Printed: **7/9/2014 2:06 PM**
OCLC In Process Date:

5-E

32044014031017

HARVARD
LIBRARY

Scan & Deliver

ILLiad TN: 4345931

Borrower: HLS

Lending String: HLS

Patron: Darnton, Robert

Journal Title: Rewriting the French Revolution /edited by Colin Lucas.

Volume: **Issue:**
Month/Year: 1991 **Pages:** 1-32

Article Author:

Article Title: The Forbidden Books of Pre-revolutionary France

Imprint: Via Scan and Deliver Service

Special Instructions:

ILL Number: 4345930

Call #: WID WIDLC DC148 .R49 1991

Location: HLS

ODYSSEY ENABLED

Charge
Maxcost:
Billing Category: Exempt

Borrowing Library:
Harvard University - Widener Library

Email:

Notes:
Transaction Date:7/9/2014 2:03:33 PM

S & D Processing Notes:

- ☐ Not as cited
- ☐ Duplicate
- ☐ Multiple articles
- ☐ Exceeds 10% of work
- ☐ Not on shelf
- ☐ On Reserve
- ☐ Too fragile
- ☐ Checked out/on hold
- ☐ Exceeds 100 pages

Initials:________

1

The Forbidden Books of Pre-revolutionary France

ROBERT DARNTON

I WANT to try to answer a question that was first raised seventy-nine years ago by Daniel Mornet and that has been dangling ever since: what did the French read in the eighteenth century? Whatever it was, according to Mornet, it was not what we commonly take to be eighteenth-century French literature. We envisage the literature of every era as a corpus of works grouped around a core of classics; and we derive our notion of the classics from our professors, who took it from their professors, who got it from theirs, and so on, back to some disappearing point in the early nineteenth century. Literary history is an artifice, pieced together over many generations, shortened here and lengthened there, worn thin in some places, patched over in others, and laced through everywhere with anachronism. It bears little relation to the actual experience of literature in a given time.

Mornet set out to capture that experience, *la littérature vécue*, by finding out what people read under the Old Regime. He began by counting books, a great many of them: 20,000 in all, which he compiled from auction catalogues of eighteenth-century private libraries. After accumulating a mountain of index cards, he decided to determine how many copies of Rousseau's *Social Contract* had been unearthed. Answer: one. One copy in a mass of 20,000 works. It looked as though the greatest political treatise of the century, the bible of the French Revolution, went unread before 1789. The connecting links between the Enlightenment and the Revolution seemed to dissolve. Instead of pondering arguments about popular sovereignty and the General Will, the French appeared to have

amused themselves with the sentimental novels of Madame Riccoboni and the adventure stories of Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe. The Revolution was not 'la faute à Rousseau' and probably not 'la faute à Voltaire', either.[1]

That was 1910. We know now that Mornet made several false steps. He ended his enquiry in 1780, just when the first of many editions of Rousseau's works, the *Social Contract* included, began to appear. He neglected popularized versions of the *Social Contract*, notably the one in Book V of *Émile*, which was incontestably a best-seller. And his source was flawed. Libraries important enough to be sold in public auctions hardly represented a common variety of book ownership, not to mention reading. And the catalogues printed for those auctions had to pass through the censorship. So the ideological element was excluded from the very source where Mornet hoped to find it.[2]

Whatever the adequacy of his answer, Mornet's question remains valid. It has provoked a succession of attempts, in research projects scattered over three-quarters of a century, to identify the literature that Frenchmen actually read under the Old Regime. Each attempt has strengths and weaknesses of its own. Each has added to our knowledge. But cumulatively they tend to cancel one another out, or to contain so many contradictions that no general pattern can be identified. Mornet's question continues to hang over literary history, as tantalizing as ever.[3]

[1] Daniel Mornet, 'Les Enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750–1780)', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 17 (1910), 449–92. In later references to this research, Mornet advanced even stronger conclusions. See Mornet, 'L'Influence de J.-J. Rousseau au XVIIIe siècle', *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 8 (1912), 44; id., *Rousseau: L'Homme et l'œuvre* (Paris, 1950), 102–6; and id., *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*, 5th edn. (Paris, 1954), 229.

[2] The best criticism of Mornet's work is still Ralph Leigh, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), 549–65. Many scholars have continued to accept Mornet's conclusions, none the less. See Alfred Cobban, 'The Enlightenment and the French Revolution', reprinted in his *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London, 1968), 22; Joan McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution, 1762–1791* (London, 1965); and the more measured interpretation in Norman Hampson, *Will and Circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (Norman, Okla., 1983), 28.

[3] For a survey of this literature, see Robert Darnton, 'Reading, Writing, and Publishing', in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 167–82 and my review of Michel Marion, *Recherches sur les bibliothèques privées à Paris au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* in *The Eighteenth Century: A Current Bibliography*, NS 6 (1984), 17–18.

It can easily become a *question mal posée,* because it is far less simple than it seems. In order to trim it down to manageable proportions, I would like to limit my enquiry to the element that Mornet left out of his: illegal literature. That eliminates a vast amount, I know. I simply cannot circumnavigate all of French literature in the eighteenth century, but I think I can map the forbidden sector, and that sector was enormous. In fact, it contained virtually the entire Enlightenment and almost everything that Mornet was later to identify with the intellectual origins of the French Revolution. The censorship, the book police, and the monopolistic practices of the booksellers' guild made it difficult and dangerous to publish anything that had not received official approval, either in the form of a royal *privilège* or under one of the many rubrics by which the officials distinguished graduated nuances of legality: a *permission tacite,* a *permission simple,* a *permission de police,* or a simple *tolérance.* In the baroque world of book administration under the Old Regime, legality shaded off into illegality by almost imperceptible degrees. But at the far end of the spectrum, there existed a category of unalloyed illegality, of books that were clearly forbidden, beyond the pale, outside the law. Those are the books that I propose to study.

This is easier said than done. The irredeemably illegal element in eighteenth-century literature does not stand out to the twentieth-century eye. Some title pages flaunt their forbidden character by gross language—*Le Cul d'Iris* (Iris's Arse)—or by provocative false addresses: 'at the sign of liberty' or 'at a hundred leagues from the Bastille'. But many look anodyne, or at least not perceptibly more illegal than the quasi-legal works that were tolerated by the government. How can one identify the truly 'bad' books, as they were known to the police? The police kept a few lists. The king's council issued individual condemnations. Bishops fulminated from pulpits. And the public hangman lacerated and burned forbidden books with great ceremony at the foot of the grand staircase before the Parlement of Paris. However, none of those activities generated enough documentation for one to be able to study the entire body of illegal literature. In fact, the hangman burned only nineteen 'bad books' during the twenty years before the Revolution, yet thousands of them circulated 'under the cloak'

during those years. How can we get our bearings on that vast, uncharted ocean of literature?

