CHAPTER ONE

The Perils of Eloquence

Y'a d'la parole dans leux ventre p'us qu'dans l'Encirclopédie.
(There are more words in their lungs than in the *Encyclopedia*.)
—*Chanson poissarde* (1789)

Early in the spring of 1793, at the height of the revolutionary crisis in France, a middle-aged domestic cook named Jeanne-Catherine Clere frequented a Parisian café near her employer on the rue des Poules where she was in the habit of tippling a few and losing her senses.[1] Once she had had a few too many, she would take to singing at the top of her lungs. And recently she had begun saying that it was "wrong to kill the King and it would have been better to kill the Queen, who was far guiltier than he." The cafetier had had to throw her out of the establishment on several occasions.

Sometime in the first week of March she had also been heard by a local architect in another café, at the corner of the rue Mouffetard and the place de Contrescarpe, saying that "It won't be tolerated if they cut off the head of the son, as they did the father." Asked by another patron in the café who she meant by "the father," she responded, "The father who was in the Temple. Vive le roi!" A bartender warned her that if she said such things outside in the street, she would be arrested.

And that is precisely what happened. At eleven in the evening on March 7, Mme Clere was thrown out of the café Mouffetard after a few drinks. She began ranting loudly as she careened down the street. To be more exact, she was singing, verses ending in resounding choruses of "*Vive le roi.*" A patriotic passerby, who turned out to be the President of her section, escorted her to the station of the local *Corps de Garde.* There,

[1]The case of Jeanne-Catherine Clere is found in the *Archives Nationales* (hereafter AN): W 268, no. 10 (28 *pièces*), April 8–18, 1793.

seeing the guard's muskets, she bragged of her father's service in the Army of the King and continued singing royalist war songs. She began denigrating soldiers who served the Republic. For several hours she held forth in the most unpatriotic terms: "The rabble that was sent to the army and was still being sent would be swept away by the 30,000 troops of our enemies"; "the rabble weren't the only ones to leave Paris," and that many honest men would die. And, she went on, according to the officers at the station: "The city of Lyon was under the white cocarde, and the province of Franche-Comté would defend Lyon, and would never betray that same cocarde"; "the Swiss Guards were of this faction"; "they too would stick up for the Franche-Comté and the city of Lyon"; "and the same was to be said for all the villages along the postal routes between France and her enemies." Finally, she opined that "the National Convention, as well as the Jacobins, should be lined up in two columns and pummeled. It was supposed to happen on the 25th of March." Asked if she wanted to have her head cut off, she said, "There will be a revolt soon, and this time it won't fail." Then, having said her peace, she fell asleep for several hours. When she woke up, Mme Clere found herself formally accused of treason and imprisoned.

On April 8, Mme Clere's case was sent to the newly constituted revolutionary tribunal. The interrogation that ensued helps to put some of Mme Clere's comments into perspective. She was married to a stagecoach driver from Lyon—hence her knowledge of affairs there. Moreover, she had sons in the Republican army, serving under General Adam Philippe Custine, who were, according to the official record, "known to be good citizens." Under interrogation, Clere first denied having made almost all of the statements attributed to her. She said that she remembered nothing except being escorted to the *Corps de Garde.* When the guards showed her their muskets, she told them that she was the daughter of a soldier who had served thirty-seven years for the King. To prove it, she began singing old war songs.

Pushed further, she admitted saying something about the white cocardes in Lyon, but claimed that she was only repeating what she had read in the old newspapers that she was asked to burn for her employer. She didn't think she was doing any harm in repeating what was already public news. Pushed again about her remarks, she admitted to having said something about plans for a revolt, but here, too, she claimed that she was only repeating things she had heard on the street. She had intended these remarks "without venom," she continued; she only wanted to say that there were "still a lot of crooks in Paris, and

that until they were purged, honest men were not free to defend the Republic."

Witnesses from the neighborhood were called in to vouch for her character. Her employer, a "man of letters" named Noel-François de Wailly, testified that she had come to work for him five months ago with referrals and that she was a "good soul." He said, however, that "she was often drunk" and that he had castigated her and threatened to fire her if she didn't stop drinking. He added that when she is taken with drink (*prise de boisson*) she rambles until she sleeps it off. Another neighbor said she had never heard her say anything. The local bartender said she often got drunk and ranted. And the police, too, said that she showed all the "symptoms of drunkenness" when she was brought to the *Corps de Garde.*

The indictment against Mme Clere acknowledged her drinking, but insisted throughout the record of events that she was "better informed and more articulate (*mieux stylée*) than she makes out to be." It stated that, even though drunk, "her thoughts are clear and well-ordered," and that she was clearly "conscious of her criticisms of the volunteers sent to the army," that is, that some of them were "rabble." On April 18, 1793, just over a month after her arrest, Mme Clere was convicted by the revolutionary tribunal of Paris for having "uttered remarks intended to provoke murder, the dissolution of the representatives of the nation and the reestablishment of royalty."[2] She was put to death by guillotine the following day on the place de la Réunion.

Jeanne-Catherine Clere was one of the first people convicted by the revolutionary tribunal. I have dwelt upon her case at this length because it is not coincidental that this early convicted traitor to the new Republic was a woman, and that her crime was seditious speech. A whole group of market women were arrested for seditious speech as early as the October days of 1789.[3] Heated political speech by women on both sides of the political spectrum was treated as a particular threat to public order by revolutionary authorities. Just after the King's flight to Varennes in June of 1791, three notorious radical women, Constance

[2]*Jugement du tribunal-criminel révolutionnaire établi au Palais à Paris par la loi de 10 mars 1793, 2ème de la République françoise, qui condamne à la peine de mort Jeanne-Catherine Clere, pour avoir provoqué le rétablissement de la royauté en France [signé Fabricus, greffier]* (Paris: Imp. du Clément, [n.d]).

[3]Barry Shapiro, *Revolutionary Justice in Paris, 1789–90* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 215.

Evrad, Pauline Léon, and Léon's mother, were stopped by a troop of royal bodyguards in the Palais Royal and almost summarily executed for calling the King's actions treasonous.[4] Many examples of this sort could be cited, but the important point is that, from very early on in the Revolution, seditious speech was more heavily criminalized than any other form of political expression or activity.[5]

Still, from what we know about the social logic of the terror, Mme Clere's execution is surprising. Women, in general, were far less likely than men to be detained as suspects. They were less likely to be convicted by the revolutionary tribunal (they constituted less than 15 percent of those put to death). It is true that Parisian women represented almost half of all women convicted, but, in contrast to the social profile of male convicts, the great majority of these came from the upper classes.[6] What made Mme Clere such an exceptional figure?

This book begins with the revolutionary conjuncture of Parisian women and political speech because the unhappy fate of eloquent women in revolutionary politics marked a critical cultural turning point for French women more generally: The demise of the oral was the first chapter in the story of their entry into the modern world.

