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Preface

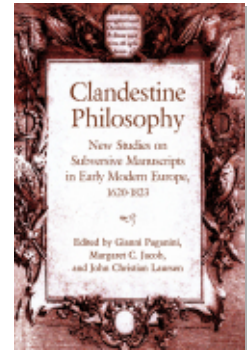
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Preface

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When it comes to the discovery of new clandestine texts, no end appears to be in sight. It is also the case that one person's heresy might need to be hidden, and another's deemed not particularly outrageous. To give but one example: the curious fate of an anonymous author who in the mid-eighteenth century attempted to articulate a self-controlled *via media* aimed at a happy life in society.¹ The actual author of *The Oeconomy of Human Life. Translated from an Indian Manuscript, written by an Ancient Bramin*, known in French as *Le Philosophe Indien*, is widely believed to be the British publisher and poet, Robert Dodsley. Safely ensconced in London, he claimed to have learned philosophy and religion from the ancient Brahmans and to have travelled to China and Tibet. Then the text moved to Catholic Europe.

While attributed to an English aristocrat, Lord Chesterfield, on the Continent the French version of *The Oeconomy* takes its place among a raft of clandestine texts, often materialist in inspiration and dating from the 1740s. It advocates an entirely natural religion, albeit a theistic one suitable for living a happy life in society. And it claimed to be composed by an ancient Brahman. Its heterodoxy and lack of identification with Christianity doomed it among the French censors.

True to the intellectual pedigree that belonged to the clandestine genre, there are Spinozist elements in the Indian philosopher's theism; he praises the wisdom of God by noting, "The marvels of his mechanism are the work of his hands. Listen to his voice ..."² Thus anthropomorphized, "the Lord is just; he judges the world with equity and truth ... The Great and the Small, the Wise and the Ignorant ... are received equally in accordance with their merit."³ This is not the God of the materialists, nor is he particularly identifiable with any of the three monotheistic

religions. No text we can associate with the Enlightenment went through more editions and translations, printed and manuscript, with copies in German, Hungarian, Welsh, and so on. In the eighteenth century two hundred editions appeared and again half as many were produced after 1800.⁴ We might describe the sentiments in *The Oeconomy of Human Life* as enlightened religiosity *light*, close to physico-theology but nowhere near as theistic. The creed being advocated by this anonymous author anchors itself in the secular, in worldly pursuits that discipline the individual. He or she has religion without the need for priests, churches, sermons, or the Testaments.

As various of the fine essays assembled here make clear, more texts are still being found by researchers working in a variety of national settings. Attempts are always being made to pigeonhole these texts as “radical” or “Spinozist” or the like, but as the case of the “Indian philosopher” makes clear, that is sometimes an exercise in futility. To be sure, the genre of “bad books,” or what we have labelled “clandestine philosophical texts,” was recognized by consumers as early as the 1770s in French, if not before.

We know about the genre because of the widow Stockdorf. In 1771 she made her way from her bookshop in Strasburg to Paris in search of bad books or manuscripts. For her trouble, she landed in the Bastille, where the police (kindly for us) left a copy of her shopping lists. She was on the trail after only heretical, irreligious, and scandalous books. Her book bag, as well as her shopping list, were confiscated by the authorities, and they offer a rare window into the universe of forbidden books and manuscripts.

The widowed bookseller knew what she was doing, and she assembled just about every forbidden book or manuscript known at the time. The genre of clandestine philosophical works must be broadly defined to include the rabidly anticlerical and anti-Catholic. Into that category fell works supposedly out of the English republican tradition – by the 1720s sometimes identified as the “country” opposition – found on the Continent and said to be written by the exiled Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke. His British political life need not be recounted here, suffice it to say “complex” would be an understatement. What the widow and her buying public, who knew little about Bolingbroke’s domestic politics, found in *L'examen important de Milord Bolingbroke* was an attack on religious fanaticism, priests, and Catholicism. Indeed, so central was religion that the discerning reader might have suspected the real author to have been none other than Bolingbroke’s good friend, Voltaire. The book claimed to date from 1736 but in fact was published in 1771, the

year the widow and her travelling companions, two abbés, started their Parisian buying spree. In the same year, the Roman Catholic Inquisition put *L'examen* on the Index of Forbidden Books, noting that “it judges, attacks, condemns and lacerates one after the other book in the Old and New Testament, the dogmas that are essential to the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church.”⁵ We distort the meaning of the genre of the forbidden if we imagine that to qualify, the text must be materialist (although there were plenty in that category), or Spinozist, or deist, or pornographic, or simply anti-Christian.

