.” The repertory of melodies was inexhaustible, the occasions for drawing on it endless, thanks to the inventiveness of the Parisians and the rumor mill at work in the court.

³¹ BA, ms. 11683, fol. 59, report on the arrest of Mairobert by Joseph d'Hémerly, July 2, 1749. The verse on the scrap of paper comes from a separate dossier labeled “68 pièces paraphées.” In a report to the police on July 1, 1749, a spy noted (fol. 55): “Le sieur Mairobert a sur lui des vers contre le roi et contre Mme. de Pompadour. En raisonnant avec lui sur le risque que court l'auteur de pareils écrits, il répondit qu'il n'en courait aucun, qu'il ne s'agissait que d'en glisser dans la poche de quelqu'un dans un café ou au spectacle pour les répandre sans risque ou d'en laisser tomber des copies aux promenades . . . J'ai lieu de penser qu'il en a distribué bon nombre.”

³² BA, ms. 11683, fol. 45.

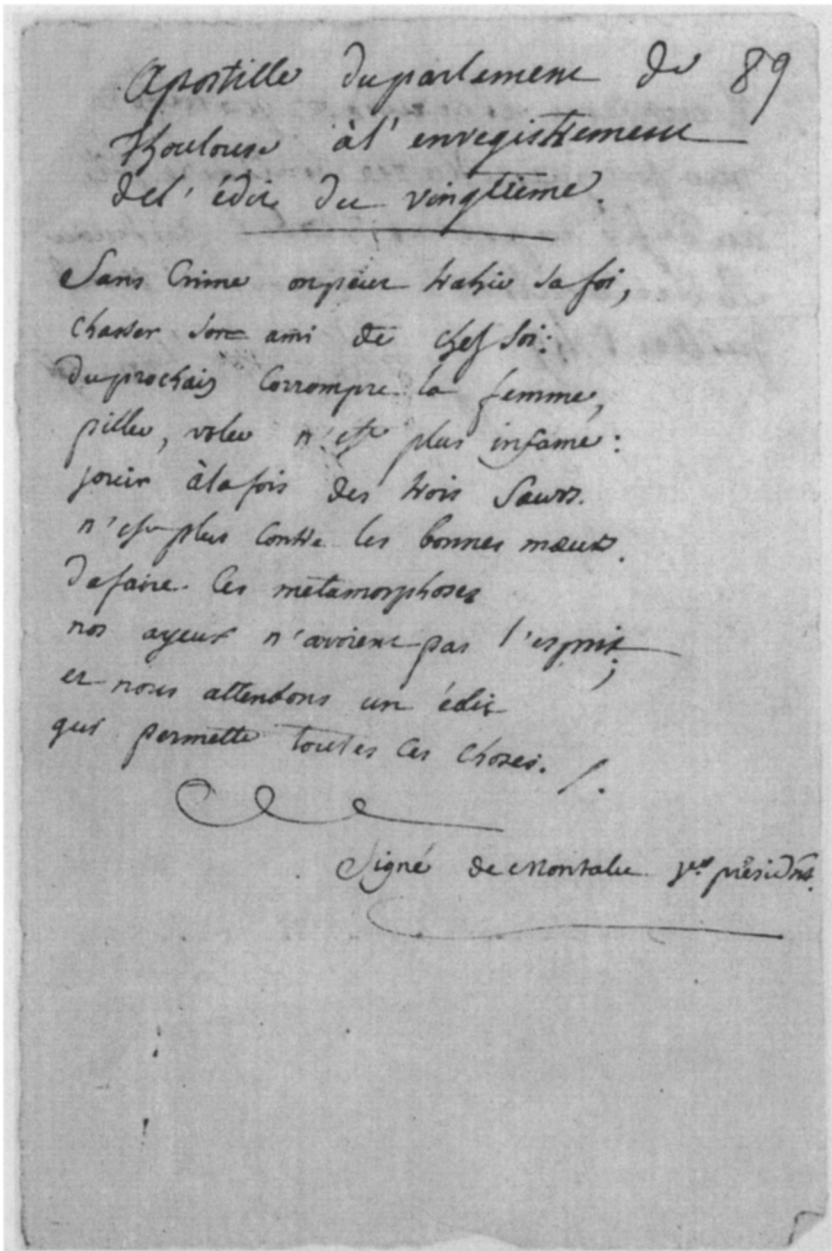


FIGURE 8: The police lifted this scrap of paper from a pocket of the abbé Guyard when they frisked him in the Bastille on July 10, 1749. The verse was dictated to Guyard by Pierre Sigorgne, a professor in the University of Paris, who had memorized a whole repertory of anti-government songs and poems and declaimed them to his students. This poem, a burlesque edict by the parlement of Toulouse, attacks the recent twentieth tax and various abuses of power, which it attributes to the immorality of the king as exemplified by his affair with the three daughters of the marquis de Nesle. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 11690, 1749.

favor by regaling him with the latest songs, even songs that made fun of Maurepas himself and especially those that ridiculed his rivals.³³

³³ Maurepas' love of songs and poems about current events is mentioned in many contemporary sources. See, for example, Rathery, *Journal et mémoires du marquis d'Argenson*, 5: 446; and Edmond-Jean-François Barbier, *Chronique de la régence et du règne de Louis XV (1718–1763), ou Journal de Barbier, avocat au Parlement de Paris* (Paris, 1858), 4: 362–66.