In retrospect, the conviction of Mme Clere may not seem difficult to explain. Her speeches *were* outrageously provocative. But on closer examination her case is more difficult to interpret. True, some of her remarks were flagrantly royalist, especially concerning the execution of the King. But she also suggested that the King was perhaps a mere victim of his wife's plotting and that the Queen should be killed for treason. And the impression that her record leaves is primarily that of a woman in distress—distress because her sons were at war and she was frightened for their safety, distress and anger because of the uncertainties of the Revolution. She blamed the new government, she longed for the security of the King. But her political views were not unambiguously royalist: Her remarks about all the "crooks in Paris" and her fears for the safety of Parisians if all the honest men went to war, were rem-

[4]See Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, and Mary Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 158–160; Dominique Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses* (Paris: Alinea, 1988), pp. 372, 375–376.

[5]Richard Mowery Andrews, "Boundaries of Citizenship: The Penal Regulation of Speech in Revolutionary France," in *French Politics and Society,* vol. 7, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 90–109.

[6]Women were 14.4 percent of the total number of defendants before the tribunal. See Stephanie Brown, *Women on Trial: The Revolutionary Tribunal and Gender,* Stanford Ph.D. dissertation 1996, pp. 53, 65–66, 89, 157, 387.

iniscent of the popular anxieties that resulted in the September massacres. And her invocation of a rumored popular revolt planned for March seems more likely to have referred to the plans for an ultrarevolutionary Hérbertist insurrection than to a counterrevolutionary uprising. What, finally, made the ranting of a drunken women seem like such a threat?

Before answering this question let us consider another case, taken from the other end of the sociocultural spectrum—the trial of the well-known Girondist *salonnière* and minister's wife, Marie-Jeanne Roland, eight months later, on November 8, 1793.[7] Mme Roland went to prison with high hopes that she would be able to use her well-known eloquence to recover her freedom. Indeed, in December of 1792 she had already successfully defended herself and her husband before the bar of the National Convention. On that occasion she had spoken with such eloquence that she had received a standing ovation from the deputies.[8]

Ten days after her arrest, Mme Roland was interrogated for the first time. She was asked if she had any special knowledge of the affairs troubling the Republic. She responded, like Mme Clere, that she had no knowledge of public affairs other than what she had read in the newspapers and heard about in public conversations. Moreover, everything that she had heard in conversation was always in a manner entirely in accordance with the principles of justice and liberty. The interrogator replied that "the words *liberty* and *justice* can become very equivocal ones when one doesn't add that equality is the basis of a Republic." Ever quick-witted, she responded that equality was "an inevitable consequence of liberty and justice." Language play was a game well suited to the talents of Roland.

Asked to name who composed her regular society, Mme Roland stressed that a great number of people passed through her house and that "she had never had what one would call a particular 'circle.'" The interrogators persistently tried to get Mme Roland to admit that she was the "director" of a secret "*bureau d'esprit*" that functioned as a propaganda center for the Federalist cause. She, in return, resisted characterization of herself as anything more than a helpmeet to her husband (his occasional secretary) and as having engaged only in casual conversation. Each time they suggested that she held private "meetings" at her

[7]For an excellent account of Mme Roland's arrest and trial, see Gita May, *Madame Roland and the Age of Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 262–288.

[8]May, *Madame Roland*, p. 250.

home, she corrected them, calling her gatherings public "conversations" as opposed to "conferences."

The interrogators became increasingly frustrated with her answers. As they put it:

> It was shocking that her responses were entirely generic and evasive of what the court wanted to hear, and we therefore required her to respond only by an affirmative or negative whether she had knowledge of an organized departmental force and whether she had agitated in favor of this in her conversations.

As she recalled this interrogation in her memoirs:

> The discussion was long and difficult. Before I could put my answers in writing they wanted to reduce them to a simple *yes* or *no*. They accused me of verbosity, and said that this wasn't the Ministry of the Interior; wit would get me nowhere. When the judge posed a question that the prosecutor didn't find to his taste, he would pose it in another manner, extending it, making it more complex or interrupting my responses, and then requiring me to abridge them. It was a real vexation."[9]

In the end, the prosecutor, Antione Quentin Fouquier-Tinville, indicted Mme Roland for counterrevolutionary conspiracy because of her correspondence and because of her private conversations, for having held "secret meetings in her home."[10]

Mme Roland's interrogation proceeded in precisely the opposite rhetorical direction from that of Mme Clere. In Mme Clere's case, the authorities worked to provoke her to greater eloquence in order to determine whether she should be judged to be the author of her own words; her culpability lay in the perception of her conscious ability to create political meanings. In Mme Roland's case, her ability to debate political meanings far exceeded that of her interrogators. They therefore pursued the opposite tactic—reducing her to two words alone.

Opposing strategies led, however, to the same end. In each case the police were determined to find these women guilty as the witting authors of their own speech, and to conclude that they deployed their speech with the intent of effecting political ends. In both cases—the

[9]Gérard Walter, ed., *Actes du tribunal révolutionnaire* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), pp. 266, 269.

[10]The *Act d'Accusation* can be found in AN: W 290, plaq. 227, p. 31.

one through her explicitness, the other through her evasiveness—the women were proved to be culpable.

While in prison, awaiting her trial, Roland still clung to hopes that once she was permitted to speak in the courtroom she would be able to sway the jurors with a rousing defense of her actions and motivations. But she was never to be given the opportunity. The moment she opened her mouth in the tribunal, she was interrupted by one of the judges and then silenced by deafening cries of "Long live the Republic, Down with the traitors," from the public galleries. Clearly, the only means to convict this eloquent woman was to silence her.[11]

Female eloquence became a central and a dangerous element in revolutionary politics. Spoken words, especially among Parisian women of the people, carried more weight—and a historically specific weight—in 1793 than they do today. Though urban France was becoming rapidly more literate, Mme Clere's world was essentially an oral one. Daniel Roche estimates that in the 1780s only about one in eight women in the Parisian popular classes could read, even if they could sign their names.[12] Illiteracy was a distinctly gendered phenomenon by the end of the Old Regime. Were we to draw a graph depicting the male and female paths to literacy beginning in roughly 1650, when all but a very small upper crust of society (say about 10 percent) could read, moving through the eighteenth century, we would see an increasing gap open up between the sexes, widening to the end of the eighteenth century and then slowly closing up toward 85 percent total literacy from the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. The Revolution thus occurred at a very particular moment in the history of literacy.

The last decade of the eighteenth century saw the greatest extent of the gender gap in literacy: Most French men were literate and most French women were not.[13] Illiteracy was a distinctly female phenomenon; women were perceived to be intimately connected with the oral.

Mme Clere claimed in her testimony to the police to be able to read newspapers. She would have been unusual in this regard and therefore especially powerful: Clere could act as a cultural bridge between her mostly illiterate milieu and the world of print. She had hoped that her claim to be merely repeating what she read in newspapers would di-

[11]May, *Madame Roland,* p. 284.

