



Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives

Arlette Farge (Contributor) , Michel Foucault , Nancy Luxon (Editor) , Thomas Scott-Railton (Translation)

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Drunken and debauched husbands; libertine wives; vagabonding children. These and many more are the subjects of requests for confinement written to the king of France in the eighteenth century. These letters of arrest (*lettres de cachet*) from France's Ancien Régime were often associated with excessive royal power and seen as a way for the king to imprison political opponents. In *Disorderly Families*, first published in French in 1982, Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault collect ninety-four letters from ordinary families who, with the help of hired scribes, submitted complaints to the king to intervene and resolve their family disputes.

Gathered together, these letters show something other than the exercise of arbitrary royal power, and offer unusual insight into the infamies of daily life. From these letters come stories of divorce and marital conflict, sexual waywardness, reckless extravagance, and abandonment. The letters evoke a fluid social space in which life in the home and on the street was regulated by the rhythms of relations between husbands and wives, or parents and children. Most impressively, these letters outline how ordinary people seized the mechanisms of power to address the king and make demands in the name of an emerging civil order.

Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault were fascinated by the letters' explosive qualities and by how they both illustrated and intervened in the workings of power and governmentality. *Disorderly Families* sheds light on Foucault's conception of political agency and his commitment to theorizing how ordinary lives come to be touched by power. This first English translation is complete with an introduction from the book's editor, Nancy Luxon, as well as notes that contextualize the original 1982 publication and eighteenth-century policing practices.

Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives Details

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Author : Arlette Farge (Contributor) , Michel Foucault , Nancy Luxon (Editor) , Thomas Scott-Railton (Translation)

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(Translation)

From Reader Review Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives for online ebook

xDEAD ENDx says

I'm pleasantly surprised by how enjoyable and thought provoking this book is. I thought it was just going to be a collection of the *lettres de cachet* that were used as source material for *Discipline and Punish*, though it seems Foucault didn't discover any of this until 5 years about *Discipline and Punish* was published. Though the material is from that period, this book also contains essay written by Farge and Foucault (2 collaborative and 1 by each author).

The primary material and Farge and Foucault's summary of it gives a lot to think about in regards to the transition from sovereignty to biopower, the collusion of the sovereign/police, the role of education in creating a moral/law-abiding child, and the general (un)importance of the *gens de pleu*.

This is something of a hidden gem I've never seen mentioned before and in some ways links together the themes of Foucault's complete works and eras of his thought. Fascinating.

Skeetor says

I received this book through Goodreads Giveaways.

A book about, and of, lettres de cachet. Although the flowery salutations and humble closings were a bit tedious to read, I understand why they were included. The letters contained in the book are a compilation by the authors of what they felt represented the types of letters received during the years of 1728 and 1758. They are categorized into two major groups (Marital Discord, Parents and Children) with an analysis preceding each group and an analysis of these letters in general and how they affected history. The book has extensive notes, a glossary of places and a listing of names for reference.

A few of the selected letters were a bit entertaining in their descriptions of the affronts committed. Some inclusions are really a collection of letters (the initial requests for containment, requests for release, requests for continued detention, rebuttals from the accused, etc.). I found these groups of letters to render a sort of "snapshot" of time from someone's life.

The translator (Thomas Scott-Railton) decided to translate the letters into equivalent eighteenth-century English and I feel that was the best method to properly convey them.

Kevin Findley says

As someone with a B.A. in History, Disorderly Families is a fascinating look at life in France in the early to mid 18th century. Farge and Foucault have put together an amazing book that lets both the student and the casual reader understand what the world was like for the average French family in their own words.

The care taken to translate each letter is carefully laid in the Translator's Preface. Many volumes I've used over the years as a student and then as a writer doing research gloss over this or ignore it completely. Seeing

how Mr. Scott-Railton dealt with bringing these letters to life across two-and-a-half centuries is very appreciated.

The only section that needs to be rewritten or perhaps merely clarified is the first section of Marital Discord (pages 29-50). It is too long and drags the reader (this one anyway) to a screeching halt. It's a shame, because it may put off the casual reader from going on to the letters and being fascinated by these missives to the King and his agents. It would be fairly simple I think to take this information and use part of it in the Introduction (pages 19-28) and the intro to the section on Parents and Children (pages 123-138).

Finally, I should compliment Ms. Luxon on her role as editor of the book. She took what could have been a very dry and dull list of complaints and truly breathed some life into these archived letters. The publication of History textbooks needs more editors like her.

I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in French History, the study of correspondence, or Family Studies and the Law to read this. If you are looking for a non-fiction book to break up your run of novels, this might be the textbook you wish you could have read in college.

Gene Reams says

I haven't read it yet but I love history I read a lot of history books.

Glen says

I'm not the biggest fan of Foucault, but his contributions to the field of history and historiography cannot be denied.

This is a collection of letters to the King, so that he might take steps to help families. I was surprised at how old some of these miscreants were. A large fraction were over 70.

I was also struck by how similar these were to statements given to the press today. The only thing missing was talk of diversity.
