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The Devil in the Holy Water: Political Libel in Eighteenth-Century France

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WHY TAKE SLANDER SERIOUSLY? It has infected politics and dogged politicians since antiquity, but it could be dismissed as 'noise'—the inevitable by-product of friction in any political system. Whether directed against a Roman emperor or an American president, it seems to have a sameness that deters historical analysis. The head of state has a scandalous private life: so what? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

I would like to argue for the historicity of slander—that is, for its character as a cultural phenomenon peculiar to a time and place, in this case eighteenth-century France. Similar arguments can be applied to seventeenth-century England[1] and to other regimes threatened with revolution. But France developed a particularly rich vein of slanderous literature, which calls for special attention.

In a previous study, I tried to determine which books actually reached readers through the vast sector of the illegal book trade during the twenty

Read at the Academy 22 February 2007.

[1] As examples of recent literature on scandal and libel in England, see Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge, 2002) and John Brewer, 'Personal Scandal and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: Secrecy, Intimacy and the Interior Self in the Public Sphere' in Marie-Christine Skuncke (ed.), *Media and Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Stockholm, 2005). For a rich corpus of texts that can be consulted on the Web, see Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae (eds.), *Early Stuart Libels: An Edition of Poetry from Manuscript Sources* <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels>.

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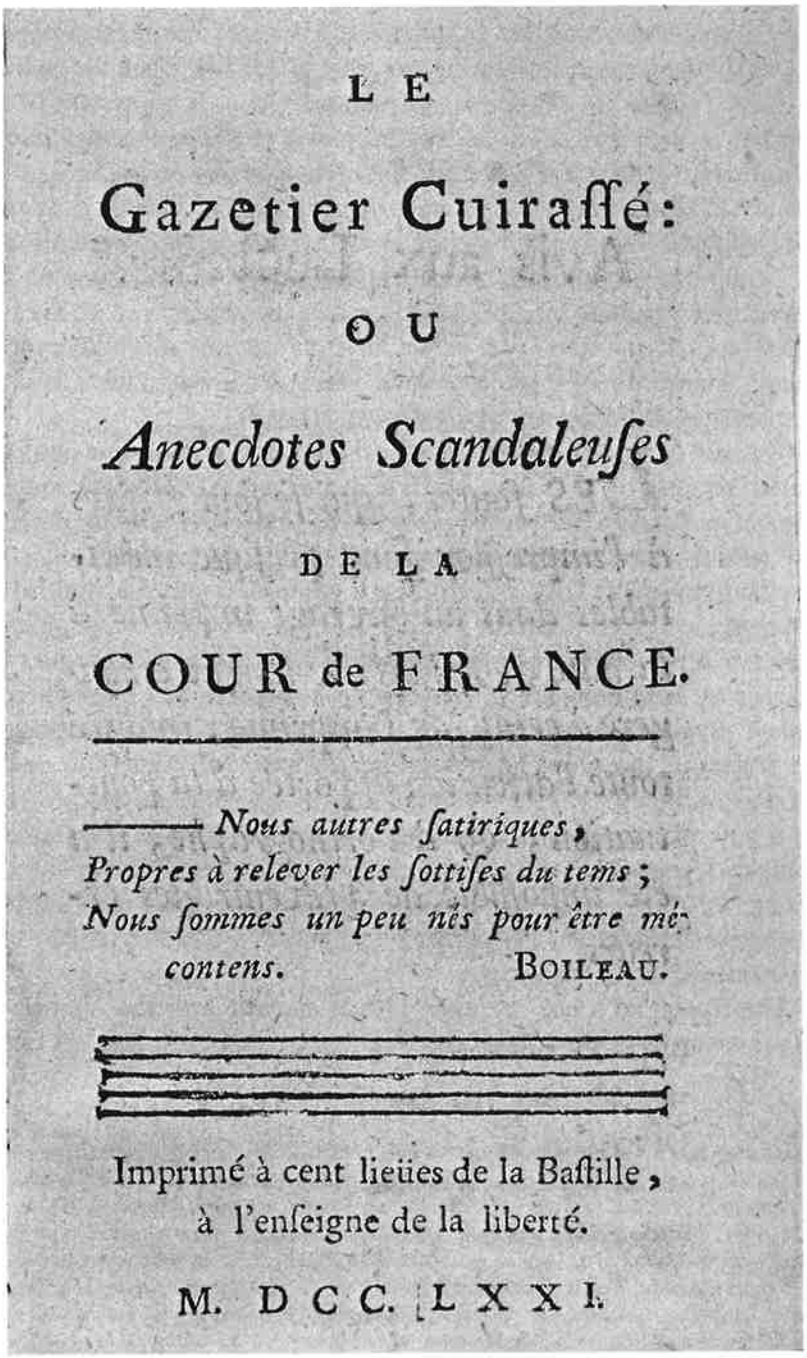


LE

Gazetier Cuiraſſé:

OU

Anecdotes Scandaleuſes

DE LA

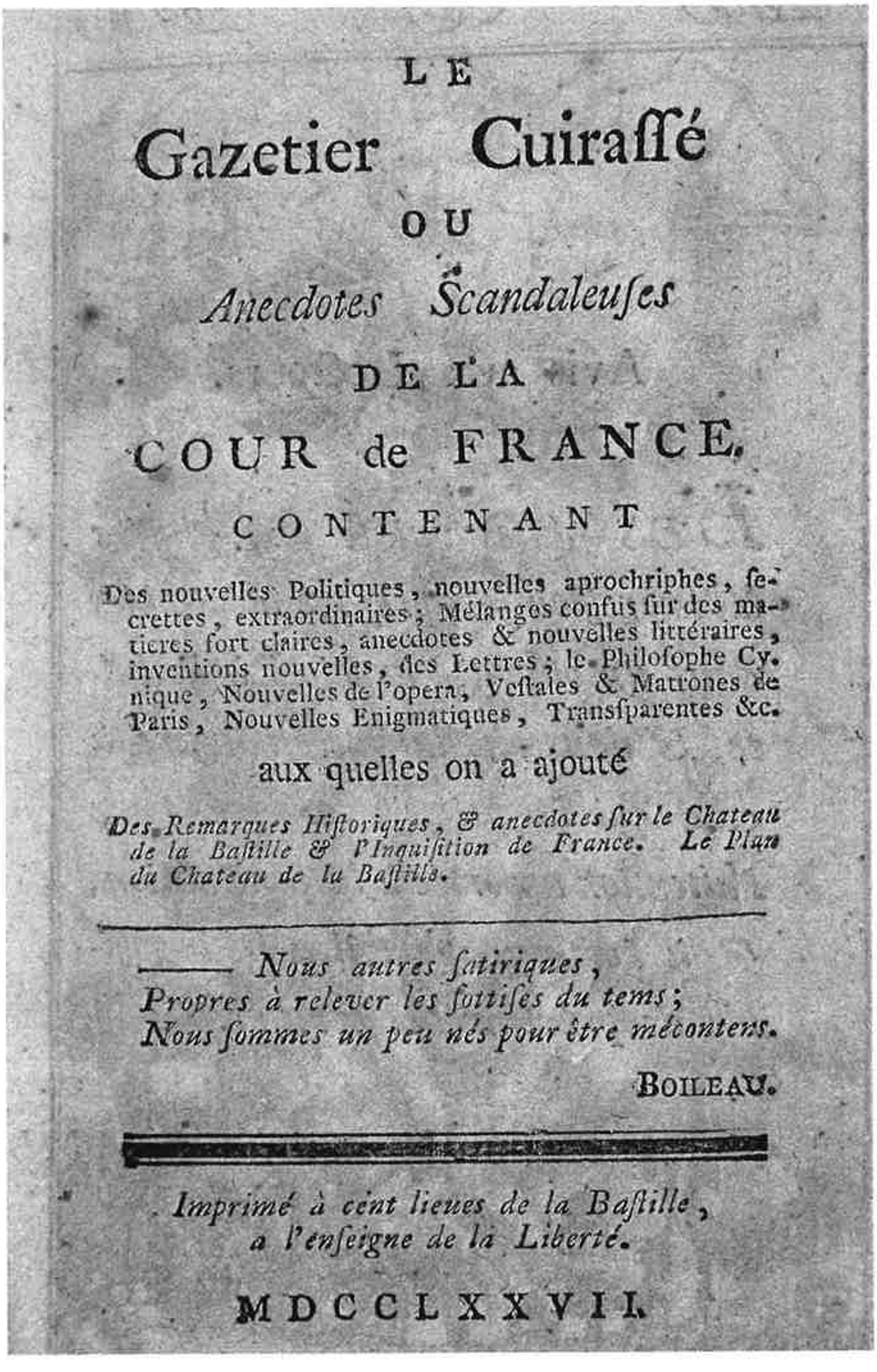
COUR de FRANCE.

