THE AFTERLIFE OF CICERO
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EDITED BY
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INSTITUTE OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
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The cover image shows a miniature of Cicero debating the nature of friendship. It comes from a manuscript containing translations of the *De Senectute* and *De Amicitia* into French by Laurent de Premierfait, dated 1460.

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AUTHOR OFFPRINT FROM THE INSTITUTE OF CLASSICAL STUDIES, LONDON
THE CATILINE CONSPIRACY AND THE CREDIBILITY OF LETTERS IN FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY ART

NINA L. DUBIN

No one conspires today and the whole world loves. – Voltaire

The afterlife of Cicero took an unexpected turn on 20 November 2014, when the Texan Republican Ted Cruz took to the Senate floor to denounce President Barack Obama’s planned executive action protecting millions of undocumented immigrants from deportation. Cruz’s address reprised Cicero’s famous oration, delivered in Rome more than 2,000 years ago against Catiline, whom the consul accused of conspiring to overthrow the republic, burn down the city, and murder its inhabitants. Alarmingly, Cruz’s adaptation substituted for Catiline’s intent to commit mass carnage Obama’s anticipated act of mass clemency. Commentators seized on the perversity of the performance. Yet beyond highlighting Cruz’s appetite for political theatre, his means of undermining an act of legislation even before it had been announced also revealed a canny grasp of the calculus behind Cicero’s oration.

In the first of four extant speeches on the subject of the conspiracy, Cicero the consul publicly addressed Catiline the senator, demanding to know how the latter had the gall to remain in the midst of a people who hated and feared him, now that his plot had been discovered. ‘Immortal gods’, he declared in the Senate, ‘where in the world are we? What country do we inhabit? […] in this, the most revered and important council in the world, there exist men who are plotting the massacre of all of us and the destruction of this city – and even of the entire world.’ At the time of the speech, Cicero’s sole evidence against Catiline consisted of a packet of anonymous letters informing various senators of the conspiracy. The power of Cicero’s oratory thus lay in direct proportion to the absence of proof. Hindered from taking legal measures, he instead endeavoured to demolish Catiline’s credibility: to confront him with his reputed villainy and with the attendant loss of his social and political capital. ‘A short while ago, you walked into the senate’, Cicero recounted. Who among those present ‘offered you a single word of greeting? […] And what about the fact that, when you entered the chamber’, all those gathered ‘left the area of benches near you empty and unoccupied the moment you took your seat? How, I ask you, do you feel about that?’

Acknowledging that some in the Senate doubted the accuracy of his charges, Cicero demanded that Catiline and his cabal remove themselves from Rome,

1 Voltaire, *Rome sauvée, ou Catilina*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet, and Jacques Joseph Marie Decroix, 92 vols (Kehl 1785–89) IV (1785) 206. All translations from the French are my own except otherwise noted.


5 Cicero, *Cat.* 1.16 (n. 3, above) 162.

the better to hasten the evolution of secret plot into open brigandage. Indeed, the oration prompted the senator’s flight to his rebel camp, and it was only a matter of time before warfare ensued, Catiline perished, and his fellow conspirators were executed.

Cicero’s first oration In Catilinam thus furnished posterity with a lesson, among other things, in the art of discrediting one’s foes. Perhaps at no time has the value of the speech as such been more frequently ratified than in the eighteenth century. In his Reflections on the Revolution in France, a bestseller that was swiftly translated into French, Edmund Burke painted the French Revolutionaries as a ‘monstrous medley of […] persons, in comparison of whom Catiline would be thought scrupulous’. Yet it was particularly across the Channel that references to the conspiracy abounded. Revolutionary orators alternatively denounced France’s émigrés as Catilines, used the epithet against one another, and fended off assaults on their credibility by comparing themselves to Cicero on the eve of Catilina’s planned assassination spree.

Such invocations reflect what historians have described as the Revolution’s obsession with conspiracy. Beginning in 1789, hundreds of newspapers and thousands of pamphlets fanned fears of an “aristo-ministerial” plot directed against the liberty of the nation; as one such media outlet declared in 1790, ‘France is surrounded by Catilinas’. They also reveal the unparalleled influence of the Catiline conspiracy on eighteenth-century political thought and revolutionary sentiment alike. ‘How many times’, recalled Camille Desmoulins, ‘did I embrace Cicero, my eyes wet with tears’. As Harold Talbot Parker has shown, an overwhelming number of Revolutionaries traced their love of republican antiquity to their classical education in collèges that familiarized them with both the orations of Cicero (whose eloquence they were trained to emulate) and Sallust’s history of the Catiline conspiracy. According to Parker’s tabulations, the Revolutionaries cited no classical author more frequently than Cicero.


Strikingly, this spirit of Ciceromania did not extend to the period’s visual arts. Few representations exist of antiquity’s most famous philosopher-statesman, Rome’s *pater patriae*.\(^{14}\)

Consider, in contrast, the massive popularity of Brutus, a revolutionary icon whose likeness circulated by way of paintings, prints, sculptures, altars, playing cards, plates, porcelain, and buttons. Similarly, scenes from the lives of Marius, Cato, Curius Dentatus, Corlianus, and Belisarius competed for space on the walls of Paris’ biennial Salon exhibitions.\(^{15}\) Yet it was not until under Napoleon, when the state commissioned a statue by Jean-Antoine Houdon of Cicero denouncing Catiline, that a major public artwork commemorated the subject.\(^{16}\) Why the discrepancy between the seeming ubiquity of allusions to the plot and its scarcity as a subject of visual representation? Granted, the sheer accessibility of Cicero to eighteenth-century readers – the proliferation of publications disseminating his extensive body of letters, orations, philosophical writings, as well as accounts of his life and career – in ensuring the ascendancy of his reputation also did damage to it. Hailed by Enlightenment thinkers as one of their own – a ‘virtuous man’ of ‘sensibilité’, wrote Voltaire, ‘a philosophe who knew doubt’ – Cicero also incurred charges of falsity, of opportunism, of complicity with tyranny, of employing his oratorical talents in the service of self-advancement.\(^{17}\)

Especially in the tumult of the Revolutionary period, when the changing tides of public opinion threatened to erode even the most seemingly solid of reputations, artists seeking unimpeachable heroes to commemorate evidently considered not even Cicero a safe bet.

