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EDITORIAL NOTE

The customary schedule of papers read at the Society's meetings is supplemented by papers from our regional meetings and symposia, comprising Peter Borsay's paper given at the symposium at the University of Glamorgan on 'Visualising the Seaside' in November 2011, Phil Withington's paper given at the University of Sheffield in April 2012 and two papers by Ian Talbot and Harshan Kumarasingham given at a regional visit to the University of Southampton in October 2012. We are also delighted to include the essay by Levi Roach, the winner of the Alexander Prize.

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TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By Colin Jones

FRENCH CROSSINGS IV: VAGARIES OF PASSION AND POWER IN ENLIGHTENMENT PARIS

READ 23 NOVEMBER 2012

ABSTRACT. This paper examines female libertinism in eighteenth-century France, highlighting the hybrid identity of actress, courtesan and prostitute of female performers at the Paris Opéra. The main focus is on the celebrated singer, Sophie Arnould. She and others like her achieved celebrity by moving seamlessly between these three facets of their identity. Their celebrity also allowed them to circulate within the highest social circles. Feminists of the 1790s such as Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt had pre-Revolutionary careers that were very similar to those of Arnould. It is suggested that understanding this kind of individual in Ancien Régime France can help us to identify a neglected libertine strand within Enlightenment culture, that merged into proto-feminism in the French Revolution. The paper offers a new approach to some of the origins of modern French feminism.

A woman, nearly naked, with heavily rouged cheeks, strolls alongside an elegantly dressed man (Figure 1). The man carries a long torch, set at an angle which would not have posed very much of an interpretative problem for good Dr Freud. The image comes from the unusual book of comic drawings, the *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, by the Parisian luxury embroiderer, Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, that provides a kind of visual chronicle of Parisian life in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The caption reads: ‘breaker of porcelain at the home of the Farmer General, vilm . . . , or, la Deschamps, notorious courtesan’.¹

¹ Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, fo. 304. See www.waddesdon.org.uk/collection/special-projects/st.-aubin (call-mark 675.304) (last accessed 3 June 2013). For the work generally, see Colin Jones, ‘French Crossings. II. Laughing over Boundaries’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 21 (2011), 1–38.

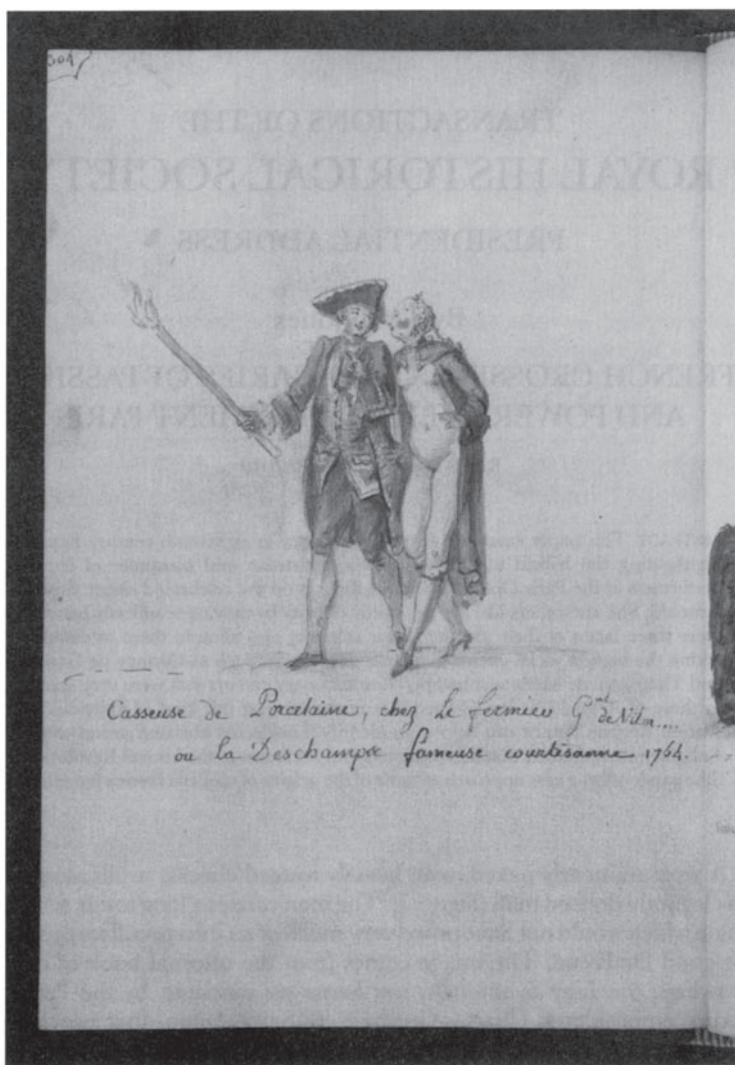


Figure 1 (Colour online) Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Casseuse de Porcelaine, chez le fermier Gal de Vilm...*, 1753–64?; watercolour, ink and graphite on paper; 187 × 132 mm; Waddesdon, The Rothschild Collection (The National Trust); acc. no. 675.304. Imaging Services Bodleian Library © The National Trust, Waddesdon Manor.

