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THE INNOCENCE OF JACQUES-PIERRE BRISSOT*

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ABSTRACT. *Even during his lifetime, the French revolutionary Girondin leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville's reputation was tarnished by allegations that, before 1789, he was a swindler, police spy, and political pornographer. These charges resurfaced in 1968 in a celebrated article by Robert Darnton, which found miscellaneous, fragmentary evidence to support them, above all in the papers of the pre-revolutionary police chief, Lenoir. Although Darnton's view has been challenged by several historians, no critic has supplied any substantive new evidence, and hence the Brissot debate remains mired in assertions and counter-assertions. This article finally offers such evidence, drawing both on Darnton's main source, the Lenoir papers, and on sources unavailable to him in 1968, notably records of Brissot's Licée de Londres and his embastillement, now on deposit in the Archives Nationales. While acquiting Brissot on all counts, it finds that Darnton's suspicions were not entirely unfounded. Brissot did have compromising links to both police and political pornographers. Nevertheless, allegations that he spied and wrote scandalous pamphlets appear malicious, despite Brissot's arrest on the latter charge in 1784. The article also attempts to explain Brissot's motivations and the lasting implications of his arrest and persecution in shaping Brissot and the French Revolution.*

The early career of Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, leading light of the French revolutionary Girondins and chief spokesman for the war party in the Legislative Assembly in 1791–2, has been hotly debated. While enthusiasts and apologists see Brissot as an idealistic, and unblemished, *philosophe* revolutionary, his detractors have challenged his credibility and moral character by repeating allegations that during the mid-1780s he was involved in the production and dissemination of pornographic *libelles*, spied for the police or the British, and defrauded his business partner, Desforges de Hurecourt. These charges were originally levelled by Brissot's enemies, above all the notorious scandal-monger, extortioner, and perjurer Charles Théveneau de Morande, whose hatred, Brissot asserted, was

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'the greatest torment of my life'.[1] He regarded Morande as the ultimate 'author of all these calumnies', which he dismissed as 'the reprehensible echo of the most wicked and basest of men'.[2] Long disregarded by serious scholars, the allegations were given a new lease of life by Robert Darnton, whose celebrated article 'The Grub Street style of revolution: J.-P. Brissot, police spy' (1968) mentions all three charges and concludes: 'Brissot sent inside information to [his publishers in] Neuchâtel because he really was an insider among the secret police as his enemies charged. He was probably a spy, and his spying probably concerned the *libelle* style of pamphleteering that contributed to his support before the revolution and his downfall during it.'[3] However, Darnton could not be more definite because the only documentary evidence for the spy charge was a brief comment in the unpublished memoirs of Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir, the Lieutenant-Général de Police de Paris, while with regard to the *libelle* charge, there was a 'suggestive gap' in the Bastille papers in place of Brissot's dossier.[4] Documents from this dossier have subsequently resurfaced.[5] They will be used in this article, together with other fresh or overlooked evidence, to explore the real nature of Brissot's relationships with Desforges, *libellistes*, and the police, and suggest that neither of the prevailing views of Brissot is adequate. Both views offer a monolithic vision of Brissot, predicated on the questionable assumption that 'people behave in a manner consistent with their beliefs'.[6] Hence both Darnton and his critics suppose that a philosophic reformer could not have worked for the police. In contrast, this article contends that while Darnton's suspicions were not entirely groundless, Brissot was neither spy nor a pornographer-*libelliste*, and his activities are misrepresented in the writings of his enemies, Darnton, and many subsequent historians. Brissot was both an ambitious would-be politician and a radical *philosophe*, who sought personal advancement, the promotion of a reformist agenda, and financial survival. Brissot may have disliked the Bourbon monarchy, but

[1] Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Mémoires de Brissot sur ses contemporains et la Révolution française*, ed. F. de Montrol (4 vols., Paris, 1830), II, p. 175. On Morande see Paul Robiquet, *Théveneau de Morande: étude sur le XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1882); Gunnar and Mavis von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe: documents inédits ou peu connus*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (hereafter SVEC) 273–4 (2 vols., Oxford, 1990); Simon Burrows, 'A literary low-life reassessed: Charles Théveneau de Morande in London, 1769–91', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22 (1998), pp. 76–94; Robert Darnton, 'The high Enlightenment and the low-life of literature in prerevolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), pp. 81–115, at pp. 102, 106–10. For Morande's perjurous testimony concerning the Chevalier d'Eon's breasts, see Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a woman: a tale of political intrigue and sexual masquerade* (New York, 1995), p. 248.

[2] Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 176. Morande's main attacks were entitled *Réplique de Charles Théveneau Morande à Jacques-Pierre Brissot, sur les erreurs, les oublis, les infidélités et les calomnies de sa Réponse* (Paris, 1791); *Lettre aux électeurs du département de Paris sur Jacques-Pierre Brissot* (Paris, 1791); *Réponse au dernier mot de J.-P. Brissot et à tous les petits mots de ses camarades* (Paris, 1791). These pamphlets appeared as supplements to Morande's *Argus patriote*, nos. 21, 24, and 25 respectively.

[3] Robert Darnton, 'The Grub Street style of revolution: J.-P. Brissot, police spy', *Journal of Modern History*, 40 (1968), pp. 301–27 at p. 325.

[4] Darnton, 'Grub Street', pp. 318–19.

[5] The Brissot papers, 446AP, were purchased by the Archives Nationales in 1982.

[6] The assertion is that of Leonore Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie: rediscovering J.-P. Brissot* (Westport, CT, 2002), p. xviii.

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prior to the revolution, reform, influence, and recognition were only likely to come through working with or within state structures. Particularly after Brissot exhausted his own resources, his survival as a writer would depend on operating inside existing patronage networks and collaborating with powerful interests. Thus Brissot's behaviour in the 1780s suggests a willingness to compromise with authority, including the police, in order to advance his career and perhaps, ultimately, his reform agenda. Yet at the same time, the persecution he received at the hands of agents of the monarchical government was to leave deep scars and have long-lasting consequences.

I

Brissot's early life has a particular interest for historians because few other prominent revolutionaries' pre-revolutionary careers can be extensively documented. In consequence, many biographers and historians view Brissot as a representative figure, treating him as an archetype in their broader interpretative schemes. This tendency began during the revolution, when moderate constitutional royalists and thereafter the Montagnards sought to discredit both Brissot and the Girondins, whom they stigmatized as 'Brissotins'. In contrast, admirers including François de Montrol, Daniel Mornet, and Frederick A. de Luna believe that Brissot was, as he claimed in his memoirs, a calumniated, philosophic reformer, whereas for Darnton, Brissot is the archetypical Grub Street literary hack.[7] For Darnton, Brissot exemplifies a generation of would-be Voltaires who found access to the promised land of literary sinecures, pensions, prizes, and recognition blocked by an enlightenment establishment comprised of talentless, well-connected literary grandees like Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard. Condemned to poverty and obscurity by the institutional structures of the *ancien régime*, hacks like Brissot, Jean-Louis Carra, Jean-Paul Marat, Pierre-Louis Manuel, or Morande turned to desperate expedients to survive – spying, pornography, blackmail, and crime. For Brissot, *embastillement* in mid-1784 and the consequent collapse of his London-based journal and literary establishment, which left him with crippling debts, proved decisive. The resultant financial pressures drove Brissot to spy for the police, though he 'seethed' with resentment and anger. Darnton contends that such sentiments were common among the hacks, who vented their rage in scathing, nihilisitic pamphlets which desacralized the regime and prepared its overthrow. During the revolution, many such men emerged as leading revolutionary publicists and politicians.

This so-called Grub Street thesis has been widely criticized, both on theoretical grounds,[8] and because other historians consider Grub Street discourses marginal

[7] Montrol, 'Préface' in Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, pp. i–xxvii, esp. pp. ii–iii; Frederick A. De Luna, 'The Dean Street style of revolution: J.-P. Brissot, *jeune philosophe*', *French Historical Studies*, 17 (1991), pp. 158–90; Daniel Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française (1715–1787)* (5th edn, Paris, 1954), p. 410; Darnton, 'High Enlightenment', pp. 98, 111, 112–13.

[8] See esp. H. T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate: books and revolution in the eighteenth century*, SVEC 359 (Oxford, 1998).

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to the enlightenment mainstream[9] or locate print culture's challenge to the regime elsewhere.[10] The juxtaposition of an institutionalized, complacent 'high enlightenment' against a radical, energetic low-life of literature also seems suspect.[11] In particular, Jeremy Popkin has demonstrated that much illegal publishing occurred within traditional networks of patronage,[12] while Elizabeth Eisenstein rejects Darnton's attempts to associate the frustration of literary hacks with pornography, libel, and subversion, arguing that outside France literary agents, writers, and 'other cultural intermediaries … propagated the enlightenment without turning to crime'.[13] Finally, the case studies of Suard and Morande, which, together with Brissot, Darnton used to illustrate the Grub Street thesis, have been called into question. Daniel Gordon has rehabilitated Suard as a man of solid intellectual achievements, who played a key role promoting and participating 'in the sphere of enlightenment sociability',[14] while Darnton's portrayal of Morande has been challenged by suggestions that he was a patriotic reformer.[15] These arguments have not been ignored by Darnton, who has retreated from his original Grub Street line. As Tom Kaiser points out, in his recent study of *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (1996), Darnton no longer attributes a major explanatory role to the hack writers' resentment, instead portraying Grub Street and the *philosophes* as parts of a single movement which sapped the foundations of the regime.[16]

Darnton's interpretation of Brissot has fared somewhat better, although it too has been challenged. Eisenstein, de Luna, Leonore Loft, Richard Whatmore, and James Livesey have all denied that he was a mere 'hack', and emphasize the consistency and political radicalism of his pre-revolutionary pamphlets. Loft traces Brissot's radicalism back to the start of his career and, although she sidesteps the spying charge, denounces Darnton's interpretation as

[9] Harvey Chisick, 'Introduction', in Chisick, ed., *The press in the French Revolution*, SVEC 287 (Oxford, 1991), pp. 1–17 at p. 8.

[10] This historiography is discussed in Simon Burrows 'Grub Street revolutionaries: London's French libellistes, 1760–1790' (forthcoming), and idem, *Blackmail, scandal and the French Revolution* (Manchester, forthcoming).

[11] See Daniel Gordon, 'The great Enlightenment massacre', in Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate*, pp. 129–56, and in the same collection, Jeremy D. Popkin, 'Robert Darnton's alternative (to the) Enlightenment', pp. 105–28; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, 'Bypassing the Enlightenment: taking an underground route to revolution', pp. 157–77. See also Eisenstein, *Grub Street abroad: aspects of the French cosmopolitan press from the age of Louis XIV to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992), chs. 4–5.

[12] Jeremy D. Popkin, 'Pamphlet journalism at the end of the old regime', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22 (1989), pp. 351–67.