——— Nous autres ſatiriques,
Propres à relever les ſottiſes du tems;
Nous ſommes un peu nés pour être mé-
contens. BOILEAU.

Imprimé à cent lieües de la Baſtille,
à l'enſeigne de la liberté.

M. DCC. LXXI.

Figure 1. *Le Gazetier cuirassé*, title page, 1771.



LE
Gazetier Cuiraſſé
OU
Anecdotes Scandaleuſes
DE LA
COUR de FRANCE,
CONTENANT

Des nouvelles Politiques, nouvelles aprochriphes, ſecrettes, extraordinaires; Mélanges confus ſur des matieres fort claires, anecdotes & nouvelles littéraires, inventions nouvelles, des Lettres; le Philoſophe Cynique, Nouvelles de l'opera, Veſtales & Matrones de Paris, Nouvelles Enigmatiques, Transſparentes &c.

aux quelles on a ajouté

Des Remarques Hiſtoriques, & anecdotes ſur le Chateau de la Baſtille & l'Inquiſition de France. Le Plan du Chateau de lu Baſtills.

——— *Nous autres ſatiriques,*
Propres à relever les ſottiſes du tems;
Nous ſommes un peu nés pour être mécontens.

BOILEAU.

Imprimé à cent lieues de la Baſtille,
a l'enſeigne de la Liberté.

MDCCLXXVII.

Figure 2. *Le Gazetier cuirassé*, title page, 1777.

title, he struck the pose of an iron-plated gazetteer, a heroic knight in armour who fired off cannonades in all directions, despite the bolts of lightning that threatened to destroy him. That much was clear, but the gazetteer was also surrounded by odd images and inscriptions, which the reader had to puzzle out and which the researcher can use to decipher some of the mysteries inherent in the history of reading. The Latin caption at the bottom reads like a riddle:

> Etna provides these weapons for the stalwart man,
> Etna which will defeat the mad fury of the giants.

To make sense of it, the reader would have to know the ancient myth about the titan Typhon who tried to storm the kingdom of Zeus by hurling Mount Etna at the heavens. Zeus fired back thunderbolts, which pinned Typhon under Etna, where he remains to this day, belching smoke and lava. Evidently the gazetteer identified himself with Typhon in a battle against the giants. He was the stalwart man shooting grapeshot at *les grands* above.

Who were the giants? The initials at the top of the frontispiece—intricately inscribed but legible enough to be deciphered—helped to identify them, provided that the reader's glance moved vertically to the images below. Underneath the 'DB' at the upper left, a barrel served as a rebus that evoked one of the anecdotes in the text: 'The equestrian statue of one of our kings was found covered with filth from a barrel, which had been overturned on top of it and covered it down to its shoulders.'[5] In 1763 a statue of Louis XV had been erected in the centre of the new Place de Louis XV (today Place de la Concorde). *Baril* in the eighteenth century was pronounced without enunciating the final *l*.[6] So the frontispiece said that Mme du Barry had defecated all over the French monarchy.

The 'SF' after the 'DB' stood for Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Saint Florentin, the minister of the king's household who was responsible for the administration of the Bastille. He countersigned all *lettres de cachet* beneath the signature of the king. So the Medusa or Gorgon head (a symbol of tyranny) beneath the 'SF' spits out thunderbolts carrying *lettres de cachet* stamped with oval seals (the *cachets*) and bearing the formulaic readers had to identify the real persons disguised behind the fictitious characters. If a key was not printed at the back of the volume, they made one of their own or bought one from the pedlars and book dealers who sold them separately.[9] *Le Gazetier cuirassé* never named its villains. It merely gave the first letters or syllables of their names and then provided a key so that its readers could verify the accuracy of their guesses. Some identifications were so obvious that they did not require keys:

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[5] *Le Gazetier cuirassé ou anecdotes scandaleuses de la cour de France* (1777), p. 54. The edition of 1771 contains an 'Explication du frontispiece' on the reverse side of the title page, although the explanation does not go into great detail.

[6] 'Baril' in *Le Grand Vocabulaire français*, 1 (Paris, 1768), p. 147: 'Le l final est muet devant une consonne; mais il se fait sentir devant une voyelle.' See also André Martinet and Henriette Walter, *Dictionnaire de la prononciation française dans son usage réel* (Paris, 1973), p. 129.

> The Chancel . . . [Chancellor Maupeou] and the duc d'Aiguil . . . [d'Aiguillon, the foreign minister] have so much mastery over the k . . . [king] that they only leave him the freedom to sleep with his mistress, to pet his dogs, and to sign marriage contracts.[10]

But others required considerable skill and familiarity with gossip about the great. What reader would be able to identify the relatively obscure 'comtesse de la Mar . . .', who, 'seeing the impossibility of making a prince, decided to make a little bishop'? Answer: the comtesse de la Marck, who took up with the archbishop of Reims in order to procure an heir to her impotent husband.[11]

These items took the form of anecdotes, as announced in the book's subtitle, 'scandalous anecdotes from the court of France'. 'Anecdote' in the eighteenth century meant nearly the opposite of what it means today. As defined in contemporary dictionaries and the *Encyclopédie*, it designated a 'secret history' of the kind originally developed by Procopius in the sixth century AD—that is, an account of something that had actually happened but remained excluded from official versions of the past.[12] Anecdotes might be exaggerated, but they always contained a kernel of truth; so they, too, had to be deciphered. *Le Gazetier cuirassé* played with citizen, is insulted with fury, where the most atrocious and absurd calumny distills a hideous poison on everything that one respects and loves.'[17]

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[9] On *romans à clé* and political attacks on Louis XV, his mistresses, and ministers, see my 'Mlle Bonafon et la vie privée de Louis XV', *Dix-huitième siècle*, no. 35 (2003), 369–91.

