

The Popularity of Mme de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*: The Bibliographical Evidence.

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The Popularity of Mme de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*: The Bibliographical Evidence

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Popularity of Mme de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*: The Bibliographical Evidence David Smith In recent years a great deal of research has been devoted to issues of "readership," especially to the question "who read what?" A related subject has been the popularity of individual works, notably in their own century, but also up to the present day. Tastes change over the years: a bestseller may finish in the literary graveyard, while a "sleeper" may achieve immortality. The factors affecting a work's fortunes are complex and their analysis requires the skills of the historian and the sociologist as well as the literary

scholar. No attempt will be made to investigate them here, but I shall list some of them in guise of conclusion. But as Fontenelle warned us in the *Histoire des oracles*, "Assurons nous bien du fait, avant que de nous inquiéter de la cause."¹ Indeed, it is not easy to establish an order of popularity for eighteenth-century French works. Back in 1910, in a pioneering article, Daniel Mornet established which works appeared most often in the catalogues of five hundred private libraries of the second half of the eighteenth century.² Fontenelle, *Histoire des oracles*, Première Dissertation, IV. 2 Daniel Mornet, "Les Enseignements des bibliothèques privées, 1750-1780," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 17 (1910), 449-96. Mornet found *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in 165 libraries, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* in 108, and *Manon Lescaut* in only 33. EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION, Volume 3, Number 1, October 1990 2 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION He was cautious about the validity of his findings, not least because the libraries he searched were entirely those of wealthy Parisians, and he insisted on the need to "multiplier autant que possible les enquêtes et les contrôles." In the last decade, similar studies have been made of notaries' lists of deceased persons' books in their inventaires après décès. Unfortunately, these lists are invariably incomplete, being restricted generally to the most valuable book on each shelf of a bookcase or library.³ More recently, Paul Benhamou has started studying the cabinets de lecture both in Paris and the provinces to find out what was read by those who could not afford to buy books.⁴ One of the problems he faces is determining what books may have been kept "under the counter" and thus omitted from the official lists, because they had been banned. Finally, Robert Darnton has studied bestsellers, using mainly the records of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel for the period 1769-89.⁵ Unfortunately, this is the only archive of an eighteenth-century publisher of French books to have survived almost intact, and little comparable evidence is available. These are just some of the many possible approaches, all presenting results of only partial validity and needing to be checked against each other until a clearer picture emerges. Another approach, which modern computer cataloguing is making increasingly viable, is through physical bibliography. Thorough searches can now produce lists of editions of an author's works which are probably close to complete. It is my contention that, if such lists can be drawn up for the major novels of the century, they will provide sounder evidence for the popularity of each than has hitherto been available. Even so, lists of this kind, as we shall see, raise as many problems as they solve. Specifically, I am preparing, in collaboration with Jo-Ann McEachern, a full descriptive bibliography of all editions of the writings of Mme de Graffigny, from 1745 to the present day. My original purpose 3 J. Quéniart, *Culture et société urbaines dans la France de l'Ouest au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978); M. Marion, *Recherches sur les bibliothèques privées à Paris au milieu du XVIIIe siècle (1750-1759)* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1978); and R. Chartier, *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Seuil, 1987). 4 P. Benhamou, "La lecture publique des œuvres de l'abbé Prévost à Paris et en province dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIème siècle," *Cahiers...*

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1 Fontenelle. *Histoire des oracles*. Première Dissertation, IV.

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