[13] Eisenstein, *Grub Street abroad*, p. 138.

[14] Gordon, *Citizens without sovereignty: equality and sociability in French thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 137–76, quote at p. 150.

[15] Von Proschwitz and von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe*; Burrows, 'A literary low-life'.

[16] Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (London, 1996), esp. pp. 169–246. Thomas E. Kaiser, 'Enlightenment, public opinion and politics in the work of Robert Darnton', in Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate*, pp. 189–206 at pp. 194–5. However, Darnton's essay in the same volume, 'Two paths through the social history of ideas', pp. 251–94, is more elusive, arguing that 'bruised' egos helped to mobilize writers refused pensions against Calonne's regime.

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'calumny'.[17] De Luna doubts Brissot's involvement in the *libelle* trade and argues that 'his whole life refutes the charge' of spying,[18] while Eisenstein contends that it is unlikely that Brissot felt degraded by working for the police as 'before 1789, agreeing to serve as an agent of a royal official was not necessarily an occasion for shame'.[19] Finally, Livesey and Whatmore have reassessed Darnton's additional charge that in the late 1780s Brissot was employed by his friend and patron Etienne Clavière to write pamphlets designed to manipulate the stock exchange and stave off state bankruptcy.[20] They argue compellingly that this financial pamphleteering had ideological motivations consistent with radical reform agenda and the development of a national commercial ethic as well as Clavière's financial interests.[21] They thus support Brissot's improbable looking claim that Clavière 'always brought a strong moral sense into his calculations. His goal was to discourage speculations that were immoral, dishonest (*fausses*) or harmful to the public interest'.[22]

Despite these criticisms, Darnton's interpretation of Brissot has penetrated reference, textbook, and monograph literature, where it necessarily loses its nuances. Thus, in the standard short English reference work on the revolution, Colin Jones states that Brissot 'was not successful [in his literary career], being imprisoned for debts and even serving as a spy to make ends meet',[23] while Leigh Whaley's *Radicals* asserts that 'by 1789 Brissot … for reasons of poverty was doing and writing almost anything, including spying for the police, to survive'.[24] Simon Schama and John Bosher also treat the charge as a proven fact, while Donald Sutherland, in a well-received textbook, expands on Darnton's evidence, stating that 'Brissot had been forced to even more desperate measures, including spying on his friends for the police to feed his numerous family.'[25] Dena Goodman, more cautious, repeats the *libelle* and spying charges, but notes that they are contested;

[17] See Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, together with idem, 'The roots of Brissot's ideology', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (1989), pp. 21–34; idem, 'J.-P. Brissot and the evolution of pamphlet literature in the early 1780s', *History of European Ideas*, 17 (1993), pp. 265–87; idem, '*Le Journal du Licée de Londres*: a study in the pre-revolutionary French press', *European History Quarterly*, 23 (1993), pp. 7–37; idem, 'Toward a more just criminal code in pre-revolutionary France: J.-P. Brissot (1754–93)', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 20 (1992), pp. 121–33, quote at p. 131 n. 9.

[18] De Luna, 'Dean Street style of revolution', quote at p. 190.

[19] Eisenstein, *Grub Street abroad*, pp. 149–50.

[20] Robert Darnton, 'Ideology on the Bourse', in Michel Vovelle, ed., *L'image de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), pp. 124–39. See also idem, 'Trends in radical propaganda on the eve of the French Revolution (1782–1788)' (DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1964), pp. 91–232.

[21] Richard Livesey and James Whatmore, 'Etienne Clavière, Jacques-Pierre Brissot et les fondations intellectuelles de la politique des Girondins', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 321 (2000), pp. 1–26. Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, pp. 11–12, generally follows a similar line, but also asserts, without providing precise references, that Calonne financed Clavière's pamphleteers.

[22] Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 348.

[23] Colin Jones, *The Longman companion to the French Revolution* (Harlow, 1988), p. 326.

[24] Leigh Whaley, *Radicals: politics and republicanism in the French Revolution* (Stroud, 2000), p. 14.

[25] D. M. G. Sutherland, *France, 1789–1814: revolution and counter-revolution* (London, 1985), p. 120; Simon Schama, *Citizens: a chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), pp. 582–3; John Bosher, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1988), p. xxvii.

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Mona Ozouf says Brissot was 'peut-être même un espion de police'.[26] Meanwhile, since 1991, Darnton has thrice defended his position.[27] His claims have become more cautious with time, but he has not been forced to concede any significant ground, not least because his critics labour under the inherent difficulty of proving a negative – i.e. that Brissot was not a spy – and thus rely on counter-assertions that the charges are inconsistent with Brissot's character. As Darnton has noted, 'they have failed to bring any compelling new counter-evidence to bear on the actual charges against him'.[28] Thus the persistent suspicion that Brissot actually was involved in spying, swindling, political pornography, and blackmail bedevils attempts to take his early political works seriously or portray him as an ideologically driven actor. There is an urgent need to establish, as far as possible, the veracity of the charges, together with a more rounded view of Brissot's personality.

II

This article offers the first substantive new evidence concerning Brissot's alleged spying, *libelles*, and swindling since Darnton's 'Police spy' article. It includes material from both Darnton's original source, the Lenoir papers, and the Brissot papers, now in the Archives Nationales. The Brissot papers are notoriously difficult to mine efficiently: inventoried badly in the early 1990s they are now available only on a piece by piece basis. In consequence, perhaps, they have been underused by contributors to the Brissot debate.[29] Moreover, immediately after their purchase Suzanne Huart used the papers for a study which, though it lacked scholarly references and found nothing to support the spy charge, appeared, according to Darnton, to justify his position by implicating Brissot in *libelles*.[30] Other scholars thus had little reason to expect to find new revelations concerning Darnton's allegations in either Lenoir's unpublished memoirs or Brissot's papers. This expectation was erroneous, especially on the spying and *libelliste* charges. Materials concerning the alleged embezzlement are more accessible but have been insufficiently scrutinized.

[26] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a cultural history of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 285–8; Mona Ozouf, 'Girondins', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1988), pp. 374–85, at p. 379.

[27] See Robert Darnton, 'The Brissot dossier', *French Historical Studies*, 17 (1991), pp. 191–205; idem, 'Two paths'; idem, 'Introduction', in Darnton, ed., 'Correspondance de Brissot de Warville' [with the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel], on the Voltaire Foundation website, at http://163.1.91.50/x_vfetc/textual/corres/brissot/bris_intro/bris_intro_003.html on 8 May 2001.

[28] Darnton, 'Two paths', p. 268.

[29] Only Loft has used the Brissot papers extensively. In 'The Brissot dossier', p. 198, Darnton admitted that he had not 'yet' consulted them, but his subsequent publications do not cite them either. The cataloguing problem was brought to my attention when Mme Ducros, archivist of the AP series, asked my advice to correct several references.

[30] Suzanne Huart, *Brissot: la Gironde au pouvoir* (Paris, 1986), p. 161; Darnton, 'The Brissot dossier', p. 198n. Actually Huart refuses (p. 88) to pronounce on Brissot's guilt.

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This final charge, though championed by Morande as early as 1785, is only mentioned in passing by Darnton.[31] However, as one more insinuation among many, it lends credibility to the other accusations and thus merits exploration. Morande alleged that Brissot swindled Desforges out of about 12,000 livres invested in Brissot's literary establishment, the *Licée de Londres* [sic]. The *Licée* aimed, according to its prospectus, to create a Europe-wide community of *savants* and thus overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries to the progress of knowledge while familiarizing Brissot's compatriots with developments in Britain. It would comprise a correspondence, journal and weekly assembly.[32] The embezzlement allegation stems from an *acte de société* dated 11 and 16 September 1783 by which Desforges, who had approached Brissot with an offer of partnership, agreed to provide 15,000 livres capital (about £625) while Brissot supplied the 'talent'.[33] A contractual document published by Morande states that this money was to cover the journal's printing and distribution costs and 'the maintenance of the premises established at no. 26 Newman Street, London, for the purpose of setting up (*à l'effet d'effectuer*) the *Lycée*, rent of the said house, and feeding and housing the persons associated with this enterprise'.[34] If this capital were exhausted Brissot would pay 60 per cent of any further costs and Desforges 40 per cent. Profits would be split similarly.[35] In October a subscribers' prospectus was circulated and the launch of both journal and assembly set for 1 January 1784.[36] In November 1783, Brissot moved into the house. The journal duly appeared, supplementing the existing correspondence, in January 1784. The assembly never met.

Thus there appears a *prima facie* case to answer on the embezzlement allegation. Certainly Eloise Ellery's study, which notes that he admitted that the house was too small for formal meetings of the *Licée* yet furnished it at the Society's expense, finds Brissot partially culpable.[37] However, subsequent commentators have ignored the swindling charge.[38] Darnton's recent work portrays the *Licée* as a

[31] See *Courier de l'Europe*, 28 Jan., 1 Feb., and 18 Feb. 1785. Brissot responded with libel proceedings against Desforges, Swinton, and the paper's censor, the abbé Aubert, which were abandoned after Swinton sold his French assets. See 'Projet des lettres que j'eus dessein d'imprimer en 1786 sur mon affaire contre Desforges, Morande, etc.', Paris, Archives Nationales (AN), 446AP/4, fo. 14; 'Mémoire pour J. P. Brissot contre les Srs Desforges, Swinton propriétaire du *Courier de l'Europe*, abbé Aubert censeur, comte d'Apremont sur une plainte en diffamation 1785', 446AP/3.

[32] [Subscribers' prospectus for] 'The London Literary Lyceum, or an assembly and correspondence established at London', AN, 446AP/2. Brissot's preferred French spelling, *Licée*, is used throughout this article, except in citations from documents that use the modern spelling, *Lycée*.

[33] Brissot, *Réplique de J.-P. Brissot à Charles Théveneau Morande* (Paris, 1791), pp. 3–4; Morande, *Réplique*, p. 52.

[34] Morande, *Réplique*, p. 70.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 53; Brissot to Lefebvre, 30 Dec. 1783, AN, 446AP/2, reveals that 9,000 copies of the prospectus were printed. An earlier business prospectus is mentioned in Villar to Brissot, Paris, 15 Mar. 1783, published in Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 68–72, and C. Perroud, ed., *J.-P. Brisssot: correspondance et papiers* (Paris, 1912), p. 47.

[37] Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: a study in the history of the French Revolution* (New York, 1915; repr. 1970), p. 29.

[38] Jean-François Primo, *La jeunesse de Brissot* (Paris, 1932), p. 172, even notes the size of the Newman Street *salon* without realizing the implications.