[12]Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 213.

[13]François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 32–33, 46.

minish her culpability for the substance of her ranting. In fact, it may have had the opposite effect on the authorities: It made her appear that much more dangerous as a potential neighborhood agitator who combined the knowledge of print with the power of speech.

The sociology of women's speech in the period of the transition to literacy should also be situated in a precise cultural context. Under the Old Regime, it was not just women of the popular classes who were associated with verbal skill. Elite French women, too, enjoyed a reputation as particularly gifted when it came to spontaneous oral eloquence. As the French language came to be codified by written regulations, women's speech took on a particular set of cultural meanings. Beginning in the mid–seventeenth century, the French crown sponsored a series of cultural initiatives to define correct speech and regulate its public use. Louis XIII patronized the composition of French grammars and dictionaries of good usage, founded the French Academy in 1635 and set for it the task of writing the definitive dictionary of the language. Written rules thus introduced models of correct speaking intended to govern oral usage. The grace and the elegance of French rhetorical style came to be admired throughout Europe.[14]

By the 1660s, the Crown had created the first royal "police" force in Paris, precisely to ensure the "politeness" of public comportment, including public speech. Indeed, there is an intimate relationship between the idea of the "police," "*politesse*" and a "well-policed," or civilized, state. Public speaking, whether in the academy or on the street, thus came under the continuous surveillance of the royal ear. As these new institutions began for the first time to give shape to normative spoken French, nonnormative French—that is, slang and other forms of transgressive speech—also came to be defined. Two forms of speech, in particular, came to denote the transgression of good style: *poissarde* and *préciosité,* one plebian, one elite.

The history of the emergence of *préciosité* and the *précieuse* style has been well studied by literary historians of the seventeenth century. Its links to women, to salon culture, and its particular political associations with the anti-absolutist machinations of the *Fronde* are well documented. In the eyes of the Crown, and its most eminent cultural ex-

[14]See Marc Fumaroli, *L'Age de l'eloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria" de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), esp. pp. 647–672, "Le Parnasse de l'eloquence royale: L'Académie Française sous Richelieu." On the special relationship of French literature to oral conversation, see also Marc Fumaroli, *Le Genre des genres littéraires français: la conversation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1992).

ponents from Molière to Boileau, *préciosité* rapidly came to represent feminine rhetorical excess and hyper-refinement in literary expression.[15]

Précieuse cultural institutions and styles formed the infrastructure of enlightened anti-absolutist intellectual activity—the so-called "Republic of Letters"—over the course of the eighteenth century and right up to the revolutionary period.[16] Throughout the last century of the Old Regime, the salon functioned as a kind of shadow institution of the French Academy in cultural matters and the *Parlement* in politics. Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought that women's extraordinary verbal skills could only be explained physiologically. He suggested that their tongues must be more flexible than men's![17] Be that as it may, women's verbal virtuosity—their ability to stimulate witty and learned conversation—was critical to the salon's success. But excessive verbal skill could be politically dangerous, especially in the world of the royal court where the shaping of perceptions through word of mouth was critical in making and unmaking the credibility of courtiers.

At the other end of the social spectrum was *poissarde*, or fishwives' speech. The history of the word suggests that it first came into use at precisely the same moment as *préciosité*, roughly the 1640s, to refer to fishwives and their notoriously vulgar, yet captivating street cries. The term soon came to be used more generally to refer to the crude speech patterns of the popular classes. From the very beginning, the poetics of the popular slang of market women, and that of the aristocratic *précieuses* were linked in the minds of male literary critics as two related examples of excessively pretentious and hyperbolic speech forms.[18]

Initially a term of denigration, *poissarde* began to take on positive

[15]Some key signposts of this vast literature are Roger Lathuillère, *La Préciosité. Etude historique et linguistique* (Genève: Droz, 1966); Dorothy Backer, *Precious Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Carolyn Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Renate Baader, *Dames de lettres: Autorinnen des preziosen, hocharistokratischen und "modernen" salons (1649–1698)* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuch, 1986); Nicole Aronson, *Madame de Rambouillet, ou la magicienne de la chambre bleue* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rationalist Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[16]Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[17]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On education*, Allan Bloom, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 376.

[18]A. P. Moore, *The Genre Poissard and the French Stage of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Institute for French Studies, Columbia University, 1935), p. 31.

literary attributes by the eighteenth century—reflecting the raw eloquence of the people. *Poissarde* speech first began to become fashionable among elites through immoral farces known as *parades,* which were presented as *entr'actes* in popular theater.[19] Over the course of the century, aristocratic households, including the court at Versailles, produced *parades* as a form of light, evening entertainment in which the elite classes took on the roles of market women and longshoremen, imitating their slang, accents, and intonation. In 1777, it is reported, Marie Antoinette even went so far as to have actual market women brought to Versailles to serve as speech coaches for her ladies in waiting in the production of one of these *poissarde* plays.[20]

By the 1740s, *poissarde* had become a bona fide literary genre, distinguished by its ethnographic realism and vivid pastoralization of popular oral forms. It was written in a pseudophonetic form (most frequently identified by the use of the first-person singular pronoun with a plural verb form, for example, "*j'avons* . . . ") with intentional phonetic misspellings of words. *Poissarde* produced social dissonance by combining popular expressions with higher poetic forms. Comic effects were produced by mispronunciation and misusage of words and figures of speech considered to be above the station of the speaker. *Poissarde* speech, like preciosity, was, above all, construed as hyperbolic—flattery too sweet or rage too strong.

It was a minor royal official, Jean-Joseph Vadé, who, in the 1740s, created the most lasting model of *poissarde* literature as a kind of fictionalized scripting of an ethnographic record of popular speech. He did this through the construction of a myth of the male author as a mere scribe of female speech, a man of letters who haunted marketplaces, taverns, and cafes of the popular neighborhoods of Paris, recording eloquent street disputes concerning jealous or ill-sorted loves, social pretensions, and just comeuppances (see Figure 1.1).

In the hands of a writer as gifted as Diderot, the fishwife became a figure of the sublime. Thus, he writes of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's portrait of his wife, shown at the 1765 *Salon:*

> This fine, fat fishwife, with her head twisted backwards, and whose pale coloring, and showy kerchief, all mussed, and expres-

[19]The most extensive study of this literature is Moore; *The Genre Poissard;* see also, Arthur Heulhard, *La Foire Saint-Laurent: son histoire et ses spectacles* (Paris: Alcan-Levy, 1877).

[20]Moore, *The Genre Poissard,* p. 291.