It is doubtful that the widow knew about the condemnation of *L'examen*, but had she, the book would only have been more eagerly sought. The widow's list and inventory are among the best evidence we have that contemporaries recognized the *genre* of the forbidden and knew exactly what belonged in it. In short, historians have not invented the category; it was there at least by the 1770s and we suspect before.

To look at a few famous examples, we need only consult the lists of what Stockdorf owned and for what she was shopping. Of course, she wanted to buy the pornographic *Thérèse philosophe*, and under it she listed *La fille de joie*, the French title of Cleland's *Fanny Hill*. The only problem with that title is, as far as the French national library can ascertain, the first published edition of the French translation was in 1776. Either there is an earlier edition missed by bibliographers, or the widow had in mind a manuscript about which she had heard and that she knew she wanted to buy. Either way, her shopping list shows expertise and a keen eye for what would sell. And from the list it is not always clear if she was shopping for texts already in print or still hand-written. All were anonymous; all could offend political or religious authorities somewhere, and all, we may reasonably assume, could be sold at a profit.

The widow was not put off by the scandalous reputation of a text that discussed in detail the impostures committed by Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed, or described the heterosexual act so explicitly that it could have been a training manual. Stockdorf was also involved in international trafficking in the forbidden; she had business dealings with shops in Maastricht. Her two-year stint in prison probably cooled her ardour, but there were plenty of other *libraires* to take her place.

A long time ago Elizabeth Eisenstein reminded us that publishers were businessmen as well as “patrons of learning or sponsors of emigré intellectuals and protectors of heterodox refugees.”⁶ We have moved away from the simple-minded notion that being in the business of the forbidden meant that you were in it for the money. Contemporary scholarship

gives much greater attention to publishing in general, and historians of the book have made a significant impact on the study of the clandestine genre. For sure there was money to be made, but there was also the possibility of imprisonment. Mixed motives abounded.

And religion cannot be ruled out entirely as one of those motives. Generally, “fringe” religions made their way to the clandestine circuit in Protestant countries, while prior to 1750 Jansenism and quietism were the most prolific offenders in Catholic lands. In either territory, the authorities took a dim view particularly when one or another sect was articulate in political matters. Indeed the French police when they went after “bad books” lumped works by Jansenists with materialist and pornographic texts, possibly being distributed by the same *libraire* and swept up in the same raid. As long as we keep our definitions fluid we stand a better chance of getting at the mindset both of the authorities and of the transgressive.

These essays attempt to give the reader a sense of the state of the field; it offers the most recent work, new discoveries, and rereadings of “classics” in the forbidden that can stand a second look. They give us access to what in early modern Europe could most offend or threaten. They could be written in Latin or the vernacular, and aimed at particular audiences. The consumer of Socinian works may be imagined as not the same person who read pornography. Or can we be sure? The multifaceted character of the genre suggests that when someone back then looked for the latter the former may have popped up from the same locked drawer. Censorship has a way of creating strange but interesting bedfellows.

NOTES

- 1 Bibliothèque d’Arsenal, Paris, MS 9528, with a preface dated 1749, Peking, and a dedication dated 1758. Facsimile edition available through Google Books and attributed, in the preface to the original manuscript and in the facsimile edition, to Robert Dodsley: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=biBhAAAacAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PR23>. There is a printed version of the text, [Anon], *Le Elixir de la morale indienne, ou Economie de la vie humaine* (Paris: chez Ganeau, 1760), authorized by a royal privilege. See also Harry M. Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley: Creating the New Age of Print* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).
- 2 MS 9528, f. 18.

- 3 Ibid. f. 110–13.
- 4 John Bray, “The Oeconomy of Human Life: An ‘Ancient Bramin’ in Eighteenth-Century Tibet,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 19, no. 4 (2009) 439–58; James E. Tierney, ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Dodsley 1733–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10–11.
- 5 Laurence Macé-Del Vento, “‘Lancer la foudre et retirer la main’. Les stratégies clandestines de Voltaire vues par la censure romaine,” *La Lettre clandestine*, no. 16, 2008, 165–77, quoted on page 166, from Rome, ACDF, Index, Protocolli 1771–1773, dossier 17, f° 66r.
- 6 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *Print Culture and Enlightenment Thought: The Sixth Hanes Lecture* (Hanes Foundation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1986), 1–2. And see also Eisenstein, “Print Culture and Enlightenment Thought,” *Réseaux* 6, no. 31 (1988): 7–38.

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