[10] *Le Gazetier cuirassé*, p. 31.

[11] Ibid., p. 49.

[12] See, for example, 'Anecdote' in *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1762 edition): 'Particularité secrète d'histoire, qui avait été omise ou supprimée par les historiens précédents. *Anecdote curieuse. Les anecdotes sont ordinairement satyriques.* Il s'emploie aussi adjectivement. *L'Histoire anecdote de Procope*'. In contrast to the negative connotations of the word today, as in 'anecdotal evidence' meaning something of dubious veracity, the article 'Anecdotes' in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert also conveyed the notion of something true but hidden: 'Anecdotes, nom que les Grecs donnaient aux choses qu'on faisait connaître pour la première fois au public. . . . Ce mot est en usage dans la littérature pour signifier des histoires secrètes de faits qui se sont passées dans l'intérieur du cabinet ou des cours des princes et dans les mystères de leur politique. . . . Procope a intitulé *Anecdotes* un livre dans lequel il peint avec des couleurs odieuses l'Empereur Justinien et Théodore, épouse de ce prince.'

Who was this gazetteer? He identified himself, though without breaking out of his anonymity, in the dedication of the book. It provides another example of paratextual parody, in this case a lampoon of fulsome dedications to literary patrons:[18]

> Dedicatory Epistle
>
> to ME
>
> My dear Person,
>
> Enjoy your glory without concern for any danger. You will be exposed to it, of course, because of all the enemies of your fatherland. You will sharpen their fury and double their ferocity. But you should know, my dear person, that in revealing their iniquitous mysteries . . . you avenge the innocent. . . . Make them tremble, those cruel monsters whose existence is so odious and so harmful to humanity. . . .
>
> I know you too well to fear any slackening of your principles. Your resolve is a guarantee that you will never deviate from them. In this opinion, I am, my dear person,
>
> your most humble and obedient servant.
>
> Myself

Beneath the burlesque rhetoric, the author dramatised himself as a hero who battled despotism single-handedly through the power of the press. He fired off copies of his book like the cannonballs aimed at the evil powers in the frontispiece. But who was he? The answer to that puzzle appeared in the second of the four libels I would like to discuss.

Le Diable dans un bénitier (1783) also had a complex title page that required a great deal of decoding (Fig. 4). The main title played with a colloquial expression—to thrash about like a devil in a baptismal font—which referred to frantic and ineffective agitation.[19] It enticed the reader with a hint about a book full of devilry, and it left an implicit question dangling: who was this devil? The other elements of the title page also operated as bait to attract the reader's attention, because, as a trained eye could easily see, they parodied all the signs of legality in a book that had been cleared through the censorship. They included a fake notice of an approbation and privilege; a fake, super-legal address (the royal printing shop); a fake author (Pierre Leroux; I have not been able to identify him); a fake editor (the abbé Jean Louis Aubert, editor of the orthodox *Gazette de France* and censor of the unorthodox *Courier de l'Europe*, a journal produced by French expatriates in London); and a fake dedication (to the marquis de Castries, minister of the navy and a main target of the slander in the text.) The long subtitle summarised the book's plot. Far from being a hero, the iron-plated gazetteer had turned coat as a 'mouche' or police spy, and he had sold out to an inspector who was trying to establish a secret branch of the Parisian police in London.

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[17] Voltaire, 'Quisquis' in his *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie par des amateurs*, 6 (no place of publication, 1775), p. 278.

[18] *Le Gazetier cuirassé*, pp. vii–viii.

[19] According to the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1866–70), the expression was picked up and popularised by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset in *Ver-Vert* (1734): 'Bien vite il sut jurer et maugréer | Mieux qu'un vieux diable au fond d'un bénitier.'

The frontispiece added new pieces to the puzzle (Fig. 5). Using ellipsis dots to disguise the names, its caption read: 'The plenipot . . . [plenipotentiary] receives the abjuration of Charlot and R . . . . . . r [Receveur] gives him the cross of Saint Andrew.' What was this devilry all about? By working through the text, the reader soon discovered the identity of the iron-plated gazetteer: he was 'Charlot' or Charles Théveneau de Morande, the most notorious libeller in the colony of French expatriates in London. Receveur was the police inspector who had arrived in London on a secret mission to exterminate the libellers. The anonymous author of *Le Diable dans un bénitier* cast these two as the villains of his narrative; and in its climactic scene, he described a burlesque ritual: Receveur inducted Morande into a Masonic-like secret society of the Parisian police. The cross on Receveur's jacket was the insignia of the order, a cross of Saint Andrew—that is, a representation of two boards attached together in the shape of an X, which the police supposedly used to hold down their victims during torture sessions in the Bastille. Around his neck, Receveur wears the order's medal, a miniature of a wheel on which prisoners were broken. He carries handcuffs in his pocket, and he dubs Morande with another symbol of despotism, tongs used to hold hot coals to prisoners' feet in order to extract confessions. By joining the secret society, Morande renounced his past as a libeller and agreed to collaborate in the repression of his former colleagues. The comte de Moustier, France's chargé d'affaires in London in 1783, presides over the scene against a background of a curtain decorated with the Bourbon fleurs de lys. On the far left, Ange Goudar, another libeller turned police spy, carries a box of opium pills, which Morande is to take in order to forget his past. Goudar accompanied Receveur to London, serving as his interpreter and guide to the literary underworld, which Goudar knew well, having inhabited it for years. The title of his best-known *chronique scandaleuse*, *L'Espion chinois*, dangles from his pocket. And with his left arm he offers Morande the medal of the society, which will seal the satanic pact being enacted through the initiation rite.[20]

After deciphering as much as possible of the title page and frontispiece, the readers were expected to continue to play the guessing game as they made their way through the text. They had to identify the characters whose names were hidden behind ellipsis dots. One copy of the book contains a key which an eighteenth-century reader wrote on a blank sheet at the end of the volume, just as readers often did while perusing *romans à clé* (Fig. 6). It gets most of the identifications right, but it contains a few mistakes—an indication that reading really did involve puzzle solving and that the puzzles could be difficult, even for seemingly well-informed contemporaries.[21] But there was no mistaking the libellous character of the text. It slandered the most powerful men in France, from ministers down to their subordinates in the police force, and it treated the entire system as a noxious form of despotism, which it contrasted with England, a regime where the liberty of the press and other fundamental rights were respected. Curiously, however, this radical political message was embedded in a story that was designed to entertain its readers. Libelling in 1783 appealed to *homo ludens*; it had a play-element to it.

The narrative recounts Receveur's efforts, aided by Morande, to destroy the colony of French libellers, and in doing so it includes a short and slanderous biography of each man—in effect, libels within the libel. It describes Morande as the depraved son of a corrupt attorney in Burgundy, whose career combined writing with crime. After enlisting in a cavalry regiment, he deserted, drifted into the underworld of gambling dens and brothels in Paris, and landed in the infamous prison of Bicêtre. Upon his release, he emigrated to London, where he lived by pimping for homosexuals and blackmailing them. The success of *Le Gazetier cuirassé* convinced him that he could do better by blackmailing the greatest figures in the French court. He therefore threatened to publish a sequel to it, *Mémoires secrets d'une femme publique*, which would relate the inside story of Mme du Barry's ignominious origins and her ascension from a brothel to the throne. In order to prevent such horrors from circulating in print, the French government dispatched Beaumarchais to buy Morande off: a matter of 32,000 livres and an annuity of 4,000 livres. From then on, Morande renounced libelling and collaborated with the attempts of the French authorities to repress the libellers who followed in his footsteps.

