

Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610–1715)

Nicholas Hammond

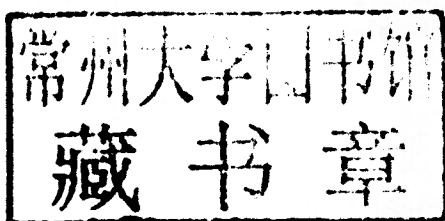
Peter Lang

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NICHOLAS HAMMOND



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in France (1610–1715)**

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Introduction

Gossip: for most housewives, it's just a harmless form of recreation, an exchange of semi-interesting titbits, concerning the semi-interesting lives of people they know. But the time comes in every neighbourhood when something very interesting happens, and that's when gossip stops being recreation and becomes obsession.

Throughout the ages, gossip has retained the power to amuse, titillate, shock and outrage. Originally meaning a godparent of either sex, the word 'gossip' was gradually transformed into a predominantly negative term almost entirely associated with what were viewed as the worst traits of women. Even the quotation above, from the American television series *Desperate Housewives*, unproblematically associates gossip with women in the twenty-first century. Until now, it is perhaps inevitable therefore that almost all studies devoted to gossip have concentrated on or taken as their starting point the pejorative depiction of women in both society and literature. This book, while taking into account many of these approaches, is an attempt to consider gossip within a particular period from another perspective.

When philosophers or moralists have written about gossip, invariably it has been in withering terms. The nineteenth-century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, for example, registers his distaste for the triviality of gossip,¹ while the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger likens gossip to idle talk.² Yet there are other writers who, while not formulating

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 69–72.

2 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 212.

a theory of gossip as such, show an awareness of its grander possibilities, encompassing fields which are decidedly not trivial. In Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the character Cecil Graham, when asked by Lord Windermere to make a distinction between gossip and scandal, replies, 'Oh! gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality'.³ As with so many of Wilde's witty one-liners, we laugh at the verbal virtuosity of the comment before attending to the meaning, which reveals itself to give gossip a privileged status over that of scandal. The charm of gossip is not as flighty as it may at first seem, unless we view the course of history as an insignificant detail. W.H. Auden, in an article entitled 'In Defence of Gossip', makes the significant point that often gossip will hold attention and maintain appeal in a way that high minded works will not:

And as for books, if you had to choose between the serious study and the amusing gossip, say, between Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* and John Aubrey's *Scandal and Credulities*, wouldn't you choose the latter? Of course you would! Who would rather learn the facts of Augustus's imperial policy rather than discover that he had spots on his stomach? No one.⁴

Indeed, sometimes the very ephemerality of spoken or written gossip or the seeming off-handedness of a chance remark can have an importance that is all too easily overlooked. Christopher Isherwood manages to evoke such consequence when, after reading the journals of the Goncourt brothers, he writes on 5 July 1940, 'Here, gossip achieves the epigrammatic significance of poetry'.⁵ Although, with the exception of the final chapter, I deliberately avoid the theme of gossip in officially sanctioned literature of the seventeenth century, I will study the various writings that to a large extent pertain to gossip (memoirs, letters, collections of anecdotes, songs, accounts of conversations held) from what could be called a variety of

3 Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, ed. Ian Small (London: A&C Black, 1999), Act III, p. 63.

4 *The Listener*, 22 December 1937.

5 Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries*, volume 1: 1939–1960, ed. Katherine Bucknell (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 96.

perspectives, using theorists of gossip from the worlds of literature, anthropology, cultural history, sociology and psychoanalysis. By looking at the ways in which scandalous or simply amusing stories are recounted, I hope to reveal the inner workings of gossip.

In Chapter 1, 'Defining Gossip in Early Modern France', I shall consider some of the ways that gossip functions in the accounts of the famous and the not so famous. Indeed, the conversations held on the sidelines of history can often tell us as much as official versions of history. Many of the documents studied here either have never been published or have not been reproduced since the seventeenth century, giving us an insight into a world which cannot be found in sanitized accounts of the time. Not only will the vocabulary used to describe gossip be discussed but also distinctions will be made between gossip and conversation, oral forms and written forms, and crucially between gossip and silence.