This was a dangerous game, however, and it backfired. On April 24, 1749, the king dismissed Maurepas from the government and sent him into exile by *lettre de cachet*. Contemporaries interpreted Maurepas' fall as a spectacular upheaval in the power system of Versailles. What had caused it? they asked. The answer, as it appears in letters and diaries, was unanimous: not political conflict, not ideological opposition, not questions of principle or policy or even patronage . . . but songs. One song, in particular, written to the tune, "Quand le péril est agréable":³⁴

Par vos façons nobles et franches,
Iris, vous enchantez nos coeurs;
Sur nos pas vous semez des fleurs.
Mais ce sont des fleurs blanches.

To the modern reader, the text, and the entire episode, is utterly opaque. Translated literally, the song sounds like an innocent exercise in gallantry:

By your noble and free manner,
Iris, you enchant our hearts.
On our path you strew flowers.
But they are white flowers.

To insiders in Versailles, however, the meaning was obvious, and it showed that the current wave of songs had gone beyond the boundaries of the permissible, even among the nastiest wits at court. The song cast Pompadour as Iris (some versions referred to her by her ignoble maiden name, Poisson, "Fish") and alluded to an intimate dinner in the private chambers of the king, where Louis was supposed to be protected from gossip by a barrier of secrecy. The little party consisted of the king, Pompadour, Maurepas, and Pompadour's cousin, Mme. d'Estrades. After arriving with a bouquet of white hyacinths, Pompadour distributed the flowers to her three companions: thus the "white flowers" in the song. But "fleurs blanches" also meant signs of venereal disease in menstrual discharge ("flueurs").³⁵ Of the three witnesses, only Maurepas was capable of turning this episode into verse and leaking it to the court. So whether or not he had actually composed the song, it produced such outrage in the private chambers that he was stripped of power and banished from Versailles.

Of course, there was much more to this than met the ear. Maurepas had enemies, notably his rival in the government, the comte d'Argenson, minister of war and an ally of Mme. de Pompadour. Her position as *maîtresse en titre*, a quasi-official role

³⁴ Rathery, *Journal et mémoires de marquis d'Argenson*, 5: 448, 452, 456. The following version is taken from d'Argenson's account of this episode, 456. See also Barbier, *Chronique*, 4: 361–67; Charles Collé, *Journal et mémoires de Charles Collé* (Paris, 1868), 1: 71; and François Joachim de Pierre, Cardinal de Bernis, *Mémoires et lettres de François-Joachim de Pierre, cardinal de Bernis (1715–1758)* (Paris, 1878), 120. A full and well-informed account of Maurepas' fall, which includes a version of the song that has "Pompadour" in place of "Iris," appears in a manuscript collection of songs in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, ms. 649, 121–27.

³⁵ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (Nîmes, 1778), 1: 526: "FLEURS, au pluriel, se dit pour flueurs et signifie les règles, les purgations des femmes . . . On appelle fleurs blanches une certaine maladie des femmes." Rather than a sexually transmitted disease like gonorrhea, this *maladie* might have been clorosis, or green-sickness.

designated by formal presentation at court, had not yet solidified to the point where she could consider herself invulnerable to gossip. A campaign of derision, orchestrated by Maurepas and conducted by means of songs, might persuade the king to renounce her in order to win back the respect of his subjects. Such at least was the opinion of some Parisians, who noted that the white flower song belonged to a flood of hostile verse that coursed through the city during the first six months of 1749.³⁶

The tide did not turn after the fall of Maurepas—perhaps, according to some observers, because his partisans kept up the crescendo of songs after he had disappeared in order to prove that he had not been responsible for them in the first place. But whatever the tactics pursued at court, the singing in Paris caused the government serious concern. With the backing of the king, d'Argenson organized a campaign to wipe it out. He went into action as soon as he learned that Parisians had taken up a new song with the first line, “Monstre dont la noire furie” (Monster whose black fury), the monster being Louis XV. From the ministry in Versailles to police headquarters in Paris, an order went out: find the author of the verse that began with those words. The order passed down the chain of command from the lieutenant general of police to a squad of inspectors and spies. And before long, Inspector Joseph d'Hémery received a note from an undercover agent: “I know someone who had a copy of the abominable verse against the king in his study a few days ago and who spoke approvingly of them. I can tell you who he is, if you want.”³⁷ Just two sentences, without a signature, on a crumpled piece of paper, but they earned the spy twelve louis d'or, the equivalent of nearly a year's wages for an unskilled laborer, and they triggered an extraordinary poetry-hunt and manhunt, which produced the richest dossiers of literary detective work that I have ever encountered. By following the police as they followed the poem, I will try to reconstruct a network that shows how messages traveled through an oral communication system in eighteenth-century Paris.³⁸

After a good deal of hugger-mugger, the police arrested the person who had possessed a handwritten text of the verse, a medical student named François Bonis. In his interrogation in the Bastille, he said he had got it from a priest, Jean Edouard, who was arrested and said he had got it from another priest, Inguibert de Montange, who was arrested and said he had got it from a third priest, Alexis Dujast, who was arrested and said he had got it from a law student, Jacques Marie Hallaire, who was arrested and said he had got it from a clerk in a notary's office, Denis Louis Jouet, who was arrested . . . and so on down the line, until the trail gave out and the police gave up, fourteen arrests from the beginning. Each arrest generated its own dossier, and each dossier contains new evidence about the modes of communication. The overall pattern can be seen in the flow chart in Figure 9.

