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The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution

COLIN JONES

Q.: What is the only thing which connects all classes?

A.: The post.

Beffroy de Reigny

ON FEBRUARY 15, 1772, Antoine Clesse, surgeon-herniotomist at Metz, placed an advertisement in his local newspaper, the *Affiches des Trois-Evêchés*. He announced he had “bandages and trusses for all sorts of descents and ruptures.” He was in addition, he noted, a qualified dentist and could clean, polish, and level teeth on request.¹

This article is in memory of Richard Cobb. A version of this article has been my “road” paper for several years. I would like to thank audiences for helpful comments on the topic at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London; the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Oxford University; the French Historical Studies Conference at the University of Delaware; and the University of Exeter, San Francisco University, University of California–San Diego, University of Chicago, and University of Wisconsin–Madison. The number of individuals who have actively helped in the crafting of the present article is too large to list, but I would like to mention Andrew Aisenberg, Jonathan Barry, John Bender, Laurence Brockliss, Jack Censer, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Dena Goodman, Daniel Gordon, Lynn Hunt, Josephine McDonagh, Mary Louise Roberts, and the graduate students at Stanford University (notably Stephanie Brown, Dan Coleman, Corey Olds, Mary Salzmann, Alyssa Sepinwall, J. B. Shank, Jutta Sperling, and Molly Watson), who forced me to rethink its premises in my time as visiting professor at Stanford in 1993–1994. I also wish to express my gratitude for funding to cover research visits to Paris, which was provided by the British Academy, the Nuffield Foundation, and the University of Exeter Research Fund.

¹ *Affiches des Trois-Evêchés*, February 15, 1772. The present article has been researched in the Bibliothèque Nationale’s voluminous holdings of prerevolutionary newspapers. The advertiser-newspapers on which the study is based changed title on numerous occasions in their lifetime. For this reason, I will refer to all these newspapers generically as “Affiches de [place-name]” and for full name changes and other details send the reader to Jean Sgard, ed., *Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600–1789*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1991), the most comprehensive bibliographical guide (hereafter, *DJ*). The *Affiches des Trois-Evêchés* is found in *DJ*, nos. 69–70.

The *Affiches* have been, as we shall see, neglected and underrated by historians. Apart from a sprinkling of articles, mainly by antiquarians, the field has been almost wholly left to scholars with a background in literature, whose work is of the highest caliber. See in particular, besides *DJ*, collected works organized and edited by Jean Sgard, notably *Études sur la presse au XVIII^e siècle: III* (Lyon, 1978); *Le journalisme d’ancien régime: Questions et propositions* (Lyon, 1982); and *La presse provinciale au XVIII^e siècle* (Grenoble, 1983). See, too, his “La multiplication des périodiques,” in Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, eds., *Histoire de l’édition française: II; Le livre triomphant, 1660–1830* (Paris, 1984). For pre-1789 perspectives, see Pierre Rétat, ed., *La révolution du journal, 1789–1794* (Paris, 1989). The outstanding articles of Gilles Feyel are also highly recommended: see “Médecins, empiriques et charlatans dans la presse provinciale à la fin du XVIII^e siècle,” *Le corps et la santé: Actes du 110^e Congrès National des sociétés savantes [Montpellier, 1985]: Section d’histoire moderne et*

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