



DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD

Collecting and Researching in the History of Books

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Collecting and Researching in the History of Books

Professors and librarians normally go their separate ways: professors write books, librarians collect them. The division of labor makes sense. It requires a special variety of erudition to build up a great collection, and it takes a peculiar kind of fortitude to overcome the loneliness of the long-distance writer. There are notable exceptions, such as Paul Needham, the Scheide Librarian in Firestone, who is a renowned author of works on the history of printing, and James Billington, a Princeton professor who went on to become Librarian of Congress. But the two varieties of scholarship rarely mix.

Their separation seems strange, however, if you consider the subject and the object that they have in common: the book, books in general, the printed and the manuscript word as a medium for storing and communicating knowledge. Now a new discipline, the history of books, promises to produce a new kind of collaboration between librarians and professors. Of course, scholars have studied paleography, printing, bibliography, and related subjects for centuries. But it was not until the 1960s that book history began to be investigated in a systematic way, one that addressed broad questions about how books became a force in history--how they penetrated the social order, how they were read, how they produced effects in the cultural and political life of entire populations.

This variety of scholarship first gathered momentum in France, where it became a crucial ingredient in the "Annales school" of history founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929. Febvre himself set the research agenda for "histoire du livre," as it came to be known, in an influential book that he published in 1958 with Henri-Jean Martin, L'Apparition du livre. Martin went on to co-edit with Roger Chartier, a sweeping survey of the history of books in France, Histoire de l'édition française (four volumes, 1983-1986), which inspired a series of national histories that are now under way--in Britain, the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and several other countries. New reviews, scholarly associations, monograph series, colloquia, fellowships, activities of all sorts have made the history of books the hottest subject in the humanities. Princeton participates actively in the field, thanks to its new Center for the Study of Books and Media. And Princeton is also making a contribution on a new front: the integration of research in book history with the development of special collections.

The collaboration extends across many fields, thanks to the combined efforts of professors like Nigel Smith in English and Anthony Grafton in history and librarians such as Steven Ferguson and Don Skemer in Special Collections and Manuscripts. It also extends to teaching. Many seminars now meet in Rare Books, and Firestone staff--from the Scheide Library, Rare Books, Graphic Arts, Preservation, Binding, and the printing shop at 185 Nassau Street--have co-taught History 420, "The Book: From Gutenberg to the Internet," with Robert Darnton.

One example of this kind of collaboration involves a project developed by Steven Ferguson and Robert Darnton. It originated from Darnton's research in the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), a Swiss publisher and wholesaler that played a major part in the market for French books between 1769 and 1789. The STN papers--50,000 letters and a nearly complete set of account books in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire of Neuchâtel, Switzerland--contain a vast amount of information

about the demand for contemporary literature, and especially the books that sold best: works that could not be marketed legally in France, owing to censorship, the book police, and the monopolistic practices of the booksellers' guild. Dozens of other publishing houses located outside the French borders operated in the same way as the STN. They were located along a huge arch that stretched from Amsterdam through the Rhineland to Geneva and Avignon, which then was papal territory. The books that they printed circulated everywhere in France, thanks to an enormous network of underground distributors. It is impossible to make accurate estimates, but it seems likely that the foreign publishers produced about half of the works in contemporary literature that were sold in France during the last two decades of the Ancien Régime.

These publishers also operated as wholesalers, because they regularly swapped copies of their new editions among themselves. When the STN printed an edition at a typical pressrun of 1,000, it traded 100, 200, or 500 copies for an equivalent number, reckoned in sheets, from the stock of allied houses, like the Société typographique de Lausanne and the Société typographique de Berne. In this way it built up an enormous inventory of all kinds of books--"livres d'assortiment" in the terms of the trade--in addition to its basic stock--"livres de fonds"--of its own publications. If it did not have a book in stock that one of its customers desired, it easily procured it by arranging a swap with another publisher.

The customers, who were mainly retail booksellers located everywhere in France, restricted their orders to a small number of suppliers, because they needed to save on shipping costs. It was much cheaper to place a large order with one supplier than to scatter many small orders among several suppliers. Moreover, the retailers rarely asked for more than a dozen copies per title. Returns did not exist in the eighteenth-century book trade, except in rare cases when a retailer would sell books as an agent--"en commission"--of a wholesaler. Retailers therefore limited their orders to the number of copies that they felt confident of selling and often settled sales in advance with their own customers before placing orders their supplier. Orders adhered closely to demand.

For all those reasons--the importance of swapping at the wholesale level, the nature of ordering by retail book dealers, and the conservative character of the orders--the archives of the STN provide a full and detailed picture of the diffusion of literature, especially illegal literature, in France during the twenty years before the French Revolution. Clerks of the STN recorded every order in special registers ("livres de commission"). They entered every sale in account books (called both "journaux" and "brouillons"). They kept track of shipments and payments in other ledgers. And the directors of the STN maintained an enormous commercial correspondence. The letters of the booksellers provide a running commentary on the market, because the retailers often accompanied their orders--long and eloquent lists of titles--with remarks about their sales.

Systematic sampling and compilation of the material in the STN archives therefore makes it possible to measure literary demand with a reasonable degree of accuracy--probably as much as in best-seller lists today, which have their own drawbacks as indexes of the book market. Of course, one must allow for some bias in the sources, because the STN sold a disproportionately large amount of books in a few genres, such as Protestant devotional works and travel literature. But one can compensate for that bias by consulting other documents. No other archives from French publishers exist, but it is

possible to compile small runs of statistics from state papers, which include records of books confiscated in police raids and in the Paris customs.