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legitimate commercial enterprise for which Brissot canvassed support from leading intellectuals.[39] Loft believes that Brissot saw the *Licée* as a means 'to accelerate change and progress through the circulation of enlightened political and social ideas',[40] while Huart and Eisenstein admire 'the grandiosity of his ambition and the extraordinary expansiveness of his plans',[41] and Dena Goodman even suggests that the (non-existent) assembly represents a key stage in the development of a masculine-dominated public sphere.[42] This unexpected unanimity stems largely from the coincidence of the *Licée*'s commercial and literary-philosophical goals. Thus Darnton, whose Brissot is financially driven, agrees with Eisenstein and Loft, who conceive of Brissot as an idealistic *philosophe*, that the assembly was the *Licée*'s crowning aim. All implicitly reject suggestions that it was a fraudulent device to subsidize Brissot's literary ventures and gentleman's lifestyle.

Such unquestioning faith might be justified on two grounds. First, because Brissot repeatedly used other sociable organizations, including the Société Gallo-Américaine, Amis des noirs, Cercle Social, and Jacobins, to advance himself and reformist political programmes.[43] Secondly, Brissot's extensive surviving correspondence confirms efforts described in his *Mémoires* to establish correspondence networks and increase his profile with leading British writers and French *philosophes*.[44] He travelled to London with the stated aims of studying British science, institutions and manners, profiting from Britain's press freedom, and establishing a literary institution. His enthusiasm for the *Licée* project is also evident in intimate correspondence to his future wife.[45] Brissot had too much at stake, both in terms of financial opportunity and literary reputation, to contemplate the failure of his assembly.

Why, then, did the assembly fail to meet? Morande and Desforges alleged that Brissot deliberately rented inadequate premises at 26 Newman Street and used them to house numerous family members.[46] However, surviving documentation does not clarify whether Desforges ever believed the house was intended for meetings, nor whether Brissot deliberately deceived him. Although Brissot remarks ambiguously 'The house where the *lycée* will be based and open, is almost determined' in a letter of September 1783,[47] the first edition of the *Journal du Licée*

[39] Robert Darnton, 'The disasters of 1783–1784', in 'Introduction', in Darnton, ed., 'Correspondance de Brissot', pp. 1–2.

[40] Loft, '*Le Journal du Licée*', p. 8. Cf. the subscriber's prospectus for the *Licée* and Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 60.

[41] Eisenstein, 'Bypassing the Enlightenment', quote at p. 163; cf. Huart, *Brissot*, pp. 63–76.

[42] Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, pp. 281–8.

[43] On these organizations see respectively Gary Kates, *The 'Cercle Social', the Girondins, and the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1985); Daniel P. Resnick, 'La Société des Amis des Noirs and the abolition of slavery', *French Historical Studies*, 8 (1972), pp. 558–69; Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, p. 15.

[44] See especially Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 64–273; Perroud, ed., *Brissot: Correspondance*, pp. 46–78 and passim.

[45] Undated letter of Brissot to Félicité Dupont, AN, 446AP/1.

[46] Morande, *Lettre aux électeurs*, p. 7.

[47] Brissot to Osterwald, London, 18 Sept. 1783, in Darnton, ed., 'Correspondance de Brissot', letter 128. Brissot's original phrase, 'La maison où est le lycée s'ouvrira [sic], est presqu'arrêtée', is ungrammatical and hence cannot be translated precisely.

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refers to 26 Newman Street merely as the 'general office'. The document published by Morande states only that the house was rented 'for the purpose of setting up the *Lycée*'.[48] The omission of provisions for meeting-halls appears suggestive, but the document was only an explanatory codicil to the original contract, and also fails to discuss the costs of the correspondence. In contrast, Brissot claims that article 8 of the original contract stated 'the rent of the site of the *Lycée*, additional rooms (*appartemens accessoires*) and furnishings will be at the expense of the *Lycée*, and borne by the partnership (*société*)' which hints at the possibility of separate premises.[49] It is probable that Brissot, at least, assumed that meetings of the *Licée* would take place elsewhere. Indeed in 1791 he admitted that the drawing room (*salon*) could hold a considerable gathering (*assemblée assez nombreuse*) but not a crowd comparable with those attending the fashionable Parisian *Musées*. Thus he used it for private meetings with distinguished men of learning.[50]

Revealingly, Desforges's complaints about the house were slow to surface. On arrival in London in late December 1783 he may indeed have been shocked by the property, but, according to Brissot, he offered to pay board and lodging. Nor did he object when he audited the accounts item by item with Brissot and agreed the expenditure of 4,836 livres. Shortly thereafter, Desforges travelled to Paris to arrange an exclusive privilege for the journal. This was granted, but on condition that the French edition would be censored and reprinted in France. This increased production costs, which helped to exhaust financial reserves.[51]

On 6 February 1784 Brissot informed Desforges that he had postponed launching the assembly until parliament reconvened, as most members of society were away from the capital. He also announced negotiations to share meeting-room premises in Pall Mall with Dr [sic] David Williams for 200 guineas (Louis) per annum.[52] Although Morande claimed that Williams never had an establishment in Pall Mall,[53] Brissot's correspondence with Williams proves beyond any doubt that these discussions indeed took place.[54] Several weeks later Brissot announced that the Pall Mall rooms would be available on 20 March.[55] Thus, the delays seem an attempt to conserve dwindling funds. Elsewhere Brissot claims that he budgeted on hiring assembly rooms from subscription receipts, only to

[48] Morande, *Réplique*, p. 70. For Brissot's account of the *Acte* see Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 4.

[49] Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 4. Morande never contradicted this statement.

[50] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[51] Ibid. The privilege was dated 11 Feb. 1784: see Perroud, ed., *Brissot: Correspondance*, p. 81.

[52] Brissot to Desforges, 6 Feb. 1784, in Morande, *Réplique*, p. 87. See also 'Projet des lettres', AN, 446AP/4, fos. 9–10.

[53] Morande, *Lettre aux électeurs*, p. 9.

[54] Williams to Brissot, 20 Jan. 1783 [sic, actually 1784] and Brissot to Williams, 'ce vendredi matin' [early 1784], in J. Dybikowski, 'David Williams (1738–1816) and Jacques-Pierre Brissot: their correspondence', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 25 (1987–8), pp. 71–97, 167–90, at pp. 79–80. The second letter also appears in Perroud, ed., *Brissot: correspondance*, pp. 77–8. Originals are held in AN, 446AP/10, and the Pierpont Morgan Library respectively.

[55] Brissot to Desforges, (extract), 25 Mar. 1784, in Morande, *Réplique*, p. 96. The letter must be misdated, since it reads 'la maison qui doit servir au Lycée sera libre au 20 du courant'.

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learn too late that payment was required up-front.[56] Cash-flow, not fraud, appears to lie behind the assembly's failure to meet. Certainly Williams was adamant on this point in his memoirs, denouncing those who 'unjustly impeached his [Brissot's] integrity'.[57]

The *Licée*'s financial troubles were compounded by pressure from Brissot's former employer, Samuel Swinton, publisher of the *Courier de l'Europe* newspaper, and his new editor, Morande.[58] They believed that Brissot's journal was responsible for a rapid fall in their subscription revenues,[59] published articles attacking him, and issued threats over a contested 1,500 livre 'IOU' note from 1779. Brissot claimed that Swinton extorted this note by duress and still owed him money.[60]

As Brissot became desperate, Desforges grew reluctant to release further funds. An account dated 17 February 1784 drawn up by Brissot revealed that 11,093 livres advanced by Desforges had been spent and that a further 507 livres was owing.[61] Without this sum and the remainder of the promised 15,000 livres, Brissot was unable to hire the Pall Mall rooms.[62] Meanwhile, bills mounted up. By the time Desforges returned from Paris on 22 April, Brissot claimed he was 1,925 livres in arrears. Desforges responded by vacillating about further payments and falling in with two other refugees, Brissot's wealthy friend Alphonse-Joseph de Serres de La Tour, the founding editor of the *Courier de l'Europe*, and the marquis Anne-Gédeon de Lafitte de Pelleport, a *libelliste*, who had other plans for his money.[63]

In desperation, Brissot now decided to travel to Paris to seek more support. Before he could leave, however, his printer, Cox, had him arrested for unpaid bills. Brissot, who had made a part-payment the previous day, felt that Swinton and Morande had coerced Cox, who as printer of the *Courier de l'Europe* was financially dependent on them.[64] However, Desforges, calculating that Brissot was more useful out of gaol, contributed 25 guineas to his associate's release.[65] Free once more, Brissot found Desforges, demanded the money owed and warned that his patience was not limitless. Desforges, in turn, accused Brissot of ingratitude and a furious row followed until he placated Brissot by vague promises to meet his obligations and offering to sell his stake in the business.[66] Before

[56] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fos. 50, 55.

[57] David Williams, *Incidents in my own life which have been thought of some importance*, ed. Peter France (Brighton, 1980), p. 24.

[58] On Swinton's liaisons with Brissot see 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fos. 13–18, 26–39, 74–7, 159–62 and passim; Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, pp. 224–9, 271–9, 296–308, II, pp. 170–5.

[59] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 31; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 299, 317.

[60] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 75, but cf. Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, p. 301.

[61] Morande, *Réplique*, pp. 92–4. 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 55, also refers to this letter.

[62] Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 6; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 298.

[63] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fos. 65, 68–9; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 305–6.

[64] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 57; Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 9n; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 299–301, 304.

[65] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 59. Serres de La Tour and an English acquaintance also provided funds.

[66] Ibid., fos. 64–5.

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Brissot left London on 19 May 1784, Desforges also persuaded him to hand over eighty letters, so that he could tally them with the Society's accounts.[67] He never returned these letters, which provided the documentary basis for Morande's later attacks on Brissot.

While travelling to Paris, Brissot wrote ultimatum notes to both Swinton and Desforges. From Swinton he demanded that money he claimed to be owed, minus Swinton's 1,500 livres billet, and intemperately offered peace or war.[68] From Desforges he demanded either the sums owed or the dissolution of their Society. He also indicated that a further 10,000 livres would be needed to hire assembly rooms and that Desforges would have to provide 40 per cent of this sum.[69] Desforges responded by telling Brissot that he wanted all his money back.[70]

Such, according primarily to documents published by his enemies, was the state of affairs when Brissot was arrested in Paris on 12 July 1784. Clearly Brissot had good – apparently genuine – reasons for delaying the first meetings of the *Licée*. It is highly unlikely that Brissot had any intention of embezzling funds. He certainly negotiated to hire meeting rooms, but as Desforges withdrew his funding, his sincerity was never tested. Brissot committed no offence more serious than chronic and costly miscalculation, a fault mitigated by Desforges's failure to provide contracted funds.