Using a report written by a police spy, we can clarify just what this incident involved.² In late March 1756, Deschamps and a female friend went to dine at the superb neo-classical residence on the north-western edge of the city owned by a wealthy farmer general (not Vilmorin in fact), one Gaillard de la Bouexière and a male friend.

The dinner was splendid and gay ... The gentlemen got up to take a stroll in the garden ... To pass the time, the ladies amused themselves by breaking the porcelain, not only all that was left on the table but also what was on the fireplace ... in the end there only remained two cups. Into these the ladies were saucy enough to deposit the digestion of their dinner.

On returning [from his walk], M. de la Bouexière was not long in noticing the charming action of these ladies, but pretending to be in no way put out he applauded it. In this he went one better than the demoiselle Deschamps who was dying to say that this was nothing for a millionaire like him. In short, they resumed at table and having got rid of the two cups, passed to liqueurs.

Later that evening, the two women were stripped naked, at which point 'the gentlemen had their servants, carrying torches, lead the women to their carriage whence they returned to their homes'. Next morning, Madame Deschamps wrote to her host requesting that he return her clothes, jewels and diamonds. He acceded to the wish, with the exception of her clothes, notably an expensive satin dress with silver and chenille embroidery, of which he made a bonfire.

This gamey anecdote played to the scatological tastes of Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin: shit in the coffee-cups was definitely his style of humour.³ Madame Deschamps, 'famous courtesan', was, like many of her type, an actress in the Paris theatre, a topic for which Charles-Germain showed much interest too. She appears elsewhere in the book, notably in a snuffbox lid of his design which was given to her by one M. de Saint-Albin (Figure 2). Charles de Saint-Albin, archbishop of Cambrai, was the illegitimate son of the regent, the duke of Orleans, and an actress (appropriately enough), and he was notorious for leading a scandalous life. If we only knew more about the snuffbox transaction, we might have discovered what the bishop really did say to the actress. We do know, however, a good deal about Madame Deschamps, who was far less obscure to Parisian contemporaries than she is to us. She left traces, and not only in the porcelain.⁴

² Camille Piton, *Paris sous Louis XV: rapports des inspecteurs de police au Roi* (5 vols. in 3, Paris, 1910–14), V, 132–5.

³ For scatology in the *Livre de caricatures*, see esp. Jones, 'French Crossings. II', esp. 29ff.

⁴ Waddesdon call-mark 675.192. Much about Deschamps's life can be gleaned from the police inspector reports in Piton, *Paris sous Louis XV*, and (for the early 1760s) in *Journal des inspecteurs de M. de Sartines*, 1e série, 1761–4 (Paris, 1863). There is a good biographical sketch drawing on these and other primary source materials in Erica-Marie Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des moeurs au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1987), 369–77 (see *ibid.*, 209, for La Bouexière's

