

## 1724: LE PREMIER VOLTAIRE AND THE PARISIAN POLICE

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Voltaire's association with the Parisian police began early: on May 16, 1717, when he was arrested and brought to the Bastille by two *exempts*, Bazin and Champez. On that occasion, however, the Lieutenant Général de la Police had instructions to rein in an unruly young man, "Monsieur Arouët," rather than a potentially important and seditious author. That situation would change dramatically over the next few years.<sup>1</sup>

By 1724, Voltaire's career and the policing of the Parisian book trade were evolving in tandem. Early in 1723, Voltaire returned to Paris after a brief immersion in the aristocratic life found in châteaux in the Loire valley. Just before that sojourn, he had traveled to The Hague and Amsterdam to sign a contract for a new edition of his epic poem, a contract that marked its name change from *La Ligue* to *Henri IV ou La Ligue*. The young author with a propensity for dangerous subjects could hardly have picked a more opportune moment to spend time in his native city.

Shortly after Voltaire's return to Paris, a new offensive against certain types of what the Lieutenant Général de la Police consistently referred to by the vague appellation "*mauvais livres*" was announced: the *Code de la librairie et imprimerie de Paris, ou conférence du règlement arrêté au conseil d'état du roy le 28 février 1723*. Among the new code's chapters was one entitled "Défenses de faire le commerce des livres sans qualité;" article 5, devoted to "mercerie, porte-balles," denounced the "soi-disant merciers" in Paris who "vendent des petits livres d'heures et prières imprimés dehors ladite ville" and gave a long history of this phenomenon and the ways in which such books reached Paris.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 The following pages began their life as a presentation for the colloquium devoted to "Le Premier Voltaire" held in Paris in June 2015. To my knowledge, the documents in Paris' Archives Nationales that I discuss here have not been previously examined. For the purposes of the colloquium, I described them and tried to include them in the history of Voltaire's involvement with printers and the policing of the Parisian book trade. I have not expanded the text of that presentation for this volume; these pages record a short, oral talk. Readers cannot therefore expect to find here a review of recent scholarship on either the book trade and its policing or the history of the book.
- 2 I cite the edition of the *Code* reprinted in Saugrain, *Aux dépens de la communauté*, 1744, p. 54.

Only weeks later, on March 20, 1723, in the last months of his life Cardinal Dubois named the abbé Dubois to examine “le poème de Henri IV de M. de Voltaire” to see if it contained material that might “choquer la cour de Rome.”<sup>3</sup> These two phenomena – the struggle to control the commerce in small devotional books sold by *merciers* and the struggle to contain an irrepressible author – appear on the surface to be completely unrelated. Soon, however, they would become intertwined.

In 1723, *La Ligue* was printed in Rouen by Abraham Viret, one of a number of printers whose shops were clustered near the Palais de Justice. By December of that year, 4,000 unbound copies were moving toward Paris. The Marquise de Bernières had shipped the *brochés* volumes in a wagon loaded with furniture and in saddlebags and baskets attached to mules following that wagon. By mid-January 1724, those copies of Voltaire’s breakthrough work had reached Paris.<sup>4</sup>

146 As luck would have it for both Voltaire and the Parisian *merciers* who trafficked in tiny devotional volumes, on January 28, 1724, a new Lieutenant Général took charge of the Parisian police: Nicolas Jean-Baptiste Ravot, seigneur d’Ombreval. D’Ombreval soon won a reputation as a hard-liner, particularly for his zeal in renewing the enforcement of old laws on prostitution. He clearly took the book trade with equal seriousness: in 1724 alone, he sent out one of his *commissaires*, Jean-Jacques Camuset, on three different missions relating to what would now be known as book censorship. Camuset also had reason to feel zealous in 1724: early that year, he had moved from the Quartier de la Grève to the Quartier de Saint-Paul. The combined efforts of a new Lieutenant Général and a newly relocated commissioner produced three remarkable dossiers, all of which survive Paris’ Archives Nationales in the *carton* containing Camuset’s miscellaneous papers from 1724.<sup>5</sup>