III

As Brissot was arrested under suspicion of complicity in writing and publishing pornographic *libelles* against the crown, the *libelliste* charge appears more promising. It should be noted, however, that *libelle* and *libelliste* are ambiguous and problematic terms and need not imply sexually scandalous or pornographic material. The *Encyclopédie*, which distinguished between a *libelle diffamatoire* and a *libelle* in the political sense, defined the latter as 'a satirical writing, injurious to the probity, honour and reputation of someone'.[71] Contemporaries used the word *libelle* to describe any libellous work, but especially political tracts attacking the government, its personnel or its policies, as well as works with a scandalous or pornographic content.[72] This ambiguity is reflected in Darnton's work, which occasionally translates *libelle* literally as 'lampoon', but also habitually implies a sexually scandalous content, apparently using it synonymously with 'political pornography'.[73] In Brissot's case, of the six *libelles* that Darnton explicitly attempts

[67] Ibid., fos. 67–8; Morande, *Réplique*, p. 105, reprints Desforges receipt.

[68] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 75; Morande, *Réplique* p. 98.

[69] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 72; Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 7.

[70] 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 70.

[71] *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (35 vols., Neuchâtel, 1751–65), IX, p. 459. A *libelle diffamatoire* was defined as 'un livre, écrit ou chanson, soit imprimé ou manuscrit, fait et répandu dans le public exprès pour attaquer l'honneur et la réputation de quelqu'un'.

[72] Police dossiers concerning pornographic pamphlets against Marie-Antoinette were entitled 'affaire des libellistes'.

[73] See especially Darnton, *Forbidden best-sellers*, pp. 198–216.

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to associate with him, five were pornographic pamphlets against the court, while the sixth, *Le diable dans un bénitier*, was a political satire closely associated with the others.[74] Moreover, the London *libellistes* add a further dimension to this picture, as they were known to be extortioners as well as pamphleteers. Indeed, in the 1770s and 1780s, the bookseller Boissière ran a veritable cottage industry, hiring French refugees to write scandalous pamphlets, usually of a sexually salacious nature, in the hope of pay-offs from the court or aristocratic victims. The French government considered involvement in the fabrication of these *libelles* a very serious offence, bordering on *lèse-majesté*.[75] As a result, except where otherwise indicated, the discussion which follows views the terms *libelle* and *libelliste* in the light of this narrow understanding, implying court scandal, political pornography, and, usually, extortion. This is certainly what was being insinuated by Darnton when he asserted that Brissot was 'probably' involved in 'the *libelle* style of pamphleteering' and by the French police when they suggested that he was a *libelliste*.

The police, largely on the basis of evidence supplied by Morande, suspected that Brissot was involved in blackmail attempts against the queen and her circle and had subsequently helped to write, produce, and distribute *Le diable dans un bénitier*, an account of the abortive mission of police inspector Receveur to purchase the blackmailers' silence in early 1783. The pamphlet, which contained revealing accounts of French espionage during the American Revolution, Receveur's recruitment of Morande as an agent, and ambassadorial involvement in attempts to kidnap *libellistes*, together with indictments of secret police methods and the ministerial despotism of Foreign Minister Vergennes, incensed Morande and the ambassador, de Moustier. While some scenes in the *Diable* are satirical – including a scene where the ambassador symbolically baptizes Morande to purge his past crimes against the monarchy – many 'facts' that it advances can be confirmed.[76] Diplomatic sources attest Morande's involvement in espionage and preparing a plan for opposing *libellistes*.[77]

The extensive diplomatic documentation concerning the *libellistes* says remarkably little about Brissot. It certainly does not suggest that he was their accomplice and establishes that the earliest *libelles* sought by Receveur and his predecessors, Goëzman and Lerchenberg, predate Brissot's arrival in London

[74] Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 321. The list is cited below.

[75] On London's *libellistes* see Peter Wagner, *Eros revived: erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America* (London, 1988), pp. 91–100; Hector Fleischmann, *Les pamphlets libertines contre Marie-Antoinette* (Paris, 1908; repr. 1976), pp. 33–78; Burrows, 'Grub Street revolutionaries'.

[76] Morande's 'crimes' included his *Gazetier cuirassé* (1771) and successful extortion of Louis XV over his memoirs of Mme Du Barry.

[77] Morande's memoir against *libellistes* is in Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (AAE), Correspondance Politique, Angleterre (CPA) 542, fos. 37–42; his spy services are summarized in Morande to Montmorin, 28 Apr. 1788, AAE, CPA 565, fos. 103–9, published in von Proschwitz and von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe*, II, pp. 1009–21. See also Burrows, 'A literary low-life', pp. 82–5.

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in December 1782.[78] In fact, when Brissot wrote a letter denying rumours of involvement, it surprised the ambassador, who had heard no such tales.[79] Brissot, who was not previously under suspicion, had been incited to write the letter by his associate Serres de La Tour.[80] Lenoir quickly ruled him out and Receveur, despite initial suspicions, also concluded that he was not the author.[81] The rumours, if they existed, were probably started by Morande.

The real author of the *libelles* – and all the evidence points in this direction – was almost certainly Pelleport, who was arrested the day before Brissot in Calais.[82] Certainly it was Pelleport who conducted negotiations with Receveur, claiming to be a middleman. Receveur was empowered to pay 350 Louis for the suppression of *La naissance du dauphin dévoilée* and the *Petits soupers de l'hôtel de Bouillon*.[83] Pelleport demanded 700 Louis and the negotiation ended in farce when, worried that Receveur intended to kidnap him, he circulated a broadside designed to incite the London mob. Entitled *An alarme-bell against French spies*, it alleged that special carriages were being built to convey kidnap victims and announced two further *libelles*, *Les passe-tems d'Antoinette* 'avec figures' and *Les amours et aventures du vizir Vergennes*.[84] Receveur, unnerved by this denunciation, complained that his life was now in danger.[85] Meanwhile, Pelleport's bookseller Boissière started carrying a pistol, hired bodyguards, and insisted on dealing through Goëzman, who was almost certainly in cahoots with him.[86] In these circumstances, Receveur gave up and returned to France.[87]

The most obvious fact implicating Brissot in these events is his close relationship with Pelleport, which, as Darnton has shown, was closer and older than

[78] Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 322 n. 54, admits that French foreign ministry papers treat Brissot as the *libellistes*' 'associate' rather than their 'collaborator'. For earlier correspondence of Lerchenberg and Goëzman see AAE, CPA 538.

[79] Brissot to 'le comte' [de Moustier], London, 14 Apr. 1783, AN, 446AP/1; 'Deuxième interrogatoire du Sr Brissot de Warville du 21 Aoust 1784', 446AP/2, fo. 1.

[80] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 1–2.

[81] Lenoir to Vergennes, Paris, 4 May 1783; Receveur, 'Compte rendu', 22 May 1783, AAE, CPA 542, fos. 177–8, 285–9.

[82] Receveur's 'Compte rendu' (cited above) concludes that Pelleport was culpable, while the Mémoires of Lenoir, Mediathèque d'Orléans (Orléans), MS 1421–3, reveal, at MS 1422, p. 56, that under interrogation Pelleport 'n'avoit pu disconvenir qu'il avoit composé et fait imprimer un seul de beaucoup de libelles que les autres lui attribuoient'. Pelleport to de Moustier, 12 Apr. 1783, AAE, CPA 542, fos. 15–16, offers to suppress the *Passe-tems d'Antoinette*; de Moustier to Vergennes, 21 [Apr.] 1783, CPA 542, fo. 81, reveals that Pelleport also approached the Polignacs. Pelleport's interrogation records have not survived, but in his Bastille dossier (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (Arsenal), MS 12,454) he alludes to his guilt over the *Diable*, but protests that he did not libel the Royal family. Further evidence is discussed below.

[83] Receveur, 'Compte rendu', AAE, CPA 542, fos. 285–9.

[84] For copies of the *Alarme-bell* see AAE, CPA 541, fo. 378, or the translation in [Pelleport], *Diable*, p. 78.

[85] Adhémar to Vergennes, London, 3 June 1783, AAE, CPA 542, fos. 373–5.

[86] [Goëzman], 'Mémoire concernant les libelles du 9 mai 1783', ibid., fos. 217–20. On Boissière's involvement, see AAE, CPA 538–47.

[87] Receveur, 'Compte rendu', AAE, CPA 542, fos. 285–9.

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Brissot dared admit.[88] Brissot was certainly generous in his dealings with Pelleport, purportedly out of concern for Pelleport's impoverished wife and children.[89] But failure to avow a relationship does not indicate guilt, and indeed Brissot says he discouraged Pelleport's *libelle* career, finding him piece work and a position with Serres de La Tour on the *Courier de l'Europe*.[90] Moreover, Brissot asserts that when questioned about his activities, Pelleport replied, 'You are too honest to know.' When he showed Brissot and Serres de La Tour freshly printed copies of the *Diable dans un bénitier*, they both exhorted him to suppress it, offering to pay his publication costs. Finally, when Serres de La Tour threatened to dismiss him, Pelleport apparently acquiesced, stopping Boissière distributing the pamphlet, while secretly sending copies to the continent.[91]

If Brissot's account of the discouragement that he gave Pelleport appears improbable, other evidence suggests that he indeed avoided close association with *libellistes*. He appears to have learned the dangers of personal invective early in his career when, as he freely reveals, he received a *lettre de cachet* for mistreating a *procureur*'s wife in print. This probably cured any taste for personal abuse, for soon after he says he refused to collaborate with a corrupt police officer, Goupil, who trafficked in *libelles*.[92] In late 1783 he also turned down the lucrative editorship of the *Courier de l'Europe* which Swinton offered on condition that he collaborate with Morande.[93] Likewise, the Brissot papers show that a plan to found a 'correspondence' similar to the Musée of M. Gebel and the Assemblée de La Blancherie in partnership with Serres de La Tour foundered when the latter proposed a third associate, the journalist-blackmailer Perkins MacMahon.[94] After Brissot made inquiries into MacMahon's background, he rejected the proposal, informing Serres de La Tour 'I have lifted the veil on what he does, and his profession is scandalous, abominable.' However, Brissot's qualms were not

[88] Brissot's first contacts with the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel were through Pelleport's mediation: Brissot to Pelleport, Paris, 31 Aug. 1779, in Darnton, ed., 'Correspondance de Brissot', letter 1. Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 162, states that they first met at Mentelle's house.

[89] 'Mémoire pour Brissot', AN, 446AP/2, fo. 3; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 191, 306.

[90] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 2, 10; 'Mémoire contre Desforges', 446AP/3, fo. 80; Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 192. This piece work included translating David William's *Letters on political liberty* (London, 1782). J. Dybikowski, *On burning ground: an examination of the ideas, projects and life of David Williams*, SVEC 307 (Oxford, 1993), p. 310, notes that advertisements for the third edition name Pelleport as the translator. Brissot's interrogators suspected his involvement in the translation, which included libellous notes, but an undated letter of Brissot to Williams in the Pierpont Morgan Library, reproduced in Dybikowski, 'David Williams and Jacques-Pierre Brissot', at p. 80, and Perroud, ed., *Brissot: Correspondance*, pp. 77–8, establishes that he was not the primary translator.

