

Addressing Sovereignty:
A Case of Epistolary Politics in Eighteenth-Century France

[DRAFT]

The scene of the dead or silent king allows another scene to appear, this one equally crucial for the status of the discourse of historical study: that of a living person who speaks too much, who speaks incorrectly, out of place, and outside the truth. The seriousness of the speech of historical study is challenged by this blind and blinding speech.

Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History*, 24

In March 1748, Geneviève Gravelle, a 50-ish unmarried woman, was confined to the Paris monastery of Madeleine-de-la-Flèche by a *lettre de cachet*.¹ The royal order was issued at the request of the Paris de Monmartel, financier to the court of Louis XV and godfather to the king's mistress, Mme de Pompadour. Gravelle had played a role in negotiating Monmartel's 1746 marriage to the impoverished noblewoman Mlle de Bethune, and apparently her ongoing demands for money for her match-making services had become an embarrassment if not a liability to the couple. Perhaps the Monmartels' intention in requesting the *lettre de cachet* was to chasten Gravelle's behavior through a temporary detention that would serve as a warning against pursuing such claims in the future. Or perhaps they intended to make her disappear permanently, confined in relative comfort to a religious community not so very different from the convents where she had lived most of her adult life and where she had originally met and befriended fellow pensioner Mlle de Bethune.

¹ In reconstructing Gravelle's story I have drawn from Archives de la Bastille (AB) 11,769 (prison dossier of Geneviève Gravelle); AB 11,785 (prisoners "G": miscellaneous documents); AB 12,498 and 12,493 (letters of Nicolas René Berryer [Lieutenant-Général de la Police] 1753 and 1757), and *Archives de la Bastille: documents inédits recueillis et publiés par François Ravaisson*, ed. François Ravaisson-Mollien (Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, 1884-1904), vol. 16. Her imprisonment and its circumstances are discussed briefly in Robert Dubois-Corneau, *Paris de Monmartel, Banquier de la Cour* (Paris: Librairie Fontaine, 1917):184-190. All translations from the French are mine unless otherwise noted.

Whatever the case, the Monmartels intentions were frustrated: both Gravelle's disciplining and her disappearance proved difficult.

Almost immediately after being detained Gravelle began writing letters and memoirs decrying the injustice of her situation. Passed by hand and deposited at the post by sympathetic or bribed residents of the monastery, her narratives of aristocratic abuse of royal authority and the subsequent disregard for her "good rights" (*bon droit*) began circulating in Paris. An exasperated Monmartel sent police chief Berryer letters of complaint, which resulted in a second *lettre de cachet* ordering her transfer to the more closely policed Hôpital des Penitents, outside the capital in Angers. The move proved ineffective. Letters and memoirs addressed to the king, members of the nobility and the provincial parlements, and lawyers in Paris continued to surface over the next two years; a third *lettre de cachet* was requested and issued, this time ordering her transfer to the Bastille. Gravelle's confinement in the château reserved for political prisoners seems to have brought an end to her epistolary outbursts; records indicate that overcrowding at the Bastille prompted a fourth *lettre de cachet* ordering her transfer to Vincennes two years later. Her death at that prison in 1760 was reported to Monmartel, whose response has a hint of the self-defensive: "I assure you," he wrote to the new police chief Sartine, "that she was at the least a very bad subject (*un très mauvais sujet*)."²

Geneviève Gravelle was, in Rancière's words, a living person who spoke too much, who spoke incorrectly, out of place, and outside the truth. The Bastille archives conserve this "excess of words"³ in a prisoner dossier that contains Monmartel's grievances and requests, increasingly desperate pleas from the religious authorities charged with her care, disavowals of her conduct sent to state officials by her relatives, administrative missives recounting behaviors observed and actions taken, and of course, Gravelle's own reckless prose: a large pile of rag paper overrun with scrawled and scratched out words, the "blind and blinding speech" of a bad subject who would not, perhaps could not, shut up. How do we read Gravelle's writings today, if indeed, we read them at all? Rancière highlights the challenges they pose to the writing of history, where orderly, explanatory accounts of the past cannot accord

² Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille*, vol. 16: 207.

