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Forensic
Storytelling and the
Literary Roots of
Early Modern
Feminism

ReSisters

BARBARA ABRAMS



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The writing of letters and the rise of the novel provided a way for some women to express themselves at a time when the all-male French Academy defined the very parameters of French literary acceptability and tradition. Women who were consigned to convents, workhouses or prisons were in most respects deprived of agency, yet many found ways to respond to the legal documents served against them. The letters and associated materials preserved in their legal files provide evidence that these women did not remain quiet, as they found means to resist authority. The forensic storytelling examined in this book supports the conclusion that the documents written in these constrained circumstances have both historical and literary merit and form the core of an understudied genre of literature.

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Barbara Abrams

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Preface

King Louis XV would use the *lettre de cachet*, a royal letter conveying royal authority, to place women in convents, workhouses, and prison. The king could write this special order to place anyone under arrest and confine them for an offensive action. The collection of letters featured here are from consigned women who became known for their subversion, overtly or inadvertently, all proving annoyances to the king.

This book's central aim is to look at the written production of women who were accused of various crimes and imprisoned or cloistered in mid-eighteenth-century France. In this study, I contextualize and interpret several letters and documents from and about consigned women. These women seemingly had very little autonomy, underscoring the importance of their writing as an emergent subgenre of eighteenth-century literature. These letters and documents were in large part direct and indirect reactions against King Louis XV and patriarchal rule.

Many women, some famous, some infamous, had *lettres de cachet* used against them. Many remained quiet; but in some instances, they wrote to their families, their lawyers, or the king, seeking any recourse they might have had. Sometimes, volumes of these letters were compiled as they sought to explain their situations or beg for release and freedom from their confines. Antimonarchical epistolarity—or letters and documents written against the king's authority—makes up the core of this study. By engaging with the forensic evidence offered by these written documents, this book uncovers the antimonarchical epistolarity present in the legal briefs of silenced women, exploring their quests for freedom of expression, voice, and agency.



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Introduction

While historians have often noted a connection between the explosion of print and the erosion of royal authority, they have tended to treat questions of form and content separately in their analysis of written works. This study seeks to address these two elements concurrently and to include other dimensions of analysis. I bring to bear historical, sociological, literary-critical, and feminist perspectives as I examine forensic storytelling, by providing authentic materials and contextual grounding in eighteenth-century France, with the aim of offering a multi-dimensional and nuanced understanding to studies of French literature.

The eighteenth-century public was passionately interested in the legal case folios that were published at the time. Robert Darnton explains that reports of trials and lurid courtroom dramas that were made available to the French public garnered great popular interest. One way such information was disseminated was through nightly newsprint, often put together after the news had been “gathered.”¹ Often people would spread news and gossip in cafés and salons. Remarking on the proliferation of all manner of written activity and oral communication of current events, especially how print journalism began to feed the prurient interest of the public by stirring up the emotions of the populace, Darnton writes:

Like most oral phenomena, it has disappeared. But it left traces of its activity at nodal points where the spoken word was picked up by writing and, in some cases, diffused still further by print. Talking and writing, hearing, and reading, ran

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together and amplified each other in ways that spread information everywhere, although they have rarely been noticed by historians. The difficulty in studying this subject comes from a lack of documentation. With some luck, however, a researcher will come across a dossier.²

In fact, these legal briefs do exist, and along with their contents they help to shed light on deeper processes in society as a prelude to the Revolution.

The genesis of this study can be traced back to the original work of my doctoral dissertation many years ago at Columbia University. I had received a grant to work on my dissertation and to consult original letters and manuscripts in the archives at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris (Mazarin) rare manuscripts room. My work was focused on a particular chapter on the foundations of Diderot's epistolary novel *La Religieuse*.³

In researching the more well-known examples of these types of public scandal cases, including works such as Diderot's *La Religieuse*, it left a deep impression on me to realize how important it would be to further explore how Diderot's epistolary novel draws upon and fictionalizes the real-life experience of Marguerite Delamarre, and by extension, to delve more deeply into the legal briefs and fictional literature that inspired it.⁴

The relevant information on Marguerite Delamarre suggests that she is the role model for Diderot's fictional protagonist, Suzanne Simonin, of *La Religieuse*. The letters and legal documents surrounding her trial, especially the remarks of Joly de Fleury, remained in my thoughts as a constant reminder of the context of women forced into living situations against their will. Though the story was compelling, I did not get a chance to use all the material in my dissertation. I was convinced, however, that the words and writing of women who were consigned to convents, workhouses, and prisons could serve as the basis of a kind of resistance literature, that is forensic in nature since it is based on material evidence.