The best way is to consult all the available documentation left behind by the professionals of the publishing business. They had to be able to recognize forbidden literature, because it was a hazard of their trade. There could be serious consequences for those who were caught selling it. On 24 September 1768, the Parlement of Paris condemned Jean-Baptiste Josserand, a grocery boy; Jean Lécuyer, a dealer in secondhand goods; and Lécuyer's wife Marie Suisse, for peddling *Le Christianisme dévoilé, L'Homme aux quarante écus, La Chandelle d'Arras*, and similar works. They were exposed in chains for three days on the Quai des Augustins, Place des Barnabites, and Place de Grève, wearing a sign saying 'Purveyor of impious and immoral libels'. The two men were then branded on their right shoulders with the letters GAL for *galérien* and sent to row in the galleys, Lécuyer for five years, Josserand for nine years, followed by perpetual banishment from the kingdom. Madame Lécuyer spent five years in prison.[4] More distinguished booksellers such as the masters of the Paris guild did not receive such harsh punishment, although in principle, according to a royal edict of 16 April 1757, they could be hanged for dealing in such literature. Instead, they generally spent five or six months in the Bastille. But the Bastille was no three-star hotel, despite the attempts of some revisionist historians to brighten up its reputation. A half-year in one of its cells could ruin a bookseller's business as well as his health. So the men in the book trade had to know how to tell the difference between a quasi-legal work and an egregiously illegal one. To them, the distinction could be a matter of commercial survival, if not a question of life or death.

They expressed the distinction in many ways. First, in their use of language. As already mentioned, the police referred to forbidden books as 'mauvais livres'. Journeymen printers had a special term for them in the argot of their craft: 'marrons' (chestnuts), whence 'marronner' (to print an illegal work).[5] Booksellers used a more elevated expression: 'livres philo-

[4] Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter BN), ms. fr. 22099, fos. 213–21.

[5] A.-F. Momoro, *Traité élémentaire de l'imprimerie, ou le manuel de l'imprimeur* (Paris, 1793), 234–5 and Nicolas Contat, *Anecdotes typographiques*, ed. Giles Barber (Oxford, 1980, from the original manuscript of 1762), 71.

sophiques'. Thus a typical remark from a letter by Gabriel Regnault, a bookseller in Lyon: 'My line is all philosophical, so I want almost nothing but that kind.' He then indicated what 'that kind' meant by ordering eighteen works and marking all the 'philosophical' ones with an X. They ranged from *De l'esprit* by Helvétius to *L'An 2440* by Mercier and *La Fille de joie*, a translation of *Fanny Hill*.[6]

Publishing houses developed alliances for marketing their work. When one publisher completed a new edition, he often traded a quarter or a half of the copies for an equivalent number, calculated in printed sheets, which he chose from the stock of an allied house. In this way he could market the edition quickly and vary the assortment in his own stock. 'Philosophical books' commanded a special exchange rate—usually one sheet for two of a legal book or a pirated version of a legal book. Thus the terms proposed by Gabriel Grasset, a Geneva printer who specialized in forbidden books, in negotiating an alliance with the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel: 'As all the other booksellers give me two sheets for every one of the philosophical kind, I propose the same exchange to you.'[7] 'Philosophy' was not an empty abstraction for eighteenth-century publishers. It was embedded in the routine of their daily business.

They often issued two kinds of catalogues: one for legal books, which carried their name and address, and another entitled 'livres philosophiques', which contained nothing but highly illegal works and excluded all kinds of incriminating information. Sales representatives carried the second kind 'under the cloak' when they made their rounds, and the home office mailed it to booksellers whose discretion could be relied upon. The booksellers, in turn, signalled 'philosophical books' in their orders. They marked the titles of egregiously illegal works with an X, or drew lines to separate them from the legal section of the order, or scribbled them on scraps of *papier volant*, which were to be burned after the arrival of the covering letter.

[6] Regnault to the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, 19 Sept. 1774 in Papers of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (hereafter STN), Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, Neuchâtel, Switzerland. For a full discussion of such usages in the book trade, see my article, 'Philosophy under the Cloak', in Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (eds.), *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800* (New York, 1989), 27–49.

[7] Grasset to STN, 19 June 1772.

When the 'philosophical books' came back in shipments from the publisher, they were stashed in the bottom of the crate, or hidden in the packing, or buried inside legal works by a technique known in the trade as 'marrying'. The supplier would slip sheets of illegal works in legal ones—books were shipped in unbound sheets—and could be confident that the inspectors in the guild halls would not look closely enough to detect them. Marriages inevitably brought together ill-sorted couples: thus an order to a Swiss firm from a bookseller in Loudun asked that *La fille de joie* be married to *Le Nouveau Testament*.[8]

Everywhere in the practice of their trade, in selling, ordering, shipping, and talking about books, eighteenth-century bookmen singled out the truly illegal works for special treatment. By studying their letters, therefore, one should be able to identify the 'philosophical' element in the trade. And by studying enough of them—order by order, title by title, copy by copy—one should be able to reconstruct the entire corpus of illegal literature that actually circulated in prerevolutionary France.

That is what I have been doing for most of the last twenty years. I have systematically worked through the archives of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), the only papers of an eighteenth-century publisher–wholesaler to survive, in order to follow the play of supply and demand on book markets everywhere in France from 1769 to 1789. The archives contain 50,000 letters and a full supply of account books. They cover all the cities and most of the towns in France. They are rich enough, I believe, to provide an answer to Mornet's question, or at least the part of it concerning illegal literature.

However, the history of literature is littered with so many failed answers, including those of Mornet himself, that it seems worth while to pause for a moment in order to consider some methodological problems. The greatest problem concerns the representativeness of the STN papers. It may be exhilarating to take a great trek through some virgin archives, but why expend so much effort if the archives do not lead anywhere in particular? Can one piece together the whole world of forbidden French books from a single collection of documents that happened to survive in the attic of an old house in a small Swiss

[8] The order appears in an entry for 24 April 1776 in the 'Livre de commission' of the STN.

city?[9] I must admit to having lost some sleep over those objections. In order to answer them, I would turn once more to the practices of the eighteenth-century book trade, especially two of them: the practices of exchanging books among publishers and of ordering books among booksellers.

Because publishers swapped large proportions of new editions among themselves, they built up large stocks of *livres d'assortiment;* and publishing shaded off into wholesaling. In fact, the functions of publisher, printer, wholesaler, and retailer blended into one another and were often difficult to distinguish before the nineteenth century.[10] Yet while combining several functions, some houses specialized in the production of certain kinds of books. 'Philosophical books' tended to be put out by obscure entrepreneurs from small shops in the tiny principalities across France's borders. Everything about these businesses was marginal—the location, the product, and the producers: men who set up shop between bankruptcies and risked prison by publishing anything the market would bear. Gabriel Grasset and Jacques Benjamin Téron in Geneva, Gariel Décombaz in Lausanne, Samuel Fauche in Neuchâtel, Louis-François Mettra in Neuwied, Clément Plomteux in Liège, Jean-Louis de Boubers in Brussels—their names are forgotten today, but they produced the bulk of France's forbidden literature. Instead of selling it all themselves, they traded it, at the advantageous rates for 'philosophical' goods, against the less dangerous works printed in the larger and better established houses. In this manner, they accumulated a stock that they could sell without difficulty in their home towns, while the big firms, like the STN, acquired

[9] On the origin and character of the STN archives, see John Jeanprêtre, 'Histoire de la Société typographique de Neuchâtel, 1769–1798', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1949), 70–9, 115–20, and 148–53; and Jacques Rychner, 'Les Archives de la Société typographique de Neuchâtel', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1969), 1–24.