³ This is the title of Chapter Three in *The Names of History*, from which my epigram is taken.

world-remaking power to such spontaneous, unruly, and difficult to document (so perhaps, “statistically insignificant”) speech. The gap thus opened—between the words uttered [written] by historical subjects and the historical event itself—proves “suicidal,” he insists, to the project of history, insofar as the narrative crafting of the past cannot or does not avail itself of the very stuff of meaning, namely, the eventful actors’ words.⁴ In their stead the historian turns to aggregation (through Marxist categories of social class, for example, or through demographic data painstakingly collected and regressed by *Annales*-style analysts) to fashion an event now shorn of the person and the practice of a meaning-making agent. As a result, he writes, history is “sacrificed” to historiography, which in its scientific and managerial aspirations becomes “a division of political science.”⁵

Rancière’s challenging (because often allusively leveled) charge against such social scientific pretensions is simultaneously methodological (by renouncing literary interpretation and production, statistical and structural approaches cannot attend to the “proper” subjects of history), aesthetic (the numerical and categorical representation of those subjects denies—or rather attempts to deny—the “poetics of [historical] knowledge” that is at once an art of creation and retrieval), and political (scientific historiography perforce diminishes and disfigures both “the poor” as historical actors and the meaningfulness of the events they would enact). There is, to be sure, a homologous charge one might level against political scientific inquiry, even as its disciplinary investments in historical study per se are decidedly circumscribed. But my present interest is not to leverage Rancière for the purposes of mounting that critique (itself a species of eternal return within the discipline) but to use his framing of an “excess of words” and the erasure of “the poor” as provocations to thinking about how and why political *theoretical* inquiry might take up the writings of obscure and in the end inefficacious historical subjects like Gravelle.⁶

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1992]): 35.

⁵ *The Names of History*, 41.

⁶ See also Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Ranciere,” *Diacritics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2000): 113-126

While undeniably a division of political science, political theory remains a (relatively) safe haven for the literarily inclined, as well as for those who take their object of study to be the forms that political action can take. Central to those preoccupations is what Patchen Markell has termed the “impropriety of action,” suggesting both improper and uncontainable effects: how action will be experienced—by the actor and her (intended and unintended) audience—cannot be determined in advance and cannot be controlled as the experience unfolds.⁷ Such impropriety threatens tidy explanatory narratives and predictive claims, even as it preserves the possibility of understanding change. My interest in Gravelle’s impropriety concerns how they might enable us to see (if not to hear) changes in political speech and communication in pre-Revolutionary France: not quite how supplicating subjects became insisting citizens, but how “illegitimate speakers” entered dialogues where they did not belong. So my interpretive concerns are only indirectly (*pace* Rancière) “historical”—whether or how, for example, she gives “voice” to a mid-century surge in anti-monarchical sentiment, given her in all probability minimal awareness of the religious, political, and economic upheavals to which historians attribute that surge.⁸ I mean to read letters by and about Gravelle as an event, one in which a “bad subject” of the *ancien régime* sought audibility, and my interpretive investment is to understand how such political voices were crafted and how they might be received, by would-be interlocutors in eighteenth-century France and by us today.

At stake are thus the literary-poetic dimensions of political speech and the material contexts (objects, institutions) of its production. Exploring those dimensions means attending to rhetorical practices: how writers engage (challenge, seduce, move, enrage, persuade, fail to persuade, etc.) their readers. It likewise requires attention to the scribal and print cultural resources—novels, newspapers, and epistolary texts, for example—which both fed and were fueled by the everyday writing and reading

⁷ Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003): 63–64.

⁸ See, for example, Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

practices of an increasingly literate French public.⁹ And while the question of how such resources circulate is relevant to understanding any rhetorical practice, the case of epistolary “speech” makes that question especially pressing: enabled and surveilled by the absolutist state through its increasingly efficient and far-flung postal network, *ancien régime* letter-writers were in some sense always at risk of addressing the king. In short, the “voices” forged in these networks of post and print were intrinsically political, a fact too easily obscured by the value placed on the letter’s promise of intimacy and self-revelation.¹⁰ That my case concerns an “illegitimate speaker”—one speaking “out of place [and] outside the truth”—suggests it might illuminate the distinctively epistolary strategies through which political powerlessness was “voiced” and thus was refused.

As Rancière’s reference to “blind and blinding” speech suggests, the challenges to seeing Gravelle’s “voice” are multiple. The hundreds of pages of her letters and memoirs weave in and out of legibility and grammaticality. Always orthographically challenged, her writings show progressive syntactic and semantic disarray over the course of her twelve-year imprisonment.¹¹ The problem was in part the conditions under which she wrote. “Perhaps you’ll have trouble reading these [text indecipherable] details,” she observes in one letter, “as I’ve hardly the leisure to finish or think my words; in such a situation, one must write voluminously.”¹² Or again: “I write by the light of the moon with all the tranquility of a woman who sees fire and

⁹ Furet and Ozouf calculate an increase in men’s rate of literacy over the course of the eighteenth-century, from 29% to 47% and in women’s, from 14% to 27%; see Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jule Ferry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 [1977]): 26. There is of course much debate about how best to determine these rates.