The fact that I have quoted comments on gossip made by three notoriously gay or bisexual men from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Wilde, Auden and Isherwood, points to the subject of the next two chapters of my book. Although, as I have already indicated, many studies have been devoted to women and gossip, surprisingly little work has been done on the connection between homosexuality and gossip. In Chapter 2, 'The Italian Vice', the links between same-sex desire in the seventeenth century and gossip will be explored. In Chapter 3, 'Scandalous Subjects', I will focus mainly on three prominent seventeenth-century figures who were known for their love of men, one a founding member of the prestigious Académie Française, another Louis XIV's greatest general, and the third Louis's younger brother. Although Truman Capote's remark that 'all literature is gossip'⁶ may itself be flippant, it applies perfectly to the subject of Chapter 4, for the publication in 1678 of Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, a work widely considered to have changed the landscape of prose fiction, marks the moment that gossip becomes literature and literature becomes gossip.

By focusing on seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France in particular, during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV (1610–1715), I hope to show how analysis of gossip in the period is essential to understanding the complexities of the age. But it is the intention of this book also to make some more general findings on gossip and sexuality which can in some respects be applied to, and in other respects be contrasted with, other periods.

Defining Gossip in Early Modern France

The English term ‘gossip’, with all its wide-ranging meanings, implications and uses, has no direct equivalent in French. Yet, both the concept and the practice of gossip are, I would argue, essential to understanding seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century France. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that gossip in this period and place has received so little consideration from scholars.¹ Instead of having one overarching word, the French language in the seventeenth century (and indeed today) relied on a plurality of terms, many of which will be considered later in this chapter, through definitions in various dictionaries from the seventeenth century.

The variety of written forms of gossip available to modern researchers will punctuate my analysis in this and succeeding chapters. However, there is one major resource that will play a particularly significant part: the multi-volume eighteenth-century manuscript collection of songs from the seventeenth century, known as the *Chansonnier Maurepas*.² Until recently, this collection has been all but ignored by scholars.³ The songs were com-

1 We shall see during this chapter a number of scholarly references to gossip in France, but no major book-length study has been devoted to the concept in this particular period.

2 There is a rare nineteenth-century edition of some extracts from the *Chansonnier Maurepas*, entitled *Recueil dit de Maurepas: Pièces libres, chansons, épigrammes, et autres vers satiriques sur divers personnages des siècles de Louis XIV et Louis XV*, 6 vols (Leiden, 1865). However, I shall be quoting from the full thirty-volume manuscript collection housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale, entitled *Recueil de Chansons, Vaudevilles, Sonnets, Epigrammes, Epitaphes, et autres vers satiriques et historiques, avec des remarques curieuses*. I shall place the volume and folio (page) numbers after each quotation.

3 Robert Darnton's *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), is the most detailed

piled, annotated, ordered chronologically and bound into volumes by Pierre Clairambault (1651–1740), and were later copied and supplemented with further texts from the eighteenth century under the guidance of Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux, comte de Maurepas (1701–1781). Although the vast majority of the songs do not appear with musical scores attached, almost all are headed by the words ‘Sur l’Air de...’ [to the tune of...]. Most people of the time shared a common repertory of tunes, and the music would serve as a mnemonic device. As Robert Darnton writes of later eighteenth-century songs (but equally applicable to earlier songs), ‘a clever verse to a catchy tune spread through the streets with unstoppable force, and new verses frequently followed it, carried from one neighborhood to another like gusts of wind.’⁴ In Paris, song-sheets were available for sale in many areas, but especially along the Pont Neuf. The purchase and performance of such song-sheets acted as ways of communicating news, especially to those who were illiterate or semi-literate; but also, in the way that the songs demonstrate delight in the scandals of the day, they allow us to come as close as it is possible to experience gossip as it was lived on the streets at that time.

Although gossip has long been viewed in a largely negative light, I hope to show in this book not only how it can be occasionally hurtful and malicious but also how it functions in more complex and positive ways. Rumour and gossip are clearly inextricably linked, and often the two can be interchangeable, but over the course of this chapter we will see ways in which the two terms both differ from each other and inform each other. First, in order to come to a fuller understanding of gossip, various distinctions need to be made, starting with gossip and conversation, moving to oral and written gossip, then to the vocabulary of gossip, before examining gossip and silence in the *Chansonnier Maurepas*.