[10] The publisher did not emerge as a professional occupying a clearly defined place in the system for producing and diffusing books until the nineteenth century. True, the word had come into existence; thus 'éditeur' according to the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*: 'Celui qui prend soin de revoir et de faire imprimer l'ouvrage d'autruil.' A few entrepreneurs such as Charles-Joseph Panckoucke began to specialize in publishing under the Old Regime, but the functions of the publisher, as distinct from the printer and bookseller, were not well established before the era of Balzac, who described them vividly in *Les Illusions perdues*. We still need a study of the rise of the publisher, but there is some information scattered through Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin (eds.), *Histoire de l'édition française* (Paris, 1984), ii.

the illegal books that they needed to satisfy customers throughout their own networks of retailers.[11]

The exchange system meant that the same general stock was available to all the major wholesale houses. Therefore, in ordering with one or two wholesalers outside France, a French retailer could get virtually everything he wanted. This practice suited the big houses, which promoted it by improvising informal alliances among themselves, even though they were competitors. In a letter to one of its customers, the STN explained: 'Despite the fact that we compete with several of our neighbours, we nevertheless co-operate with them. Having by now a very extended business, we succeed in selling their books along with our own.'[12] The STN's catalogue in 1785 contained 700 titles. An inventory of its stock in 1787 ran to 1,500 titles. Already in 1773 it boasted, 'There is no book of any importance that appears in France that we are not capable of supplying.'[13]

Seen from the perspective of the bookseller placing orders, this system had one feature that made it fundamentally different from the book-ordering practices of today: it did not permit returns. Retailers therefore tended to be cautious. They ordered only as many copies as they felt sure of selling. In fact, they often arranged sales in advance and adjusted the size of their order accordingly. A typical order from a provincial city like Orléans or Nancy would contain only four or five copies per title (though occasionally the bookseller would request a dozen copies in order to get the free thirteenth) but it would include a great many titles. The point of this practice was to save on transport costs. Costs were cheapest in bulk shipments that went by wagon (*voiture*), but the wagoners would not take anything that weighed less than 50 pounds. The lighter shipments had to travel by coach (*carosse*) at a rate that could be ruinously expensive. So the *voiture–carosse* distinction served as a guideline in the ordering strategy of booksellers. It meant that they ordered large assortments of books from a small number of suppliers instead of scattering their orders among many houses

[11] The account of these trade practices is derived from the dossiers of the printers and booksellers who did business most regularly with the STN, notably Gabriel Grasset, Jacques Benjamin Téron, and Gabriel Décombaz.

[12] STN to Mossy of Marseille, 10 July 1773.

[13] STN to Astori of Lugano, 15 Apr. 1773.

according to whatever advantages they could find in the wholesale prices.

Of course, when booksellers caught the scent of an unusual bargain or a possible coup, they would order from anyone who could supply the goods. But they tended to develop stable relations with a few wholesale houses. So a compilation of their orders with one major supplier over several years can reveal the general pattern of their business. And since they often accompanied their orders with comments on their trade, their correspondence provides plenty of qualitative evidence to supplement the statistics. By the same token, the trade of one big supplier like the STN can serve as a window, which provides an accurate view of the illegal commerce as a whole.

Admittedly, there is bound to be some distortion. The STN sold its own publications in larger numbers than the books it procured from other publishers, and it specialized slightly in a few genres such as travel and Protestant devotional works. However, one can allow for those factors. By studying the STN's business with a dozen of its most regular customers distributed everywhere in France, one can calculate the demand for illegal literature with considerable precision. It is even possible to construct a retrospective best-seller list and thus, at last, to answer Mornet's question—all because the STN archives really are representative of the illegal book trade in general.

However, I *want* them to be representative. After twenty years and 50,000 letters, the hunger for significant conclusions can be overwhelming—and that is dangerous, because as soon as a historian desires a certain result, he is likely to find it. So, in order to control for bias built into my work in Neuchâtel, I have undertaken three research projects in other archives. It would be misleading to refer to them as 'control' studies, because no attempt to measure literary demand two hundred years ago can be conducted with scientific rigour. All the sources are imperfect, and none of the methods for studying them is foolproof. Worst of all, there are no publisher's papers comparable to those of the STN. But it is possible to find some points of comparison by culling statistics from three other kinds of documents: registers of books confiscated in the Paris customs, inventories of bookshops made during police raids, and catalogues of *livres philosophiques* from other Swiss publishers.

A detailed description of all this supplementary research would be out of place here. Suffice it to say that the STN papers yield a list of 457 titles of illegal books, which can be compared with lists compiled from the other three sources. The French authorities kept a record of all the books that they confiscated in the Paris customs from 1771 to 1789, and in each case they noted the reason for the confiscation—that is, whether the book was pirated, or relatively inoffensive but *non permis*, or unambiguously illegal. The total number of titles among the illegal books comes to 280, of which 166 (59 per cent) appear on the STN list.[14]

Police inspectors often raided bookshops after receiving tips about suspicious activities. When they caught a bookseller with a substantial stock of illegal works, they confiscated the books and listed them in inventories. The archives of the Bastille contain nine such inventories from raids in Paris, Strasbourg, Caen, Lyon, and Versailles between 1773 and 1783. They also contain a list of all the confiscated books in the *pilon* (pulper) of the Bastille. These lists yield 300 titles, of which 179 (60 per cent) are on the STN list.[15]

Finally, the manuscripts in Neuchâtel and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris contain six catalogues of *livres philosophiques* issued by publishers in Geneva, Lausanne, and Berne between 1772 and 1780. The catalogues indicate the character of the stock of illegal books kept by a half dozen houses like the STN. Altogether they include 261 titles, of which 174 (67 per cent) are on the STN list.[16]

All this compiling and comparing confirms the conclusion that the STN list does indeed represent the illegal trade in general, although of course it does not cover every book that

[14] BN, ms. fr. 21933–4. I will give a full account of this and the other two projects in a later publication.

[15] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 10305. The papers from the *pilon* of the Bastille are badly scrambled and require unusual caution in their study. I have limited myself to unambiguous accounts of *perquisitions* during raids on bookshops and to one inventory of the *pilon* itself, made in 1774.

[16] The catalogue from Berne, which was almost certainly issued by the Société Typographique de Berne, is in the BN, ms. fr. 22101, fos. 242–9. The others can be found in the archives of the STN, included in the following letters: Gabriel Grasset to STN, 25 Apr. 1774; Gabriel Décombaz to STN, Jan. 1776; Jean-Samuel Cailler to STN, 30 Apr. 1777; Jean-Abram Nouffer to STN, 4 Feb. 1778; and J.-L. Chappuis and J.-E. Didier to STN, 1 Nov. 1780.

circulated outside the law. The representativeness can be seen most clearly at the top of all four lists, where the overlap is greatest. That is, the books ordered in the largest quantity and with the greatest frequency from the STN were also the books most confiscated in the Paris customs, most impounded in the police raids, and most often listed in the clandestine catalogues of other publishers. By amalgamating all four sources, one can produce a fairly complete bibliography of the illegal literature in prerevolutionary France, 720 titles in all. And by closer analysis of the orders to the STN, one can measure the relative importance of individual works, authors, and genres.

This analysis is based primarily on the compilation of every illegal book in every order from twelve regular customers of the STN, the 'major dealers' indicated on Map 1. The statistics make it possible to draw a profile of the business of a dozen booksellers scattered around the kingdom. I have supplemented those case-studies with surveys of the illegal market in three especially active areas—Paris, Lyon, and Lorraine—where I could amalgamate statistics from many different businesses. Then, to extend the enquiry further, I compiled the orders from seventeen 'minor dealers' in other locations (see Map 2), and from *colporteurs* (hawkers). They did not place enough orders with the STN for me to draw firm conclusions about their trade as individuals. But taken as a whole, their orders fall into a significant pattern. In fact, it is virtually the same as the overall pattern that emerges from the orders of the 'major dealers'. So all the statistics can be combined in a survey which, by eighteenth-century standards, is remarkably exhaustive. It covers 28,212 books and 3,266 orders. It is as valid, I believe, as most best-seller lists today.