This essay seeks an answer to the question above in the light of the few artworks to have represented the conspiracy – most remarkable among them Jean-François Janinet’s etching and engraving from 1792, after a drawing from a year earlier by Jean-Guillaume Moitte (Fig. 1). Though exceptional for reasons that will be outlined below, the print brings to bear on its subject conventions that recur in the handful of objects to depict the subject – conventions that might best be described as aspiring toward an iconography of credulity. Inspiring confidence, foreclosing doubt: such imperatives were as crucial to Cicero’s victory over Catiline as they were to the success of the Revolution. Yet in translating such imperatives into visual form, artists depicting the conspiracy risked underscoring less the triumph of virtuous belief over unpatriotic suspicion than the elusiveness of trust as a social adhesive.

*The Catiline Conspiracy* was nothing, then, if not a gamble (Fig. 1). The print portrays an episode notably absent from Sallust’s history, but rather drawn from Plutarch’s *Life of Cicero* (a far more favourable account of the consul’s role in the conspiracy’s defeat). The powerful patrician Marcus Crassus, shown seated at left, having received the anonymously delivered packet of letters detailing the conspiracy, has arrived along with his allies Marcus Marcellus and Scipio

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\(^{14}\) Plutarch notes the bestowal of this title upon Cicero following his defeat of the conspiracy in *Life of Cicero* 23.6 (n. 4, above) 104.


\(^{16}\) Houdon’s statue, commissioned by the Senate, was completed in 1803–04, as was François Frédéric Lemot’s statue of Cicero, commissioned in 1800 for the courtroom of the Palais Royal. Plaster versions of both are conserved in the Musée du Louvre.

Metellus for a midnight meeting at the home of the consul. Crassus is shown reading aloud from a letter while Cicero, gesturing skyward, responds at right. Beside him in the central background, their eyes fixed on his grave countenance, appear Marcellus and Metellus. The figure leaning over Crassus’ shoulder is likely to be Cicero’s wife, Terentia, whose attendants huddle at right. Mars, the god of war, ominously appears in the form of the statue at left.

Beyond the distinctiveness of its subject matter, the work also poses a rare example of an ambitious neoclassical print. Among the most accomplished engravers of the century, Janinet was one of the few printmakers who sought to overcome the divide between a medium associated with commercial profit and modern technology on the one hand, and on the other, neoclassicism’s project of recuperating an ideal of ancient purity. Trained as a sculptor, his collaborator Moitte was also a graphic artist who worked with some of the most prominent Parisian printmakers and publishers. The antique frieze format displayed in the print – the theatrical placement of figures against a dark ground – drew on the fascination with Etruscan vases and Pompeian murals and counted among Moitte’s most popular compositions, works executed in sepia or Chinese ink and wash. Also in vogue was the print’s ‘crayon manner’ technique. The new art form, an innovation in late eighteenth-century print production that enabled printmakers to imitate the colours and textures of the original drawings, appealed both to a connoisseur’s delight in trompe l’œil and to an expansive market for imitation luxuries.

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22 K. Smentek, ‘ “An exact imitation acquired at little expense”: marketing color prints in eighteenth-century
The inventor of a multiple-plate full colour aquatint technique that he famously showcased in a 1777 portrait in wash manner of Marie Antoinette, Janinet specialized in *douceur de vivre* scenes celebrating femininity, frivolity, and fashion. *The Catiline Conspiracy* would thus have turned heads as a bold reversal from his recent output. *La Comparaison*, from just a few years earlier, in which two female friends – one gratuitously sporting the latest in millinery design – bear their secrets, exemplifies the artist’s taste for the titillating and modish (Fig. 2). Befitting the work’s embrace of the art of appearance, Janinet has employed his signature wash manner technique. The effect is to lend the reproduced image the deceiving look of the gouache original by Nicolas Lavreince, a Swedish artist with a predilection for the racy. Both for their prurient subject matter and for their recourse to a pleasurable duplicity, prints such as these hardly presaged their maker’s imminent turn to a colourless, neoclassical severity.23

With the events of 1789, Janinet reinvented himself, trading in his prints of *elegantes* for ones chronicling the Revolution.24 By 1791, Janinet had ceased collaborating with Lavreince, having

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23 See the examples of such prints by Janinet and other colour engravers in Grasselli, *Colorful impressions* (n. 22, above) and Carlson and Ittman, *Regency to Empire* (n. 19, above).

more prudently replaced him with Moitte, whose pared-down classicism made him a favourite with the Revolutionary state; the artist’s public commissions included designing and sculpting the pediment of the Panthéon, which he completed in 1793. At the Salon exhibition of that year, Janinet exhibited *The Catiline Conspiracy* along with a second print, also after Moitte, featuring *The Death of Lucretia*. Unlike Cicero’s salvation of Rome, Lucretia’s suicide following her rape by Sextus Tarquinius inspired numerous representations in the period (the heroine’s embodiment of female virtue rendering her a compelling antidote to the devious seductresses of old regime visual culture). Together, *The Death of Lucretia* and *The Catiline Conspiracy* meaningfully bookend a history of republican Rome: if the former recalls the republic’s roots in a rape that moved its founders to overthrow a tyrannical regime, the latter treats a moment at the twilight of the republic’s existence, when Rome teetered on the brink of destruction.