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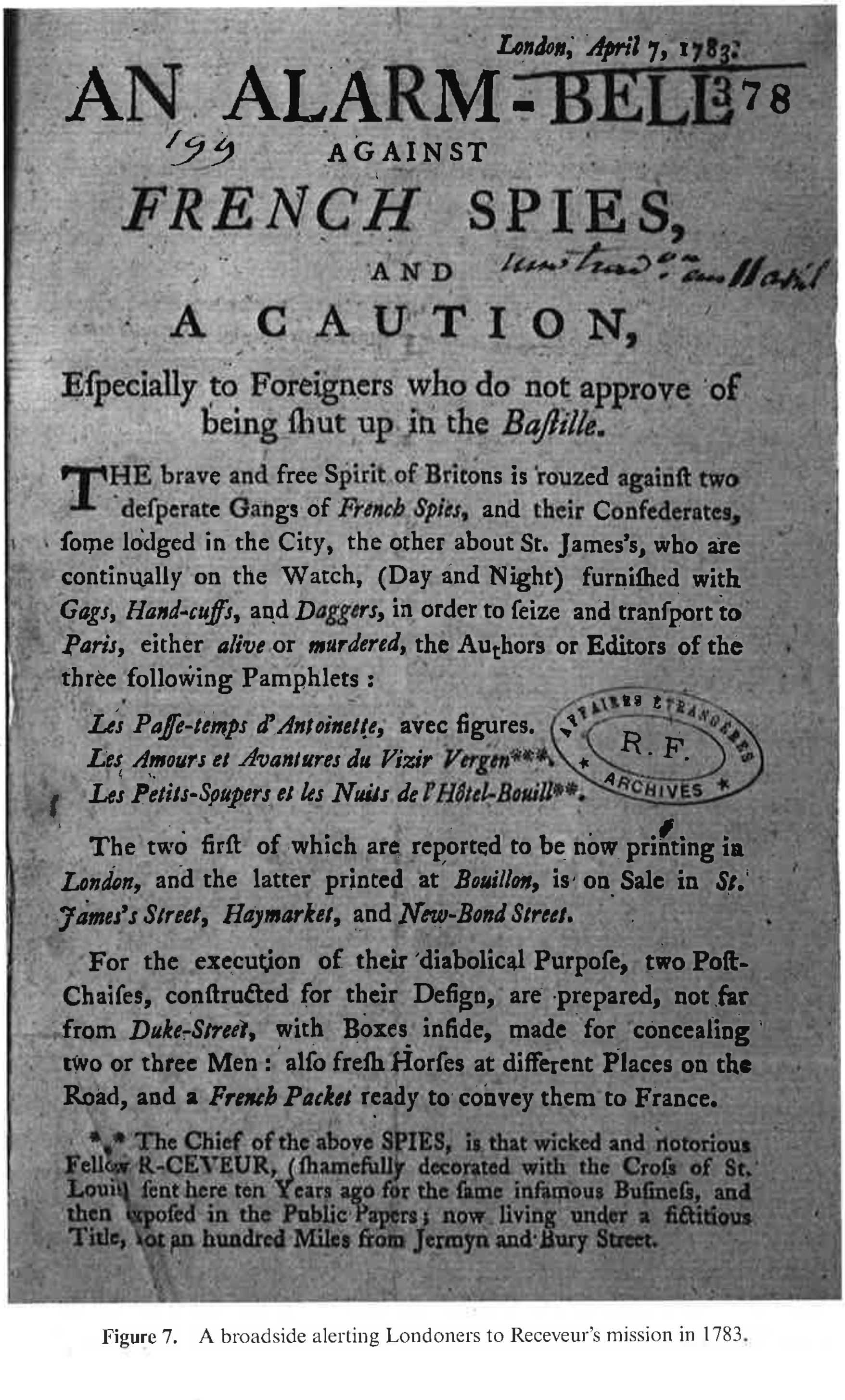
[20] This scene is described in the text: *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, pp. 84–5. It was not meant to be taken literally but rather to express Morande's defection to the police.

[21] On the left side of the page, the key gives the number of the page on which a name first appears. The next column gives the disguised versions of the names as they were printed, with dashes to conceal their full identity. The column on the right gives the identifications worked out by the reader. He or she wrongly identified 'le Gazetier cuirassé' as Beamarchais and 'M. De la F—' as a 'M. de la Fare'. In fact, De la F—stood for la Fite de Pelleport—or so I have concluded after a close reading of the text and a study of Pelleport's career. The key is in a copy that I possess.

As described in *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, Receveur outdid Morande in villainy, for he was the actual devil in the holy water. Born with a penchant for cruelty—as a child he trotted after inspectors hauling off victims to torture chambers and as an adolescent he aspired to marry the daughter of the public executioner—he became a police agent who specialised in kidnapping exiled writers and torturing them in the Bastille. In fact, as *Le Diable dans un bénitier* revealed, he was the last in a series of secret agents sent to murder, abduct, or buy off the libellers in London. After Beaumarchais moved on to other adventures, the government commissioned Louis Valentin Goezman, Beaumarchais's opponent in a famous court case that compromised the Maupeou judiciary in 1773–4, to prevent the publication of a libel against Marie-Antoinette. Disguised as an Alsatian 'baron de Thurne', Goezman purchased the (purportedly) entire edition of *Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette*—an obscene poem-pamphlet about the supposed impotence of Louis XVI and the queen's supposed orgies with his younger brother, the comte d'Artois—for 17,400 livres. Then he warned that more books on the same subject were in press; and having run up a suspiciously high expense account, he kept repeating the same refrain: send money.

Instead, *Le Diable dans un bénitier* recounted, the French authorities sent another agent, Alexis d'Anouilh, a police spy attached to the naval ministry who knew nothing about England, except that it rained a great deal there. He therefore set off for London disguised as an umbrella merchant. Gravitating to taverns and gambling dens, he, too, accumulated huge expenses. Eventually he made contact with Richard Sheridan, the playwright who had become an undersecretary for foreign affairs in 1782. With Sheridan's help, he hoped to get Parliament to pass a bill that would make it a crime to libel non-British subjects living abroad—such as the queen of France. To round up the necessary votes in the House, Sheridan would have to pay out vast sums in bribes. So d'Anouilh returned to Versailles for consultations and a bigger expense account. After hearing



London, April 7, 1783.

378

AN ALARM-BELL

199

AGAINST

FRENCH SPIES,

AND [illegible]

A CAUTION,

Eſpecially to Foreigners who do not approve of being ſhut up in the *Baſtille*.