[91] Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 26; 'Mémoire pour Brissot', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 2–3. However, Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 192, says Pelleport refused these offers.

[92] Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, pp. 166–70. Goupil was exposed and died in prison at Vincennes.

[93] Brissot to [Martin?], 20 Aug. 1784, AN, 446AP/2; 'Mémoire contre Desforges', 446AP/3, fos. 32–3.

[94] On these establishments see Goodman, *Republic of Letters*, pp. 242–53, 259–80. This seems to be Brissot's earliest initiative towards founding the *Licée*.

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absolute: MacMahon might still submit articles anonymously.[95] This refusal cooled Serres de La Tour's ardour, and the project folded. The incident suggests that in his professional life Brissot was desperate, for pragmatic as much as moral reasons, to distance himself from *libellistes*, even at personal cost.

The transcript of Brissot's interrogations fortifies these impressions and suggests that the *Diable dans un bénitier* was the only pamphlet about which Brissot had certain knowledge.[96] Such an assertion runs contrary to Darnton's insinuation that once in the Bastille, Brissot

> must have been able to tell Lenoir a good deal more than he admitted in his memoirs about the *Naissance du dauphin*, the *Petits soupers de l'hôtel de Bouillon*, the *Rois de France dégénérés*, the *Passe-temps d'Antoinette et du Vizir de Vergennes* [sic], the *Diable dans un bénitier*, and other such pamphlets that the *libellistes* smuggled into France or surrendered for a ransom to the Parisian police.[97]

There is some chronological inconsistency in Darnton's allegation, since it implies that Brissot was a *libelliste* before the ruinous imprisonment in the Bastille that supposedly consummated his radicalization and hatred of the regime. Moreover, nothing in Brissot's extensive and mundane correspondence with his Swiss publisher, the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), which Darnton has transcribed and edited, reveals him producing or trading in pornography or *libelles*.[98] Thus Brissot's interrogation records remain the key evidence.

Brissot tells us that three days after his arrest he was visited by Lenoir, who informed him of the charges against him and, although Brissot gave him details of Pelleport's negotiations concerning the *Passe-tems d'Antoinette*, was easily convinced of his innocence.[99] While this visit cannot be verified, the evidence and reasoning found in Brissot's account of this interview resemble those used in his interrogations before Pierre Chénon, *Commissaire* at the Châtelet de Paris, three weeks after his arrest. Chénon was an experienced interrogator who asked leading questions and ambushed Brissot with supposedly contradictory evidence. His most damning allegation during their first encounter was that Brissot's brother (Brissot de Thivars) had carried the proofs of the *Diable* to the compositor Lion and told him that Brissot had provided several passages and corrected most of the rest.[100] In a second interrogation Brissot was shown a signed certificate from Lion affirming these facts. Moreover, Lion claimed Pelleport and Thivars had informed him that Brissot packed copies of the *Diable* in crates with his *Journal du Licée*, and deduced that they were for Villebon in Brusssels, Virechaux in Hambourg, Metra in

[95] Minute d'une lettre de Brissot [to Serres de La Tour], dated 28 fr [?] [Feb.] 1783, AN, 446AP/1. MacMahon's identity is clear although he is only named as 'Mac- Irlandais'.

[96] Interestingly, Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 342, refers his children to the transcripts of his interrogations as proof of his innocence.

[97] Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 321.

[98] Darnton, ed., 'Correspondance de Brissot'. He did, however, occasionally forward manuscripts on behalf of others.

[99] Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 316–17. There is no record of this meeting in the governor of the Bastille's correspondence with Lenoir, Arsenal, MS 12,517.

[100] 'Interrogatoire de Brissot de Warville à la Bastille', 3 Aug. 1784, AN, 446AP/2, fo. 1.

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Cologne, and Larrivée in Paris. He even claimed to have seen Brissot add copies to his parcels. Surely, declared Chénon, this confounded his previous protestations of innocence.[101]

Brissot replied that the accusation was impossible since the *Diable* was printed in the summer of 1783 and Thivars did not arrive in London until the following November, facts which can be verified.[102] Moreover, Lion's testimony was suspect because he worked for Cox, who was in dispute with Brissot and dependent on Swinton and Morande. Furthermore, it did not conform to the proper British legal form of a sworn *affidavit*, and for good reason: perjury was a hanging offence. Similarly Lion had carefully avoided stating that Brissot had corrected the proofs himself, because proofs were customarily left at the printshop and might be recovered for examination. Brissot also asserted that Virechaux or Larrivée were never sent copies of his *Journal du Licée*. The latter would swear that he had never heard of the *Diable*.[103] Thus Brissot concluded that on the maxim *semel mendax, semper presumitur mendax* ('once a liar, always presumed to be a liar') Lion's testimony had to be rejected.[104]

This answer clearly impressed Brissot's interrogators and, together with the internal consistency and helpful, expansive detail of his answers, convinced Chénon of his innocence. On the basis of Chénon's reports, on 5 September Lenoir wrote to the Baron de Breteuil, giving his verdict. Although Brissot had been suspected of complicity in Pelleport's *libelles*, Lion's certificate, sent from London, appeared devoid of authenticity and Brissot, 'who replied very well under interrogation', attributed it to the animosity of his enemies. Lenoir insisted that Brissot's attentions were wholly devoted to the *Journal du Licée*, and that his liaisons with Pelleport ended several months previously. He added that Brissot 'has wit (*esprit*); he is a man of letters; he appears to possess [moral] sytems and remarkable principles' and added 'I consider it just to release him.' Five days after Lenoir wrote to Breteuil, Brissot was freed. Pelleport, in contrast, remained in prison until 1788,[105] having apparently insisted under interrogation that Brissot was innocent, though admitting his own guilt on some charges.[106] Nevertheless,

[101] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 6–7.

[102] Adhémar to Vergennes, 4 Octobre 1783 (extrait), AAE, CPA 545, fo. 132, mentions the recently published *Diable*, but Thivars only arrived in London in November. Darnton assumed from Brissot's comment that his brother was bringing his papers (Darnton, 'Correspondance de Brissot', letter 127, dated 12 Aug. 1783) that Thivars departed for London in August. However, Brissot does not mention him again until 11 November when he refers to recent news brought by Thivars and announces triumphantly 'J'ai mes papiers' (letter 131). Under interrogation Brissot dated his brother's arrival to 7 November 1783.

[103] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 7–8.

[104] Ibid., fo. 7.

[105] [L. Charpentier, attrib.], *La Bastille dévoilée ou recueil de pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (9 livraisons, Paris, 1789), 3e livraison, p. 12.

[106] Brissot, *Réplique*, p. 25, and 'Mémoire contre Desforges', AN, 446AP/3, fo. 153, affirm that Pelleport declared him innocent; fo. 156 asserts that Desforges wrote to Brissot's mother-in-law reassuring her that Brissot was no *libelliste* on 18 July 1784 – a letter he presumably expected to show in court. There are no indications in Brissot's interrogations that Pelleport implicated him.

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Lenoir insisted that Brissot be compelled to remain in France at a specified domicile.[107]

Since extensive documentary records produced by the authorities, the judgement of a hardened interrogating officer, and the confessions of his co-accused concur in Brissot's innocence, it would be perverse, in the absence of contrary evidence, to conclude that he was guilty of composing *libelles*. However, he was not faultless. When asked under interrogation whether he had asked Vingtain, commissionaire at Ostende, to send 125 copies of the *Diable* in two parcels for Villebon of Brussels, he admitted to passing on single copies of the *Diable* to Vingtain and Metra on Pelleport's behalf 'but that's all'.[108] This looks disingenuous, for in 1791 Morande published a letter supposedly written by Vingtain to Brissot, dated Ostend 3 April 1784, which appears to confirm these facts and reads:

> In conformity with your letter of the 30th of last month, I forwarded the letter for M. Mitra [sic – presumably Metra], which I sealed and franked. M. de Pelp … has written to me and acknowledged having credited the 17 – 6 in accordance with the account that I sent. It records that I have sent six *diables* [my italics] to Lacroix, bookseller in Bourges, for which he wishes me to receive from the said gentleman 36 livres tournois in total. I have forwarded all those that you sent me, following [the instructions in] your letters, to M. de Villebon, in Brussels, the first [delivery?] totalling 67, and the second 58, as you instructed me by your letter of 10th February last. Thus I have none left. Enclosed herewith is a letter for him. I count on his exactitude in reimbursing my expenses for postage and franking of his letters. I will follow your orders for the crate [of books] that you announce.[109]

Although the letter's authenticity cannot be proven, and it is curious that Morande did not forward it to Brissot's interrogators, this looks like telling evidence that Brissot lied and had indeed handled the pamphlet on Pelleport's behalf, sending it in his crates with instructions for distribution.

A similar, unsigned document entitled 'New account with Pelleport' which mentions two copies sold and 100 more forwarded to Metra, was shown to Brissot during his interrogation. Initially, he denied that the handwriting belonged to him or Thivars, who served as his clerk,[110] but in a subsequent memoir prepared in the Bastille, Brissot accepted that Thivars probably wrote this 'account' and that it required explanation. Nevertheless, he claimed that it only proved that, harassed by Pelleport, Thivars took a couple of copies 'out of charity' and imprudently shipped copies of the brochure in return for postage, 'without sensing the

[107] 'Note [of Lenoir] pour le Baron de Breteuil', 5 Sept. 1784, AN, 446AP/2. The document was printed in Brissot, *Réponse de Jacques-Pierre Brissot à tous les libellistes qui ont attaqué et attaquent sa vie passée* (Paris, 10 Août 1791), first published in *Patriot français*, 739–40 (18–19 Août 1791), pp. 199–208 and 210–12, at p. 203.

[108] 'Interrogatoire de Brissot', AN, 446AP/2, fo. 5.

[109] Morande, *Réplique*, pp. 106–7. François Dupont to Brissot, Ostende, 14 May 1783, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouvelles acquisitions français, MS 9534, fo. 321, reproduced in Perroud, ed., *Brissot: correspondance*, pp. 54–5, shows that Vingtain regularly undertook commissions for Brissot.

[110] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fo. 12.

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consequences'. Brissot insisted that he was ignorant of the document, had not signed it, and that Pelleport, who had turned against him, had given it to Swinton in order to destroy him.[111] Brissot's explanation of the account's provenance appears a disingenuous attempt to suggest that Desforges and Morande had not discovered it among his papers. This seems unlikely. Brissot would surely have been aware of any account, and there is no independent evidence of Pelleport's purported enmity.