¹⁰ See, for example, Habermas’s representation of the letter’s self-expressive power—a practice of reading and writing wherein the individual “unfolded himself in his subjectivity;” Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989): 48.

¹¹ On women’s “bad” spelling, see Dena Goodman, “L’ortografe des Dames: Gender and Language in the Old Regime,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2002): 191-223

¹² AB 11,769, f. 118 [v]. I use various formulations to signal challenges as well as impasses in translating (reading) Gravelle’s writing. “Text indecipherable” refers to my inability to make sense of the words as a result of how they appear on the page (e.g., smudged text; illegible handwriting). “Text missing” refers to the absence of words (e.g., ripped, torn pages, or missing pages; incomplete sentences that run off the page). I likewise risk the irritation of readers with no knowledge of French, by including more of the original than is customary; I do so to expose especially problematic translation choices.

robbers in the four corners of her house.”¹³ She knew she was difficult to hear: likening her prose to the pronouncements of “the prophet Ezekiel, obscure,” Gravelle asked repeatedly for permission to revise her writings, to “clean them up,” to retain a lawyer to redraft them, and to have them printed for easier reading.¹⁴ Better yet, as she explained in a letter to Louis XV, would be to forego epistolary mediation altogether and have a face-to-face meeting with her accusers “at the feet of your throne” so they might each present their version of the facts.¹⁵ As it was, her stylistic as well as physical limitations cramped dialogic possibilities: “My writings are catechisms of call and response; I feel it (*je le sent*) and also feel that I don’t know otherwise/more (*que je n’en say pas davantage*).¹⁶ By and large, her appeals went unanswered: those who received her letters typically forwarded them to the police, often with commentary characterizing her as “crazed” or “hot-headed” (*cerveau brulé*).¹⁷

But Gravelle wasn’t unintelligible. Monmartel’s growing concern about her success in circulating her writings is itself indicative of a risk that she might be comprehended. Likewise, several recipients of her letters responded to her directly, acknowledging her plight. One respondent returned her letters, together with a note expressing concern that they might appear “prejudicial” and thus should be burned: “take recourse in God, ask from him what you are denied by men.”¹⁸ But at least one letter among the many she sent to state officials seems to have hit its mark, judging from the following:

Paris, November 9, 1750

I request, Monsieur, that you send me word if you have knowledge of an order from the king, conveyed in December of last year, as a result of which Mlle Geneviève Gravelle was taken to the house of Penitent girls [*maison des filles Penitentes*] in the town of Angers, where she remains. And in that case, please be so kind as to instruct me on the motives that prompted this order. No one can be, with more sincerity and firm attachment than I am, Monsieur,

¹³ Ibid., f. 131 [v]

¹⁴ Ibid., f. 89 [v], 100

¹⁵ Ibid., f. 37 [v]

¹⁶ Ibid., f. 125 [v]

¹⁷ Ibid., f. 104

¹⁸ Ibid., f. 110

Your very humble and very obedient servant,

Joly de Fleury¹⁹

While I found no indications of whether this inquiry from a member of the illustrious *noblesse de robe* family received a response, its date corresponds to a particularly fertile period in Gravelle's illicit epistolarity. Throughout the fall of 1750, she wrote and successfully passed out of the Hôpital large stacks of letters in which she narrated her "abduction," how the Monmartel "cabal" was behind this injustice, and her multiple attempts to alert the king to their cynical manipulation of his good will. Included with these narratives was a letter instructing their recipient—a pensioner at one of Gravelle's former homes, the monastery of St. Clare—to whom they should be forwarded (a long list of nobles and judicial officials that included Joly de Fleury), how (by post, messenger, etc.), and when (at different postal offices, on different days, etc.). A large number of these writings were sent first to M. des Orgeries, president of a judicial tribunal in Alençon and apparently a distant relative of Gravelle's, who duly forwarded them to the Paris police. (Not, however, before receiving a letter from Berryer requesting that he do so: "Having been informed that Geneviève Gravelle, detained by *lettre de cachet* at Angers, has addressed you two packets of defamatory libels against various persons who merit consideration, [I] should warn you that the intention of the king was to prohibit her from all writing; she has thus formally disobeyed his Majesty's order, of which she has been sufficiently notified since her detainment. I've been told that she sent them to you with a request that you take them to St Clare and have 30 copies printed, something you surely have not done. I am confident than it won't be any trouble to return these works to obscurity (*aux tenebres*), at issue being the citizens' tranquility."²⁰) Apparently when Joly de Fleury received his letter, he was spurred to action of a different sort.