THE brave and free Spirit of Britons is rouzed againſt two deſperate Gangs of *French Spies*, and their Confederates, ſome lodged in the City, the other about St. James's, who are continually on the Watch, (Day and Night) furniſhed with *Gags*, *Hand-cuffs*, and *Daggers*, in order to ſeize and tranſport to *Paris*, either *alive* or *murdered*, the Authors or Editors of the three following Pamphlets :

Les Paſſe-temps d'Antoinette, avec figures.
*Les Amours et Avantures du Vizir Vergen***.*
*Les Petits-Soupers et les Nuits de l'Hôtel-Bouill**.*

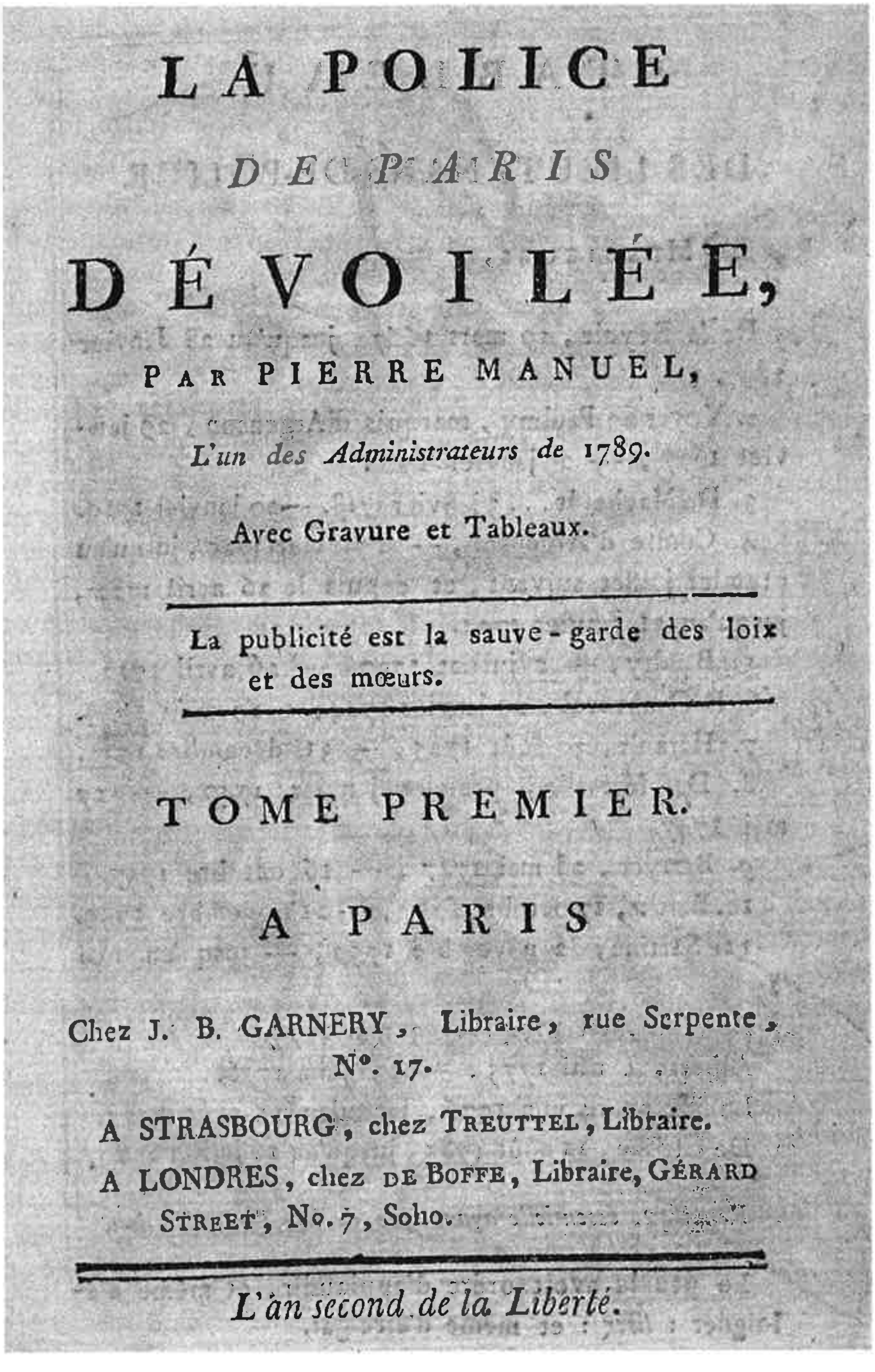
AFFAIRES ETRANGERES R.F. ARCHIVES

The two firſt of which are reported to be now printing in *London*, and the latter printed at *Bouillon*, is on Sale in *St. James's Street*, *Haymarket*, and *New-Bond Street*.

For the execution of their diabolical Purpoſe, two Poſt-Chaiſes, conſtructed for their Deſign, are prepared, not far from *Duke-Street*, with Boxes inſide, made for concealing two or three Men : alſo freſh Horſes at different Places on the Road, and a *French Packet* ready to convey them to France.

⁂ The Chief of the above SPIES, is that wicked and notorious Fellow R-CEVEUR, (ſhamefully decorated with the Croſs of St. Louis) ſent here ten Years ago for the ſame infamous Buſineſs, and then expoſed in the Public Papers; now living under a fictitious Title, not an hundred Miles from Jermyn and Bury Street.

Figure 7. A broadside alerting Londoners to Receveur's mission in 1783.



LA POLICE
DE PARIS
DÉVOILÉE,
PAR PIERRE MANUEL,
L'un des Administrateurs de 1789.
Avec Gravure et Tableaux.

La publicité est la sauve-garde des loix et des mœurs.

TOME PREMIER.

A PARIS

Chez J. B. GARNERY, Libraire, rue Serpente, N°. 17.
A STRASBOURG, chez TREUTTEL, Libraire.
A LONDRES, chez DE BOFFE, Libraire, GÉRARD STREET, No. 7, Soho.

L'an second de la Liberté.

Figure 8. *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, title page.