Figure 1.1 The Male Writer Transcribes Female Speech. "La vente de la seringue (The Sale of the Seringue)," from Jean Joseph Vadé, *Oeuvres poissardes, illustrées par Monsiau* (Paris: Defer de la Maisonneuve, an IV [1796]). Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

> sion of pain mixed with pleasure depicts a paroxysm that is sweeter to experience than it is decorous to paint.[21]

Diderot's sublime figure of the *poissarde,* at once ecstatic and enraged, has come down to us today as the defining example of the word *poissarde* in the *Grand Robert* dictionary.[22] Greuze's painting betrays the elite literary origins of this image of the fishwife, and the power of the literary experience engendered by her speech: His wife's paroxysm is, it appears, a result of reading and writing (see Figure 1.2).

In cultural terms, women's speech in the period of the transition to literacy can be conceptualized as the two ends of a bell curve in which correct speech, linked with eloquent style, was figured as a masculine norm (the rhetoric of the academy, the pulpit, or the law courts). Female speech represented the two extremes of the curve: on the one hand the excessively vulgar, and on the other hand the excessively refined. Conversational rather than oratorical, these speech forms were recognized as powerful rhetorical elements, both eloquent and dangerous. Repartee, by nature an improvisational and open-ended game in which each party sought to exceed the other in wit, always carried the risk of going too far.

Each of these oral forms was associated with a particular sociocultural milieu—the salon and the marketplace. These were, then, two key feminine sites of interpretation and commentary in a social and political world that was still primarily an oral one. Not surprisingly, they were, by the end of the eighteenth century, heavily policed.[23] Courtiers discreetly listened in on the "gallant conversations" in aristocratic drawing rooms, while police spies circulated in the marketplaces of the capital.

Women's public speech, and especially the speech of market women, had, moreover, a recognized place in the political ritual of the Old Regime. The market women of Paris had had a special relationship

[21]Denis Diderot, *Salon de Greuze* (1765), in *Diderot on Art I: The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting,* John Goodman, trans. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 102.

[22]See the definition of *poissarde,* in *Le Grand Robert de la langue française,* 2nd ed., vol. 7 (Paris: Le Robert, 1985).

[23]For regulation of popular public speaking, see Arlette Farge, *Le Dire et le mal dire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); for the codification of *politesse* and the regulation of verbal expression in the salon, see Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994) and Goodman, *The Republic of Letters.* See also Lisa Jane Graham, *If the King Only Knew: Seditious Speech in the Reign of Louis XV* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

Figure 1.2 Diderot's Fishwife. "Madame Greuze or, 'La Philosophie Endormie" (Philosophy Sleeps)," engraving, Jacques Aliament, after Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1761). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

to the King since the middle ages, when St. Louis granted destitute women the exclusive privilege to sell retail goods and, in particular, fish, at designated sites in the city markets. These retail locales came to be known as *places St. Louis.* The women who obtained the royal privilege to make use of these spaces were formed into a mutual aid society known as the "Confraternity of Saint-Louis."[24] Royal charity, thus, not only rescued desperate women from sinful forms of gain but also facilitated the observance of Lent by making fish more widely available.

Fish selling was no small matter. Fish, from biblical times, were considered a particularly pure species in both Aristotelian and biblical sources. Because fish shared neither of humankind's two environments (air and land), Aristotle saw them as living in another world. Biblical commentators found fish to have been exempted from God's curse in Genesis, never fallen, and therefore especially holy.[25] Before the Revolution, there were 138 fast days a year. On these days one abstained from all meat except fish. Supply was critical to observance. Fishwives thus played a central role in maintaining the ritual sanctity of the realm and they were regulated with special care by royal authorities in collaboration with the Church.[26]

Certain fish, notably the salmon and the whale, were considered "royal fish" and the King had special privileges in relation to their catch. Under Louis XV, salmon, in particular, took on special associations with the court when Mme de Pompadour chose it as an image for her china pattern. The market women of Paris, and especially the fishwives, thus owed a very special debt to the King for his protection, and they held a special place in his heart.

Over the course of the early modern period, this special relationship crystallized into the ritual reception of a delegation of market women by the King twice a year—on the Jour St. Louis (August 26) and at the New Year. They also visited the Queen on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin. And they appeared on special occasions such as royal mar-

[24]Little is known about this confraternity except that they dissolved themselves along with other royal corporations in 1791. See *Adresse des dames de la halle à l'assemblée nationale, séance du 27 août 1791.* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1791).

[25]For the best institutional history of the *Dames de la Halle* to date, see Rene S. Marion, *The Dames de la Halle: Community and Authority in Early Modern Paris,* Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1994; see also Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police* (Paris: J. P. Cot, 1705), entries on *poisson.*

[26]For the history of the administration of the principal market in Paris, *les Halles,* see Jean Martineau, *Les Halles de Paris des origines à 1789* (Paris: Editions Montchrestien, 1960).

riages and births or the recovery of health of a member of the King's family or the celebration of French military victories.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the ritual exchanges between the market women and the King had become rather elaborate. The women would make a procession from Paris to Versailles, or the King would take the occasion to visit the marketplace. The royal visit might include a feast, and on very special occasions a theater performance in which the King and Queen would sit next to a market woman and a longshoreman to ritually enact their communion with their people.[27]

The visits of the market women to Versailles and, reciprocally, their role in welcoming the King when he visited his capital, gave them a special privilege to offer the King their wares and, especially, a bouquet, along with a verbal toast to the health of the King and the royal family. Reciprocally, the visits gave the King an opportunity to inquire directly about the well-being of his people. These verbal exchanges between the King and the market women, could, however, in bad years—like 1750—become quite tense: Caught in the grips of a panic about the mysterious disappearance of street children, the market women of Paris threatened to go to Versailles and "tear the King's hair out" if he did not protect them from the police.[28] The market women of Paris thus acquired a kind of popular political legitimacy and a privilege to free political speech enjoyed by no other group in French society under the Old Regime.

But even without this intimate dialogue with the King, the public speech of fishwives was extremely powerful in shaping popular perceptions of the monarchy. Fishwives gathered daily in neighborhood wine bars, like the one frequented by Mme Clere on the rue Mouffetard, and held forth on the political issues of the day. Wine bars were thus key nodes in the oral networks of Parisian neighborhoods: It was here that political news was transmitted in an illiterate world.[29]

As with the salon, elites embraced *poissardes* not only for literary pleasure, but for political profit as well. Literary *poissardes* witnessed a

[27]See Marion, *The Dames de la Halle.* See also Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1782–1788).

[28]Farge, *Le Dire et le mal dire;* see also, Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *Logiques de la foule* (Paris: Hachette, 1988).

[29]David Garrioch, *Neighborhood and Community in Paris, 1740–1790* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 182–183. See also W. Scott Haine, "A Voice of Their Own: Parisian Working Women and Café Politics, 1789–1800," in *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850: Proceedings 1989* (Tallahassee, FL: Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution, Florida State University, 1990), pp. 539–544.

slow but definitive politicization over the course of the eighteenth century. The fortuitous fact of Mme de Pompadour's maiden name—Mademoiselle Poisson—offered too fine an opportunity to her detractors not to make the unflattering linguistic link between the royal mistress and the haranguing fishwives. Thus a series of anonymous *poissonades* appeared in 1749, lampooning the marquise as a "*petite bourgeoise, elevée à la grivoise*." ("A petty-bourgeois, of vulgar upbringing")[30] By the second half of the century, as the constitutional crisis between the Crown and the *Parlements* deepened, lawyers began to appropriate the voices of the market women and their privilege of political speech in order to compliment or correct the King.