³⁶ In addition to the references given above, note 30, see Bernard Cottret and Monique Cottret, “Les chansons du mal-aimé: Raison d'Etat et rumeur publique (1748–1750),” in *Histoire sociale, sensibilités collectives et mentalités: Mélanges Robert Mandrou* (Paris, 1985), 303–15.

³⁷ BA, ms. 11690, fol. 66.

³⁸ I have discussed this affair at length in an essay, “Public Opinion and Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” to be published sometime in 2001 by the European Science Foundation. Its text, which contains references to a great deal of source material, can be consulted in the electronic version of this essay, on the *AHR* web site, www.indiana.edu/~ahr. Most of the documentation comes from the dossiers grouped together in BA, ms. 11690.

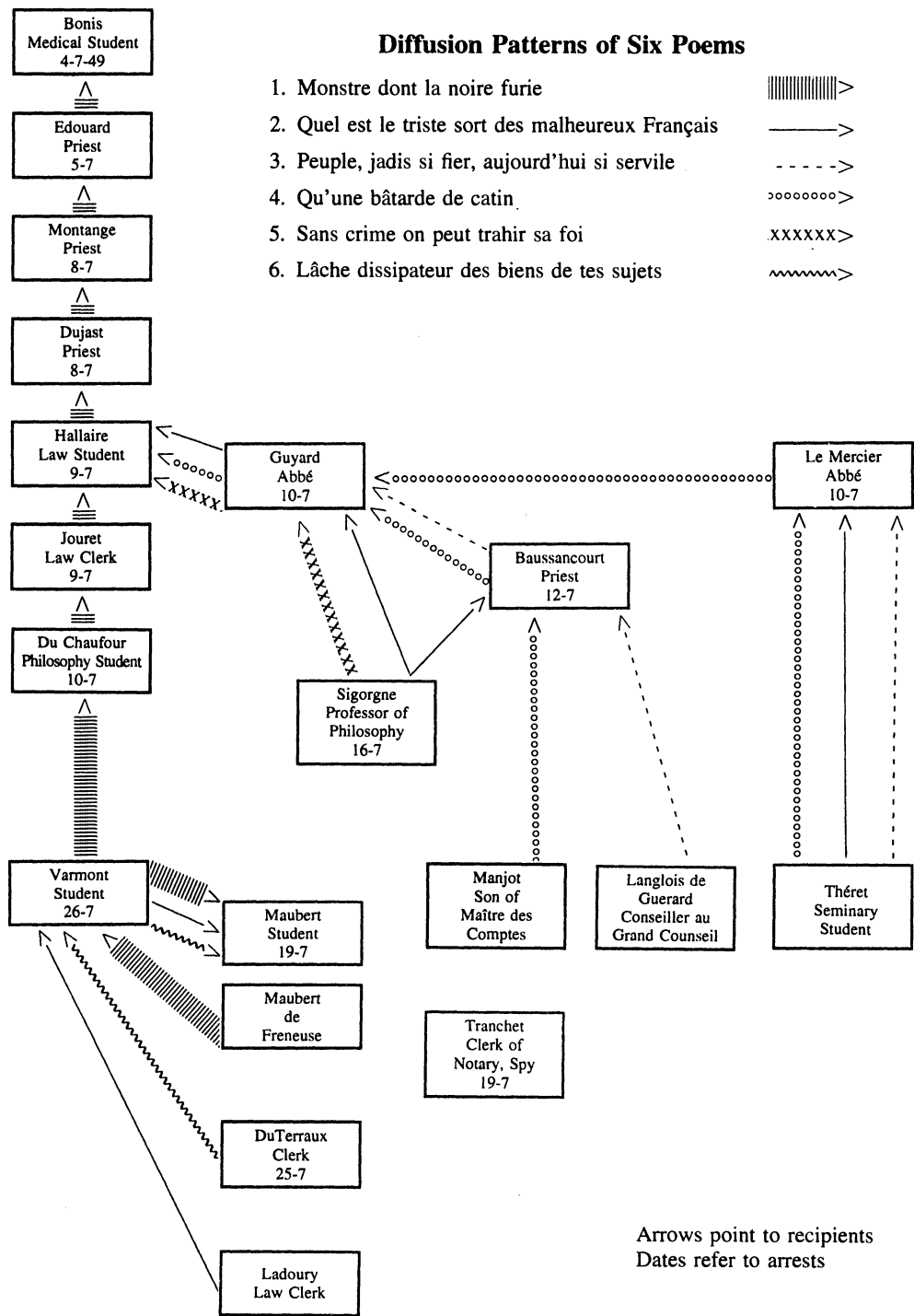


FIGURE 9: The diffusion pattern of six songs and poems.