Of course, in commemorating such a history, the prints implicitly acknowledged the fragility of the Republic of France, constituted on 21 September 1792. Janinet reproduced Moitte’s drawings before a backdrop of mounting belief in the existence of a ‘grand conspiracy’ – a master plot to overthrow the patrie. National threats ranged from the invading Austro-Prussian army’s campaign to restore the monarchy to the political instability resulting from a polarized National Assembly. It is also the case that Moitte produced the drawings for reproduction in 1791, months after Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution*, and the dangers the prints thematize include efforts both domestic and abroad to dissolve confidence in the new state. Simply put, while *The Death of Lucretia* reminded Salon viewers of the Revolution’s commitment to restoring a state of virtue, *The Catiline Conspiracy* endeavoured to promote the Revolution’s credibility. More specifically, as this essay proposes, such an endeavour was both concentrated in and complicated by the central motif of Crassus’ letter.

If Moitte’s drawing emblematised the conspiracy fears that gripped Parisians in 1791, its reproduction coincided with the metastasis of such anxieties into a crisis of trust. Following the King’s flight to Varennes in 1791, belief in a ‘grand conspiracy’ intensified with the confiscation of his secret papers, including his handwritten statement that his support of the Revolution had been insincere, as well as troves of correspondence with émigrés and royalists abroad. Not only did the discovery of Louis’ hidden armoire de fer in the Tuileries provide justification to the movement to try the King; the introduction on 11 December 1792 of the seized letters as evidence of his guilt counted among the most powerful moments in the trial. The monarch’s disgrace (and that, posthumously, of Mirabeau, whose complicity with the monarch the documents brought to light) may also be viewed as the climax of a drama over letters that began in 1789, when the newly formed Paris National Guard began intercepting all ‘suspicious’ mail, thus setting in motion an anguished debate (one all too familiar today) over the sanctity of privacy.


26 See on this climate n. 10, above.


29 B. M. Shapiro, *Revolutionary justice in Paris, 1789–1790* (Cambridge 1993) 48–55. The revolutionary state thus availed itself of one of the most widely condemned practices of the old regime – its surveillance of postal communication. See J. Caplan, *Postal culture in Europe*, 1500–1800 (Oxford 2016) 23–52, 95–123. Mirabeau’s perceived devotion to the revolution had been the subject of a recent print. Published in 1792 and titled *Mirabeau arrive aux Champs Élysées*, the print – by Louis-Joseph Masquelier after Jean-Michel Moreau – is further notable in that the luminaries it features, gathered in honour of Mirabeau’s arrival on the banks of the Elysian Fields, include...
attention to the interception of thousands of private letters by Revolutionary authorities hoping to submit ‘proof’ of counter-revolutionary sentiments to the public it sought to propagandize.\(^{30}\) More broadly, fear of the secrets contained in letters evidenced what Timothy Tackett has described as the collapse of trust in the wake of the king’s betrayal: ‘with all the bonds of Old Regime society and culture progressively overthrown, there was an increasing fluidity of identity, a growing uncertainty as to who one was, what one could rely on, and whom one could trust’.\(^{31}\)

Tackett’s description – with some revision – equally lends itself to Cicero’s Rome, governed by a deeply factionalized Senate and mired in political, social, and economic unrest. Sallust’s account of the conspiracy, widely read in the eighteenth century, presents Catiline as the face of an age of dissemblance, when Romans tended ‘to have one thought locked in their breast, another ready on their tongue; to value friendships and enmities not on their own merits but by the standard of self-interest, and to show a good front rather than a good heart’. The rise of Catiline – plagued by charges of murder, plunder, and debauchery – mirrored Rome’s corruption following its Mediterranean conquests, the republic’s transformation ‘from the noblest and the best’ into ‘the worst and the most infamous’. Economic instability – ‘debt was enormous throughout all lands’, writes Sallust – together with social turmoil created the conditions for the Conspiracy.\(^{32}\) For Salon viewers well versed in one of antiquity’s most famous chapters, the atmosphere of suspenseful uncertainty conjured in Janinet’s print would thus have seemed doubly familiar, its emotional climate of dread vivifying the deterioration of trust witnessed in both Catilinarian Rome and Revolutionary France.

That Moitte opted to treat the Conspiracy through the lens of a deepening deficit of trust may be gleaned from his choice to portray the unexpected arrival in Cicero’s home of the epistle-bearing Crassus. The event described by Plutarch also appears in Charles Rollin’s twelve-volume Histoire romaine (1738–48), which was reprinted well into the following century. A financier, former consul, and torchbearer of the so-called populares, Crassus – whose massive wealth made him one of Rome’s most powerful creditors – was possessed, writes Rollin, of ‘insatiable avidity’ and employed every ‘injustice’ and ‘odious method’ to enrich himself. Rumour had it that along with Caesar, Crassus had previously conspired with Catiline to massacre Rome’s principal senators and become dictator.\(^{33}\) According to Rollin, Crassus arrived at Cicero’s home ‘in the middle of the night’ and,

having caused him to be called up, put into his hand a packet of letters, that had been brought to him after supper by a man unknown. Amongst these letters there was one for Crassus himself, but without a name; the rest were directed to different persons. Crassus having opened his, and seeing that he was advised to quit Rome, because Catilina was soon to make a great slaughter in it; struck with horror and dread, and being desirous to obviate the suspicions which his long union with the Chief of the conspiracy might occasion, he went immediately to carry all those letters to the Consul.\(^{34}\)

Fearful that guilt by association would destroy his already damaged credibility, Crassus hurried to his rival’s home, letters in hand. Of all the moments that Moitte could have represented, he chose Cicero.