Table 1 shows the top thirty-five best-sellers from the illegal trade in France from 1769 to 1789. It should not be read literally, because the place of individual books cannot be determined with absolute accuracy. Also, it over-represents the importance of books published by the STN, which are indicated by an asterisk, and it underrates a few works published at the very end of the period, when the STN had cut back on its business in France. But the table provides enough information for one to allow for irregularities. The first column on the right shows the total number of copies ordered for a title. The second column

Major (provincial) dealers

Bergeret, Bordeaux
Blouet, Rennes
Buchet, Nimes
Charmet, Besançon
Letourmy, Orléans
Malherbe, Loudun
Mauvelain, Troyes
Manory, Caen
Mossy, Marseille
Pavie, La Rochelle
Rigaud, Pons, Montpellier
Robert et Gauthier, Bourg-en-Bresse

Lorraine:

Audéart, Lunéville
Augé, Lunéville
Babin, Nancy
Bergue, Thionville
Bernard, Lunéville
Bertrand, Thionville
Bonthoux, Nancy
Carez, Toul
Chénoux, Lunéville
Choppin, Bar-le-Duc
Dalancourt, Nancy
Gay, Lunéville
Gerlache, Metz
Henry, Nancy
L' Entretien, Lunéville
Matthieu, Nancy
Orbelin, Thionville
Sandré, Luneville

Lyon:

Baritel
Barret
Cellier
Flandin
Jacquenod

Paris:

Barré
Barrois
Cugnet
Desauges
Lequay Morin
Prévost
Védrène

MAP 1 Major provincial dealers in illegal books, including three areas with composite statistics: Lorraine (centred on Nancy), Paris, and Lyon

Minor (provincial) dealers:

Boisserand, Roanne
Billault, Tours
Bonnard, Auxerre
Caldesaigues, Marseille
Cazin, Reims
Chevrier, Poitiers
Fontaine, Colmar
Habert, Bar-sur-Aube
Jarfaut, Melun
Lair, Blois
Laisney, Beauvais
Malassis, Nantes
Petit, Reims
Resplandy, Toulouse
Sens, Toulouse
Sombert, Châlons-sur-Marne
Waroquier, Soissons

Itinerant hawkers:

Blaisot
Giles
Planquais
'Troisième'

MAP 2 Minor provincial dealers in illegal books

TABLE 1 *Best-sellers: total orders (major and minor dealers)*

Title [Author]	Books	Orders	Editions	Sources
1. *L'An 2400* . . . [Mercier]	1,394	(124)	25	ABCD
2. *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* [Pidansat de Mairobert? or Théveneau de Morande?]	1,071	(52)	5?	ACD
3. **Système de la nature* . . . [d'Holbach]	768	(96)	13	ABCD
4. **Tableau de Paris* . . . [Mercier]	689	(40)	2?	AD
5. **Histoire philosophique* . . . [Raynal]	620	(89)	8?	ABCD
6. *Journal historique . . . par M. de Maupeou* . . . [Pidansat de Mairobert and Moufle d'Angerville]	561	(46)	3?	ACD
7. *L'Arrétin* [Du Laurens]	512	(29)	14	ABCD
8. *Lettre philosophique* . . . [Anon.]	496	(38)	9	ABCD
9. *Mémoires de l'abbé Terray* . . . [Coquereau]	477	(24)	2?	AC
10. *La Pucelle d'Orléans* . . . [Voltaire]	436	(39)	36	ABCD
11. **Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* . . . [Voltaire]	426	(63)	5	ABCD
12. *Mémoires de Louis XV* . . . [Anon.]	419	(14)	1?	AD
13. *L'Observateur anglais* . . . [Pidansat de Mairobert]	404	(41)	3?	ABCD
14. *La Fille de joie* . . . [trans. by Lambert? or Fougeret de Montbrun?]	372	(30)	16	ABCD
15. *Thérèse philosophe* . . . [d'Arles de Montigny? or d'Argens?]	365	(28)	16	ABCD
16. *Recueil de comédies et . . . chansons gaillardes* . . . [Anon.]	347	(27)	1?	ABCD
17. **Essai philosophique sur le monarchisme* . . . [Linguet]	335	(19)	2?	A

18. *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ* . . . [d'Holbach]	327	(36)	3	ABCD
19. *Les Plus Secrets Mystères . . . de la maçonnerie* . . [trans. by Bérage?, ed. by Koeppen]	321	(36)	6?	A
20. **Requête au conseil du roi* . . . [Linguet]	318	(17)	1?	AD
21. *La Putain errante* . . . [Aretino or Nicolo Franco]	261	(27)	10	ABCD
22. *Le Christianisme dévoilé* . . . [d'Holbach]	259	(31)	12	ABCD
23. *Œuvres* [Rousseau]	240	(58)	21	ABCD
24. *Le Paysan perverti* . . . [Restif de la Bretonne]	239	(19)	10	AD
25. *L'École des filles* . . . [Milot]	223	(16)	3	ABCD
26. *Le Bon-Sens* . . . [d'Holbach]	220	(16)	11	ABCD
27. *Lettre de M. Linguet à M. le comte de Vergennes* . . . [Linguet]	216	(4)	1?	A
28. *De l'homme* . . . [Helvétius]	215	(21)	6?	ABCD
29. *Système social* . . . [d'Holbach]	212	(32)	4	ABCD
30. *Le Monarque accompli* . . . [Lanjuinais]	210	(18)	3?	ACD
31. *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* . . . [Voltaire]	204	(27)	11	ABCD
32. *La Vie privée de Louis XV* . . . [Moufle d'Angerville? or Laffrey?]	198	(17)	4?	AD
33. *La Lyre gaillarde* . . . [Anon.]	197	(14)	2?	ABCD
34. *Les Lauriers ecclésiastiques* . . . [Rochette de la Morlière]	191	(22)	13	ABC
35. *Histoire de dom B, portier des Chartreux* . . . [Gervaise de Latouche? or Nourry?]	190	(20)	20	ABCD

* An STN edition.

Sources: A = STN; B = Catalogue; C = Police confiscations; D = Customs confiscations.

indicates the number of orders placed for that title—that is, it permits one to study the incidence of repeated orders. The third column summarizes the available information about the number of editions of the work, although bibliographical studies are so uneven that it can provide only rough approximations. And the fourth column shows which books appeared most frequently in the four sources that I studied.

Are there any surprises on this list? One might expect to find Raynal's *Histoire philosophique* near the top of it along with Voltaire's *Pucelle*. But *L'An 2440*? *Anecdotes sur Mme Du Barry*? *L'Arrétin*? The literary market-place in the eighteenth century overflowed with best-sellers that have been completely forgotten today.

Table 2 lists the writers whose works sold best. Almost all illegal books appeared anonymously, but most of their authors can be identified. Some authors, like Raynal, conquered the market with a single work, while others, like Voltaire, wrote several best-sellers. Indeed, Voltaire's output was amazing: 68 of the books on the STN list, in nearly all the genres of illegal literature. Second to Voltaire but far below him in importance were d'Holbach and his collaborators, who composed, translated, and adapted a small library of anti-Catholic and atheist tracts. The Holbachean current of irreligion reached far more readers than is generally believed, although none of them at the time could trace its source to d'Holbach's salon. Then, following those two familiar names, comes a string of others that are now extinct, except among a few specialists in eighteenth-century literature: Pidansat de Mairobert, Théveneau de Morande, Du Laurens, Coquereau, d'Argens, Fougeret de Montbrun, de Pauw, Goudar, Moufle d'Angerville, Rochette de la Morlière . . . These were the men who wrote the best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France, yet they have disappeared from literary history.