Fishwives were mobilized from the 1750s onward to the cause of the Jansenist church leaders in Paris who sought to restore the Church to a more rigorous moral purity.[31] By the 1770s, following the crisis over the Crown's attempt to deregulate commerce, the market women of Paris had taken up the cause of the *Parlementaires* against royal attempts to impose "unconstitutional" economic reforms. On November 21, 1774, for example, a delegation of market women greeted the restored *Parlement* and offered its president, Etienne-François d'Aligre, a bouquet in homage.[32] By 1787, when the standoff between *Parlement* and Crown became a matter of life and death for the regime, the market women of the capital were fully politicized on behalf of the constitutional cause.[33] As an act of overt protest, they refused to come to Versailles on the Queen's Saint day to offer their compliments. By the eve of the Revolution in 1789, the *poissarde* alliance with the party of reform was made vividly clear by the arrangement for the appearance of several fishwives on the stage of a performance of the *Souper de Henri IV* at the *Théâtre de Monsieur,* to drink a toast to Henry IV, the most popular of all French Kings. The performance was an explicit political message to the King that he should emulate his beloved ancestor and act in the interests of the common people rather than the aristocracy and the clergy.[34]

Indeed, the rhetorical form of the eighteenth-century political pamphlet owes as great a debt to the female speech of the marketplace as it

[30]*Receuil Clairambault-Maurepas, chansonnier historique du XVIIIe siècle, publié avec une introduction, commentaire, notes et index par Emile Raumié* (Paris: A Quantin, 1882). I am grateful to Thomas Kaiser for this reference.

[31]See Marion, *The Dames de la Halle,* p. 283.

[32]Jean Tulard, *Nouvelle Histoire de Paris, la révolution,* (Paris: Hachette, 1989), p. 512.

[33]Marion, *The Dames de la Halle,* pp. 310–321.

[34]Moore, *The Genre Poissarde,* p. 349.

does to the *mémoire judiciaire* or the pornographic tract.[35] In the closing years of the Old Regime the production of political *poissardes,* written mostly by lawyers in the voices of fishwives, became increasingly widespread.[36] The *Bouquet,* for example, became a popular satirical pamphlet genre for offering ironic compliments to the King, and the *Cri* a genre for offering invective and correction. The adoption of this voice became a sign of popular legitimacy for the newly emergent political classes of the revolutionary period.[37]

The *poissarde* was also a central figure of Carnival, both as a theatrical persona and as a written form. The literary transvestism of men appropriating women's voices, and the rhetorical masquerade of pseudophonetic representations of speech in written form were given religious legitimation at Mardi Gras, and as post-Lenten forms of comic release. Because of the association of the fishwife with Lenten observance, the *poissarde* genre was also appropriated, in carnivalesque form, by church leaders, to militate against efforts to reform the Church along Jansenist lines.[38]

After 1789 the monarchy and the aristocracy could no longer control the sites of legitimate free speech within French society. The collapse of the Bourbon monarchy after 1789 sent the cultural institutions formed during the last several centuries of its reign into total disarray, not least of all the salons of the aristocracy and the rituals of the market women of Paris. New sites of cultural power, like the revolutionary salons of Mme Roland and Mme de Staël were constituted along political lines, reflecting the shifting force fields within the new National Assembly rather than the hierarchical channeling of patronage through networks controlled by the court and the higher aristocracy.[39] Now it was the politics

[35]For recent work on the contribution of the *mémoire judiciaire* to late eighteenth-century political rhetoric, see Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Pre-revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For work on political pornography, see Robert Darnton, *Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995); Antoine de Baecque, "Pamphlets: Libel and Political Mythology," in Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 165–176; and Lynn Hunt, "Pornography in the French Revolution," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), pp. 301–340.

[36]See Moore, *The Genre Poissarde;* see also, Farge, *Le Dire et le mal dire.*

[37]See Ferdinand Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française des origines à 1900. Tome X: La Langue classique dans la tourmente* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1939), pp. 259–270.

[38]See Alain Fauré, *Paris Carême-Prenant: du carnaval à Paris au XIXe siècle, 1800–1914* (Paris: Hachette, 1978), and Pierre Frantz, "*Travestis Poissards,*" *Revue des Sciences Humaines,* vol. LXI, no. 190 (Avril–Juin 1983): 7–20.

[39]Regarding the new revolutionary salons, see May, *Madame Roland,* pp. 180–199.

of political faction, rather than those of court intrigue that would determine the influence of eloquent elite women in the world of public affairs.

The monarchy was also rapidly losing its grip on popular political expression. On July 14, 1789, the King's cherished fishwives were central participants in the Parisian crowd that brought down the Bastille. Women from the market of the district of St. Paul went in delegation to the new municipal officers on July 20, 1789, in order to make their opinions on events known.[40] In late August, the King made clear to the mayor of Paris, Jean Sylvain Bailly, that he did not want to receive any unauthorized delegations of market women at Versailles on his Saint's day, because of a fear of popular demonstrations.[41] No one listened.

On October 5, 1789, processions of market women led the massive march to Versailles that brought the King and the royal family back to Paris and ensured the ratification of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (Figure 1.3).[42] This overt break of the fishwives of Paris with the Crown was looked upon with horror by that acute observer of popular culture, the writer Antoine Rivarol, who noted in disbelief that people confused the *poissardes* who marched on Versailles with the fish sellers of Paris. Those who betrayed the King, were, in fact, in his words "false *poissardes*," mere impostors.[43] Fish sellers had, inconceivably, become revolutionaries.

On November 2, 1789, the royally privileged fishwives of Les Halles, the main Parisian marketplace, made a patriotic contribution to the National Assembly to help the new nation. And in 1791 when the National Assembly abolished all corporations, they dissolved the "Confraternity of Saint-Louis" and made a further donation of its remaining funds to the nation.[44] With the dissolution of this corporation, the last formal ties between the monarchy and the fishwives of Paris were broken.

[40]*Discours adressé à l'assemblée des électeurs par les dames poissardes du marché de St. Paul le 20 juillet 1789,* in *Procès-verbal de l'assemblée des électeurs de Paris,* Bailly et Duveyrier, eds., vol. II (Paris: Baudouin, 1790), p. 228.

[41]AN: O1 500, fol. 440, "*Lettre du ministre de la maison du Roi, à M. Bailly, le priant de s'opposer à la venue des femmes du marché Saint-Martin à Versailles, pour éviter les manifestations populaires, le Roi ne voulant recevoir que les dames de la Halle, 20 août 1789.*"

[42]See Paule Marie Duhet, *Les Femmes et la Révolution française, 1789–1794* (Paris: Juillard, 1971), and Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution,* Katharine Streip, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; original French edition, 1988).