A number of excellent studies and essays on gossip have been written, many of which will be referred to in the course of this chapter. However,

account of later eighteenth-century street songs; but Darnton’s study begins where this book ends: the death of Louis XIV in 1715. Songs from 1748–50, performed by cabaret artist Hélène Delavault, are available online at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/darpoe>.

4 Darnton, *Poetry and the Police*, p. 79.

almost all are related to the concept in general or to various periods in Britain in particular. While having some points in common with other periods and places, gossip in seventeenth-century France seems permeated with a peculiar intensity. And I would argue that this intensity is derived from its relationship to and, more importantly, its difference from the role played by Conversation in the period. Therefore, before defining gossip, a brief analysis of Conversation is necessary.

Gossip and Conversation

Because written texts, as opposed to the spoken word, have survived through the centuries, it is understandable that scholars have concentrated on the wealth of literature which abounded in the seventeenth century rather than on what remained unwritten. However, we should not underestimate the importance of oral communication in the period. It is surely not for rhetorical effect alone that the writer and grammarian Gilles Ménage (1613–1692) mentions that he agrees with his friend Varillas's comment that 'de dix choses qu'il savoit, il en avoit appris neuf dans la Conversation' [he had learned nine out of ten things that he knew in conversation].⁵ Here his use of the word 'Conversation' would seem to cover all kinds of spoken exchange, but there was also a much more formal idea of conversation which was particularly related to the literary salons of the day.

Far from what we may regard as the spontaneity of conversation nowadays, conversation in the seventeenth century was highly regulated and closely fashioned on an aristocratic ideal of sociability and civility. Not only did manuals on conversation demonstrate the importance attached to conversing appropriately but conversations themselves were used as

5 Gilles Ménage, *Menagiana, ou bons mots, rencontres agreables, pensées judicieuses, et observations curieuses de M. Ménage* (Paris: Pierre Delaulne, 1694), 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 284.

models for good writing and indeed good behaviour.⁶ In other words, the making of character and indeed a sense of the self as a social being are closely entwined with the various functions of conversation. Indeed, often conversation is located between oral discourse and a more formal written mode: as Delphine Denis writes, conversation in the seventeenth century is 'comprise comme l'un des lieux d'articulation privilégiés entre politesse et littérature, entre réalité mondaine et fiction galante' [understood as one of the privileged loci of articulation between politeness and literature, between worldly reality and *galant* fiction].⁷ Moreover, to use Elizabeth Goldsmith's terms, 'Conversation created its own social space with carefully marked boundaries'.⁸

As far as gossip is concerned, the essential difference lies in the fact that there are no such carefully circumscribed borders;⁹ gossip constitutes

- 6 See Christoph Strosetzki, *Rhétorique de la Conversation*, trans. S. Seubert (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1984), pp. 24–30, for analysis of different kinds of conversation in seventeenth-century France; for the importance of social class in conversation, see pp. 199–211. See also Benedetta Craveri, *L'Âge de la Conversation*, trans. E. Deschamps-Pria (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), who defines conversation as 'un idéal de sociabilité' [an ideal of sociability], closely linked to the noble élite, p. 9. For analysis of conversation manuals, see Volker Kapp, 'L'Art de la conversation dans les manuels oratoires de la fin du XVIIe siècle', in *Art de la lettre, art de la conversation*, ed. Bernard Bray and Christoph Strosetzki (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995), pp. 115–29.
- 7 Delphine Denis, ed., *Madeleine de Scudéry, 'De l'air galant' et autres conversations: pour une étude de l'archive galante* (Paris: H. Champion, 1998), p. 63. See also Wendy Ayres-Bennett, *Sociological Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 123–5.
- 8 Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), p. 2.
- 9 In this regard, I diverge from anthropologist Max Gluckman's description of gossip as 'a culturally controlled game with important social functions', 'Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963), pp. 307–16, p. 312, as his use of the word 'game' implies a careful set of rules. Robert Paine's conception of gossip as 'a genre of informal communication' comes nearer to my reading, 'What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis', *Man* 2 (1967), pp. 278–85, p. 278. See Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 30–40, for a more sustained discussion of Gluckman and Paine.