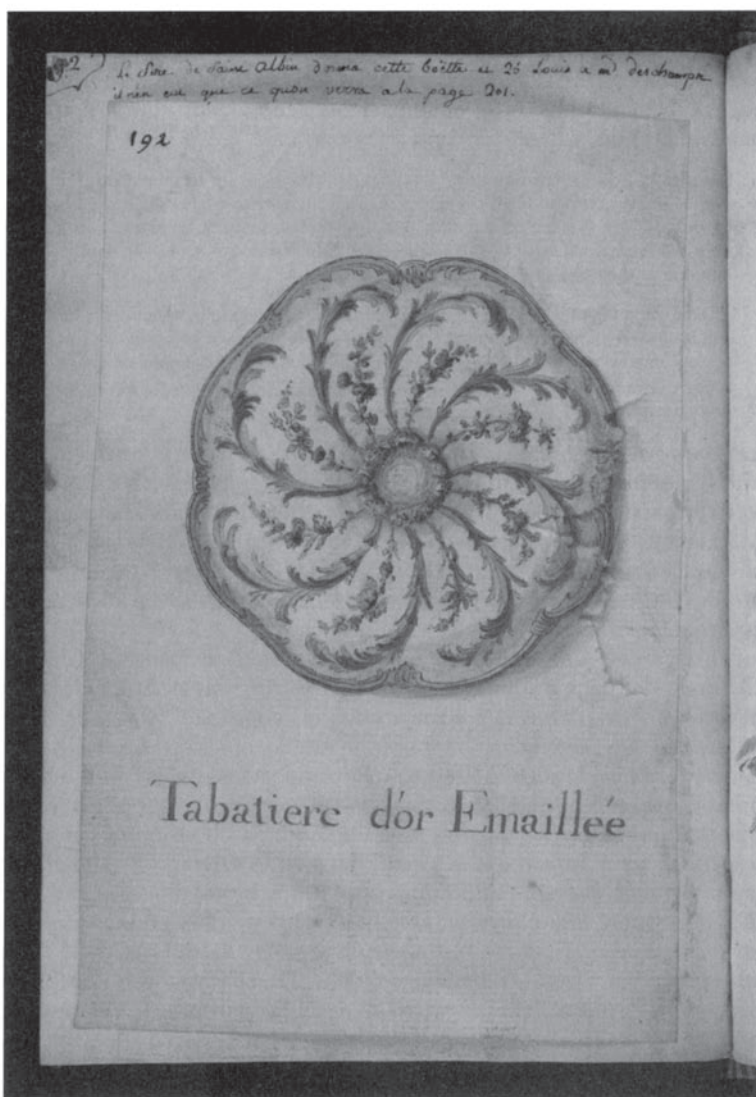


Figure 2 (Colour online) Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Tabatiere d'or Emaillee*, c. 1740 – c. 1775; watercolour, ink and graphite on paper; 187 × 132 mm; Waddesdon, The Rothschild Collection (The National Trust); acc. no. 675,192. Imaging Services Bodleian Library © The National Trust, Waddesdon Manor.

Madame Marie-Anne Deschamps, née Pagès, was an actress, a courtesan and a prostitute. Born in 1730, she was the daughter of a Parisian lady's shoemaker, but left this humble background in her early teens to launch herself into the world of prostitution. By the time of her death in 1764, songs had been written about her and gossip retailed about her, while *philosophes* had puzzled over her, police spies had kept an eye on her and moralists and cultural commentators had proved more than willing to be shocked by her. A period as dancer at the Opéra-Comique in the 1740s had led to her becoming a member of an acting troupe attached to the French army in the War of Austrian Succession. Here, first, she married a ne'er-do-well actor Deschamps. Second, in swift succession, she became the lover of the French commander, the comte de Clermont. When the comte returned to his established mistress, Madame Deschamps returned to Paris, the chorus of the Opéra, and a life of sexual adventure and social climbing. By 1754, the Paris police was identifying her as one of the two 'most dazzling whores in the whole of Paris'.⁵

The comte de Clermont was one of no fewer than five princes of the royal blood to whom the shoemaker's daughter became lover. One of them, the raddled voluptuary, the prince de Conti, was said to have performed the act of love with her no fewer than twelve times in a single night. For the rest of his life, allegedly, Conti worshipped at the shrine of the number 12, which he had embroidered to his shirts, hats and handkerchiefs, embossed on his breeches' buttons, and so on. As well as dipping into royalty, 'La Deschamps' also broke through into the world of the farmers-general, the billionnaires of the day, by allegedly spending a night with the high financier Villemur for 100 louis. But she soon moved – in the professional argot – from retail to wholesale, abandoning passing flings for establishment as a kept woman.⁶

There would be some rocky moments for Madame Deschamps over the next decade or so, notably when she was between lovers, who besides princes and financiers included old nobles and strapping young army officers with the occasional Jewish banker, foreign aristocrat, English gentleman, ambassador and archbishop thrown in. Such was the demand for the services of this 'veritable Messalina' (as a police spy called her) that she was known to break off love-making half-way through and demand

residence). See too the older G. Capon and R. Yve-Plessis, *Fille d'Opéra, vendeuse d'amour. Histoire de Mademoiselle Deschamps (1730–64)* (Paris, 1906).

⁵ Capon and Yve-Plessis, *Fille d'Opéra*, 137, 141–2.

⁶ G. Capon and R. Yve-Plessis, *La vie privée du prince de Conti, Louis-François de Bourbon (1717–76)* (Paris, 1907), 87. The account of her life given here draws on the sources cited above, n. 4. The other princes of blood besides Conti and Clermont were Orléans, La Marche and Charolais. For Villemur, see Piton, *Paris sous Louis XV*, v, 98, 390 and *passim*; and for 'retail', *ibid.*, v, 106. For the argot of Parisian prostitution, see Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs*, 212–14, 331ff.

higher payment from clients she adjudged too ugly. Her taste for female partners, however, complicated and partly compromised her reputation.⁷ This was also affected by spells of gonorrhoea, which were not brilliant for trade, and also involved the administration of a ghastly, mercury-based treatment. Spasmodically, too, her husband appeared on the scene to cramp her style, as financial leech or physical bully, and sometimes both.