[43]Antoine Rivarol, *Memoires de Rivarol* (Original edition: Paris: Baudouin, 1824; reedited by Editions GALIC, Paris, 1962), p. 263.

[44]*Adresse des dames de la halle à l'assemblée nationale, séance du 27 août 1791.* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1791).

Figure 1.3 Market Women March to Versailles. "Le départ: Du pain et le roi (The Departure: Bread and the King)." Anonymous engraving, 1789. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, cabinet des estampes, Paris.

The deinstitutionalization of popular female speech heightened the fear of women's words on the street. Which brings us back to the drunken, raving domestic with whom I began. Who could speak, when and where, had ceased to be governed by public authorities, royal or revolutionary. Whatever the political allegiances of market women might actually have been—a much-debated topic—their symbolic bonds with the monarchy had been broken. Political, religious, and economic fissures were everywhere, but nowhere were these more public than in the speech of women selling fish. And men, within both the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary camps, monitored the places of that speech closely in order to detect shifts in the political opinions of women of the popular classes.[45]

While fear of actual women speaking on the streets grew during the Revolution, the *poissarde* pamphlet genre, in both its political and its religious forms, exploded as (mostly) male authors took on the voice of the fishwife to heighten their claims to popular legitimacy: At least sev-

[45]See Godineau, *The Women of Paris.* See also Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution, 1789–1796," *Past and Present,* no. 53 (1971): 90–108, and Levy, Applewhite, and Johnson,*Women in Revolutionary Paris.*

enty political pamphlets and an additional dozen literary works—from songs to plays—were written in the voices of market women in the decade of 1789 to 1799; twenty-five in the year 1789 alone. Interestingly, the *poissarde* form knew no political bounds. It was appropriated—as the range of *Mère Duchêne* publications amply illustrates—by clerics and radical *sans-culottes*, royalists and republicans alike (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5).[46] This rhetorical form of popular legitimacy even permeated into petitions sent by popular societies to the National Convention, and were published in the official Bulletin of the Convention to legitimate its policies.[47]

The fishwife persona created in popular song, verse, and theater over the course of the eighteenth century—the stock characters Margot, Merluche, Enguele, Mme Angot, Mère Saumon, Mère Jérôme, and, of course, the Mère Duchêne herself—became such a distinct part of popular consciousness and political dialogue during the Revolution that they even began to shape—indeed to haunt—the perceptions of the police. Hence an undercover police officer offered the following description of a potential counterrevolutionary agitator during a patriotic procession on June 24, 1793—a few months after the execution of Mme Clere:

> As the procession began, an ugly woman, a fat Margot, one of those who sells hotcakes in the market, put herself at the head of the group behind the cavalry. The guards began laughing, but they didn't remove her because she was wearing a cocarde, even though a Jacobin, dressed to look like an executioner, wanted her evicted.[48]

Thus, the line between literary fiction and social actor began to blur. And it was precisely this blurring of the boundary between art and life that made it possible for the authorities to become convinced that the tirades

[46]The *Mère Duchêne* publications have recently been reedited in their entirety: *Lettres bourgrement patriotiques de la Mère Duchêne, suivi de Journal des Femmes,* Ouzi Elyada, ed. (Paris: EDHIS, 1791). For the best study of the political perspectives of the Mère Duchêne, see Ouzi Elyada, "*La Mère Duchêne: masques populaires et guerre pamphletiare, 1789–1791,*" *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française,* no. 271 (Janvier–Mars 1988): 1–16. See also Pierre Frantz, "*Travestis poissards,*" *Revue des Sciences Humaines,* vol. LXI, no. 190 (Avril–Juin 1983): 7–20.

[47]See Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française,* vol. X, p. 267.

[48]"*Rapport de l'observateur Dutard à Garat, ministre de l'Intérieur,*" AN: F1c III Seine, 27, A. D. Schmidt, ed., *Tableaux de la Révolution française,* vol. 2, p. 84; cited in A. Tuetey, *Paris pendant la Révolution,* vol. 9, p. 712.

Figure 1.4 Women and Fish on Top. "The World Turned Upside Down." Anonymous French engraving, 18th Century. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

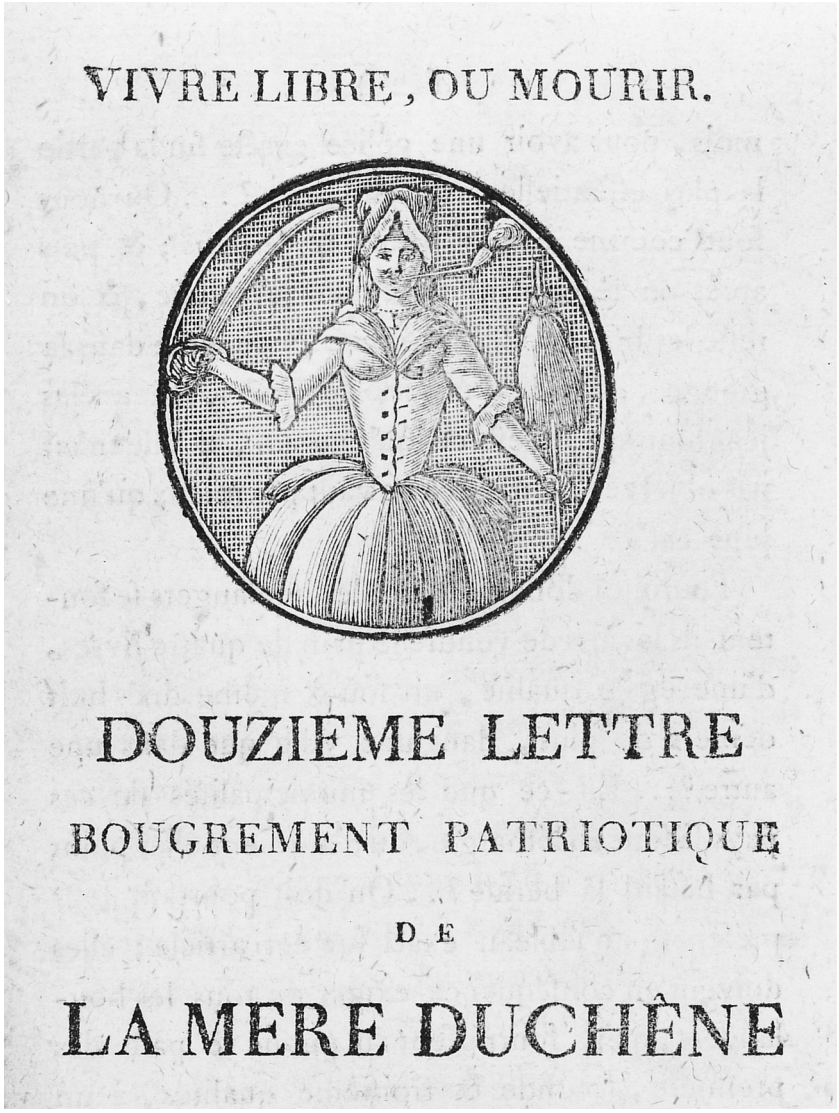

Figure 1.5 A Revolutionary Fishwife. *Douzième Lettre bougrement patriotique de la mère Duchêne (*The Twelfth Fucking Patriotic Letter of Mother Duchêne). 1791. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Library, Stanford. Palo Alto, California.

of the drunken Mme Clere on the rue Mouffetard were a conscious act of treason rather than a sign of mental derangement.