\(^{30}\) Hesse, ‘La preuve par la lettre’ (n. 28, above) 642.

\(^{31}\) Tackett, ‘Conspiracy obsession’ (n. 10, above) 713 and 706–08 on conspiracy reports following the flight to Varennes.


\(^{33}\) Charles Rollin, The Roman history from the foundation of Rome to the Battle of Actium, 3rd edn, 10 vols (London 1768) VII (1768) 316, 318; Sallust 17.4 (above, n. 32) 47; Plutarch, Life of Cicero 15.3 (n. 4, above) 97.

\(^{34}\) Rollin, The Roman history (n. 33, above) 516.
the one in which Cicero’s salvation of the republic hinged upon his suspension of mistrust in an inherently untrustworthy source.

Doubt, fear, dread: eighteenth-century viewers would have been primed to empathize with Cicero’s burden, all the more so given the centrality of the letter, its significance as engine of the Conspiracy’s drama compounded by the complex associations the medium accrued over the course of the eighteenth century. If the print coincided with Revolutionary postal politics, so too did it belong to the age of the epistolary novel. As Moitte’s composition underscores, letters secretly sent and intercepted loom large in the Conspiracy. The morning after Crassus’ visit, Cicero calls an emergency session, gives the letters to their addressees and has the Senators read them aloud. The Conspiracy is finally foiled when the Allobroges – a Celtic tribe Catiline hoped to recruit – having secretly consulted with Cicero, solicit incriminating letters from the Conspirators and surrender them to the Roman army. The guilty authors, confronted with the proof of their crimes, are forced to identify their seals and handwriting, before their letters are read aloud in the Senate. Similar plotlines appear in eighteenth-century novels.

Yet if the wildly popular genre of epistolary fiction taught readers anything, it was that letters served as unreliable media of exchange, emotional and otherwise. The discovery, theft, forgery, replication, and circulation of private letters to unintended audiences routinely occur not only in epistolary novels, including such widely read examples as Montesquieu’s *Les lettres persanes* (1721) and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782), but also in such pivotal works from the previous century as Madame de La Fayette’s *La princesse de Clèves* (published anonymously in 1678) and Honoré d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée* (1607–27). By the end of the eighteenth century, acceptance of the uncertain truth-value of missives had become enough of a commonplace that the genre of fake letter collections flourished alongside authentic ones. When a reviewer of one such volume (*Lettres originales de Madame la comtesse du Barry*), writing in 1779, characterized the spurious correspondence as ‘all the more true for having been invented’, he expressed the cognitive capacities of a public that had been trained to reconcile the private missive’s claim to sincerity and intimacy with its potential for fraudulence. Janinet’s print, exploiting its audience’s complex relationship with the epistolary, placed viewers in a position akin to that of their ancient Roman counterparts. For as anyone with a classical education knew, the mysterious missives received by Crassus occasioned not only terror but also disbelief in their authenticity, which persisted until the following month, when hard proof of the conspiracy finally arrived in the form of the sealed letters retrieved from the Allobroges.

From the time of the Great Fear of 1789, when anticipation of an aristocrat-led invasion consumed the capital, it was this aspect of the Conspiracy – the tension between the reality of the plot and the lack of empirical evidence – that resonated most profoundly with Revolutionaries. In October 1791, it incited debate in the Legislative Assembly over the potential threat posed by France’s aristocratic émigrés. Conceding that he had no proof of a plot against the Revolution, the deputy Pierre Victurnien Vergniaud nonetheless persuaded the assembly to declare the émigrés conspirators. Casting their apparent inaction as a ‘profound dissimulation’, Vergniaud conjured an image of the émigrés secretly rallying the seditious to their ‘fatal coalition’, like Catiline before them. ‘I hear a voice’, he declared, ‘that cries, where is the legal proof …? When you produce it, then the time will come to punish the guilty […] Oh, you who use such language, were not in the

35 The two, as Hesse observes, can hardly be separated; see Hesse, ‘La preuve par la lettre’ (n. 28, above) 642. The print also coincided with the waning of the epistolary age. For an account of the decline in these years of the epistolary novel, see L. Versini, *Le Roman épistolaire* (Paris 1979), 84–99.
37 Quoted in C. Crowston, *Credit, fashion, sex: economies of regard in old regime France* (Durham and London 2013) 92. The genre continued to thrive, as noted by Hesse, who discusses the Thermidor-era use of fabricated letters to complete the disrepute of Revolutionaries. See Hesse, ‘La preuve par la lettre’ (n. 28, above) 641.
Roman senate when Cicero denounced the conspiracy of Catiline! You would have demanded legal proof from him as well! [...] Rome would have been pillaged and you and Catiline would have reigned over its ruins! With the Revolution’s radicalization, the conspiracy gave ammunition to those advocating for the identification of ‘traitors’ on premises other than those of legal evidence.

It is thus no surprise that Janinet’s print meditates on the problem of proof, the letter in Crassus’ hand serving not as hard evidence of the plot but rather as an anxiety-inducing substitute for it. At the same time, the print posits a direct trajectory from the anonymous note to Catiline’s downfall. Literally, the letter that Crassus reads records Rome’s destiny, for inscribed on it are fragments – miniscule, and thus barely decipherable – of the oration against Catiline that Cicero would deliver the next day. These include the speech’s famous inaugural words – *Quo usque tandem* – extracted from the oration’s interrogatory opening: ‘How far, I ask you, Catiline, do you mean to stretch our patience? How much longer will your frenzy continue to frustrate us?’