I should not, of course, make too much of what appears to be Gravelle's success on this score. Neither should I spend any more time attempting to retrace the path taken by letters she sent to a newsmonger in Paris, the bookseller M. David, who

¹⁹ Ibid., f. 18. The author is almost certainly Joseph Omer Joly de Fleury, at the time president of the Paris parlement, perhaps best known today for his persistent opposition to *philosophie* publications. (Unlikely but not impossible: the author is his brother Jean-François Joly de Fleury, Intendant for Dijon.

²⁰ Ibid., f. 107

accepted interesting anecdotes and stories from the public for possible inclusion in the various *gazettes d'Hollande*.²¹ Published in Amsterdam, Leyde, Rotterdam, and other Dutch cities, these minimally censored newssheets were targeted largely at a French readership; among their regular subscribers was at least one state ministry.²² For my purposes, as salient as whether Gravelle's writings reached their destinations—social and political elites of the *ancien régime*, the bookseller David, the printers in Holland—is her announced intention to address the French people and the French state through epistolary networks, international in scope, that could transmit her poorly spelled, obsessively repeated, syntax-mangling words from the written to the “cleaned up” printed text.

So here was one strategy for refusing political powerlessness, adopted after two years of attempts to address the king, juridical officials, and Paris and Mme de Monmartel (or as Gravelle always refers to her, “*Mlle de Bethune presently de Monmartel*”) directly. As her opportunities to speak truth to power were closed off (and as a result, her chances of getting any sort of hearing let alone response from power dwindled), she turned to address anyone and everyone who might hear. Her vision, as she expressed it in the letter of instruction to her former friend at St. Clare's, was that her cascade of missives—appearing simultaneously in the cafés and bookstores of Paris and in the hands and homes of nobles and state officials in the capital, Versailles, and major provincial cities—would “by print and by post, strike like a thunder bolt.”²³ While this particular effort to unleash her “excess of words” appears to have been ineffective, the following year Monmartel and Berryer moved quickly to obtain a *lettre de cachet* ordering Gravelle's transfer to the Bastille after she mounted another letter-writing campaign, this time exclusively targeted at “Seigneurs of the Great Chamber,” members of the high court of the Paris parlement who heard and decided matters of both civil and criminal law.²⁴ From “throwing [herself] at the throne of equity” in letters to the king and before the public, Gravelle

²¹ Ibid., f. 101 [v]; Eugen Hatın, *Les Gazettes de Hollande et la presse clandestine* (Paris: Rene Pincebourde, ed. Librairie Richelieu, 1865): 45-46.

²² Anne-Marie Enaux et Pierre Rétat, “La *Gazette d'Amersterdam*, Journal de Référence: la Collection du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères,” in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 40 (1993): 152-169.

²³ AB 11,769, f. 99 [v]

²⁴ Ibid., f. 130, 137 [v], 142

moved to “throw [herself] in spirit (*en esprit*) at the feet of the court to implore that justice be made of injustice.”²⁵

The existence of epistolary networks and their capacity to convey the words of “illegitimate speakers” to sites of power and publicity were thus central to Gravelle’s efforts to create and to throw her political voice. And while the impediments to its reception were multiple—the very impropriety of her actions being as significant on this score as was the diligence of the Paris police or her limited access to paper and willing accomplices—any attempt at transmission could begin only after an enactment of authorial power. In other words, Gravelle needed first to claim the entitlement or freedom to initiate dialogue with those who were decidedly not her social or political equals. No doubt feelings of desperation and righteousness (they seem to emanate from her pages) spurred her on: a “well born maiden,” as she typically described herself, should expect the care of the king and the protection of parlement, as well as the public’s sympathy and indignation. But seeing such acts of self-authorship as a predictable response to the galvanizing experience of suffering injustice fails not only to grapple with how suffering becomes intelligible *as* an injustice, but also to understand “voice” as a precarious, often improprietous, and multiply mediated event. Seen from a different perspective, the problem is a tendency to naturalize reading and writing practices rather than parsing them as constitutively political acts. By constitutive I mean to suggest they serve not only to convey or affect political ideas, positions, identities, or arguments—a medium, so to say, for representing a politics unfolding elsewhere and otherwise (in “live” voices, “real” agents and their principals, or “actual” institutions and governmental processes)—but rather that they are both site for and a form of political (inter)action.

