

The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009.

Living in the age of immediate virtual news, blogs, and paparazzi, we often think that our society has become degraded in its continual chase for the next scandal. In *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* Robert Darnton puts forth an in-depth historical and literary analysis of slander in the Eighteenth Century that demonstrates the pursuit for scandal isn't a recent invention. As a scholar of Modern Europe specializing in the history of the book, Robert Darnton, who is currently the Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and Director of the Harvard University Library, has written multiple other books on related topics, such as *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984), which is arguably his most popular work. Continuing with his interest in the underground press and book industry that he has previously treated in his books *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France*, Darnton's latest book bases its history of slander on the study of the underground *libelle* (or libel), which he defines as "a scandalous account of public affairs and private life among the great figures of the court and capital."¹ *The Devil in the Holy Water* introduces the libel as a literary genre of its own in the Eighteenth Century and reveals a period when literature was not so easily separated from law and government, as it is today, and was capable of affecting real change in society. By following the history of the libel and the reactions against it, Darnton shows how this literary current helped delegitimize the Ancien Régime and then transformed to fit the needs of the revolutionaries, therefore becoming an integral part of the denunciation of political criminals (which in hindsight we know was key to the denouement of the French Revolution).

Darnton begins the history of the libel with four beautifully illustrated frontpieces of Eighteenth Century libels at the front of the book and using these frontpieces, embarks on the history by closely examining a small selection (four) of some of the most important libels, their authors, and to the extent possible the reader reactions. The second part of the book then discusses the reaction of the government to the libel, including stories of spies, double agents, blackmail, and time spent in the Bastille, and commences the discussion of the evolution of libels in the revolutionary period. He then takes a step back in the third section to look at how the libel progressed from the Seventeenth Century onward and to examine the libels from a literary perspective. The final segment addresses the changes in the libels within the revolutionary period and how they were modified to suit the then-current needs of the writers and public. This organizational structure which moves from analysis of specific examples to a more general interpretation of the libels (done intentionally by Darnton as indicated in the introduction) is particularly effective in this instance because it is addressing a lesser-known variety of literature (at least today) and specific examples give the reader a grasp of the literature being discussed.

¹ Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 2.

Reading the stories or “anecdotes” told in the libels is captivating in itself as they are filled with salacious intrigues and much humor, at least before the revolutionary period, and much drama thereafter; even so, Darnton not only exposes this literary genre to a new audience, he also analyses it in a profound way that reveals its’ true consequences within the fall of the absolute regime and the revolution. Although the libels started out as amusing, yet defamatory, puzzles usually about sexual escapades in the royal court, they were transformed into more serious denunciations of despotism in the revolutionary period. As Darnton states, “revolutions cannot create new worlds out of nothing, despite the utopian energy that drives them. They must build with materials gleaned from the ruins of an old regime.”². While working towards illuminating the libel and its affects, Darnton succeeds in reconstructing the world of underground slanderous literature in France and abroad (particularly England) which is filled with many conspiracies itself that shape the production of this literature and provide more tales to engage the modern reader. Throughout this well-written and extremely informative text, countless examples and detail are supplied to support his eventual hypothesis making the text rich, but dense. The inclusion of over 45 figures within the text featuring engravings, prints, and title pages, along with Darnton’s excellent assessment of these various figures, bring this book to life and also provides needed visual and topical interest in a rather lengthy, albeit interesting text.

The literary analysis of the libels, focusing on the similarities between diverse texts and then their renovation in the revolutionary period, establishes these various works as a coherent literary genre that employs literary devices and even has sub-genres within it. Following the current trends in scholarship, the text even goes so far as to attempt to determine the ever-elusive reader response to the libels, although always couched with the statement that it is not possible to definitely determine reader response in this time period. Unfortunately the information gleaned from this attempt is fairly general and leaves the reader wanting more; though a valiant attempt by Darnton to include this portion, there doesn’t seem to be enough evidence available to support any more in-depth analysis than what is provided.

Since *The Devil in the Holy Water* illustrates that during the Eighteenth Century literature, law, and government were truly intertwined it is useful and relevant to many different disciplines. The study of this particular literary genre is clearly suitable for those studying literature, but it also crosses disciplinary boundaries and is fitting for the realm of law and particularly the field of literature and law since this book demonstrates how literature can truly impact law and vice versa. Of course, this meticulously researched analysis is equally appropriate for historians, though the deep detail would probably not appeal to all but the hardier amateur historians.

On the whole, Darnton’s history of slander is intriguing, providing a new angle from which to study the Eighteenth Century and the French Revolution. While a historical study, *The Devil in the Holy Water*, as Darnton suggests himself in the conclusion, applies to the modern day in that it shows the power of words and the risk of stripping down political principles to personalities. The faith that Eighteenth Century readers appeared to have in these outrageous libels may seem outrageous to us today, but

² Ibid, 444.

it provides a lesson in moderation when thinking of our own scandal sheets and what the typical reader chooses to believe today.