It is highly probable, therefore, that Brissot did facilitate the distribution of the *Diable*. However, at most, the account and letter to Vingtain prove only that Brissot acted as a typical middleman in the trade, paid to ship pamphlets on behalf of a third party to customers outside France. They also implicate Pelleport as the publisher and probable author, as does Lion's certificate, which said Pelleport paid for the pamphlet.[112] As the *Diable* was published several months before Brissot wrote to Vingtain or began sending his journal to Metra, and Pelleport's *libelles* are not mentioned in Brissot's correspondence with the STN, he appears not to have been the sole or original distributor. Moreover, there was nothing hypocritical or dishonourable in Brissot's decision to distribute the *Diable*, even if it is true, as Lion alleged, that he consciously provided a couple of anecdotes or helped to polish Pelleport's style.[113] Though grossly exaggerated in places, the content of the pamphlet was political, not pornographic, and consistent with Brissot's radical ideological aims. It offers a blistering attack on ministerial despotism, arbitrary arrest, and the police spy system, the conservatism of Vergennes and the unaccountable spending and financial corruption of the French naval and foreign ministries, together with a commentary on the ills stemming from secretive and absolutist government and censorship.[114] Although Brissot probably helped to promote and distribute Pelleport's *Diable*, no reliable evidence in the wealth of surviving documentation implicates him in writing, publishing, or smuggling *libelles* or political pornography.

IV

This leaves the allegation that Brissot was a spy, which Darnton has traced from its origins in rumours circulating around September 1790, via right-wing publications and *feuillant* pamphlets in 1791–2, into the Montagnard propaganda of Marat of 1793. As Darnton noted, these allegations are inconsistent: many did not offer dates, and those that did offered diverse ones.[115] Moreover, Morande, who actually was a police spy and received material from police files on several occasions, ignored the police spy allegation altogether, preferring to accuse Brissot

[111] 'Mémoire pour Brissot', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 3–4.

[112] 'Deuxième interrogatoire', AN, 446AP/2, fos. 6–7. A chevalier de Rheda also helped to fund it.

[113] Ibid., fo. 7.

[114] See also Munro Price, *Preserving the monarchy: the comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 168–70.

[115] Darnton, 'Grub Street', pp. 309–17.

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of being a British agent.[116] This absurd but damaging and often repeated charge stressed Brissot's links to British abolitionists and supposed that he opposed the slave trade in order to ruin France's colonies.[117]

Thus none of the printed accusations of Brissot's enemies adds credible corroborative weight to Lenoir's testimony, which, in Darnton's translation, reads:

> Brissot remained in Paris [after his release from the Bastille]; he came to offer his services to the police. I refused them, but for about a year he was connected as a spy with one of the secretaries of this department, who presented his reports to me, and he was paid for those reports. Shortly before my retirement [August 1785] Brissot was still retained as a spy by the police.[118]

Nor is Lenoir's testimony corroborated by the other circumstantial evidence that Darnton offers, which amounts to speculation that Brissot worked with the police from 1781, when he negotiated for the return of a consignment of books. This seems far-fetched and inconsistent with Darnton's own chronology. The evidence offered shows only that Brissot tried to 'pump' a key police official, Martin, for information on booktrade issues on behalf of his publishers. Nothing in his correspondence with the STN indicates that he was an 'insider' in the sense that Darnton intended. Indeed, when Brissot informed his publishers that he had information on 'good authority' or would 'sound out M. Martin', it was to gain intelligence from, rather than for, the police.[119] Nor does the transcript of Brissot's interrogation hint that he was willing to spy for the police.

There are further reasons to question the credibility of Lenoir's testimony. Darnton considers Lenoir to have been 'an honest, quite undespotic civil servant – too honest, in fact, to have lied about Brissot in the unlikely event that he had a motive to do so'.[120] However, this statement overlooks both a clearly stated motive and a transparent example of Lenoir lying about Brissot. Let us first consider the question of motive.

De Luna speculated that Lenoir's memoirs, mostly written in exile, might reflect resentments towards leading revolutionaries.[121] This observation underestimates Lenoir's personal animosity and resentments towards Brissot. It was notorious that Brissot was closely associated with the production and promotion of Manuel's *La police dévoilée*, which demonized Lenoir.[122] Furthermore, Brissot's

[116] Morande used police information to expose Cagliostro in 1786. See Robiquet, *Théveneau de Morande*, pp. 189–205.

[117] Morande, *Lettre aux électeurs*, pp. 19–20. See also Morande, *Réponse au dernier mot*, pp. 3–5, 10.

[118] Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 318. Cf. my rendering below and n. 134.

[119] Ibid., pp. 322–5, quotes at pp. 323 and 325.

[120] Ibid., p. 318.

[121] De Luna, 'Dean Street style of revolution', p. 182. Lenoir's memoirs were written in two phases. The first part, written during Lenoir's exile, was probably begun in late 1791 or 1792. The second part was written in France between 1802 and 1807, and contained comparative reflections on the *ancien régime* and Napoleonic police. Extensive redrafts of both parts survive. The memoirs are written in the hands of several secretaries, but Georges Lefebvre, Darnton, Maxime de Sars and this author have found no reason to doubt their authenticity.

[122] For example, Morande's *Argus patriote*, 22 (25 Août 1791), p. 578, denounced Brissot as 'l'instigateur et le complice' of Manuel's work. Pierre-Louis Manuel, *La police de Paris dévoilée* (2 vols., Paris, l'an II de la liberté [1791]).

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review of Manuel's work misrepresented Lenoir's treatment of him in the Bastille, writing:

When he [Lenoir] denied [the existence of] the dense web of dreadful threads employed to ensnare me, (because I propagated the spirit of liberty in France), the perjury, the false certificates, the mendacious letters, he did not foresee that one day all the documents which confirm the infamous wickedness of my enemies, and which ought to lead them to the scaffold … would fall into my hands and that I would find among them the homage paid to my innocence … in a memoir he sent to the ferocious tiger [Bretueil] who was then in charge of the royal prisons.[123]

Thus even Lenoir's pleadings on Brissot's behalf were used to vilify him. Likewise, a passage in Brissot's newspaper depicts Lenoir drinking champagne with pretty women he had kidnapped, mocking imprisoned *philosophes*, and voicing contempt for the stupidity of the common people.[124] In Lenoir's eyes, Brissot must have seemed a base ingrate. It is indisputable that Lenoir deeply resented such personal attacks, for passages in his memoirs repeatedly refute or address slanders against his administration and the police, especially those published between 1787 and 1791.[125] Lenoir tells us that he had read most of this literature, especially after his return to France in 1802, and adds:

One no longer need credit all or as many atrocities as they contain. Their authors included false reports … they affected to discuss the truth … [but] must one today place faith in declarations made by men such as Linguet, Manuel, Jacquet, and the others whose lies and tales fill the greater part of these volumes? [Underlining in original].[126]

It is unlikely that Brissot's attacks and close collaboration with Manuel and on Linguet's pre-revolutionary *Annales* had escaped Lenoir's attention. He was probably also aware of Brissot's involvement in the anonymous *La Bastille dévoilée*, in which Lenoir was attacked and Brissot published a self-serving account of his own imprisonment.[127] Finally, Lenoir claims that Brissot collaborated on an anonymous *Dictionnaire de jurisprudence*, supplying false anecdotes against the police collected while working for them.[128] Thus Lenoir had strong motives to calumniate Brissot and his memory.

Furthermore, Lenoir's memoirs lie blatantly about Brissot's involvement in the London *libelle* trade and *embastillement*. In a section where he reports the motives for the detention of prisoners in the Bastille, Lenoir writes:

As soon as he learned of the arrest of Jacquet [another *libelliste*] in Paris, Brissot closed his manufacture of *libelles* in London. He was lured to France under false hopes of a great

[123] *Patriot françois*, 28 July 1791, p. 115.
[124] Ibid., 10 Aug. 1790, reproduced in Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 318.
[125] See especially Orléans, MS 1422, pp. 25, 88–90, 242–3, 274, 303.
[126] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 242.
[127] For Brissot's dossier see [Charpentier, attrib.], *La Bastille dévoilée*, 3e livraison, pp. 75–9.
[128] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 321. Barbier identifies the editor of this work as Lerasle, 'ancien professeur du droit, avocat au Parlement', but Lenoir and Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, p. 105, attribute it to M. Prost de Royer, Lieutenant de Police de Lyon, whom Brissot knew well and praises.

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profit to be paid for some of his works and was arrested at Calais.[129] Taken to the Bastille, no papers were found on him … due to lack of evidence he was released after several months imprisonment. He owed the shortness of his detention to his good behaviour in the Bastille and the start of his work on criminal laws; and yet for an entire year, lasting from his departure from London until 1785, no further diffamatory works against the court of France and royal family were printed there.[130]

It is hard to believe that this passage is written by the same 'honest' Lenoir who had recommended Brissot's release on the grounds of his innocence. Having thus caught Lenoir in the act of misrepresenting Brissot's past, let us turn to his assertion that Brissot was a spy.

Lenoir's testimony on the spying charge contains several inconsistencies. De Luna wonders why Lenoir should refuse Brissot's services yet permit a subordinate to hire him. He also notes that Brissot did not initially stay in Paris, as Lenoir says, but went to stay with his mother-in-law at Boulogne, according to the terms of the good-behaviour bond brokered by Lenoir. He was there from mid-October until late December 1784, and spent the summer of 1785 near Châteaudun, so could not have been a spy at the precise times that Lenoir alleged.[131] At the very least, Lenoir's memory was faulty on vital questions of detail.

However, my own re-examination of the Lenoir papers reveals a bigger textual problem with Darnton's key evidence, since he failed to note that the spy allegation only appears in the earlier of the two surviving drafts of the text. It is omitted from the subsequent fair-copy version.[132] Moreover, the earlier draft was amended twice. In his first amendment Lenoir crossed out both the phrases that stated categorically that Brissot was a spy. Later still he crossed out the whole passage. The deleted passage is translated below in its entirety, showing how Lenoir amended it. Passages Lenoir deleted prior to crossing out the whole section appear in square parentheses; the text used to replace these initial deletions is given in italics:

Brissot remained in Paris; there, he came to offer his services to the police; I refused them but for almost a year he had [espionage] links[133] with one of the secretaries of this department, [who presented his reports to me, and he was paid for his reports. Shortly before my retirement, Brissot ceased[134] to be employed as a spy by the police; but] several months after *my retirement* [I was surprised to] *I* met him at the house of M. de la Fayette to whom he

[129] This is inaccurate: Pelleport, not Brissot, was arrested in Calais. Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 192–3, claims Pelleport was lured there by Swinton.

[130] Orléans, MS 1422, pp. 55–6; the otherwise almost identical earlier draft at p. 123 does not mention the royal family.

[131] De Luna, 'Dean Street style of revolution', p. 181.

[132] The Lenoir papers were only given page numbers and microfilmed in 1973, so it is conceivable that Darnton saw another draft that has subsequently disappeared. However, the draft from which the allegation is absent is a fair copy and clearly a final version for publication.