I would suggest that for political theorists, this claim is both obvious and obscure. Obvious inasmuch as a subfield within political science organized by its relationship to a canon of “great books” has clearly invested heavily in the political relevance of writing and reading and in the objects—texts, informed citizens, public spheres—that they spawn. Obscure inasmuch as the presumptively transhistorical relevance of “great books” tends more often than not to sever the meaningfulness of

²⁵ Ibid., f. 77 [v], 130 [v]

the text from the writing or reading *practices* that produced it. It's not that political theory has embraced Barthes' notion that "the author is dead": on the contrary, author fetishism (what my colleague Don Herzog has characterized as our necrophilia) remains a distinct pleasure (or perversion) of the subfield. It's rather than our capacity or perhaps willingness to treat rhetorical practice as political is tightly circumscribed, hemmed in on the one side by the need to untether texts from the constraints of historical context and on the other by a very old battle between philosophers and rhetoricians.²⁶

While it is obviously my intention that these long-standing and lofty preoccupations of political theory hover in view, it is fortunately well beyond the scope of this paper to explore them in any detail. Instead I will return to the political writer Gravelle and to my claim that her initiating acts of self-authorship—her performances of authorial power—demand and reward interrogation. The practice of letter writing was of course widespread in eighteenth-century France and not limited to the elite. (Or to the literate: public writers, hired to compose everything from love letters to formal petitions, could always be found in their open-air stalls in a corner of Paris's Saints-Innocents cemetery.²⁷) So too there was a brisk business throughout the century in *secrétaries* (letter-writing manuals), both in expensive, leather-bound editions and in a cheap, mass-produced form available through the *Bibliothèque Bleue*. In addition to general advice on how to compose oneself in the "*stile épistolaire*," these manuals included sample letters, lists of proper titles of address, and advice on the finer points of accepted pagination and sealing techniques (e.g., "All letters to the King must be in *folio*;" "only members of religious orders may use bread as a *cachet*, as a sign of their poverty and simplicity"²⁸). And among the many collected correspondences by women and men published or reprinted during the

²⁶ This very quick gloss risks an injustice to the so-called "Cambridge historicist school," associated with the work of Quentin Skinner (and others). The theoretical and historical investments as well as interpretive protocols that distinguish my approach from theirs might need some sustained discussion.

²⁷ See Christine Métayer, *Au Tombeau des Secrets: Les Écrivains Publics du Paris populaire et Cimetière des Saints-Innocents, XVIe–XVIIIe siècles*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

²⁸ *Le Nouveau Secrétaire de la Cour ou lettres familières sur toutre sorts de sujets avec des reponse*, etc. (1744): 417, 444

century, Mme de Sévigné's arguably solidified the popular image of the letter writer as a feminine figure.

So Gravelle's epistolary predilections are not in and of themselves surprising. Certainly the stacks of letters that were (following standard procedure) seized along with her person in 1748 and subsequently remained in her possession until her death attest to her long-standing habits on this score. More intriguing is her move to establish correspondence with the king. On the one hand, such a move cannot be taken as a patently outrageous act of overreach, inasmuch as absolutist ideology held that every subject could in principle supplicate the king for redress. Likewise, the king's presence in epistolary circuits is recognized in letter writing manuals, e.g., in the *Nouveau Secrétaire's* instruction, quoted above, to use a full (rather than multiply folded) sheet of paper when writing to him. No doubt his inclusion in this and other manuals was owing to the close historical and generic ties between French letter-writing and absolutism: as Janet Altman has shown, the majority of eighteenth-century *secrétaires* were reissues of seventeenth-century courtly manuals in which the goal of epistolary training remained mastery in "the art of pleasing rulers."²⁹ And indeed, the *Nouveau Secrétaire* emphasized the highly restricted propriety of addressing the king (as well as the general inadvisability of writing letters to princes of the blood, emperors, and queens). Still, the king's persistent appearance in this and other *secrétaires*—as both addressee and addresser (e.g., "only the King signs his letters with his proper name"³⁰)—reiterates his ongoing presence in the network.