In May, the month of the publication of a royal ordinance concerning religious orthodoxy that d’Ombreval would struggle to enforce all during his tenure, he sent out Camuset to determine how effectively the Parisian printers’ guild had been policing its members. The resulting report, dated May 12, is a 14-page document: “Procès-verbal de l’ordre de M. le lieutenant général de la police au sujet de la suppression des livres à la chambre syndicale.” Camuset had had a list drawn up of all the works “suppressed” between April 8, 1722 and March 8, 1724, always with precise editions noted. It’s a document full

3 *Les Correspondants de la Marquise de Balleroy*, ed. É. de Barthélemy, Paris, Hachette, 1883, 2 vols., vol. 2, p. 256.

4 For biographical information on this period in Voltaire’s life, see René Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1985, 5 vols., vol. 1 *D’Arouet à Voltaire, 1694-1734*, chapters 11-12, especially pp. 166-72.

5 Camuset’s papers from 1724 are found in the Archives Nationales: Y//12018.

of valuable information of all kinds, first of all because it provides a snapshot of the works that pirates and smugglers considered marketable in Paris at the time.

During the years that immediately followed the publication of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* in Amsterdam, there's little indication that the seismic shift we know as the Enlightenment was looming on the horizon: a lone copy of Vauban's *Dîme royale* that surfaced in a trunk shipped from Évreux to the abbé de Saint-Pierre, is the only politically controversial work on the list. There are a few mildly erotic volumes – a copy of Brantôme's *Dames galantes* in a *balle* shipped from Rouen in 1722 to Mr. de La Bottière, for example, referred to as “*mauvais*.” Since Brantôme could hardly have been considered truly dangerous in 1724, “*mauvais*” in this case probably simply referred to the fact that the volume's printing was of poor quality. Indeed, most of the confiscated volumes had been seized because they were pirated and/or because of their inferior print quality.

Most of those labeled “*mauvais et contrefait*” were in fact classics of a by then bygone age: Racine's theater, La Fontaine's fables. One work from the same period that still packed a considerable religious punch did turn up on several occasions – in 1723 in a trunk sent from Limoges to Mr. Chevetaille, for instance: Pascal's *Pensées*. The continued popularity of Pascal's 1669 work was surely a fact of which the young Voltaire was aware.

Even though Camuset's investigation turned none up, during the spring of 1724, pirated editions of a much more recent work were circulating in Paris: *La Ligue*. At that moment, Voltaire was revising his work with a far grander publication in mind. Before the middle of August, he moved into an apartment in the home of the Marquis and Marquise de Bernières on the rue de Seine on the corner of the rue de Beaune. Within weeks, he would finish work on his revised text. Shortly before Voltaire had time to do so, the Parisian police caught up with his work.

In his biography, René Pomeau points out that, already in June 1724, Parisian readers had begun to adopt a new name for Voltaire's epic poem: *L'Henriade*, or *La Henriade*.<sup>6</sup> But on August 23, 1724, when d'Ombreval sent Camuset out on the trail of the new work, he was asking about a volume entitled *La Ligue*. The four-page procès-verbal of Camuset's attempt to satisfy the tough new Lieutenant Général is packed with the kind of precise facts about the day-to-day, small-scale workings of the clandestine book trade that can rarely be found. It may also mark a turning point of sorts in Voltaire's career: the first time that he was identified on the cover of a police file as “Voltaire” rather than “Arouet.”

6 *D'Arouet à Voltaire, op. cit.*, p.172.

Accompanied by an *exempt de robe courte* by the name of Tupin, Camuset set off early in the day to “execute his orders.” And it would prove to be a very full day indeed. Commissaire Camuset never explains why they began their search at the printshop run by “le sieur Prévost” on the rue Hurepoix (now part of the Quai des Grands-Augustins), near the Convent of the Grands-Augustins. Someone had surely tipped off d’Ombreval to the bookseller’s role in the distribution of Voltaire’s poem. When they arrived, Nicolas Prévost, member of a long and distinguished line of *libraires* who had recently taken over the shop from his father, was not there. But his wife, Françoise Bienfait, was in: she was the daughter of Pierre Bienfait, also a *libraire* and the son of still another *libraire*.<sup>7</sup> Both Prévost and Bienfait were thus seasoned book trade professionals, surely well accustomed to dealing with such inquiries. But Bienfait also must have just as surely realized that this search, ordered by a new Lieutenant Général, should be carefully dealt with.