what John Forrester, in his book *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis*, calls 'the no-man's land of fiction'.¹⁰ Even though, as we shall see, it creates very clear oppositions between different sets of people, gossip intrudes on all kinds of spaces not frequented by conversation. While civilized conversation takes place within the relative formality and safety of the salon or in ceremonial situations, gossip can circulate on the street, in the taverns, in the corridors of royal palaces, in the bedchamber.¹¹ Jean Loret evokes the restlessness and immediacy of gossip in his *Muze historique* (a text which we will meet at various points in this chapter):

On dit encor par-cy, par-là,
Les uns cecy, d'autres cela;
Les nouvelles sont assez drues
Sur le Pont-Neuf et dans les rues;
On entend divers bruits courans
Du Roy, de la Reine et des grands.¹²

Gluckman's research on gossip was groundbreaking for the positive social function that it ascribed to gossip. See also Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

- 10 'Knowledge had by gossip only barely maintains its claim on that word, sketching out the no-man's-land of fiction which equally constitutes the social knowledge by which we live', *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, first published 1990), p. 244.
- 11 Cf. Jörg R. Bergmann, who writes that 'places or occasions for gossip are found everywhere acquaintances – accidentally or unintentionally – meet, pass the time undisturbed, or better still are able to combine the passing of time with other activities', *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*, trans. John Bednarz Jr and Eva Kafka Baron (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), p. 15.
- 12 Jean Loret, *La Muze historique, ou, Recueil des lettres en vers contenant les nouvelles du temps* (Paris, 1650–65; repr. Paris: P. Jannet, 1857–78 and 1891), 4 vols, vol. 1, p. 235. See Stéphane Van Damme, *L'Épreuve libertine: morale, soupçon et pouvoirs dans la France baroque* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008), who writes that 'les ponts sont d'abord les lieux privilégiés de la diffusion' [bridges were above all the main place of dissemination], p. 185.

[Things are said here and there, some say this and others say that; the items of news are rather plentiful on the Pont Neuf and on the streets; different circulating rumours about the King, the Queen and the nobility can be heard.]

In order to demonstrate some differences between conversation and gossip, let us return to Ménage, who is described by that other great seventeenth-century purveyor of gossip, Tallemant des Réaux (1619–1692), as being naturally inclined towards gossip: ‘il disoit tout ce que luy venoit à la bouche, et mesdisoit du tiers et du quart’ [he used to say everything which came to his mouth and gossiped maliciously about all and sundry],¹³ adding that ‘il est de ceux qui perdroyent plus tost un amy qu’un bon mot’ [he is one of those people who would sooner lose a friend than a skilful turn of phrase],¹⁴ which, coming from Tallemant’s pen, was rather like the pot calling the kettle black. Soon after Ménage’s death in 1692, his friends and colleagues gathered together many of his sayings and discussions. The resulting two-volume work, the *Ménagiana*, not only gives valuable insight into the life and thoughts of Ménage himself but also comes as close as it is possible to replicate patterns of spoken discourse and gossip. One anecdote shows Ménage’s awareness of the different levels of such discourse. Two leading literary figures of the seventeenth century, Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin (1595–1676) and Guez de Balzac (1597–1654) are described by Ménage as engaging in a formal conversation, which is marked by great care to observe all rules of correct expression and appropriate subject matter:

13 Tallemant des Réaux, *Historiettes*, ed. A. Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–1), 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 319. In the same passage, Tallemant includes also an intriguing anecdote in which Ménage asks a young woman if she knows what malicious gossip (‘la mesdisance’) is, which receives the reply: “Pour la mesdisance”, dit-elle, “je ne sçaurois bien dire ce que c’est; mais pour le mesdisant, c’est M. Menage” [As for malicious gossip, she said, I cannot say what it is; but as for a gossipier, it is M. Menage], *ibid.* Cf. also Tallemant’s report of D’Ablancourt, who said of Ménage, ‘nous sommes amys, mais je ne pretens pas l’empescher de babiller’ [we are friends, but I cannot claim to prevent him from prattling], *ibid.*, p. 320.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 324.