In April 1760, she fell on particularly hard times.⁸ The Seven Years War was damaging luxury spending in Paris and reducing the clientele for sexual services. Deschamps decided to sell off her porcelain (coincidentally enough): Vincennes, Sèvres, Meissen, the very finest international brands. (But she kept her carriage, which was one of the most ostentatiously luxurious vehicles to be seen in Paris, as well as her diamonds.) The queues of individuals and carriages at the sale of her effects stretched out from her hôtel and down the street. People lingered to ogle and some to buy the stupendous wealth on display, ‘fruit of debauchery and prostitution’, as one irate contemporary put it, in this ‘enchanted palace’ fit for a prince (that even boasted English water-closets). Two decades later, the literary chronicler Grimm still remembered with awe this occasion inspired by ‘one of the most illustrious courtesans of the age’.⁹

The bubble burst. In 1762, with war still dragging on, Madame Deschamps, plagued by recurrent venereal disease, had fallen so deeply in debt that she fled the city for Italy to lie low. When she returned in 1763, it was incognito, sick, thin and frail, and with growths on her knees, a just reward for her vices, said the devout. In January 1764, the police reported the death of ‘La Deschamps’, ‘so notorious for her debauchery, her luxury and by the excessive price she set on her favours’.¹⁰ She was thirty-four years old. In her final illness, she was said to have turned to a life of piety and repentance. William Hogarth could not have plotted it better.

This was a career spent crossing boundaries, social and sexual, that was so extraordinary that it prompted – and prompts – serious reflection.

⁷ Capon and Yve-Plessis, *Fille d’Opéra*, 179 (Messalina); Dufort de Cheverny, *Mémoires*, ed. J. P. Guicciardi (Paris, 1990), 278 (ugly lovers); and Piton, *Paris sous Louis XV*, v, 135–6 and *passim* (lesbianism).

⁸ The outline of the narrative can be followed in police reports in *Journal des inspecteurs de M. de Sartines*, and in Charles-Simon Favart, *Mémoires et correspondance littéraire, dramatique et anecdotique* (3 vols., Paris, 1808), II, 13–18, inc. footnotes. For the early 1760s as hard times for prostitutes, see Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs*, 341, 349.

⁹ [Edmond-Jean-François Barbier], *Chronique de la Régence et du règne de Louis XV, ou Journal de Barbier* (8 vols., Paris, 1857–66), VII, 246–7; [Grimm], *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.*, ed. Maurice Tourneux (16 vols., Paris, 1877–82), XII, 312 (Sept. 1779). For another backward glance on her memory, see Pierre Manuel, *La police de Paris dévoilée* (2 vols., Paris, Year II = 1794), I, 124, II, 169.

¹⁰ Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs*, 376; Capon and Yve-Plessis, *Fille d’Opéra*, 193.

Deschamps was a 'prodigy', of whose wealth and independence any decent woman would be jealous, wrote one author. 'One of the seven wonders of the [modern] world', opined another. Women of bad morals like her, thought the Russian visitor Denis Fonvizine, covered in diamonds from head to toe, made Paris a city 'which gives nothing away to either Sodom or Gomorrah'.¹¹ And some twenty years after the death of 'la Deschamps', the writer and dramatist Louis-Sébastien Mercier (whose father, coincidentally enough, had rented rooms to her for select dinner parties) pondered on her fate less in terms of divine retribution than of the swings and roundabouts of fortune:

Who can really tell why the late Mademoiselle Deschamps reached this level of opulence which permitted her the insolent luxury of putting paste jewels around her horses' harnesses and edging her commode with English lace draft-excluders? Another girl from the Opéra dies leaving huge effects and a considerable estate. Was she more beautiful or witter than any other? No, issued from the lowest class of the people, she had in her support the favours of that ineffable destiny which raises, brings down, maintains and overthrows both ministers and whores (*ministres et catins*).¹²

As historians, we are well used to following the fates and fortunes of statesmen – Mercier's '*ministres*'. We are less habituated to doing the same with *catins*. But sex and passion are as much within our remit as historians as politics and power. In this paper, my focus will be on *catins*.