Recognition and fear of the power of women's speech, when freed from the constraints of ritualized containment, struck into the hearts of political actors on both sides of the revolutionary battle. At the intellectual pinnacle of revolutionary literary culture, Louis Sebastien Mercier, in his treatise *La Néologie,* explicitly invoked market women as a vital source of French linguistic creativity.[49] Popular oral improvisation, which knew none of the constraints of learned culture, and especially the intense poetic energies of the retailer, were the greatest source, Mercier insisted, of new words than kept the French language alive and fecund. But during the crisis of the Year II (1793–1794) such creativity was anathema to political as opposed to cultural authorities. While the republican authorities vigilantly monitored the marketplaces, planting newspapers and broadsides to sway the views of government policy on the street, royalists also agitated to shape the opinions of the popular classes.

Interestingly, despite their opposing political viewpoints, royalists and republicans alike shared a cultural agenda of imposing the authority of the written word against the spoken. As authority came to be embodied in written law rather than personal prerogative, and as printing became the chosen mode of publication, the dangers of illiteracy heightened. The unlucky Mlle Ferrand, an illiterate petty thief, found herself in much bigger trouble than she ever anticipated when she unwittingly defied the laws against emigration by evading the border at Strasbourg, purportedly to get married. Her suspicious comings and goings (probably involving the fencing of stolen goods) led to her arrest and execution for aiding the emigrés.[50] Her inability to read the new laws was not accepted as a defense. Illiteracy created disproportionate danger for women in the Year II (1793–1794).[51] Unable to read the laws now posted with unprecedented rapidity in broadside form on the streets, rather than proclaimed aloud at mass, many women of the popular classes unwittingly fell afoul of the proliferation of emergency measures.

The struggle between the written and the spoken word for cultural

[49]This treatise was composed in the 1790s. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *La Néologie* (Paris: Moussard, 1801); cited by Daniel Blake Rosenberg in, "Making Time: Origin, History, and Language in Enlightenment France and Britain," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1996, see esp., chap. 7.

[50]AN: W 268, dossier, Mlle Ferrand (an II).

[51]Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses,* pp. 215–217.

hegemony in the Parisian popular classes was thematized most explicitly in the royalist *poissarde* pamphlet, *Le Falot du peuple, ou entretiens de Madame Saumon, marchande de marée, sur le procès de Louis XVI.* In this classic argument between two fishwives—Mme Saumon and Mme Doucet—Mme Saumon claims that the King is surely guilty of treason and deserves to die. (The symbolism of Mme Saumon taking up the republican cause would not have been lost on contemporary readers, because salmon was considered a "royal" fish, one upon which the King retained special privileges. In sum, his fish had turned on him.)

Mme Doucet asks her for proof of these serious charges, and she responds that she has heard this at the tribunes of her sections, and she has a cousin in the National Guard from whom she has heard this as well. He was there on August 10, 1792, and watched the massacre of citizens by the King's private guard. Mme Doucet responds that you shouldn't believe everything you hear. She wants written proof. And so Mme Doucet suggests that they visit their local writer, a certain Monsieur du Style who can show them all that has been said in the newspapers. She has the ultimate trust in him to adjudicate the case because he had formerly been a lawyer. Monsieur du Style says:

> I occupy myself reading in order to know what is going on: you don't read anything. So much the better, and so much the worse; better because it doesn't break your brains; and worse because anyone can make you believe anything.[52]

In the end, the written word, the male writer, and the law, triumph in this story, over the insurrectionary words circulated among the old fishwives and their relations. Mme Saumon's eloquence was beginning to fail her. Here, too, as in the cases of Mme Clere and Mme Roland, when the legitimacy of one's political opinions was challenged, the first recourse was to point to what was printed in newspapers as opposed to what was heard either in drawing rooms or on the street.

Indeed, we can detect a shift in the topos of illiteracy in the *poissarde* genre over the course of the revolutionary decade. The *poissarde* plays and verse of the prerevolutionary period always cast the male writer as the butt of the fishwife's wit. Her natural eloquence trumps his literary pretensions. He is reduced to the scribe and this is how the genre produces what we might call its "authenticity effect"—we are meant to be

[52][Bellanger] *La Falot du peuple, ou entretiens de Mme Saumon, marchande de Marée, sur le procès du Louis XVI* (Paris: n.p., 1792], p. 12.

hearing the real voice of the market. In Fleury de Lescluse's *Dejeuner de la rapée* of 1755, one of the very early plays presenting the most famous of *poissardes,* Mme Angot, the local fishwives get the better of the literary pretensions of Mme Angot's daughter. The daughter, having married a money changer, now thinks herself important enough to own a library with works like the "*Metaphores d'Olive*" (i.e., Ovid's *Metamorphosis*). The joke is clearly on her, the female character who dares to pretend to read.[53]

By 1792, Mme Saumon, like the King whose fish she represents, saw her authority eclipsed by the author himself, Monsieur du Style. And in 1796, Mme Angot has another go-round with her daughter in the comic opera by Maillot, *Mme Angot, ou une poissarde parvenue.* In this postrevolutionary tale, the illiterate Mme Angot wants her daughter to marry a self-described nobleman named Girard. Her literate daughter, Nanon, wants to marry the humble, but beloved François. The play opens with a figure of female literacy—the daughter writing to her lover. A second daughter defends her sister by citing an exemplary tale she has read in history books, that of the unhappy marriage of Cleopatra to Augustus, in order to counsel her mother about the dangers of arranged marriages. To which Mme Angot replies, "*Mon Dieu, c'est donc beau d'avoir lu comme vous. Mais ça ne s'apprend que de jeunesse.*" (Roughly: "My God, it's mighty fine to be able to read like you, but you can only learn when you are young.")[54] With the help of a local notary, Nanon and François unmask the pretender Girard and spare the foolish mother social embarrassment. The literate daughters triumph over their traditionalist mother. The moral of the story, then, is that literacy and self-determination go hand in hand.