Literary publications then began to shift their focus onto current events and the activity of the courtroom, as more current events-oriented stories proved appealing to the prurient appetites of the reading public and their desire for sensationalist tales. The fiction created by these lawyers expanded and included adulterous

women and women accused of debauchery, many of whom were relegated to convents, workhouses, and prisons. Masculinist forms of literary production, including *Les Lettres de Cachet*, *Les Mémoires Judiciaires*, *Les Causes Célèbres*, and *Les Notes sur les Filles Gallantes*, all provide striking admission that women of all classes possessed very limited agency of expression and were exploited in the rewriting of their lives.

Within the confines of eighteenth-century French society, women of the upper classes were offered some degree of education. They were afforded this privilege in convent schools and at home to make them marriage-ready. Overall, women were precluded from entering larger, more literary circles, except as hostesses in salons and patronesses of the arts and literature. It is true that the rise of the novel provided a way for some educated women to express themselves through their writing, but the then all-male French Academy dictated and defined the parameters of French literary acceptability and tradition. It is therefore logical that women's writings produced in the context of their legal proceedings were not considered to contribute to the literary production of the time. Still, the power of this literature was appreciated by the lawyers of the era, who began a trend of using these documents as the basis of their gossip-fueled work, in fact, the interpretation of court proceedings became the popular literature we know as *Les Causes Célèbres*. Perhaps the attention these materials garnered also fueled the efforts of women to write and protest more by all means at their disposal.⁵

Later, I researched the files of Marie-Madeleine Bonafon in the Archives de la Bastille at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris. In 1745, Bonafon published a roman-à-clef, *Tanastès*, set in an imaginary royal court punctuated by fantastical acts and the sexual conquests of royal figures. This work caused a short-lived but significant scandal. Well before all the published copies were sold, Bonafon was imprisoned in the Bastille. She fell ill and used her fragile situation to be transferred to a convent. She was then confined to a cloister in Moulins for many years and eventually released for good behavior. While her novel and legal battles were the subject of some interest in her time, Bonafon was largely dismissed as a writer and generally thought of as a curious chambermaid rather than as a woman of letters. While Bonafon's accusers and current historians agree that *Tanastès* was inflammatory, it is only after

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reading her legal brief that modern readers may reliably conclude that she was truly seeking to threaten the king through her work. That she managed to escape the cruelest of punishments and only be confined to a convent is a testament to her talent as a strategist and writer. The rediscovery and afterlife of this small but pointed novel, and especially the writings surrounding the “*Bonafon Affaire*,” are the focus of this forensic investigation.

While I studied the story of Bonafon, I was reminded again of the letters of Marguerite Delamarre and the important fact that she was not alone in her reaction to the king. There were many women who were consigned against their will to the convent, and many who wrote to the king and the police to protest this form of injustice. In examining many of the legal briefs, I noticed that in the files there were letters, playing cards, pieces of fabric, memoirs, and all manner of materials that allow one to piece together a story of the consigned individual.⁶ I also learned that some women, like Glucka/Angélique Schwab, even asked the king to help them leave their families as a kind of protection against their decided fate. It occurred to me that these women’s authentic stories have both literary and historical merit, especially when studied within a feminist framework.