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Indeed, as soon as she learned the purpose of Camuset’s visit, Françoise Bienfait produced “une brochure in douze relié et couvert de papier bleu qui avait pour titre La Ligue de Henry le Grand poëme epique de M. de Voltaire avec des additions et un recueil de pieces diverses du même auteur, qui paroît imprimé à Amsterdam chez Jean Frederic Bernard, quoiqu’il paroisse à nous commissaire imprimé à Paris.” The description is unusually detailed for such a procès-verbal – there is even a marginal note that complicated still further the question of where the small volume had been printed by adding “ou à Rouen.” Had Bienfait cooperated and told them everything she knew or could guess about the controversial little anthology? Or had Camuset been chosen for this job because he was particularly well-informed about the rules of book format and the appearance of pirated volumes and was therefore able to guess that Rouen was a likely place of origin?

From then on, their inquiry proved less fruitful. To begin with, their search of the Prévost printshop, as well as the *arrière-boutique* and even Bienfait’s bedroom, turned up no further copies, supporting Bienfait’s claim that she had only ever seen the single “brochure” she turned over to Camuset. She claimed that it had been brought to them “about a week before” by someone she referred to as “Baudelet,” and about whom she knew only that “she believed that he was a *garçon libraire* who was living with a relative named Mauger.”

Willfully or not, Bienfait had scrambled all the key information she gave, but Camuset soon decoded it and they thus found “A Saint-Ignace” on the rue

7 Information on Parisian *libraires* included in Camuset’s inquiries is from the *Dictionnaire des imprimeurs, libraires, et gens du livre à Paris, 1701-1789*, eds. F. Barbier, S. Juratic, A. Mellerio, Genève, Droz, 2007.

Saint-Jacques opposite the Collège des Jésuites, the shop then run by Marie-Jeanne Largentier. Largentier was the widow not of printer François Mauger, as Bienfait's information would have led them to believe – the veuve Mauger ran “Au Grand Cyrus” in the Grande Salle du Palais – but of Joseph Mongé. Largentier explained that “about two weeks earlier” someone had brought her cousin – whose name was not “Baucelet” but “Bordelet” – “quelques exemplaires brochez.” She claimed to know no more than this, but called up to Bordelet to ask him to hurry down from his room upstairs.

When interrogated, Marc Bordelet, then 27 and having recently completed his apprenticeship, demonstrated the kind of sound judgment that would serve him well in the course of an impressive career in the book trade: in 1727, he was named *libraire suivant la cour*; in 1730, six years after Camuset's search, he took over Joseph Mongé's printshop, having married Mongé's widow, Marie-Jeanne Largentier. Bordelet was quick to inform Camuset that he had had nothing to do with the printing of this edition and that he had no idea where or by whom the work had been done. After those standard denials, Bordelet disclosed a first tantalizing bit of information: “C'est le laquais d'un monsieur dont il ne sait pas le nom, lequel demeure aux environs de la place de Vendome qui les luy a apporté [*sic*] il y a un mois.” Bordelet then hesitated before revealing the exact number that had passed through his hands: “environ” has clearly been scratched out. He finally admitted to having taken on 120 copies and claimed that, of those, only three were left. He handed those three, “brochés en papier bleu,” over to Camuset: the epic poem of M. de Voltaire more closely resembling a humble *bibliothèque bleue* volume than the grand luxury edition of which the poem's author, just minutes away across the Seine, continued to dream.