It may seem nonsensical, this all-but-invisible conflation of a letter detailing the conspiracy with Cicero’s impending speech. Yet the conflation, albeit surreptitiously, stabilizes the insecure medium of the anonymous note. It renders the document no longer a mere stand-in for concrete evidence but rather the ennobled precursor to a powerful oration that in turn triggered the events leading to Rome’s salvation.

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38 Stephens, *The principal speeches* (n. 9, above) I 258, 260.

39 With the aid of a loupe, the following phrases appear upside down on the letter’s folded, upper portion: *Quo usque tandem* [...] *patentia* [...] *Nos autem fortes viri*. I remain immensely grateful to Hérica Valladares for assisting me in their identification. Cicero, *Cat.* 1.1 (n. 3, above) 157.
Janinet’s print was not the only artwork of its day to evince a preoccupation with proof. Exhibited at the same Salon was Jean-Joseph Taillasson’s painting portraying the revival of Paulina, Seneca’s widow, on the heels of her attempted suicide (Fig. 3). Paulina had resolved to end her life following the death of her husband, whose suicide was commanded by Nero. As Tacitus recounts, learning of Paulina’s intentions and keen on limiting the consequences of his perceived cruelty, the Emperor ordered that her opened veins be bandaged.\(^{40}\) Taillasson garnered criticism for the overly theatrical depiction of the imperial messenger, and indeed, so intent seems the artist upon spotlighting the presentation of proof that the hysterical brandishing of the emperor’s decree competes for attention with the sight of the dying Paulina.\(^{41}\) More famously, Jacques-Louis David’s *Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* of 1789 (a picture to which I shall return) depicts the republican hero in the aftermath of his sons’ execution, clutching the letter incriminating them for conspiring against the republic (Fig. 4).

Both David’s painting and Taillasson’s, then, share a notable commitment to including in their depictions of questionable actions the documents signalling their legitimacy. This parading of written evidence, of official decree, performs the lawfulness of the deeds depicted in the spirit of a bureaucratic state’s will to transparency.\(^{42}\) Yet such insistence on documentation also reads as a nervous attempt to foreclose doubt over the justness of controversial choices. In both cases, the


display of evidence, the invocation of abstract law, circumvents the operations of trust that would otherwise be necessitated.

Conversely, as we have seen, Moitte’s portrayal of the conspiracy depicts not the moment when Cicero recuperates proof of the plot, but rather an uncertain interval when the only evidence available is immanently disputable. By dwelling on the most dubious of epistolary evidence, delivered by one of the least sympathetic of messengers, the print places its audience in the vicarious position of undertaking a leap of faith – of buying into the letter’s claims. Meaningfully so, for the salvation of France’s new order demanded such an act of collective trust, a willingness to believe in the Revolution despite mounting evidence of its vulnerability.

No such evidence plagued the Revolution more than the assignat, the state’s troubled monetary currency, and as a medium of exchange that both demanded and defied credulity, the financial instrument bears a conceptual resemblance to Crassus’ letter. As critics well understood – not least among them, Burke – the key to destroying the Revolution, to weakening the state and precipitating its bankruptcy, lay in discrediting its new paper money. Much like Cicero making a spectacle of Catiline’s friendlessness, Burke trumpeted France’s failure to compel even a single European country to invest in its currency. ‘Credit, properly speaking, they have none’, he wrote of the Revolutionaries. Painting the new state as a scam, Burke characterized its money as ‘discredited paper securities’ circulating in lieu of inherently valuable coins, as a fiction backed by no actual assets – in other words, fake proof of wealth.43

The assignat, as Rebecca L. Spang has recently argued, lay at the heart of the Revolution’s crisis of credibility. Not only did the Revolution’s success rest on reversing the nation’s ‘political-emotional shortage of trust’; what is more, the state’s effort at doing so was concentrated in its currency. 44 Recognitio of the assignat’s legitimacy was understood as a marker of faith, the health of the currency serving as the ultimate safeguard against the prospect – relished by the émigrés – of national bankruptcy. The Revolutionaries faced the imperative of igniting confidence in the assignats by presenting them not merely as signs of the country’s wealth, but rather as skepticism-overriding proof of its reality.

Meant to rekindle social trust, the assignats nonetheless threatened its collapse. For one, their dissemination risked stirring memories – still vivid – of the calamitous Mississippi Bubble, occasioned seven decades earlier by John Law’s introduction of paper money. In an effort to ward off such comparisons, the Revolutionaries presented the assignats as tied to the worth of former church properties that had been nationalized – that is, as a cross between movable wealth and the solid value of land. Even following its evolution into legal tender, the assignat retained its designation as interest-bearing income, the better to enhance its credibility. Such measures reflect a vision of the assignat as a trust-restoring balm for a society in need of cohesion. Replenishing the national treasury and in turn securing the new state depended on compelling a perception of the value of the assignat as reassuringly backed by stable resources.45

Janinet’s print vivifies this climate of economic and social mistrust along with its antidote: an infusion of belief. The all-important letter in Crassus’ hand allegorizes the urgency of giving credence to mere paper. Whereas the documents wielded in Taillasson’s Paulina and David’s Brutus assert the law of, and compel submission to, a powerful state apparatus, Crassus’ letter – previewing Cicero’s speech – makes a plea for trust in lieu of imposing compliance. This particular distinction between the paintings and the print is one of no small historical relevance, for it