[133] 'relations d'espionage'.

[134] Darnton read this, heavily crossed out, as 'resta' but when magnified there is no doubt that the word is 'cessa', which makes better sense in context.

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was attached and where he read a work in the presence of M. [le duc de Rochefoucauld, de M.] de Condorcet and others.[135]

Why did Lenoir delete the damning assertions that Brissot was a spy from his memoirs and then remove the passage altogether? Certainly it was not due to scruples about defaming Brissot, for his false statement that he was a *libelliste* appears on the very same page. Perhaps he felt that the allegation would not be credited, but that seems unlikely. As Lenoir refers in several other places to Brissot's performing various, less compromising, services for the police, it seems more probable that the initial amendments, removing all references to spying, were a clarification.

Lenoir wished to be very precise about spies. Although he never offered a positive definition of what constituted a 'police spy', he provided several glosses concerning who should *not* be considered a spy, arguing for example, 'One should not rank as spies the unfortunates whose distress was relieved by the police, and who out of gratitude, but without any commission, came to give them information which could often not be ignored.'[136] Nor did he 'classify as spies the agents ('préposés') attached to the police officers who assist in their operations; they must be categorised as minions and assistants of the officers of justice'.[137] The aim of such clarifications was to reduce the apparent size of the police espionage establishment. Lenoir wished to answer the revolutionaries' charges against the police and his administration, by showing that the police had made only limited use of spies and informers and hence that the *ancien régime* was less despotic than popularly believed. Thus he assures his readers that both he and his predecessor only used as 'secret agents … several men and women with connections', both society figures and former servants. He supported these contentions by producing accounts showing an improbably low annual expenditure on espionage, totalling just 6,000 livres.[138] He added that although he had sought to give the impression that his spies were everywhere, the police actually learned more from a sixty-year-old woman spy, a former brothel-keeper with access to many great houses, than from all their temporary agents (*agents de circonstance*) combined.[139] The desire to minimize the number of spies received an added boost by the time Lenoir was preparing the final drafts of his memoirs, because when he returned to France, he was consulted by Napoleon's police minister, Fouché, who was apparently impressed by the low cost and efficiency of the *ancien régime* police.[140]

[135] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 124; the later version, where this passage is omitted, is at pp. 55–6. Both versions contain the false *libelliste* allegation.

[136] Ibid., p. 99.

[137] Ibid., p. 134.

[138] Ibid., pp. 134–5; but cf. p. 971 where accounts budget 20,000 livres p.a. for 'secret expenses' and p. 897 where Lenoir says that the 'secret expenses' budget was 80,000 livres in 1780, though he drew only half this sum. The lower figures, in particular, render improbable claims that Brissot received 150 livres per month (i.e. 1,800 p.a.) from the police, especially if, as Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, notes (p. 118) the police employed 340 spies.

[139] Orléans, MS 1422, pp. 96–100, 134.

[140] M. B. Saint-Edmé, *Biographie des lieutenans-généraux, ministres, directeurs-généraux, chargés d'arrondissemens, préfets de la police en France et de ses principaux agens* (Paris, 1829). Maxime de Sars, *Lenoir, lieutenant de police* (Paris, 1948), found little to say on this consultation.

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As Lenoir's aim was to minimize the extent of the police spy network, rather than to deny its existence, there was no reason why he should not have accused Brissot of spying had he wished to do so. Indeed, he does name two other revolutionary deputies – Manuel and his associate Audouin – as spies, and gives detail of their services.[141] It seems more likely therefore that Lenoir's aim in amending his text was to clarify Brissot's exact services to the police. The second amendment, on the other hand, seems to have been a case of tight editing: Lenoir realized that he had deviated from his chosen topic, the motives behind the arbitrary arrests of individual prisoners, and deleted the whole passage. A similar passage on Mirabeau's services and publishing activities was also deleted.[142] These conclusions are supported by several other passages, scattered throughout his memoirs and hence written across several years, where Lenoir talks of Brissot's services and other activities without ever again suggesting that he was a spy.[143]

Detailed analysis of Lenoir's editorial decisions thus suggests paradoxically that Brissot was not a police spy, certainly not in the literal sense of someone paid to seek out information, but served the police in other capacities. This distinction was more than semantic. Police spies were hated and held in contempt both prior to the revolution and afterwards, but before revolutionary pamphleteers delivered the whole police regime to execration, views of the administration of the police – which was responsible for most functions we would associate with municipal government – were more nuanced. For example, Louis Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, which like Brissot's early writings is scathing about the use of spies, expresses admiration for the role of the police in providing medical supplies and street lighting and, more ambiguously, in maintaining order. It also explicitly praises both Lenoir and his predecessor Sartine for individual acts.[144] The nature of Brissot's services to the police thus becomes significant. But what were these services? In the original accusation, Lenoir talks of Brissot preparing 'reports' and being paid for them, but tantalizingly fails to reveal their subject matter. Elsewhere, however, he elaborates, above all in a draft note for his memoirs that discusses the problems of policing and suppressing rumours. It tells how Lenoir received reports on public opinion containing 'more toadyism (*flatteries*) than truth' but also 'plenty of tales based on both well-founded and poorly-founded rumours' from twenty *mouches* (i.e. spies).[145] It is conceivable that Brissot was one of these '*mouches*', but highly improbable, since Lenoir explicitly

[141] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 57; MS 1423, pt 3, p. 61.

[142] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 130.

[143] The most explicit such reference, Orléans, MS 1422, pp. 320–1, refers to Brissot having been 'employed in the offices of the police of Paris'. The word 'secretly', originally included after 'employed', was crossed out.

[144] See, for example, Mercier's articles on 'Espions', 'Hommes de la police', 'Révèrbères', 'Enseignes', 'Prévoyance', 'Emeutes', 'Bicêtre'. All these articles appear in the translated selection in Mercier, *Panorama of Paris*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin (University Park, PA, 1999), pp. 36–7, 39–44, 51, 111–13, 159–65. Brissot's attacks on police espionage are discussed in Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, p. 119. Contemporaries were also fulsome in their praise of police provision of relief and work schemes for the poor.

[145] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 315.

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juxtaposes their work to Brissot's services, which occurred at other stages in the process of policing and counteracting rumours. For, having described the *mouches*, an almost illegible, ungrammatical marginal note adds (deletions again are given in square parentheses): 'The celebrated Comte de Mirabeau was above all employed by and bound to (*obligé*) the Lieutenant of Police, the famous Brissot de Varville [sic] also. The police occupied them in comfort [disseminating] making up packages of (*faisoient des malles des*) pamphlets [*d'esprit*] news bulletins reporting well or ill-attested facts.'[146] Thus it seems that Brissot helped with the distribution of brochures and handbills for the police, apparently as part of Lenoir's attempts to contradict rumours which threatened public order. The extract is ambiguous as to whether Brissot wrote such pamphlets as well. However, if Lenoir's association of Mirabeau and Brissot, both of whom also worked for Clavière, is deliberate, the aforementioned suppressed paragraph concerning Mirabeau is revealing. Though it does not accuse Mirabeau of spying, it alleges that after his release from the Château de Vincennes:

> The Comte de Mirabeau, not knowing where to go in Paris, was first of all received at the house of Sieur Boucher, one of the secretaries of the police, who he calls his guardian angel in his letters … He offered to write for me in favour of *lettres de cachet* and also the police regime, which he said he had calumniated too much [in his *Des lettres de cachet et des prisons d'état*]. After a reconciliation with his father that was more feigned than sincere, he sought to establish relations with the ministers. Several employed him to produce works against *agiotage*[147] and various European governments. I could cite several works for which he was paid, sometimes by the finance ministry, others by the ministry of foreign affairs and even the police.[148]

It is almost certain that, as a fellow member of Clavière's stable of writers, Brissot also served as a hired pen. Brissot's *Mémoires* even hint at this possibility, noting that Calonne paid him and Clavière to cede a title to Mirabeau, whose name

[146] Ibid. Cf. Darnton's attempted transcription in Darnton, 'Grub Street', p. 321 n. 52, and the translation of the same passage in Robert Darnton, *The literary underground of the old régime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 228 n. 50. Darnton believed that this near illegible passage indicated that Mirabeau and Brissot wrote these pamphlets, but with the advantage of modern electronic magnification it appears that it actually reads (with deletions indicated in square brackets), 'Le fameux Cte de Mirabeau avoit été emploié et obligé surtout par le Lt de Police le fameux Brissot de Varville [sic] de même. La police les occupait à l'aise [à repandre] faisoient des malles des pamphlets [d'esprit] de bulletins bien ou mal avoués.' Although this is ungrammatical, the inclusion of the word 'répandre' in the initial draft and use of 'des malles', show that the passage concerns dissemination. However, Lenoir may conceivably also have meant the sentence to carry a metaphorical meaning – i.e. to hint that they wrote pamphlets too. My translation of the ambiguous word 'malle' as 'package' seems preferable to the alternatives (e.g. 'trunk', 'leather case', 'box' or 'mail coach').

[147] This word, which has no precise English equivalent, signifies the practice of speculating on the price rises of artificially puffed shares. The practice was roundly condemned by Mirabeau, Brissot, and Clavière, who saw it as both dishonest and damaging to the public interest.

[148] Orléans, MS 1422, p. 130; p. 468 repeats the statement about writing against *agiotage*.

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was better known to the public.[149] It seems likely that Brissot also prepared written reports and memoranda as Lenoir stated. However, such reports could have covered a wide range of topics. The Lieutenant-Général de Police's reponsibilities included portfolios as diverse as the provisioning of Paris, public health, regulation of workers and servants, and the administration of public highways and street-lighting. Brissot's reports may therefore have dealt with any number of subjects, but probably covered areas of specialist knowledge, such as criminal law, justice, and punishment. Perhaps he also revenged himself on Morande and his *coterie* of swindlers, blackmailers, and thieves by passing on what he had learned of their criminal activities during his stay in London to the police?

Despite his radical beliefs, Brissot probably welcomed the chance to serve the administration. By 1784 he had exhausted three of the four strategies for survival available to ambitious *philosophes* described by Roger Chartier.[150] He had lived off his own resources for as long as possible; journalism and writing had failed to support him; and his institution of enlightened sociability, the *Licée*, had proved unprofitable. His imprisonment consummated the fall of the *Licée*, and with the demise of his journal, banned in France from June 1784, he lost his cherished independent journalistic platform. His only chance for influence now was to work for patrons or powerful influence groups. Brissot, who had always aspired to better society through his work, probably welcomed the opportunity to have a direct influence on government, however slight. He would not have been alone among writers: by the 1780s the idea of the *philosophe* as public servant, exemplified by Turgot and popularized by his disciple and Brissot's future political ally Condorcet, was gaining ground.[151] Moreover, Norman Hampson has speculated that as early as 1780, Brissot's *Testament politique de l'Angleterre* was written in order to attract the patronage of Vergennes.[152] It is possible that Brissot's preference was to promote the common good by spreading knowledge of British discoveries, institutions, and constitution to the French public, just as he asserted in his *Licée*'s prospectus. However, deprived of this opportunity, serving the police probably appeared his best hope for advancing himself, and possibly his ideas, within the administration. If he maintains a prudent silence over such services in his memoirs, written while in prison under the threat of the guillotine, it is unlikely that until the revolution

[149] Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 351–2. This adds a new dimension to both Brissot's financial pamphleteering and ministerial politics, especially since Darnton and Livesey and Whatmore's studies treat Clavière and Brissot as autonomous actors. Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, pp. 11–12, discusses Calonne's backing for the financial pamphleteering campaign, but ignores its problematic implications for her own elevated view of Brissot.