Forthcoming to a degree unusual in such an interrogation, Bordelet explained that he had already “vendu le surplus à differents particuliers et entr'autres six audit prevost.” Camuset and the exempt searched both work spaces and living quarters, but found no more copies. Then, as they were leaving with the three copies to turn over to the Lieutenant Général, Bordelet sent them on their way with still more food for thought: “Il croit que c'est un des amis du sr. de Voltaire qui a fait imprimer le livre et a payé ce laquais, à raison de vingt sols chaque exemplaire.” If the information Bordelet passed on was correct, then this print-run of *La Ligue* would seem to have been financed by an individual with very deep pockets indeed: from the start, the area surrounding the Place Vendôme had been the almost exclusive preserve of the wealthiest of those individuals known as financiers. This would explain the reasonably handsome fee paid the *laquais* who had handled its distribution: twenty *sols* or a *livre* per copy, at a moment when workers could hope to earn four or five *livres* a day,

or when a *rôtisseur* charged one *livre* to prepare and deliver a plump pigeon to a great lord's house.<sup>8</sup>

All in all, Camuset's 1724 *procès-verbal* provides both a more detailed and a far less sordid view of the workings of the clandestine book trade in Paris than the usual image: the individuals taking risks were well remunerated; the small cogs in the machine co-operated with the authorities rather willingly and were apparently unafraid to reveal either their personal role in the circulation of forbidden works or to indicate how widespread the practice of unloading risky titles a few copies here, a few there had become.

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During these first two searches from 1724, the new team's zeal seems to have paid off. A final investigation was soon to make obvious, however, the limitations of too strict an adherence to the letter of the law. Camuset's third assignment of the year was the most ambitious by far. It was also the moment at which the concerns that drove the year's first two searches could easily have come together to give the authorities the answer to a question that had troubled them for months: where and by whom had *La Ligue* been printed, and how had copies reached Paris?

This time, the mandate for Camuset's search was signed not by d'Ombreval but by the king himself: "à Fontainebleau le 30 septembre 1724 Louis." And indeed for the first time Camuset was sent outside his home jurisdiction to "faire visite dans les imprimeries et magasins des imprimeurs et libraires de la ville de Rouen." Camuset's stated goal was to arrive "le plus secrètement possible et presque dans le même temps" at as many printshops as possible. He was assigned a double task: to learn which printers might be producing "livres et brochures contre la religion, les bonnes mœurs, et même contre l'état," and to interrogate "le maître des carosses de Rouen pour tirer de lui ou par l'examen de ses registres la connoissance des personnes qui chargent à Rouen ces carosses de cette méchante marchandise." Accompanied by two *exempts*, Camuset left Paris at 6 AM on Sunday, October 8. He had not counted on what he termed "la difficulté des chemins," so he arrived later than he had hoped, only at 11 AM on Monday. Once there, the Parisians joined forces with two colleagues from Rouen in order to carry out a simultaneous search on as wide a scale as possible.

The king's mandate was quite specific: Camuset was assigned to investigate four printers and in this order: Machuelle [*sic*], Prévost, Ferrand, and Besogne. The commissaire soon realized that there were in fact four printers named Machuel: the names and addresses of all four of them topped his personal list.

8 On a worker's daily wage in the early 1720s, see Edmond Jean François Barbier, *Chronique de la régence et du règne de Louis XV (1718-1763)*, Paris, Charpentier, 1857-1866, 8 vols., vol. 1, p. 42. For the cost of a pigeon prepared by a *rôtisseur* in 1720, see Archives Nationales, Y//1899.

And right after the Machuels, Camuset added the first name not specified by the king: “Viret, rue Senecaux.” Though Camuset gave no explanation for this decision, anyone familiar with both the story of *La Ligue*’s original printing, by Abraham Viret in Rouen in late 1723, and that of Camuset’s search for clandestine copies of *La Ligue* in Paris only six weeks prior to his trip to Rouen cannot help but wonder if, by October 1724, the commissaire had not somehow made the connection and had therefore decided to broaden the parameters of his search to include the only contemporary work by a living author that was on the radar of the Parisian police in 1724.

Camuset and his men first questioned the Maître des Carrosses. They had him draw up a list of all the *ballots* and *caisses* sent from Rouen to Paris between May 17, 1723 and May 27, 1724 that could be considered suspicious, with the names of all those who had shipped such merchandise. And it’s at this moment that they made a decision because of which they failed to pick up the trail of Voltaire’s *La Ligue*.

