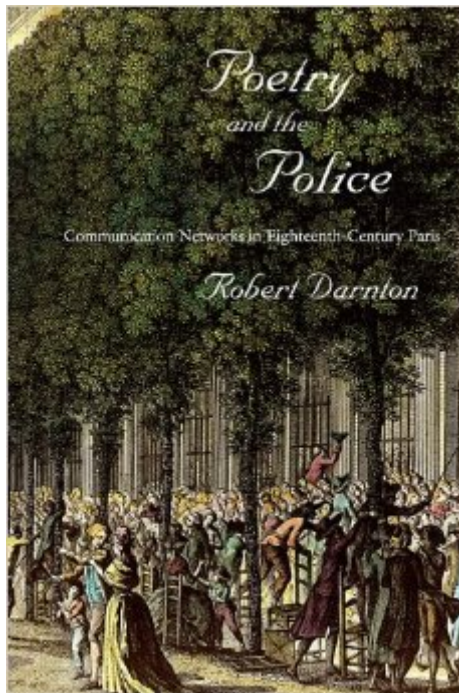


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Poetry And The Police: Communication Networks In Eighteenth-Century Paris



Synopsis

Listen to "An Electronic Cabaret: Paris Street Songs, 1748-1750" for songs from Poetry and the Police Audio recording copyright © 2010 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. In spring 1749, François Bonis, a medical student in Paris, found himself unexpectedly hauled off to the Bastille for distributing an abominable poem about the king. So began the Affair of the Fourteen, a police crackdown on ordinary citizens for unauthorized poetry recitals. Why was the official response to these poems so intense? In this captivating book, Robert Darnton follows the poems as they passed through several media: copied on scraps of paper, dictated from one person to another, memorized and declaimed to an audience. But the most effective dispersal occurred through music, when poems were sung to familiar tunes. Lyrics often referred to current events or revealed popular attitudes toward the royal court. The songs provided a running commentary on public affairs, and Darnton brilliantly traces how the lyrics fit into song cycles that carried messages through the streets of Paris during a period of rising discontent. He uncovers a complex communication network, illuminating the way information circulated in a semi-literate society. This lucid and entertaining book reminds us of both the importance of oral exchanges in the history of communication and the power of viral networks long before our internet age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Robert Darnton, the author of this short but pithy book, has been writing all his professional life

about the book trade in France during the "ancien regime", and especially about what we would call "banned books" in 18th-century France. "The Forbidden Best Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France", one book of a three-volume work on the subject, gives you an idea of his area of expertise. "Poetry and the Police" begins with Francois Bonis, a young medical student, who is turned in by an informant for possessing a poem highly critical of Louis XV, the King of France. The informant is paid the equivalent of a year's wages; Bonis is arrested and subjected to interrogation in the Bastille. The police want to trace the "diffusion process upstream" from Bonis to as many people as possible. Bonis names names, other people are hauled in, and a network of people passing poetry critical of Louis XV, his mistress Madame de Pompadour, and various of the regime's ministers is uncovered. Darnton looks at police records of the time and from there does some superb sleuthing of his own in showing how the King's detectives of the Paris police traced down those who partook in this illegal-poetry network. In a time and place in which censorship was part of the state apparatus, those in possession of such poems were dealt with harshly. It's an amazing story and the suspense Darnton creates in the tracking down of the suspects reads like a thriller. Pretty darn good for what is essentially an academic work. A number of the poems are reproduced in French and in English translation, and there is even a web site, "An Electronic Cabaret" Darnton calls it, where the reader can go to hear the poems sung by a skilled contemporary singer, Helene Delavault (many of the poems were meant to be sung). This is an extraordinary book that opens a window into 18th-century France, when possessing certain kinds of poetry could be exceedingly dangerous to the reader. Highly recommended.

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