A story of particular fascination is the case of a Jewish woman, Glucka Schwab (also spelled Schouabe in the sources), who in 1729 was sent to the convent of Les Nouvelles Catholiques. In that same year, several members of the Schwab family were involved in the famous “Schwab Affair” involving bankers, accusations of financial crimes, and legal responses colored by the reigning antisemitic attitudes of French society in Paris and Metz. The extant legal records indicate police files were opened on the same day for a certain Abraham, son of Jacob and a woman named Glucka, daughter of Ruben. There is much evidence to suggest that these cases are related and that Glucka herself initiated her conversion to Catholicism. Her name became Angélique, and the young woman remained in the convent after her conversion. Soon afterward Angélique contracts an illness from which she is not expected to survive. We can only speculate on Angélique’s motives for conversion and her entry into the convent. Jewish women like Angélique had little agency in family and in society. Her motives for conversion, assuming she made this choice for herself, may have been to separate herself from her family, who was then embroiled

in legal problems. While her sincere conversion cannot be ruled out, it seems more likely that hers was a calculated attempt to gain more control over her desperate situation of forced marriage and a great deal of antisemitism. In a sense, for Angélique and perhaps others in desperate circumstances, conversion to Catholicism and residence in a convent may have provided a modicum of control, support, and safety for women who were particularly vulnerable.

We often hear the expression “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Geneviève de Gravelle came to be heard and seen by virtue of her constant letter writing, which called attention to her unjust treatment. Her story illustrates the invisibility experienced by many women in her time, especially those “of a certain age,” who had very little control over their lives and fates. Here we look at one woman’s effort to be seen by being heard. Her story is emblematic of the conditions of women, their agency, rights, and accessibility to resources and recourse in mid-eighteenth-century France.

As we delve into our subject, it is well to keep in mind that the purpose of this study is to address the following questions: 1) Why did society seek to silence vulnerable women and isolate them from society? 2) Can we retell their truths in a more authentic voice if we are to use the methods available to us, including that of a modern feminist lens? This study focuses on the writings of women who were confined and of those who wrote responses in protest (directly or indirectly) of their confinement. With the newer readings, and a deeper awareness of the context and its significance, the continuous redefinition of these literary studies is impacted by considering the actual production and object in their authentic context.

Notes

- 1 Robert Darnton, “Theatricality and Violence in Paris, 1788,” filmed 17 March 2022 at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, England, video, 55:29.
- 2 “Mademoiselle Bonafon and the Private Life of Louis XV: Communication Circuits in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Représentations* 87, no. 1 (2004): 103.
- 3 This work became my book, *Le Bizarre and Le Décousu in the Novels and Theoretical Works of Denis Diderot: How the Idea of Marginality Originated in Eighteenth-Century France* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).
- 4 Georges May performed the preliminary research on *La Religieuse* in his seminal work, *Diderot et “La Religieuse”: Étude Historique et Littéraire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

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- 5 The *lettres de cachet* are a catalyst for creating a larger category of rhetoric and literature in eighteenth-century France and most specifically *Les Causes Célèbres*. The *lettres de cachet* are discussed in detail in the next chapters.
- 6 Reading through all the files in alphabetical order, I noted the top front page of each *memoire* that had a categorization of case “type.” I also checked the uncategorized folios to make sure there were no letters penned by or dictated by women.

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1 Forensic Storytelling and Antimonarchical Epistolarity

Women, Equality, Liberty: Private Lives and Public Spheres, 1715–1815

A recent lecture about feminist literary studies in France, which emerged from a long-term study group on *Femmes littéraires* at Harvard University, proposes to reverse the paradigm of a male-dominated definition of “what makes a piece literary.”¹ This project, under the directorship of Christie MacDonald, sought to define the many different categories of women’s writing in France in the eighteenth century. This study group brought together many scholars and graduate students working in eighteenth-century and women’s and gender studies and employed a new tool for their investigations: the search engine at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This powerful system, paired with the resources of the research group and a vast database, made it possible to trace the history of women’s literature and the evolution of ideas therein by searching the following terms over time: *libertés*, *égalités*, *dilemmes*. MacDonald begins the study by seeking to clarify what is meant by *liberté* from a feminist perspective. With further precision, the researchers posed the question, “What was the experience of women as writers and how did they see their intellectual, social, and political roles?” It is through this lens that MacDonald questions how women in the eighteenth century approached written discourse. The last part of the study proposes several ways to think about the history of literature and women’s role in shaping literature in general. The key, according to MacDonald, is to identify the form of the conflicts or tensions that female authors brought to the genre itself. These she would refer to as the *dilemmes*. Chief