Thanks to all this compiling and comparing, it is possible to produce a best-seller list of the illegal books. Darnton published such a list in The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France (W. W. Norton, 1995) and provided detailed information on the diffusion of 720 works in a companion volume, The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789. But what about the books themselves? Many of them were obscure works, which sold well in the eighteenth century but have been forgotten since then. Many never made it into libraries. Many more were never mentioned in histories of literature, because literary history favors a canon of classics, books judged to be important by critics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than books that appealed to readers under the Ancien Régime.

At this point, Steven Ferguson, curator of rare books in Firestone Library, saw an opportunity to develop a new kind of collection. Most rare book libraries feature first editions of famous works. They preserve books in superb bindings and in mint condition--often with their pages uncut, because they have never been read. They are prized for their esthetic value as examples of fine printing. And their value often consists in their rareness: they represent the least widespread variety of literature.

Of course, strong arguments can be made for collecting such books. Libraries have a mission to preserve the finest specimens of the printer's craft, and books that had a small circulation sometimes produced enormous effects. Few readers could make sense of Newton's Principia when it appeared in 1687, but the book contributed mightily to a transformation in humanity's understanding of the universe. Ferguson did not reject the rationale for rare-book collecting in general. But he undertook something new. Instead of buying rare works of great value, he set out to acquire the books on Darnton's best-seller list--that is, ordinary books that had appealed to ordinary readers.

They turned out to be not very rare at all, because they really had been diffused widely in the eighteenth century, and many copies were still available in antiquarian book shops. They did not need to be first editions. On the contrary, it was preferable to find works from the later, cheaper editions that had the greatest circulation. Nor did they need to be elegant. The physical qualities of the cheap contemporary reprints conveyed something of the experience of humble readers when they came into contact with literature in the eighteenth century. Crude paper, worn type, and cardboard wrappings have the flavor of down-market consumerism at a time when books were beginning to be bought on a mass scale. In some copies, one can find threads embedded in the paper--remnants of shirts or petticoats gathered by the ragpickers who supplied papermillers with the basic raw material for literature in the eighteenth century. In short, the cheaper the book, the better: this variety of book collecting began from a principle that contrasted completely with the strategy that prevails in most rare book libraries.

To put the principle differently, the collecting was driven by the research, not by the taste of a collector. The purpose was to assemble physical artifacts from literature as it was actually experienced by the great bulk of readers two centuries ago. But this kind of collection can also stimulate further research. By reading their way through eighteenth-century editions of eighteenth-century best-sellers, students can enter imaginatively into the mental universe of eighteenth-century readers. Not that such an enterprise is easy. Rare book rooms are not time machines, and readers in them cannot

slip effortlessly into a pre-modern frame of mind. Too many barriers separate us from the world inhabited by people who experienced the Enlightenment and the French Revolution first hand. But we can make contact with that world. Underlining, margin notes, keys to romans à clé, the texture of the paper, the feel of the volume in the hand, all suggest something of what it was like to read a book centuries ago. And most important, we can reconstruct general patterns of reading, so that we can put ourselves on the same literary diet that nourished the contemporaries of Voltaire and Rousseau.

Did Voltaire and Rousseau dominate the best-seller lists of their time? That is but one of many questions that can be put to the material collected in Firestone Library. Instead of attempting to answer it here, it seems preferable to illustrate the character of the collection by listing the thirty-five top best-sellers and providing information about the copies that are available in the rare book room.

The Thirty-Five Forbidden Books Diffused Most Widely in France, 1769-1789

1. L'An 2440, Mercier
2. Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry, Pidansat de Mairobert ?
3. Système de la nature, d'Holbach
4. Tableau de Paris, Mercier
5. Histoire philosophique, Raynal
6. Journal historique...par M. de Maupeou, Pidansat de Mairobert and Moufle d'Angerville
7. L'Arrétin, Du Laurens
8. Lettre philosophique, anonymous
9. Mémoires de l'abbé Terray, Coquereau
10. La Pucelle d'Orléans, Voltaire
11. Questions sur l'Encyclopédie, Voltaire
12. Mémoires de Louis XV, anonymous
13. L'Observateur anglais, Pidansat de Mairobert
14. La Fille de joie, trans. by Lambert or Foucheret de Montbrun?
15. Thérèse philosophe, d'Arles de Montigny or d'Argens?
16. Recueil de comédies et...chansons gaillardes, anonymous
17. Essai philosophique sur le monachisme, Linguet
18. Histoire critique de Jésus Christ, d'Holbach
19. Les Plus Secrets Mystères...de la maçonnerie, ed. by Koeppen
20. Requête au Conseil du roi, Linguet
21. La Putain errante, Aretino or Niccolò Franco?
22. Le Christianisme dévoilé, d'Holbach
23. Oeuvres, Rousseau
24. Le Paysan perversi, Restif de la Bretonne
25. L'Ecole des filles, Milot
26. Le Bon-Sens, d'Holbach
27. Lettre de M. Linguet à M. le comte de Vergennes, Linguet
28. De l'Homme, Helvétius

29. Système social, d'Holbach
30. Le Monarque accompli, Lanjuinais
31. Dictionnaire philosophique portatif, Voltaire
32. Vie privée de Louis XV, Moufle d'Angerville or Laffrey?
33. La Lyre gaillarde, anonymous
34. Les Lauriers ecclésiastiques, Rochette de la Morlière
35. Histoire de dom B..., portier des Chartreux, Gervaise de Latouche or Nourry?