The Darnton debate

books and revolution in the eighteenth century

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Ever since Professor Robert Darnton aroused the interest of all Enlightenment scholars with the publication of ‘The High Enlightenment and the low-life literature in pre-revolutionary France’ in 1971, he has been in the forefront of debate about that period and the French Revolution which followed it. His work has long been an indispensable study for all those who ponder on the nature and evolution of these great movements.

By the mid 1990s, however, it was apparent that Darnton’s far-reaching conclusions on the relationship of the Enlightenment to the Revolution, together with his historical accounts of printed works and the mentalités of the eighteenth century, merited a comprehensive debate on his whole œuvre. The present collection sparks off that debate. The contributors to this volume were invited freely to address any particular aspect of Robert Darnton’s researches or to discuss the whole trust of his thinking about the past. Darnton readily agreed to this proposal, encouraging the editor to send invitations to long-standing critics just as much as to more sympathetic readers.

The essays collected here respond to the original request, in diverse ways. Taking up a whole spectrum of positions about Darnton’s work, they attempt an answer based on deep reflection or assiduous source-research or both.

In a coda to the volume Robert Darnton responds robustly to the various readings of his work. In places he seeks to rescue it from what he considers to be false interpretations and to set the record straight. But his essay is not just a rebuttal. It moves the debate on, bringing new insights and information not previously published. His conclusion are as flexible open-ended as one could wish, and in line with which they have been richly plumbed in his writings.

The threads running through the various essays are drawn together by a comprehensive
List of illustrations

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Works by Robert Darnton cited in this volume

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Times Literary Supplement

Darnton at his best [...] adds new and often vivid evidence to support arguments he has
advanced before. The book is a Festschrift...; a commentary on the impact on his chosen field of an original mind and a distinguished stylist.

Modern language review

This excellently conceived volume reflects the centrality of Darnton’s achievement to the historical orientation of eighteenth-century scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century by bringing together the views of twelve distinguished specialists. The collection concludes with a reaction to the debate by Darnton himself. Not all the contributors are pro-Darnton enthusiasts, and the volume is far more than just a tribute to the work of a great scholar. It offers thoughtful reflections on, and a vigorous critical engagement with, the way Darnton addresses the past.