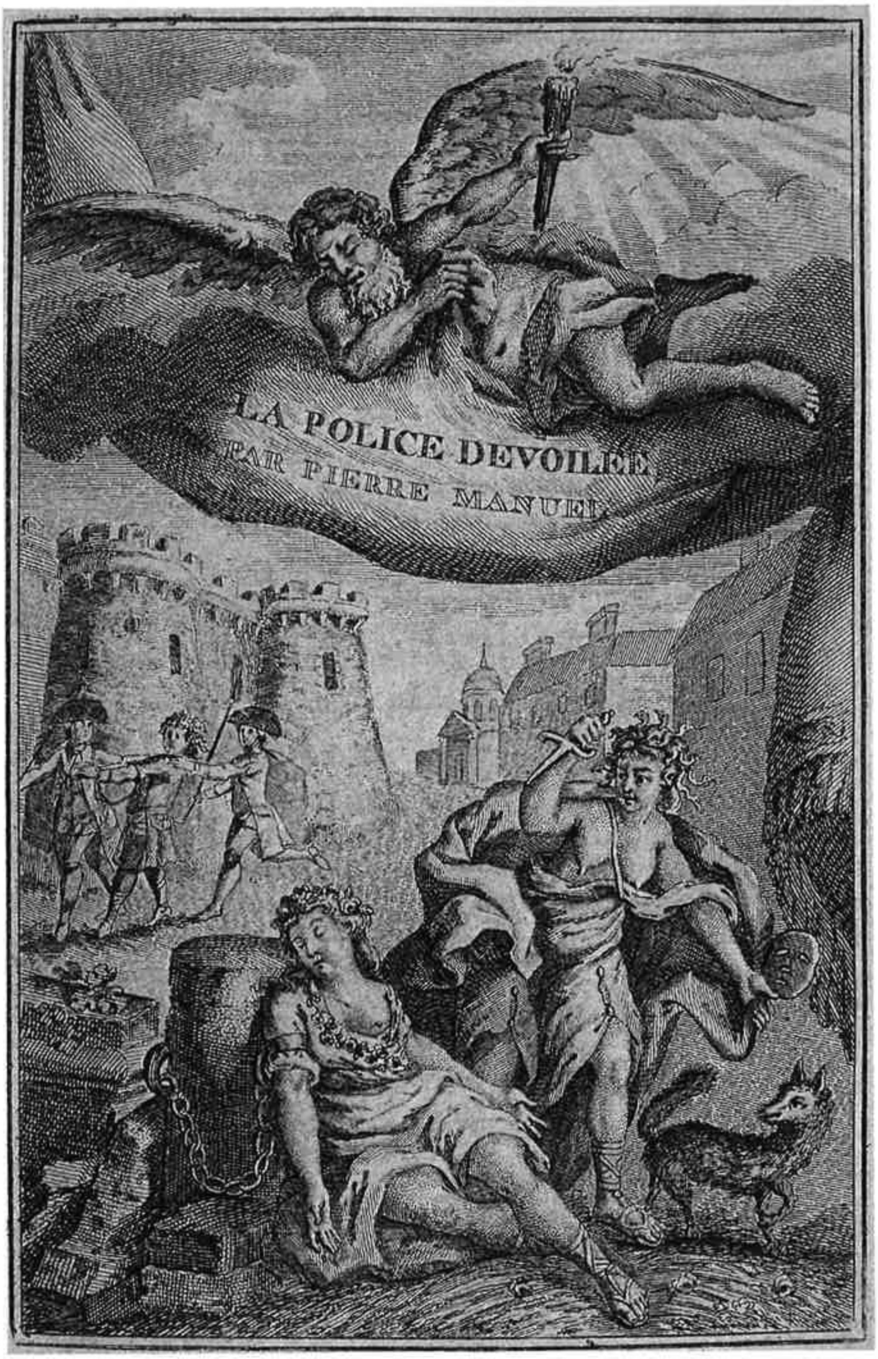

LA POLICE DEVOILÉE
PAR PIERRE MANUEL

Figure 9. *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, frontispiece.

France. The last attempt at blackmail failed, exactly as related in *Le Diable dans un bénitier*. After its publication, Morande captured some page proofs with corrections in Pelleport's handwriting. He forwarded them to the Paris police; they lured Pelleport to Boulogne-sur-mer and locked him up in the Bastille on 11 July 1784. He stayed there for more than four years and was released only because his nemesis, the foreign minister Vergennes, had died and the new ministers were more concerned with the preparations for the Estates General than with a genre of polemics that went back to the reign of Louis XV. But the genre took on new life after 1789, thanks in large part to the unveiling and unmasking done by writers like Pierre Manuel. So we face a final question: who was he?

He appears on the frontispiece of the fourth and last libel in the series, *Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel* (1793) (Fig. 10).

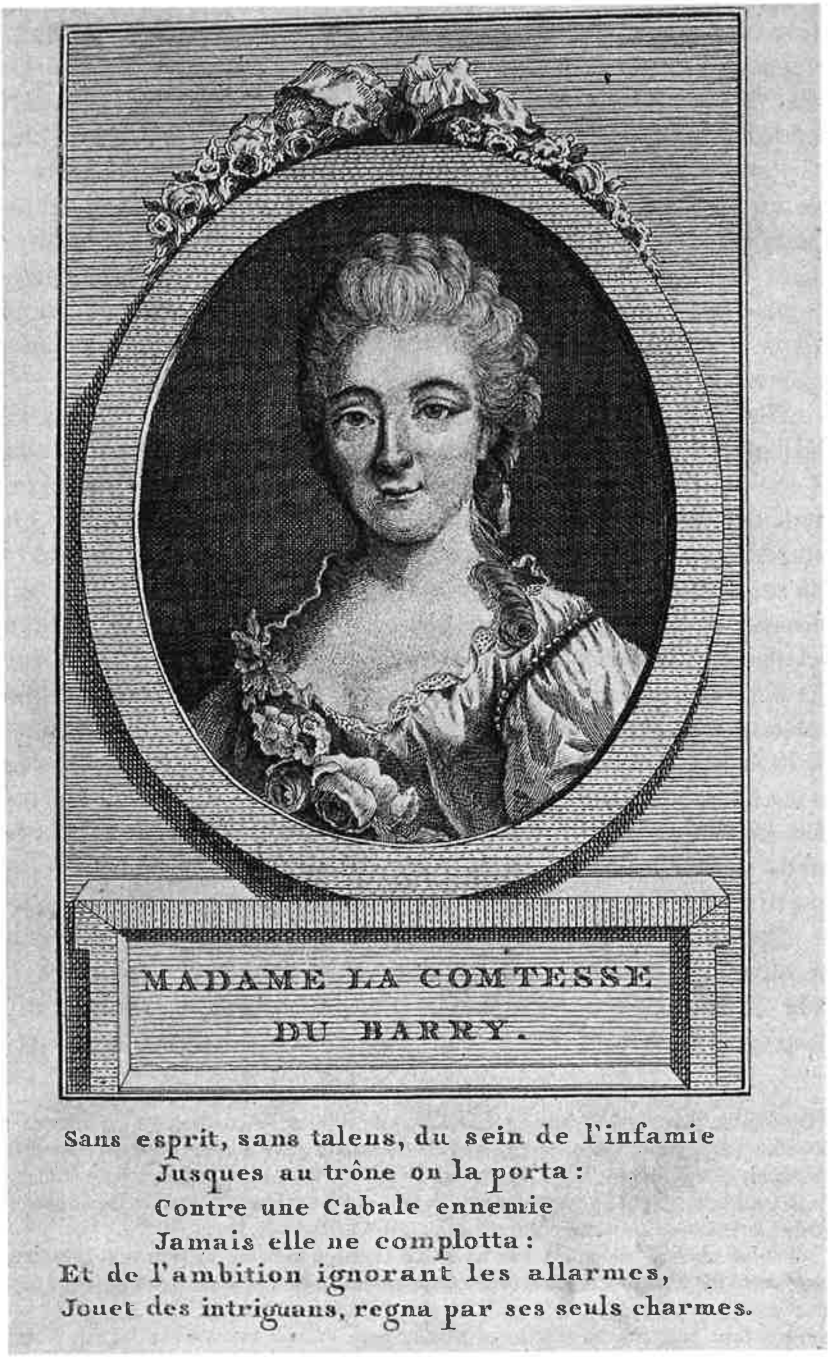
The image provides a straightforward view of Manuel looking out at the reader in a dignified pose, the sash of a deputy to the Convention around his shoulder. But the caption conveys the secret hidden behind the picture:

> I was not born with a delicate disposition,
> My soul is sordid and vulgar,
> I have pillaged altars and betrayed the state
> In order to increase my fortune.