[150] Roger Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC, 1991), pp. 55, 191.

[151] On this point see Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, pp. 101–3.

[152] Norman Hampson, *Will and circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (London, 1983), p. 86. Loft, *Passion, politics and philosophie*, p. 5, asserts Hampson's contention as fact, but at p. 97 presents it as a possibility only.

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many contemporaries or fellow *philosophes* would have seen them as a matter for reproach.

V

This article therefore refutes Robert Darnton's interpretation of Brissot by offering strong evidence that Brissot was not a swindler, *libelliste*-pornographer, or police spy, a term which is particularly misleading given its association with twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. However, it also rejects the extreme position of Darnton's critics, who have suggested that Brissot was morally pure, and shows that Darnton's suspicions that Brissot had links with the police and *libellistes* are far from groundless. Like most effective calumnies, those against Brissot contained grains of truth, for he made compromises typical of the *ancien régime*. While keeping *libellistes* at arm's length to avoid implicating himself too deeply in their activities, he forwarded copies of Pelleport's *Diable* and appears to have accepted private, ministerial, and police patronage, preparing reports and propaganda. This willingness to accept patronage was usually an essential part of a successful literary career before the revolution, and by late 1784 was Brissot's only realistic means to contribute to public debate and perhaps influence policy. If even radicals like Brissot operated within traditional networks of patronage control and political faction, it is clear that further work is needed if we are to understand the connections between politics, pamphleteering, and the origins of the revolution.[153] Moreover, Brissot's case also hints that advocates of a historiographical tradition, extending from Tocqueville to Chartier and beyond, which sees the French enlightenment and centralized political authority as essentially opposed and separate categories, juxtaposing 'government' to 'literary politics' and 'public opinion', may overstate their case.[154] We can thus see Brissot in essence as he depicted himself without finding major contradictions. He was a committed *philosophe* and reformer, keen to avoid unnecessary entanglement in illegal activities, who despite his political radicalism, aspired to advise the regime and serve like-minded patrons. The charges against him are false or misrepresented and he was imprisoned on the basis of fabricated allegations based on forged evidence.

Nevertheless, the allegations had serious consequences and left Brissot vengeful. During the revolution, he took his revenge on both Morande and Lenoir, whom he accused of deliberately prolonging his detention.[155] In 1791, Brissot's friend Manuel supplied him with the transcripts of his interrogations and several anonymous letters in Morande's hand which proved his role in Brissot's

[153] Starting points for such work include: Popkin, 'Pamphlet journalism'; Daniel Wick, *A conspiracy of well-intentioned men: the Society of Thirty and the French Revolution* (New York and London, 1987); Kenneth Margerison, *Pamphlets and public opinion: the campaign for a union of orders in the early French Revolution* (West Lafayette, IN, 1998). [154] See especially Chartier, *Cultural origins*, pp. 14–15.

[155] Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 318–19.

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embastillement.[156] Shortly afterwards, Morande published a series of calumnious pamphlets against Brissot which threatened to prevent his election to the Legislative Assembly.[157] Paris's twenty-four representatives were elected by a series of straight head-to-head run-offs over several days. In the first ten ballots Brissot was defeated: he squeaked home by a narrow margin in the eleventh ballot.[158] It had been a harrowing and debilitating campaign. A year later Brissot was accused of having expressed disappointment that Morande was not among the dead in the September massacres in front of Chabot and Danton.[159] While these are unreliable witnesses, Brissot was almost certainly responsible for Morande's arrest several days later, on charges later dismissed as vexatious.[160] Morande apparently returned the compliment, offering to testify at the trial of the Girondins, when again Brissot's character was a key target for his enemies.[161] The final judgement of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which found the Girondins guilty of 'conspiring against the unity and indivisibility of the Republic', offers the ultimate, fatal reflection of these allegations.[162] It describes Brissot as the 'agent of the police under the kings, dishonoured, even under the *ancien régime*, by base intrigues', refers to his stay in London, and indicates that he and his accomplices were 'the agents of the English faction' who 'under the guise of philanthropy' ruined France's colonies.[163]

Brissot's experience of persecution at the hands of the monarchic regime and its agents fed his fears of conspiracy and distrust of the court. Although Loft has clearly established that his radical political ideas were formed before 1784, his imprisonment and subsequent persecution undoubtedly exacerbated his suspicion of a regime that could employ agents like Morande, detain innocents for weeks on their clearly fabricated evidence, and, according to some accounts, consider kidnapping or murdering malefactors like Boissière or Pelleport. This latter story, endorsed by the *Diable dans un bénitier*, is not an isolated incident: similar tales concerning attempts at kidnap and assassination against renegade exiles such as the chevalier d'Eon and the comte de la Motte, some of them verifiable from surviving documents, abounded in pre-revolutionary underground literature and were hence familiar in radical circles.[164] Moreover, Brissot

[156] Manuel to Brissot, undated letter [Summer 1791], AN, 446AP/7; Morande's three letters dated 13 and 16 July 1784 and 'reçu le 8 août [1784]' are in 446AP/2. See also Brissot, *Mémoires*, IV, pp. 108–10. [157] See n. 2 above. [158] *Patriot français*, 15 Sept. 1791, p. 326.

[159] Camille Desmoulins, *History of the Brissotins; or part of the secret history of the Revolution; and of the first six months of the Republic* (London, 1794), p. 35; Desmoulins's allegation was used by Saint-Just in his 'Report on the proscribed Girondin deputies' on 9 July 1793: see H. Morse Stephens, ed., *The principal speeches of the statesmen and orators of the French Revolution, 1789–1795* (2 vols., Oxford, 1892), II, pp. 473–506 at pp. 484–5. [160] See AN, F^7 4774^{51} dossier 3; W251 dossier 27.

[161] Siessel [?] fils to Fouquier Tinville, 17 brumaire [1793], AN, W292 dossier 204, 3e partie, no. 6. Siessel claimed – improbably – not to know Morande.

[162] *Jugement rendu par le Tribunal Criminel Révolutionnaire* [on 9 brumaire of the year II, against Brissot and his co-accused] (Paris, 1793), quote at p. 5. [163] Ibid., pp. 6, 18.

[164] [Pelleport], *Diable*, pp. 64, 78. On these tales see Simon Burrows, 'Despotism without bounds: the French police and the silencing of dissent in London, 1760–1790' (forthcoming).

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was not the only writer, revolutionary, or public figure persecuted by Morande: Mirabeau, Calonne, Beaumarchais, Linguet, and Cagliostro were also among his public and high-profile victims prior to 1789.[165]

The experience of Brissot and his ilk, together with the widespread publicity given to their sufferings, has interesting implications for our understanding of the revolutionary fear of conspiracy and the machinations of the court, a phenomenon which post-revisionist historians have seen as intrinsic to the dynamics of the revolution, both at popular and elite level.[166] In contrast to popular fears, where continuities and traditional patterns of thought are evident, recent historical work has attempted to explain elite fears as consequences of short-term political developments. Hence Timothy Tackett argues from a survey of the correspondence and diaries of deputies to the National Assembly that conspiratorial modes of explanation were a by-product of revolutionary events, especially the crisis of July 1789.[167] Such an argument relies on the premise that the revolutionaries' confidence in Louis XVI's goodwill initially overrode anxieties based on the historical precedents of royal attacks on Paris during the Fronde and the wars of religion, or France's more recent interventions to crush Genevan 'democrats'. This seems questionable and also fails to explain why such confidence in the king, if it existed, was so quickly eroded. A partial key to this enigma is perhaps provided by recent work by Tom Kaiser connecting the July days to the growth of an elite anti-aristocratic sentiment, linked to Austrophobia and alienation from Marie-Antoinette's aristocratic *coterie*, which metamorphosed into fear of an 'aristo-ministerial' conspiracy.[168] However, a comprehensive explanation would also need to consider the life experience of the revolutionary generation, to assess how far their fears had pre-revolutionary origins, grounded in events and rational expectations. Here tales of ruthless court-sponsored persecution of dissidents appear fundamental. The widely publicized experience of men like Brissot, reinforcing historical precedent, predisposed the revolutionary elite towards a conviction that court factions would stop at nothing to contain political opponents – even conspiring to storm or starve Paris. No wonder the revolutionaries were easily convinced of the reality of a court-sponsored *coup* attempt in July 1789. Nor was it a coincidence that two years later it was Brissot – celebrated victim of arbitrary government – who led the charge for war with the crowned heads of Europe in the Legislative Assembly, convinced,

[165] See Robiquet, *Théveneau de Morande*; von Proschwitz and von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe*; Burrows, 'A literary low-life'.

[166] The earliest expositions of the post-revisionist view are in François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Foster (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 53–6, and Lynn Hunt, *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 38–44.

[167] See Timothy Tackett, 'Conspiracy obsession in a time of revolution: French elites and the origins of the Terror, 1789–1792', *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), pp. 691–713.

[168] Thomas E. Kaiser, 'Nobles into aristocrats, or how an order became a conspiracy', unpublished chapter. I am grateful to the author for sending me a copy of this paper. See also idem, 'Who's afraid of Marie-Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia and the queen', *French History*, 14 (2000), pp. 241–71; Wick, *Conspiracy*.

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like so many other revolutionaries, that free publicity and the democratic rule of the sovereign people would be welcomed by Frenchmen and foreigners alike as an antidote to the secrecy and wickedness of courts. His arbitrary arrest, together with the calumnies and evidence fabricated against him, had helped to forge the revolutionary.

POSTSCRIPT

Robert Darnton and I no longer seem to disagree about Brissot's involvement in the *libelle* trade. His latest collection of essays, entitled *George Washington's false teeth: an unconventional guide to the eighteenth century* and published in June 2003, which reached me while the current article was in press, contains an essay entitled 'The skeletons in the cupboard: how historians play God', in which, without citing new evidence, he appears to retract his earlier suggestion that Brissot was probably a *libelliste*. This essay first appeared in 2002 in an American quarterly review. I have therefore had no chance to address it in the present article, and will do so in a future essay.

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