At first glance, the pattern looks straightforward, and the milieu seems to be homogeneous. The verse (poem 1 on the diagram) was passed along a line of students, priests, lawyers, notaries, and clerks, most of them friends and all of them young—between sixteen and thirty-one, generally in their early twenties. The verse itself gave off a corresponding odor, at least to the comte d'Argenson, who returned a copy to the lieutenant general of police with a note describing it as an “infamous piece, which seems to me, as to you, to smell of pedantry and the Latin Quarter.”³⁹ But the picture became more complicated as the investigation broadened. When it reached Hallaire, the fifth person from the top of the diagram, the path of the poetry bifurcated. Hallaire had received three other poems from the abbé Guyard, who in turn had three further suppliers, who had suppliers of their own, and so on, until the police found themselves tracking a total of six poems and songs, one more seditious than the next (at least in the eyes of the authorities) and each with its own diffusion pattern.

In the end, they filled the Bastille with fourteen purveyors of poetry—hence the name of the operation in the dossiers, “The Affair of the Fourteen.” They never found the author of the original verse. In fact, it may not have had an author at all, not because Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have told us that the author is dead, but because people added and subtracted stanzas and modified phrasing as they pleased. It was a case of collective creation; and the first poem overlapped and intersected with so many others that, taken together, they created a field of poetic impulses, bouncing from one transmission point to another and filling the air with *mauvais propos*, a cacaphony of sedition set to rhyme.

The interrogations of the suspects in the Bastille provide a picture of the settings in which the verse circulated as well as the modes of their transmission. At each point, the poetry readings were accompanied by discussion. Bonis said that he had copied the first poem in the Hôtel-Dieu, where he had found a friend deep in conversation with a priest. “The conversation turned on the subject matter of the gazettes; and this priest, saying that someone had been so wicked as to write some satirical verses about the king, pulled out a poem attacking His Majesty.”⁴⁰ Hallaire testified that he had made his copy during a dinner with some friends in the house of his father, a silk merchant in the rue Saint-Denis. Montange copied the poem after hearing it read aloud during a bull session in the dining hall of his college. Pierre Sigorgne, a professor at the Collège Du Plessis, dictated two of the poems to his students: it was a political *dictée* in the heart of the University of Paris! Sigorgne knew the poems by heart, and one of them had eighty-four lines. The art of memory was still flourishing in eighteenth-century Paris, and in several cases it was reinforced by the greatest mnemonic device of all, music; for some of the poems were composed to fit the rhythms of popular tunes, and they circulated by means of singing, along with the songs that came from the court and that had provoked the investigation in the first place.

Whether sung or declaimed from memory, the verse was copied on scraps of paper, which were carried about in pockets and swapped for other verse. The texts

³⁹ Marc Pierre de Voyer de Paulmy, Comte d'Argenson, to Nicolas René Berryer, June 26, 1749, BA, ms. 11690, fol. 42.

⁴⁰ “Interrogatoire du sieur Bonis,” July 4, 1749, BA, ms. 11690, fols. 46–47.

soon found their way into manuscript gazettes and, finally, into print. The two longest poems, “Quel est le triste sort des malheureux Français” (What is the sad lot of the unhappy French) and “Peuple, jadis si fier, aujourd’hui si servile” (People, once so proud, today so servile), appeared prominently in *Vie privée de Louis XV*, the hostile history of the reign that became a bestseller in the 1780s. In discussing the outburst of songs and poems in 1749, it observed:

It was at this shameful time that the general scorn for the sovereign and his mistress began to become manifest, then continued to grow until the end of the reign . . . This scorn broke out for the first time in some satirical verse about the outrage committed to Prince Edward [Charles Edward Stuart, or Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, who was arrested in Paris on December 10, 1748 and expelled from the kingdom in accordance with the British demands accepted by France in the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle], where Louis XV is addressed in a passage that compares him with that illustrious exile:

Il est roi dans les fers; qu’êtes-vous sur le trône?
[He is a king in irons; what are you on the throne?]

And then, in an apostrophe to the nation:

Peuple, jadis si fier, aujourd’hui si servile,
Des princes malheureux vous n’êtes plus l’asile!

[People, once so proud, today so servile,
You no longer provide a sanctuary for unhappy princes!]

The eagerness of the public to seek out these pieces, to learn them by heart, to communicate them to one another, proved that the readers adopted the sentiments of the poet. Madame de Pompadour wasn’t spared, either . . . She ordered a drastic search for the authors, peddlers, and distributors of these pamphlets, and the Bastille was soon full of prisoners.⁴¹

In short, the communication process took place by several modes in many settings. It always involved discussion and sociability, so it was not simply a matter of messages transmitted down a line of diffusion to passive recipients but rather a process of assimilating and reworking information in groups—that is, the creation of collective consciousness or public opinion. If you will tolerate some jargon, you could think of it as a multi-media feedback system. But that sounds rather fancy. I merely want to signal you that there are theoretical issues at stake in this kind of study and that in pursuing it I have drawn on the sociology of communication developed by Elihu Katz and Gabriel Tarde rather than the more vogueish theories of Jürgen Habermas.⁴²

⁴¹ *Vie privée de Louis XV, ou principaux événements, particularités et anecdotes de son règne* (London, 1781), 2: 301–02. See also *Les fastes de Louis XV, de ses ministres, maîtresses, généraux et autres notables personnages de son règne* (Villefranche, 1782), 1: 333–40.