43 Burke, Reflections (n. 8, above) 337, 56.
44 R. L. Spang, Stuff and money in the time of the French Revolution (Cambridge, MA 2015) 74. Richard Taws has recently argued that the assignat’s inherent instability paradoxically boosted its legitimacy for a public that no longer trusted in claims to permanence. See R. Taws, The politics of the provisional: art and ephemera in revolutionary France (University Park 2013) 13–41.
45 Spang, Stuff and money (n. 44, above) esp. 57–209.
replicates the very conflict that beset the state’s fiscal policy: whether to regulate the currency and enforce the use of assignats – effectively coercing the nation’s trust – or to recognize the sovereignty of liberty, of individual choice, in commerce as in all aspects of social life.46 (As noted above, it was precisely the tension between what Barry Shapiro describes as ‘repressive … justice’ and ‘notions of individual rights’ that played out in the postal service, the state’s effort to monitor correspondence conflicting with its desire to respect the ‘inviolability of letters’.)47

The print, in understanding itself as an instrument for inspiring the nation’s belief, for marshalling confidence in the new order, followed in the footsteps of numerous works contributed by Revolutionary artists – chief among them, Moitte. A year before completing the composition for The Catiline Conspiracy, the sculptor-draftsman had taken part in preparations for the Festival of the Federation – an event that brought some 300,000 participants to the Champ de Mars on the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. The grisaille friezes Moitte designed for an arc de triomphe erected in wood for the occasion commemorated the taking of the civic oath by members of the National Guard and the fall of the Bastille; the patriots he depicted include the participants in a 7 September 1789 procession – headed by Madame Moitte – of the wives and daughters of artists (including Madame David) to the National Assembly at Versailles, where, in the spirit of their ancient Roman female counterparts, they donated their jewels for the benefit of the nation. Moitte’s designs, not to mention the festival itself, reflect the state’s use of the arts as a means of inculcating a new harmonious Revolutionary citizenry – of fulfilling, as Mona Ozouf writes, ‘a desire for union’.

46 Spang, Stuff and money (n. 44, above) 182–90.
47 Shapiro, Revolutionary justice in Paris (n. 29, above) 48 and 48–55 on the postal dramas of 1789.
Echoing Moitte’s classical friezes of a year earlier, *The Catiline Conspiracy* took part in an effort to galvanize the nation’s trust, but at a considerable risk. Mail – the vagaries of the post – constituted a favoured subject of eighteenth-century visual representation, culminating by the last decades of the old regime in a torrent of pictures showing women reading or dispatching love letters. Janinet’s print would likely have put Salon viewers in mind of the conventions of epistolary pictures, especially given that one such work hung in the same exhibition. A print by Louis-Charles Ruotte after a painting attributed to Jean-Honoré Fragonard, it features a woman gazing at a portrait of her beloved while holding his letter (Fig. 5). Her careless posture and dreamy expression connote a lover’s propensity for self-delusion – the risks associated with placing one’s trust in letters. As a traditional symbol of fidelity, the dutifully seated canine beside the portrait plays the role of ironic foil to the male correspondent, casting further aspersions on the absent lover’s credibility.49

Epistolary images like Ruotte’s, widely disseminated in the second half of the century, were calculated to stir apprehension of the uncertainty of trust relations, typically between a lover and an absent beloved, but also between a letter-writer or recipient and her confidante.50 Janinet was no stranger to the epistolary motif. His prints after Lavreince include two epistolary scenes, both


of which playfully obscure the boundary between a trusted friend and a treacherous one. On the surface, Le petit conseil (Fig. 6) seems to portray a straightforward interaction between two intimates discussing a love letter. Yet the differentiation of the seated woman, in possession of the letter, from her standing companion hints at a potential imbalance, playing on period adages about friendship and love being equally illusory. Similarly, the struggle in L’Indiscrétion between two women over a love letter animates perceptions of the ever-present possibility for a faithful friend to metamorphose into a dissembling con (Fig. 7). In both cases, the relationship between the two female protagonists remains no less enigmatic than that between the seated women and the absent lovers. Once more, Janinet’s use of colour print technologies, in permitting his prints to resemble something they are not, underscores the point. In aping the delicate effects of the drawings they reproduce, the prints remind viewers of the human susceptibility to mistake appearance for truth.

The hovering presence of Terentia in The Catiline Conspiracy reinforces the associations of epistolary exchange with the precariousness of trust relations. Cicero’s future ex-wife, Terentia, had a reputation for being, as Plutarch puts it, ‘not generally submissive or unadventurous by nature but a woman who … in Cicero’s own words … more readily participated in his political deliberations than allowed him a share in the management of the household’. When Terentia left him years later, Plutarch continues, ‘Cicero’s house was stripped of everything and abandoned with many major unpaid debts’. The print implicitly acknowledges Terentia’s purportedly compromised motivations. It places her in a role familiar from seventeenth-century Dutch love letter pictures (a genre coveted by French artists and connoisseurs), including Gerard Terborch’s Curiosity, which rotated through some of the most prominent collections in eighteenth-century Paris (Fig. 8). In such works, the motif of a figure peering over the shoulder of a letter-reader often blurs the line between confidante and voyeur, much as the paintings themselves preclude certainty in the credibility of letters and the trustworthiness of those who send them.