Rather than look into all the containers shipped that could have held “bad” books, Camuset, surely inspired by the Lieutenant Général, took his cue from that February 1723 *Code de la librairie et imprimerie de Paris*: he asked to be shown information only on containers marked “*mercerie*.” Even so, quite a number turned up – for example, on April 26, 1723, the curé d’Épinay shipped to Mr. de La Rivière “deux double bannette mercerie pesant 487 payé par M. de Horn 19 l., 9 s.” [*sic*] – but none of them were singled out for further investigation.

This task accomplished, the officers split up with the goal of arriving “presque en même temps” at the shops of the four printers on the king’s list: Pierre Machuel, Antoine Prévost, Charles Ferrand, and Jean-Baptiste Besogne. Each time, they checked to see what was then being printed; they searched the premises; they verified their registers – and they posed the same question: had the printer shipped any “ballots de livres sous le titre de mercerie chargé au carrosse de Rouen à Paris ou sur d’autres voitures.” They visited nineteen *libraires* in all; each one gave the same negative reply. They had shipped nothing “sous le titre de mercerie.”

Mysteriously, they seem not to have made it to the shop that is number 5 on the list Camuset included in the dossier: that of *La Ligue*’s printer, Viret. And that omission is even more mysterious given that all the shops they did visit were located, just as was Viret’s, in the immediate vicinity of the Palais de Justice. But even had they made it there, Viret would surely have answered just as his nineteen colleagues did, that he had sent no containers to Paris “sous le titre de mercerie.”

The snapshot provided by the activity the inspectors noted on that October day indicates that the printers of Rouen were an upstanding bunch. On one

press, the officer found “une ordonnance sur les gabelles,” on another a life of Jesus Christ, on a third a work on the *tailles*, and on still another the lives of the saints – not quite death and taxes, but still. Among the few titles not in those categories was Gautier [Wouter] Schouten’s voyages to the West Indies that Jean-Baptiste Machuel fils was printing.

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But there was the matter of the lone print job that did correspond to the directives issued in that 1723 code. In Pierre Machuel’s shop at the enseigne “Le bien aimé,” they found a *compagnon* who was printing “une feuille in 24 qui avoit pour titre les heures de Notre Dame;” he claimed that the job was being done for the veuve Jean Oursel, whose name is on the title page. The officer confiscated the sheet he found in the press; it remains still in the box in the Archives Nationales. Camuset doesn’t comment on it, but that sheet was the only evidence found of the practice that had become the sole purpose of their investigation. When cut and assembled, the *Heures de Notre Dame* would have been a textbook example of the “petits livres d’heures” printed outside of Paris and brought there to be sold by “soi-disant merciers.” It is dangerous in no other way: the prayers it contains are all simply standard prayers, with no blasphemous twists. One has to wonder why the printers of Rouen, seemingly such law-abiding practitioners of their trade, had begun to hide behind the term “mercerie” and what perhaps less innocuous titles had been included in all the *ballots* and *malles* that had been sent off to Paris and described as containing only pins and needles and thread.

René Pomeau characterized the scenario devised to smuggle the copies of *La Ligue* printed by Viret in these terms: “Voltaire imagine un subterfuge rocambolesque.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, there was nothing even remotely “rocambolesque” about the means of transportation elected – certainly the idea of slipping books into cases packed with furniture seems far less fantastic than packing them in with small fashion accessories such as ribbons and *coiffes* of various kinds. Rather than a true “ploy,” Voltaire’s decision was but an early stroke of the kind of good luck that often marked his career. In October 1724, Camuset was not instructed to look for cases packed with furniture and loaded in Rouen into carriages bound for Paris. He thereby missed the chance to connect the links in a chain of clandestine publication and to learn exactly how in the first half of 1724 Paris came to be flooded with copies of *La Ligue*.

9 *D’Arouet à Voltaire, op. cit.*, pp.170-71.