I have organised my set of Presidential Addresses around the theme of 'French Crossings', and here is an identity, an identity (or, more correctly, a suite of interrelated identities – actress, courtesan, prostitute) which contemporaries called 'libertine', and whose very essence was crossing social and sexual boundaries.¹³ Because human, sexual desire was involved, libertine identity frequently shuttled back and forth between fixed social roles and role-playing, between truth and fiction. With such

¹¹ De Chevrier, *Le Colporteur* (Paris, 1762), 97 (prodigy); Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs*, 334 (citing La Morandière: seven wonders); Denis Fonvizine, *Lettres de France (1777–8)* (reprint edn, Oxford, 1995), 127 (Sodom).

¹² Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1994), II, 17. For Mercier's father, see Piton, *Paris sous Louis XV*, 117. The premises were on the Rue Bellefonds.

¹³ There has been a revival of interest on libertinage in recent years, most of it highlighting aristocratic men. See, for example, Patrick Wald Lasowski, *L'ardeur et la galanterie* (Paris, 1986); Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris, 2000); Didier Foucault, *Histoire du libertinage des goliards au marquis de Sade* (Paris, 2007); and Olivier Blanc, *L'amour à Paris au temps de Louis XVI* (Paris, 2002). A more open approach is offered in *Libertine Enlightenment. Sex, Liberty and Licence in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Cryle and Lisa O'Connell (2004). For women, see also Olivier Blanc, *Les Libertines: plaisir et liberté au temps des Lumières* (Paris, 1997), and *Femmes et libertinages au XVIIIe siècle: ou les caprices de Cythère*, ed. Anne Richardot (Rennes, 2003). A recent return to the history of prostitution is *Prostitution in the Eighteenth Century: Sex, Commerce and Morality*, ed. Markman Ellis and Ann Lewis (2012). See esp. Ann Lewis, 'Classifying the Prostitute in Eighteenth-Century France', in *ibid.*, 17ff, for a thorough review of the range of practice in this domain.

a figure in the public imagination, one never knew where reality ended and fancy began. Finally, this is also a story in which, as Mercier devined, fate takes a role. There was much that was unpredictable and arbitrary about these crossings.

My first published article, in *History Workshop Journal*, was on prostitution in eighteenth-century Montpellier.¹⁴ This was in 1978, a moment when the author of any article on the history of women felt that she or he was making a political statement and putting in place a contribution to a meta-narrative that had been hidden from History with a capital H.¹⁵ A journal for socialist and feminist historians as *History Workshop* proclaimed itself seemed the obvious place. My main area of expertise at that time was the French Revolution. Yet if I look now at the textbooks on the Revolution that I used and that I recommended to my students at that time, there was simply no mention at all of the key themes of women's history. If women were even mentioned in textbooks on the French Revolution, it was Marie-Antoinette and Charlotte Corday who predominated (with the occasional walk-on part given to Madame Defarge, Charles Dickens's fictional *tricoteuse* from *A Tale of Two Cities*).

Go now to the textbooks, and things are very different. Now, the role that women played in the early stirrings of modern feminism in the Revolutionary decade is freely acknowledged. Now, no textbook worth its salt could *not* mention the figures most prominent in this development, sisters of England's Mary Wollstonecraft (author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)): Olympe de Gouges, author of the *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791), which sought to extend to women the rights outlined in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man. Or Etta Palm, the Dutch feminist, author, activist and sometime diplomatic spy. Or Théroigne de Méricourt, frenzied cross-dressing street-fighter. Or Claire Lacombe, founder of the shortlived Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, arguably the first feminist political club in world history.¹⁶

¹⁴ Colin Jones, 'Prostitution and the Ruling Class in Eighteenth-Century Montpellier', *History Workshop*, 6 (1978), 7–28.

¹⁵ Representative of this moment in the feminist history of women were works with titles like Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Female Oppression* (1974), and *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, MA, 1977). Fundamental, in terms of the French Revolution, was Olwen Hufton, 'Women in Revolution, 1789–96', *Past and Present*, 53 (1971), 90–108. For an overview of Hufton's feminist history, see Colin Jones, 'Olwen Hufton's "Poor", Richard Cobb's "People" and Notions of the *Longue Durée* in French Revolutionary Historiography', in *The Art of Survival: Gender and History in Europe, 1450–2000*, ed. Ruth Harris and Lyndal Roper, Past and Present Supplement 1 (Oxford, 2006), 78–103. Another work of this earlier generation is *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–95*, ed. Darleen G. Levy, Harriet B. Applewhite and Mary D. Johnson (Urbana, 1979).

¹⁶ Olivier Blanc, *Marie-Olympe de Gouges, une humaniste à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2003); Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (1996), focused on