Their disappearance may seem less surprising if one views literary history itself in the manner that I mentioned earlier—as an artificial construct, passed on and reworked from generation to generation. 'Minor' authors and 'major' best-sellers inevitably got lost in the shuffle. We do not expect the best-sellers of our own day to be read two hundred years from now. Yet do we not think that literary history should take account of the literature

TABLE 2 *Authors by number of books ordered*

	Author	Books
1.	Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet de	3,545
2.	Holbach, Paul-Henri-Dietrich Thiry, baron d' (and collaborators)	2,903
3.	Pidansat de Mairobert, Matthieu-François (and collaborators)	2,425
4.	Mercier, Louis-Sébastien	2,199
5.	Théveneau de Morande, Charles	1,360
6.	Linguet, Simon-Nicolas-Henri	1,038
7.	Du Laurens, Henri-Joseph	866
8.	Raynal, Guillaume-Thomas-François[a]	620
9.	Rousseau, Jean-Jacques	505
10.	Helvétius, Claude-Adrien	486
11.	Coquereau, Jean-Baptiste-Louis[b]	477
12.	Argens, Jean Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'[c]	457
13.	Fougeret de Montbrun, Charles-Louis[d]	409
14.	Restif de la Bretonne, Nicolas-Edmé	371
15.	Bérage/Koeppen, Karl-Friederich[e]	321
16.	Mirabeau, Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, comte de	312
17.	Aretino, Pietro Bacci[f]	261
18.	Pauw, Cornelius de	235
19.	Milot (or Mililot)[g]	223
20.	Goudar, Ange	214
21.	Lanjuinais, Joseph[h]	210
22.	Moufle d'Angerville, Barthélemy-François-Joseph[i]	198
23.	Rochette de la Morlière, Charles-Jacques-Louise-Auguste	197

[a] One title: *Histoire philosophique . . . deux Indes.*
[b] One title: *Mémoires de l'abbé Terrai.*
[c] Includes *Thérèse philosophe* (365 books, 28 orders) which is also attributed to d'Arles de Montigny. D'Argens, however, has six other titles attributed to him, so he is not disproportionately high on the list.
[d] Includes *La Fille de joie,* his translation of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (*Fanny Hill*) by John Cleland. This translation has also been attributed to a certain Lambert.
[e] One title: *Les Plus Secrets Mystères des hauts grades de la maçonnerie dévoilés, ou le vrai Rose-Croix; traduit de l'anglais, suivit du Noachite traduit de l'allemand.* By usage, the translator is cited as 'Bérage' (e.g. Barbier and Caillet). Fesch gives Koeppen as the editor, without citing any original English or German works.
[f] One title: *La Putain errante.*
[g] One title: *L'École des filles.*
[h] One title: *Le Monarque accompli.*
[i] One title: *La Vie privée de Louis XV,* attributed to both Moufle d'Angerville and Arnoux Laffrey (198 books, 17 orders).

that actually reached most people? Should not literary historians study the ordinary varieties of *la littérature vécue,* the sort of thing that we refer to loosely by expressions such as 'taste' and 'demand' among the 'general public'?[17] Table 3 provides some preliminary answers to those questions by showing which genres of illegal literature were most popular. To be sure, its categories, like those in any classification system, are arbitrary. They may be inadequate as a means of sorting out data, and the sorting involves a great deal of subjective judgement: is a work primarily irreligious, or seditious, or pornographic, or does it manage to be all three at the same time? None the less, the rubrics in the table work reasonably well; the classifying proved to be a manageable task; and the result, however approximate, provides a general picture of the proportions within the corpus of forbidden literature as a whole.[18]

The main surprise in this picture is the relative unimportance of pornography: only 13 per cent of the total, or 19 per cent if one adds bawdy works that were primarily anticlerical. A poor score for the century of Restif de la Bretonne and the marquis de Sade, even though it does not do justice to the selling power of a few classics such as *La Fille de joie* and *La Putain errante*. Political works, by contrast, stand out as the most important general category. They did not include many theoretical treatises like Rousseau's *Social Contract*, however. In fact, the *Social Contract* did not figure among the top 400 books ordered from the STN. It

[17] In putting these questions in this manner, I do not mean to imply that literary historians should abandon the study of great books, even though 'greatness' is a culture-bound category. Nor am I arguing for a revival of positivism. I think it important to discover patterns of literary demand by means of empirical research, but I also consider it crucial to go on to questions about how books were read, taste was formed, and literature was related to other elements in culture and society. Finally, I should explain that my statistics cover supply as well as demand. Thanks to its extensive stock and the system of exchanges, the STN was able to fill a very large proportion of the orders it received. And despite occasional mishaps, it usually got the books to its customers.

[18] A full account of this research, with details on how individual best-sellers were classified, will be given in a book-length study of the subject. But even in this shorter version, the reader can allow for possible bias by shifting subheadings. For example, 'irreligious ribaldry' could be shifted from the general heading 'religion' to 'sex' because it contains works that were both bawdy and anticlerical. I think the irreligion predominates in books like *La Chandelle d'Arras,* but others may disagree. When all the data are published, they will be able to determine patterns of their own.

TABLE 3 *General pattern of demand*

Category and sub-category	Titles		Copies ordered	
	No.	%	No.	%
Religion				
A. Treatises	45	9.8	2,810	10.0
B. Satire, polemics	81	17.7	3,212	11.4
C. Irreligious ribaldry, pornography	18	3.9	2,260	8.0
Subtotals	144	31.5[a]	8,282	29.4
Philosophy				
A. Treatises	31	6.8	723	2.6
B. Collected works, compilations	28	6.1	1,583	5.6
C. Satire, polemics	9	2.0	242	0.9
D. General social, cultural criticism	33	7.2	4,515	16.0
Subtotals	101	22.1	7,063	25.1[a]
Politics, current events				
A. Treatises	20	4.4	986	3.5
B. Topical works	50	10.9	2,213	7.8
C. Libels, court satire	45	9.8	4,085	14.5
D. *Chroniques scandaleuses*	17	3.7	1,051	3.7
Subtotals	132	28.9[a]	8,335	29.5

TABLE 3 *General pattern of demand (cont.)*

Category and sub-category	Titles		Copies ordered	
	No.	%	No.	%
Sex	64	14.0	3,654	12.9
Other				
A. Occultism	2	0.4	111	0.4
B. Freemasonry	6	1.3	639	2.3
Subtotals	8	1.7	750	2.7
Unclassified	8	1.8	128	0.5
TOTALS	457	100.0	28,212	100.0

[a] Rounding creates the discrepancy in the subtotals of percentages.

did not appear in any of the clandestine catalogues and did not get seized in any of the police raids, although it was confiscated four times in the Paris customs. So Mornet was probably right in stressing the poor diffusion of Rousseau's treatise. But he overstated his case, because the *Social Contract* was included in many editions of Rousseau's works, and those editions appear near the top of the best-seller list, even though they contained as many as 38 volumes and often cost 24 livres or more. (The common and relatively cheap duodecimo edition published in 31 volumes by the Société Typographique de Genève sold for 25 livres in 1785.) In any case, it is clear that political theory sold far less well than topical works, personal libels, and *chroniques scandaleuses*. These sub-genres overlapped so much that they cannot always be distinguished. But, when taken together, they can be seen to have constituted a kind of muckraking journalism, which was all the more sensational in that modern political journalism did not yet exist in France. These books operated on the still unannounced principle that names make news; so they concentrated their fire on the most eminent personages of the kingdom. They began with the king himself, working their way down through ministers and royal mistresses to the common run of courtiers and *filles d'Opéra*; and they blasted away so effectively that they made the whole regime look rotten.

