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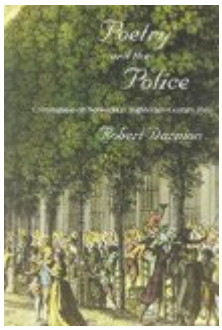
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Darnton. *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Illustrations. vi + 224 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05715-9.



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Published on Jhistory (June, 2014)

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In the late spring and early summer of 1749, the police in Paris did their best to track down the author of a poem critical of the monarch Louis XV, in particular his recent dismissal of the comte de Maurepas. The authorities uncovered a network of students and churchmen who, in this and similar verses, used poetry and songs to make critical comments on the affairs of the day, sharing new material in various settings, adding and amending lines as they and the turn of the news saw fit. Fourteen men were arrested and interrogated over this matter, with most if not all of them finding that their youthful indiscretion had lasting effects on their career prospects, although the original author was never identified.

In *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Robert Darnton conducts his own investigation into L'Affaire des Quatorze, using the dossiers compiled by the police during their initial investigations. However, he is on the trail of something rather different than what his investigative predecessors found. Darnton is interested in seeing how information moved between parties in an age of widespread illiteracy, crucially how the nebulous entity that would come to be known as "public opinion" both formed and manifested itself in prerevolutionary Paris. L'Affaire des Quatorze, with its extensive supporting evidence, provides a wealth of material to achieve this.

As Darnton does not limit himself to his detective story and its immediate repercussions, he can attempt to recreate the oral communication networks of eighteenth-century Paris. In tracking the circulation of the poems and the paths they took through society, the people who shared them, and the places they met, he is able to take the reader onto the streets, into the taverns, and into meeting rooms where the distant comings and goings at Versailles were reported and commented on. And in the hands of such a skilled storyteller as Darnton, the journey is never less than engagingly rendered, although readers sometimes will need to keep their wits about them to keep up with the pace and the cast. The reader certainly comes away with a vibrancy and variety of mid-eigh-

teenth-century Parisian society; from the initial investigations into one verse, through the overviews of what aspects of the monarch's conduct Parisians found particularly offensive, to the detailed explorations of the verses themselves and when and where they were likely to be performed, this is a work that recreates its subject's world in vivid detail, admirably aided by Darnton's engaging writing. As befits the scholarly recreation of a burgeoning metropolis, the scope of the subjects touched on in the course of the work is vast, ranging from international politics in the wake of the War of the Austrian Succession to street music performance. It is hardly surprising then that some aspects are perhaps a little truncated in their treatment in order to keep up the sweeping pace.

The work's structure does also take some getting used to especially for those accustomed to more traditional scholarly works. The main text is only 145 pages long, yet broken down into fifteen chapters, plus introduction and conclusion. For readers attuned to reading monographs where chapters might easily be built over twenty to thirty pages, the shift to capsule chapters of between five and fifteen small format pages might take a bit of getting used to. Where the reader might be expecting a prolonged intensification of an isolated point, here the chapter breaks and the narrative takes an unexpected turn. At several points the close study of the particular case of the mystery poem is broken off, and we swoop from worm's-eye to bird's-eye views of French "enlightenment" society, as in chapter 8 when we are introduced to the wider context, in particular the repercussions of the War of the Austrian Succession, or in chapter 11 when we are given an overview of eighteenth-century street musical practice. This range does mean that the focus tends to shift, at points rather abruptly, and it must be noted that not all the joins are seamless. Characters are introduced in one chapter and then reintroduced in another as though not previously encountered, sometimes within a matter of pages. The rapid shifts also curtail some of the more sustained discussion that Darnton's academic audience would no doubt savor--the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault are condensed down to a point that borders on frustrating for the reader already acquainted with their theories. And at points the reader does need more to go on. The seditious verses at the heart of the investigation are presented as titillating fancies in places and as a serious threat to the state in others: whilst it is of course possible they were both at the same time, slightly more explanation of their envisioned intention and effect would be useful, particularly as much of this discussion is concentrated in the early chapters of the work, before the detailed examination of the individual verses.

The book itself is neatly presented, with a hefty raft of supporting materials in the appendices, including an overview of the poems circulated by the accused parties, a summary of the investigation from the police files, and an explanation of which song tunes were popular in eighteenth-century popular society. Particularly fascinating is the outline of how one text, "Qu'une bâtarde de catin," evolved and mutated between renderings. Textual support is further developed by the accompanying website, where Hélène Delavault performs a selection of the material discussed by Darnton. There is some slight repetition between the material presented in the appendices and the main text, particularly in the reproductions of the variations of some of the verses which occurred as the material circulated, although the thoughtfulness of the verse translations, designed to convey the spirit as well as the meaning of the original, must also be acknowledged. The work is further supported by the images reproduced in the text, particularly of the manuscripts discussed. Although some of the images are on the small side, they are thoughtfully positioned and aid the reader's conceptualization of the world under discussion, in particular the diagram showing how six poems appear to have traveled between various parties (p. 16). And this speaks to

the full value of Darnton's work: it illuminates the historian's craft, and the various ways in which research can be pursued. Darnton shows us the stages of how research can be conducted, and provides his readers with excellent outlines of how particular cases link with wider thematic questions, how tricky it can be to position one's own research within the expected paradigms, and when historians need to think beyond the text in front of them. For example, he includes personal reminiscences and at times admits to his own speculations, not really typical of scholarly writing, at least outside of the supporting materials. This is not mere posturing, however; Darnton is meticulous in linking the various elements together, supporting his insights, and carefully introducing the various pieces of evidence from the multitude of sources, bringing us onward. In this way, it is an excellent work to use with both undergraduates and postgraduates, not only in terms of the general subject matter and the contribution to the field of early modern communication studies, but also in terms of how we explain to future scholars the ways in which they are able to pursue their work.

The connections to our modern communications world, of the "information society," are obvious, and Darnton does not shy away from making the comparison, arguing compellingly in his introduction against the acceptance of a "false sense of consciousness about the past--even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the internet" (p. 1). Yet he is also careful to remain largely true to his eighteenth-century focus. The only slightly jarring note comes from the lurking awareness of the oncoming Revolution, and the attempts to balance out what 1749 has to tell us with what has been argued for a later generation come across as slightly begrudging at points. After steering the reader away from 1789 for much of the work, toward the end Darnton engages directly with the possible comparisons with the communications culture of the revolutionary period, before concluding that "at mid-century, Paris was not ready for revolution. But it had developed an effective system of communication, which informed the public of events and provided a running commentary on them" (p. 145).

Poetry and the Police is a work of historical scholarship, indeed a painstaking work from a scholar celebrated not simply for his familiarity with the archives and their treasures, but one who is unafraid to follow where the archival clues lead, even if the path might be murky and uncomfortable at times. In its scope and its format, it is a book of contrasts: between the intricate political intrigues of the court and their reception and dissection on the streets and between its own traditional presentation as a scholarly book and the possibilities Darnton sees within that format, giving us bite-sized chapters and substantial support from the appendices and website. There is also a contrast between the envisaged readerships of the work too, scholarly and popular, both of whom will find much to admire and even more to think about in this work.

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Citation: Sara Barker. Review of Darnton, Robert. *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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