⁴² My own understanding of this field owes a great deal to conversations with Robert Merton and Elihu Katz. On Gabriel Tarde, see his dated but still stimulating work, *L’opinion et la foule* (Paris,

But to return to the medium of singing, the song that circulated most actively among the Fourteen, “Qu’une bâtarde de catin,” typified the ballads that had the most popular appeal in Paris. Its simple, eight-syllable lines fit a common tune, “Quand mon amant me fait la cour,” which was also identified in some sources as “Dirai-je mon Confiteor?” The “catin” (strumpet) in the first line was Mme. de Pompadour. And the catchy refrain, “Ah! le voilà, ah! le voici / Celui qui n’en a nul souci,” pointed a finger at the king, clueless, carefree Louis. The first verse went as follows:⁴³

Qu’une bâtarde de catin
A la cour se voie avancée,
Que dans l’amour et dans le vin,
Louis cherche une gloire aisée,
Ah! le voilà, ah! le voici
Celui qui n’en a nul souci.

[That a bastard strumpet
Should get ahead in the court,
That in love and wine
Louis should seek some easy glory,
Ah! there he is, ah! there he is
He who doesn’t have a care.]

Each verse satirized a public figure. After Pompadour and the king, the song worked its way down through ministers, generals, prelates, and courtiers. Everyone appeared incompetent or corrupt; and in each case, the refrain reiterated the song’s main theme: that the king, who should have taken responsibility for the welfare of his people, paid no heed to anything but drink and sex. While the kingdom went to hell, Louis remained “he who doesn’t have a care.” Although I cannot prove it, I think the song suggests a children’s game—the kind where one person stands in the middle of a circle and the rest join hands and skip around him singing “the farmer in the dell” or “the cheese stands alone”—except here the singing is pure mockery: the king is the ultimate idiot.

The verses cover all the major events and political issues between 1748 and 1750, and the versification is so simple that new subjects of mockery could easily be added as events evolved. That is exactly what happened, as you can see by comparing all the surviving versions of the song. I have found nine, scattered through various

1901); and Terry N. Clark, ed., *On Communication and Social Influence* (Chicago, 1969). For my part, I find Habermas’s notion of the public sphere valid enough as a conceptual tool; but I think that some of his followers make the mistake of reifying it, so that it becomes an active agent in history, an actual force that produces actual effects—including, in some cases, the French Revolution. For some stimulating and sympathetic discussion of the Habermas thesis, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

⁴³ I have located and compared the texts of nine manuscript versions of this song. The first verse, quoted below and reproduced in Figure 10, comes from the scrap of paper taken from the pockets of Christophe Guyard during his interrogation in the Bastille: BA, ms. 11690, fols. 67–68. The other texts come from: BA, ms. 11683, fol. 134; ms. 11683, fol. 132; BNF, ms. fr. 12717, pp. 1–3; ms. 12718, p. 53; ms. 12719, p. 83; Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, ms. 648, pp. 393–96; ms. 649, pp. 70–74; and ms. 580, pp. 248–49.

manuscript collections. They contain from six to twenty-three verses, the later ones alluding to the most recent events such as the notorious cuckolding of the tax farmer A.-J.-J. Le Riche de La Popelinière by the duc de Richelieu in the spring of 1750. Furthermore, if you compare different versions of the same verse, you can find small differences in phrasing, which probably bear the mark of the oral diffusion process, since variations crept in as the song passed from one singer to another. The Parisians may not have been signers of tales, like the Serbs studied by Albert Lord, but they were singers of news.⁴⁴ “Qu’une bâtarde de catin” contained so much news and commentary that it can be considered a sung newspaper.

But it should not be considered in isolation, because it belonged to a vast corpus of songs, which extended nearly everywhere in Paris and covered virtually everything of interest to Parisians. It is impossible to measure the size of this corpus, but we can get some idea of its dimensions by examining all the evidence that remains in the archives. When consigned to writing, the songs first appeared on slips of paper like that in Figure 10, which contains a selection of verses from “Qu’une bâtarde de catin” and came from a pocket of Christophe Guyard, one of the Fourteen, when he was frisked in the Bastille. As already explained, a similar scrap of paper, also with verses from “Qu’une bâtarde de catin,” was confiscated from a pocket of Mairobert. He had no connection with the Fourteen, so he probably acquired the song by tapping into another network. And seven other copies, which have turned up in various libraries, probably came from still other sources. In short, the song had traveled through many channels of diffusion, and the network of the Fourteen was but a small segment of a very large whole.