As such precedents underscore, epistolary pictures had long trained viewers to question the veracity of paper sentiments, a lesson that attendants at the Salon of 1793 could not have failed to apprehend. Ruotte’s print exemplifies the genre’s treatment of letters as dubious paper goods, associated with the potential for trickery. Such works, more than emblematizing the expansion of epistolary culture, may be considered symptomatic of what one commentator, writing from the vantage point of 1801, called ‘the papered century’. The phrase, while encompassing epistolary exchange, also evokes the unprecedented circulation of monetary instruments, from stock certificates to credit and debt notes: in other words, the Regency-era traffic in essentially fictive paper, remembrance of which the Revolutionaries were so determined to forestall. For chroniclers of ‘the papered century’, epistolary instruments posed dangers similar to those attributed to newfangled forms of currency. In Montesquieu’s Lettres persanes, to cite one popular example, the false avowals of love and fidelity received by the novel’s protagonist resemble the unreliable promissory notes that fuelled the Mississippi Bubble.

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51 On sceptical attitudes towards love, friendship, and social commerce in general see F. Gerson, L’Amitié au xviiie siècle (Paris 1974) 93–123.
52 On the significance of such duplicity in Revolution-era colour prints, see Taws, Politics of the provisional (n. 44, above) 119–41.
53 Plutarch, Life of Cicero 20.3, 41.3 (n. 4, above) 101, 120.
Just as irrepressible memories of Regency-era folly menaced the salvific promise of the assignat, a similar spectre haunted The Catiline Conspiracy. The artwork served as a powerful allegory of the dangers facing Revolutionary France, yet, together, the maker of the print and its epistolary focus threatened to recall the disreputable pastimes of the old order. Despite the neoclassical idiom, the print undermined its own effort to channel a history painting’s commitment to abstract, universal, timeless ideals. Endeavouring to promote the shared values of a cohesive civic sphere, it registered the inscrutable workings of hidden agendas. To represent the Catiline conspiracy was ultimately to tell the tale not of a robust body politic but rather of the brittleness of trust in private life, and thus in the public sphere as well. And there, in essence, lay the problem with the event as a subject for Revolutionary art. On the one hand, as the most paradigmatic of conspiracies, it exercised an unrelenting grip on eighteenth-century political imaginations. On the other hand, the subject bore the weight of, and ineluctably triggered, old regime habits of interpretation.

Significantly, old regime sources inevitably read the Catiline conspiracy through the lens of their own understanding of court politics as mediated – like elite culture more broadly – by conspiracy, plot, and intrigue.\(^5^7\) Consider, for instance, the account offered in François-Joachim Duport du Tertre’s 10-volume Histoire générale des conjurations, published between 1754

\(^{57}\) See on this score P. R. Campbell’s argument that the eighteenth-century ‘social system was the political system’ and that the conspiratorial culture of the old regime thus permeated politics and court society alike, in ‘Perceptions of conspiracy on the eve of the French Revolution’, in Conspiracy in the French Revolution (n. 10, above) 15–41 (21).
and 1760 – a narrative that appears as indebted to a libertine novel as it is to Sallust. The work presents Catiline as a money-borrowing rake who basked ‘continually in the pleasures of amour’ as well as a master dissimulator: ‘Obligated to deal with persons of different characters, he was so adept at accommodating himself to the mores of each that he was equally pleasing to all.’ Suffice it to say, such characteristics comprised the hallmarks of a French courtier. Likewise, Sempronia – one of the women recruited by Catiline to join his cause and known for her hearty sexual appetite – would have been entirely at home at the court of Louis XV (‘no one danced with more grace […] her conversation was the most amusing’; ‘depending on circumstance she spoke wonderfully the language of tenderness or that of libertinage’; she was ‘little scrupulous in the means of acquiring money’).58 Relishing the inseparability of political and amorous intrigue, Duport du Tertre emphasizes the turbulent love affair between Quintus Curius and the unsavoury Fulvia who, having drawn out his secrets, shared her knowledge of the conspiracy with Cicero (‘Thus it was a woman devoid of reputation who preserved Rome from the greatest of evils’).59 The terms the author employs to describe the opulent residences of Rome’s elites – le luxe, la mollesse & la volupté (‘luxury, softness, sensuality’) – evoke contemporaneous

58 François-Joachim Duport du Tertre, Histoire générale des conjurations, conspirations, et révolutions célèbres, tant anciennes que modernes, 10 vols (Paris 1754–1760) I (1762; new edn.) 52, 63. Sallust includes Sempronia among the conspirators and describes her as sexually voracious in War with Catiline 25 (n. 32, above) 61–63.
59 Duport du Tertre, Histoire générale (n. 58, above) 60.
treatises on the erotics of Parisian interiors, just as his portrait of the conspirators as ruined by debauchery resembles critiques of a corrupt French aristocracy.60

Still other accounts of the conspiracy foreground the resemblance of late republican Rome to old regime Paris. Catilina, Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon’s play of 1748, imagines the modernity of the subject in the form of a love triangle between Catiline, Fulvia, and Cicero’s daughter Tullia. Fulvia even makes an appearance as a disguised male servant, a role familiar from the cross-dressing antics Parisian viewers witnessed in the plays of Marivaux. A year later, Voltaire responded by contributing his own dramatization of the Conspiracy. In the preface to his Rome sauvée, ou Catilina, he commented on the difficulty of treating material that existed at such a remove from modern-day Paris, noting, ‘no one conspires today and the whole world loves’.61 The formulation is curious, given that Voltaire’s play dispenses with historical accuracy in order to emphasize the strain placed by the plot on Catiline’s marriage. Conspiracy and love thus reside in explosive proximity.