The contrast between the undoctored image and the tendentious caption is typical of all the 'private lives' or slanderous biographies from the Old Regime and the Revolution. Here, for example, is the frontispiece of *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* (1776), one of the best-selling libels of the pre-revolutionary period (Fig. 11).

Despite the strong elements of continuity from the libel literature of the *Ancien Régime*, the revolutionary libels adopted a fundamentally new tone. As one can see at a glance from their frontispieces and title pages, they do not try to attract the reader with the prospect of games to play. They offer nothing to decipher, no jokes to get, no ambiguity, no humour. Instead, they employ a rhetoric aimed at a different audience: the common people or sans-culottes. They also utilise a popular variety of imagery, one that did not assume any sophistication on the part of the public. To illustrate that point, I would like to make a quick detour into revolutionary iconography.

After 14 July 1789, the streets of Paris were flooded with images—caricatures, broadsides, canards, posters, portraits, engravings about current events. They were churned out by craftsmen in the rue Saint Jacques,



Sans esprit, sans talens, du sein de l'infamie
Jusques au trône on la porta :
Contre une Cabale ennemie
Jamais elle ne complotta :
Et de l'ambition ignorant les allarmes,
Jouet des intriguans, regna par ses seuls charmes.

Figure 11. *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry*, frontispiece.

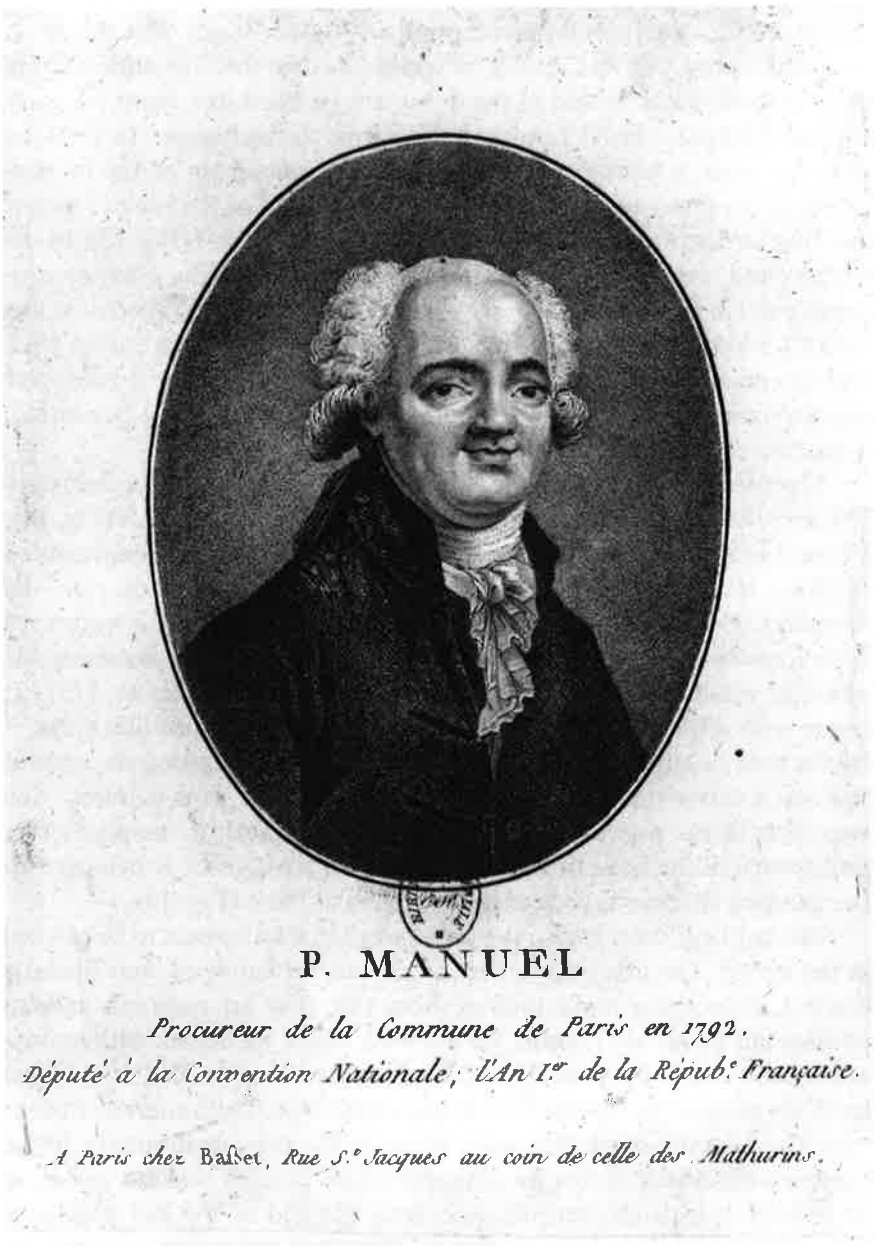

P. MANUEL
Procureur de la Commune de Paris en 1792.
Député à la Convention Nationale; l'An Ier de la Répub.e Française.
A Paris chez Basset, Rue S.t Jacques au coin de celle des Mathurins.

Figure 12. Print of Manuel, 1792.