Whether it actually looked that way to the readers of the books cannot be determined. The archives say very little about the social composition of the readership and almost nothing about the experience of reading. They raise a host of new questions, which lie beyond the range of statistical analysis and which make Mornet's old question seem simple in comparison. But this is not the place to take on a new set of problems. Instead, after so much quantification, it may seem time to stop counting and start reading the forgotten best-sellers. Although we cannot read them exactly as they were read in the eighteenth century, we can study the way the texts work and try to capture something of their flavour. Without pretending to be immune from anachronism or to provide anything more than an introduction to this literature, I would like to discuss three forbidden books that were most popular then and are least familiar now.

Thérèse philosophe, by the marquis d'Argens or d'Arles de

Montigny, comes about as close as a book can get to 'pure' pornography.[19] The narrative consists of orgies strung together with bits of conversation while the partners gather their forces for the next round of pleasure. It has little redeeming social comment. Like most of the older varieties of bawdy literature, it mixes sex with anticlericalism; but it remains explicitly respectful of all the secular authorities.

The novel is actually a *Bildungsroman*, recounted in the first person by Thérèse herself. She tells the story of her education, an education in pleasure, which leads from her first exploration of her private parts as an infant to the full flowering of her sexuality as the mistress of the comte de ***. As in many *romans galants*, the narrative takes the reader inside nunneries and brothels; and its tone remains consistently voyeuristic, in keeping with the illustrations, which show couples copulating and spying on one another in bowers and boudoirs.

It is all very genteel, and rather passionless, too; for pleasure, as Thérèse presents it, is not so much an emotion as an idea—a tingling in the epidermis, which passes through the animal spirits to the brain, where it is stored as food for thought. Ultimately, then, sex becomes cerebral. By instructing Thérèse in its mysteries, her lover provides her with an education in metaphysics, like the tutor in *Émile*. He strips away the spiritual side of Cartesianism, revealing a world of matter in motion, devoid of any ethical reality beyond the pleasure principle. Principled pleasure, however, turns out to be a hedonistic calculus in which the first principle is: thou shalt not get pregnant.

The comte de *** therefore provides Thérèse with a hundred lessons on how to reach orgasm without conceiving. They masturbate and philosophize deliciously until the culminating moment of the narrative. Then, in a paroxysm of pleasure, Thérèse begs the count to bury himself in her. He agrees, but at the climactic moment, by a supreme effort of the will, he withdraws, spilling his seed safely outside her. It is a lesson in coitus interruptus, a lesson fraught with implications for demographic history.

[19] *Thérèse philosophe, ou mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du P. Dirrag et de Mlle Eradice*, 2 vols. The first edition, which lacks a place and date of publication, appeared in 1748. Most authorities attribute it to Jean-Baptise de Boyer, marquis d'Argens.

Childbirth was a dangerous business in the eighteenth century. Thérèse decides it is not worth the risk, her own mother and her best friend having nearly died in labour. She resolves to take charge of her fate, rejects the role of wife and mother, and lives out her life as the voluptuary companion of her philosophic count. Instead of becoming a sex object, like Fanny Hill, she provides an object lesson in the self-determination of woman. But above all, she embodies a lesson in philosophy—that is, in the importance of regulating the pleasure principle and of subordinating it to reason, all in the name of achieving the greatest possible happiness. That was a revolutionary idea, one that would appear twenty-eight years after the original publication of *Thérèse philosophe* in the American Declaration of Independence.

As a philosopher, Thérèse understands that there is no god, or no monotheistic being beyond nature itself, but that two deities can be said to preside over man and womankind, Voluptuousness and Philosophy. They appear in the frontispiece to the book, with a caption that summarizes its message: 'Voluptuousness and Philosophy create the happiness of the sensible man. He embraces Voluptuousness by taste. He loves Philosophy by reason.'

L'An 2440 reads like a Rip Van Winkle tale.[20] The narrator falls asleep and wakes up in the year 2440, when he has reached the age of 700 and France has turned into a utopia. He can barely recognize Paris, it has become so clean and orderly. Carriages proceed slowly along the right-hand side of the immaculate streets, stopping deferentially before pedestrians. The Bastille has been replaced by a 'Temple of Mercy'. The Hôtel de Ville has been moved next to the Louvre, leaving room for civic festivals at the Place de Grève. The Pont Neuf, now called Pont Henri IV, is lined with statues of patriotic statesmen, which make it function as a 'book of morals'.[21] In fact the entire city can be read as a book proclaiming a civil religion. The Catholic Church has been reduced to a deistic cult preached in glass-covered temples and transmitted through an initiation rite, the 'communion of the two infinites', in which adolescents develop an ecstatic

[20] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais* (Amsterdam, 1771). The following quotations come from the expanded text published in 1775 under the false address of London.

[21] Ibid. 37.

sense of the Supreme Being by means of telescopes and microscopes.

But the most important cult is devoted to writers. Their statues preside over the public squares, celebrating their triumph over superstition and tyranny. Corneille stands with the head of Richelieu under his foot, and Voltaire and Rousseau bestride pedestals that proclaim them to be the greatest prophets of the third millenium. Writers rule the world, not directly, but by guiding public opinion, which has become the supreme force in society, thanks to an enlightened system of education and a free press. While the greatest patriots devote themselves exclusively to enlightenment, every citizen contributes to the collectivity as a writer; for everyone distills the essence of his experience into an autobiography, which serves as a monument to him after his death, and the French as a whole govern themselves as a collective 'author' ('tout un peuple auteur'.)[22] Writing and reading combine in the same way as active and passive citizenship, according to Rousseau. Print culture and the General Will have been fused in the ideal society, a political version of the Republic of Letters.

It is a curious fantasy, at least for the modern reader. But the readers of the Old Regime loved it. *L'An 2440* was the supreme best-seller in the entire corpus of forbidden literature. It went through twenty-five editions between 1771 and 1789. Mercier expanded the text from edition to edition without bothering much about the plot. In fact, the book hardly has a plot at all. It is presented as a walk through Paris in the future just as Mercier's other best-seller, *Le Tableau de Paris*, was a walk through the Paris of the present. The two works complemented one another, providing a positive and a negative picture of the same subject. But *L'An 2440* seems to have struck the imagination of his contemporaries with particular force. It was not the first utopian novel, far from it; but it was the first to be set in the future. Readers could enjoy a new kind of mental experiment, imagining their own world transformed in time. Mercier helped them along with abundant descriptions of daily life. He gave a detailed account of how people dressed, for example. They wore Roman-like smocks, gathered at the waist by a sash, in place of the unnaturally constrictive clothes of the Old Regime.

[22] Mercier, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 52.

Of course no one wore a sword, 'an old prejudice of gothic chivalry',[23] or any of the gear that made clothing such a strong social code in the eighteenth century. Distinctions existed only in the form of embroidered hats, which were awarded to citizens who had performed some great act of humanitarianism or who excelled in their craft.