On the other hand, Gravelle's epistolary hails to Louis XV are singularly out of place inasmuch as they are composed as responses to "her" *lettre de cachet*.³¹ Such rhetorical self-positioning remains "outside the truth" in interesting ways. Consider that letter writing—in the form of *lettres patentes* and *lettres de cachet*—was a crucial means of conducting rule in *ancien régime* France. The former, issued by the king in

²⁹ Altman, quoting Richelet (1689), "Women's Letters in the Public Sphere," in Goodman and Goldsmith (1995); see also Altman, "Teaching the 'People' to Write: The Formation of Popular Civic Identity in the French Letter Manual."

³⁰ *Le Nouveau Secrétaire*, 491.

³¹ Very rarely *lettre de cachet* ordering detention were addressed to the person to be detained, ordering them, for example, to appear at a particular prison on a particular date and submit themselves to the governor's authority. The order to detain Gravelle was addressed to the Paris police.

consultation with his council, were always open and always bore the authenticating imprimatur of the “great seal of France.” Addressed to *parlement* for acceptance by its members, the *lettre patente* once registered became law applicable across the realm. *Lettres de cachet*, by contrast, were always closed and always with the king’s personal seal, the *sigillum secreti* or simply *le cachet*. Intended for a particular addressee and thus a “private” enactment of the king’s will, they had by mid century become a potent symbol of arbitrary rule.³² By misunderstanding that “her” *lettre de cachet* might anticipate or simply open the space for a response, Gravelle refashioned as a dialogic exchange what was in fact an (increasingly reviled) act of sovereign power.

Perhaps in every epoch, the exercise of sovereignty entails authorial acts that posture mastery over words and thus surety apropos their performative force. So perhaps where sovereignty inheres in a single person, the coincidence of his (or her) words and ruling power only amplifies the significance of authorship as a political practice. But when challenges to such singular sovereignty (even or especially when not quite viewed by their initiators as such) also take authorial form, political analysis—inquiries into how state power is maintained, disrupted, and on occasion demolished—might need to proceed through literary analysis. Otherwise put, examination of the rhetorical, poetic, and generic dimensions of speech acts enables us to understand better the politics of French absolutism and of its demise. To anticipate my conclusion in overly bald (and bold) terms: *ancien régime* sovereignty had a genre—epistolarity—and its radical reconfiguration was enacted in part through those generic practices, not infrequently by “illegitimate speakers” attempting to forge voices that the king and the public could hear.

My reference to radical reconfiguration is intended to signal the important continuities that link together monarchical and republican notions of state power. Central to these continuities is what might be called the generalization of absolutist sovereignty: the presumption of self-authorial power characteristic of monarchical rule is less attacked and dismantled than it is appropriated and redeployed over the

³² See Brian Strayer, *Lettres de cachet and Social Order in the Ancien Régime, 1659-1789* (Lang, ???):1 and Lamoignon de Malesherbes, “Mémoires sur les Ordres du Roi,” A.N., A.P. 263 (162MI 13).

course of the century, culminating in its Revolutionary reconfiguration as the essential quality of “the people.” So too the decidedly less than absolute quality of French absolutism—the in reality fragmented, conditional, and even precarious aspects of kingly rule—are reproduced at the core of republican sovereignty and indeed, in any claim to power dependent on the mastery of self-authorial practice. And while these broadly drawn characteristics of sovereignty have been identified and explored from multiple perspectives—both by historians and political theorists—a simultaneously literary and material analysis of enactments of sovereign power can illuminate them in new ways.

[Workshop readers: this is as far as I’ve gotten. I’m not sure whether at this point to unpack and develop further my claim about authorship as a site/form of sovereign power or whether to begin focusing directly on some sample letters from Gravelle’s dossier. I tend to think I’ve been going on too long without getting deeply into the “texts,” given that they’re where all the action is (so I’m claiming). But the to some extent “core” claim I want to make—about sovereign power taking authorial forms and what the implications of that are for understandings of republicanism—might need to be more fully front-loaded. In so doing I’d return to Patchen Markell’s *Bound by Recognition* to take up his discussion of “sovereign selves,” which on his reading sustain problematic dimensions of identity claims and the politics of recognition those claims spawn. I’d do in part to assuage my own hesitations about using sovereignty in too loose or “merely” metaphoric ways, e.g., one risks losing sight of sovereignty as a property of states and as a characterization of their power when it’s used to characterize modern subjects’ sense of their own self-definitional powers. But in fact, I’m to some extent trying to retrace that “merely” metaphoric usage as rooted in historical, political, and literary events of the “long” eighteenth century (the one that runs from about 1650 to the mid 1800’s...).