How large? Consider the next category of evidence: collections. Many Parisians picked up scraps of paper scribbled with verse from cafés and public gardens, then stored them in their apartments. The police found sixty-eight of these snippets—songs, poems, scribbling of all sorts—when they searched Mairobert’s room. Wealthier collectors had their secretaries transcribe this material into well-ordered registers, known as *chansonniers*. The most famous of these, the “Chansonnier Maurepas,” contains Maurepas’ own collection and runs to thirty-five volumes.⁴⁵ By studying it and seven other *chansonniers* from the mid-century years, I have formed a rough idea of how many songs existed at that time and which ones were the most popular. The richest source, a twelve-volume collection in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris entitled “Oeuvres diaboliques pour servir à l’histoire du temps,” contains 641 songs and poems from the period 1745–1751 and 264 that date from the end of 1748 to the beginning of 1751.⁴⁶ It seems clear, therefore, that the six songs and poems exchanged among the Fourteen constituted only a tiny fraction of a gigantic repertory, but they show up everywhere in the *chansonniers*, along with a host of other songs and poems on the same subjects. “Qu’une bâtarde de catin” appears most often, eight times in all. It can be taken as a fairly representative example of what Parisians sung in the middle of the century.

A final run of documents makes it possible for us to have some notion of what the

⁴⁴ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), shows how the rhythms of poetry and music contribute to the extraordinary feats of memorizing epic poems.

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the *chansonnier* Maurepas stops in 1747, but the even richer *chansonnier* Clairambault extends through the mid-century years: BNF, mss. fr. 12717–20.

⁴⁶ Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, mss. 648–50.

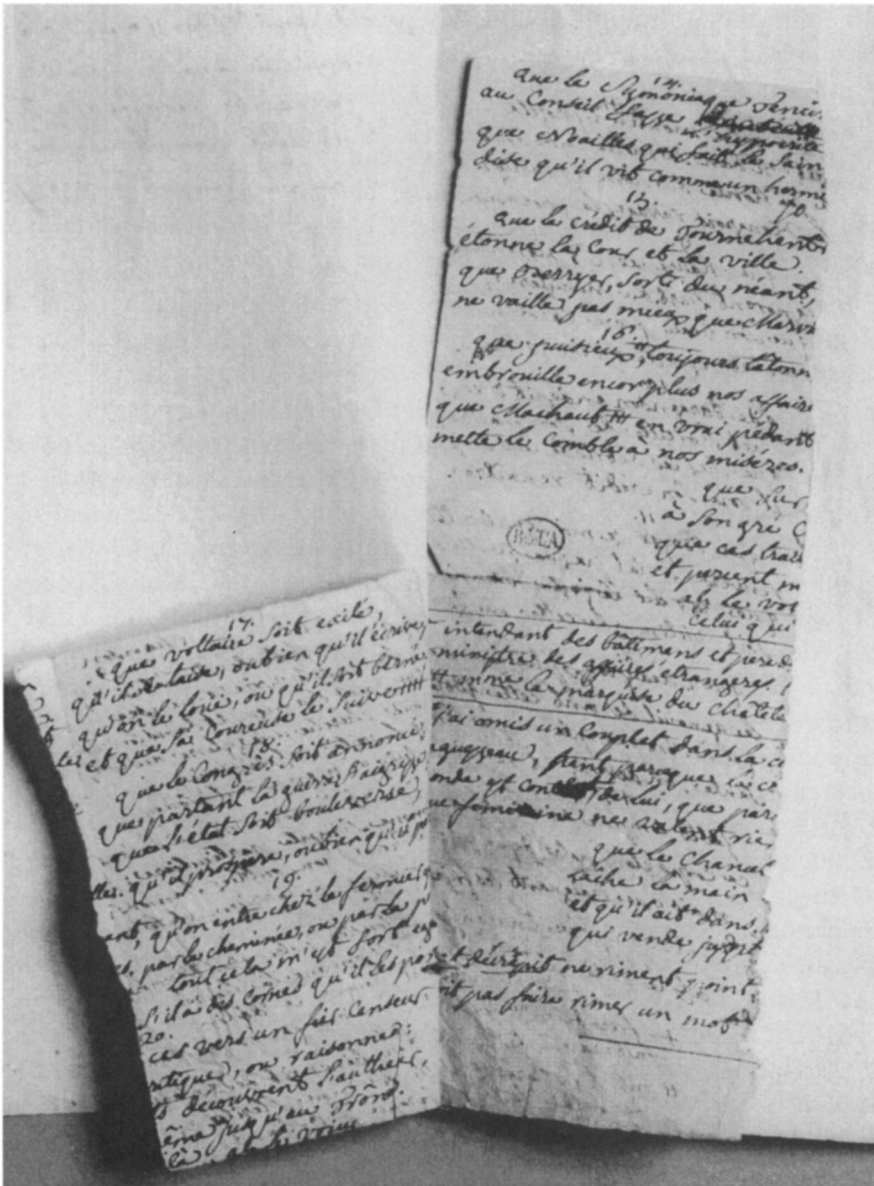


FIGURE 10: Some verses from the song “Qu’une bâtarde de catin,” taken from the abbé Guyard by the police when they frisked him in the Bastille. Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, ms. 11690, fols. 67–68, 1749.