Nothing could be further in spirit from the science fiction of today. When we read about the future, we expect to find technological marvels. Mercier's future had none—no ray guns, no intergalactic television, no zipping about in space machines, no star wars. Utopian gadgetry was unthinkable in the fantasies of the Old Regime. The dimensions of Mercier's utopia were moral, and the elements missing from it, as he made clear in footnotes to the text, were the abuses that he found most objectionable in contemporary France. The France of 2440 had no priests, no Parlements, no *lettres de cachet*, no censorship, and no oppressive taxes. Mercier did not go so far as to conjure up a France purged of all social distinctions. In fact, his imagination seemed bounded by the outer limits of society under the Old Regime. He described a world of rich and poor, of noble and common, fixed in the economic and demographic conditions of the eighteenth century. True, he eliminated the extremes of wealth and poverty. He turned his princes into innkeepers and required them to give free meals to the old and the infirm. But he did not envision any basic change in the social structure or the standard of living.

Mercier did not show much interest in political institutions, either. He indicated that France was ruled by the General Will but did not explain how it operated. The state seemed to run on civic virtue, fraternal love, and general openness. Mercier allowed for a few officials, a Senate, and a king. But none of them had much power, the king least of all: he merely presided over civic festivals and laboured with peasants in the fields for a certain period every year. Apparently, like Marx, Mercier felt no need to produce a blueprint for the government of the future, or perhaps utopian tinkering of that sort had little appeal for the French before 1789. Whatever the reason, Mercier's argument remained essentially negative. It kept returning to the evils of the Old Regime and presented them, not as the consequence of

[23] Ibid. 17.

faulty institutional design, but rather as a matter of public morality—that is, of corruption at the top of society where power was monopolized by decadent courtiers, overweening ministers, and despotic monarchs.

The book ends with an account of a visit to Versailles, written in the overblown style of Young's *Night Thoughts*. The palace has fallen into ruins. The gardens have run wild, forming a melancholy anti-Eden at the other end of time. In the midst of the desolation, the narrator comes upon Louis XIV, who has been reincarnated as an old man and condemned to inhabit the site of his former glory, contemplating the folly of his pride and weeping over the misery he inflicted on his people. In the midst of a tearful lamentation, a serpent crawls out from under a rock and bites the narrator, causing him to wake up back in the eighteenth century.

The futuristic fantasies of *L'An 2440* provided a powerful indictment of the Old Regime, but they did not give Frenchmen a way to think the unthinkable—that is, to imagine something comparable to the Revolution, which was only a few years away. Instead of predicting the future, Mercier translated the utopian vision of Rousseau into terms that could be grasped by everyone and turned against abuses in the present. It is a pity that Mornet did not study *L'An 2440* as well as the *Social Contract*, for Mercier's dream disseminated radical Rousseauism more effectively than Rousseau's own treatise.

Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry by Pidansat de Mairobert ranks second to *L'An 2440* on the best-seller list. In a way it can be considered even more of a success,[24] for it contains many episodes that can also be found, sometimes word for word, in the other libels and *chroniques scandaleuses* on the list: *Journal historique . . . par M. de Maupeou, Mémoires de l'abbé Terray, L'Observateur anglais, Vie privée de Louis XV, Correspondance secrète et familière de M. de Maupeou, Les Fastes de Louis XV, Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres, Le Gazetier cuirassé, Mémoires authentiques de Mme la comtesse Du Barry, Précis historique de Mme la comtesse Du Barry,* and *La*

[24] *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* (London, 1775). Standard bibliographies and catalogues refer to four other editions between 1775 and 1778; but considering the lack of bibliographical information about this kind of literature, it seems likely that the number was much higher.

Chronique scandaleuse, to name the most popular in the order of their popularity. It is difficult to know who copied whom, because the authors of these works drew on the same gossipy sources, and they lifted material from one another without the slightest concern for plagiarism, or intertextuality, as it is known among literary theorists today.

The result was an enormous body of literature which purveyed the same set of themes. But *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* stood out above the others, because it told the common tales with exceptional skill. The narrator presents himself as a historian, the chronicler of a life bound up with the deepest secrets of the times. He promises to cull through all the sources—private letters, interviews, underground gazettes—in order to extract nothing but the hardest facts. Although he is obviously writing a libel (the French term, *libelle*, had a specific resonance for eighteenth-century readers), he pretends to despise the genre. He claims to restrict himself to the most sober version of Du Barry's biography. Indeed, he insists on refuting the worst calumnies—and proceeds to do so in such an unconvincing manner, while serving up so much damning evidence, that he makes his own account seem modest in comparison. This technique reinforces the authority of the narrator while providing the greatest possible *frisson* for the reader: everything in the rhetoric works to promote the illusion of an inside view of the innermost corridors of power.

The narrative combines a biography of Madame Du Barry with a political history of the reign of Louis XV. It is a sexual success story organized around a single theme: from brothel to throne. The plot leaves plenty of room for salacious detail about key questions such as: Who first had the heroine's maidenhead? The narrator refuses to pronounce. He finds too many possibilities, too much ambiguous evidence, to make a responsible judgement. But one thing is certain, he assured us: she was sold as a virgin half a dozen times in the whore-house of Madame Gourdan. It was here that Du Barry received her education. She ran through the full gamut of the classical positions and the main variations with a whole array of bishops, courtiers, and magistrates—mainly for the fun of it, because she took to the profession by inclination and usually asked for nothing in compensation beyond a few baubles or clothes. Her career as a

whore turned out to be profitable in the long run, however, because she picked up tricks in Madame Gourdan's that later proved to be crucial in arousing the jaded libido of Louis XV and thus in conquering Versailles.

While chronicling the stops as Du Barry sleeps her way to the top, the narrator brings out two subsidiary themes. First, her commonness. He dwells on the disparity between her humble origins and her elevation to the summit of society. Writing for a readership that was especially sensitive to parentage, he ends the book with a genealogical appendix about the Du Barry family (they are fake aristocrats who agree, in exchange for a sum, to provide the heroine with a title by means of an arranged marriage so that she can appear at court), and he begins it with an account of her birth. She was the offspring of a cook and a *rat de cave* (tax inspector), he explains, indignantly rejecting the story that her father was a monk. He also insists that his heroine's career as a whore was limited almost entirely to a short stint at Madame Gourdan's, which was the classiest establishment in Paris. Honesty forces him to admit, however, that Du Barry spent some time as a streetwalker. Thus a motif in the popular songs and verse that he quotes throughout the text: anyone could have had her for a few pennies only a few years before she became the mistress of the king—and a great many did, including 'all of our lackeys'.[25]

But as Du Barry rises through society, she becomes a plaything of the rich and the well-born; and when they get between the sheets—our omniscient author takes us everywhere—they prove to be incompetent or perverted. Dukes cannot have erections; prelates require flagellation; countesses are lesbians. When she wants to satisfy herself, Du Barry has to descend to the servants' quarters. This second theme reverses the direction of the first. Instead of exposing violations of the social hierarchy, it asserts the native superiority of the common people. It is implicitly democratic. In fact, Du Barry makes it explicit at an early point in her career, when she expounds her philosophy in a letter to one of her lovers, a pretty boy who is trying to seduce his way upward along a path parallel to hers.

[25] *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* (London, 1776), 167: 'Tous nos laquais l'avaient eue, | Lorsque traînant dans la rue, | Vingt sols offerts à sa vue | La déterminaient d'abord.'