Which leads me to.... any further elaboration at this point (of the notion of authorial sovereignty) would probably need to take up Foucault’s “What is an Author?”; but treating that argument with the necessary care risks further dissipation and delay re the force of Gravelle’s writings.

In terms of readings of Gravelle's letters, my plan is to show two different sorts of practices going on. The first concerns her novelistic narrative style: the voice she crafts is that of an epistolary novel heroine, using all the tropes and plot twists of the virtuous maiden wronged, aristocratic malfeasance (always, as in the vast majority of French epistolary novels, tinged with accusations of libertinage), and the subsequent "hail" to a father-protector who can save her. [NB: *Pamela* (Richardson) was published in 1740 and translated into French in 1742; it was an immediate bestseller.] Lots to say about that, but one point of possible interest is how my reading intersects with and remains at odds with Lynn Hunt's recent argument (*Inventing Human Rights*, 2007) about the cultural force of the epistolary novel on political imagination: she argues that people "learned" to think in universalistic terms about dignity, security, etc. by being drawn into stories of often "common" women suffering and expressing that suffering in terms that touched readers hearts, then subsequently their heads. Gravelle seems precisely to pursue such readerly affects and responses, but 1) she can't quite maintain the pose: she'll break off in the middle of some dramatic account of her vulnerability to vent outrage at her material conditions, using plenty of "street" vulgarities ("I'm left here to wallow in the shit and the snot while Mlle Bethune indulges in luxuries"); so perhaps 2) Hunt underplays the importance of the *fictional* status of suffering in developing a political value: the reality of women's (and other illegitimate speakers') impropriety anger can engender a different response.

The second sort of practice concerns how she deploys political and juridical language—and the different ways in which she does so when writing to the king v. the police v. judges v. "the public." Two examples: in writing the king and various nobles, she draws regularly on biblical stories in which political injustice figures prominently. A good Christian subject of a good Christian king (characterizations that recur in her letters), she uses biblical imagery to evoke the consequences of nefarious rule, and in so doing, redirects her Sovereign to the "original" sovereign (God) who retains power over both of them. In writing to the police and judges, she regularly insists that proper procedures aren't being followed, that her rights are being violated; she demands to confront her accusers and to be put on trial and have an open airing of the charges against her (of which, of course, there were none: she's in prison because

the king said so, not because she's violated any laws). Here her rhetorical self-positioning comes very close to the juridical subject, one defined by rights, legal procedures, and the state's "interpellative" power to mete out justice.

How I'm going to tie this altogether to conclude is a bit of a mystery at this point. But I have some ideas I can share, or not, when we meet.

Finally, because I never got to the actual readings of her letters, I cut and paste below some samples.]

1) from f. 36-37 (Sept 1750; letter to Louis VX)

Sire:

It is at the throne of justice and equity that oppressed innocence finds refuge. Some one is abusing your authority and your trust to bring about the darkest injustices. M and Mme de Monmartel and the Marquis de Bethune have given me *cruel* proof of it, helped by M. Berryer, Lt of the Paris police.

It is to the feet of your majesty that a miserable in chains dares to speak [*s'adresser*]. I have been held for close to three years in les *maisons de force* without knowing the crime of which I am accused. If I recognized myself [*me reconnaisais*] to be guilty, I would accept the loss of my goods and my liberty without a murmur. But since birth I've recognized myself to be criminal only of a heart too tender and too inclined to please my friends.

[...]

Mlle Bethune presently de Monmatel can provide sincere testimony/witness [to the] number of years I served her as a mother, sacrificing my health, my fortune, for hers and I believe that she is the sole author of my current woes. This is how she intends to repay the sum she owed me before her marriage and which I have asked for and for which she [having acquired a "lack of truth"] has substituted lies and obtained a *lettre de cachet* from your majesty under false pretenses (*expose*). Thus she repays the most sincere friendship with the most hateful/odious ingratitude.

[...]