No one was more sensitive to the cultural shift from the spoken to the written word as the source of public authority during the revolutionary decade than its greatest woman writer, Germaine de Staël. Nor did any writer better perceive its consequences for eloquent women, of both the popular and the precious kinds. Staël's 1807 novel *Corinne* has most often been read as an autobiographical portrait of the woman writer as a tragically misunderstood genius, who ultimately has no place in the modern era. The woman of genius, whose brilliance is celebrated in courtly aristocratic societies, is unable to conform to the new

[53]Moore, *The Genre Poissard,* pp. 150–152.

[54]Antoine-François-Eve Maillot, *Madame Angot, ou une poissarde parvenue: opéra-comique, en deux actes, joués sur le Théâtre de l'Emulation* (Paris: Barba, an V [1796]), p. 15.

domestic roles being demanded of women in bourgeois society. She is destined to isolation, exile, and ultimately death.

But Staël's heroine, Corinne, is in fact not a writer—even though some of her works are published. She is above all an improvisational oral poet: a performance artist reputed for her spontaneous eloquence. Moreover, she may not even be a figure of aristocratic civility. Her social origins are obscure—she has no patronymic. Here are the words Staël has Corinne speak to her suitor Oswald:

> I take pride in nature's generosity. I particularly like improvisation in men and women of the people; it brings their imagination to light, though everywhere else it is hidden, developing only among us.[55]

Thus, Staël links the spontaneous eloquence of the popular classes with the imaginative wit of the most accomplished of *salonnières*, her heroine. Rising almost to Homeric, indeed mythic, stature, Corinne spontaneously recounts the glories of the Italian republic before enraptured crowds. She is the apotheosis of the traditions of female eloquence (popular and elite) that the Revolution—with its explosion of print—swept into the past.

Though Mme de Staël and Mme Roland held no great regard for one another, Staël, more than anyone else would have understood the plight of Roland—a woman of artisanal origins who had risen to the heights of political society through her wit alone. She, too, would have understood the distinction that Roland had sought to make between a "conversation" and a "meeting"—between the engagement of intellect and political plotting.

The significance of the demise of Mme Roland was not, I suspect, lost upon Staël either, as embittered as she was by her own exile from Napoleonic society. Corinne's story is the story of a world in which female oral genius no longer has a central place in cultural life. Staël has often been interpreted as suggesting that all forms of female literary talent were to be eclipsed in the modern, bourgeois world. But Staël's own career as a writer belies this conclusion. *Corinne,* the novel, was published to extraordinary success, despite the official disapprobation of the Napoleonic regime. The cultural change that Staël recorded in her

[55]Germaine de Staël, *Corinne,* Avriel H. Goldberger, trans. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987; original ed. Paris: Imprimerie des Annales des Arts et Manufactures, 1807), p. 44.

book was the downfall not of women writers, but of women as virtuosi of the spoken word, as *salonnières.*

Staël's prediction that the postrevolutionary world would witness the disappearance of the salon, and the feminine eloquence that animated it, we know in hindsight was premature. The salon as a cultural institution persisted until the opening years of the twentieth century. The ritual reception of the market women of Paris by the King of France was also restored, along with the monarchy, in 1815. But it, too, ultimately, disappeared. The last visit of fishwives to offer a greeting to the Crown occurred with the birth of the Duc de Bordeaux in 1820. A trace of this ritual remains in the republican era in the official presentation of a bouquet to the newly elected president of the French Republic.[56] And so, too, the *poissarde* genre continued until 1875, when the last of the Mme Angot plays, *La Fille de Mme Angot,* was staged in Paris.[57]

The opening of the twentieth century, however, brought with it a series of changes that definitively closed the door on the cultural world of the *précieuse* and the *poissarde.* The destruction of the traditional popular neighborhoods of Paris under Louis Napoleon rid the city of the inns and taverns of the market women and their longshoremen. These locales were supplanted by boulevard cafes. Moreover, with the institution of universal secular education and a mass penny press, female illiteracy conclusively disappeared. With it went the cultural forms that had celebrated feminine oral expression—the *poissarde* and the *précieuse.*

Female speech crimes during the French Revolution occurred at a precise conjuncture within the much broader structural transition in extraparliamentary French political culture from essentially oral to essentially written forms in the period roughly from 1640 to 1910. The era begins with the founding of the French Academy, which sought to regulate speech through written words, and ends with the advent of equal educational opportunities for men and women at the opening of the twentieth century. This transition to literacy, a long cultural *durée,* entailed what we might call a shift from a regime of rhetoric to a regime of philosophy; the transition to literacy and the hegemonic triumph of

[56]Pierre Frantz, "*Travestis poissards,*" p. 15.

[57]Louis F.-N. Clairville and Jules Claretie, *La Fille de Mme Angot opéra comique en trois actes. Paroles de Clairville, Sirandan and Koning, musique de Charles Lecoq. Edition illustrée* (Paris: F. Pols, 1875); on the fate of the *poissard* genre, see also Frantz, "*Travestis poissards,*" and Alain Fauré, *Paris Carême-Prenant: du carnaval à Paris au XIXe siècle, 1800–1914* (Paris: Hachette, 1978).

script eclipsed oral performance as the basis of cultural as well as political legitimacy.

In France this transition also coincided with the opening up of a cultural gap between men and women—differential rates of literacy and a differentiation of women's speech from male norms. In the eighteenth century, the improvised spoken word—especially its eloquent excess—was coded as a feminine cultural trait, while the written word and its power to discipline speech was viewed as the masculine rhetorical domain. The power of the written word did not supplant public speech (the theater and the political podium thrived, to be sure); rather, it came increasingly to underwrite its authority.

The spoken word in both popular political life and in popular cultural expression nonetheless remained, until the French Revolution, the more powerful of the two forms of public expression. The salon and the marketplace mirrored the academy and the court as a kind of shadow government where women ruled. This led to the invention of a fascinating set of hybrid cultural forms, most notably the *poissarde,* a means of appropriating the power of speech in written and printed form. Paradoxically, print first heightened the power of the spoken word before it eclipsed it. Thus, in 1789, an anonymous pamphlet titled *Chanson Poissarde,* boasted, "There are more words in their lungs than in the *Encyclopedia.*"[58]

But over the course of the French Revolution, with the advent of legislative democracy and the mass press, as opposed to court intrigue and popular spectacle, the written and the printed word definitively supplanted the spoken word as the source of popular legitimacy. The *poissarde* as a political form flourished, and was then rapidly marginalized as a mere cultural amusement. One now laughed as much at Mme Angot's illiteracy as one formerly had at her eloquence. One now celebrated Staël the writer as opposed to Staël the artist of conversation. The Revolution was thus a critical turning point, not in the history of literacy (which would take a century, still, to fully achieve), but for the triumph of the power of the written over the spoken word in public affairs. Public life would now be governed by writing. And women would have to find their way into literate culture or see their cultural and political power eclipsed. Caught in the scissors of this transition were the *poissardes* and the *précieuses* of the Year II, for whom eloquence had become a perilous art, indeed.

[58]*Chanson poissarde* ([Paris: n.p. 1789]).