The letter proclaims that all men are equal when it comes to love, although servants tend to be better value than masters, and that all women are divided into two classes, the beautiful and the ugly.[26] Instead of making Du Barry into the embodiment of evil, the text comes close in places to glorifying her. True, she nearly ruins France. But she has no personal ambition and no particular taste for riches or social advancement. She just loves sex. Although she lets herself be used by wicked courtiers, she remains curiously innocent, protected from the corruption around her by her healthy appetite and indominable naïveté. In the end, she can be considered, at least in one possible reading, as a genuine heroine, a forerunner of Marianne.

But the story concentrates on her role in the political crisis that nearly crippled France during the last years of the reign of Louis XV. Du Barry reaches the royal bed through the offices of Le Bel, the king's valet and procurer, who scours the country for 'game', 'real pieces fit for a king'—the narrator's favourite terms derive from hunting and eating—and produces two a week on average. They are cleaned up ('décrassées'), dressed up, and pensioned off after one-night stands at 200,000 livres apiece—or 10 million a year, according to the author's estimate; enough to bankrupt the kingdom.[27] Unlike the others, thanks to her temperament and training, Du Barry manages to retain the king's favour. She becomes *maîtresse en titre* and is presented at court.

At that point, her personal story intersects the history of France, and the book turns into a behind-the-scenes account of politics in Versailles. It takes the reader through all the major events during the latter part of Louis XV's reign: the fall of Choiseul, the partition of Poland, and the destruction of the Parlements by Maupeou. In each case, the decisive factor is not a matter of principle, not even reason of state, but rather the vilest variety of personal intrigue. Bored with incest and driven by jealousy, the duchesse de Grammont tries to supplant Du Barry in the king's bed and brings down a ministry. The duc d'Aiguillon climbs into power by wooing Du Barry with presents—they include a carriage whose price, according to the narrator, was the equivalent of what it would have cost to feed the poor in an entire province for several months—and then

[26] Ibid. 31. [27] Ibid. 54–6.

seduces her, effectively cuckolding the king. Meanwhile Terray, the controller-general of finance, tries to cut out d'Aiguillon by sprinkling gifts of châteaux and estates through the Du Barry clan; and Maupeou, the chancellor, tries to undermine both d'Aigullon and Terray by cultivating the so-called 'devout party', which has formed around the dauphin, the future Louis XVI. The dauphin himself will have nothing to do with Du Barry, because she has mocked his impotence and criticized his wife's complexion. And so it goes; politics reduced to trivia in round after round of plotting and bickering.

Through it all, the real power behind the throne turns out to be not Du Barry herself—to the end she remains interested only in sex and clothes—but her brother-in-law and former lover, and comte Jean Du Barry, who is not really a count at all but a pimp. He operates out of gambling dens in Paris and governs France by means of couriers whom he dispatches regularly to Versailles with secret orders for the royal mistress. Once she has received her instructions, Du Barry fills the king with drink, drags him to bed, and gets him to sign anything she asks. It was by this procedure, the narrator explains, that Du Barry led Louis XV to destroy the country's parlementary system in the judicial coup of 1771.

The narrator spices up his account of such episodes with excerpts from poems, songs, placards, gossip, and *bons mots*. In fact, he cites so many that the story-line sometimes disappears, and the last part of the book reads like a digest from the *Mémoires secrets*, which was also written in large part by Mairobert. Each item has its shock value, however. We get the story of how the papal nuncio and the cardinal de la Roche-Aymon held the favourite's slippers for her as she slid, naked and giggling, out of the royal bed. And her famous remark as the king began to spill his coffee: 'Eh! La France, prends donc garde, ton café fout le camp' ('Look out, France! Your coffee's running away').[28] And also the poisonous paternoster:

> Our Father who art in Versailles. Abhorred be thy name. Thy kingdom is shaken. Thy will is not done, neither on earth nor in heaven. Give us back our daily bread, which thou hast taken from us. And forgive the trespasses of thy Parlements, which have upheld thy interests, as you

[28] *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry*, 215.

have forgiven your ministers, who have betrayed them. Do not succumb to the temptations of the Du Barry. But deliver us from the satan of a chancellor. Amen![29]

This material often dwells on the symbolic aspect of the monarchy and systematically desecrates it, as if the libellers meant to destroy the aura of sacredness that surrounded the king. The poems and anecdotes picture Du Barry as fouling the *fleurs de lys*, the crown, and the throne. One popular song even associates the feebleness of the sceptre with the debility of the royal penis. Thus, when at last Du Barry has succeeded in arousing the dirty old monarch, he says

Viens sur mon trône,
Je veux te couronner,
Viens sur mon trône:
Comme sceptre prends mon vit.
Il vit, il vit!

(Come on my throne,
I want to crown you,
Come on my throne:
As sceptre take my cock.
It's alive, it's alive!)[30]

All the narrative devices seem to be aimed at the same effect, the desacralization of the monarchy. The moral of the story stands out on every page: France has become mired in decadence and despotism. In fact, according to the narrator, the kingdom would have collapsed, had it not been saved by the death of Louis XV. And how did he die? The narrator revealed the awful secret. As Madame du Barry became increasingly incapable of exciting the aged monarch, she turned procuress and held on to his favour by slipping fresh young girls into his bed. One girl had an undetected case of smallpox. She gave it to the king; he died; and everyone in France breathed a sigh of relief.

But that was not the end of the story. The reign of Louis XVI did not promise to be much better, because the new king inherited the old system of corrupt court politics. To be sure, he was not a sexual monster. On the contrary, he was impotent.

[29] Ibid. 153.
[30] Ibid. 76. For similar examples, see ibid. 160, 211, 258, 260, and 297.

But that made him monstrous in his own way, while Marie-Antoinette was succumbing to nymphomania. The stage was set for the Diamond Necklace Affair and a still more vicious flood of libels, which would continue unabated until the overthrow of the monarchy.

If one studies the *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse Du Barry* in company with its sister libels, they seem to constitute a full-blown political mythology. They all have the same motifs, and they all spread the same theme: moral rot had made the monarchy degenerate into a despotism. Their cumulative effect, in so far as one can guess at it, was to corrode the sense of legitimacy that bound the people to the king. It took a great deal more to bring the monarchy down, but the collapse that occurred in 1792 seems unthinkable without the delegitimation perpetrated by the illegal literature of the previous two decades.

Thus Mornet's question leads to the larger question of the ideological origins of the French Revolution, just as it did when he pursued it seventy-nine years ago. But the issues now seem infinitely more complex. One cannot string an argument along a series of inferences that link the buying of a book to the reading of a book to the assimilation of the reading in personal convictions and the expression of those convictions in political engagement. Linear causality does not operate in literary history any more than it does in history *tout court*.

Nevertheless, in order to advance some conclusions that have a semblance of conclusiveness, I would say that the 'philosophical books' undermined the legitimacy of the Old Regime in two ways. First, in theory: the Voltairean and Holbachean works directly attacked the Church and the Crown and all the values that supported them. Secondly, on a visceral level: the scandalous political libels reduced the baroque world of Old Regime politics to a mythology built around the theme of decadence and despotism. But the illegal best-sellers contain so many themes that a single essay cannot do justice to them. There is a whole world of forgotten literature waiting to be explored. Once one ventures into it, all literary history begins to look different, and all kinds of possibilities open up—even a fresh view of the French Revolution.