It is the kindness of your heart SIRE on which I call. Give me judges and make it so that I will die if I have committed a crime. Death is gentle/soft [*doux*] in my position: it makes me see all events/circumstances with the same eye; it makes me say to your majesty you [elle] can't avoid this without making the whole earth tremble [by] ordering that I be transferred to a convent in Paris suited for well-born persons like myself, such that I be permitted to retain my rights vis-à-vis Mme de Monmartel and accomplishes. They have treated me like a criminal; I request the privilege [*privilege*] of a trial that will decide my guilt or innocence.

God does not prohibit the paths of justice as a means of upholding the honor of his reputation when it is attacked: it is man's only good. [He has given it only that it will be conserved/maintained. I request you majesty with all respect that faith be carried out [*l'execution de la foi*].

It orders that all accused will be interrogated on the facts and *articles*, that the accused be able to [intervene in order to] respond to their accusers, either to trip them up [*les confondre*] in their injustices or to be so tripped up themselves, that no homme will be condemned without first being heard. If your majesty does not uphold the [*sa*] law, if you permit *credit* [privilege] to annul it, if crime is unpunished, if justice is refused *au bon droit*, if vice locks up virtue, will the crown remain safe? Who will uphold the state and religion? What will become of your parlement, that well of science, of justice, the protector of the widow and the orphan, the force [*appui*] of *bon droit* that puts my own before your eyes? There is, Sire, an easy way [*un chemin court*]: if your majesty would agree [*veux bien*] to order M and Mme de Monmartel, Marquis and Marquise de Bethune, M d'Argenson, and Berryer, all together with myself, at the feet of your throne, on the day indicated by your majesty, to talk and discuss there the facts/events that authorized them to lead me over the past three years from prison to prison, galley to galley, from *maison de force* to *maison de force*. And I, Sire, will prove the truth of what I write...

2) from f. 41 [v] (January 1749, letter to Police Chief Berryer)

I cry vengeance to God and men, for the return of my honor and reputation...You'd introduce the inquisition into France...I know you've stolen letters de cachets from the king..

God is too just to leave you unpunished and don't doubt that your fall will be as swift as your elevation...just like Pharaoh's...

Tremble, Berrier, you [*tu*] will not perish on the red sea like he did but at [text indecipherable] place suitable/fitting to your injustice. With this sentiment I call (to) myself [*je me dis*] Geneviève Gravelle, au penitente de la flacihé ce 22 janvier 1749

3) from f. 49 (Letter to the General Administrator of the Post, no date)

how can a prisoner unjustly abducted [*enlevee*] throw herself in spirit at the feet of the court to ask that justice be done...History has perhaps never heard speak of a similar affair: a well-born *demoiselle* reduced in chains/irons, for a rare misfortune, to have showered bethune presently paris de monmartel with tenderness, to have served for years as her mother, to have miraculously accomplished her marriage, to have requested my due...I request justice from the court and the execution of the law that orders that all accused can intervene to respond to their accusers, that no man will be condemned without having been heard. All laws have fairness as their goal [*objet*], and the upholding of sound orders for the conservation of people's rights [*droit des gens*] which cannot survive if crime is not punished, if one does not render justice to truth...

4) from f. 83 (in Gravelle's hand: "double of letter sent to Mme Monmartel"; no date)

I smiled when he (Berreyer) [used your letter to convey to the abbess] that my pretensions were only a figment of my imagination. It would be of great value if your orders could erase your letter but it's a piece of writing that will cost you dearly.

...Without a doubt you have destined me to walk in this galley of mud and spit on shit, for how to call otherwise this small place [small room, no curtains, a single carbon heater, half-lit, bad blankets] reduced to using my napkin for a handkerchief, getting one only every 8 days...we have changed places, Mme, you have put me where you once were.

...your injustice must be punished or there is no justice in France. GG.

5) from f. 87 (addressee unknown; no date)

It's craziness, I'm told, to think that the court would act against the Paris's. I respond that it is craziness to believe that the court would refuse its protection, its justice, to a victim with a good heart, an oppressed innocent who reaches them. These caesars, these alexanders have taken up arms for the glory of conquering all the earth, and the court takes up arms to uphold the good rights of the widow and the orphan and the unknown in chains/irons. The court has only justice for its guide: the good right [*bon droit*] is received there nude and lacking everything. Absent this thought, this hope, I would have died 10 thousand times since my detention.

...they [Monmartels] alone dissolve/crush the idea of the court, the judge, and the public. I oppose them. I want to prevail (succeed) through a proper judgment. I reject and I will reject all obscurity and all that can crush the idea of my judge and bring about perplexity.