Parisians heard. Of course, the sounds themselves disappeared into the air 250 years ago, and they cannot be duplicated exactly today. But a series of musical “keys,” such as “La clef du Caveau” in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, contain the actual music to the tunes cited in the *chansonniers*.⁴⁷ I am incapable of

⁴⁷ P. Capelle, *La clef du Caveau, à l’usage de tous les chansonniers français* (Paris, 1816); and J.-B. Christophe Ballard, *La clef des chansonniers* (Paris, 1717). Most of the other “keys” are anonymous manuscripts available in the Fonds Weckerlin of the BNF. The most important for this research project are *Recueil d’anciens vaudevilles, romances, chansons galantes et grivoises, brunettes, airs tendres* (1729) and *Recueil de timbres de vaudevilles nottés de La Coquette sans le savoir et autres pièces à vaudeville*

France” evoked a particular meaning in the social code of the time. Lackeys were often called by the province of their origin. So by shouting out “La France” in an unguarded moment, du Barry was calling the king her lackey.⁴⁸ She did so in a spectacularly vulgar manner, one that could be taken to reveal the plebeian nature beneath her courtly veneer; for “fout le camp” was the language of the brothel, not the court. Similar outbursts of vulgarity occur throughout the book. In fact, they constitute its central theme. *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry* was a classic *libelle*, organized according to the formula that I mentioned earlier: from the brothel to the throne. Du Barry sleeps her way to the top, using tricks she picked up in the whorehouse to revive the exhausted libido of the old king and thus to dominate the kingdom. She is a slutty Cinderella and therefore different from all previous royal mistresses—or all since Mme. de Pompadour, née Poisson—who, whatever their morals, were at least ladies. This theme is summed up by a song—one of many songs printed in the book—which includes the lines:

Tous nos laquais l’avaient eue,
Lorsque traînant dans la rue,
Vingt sols offerts à sa vue
La déterminaient d’abord.

[All our lackeys had her
In the days when she walked the streets,
And twenty sols offered up front
Made her accept at once.]⁴⁹

The rhetoric plays on the assumption that readers wanted their kings to be discriminating in their gallantry, just as they were expected to be heroic in war, regal in court, and pious in church. Louis XV failed on all counts, although he got high marks for his bravery at the battle of Fontenoy in 1745. He was the antithesis of France’s favorite king, Henri IV. And he was reviled in the book, not because the author held him up to any radical or republican standard of statecraft but because he had not been kingly enough. Thus a second leitmotiv that runs throughout the text: the degradation of the monarchy. At every point, the narrative dwells on the profanation of royal symbols and the person of the king himself. The scepter, it says, has become as feeble as the royal penis.⁵⁰

This was strong language for an age that treated kings as sacred beings directly ordained to rule by God and invested with the royal touch. But Louis had lost his touch, as I explained earlier. *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry* compounded that loss by presenting him as an ordinary mortal—or worse, as a dirty old man. At the same time, it invited the reader to enjoy the *frisson* of seeing into the innermost chambers of Versailles, into the *secret du roi* itself, even to observe the king between the sheets. For that is where the great affairs of state were decided—the fall of Choiseul, the partition of Poland, the destruction of France’s judicial system by the

⁴⁸ Louis Petit de Bachaumont, the doyen of Mme. Doublet’s salon, had a lackey known as “France”: see Funck-Brentano, *Figaro et ses devanciers*, 264.

⁴⁹ *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry*, 167.

⁵⁰ *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry*, 76.

chancellor Maupeou, everything that would have warranted a banner headline, if there had been headlines, or newspapers with news. In each case, as the story went, du Barry filled the king with drink, dragged him to bed, and got him to sign any edict that had been prepared for her by her evil counselors. This kind of reportage anticipated techniques that would be developed a century later in yellow journalism: it presented the inside story of politics in Versailles; it pictured power struggles as what-the-butler-saw; it reduced complex affairs of state to backstairs intrigue and the royal sex life.

That, of course, was hardly serious history. I would call it folklore. But it had enormous appeal—so much, in fact, that it is still alive today. I found the coffee-spilling episode—with the wrong mistress but the right emphasis on her vulgarity—in a French-Canadian comic book. (See Figure 11.) Instead of dismissing political folklore as trivial, I would take it seriously. In fact, I believe it was a crucial ingredient in the collapse of the Old Regime. But before leaping to that conclusion, I had better retreat to familiar territory: the trade in forbidden books, which I studied in my last round of research. The main results of this study can be summarized in the following bestseller list, which shows which books circulated most widely in the vast underground of illegal literature during the twenty years before the revolution:⁵¹

L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante by L. S. Mercier
*Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry** by M. F. Pidansat de Mairobert
Système de la nature by P. H. Baron d'Holbach
Tableau de Paris by L. S. Mercier
Histoire philosophique by G. T. F. Raynal
*Journal historique de la révolution opérée . . . par M. de Maupeou** by M. F. Pidansat de Mairobert
 and B. J. F. Moufle d'Angerville
L'Arrétin by H. J. Du Laurens
Lettre philosophique par M. de V—, anonymous
*Mémoires de l'abbé Terray** by J.-B. L. Coquereau
La pucelle d'Orléans by Voltaire
Questions sur l'Encyclopédie by Voltaire
*Mémoires de Louis XV,** anonymous
*L'espion anglais** by M. F. Pidansat de Mairobert
La fille de joie, a translation of *Fanny Hill* by Fougeret de Montbrun (?)
Thérèse philosophe by J.-B. de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens

Five of the top fifteen books on the list, those marked by an asterisk, were *libelles* or *chroniques scandaleuses*, and there were dozens more. A huge corpus of scandalous literature reached readers everywhere in France, although it has been almost completely forgotten today—no doubt because it did not qualify as literature in the eyes of literary critics and librarians. The *libelles* often have impressive literary qualities, nonetheless. *Anecdotes sur Mme. la comtesse du Barry* made it to the top of the bestseller list because, among other things, it was very well written. Mairobert knew how to tell a story. His text is funny, wicked, shocking, outrageous, and a very good read. I recommend it strongly.