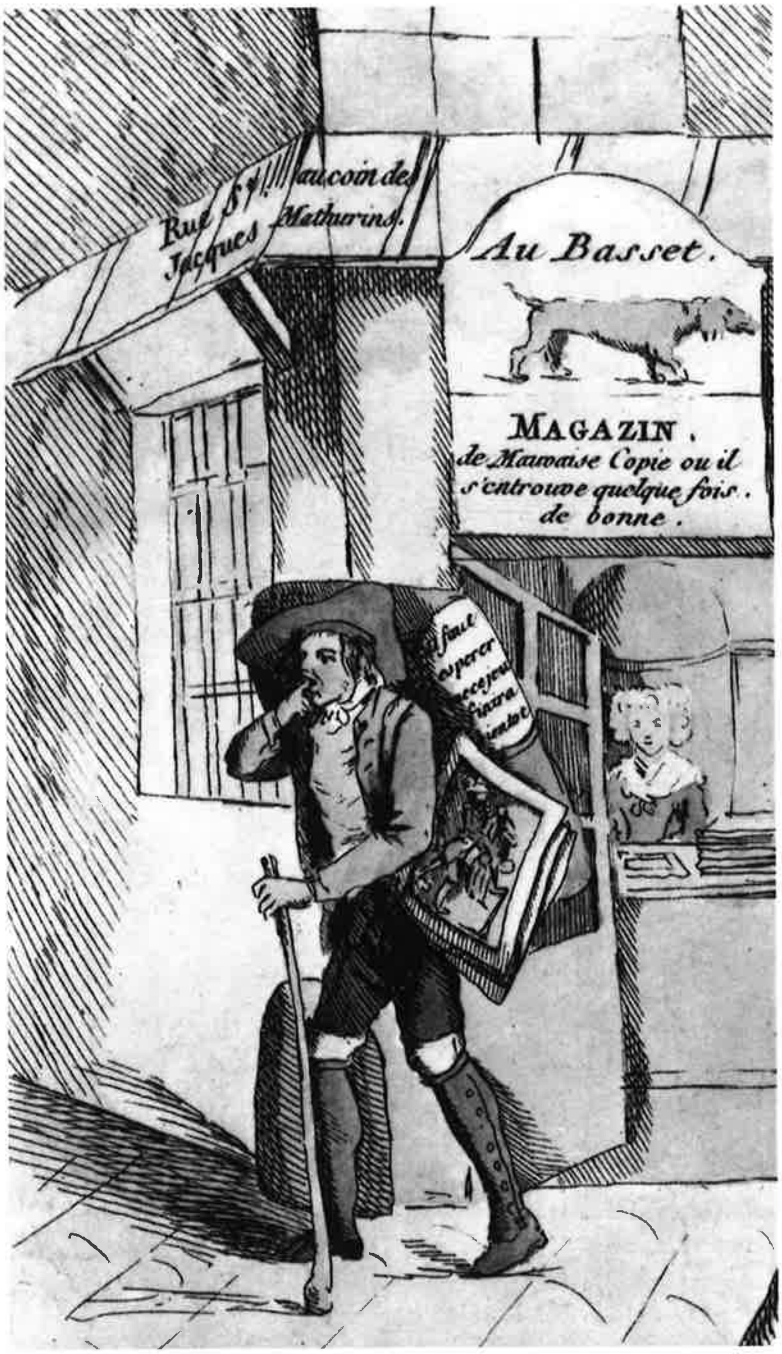
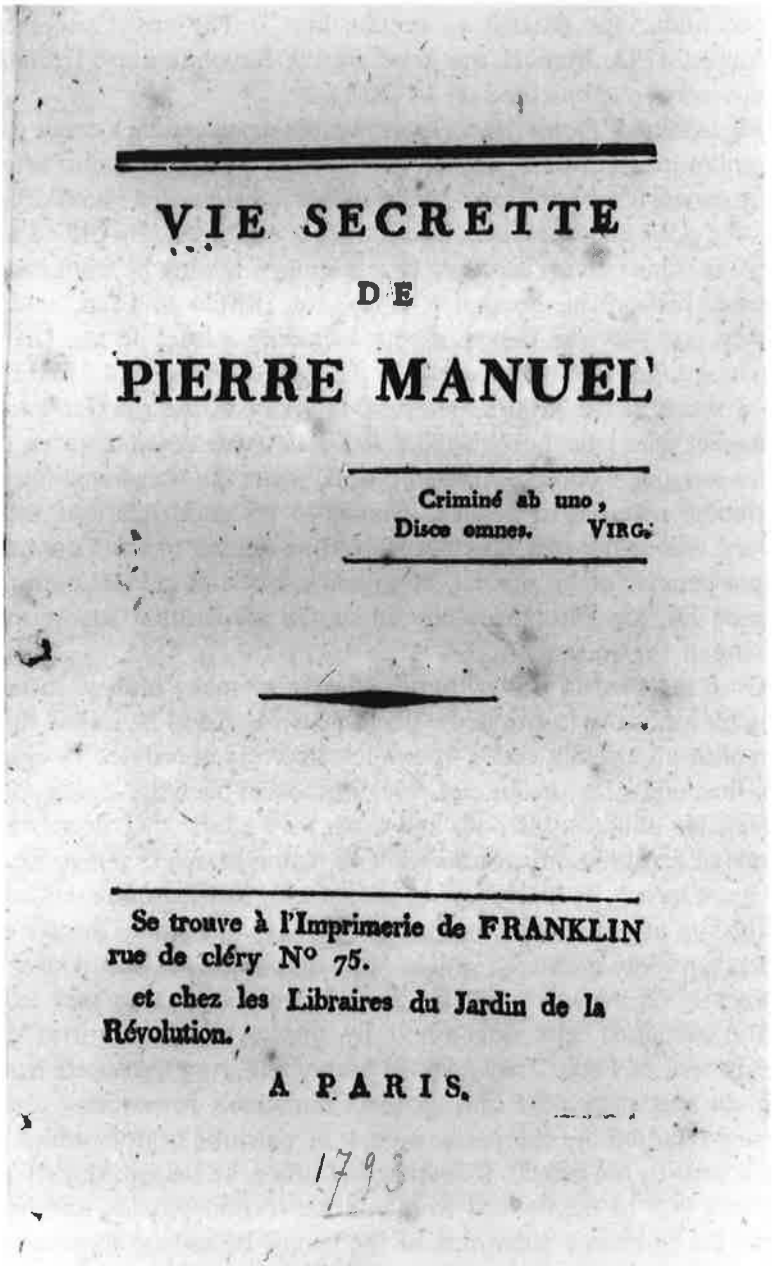

Rue St. Jacques
au coin des Mathurins.
Au Baſſet.
MAGAZIN.
de Mauvaise Copie ou il ſ'entrouve quelque fois. de bonne.
faut
esperer

Figure 13. A satirical print of 1790 showing Basset's shop (detail).



VIE SECRETTE

DE

PIERRE MANUEL

Crimine ab uno,
Disce omnes. VIRG.

Se trouve à l'Imprimerie de FRANKLIN
rue de cléry N° 75.
et chez les Libraires du Jardin de la
Révolution.

A PARIS.

1793

Figure 15. *Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel*, title page.

Massacres, he appeared at the side of the sans-culotte leaders. But the contradiction between his public and private lives surfaced as soon as he became embroiled in the politics of the Convention. He sat with the Girondins, voted against the death of the king, and then retired to Montargis in the hope of enjoying his ill-gotten gains in obscurity. In the end, as in the case of all false patriots, the Revolution caught up with him. His life illustrated the greatest danger facing the republic in 1793: vice disguised as virtue.

Everything about *Vie secrète de Pierre Manuel*, its slipshod style as well as its crude printing, suggests that it was a hack work put out at great haste by the propaganda machine of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety. It belonged to a series of similar libels, all of them anonymous, produced in the Year II (1793–4) with the same address, 'à l'Imprimerie de Franklin, rue de Cléry no. 75'. They included *Vie secrète et politique de Brissot*, *Vie de Capet, ci-devant duc d'Orléans*, *Vie privée et politique de J.-R. Hébert*, and *Vie politique de Jérôme Pétion* (this last libel actually had no address). The Robespierrists needed to win over public opinion in 1793–4, just as Maupeou did in 1771, but they dealt with a different public, one that responded to denunciation and moral indignation, not wit and word games.

The succession of 'private lives' actually extended through the entire Revolution. I have found thirty-eight of them published between 1789 and 1800—or forty-two, if one counts short biographies grouped together in a single volume. Most of the revolutionary leaders were slandered in this fashion, from Lafayette and Mirabeau to Marat, Robespierre, and the top figures of the Directory. The line also extends far back into the *Ancien Régime*. *Vie privée de Louis XV*, *Mémoires de Mme la marquise de Pompadour*, and *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* made most of the century look like a continuous *chronique scandaleuse*. Moreover, those works derived from varieties of slander that went back to the Huguenot attacks on Louis XIV, the Fronde, the religious wars, and the power struggles in the Renaissance courts of Italy. Libelling of this sort still exists today. *Primary Colors*, an anonymous *roman à clé* about the private life of Bill Clinton, shows that the tradition has life in it yet.

But the long-term continuities should not obscure the differences that stand out if one examines libel literature up close during a particular era. The four works that I have discussed represent successive stages of libelling as it evolved from the France of Louis XV to that of Louis XVI, the early Revolution and the Terror. By studying the common