It also looks impressive physically. It comes packaged in an imposing, 346-page

⁵¹ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995).



FIGURE 11: The coffee-spilling episode as pictured in a modern-day French-Canadian comic book. Mme. de Pompadour is mistakenly substituted for Mme. du Barry. From Léandre Bergeron and Robert Lavaill, *Petit manuel d'histoire de Québec* (n.p., n.d. [1970s]), 48.

tome, complete with a handsome frontispiece and all the appearances of a serious biography. The other *libelles* are often more elaborate. They contain footnotes, appendices, genealogies, and all sorts of documentation. The *Vie privée de Louis XV* provides a four-volume history of the entire reign, more detailed and better documented—for all its scurrility—than many modern histories. The *Journal historique de la révolution opérée . . . par M. de Maupeou* runs to seven volumes;

L'espion anglais runs to ten; *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France* to thirty-six.

These books charted the whole course of contemporary history. In fact, they were the only map available, because political biography and contemporary history—two genres that provide the backbone of our own bestseller lists—did not exist in the legal literature of the Old Regime. They were forbidden.⁵² Contemporaries who wanted to orient themselves by relating the present to the recent past had to turn to libel literature. They had nowhere else to go.

How did that process of orientation take place? If you read your way through the entire corpus of *libelles* and *chroniques scandaleuses*, you find the same traits, the same episodes, and often the same phrases scattered everywhere. The authors drew on common sources and lifted passages from each other's texts as freely as they traded scraps of news in the cafés. It was not a matter of plagiarism, because that notion hardly applied to underground literature, and the books, like the songs, hardly had individual authors. It was a case of rampant intertextuality.

Despite their baroque profusion, the texts can be reduced to a few leitmotifs, which recur throughout the corpus. The court is always sinking deeper into depravity; the ministers are always deceiving the king; the king is always failing to fulfill his role as head of state; the state's power is always being abused; and the common people are always paying the price for the injustices inflicted on them: higher taxes, increased suffering, more discontent, and greater impotence in the face of an arbitrary and all-powerful government. Individual news items like the coffee spilling were stories in themselves. But they also fit into narrative frames of whole books, and the books fit into a meta-narrative that ran through the entire corpus: politics was an endless series of variations on a single theme, decadence and despotism.

True, I don't know how the readers read those books, but I don't think it extravagant to insist on a quality of reading in general: it is an activity that involves making sense of signs by fitting them in frames. Stories provide the most compelling frames. Ordinary people often find meaning in the booming, buzzing confusion of the world around them by telling, hearing, and reading stories. The general readers in eighteenth-century France made sense of politics by incorporating news into the narrative frames provided by the literature of libel. And they were reinforced in their interpretations by the messages they received from all the other media—gossip, poems, songs, prints, jokes, and all the rest.

I HAVE REACHED THE END OF MY ARGUMENT, and I realize that I have not proven it. To drive it home, I must push it in two directions. First, further back into the past. The corpus of *libelle* literature from the 1770s and 1780s grew out of an old tradition, which goes back beyond the Huguenot propaganda against Louis XIV, beyond the seditious libeling of Jules Mazarin (*mazarinades*), and beyond the pamphleteering of the religious wars to the art of insult and rumor-mongering

⁵² Despite their official function, few *historiographes du roi* wrote contemporary history. The exception was Voltaire, whose *Siècle de Louis XV* reads like a political pamphlet in comparison with his magisterial *Siècle de Louis XIV*.

developed in the Renaissance courts. From the political slander of Pietro Aretino onward, this tradition changed and grew, until it culminated in the vast outpouring of *libelles* under Louis XV and Louis XVI.⁵³

Those *libelles* in turn provided a frame for the public's perception of events during the crisis of 1787–1788, which brought down the Old Regime. That is the second direction in which I would take the argument. But to explain how that happened, I will have to write a book, showing how the crisis was construed, day by day, in all the media of the time.

So I am issuing promissory notes instead of arriving at a firm conclusion. But I hope I have said enough to provoke some rethinking of the connections between the media and politics—even politics today. Although I am skeptical about attempts to make history teach lessons, I think the Paris of Louis XV may help us gain some perspective on the Washington of Bill Clinton. How do most Americans orient themselves amidst the political confusion and media blitzes of the year 2000? Not, I fear, by analyzing issues, but from our own variety of political folklore—that is, by telling stories about the private lives of our politicians, just as the French regaled themselves with the *Vie privée de Louis XV*. How can we make sense of it all? Not merely by reading our daily newspaper but by rereading the history of an earlier information age, when the king's secret was exposed beneath the tree of Cracow and the media knit themselves together in a communication system so powerful that it proved to be decisive in the collapse of the regime.

⁵³ I have attempted to sketch the long-term history of *libelles* in *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, chap. 8.

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