60 Duport du Tertre, Histoire générale (n. 58, above) 52. The terms appear, for instance, in Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, Le Génie de l’architecture, ou l’analogue de cet art avec nos sensations (Paris 1780) 116.
61 Voltaire, Rome sauvée (n. 1, above) 206.
In period imaginings, political conspiracy often intersects with romantic entanglement. The libertine novels of Charles Pinot Duclos present such instances, including his *Histoire de Madame de Luz* of 1741. In a subplot of Duclos’ tale of a heroine who falls victim repeatedly to the machinations of rapacious men, a disgruntled courtier conspires to provoke a war with Spain. Predictably, the conspiracy’s discovery results from the theft of private correspondence (thus bearing out Montesquieu’s observation that ‘since the invention of postal service, conspiracies in the state have become more difficult because the public has all private secrets in its power’). The fictive episode typifies cultural perceptions of written correspondence – in political and intimate domains alike – as vehicles of intrigue.

In this context the Catiline conspiracy signified not simply the occasion of Cicero’s victory over a malevolent enemy of the state. It also posed a tale of the public welfare being utterly enmeshed with private scheming, sexual conquest, and fraudulent transactions of all sorts: in other words, the very stuff of a series of scandals that rocked pre-Revolutionary Paris. As Sara Maza has shown, France in the 1770s and 80s was embroiled in one *cause célèbre* after another involving sexual, political, and financial conspiracy, most famous among them the Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785, which arguably expedited the fall of Marie Antoinette. That such scandals turned on the dissemination of fabricated letters and forged money orders deepened the association of epistolary exchange with what critics denounced as a culture of collusion and illusion.

Revealingly, the few visual depictions we possess confirm the Catiline conspiracy’s associations with the epistolary trade. Commissioned to illustrate Voltaire’s play, Jean-Michel Moreau (who also illustrated the 1774 edition of the most beloved of the age’s epistolary novels – Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou, La nouvelle Héloïse*) represented the moment (as imagined by the playwright) when Catiline’s wife, Aurelia, confronts him with epistolary evidence of his betrayal of Rome, and, by extension, of her love (Fig. 9). In the scene depicted by Moreau, Aurelia hands the letter to Catiline, stating, ‘There, Catiline, read Aurelia’s fate and thine, Thy crime and thy just sentence.’ She continues, ‘spite of myself you made me A vile accomplice […]. I blush to think how grossly you abused A woman’s fond credulity.’ Moreau’s print, which hung at the Salon of 1785, locates the unwelcome letter at the crossroads of the domestic and civic.

An emphasis on the destabilizing fluidity between public and private trust occurs in another rare portrayal of the conspiracy. Commissioned in 1794 to illustrate the works of Sallust, Pierre Peyron exhibited at the Salon two years later a drawing of Fulvia informing Cicero of the plot (Fig. 10). The publication was never realized, but the drawing, in addition to being reproduced in an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Blaise Simonet, inspired a painting by a student of Peyron, Nicolas-André Monsiau, which was exhibited at the Salon of 1822. No doubt the subject’s appeal rested in part on the sheer improbability of the relationship between the venerable consul and an aristocratic woman ‘decried’, in Duport du Tertre’s telling, ‘for her lack of morals’. Fulvia’s accidental historical significance derives from her status as the mistress of the ‘shameful’, ‘irresponsible’ and ‘reckless’ Curieus; as Sallust writes, only after her lover’s insolvency caused him to fall from her favour, prompting him ‘to promise her heaven and earth, and sometimes to


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threaten her with steel if she did not bow to his will’, did Fulvia manage to uncover ‘the cause of Curius’ unusual behavior’ which she swiftly shared with Cicero.68

Not unlike Janinet’s *Le Petit Conseil* (Fig. 6), Peyron’s composition restricts its attention to the relationship between the seated consul and the standing informant. It shows Cicero holding pen to paper, poised to inscribe the names of the conspirators as they fall from Fulvia’s lips. The scene borrows certain elements from Moitte: the profile view of the consul – recognizable from his famous portrait bust – as well as the candelabra, sole source of pre-dawn illumination. In both works, the cloak of darkness not only heightens the sense of looming, terrifying danger; the absence of clarity also marks an existential hardship, Cicero’s trust in his unbidden visitors resting on his necessary acquiescence to uncertainty.

Though Peyron’s drawing concerns a moment that predates the episode depicted in Moitte’s, the former extends preoccupations that lurk under the surface of the latter. The subtle implication in Moitte’s composition of an uneasy relationship between Cicero and a potentially untrustworthy woman becomes the central subject of Peyron’s. Moitte’s drawing, isolating Terentia from her husband, hints at an unstable economy of trust in the private sphere. Similarly, in Peyron’s, the *frisson* of witnessing Cicero’s dependence on the unprincipled Fulvia vies with the significance of his proudest accomplishment – his vanquishing of the Catiline conspiracy. Playing the part

of female avenger, Fulvia, moreover, summons recollections of her far more famous namesake: the future wife, successively, to Clodius, Curio, and Marc Antony, and a woman who, following Cicero’s assassination, reputedly stabbed the tongue of his decapitated head with her hairpins.  

Complicating the moral of the conspiracy, such reflections occasion a question whose repression we might detect in Janinet’s print: namely, did the thwarting of the plot foretell the salvation of the French republic or its downfall? The print’s self-conscious citation of aspects of David’s *Brutus*, including the positioning of figures, the use of still-life elements, and the segregation of husband and wife, renders the question inevitable (Fig. 4). It is tempting to attribute a kind of wishfulness to such borrowings – that is, to view them not simply as echoes of David’s ground-breaking neoclassicism but more specifically as laden with memories of the republic’s infancy. Yet to cite *Brutus*, to retrieve the image of the Roman hero’s unfathomable personal sacrifice, was also to recall the work’s chilling polarization of personal interest and general welfare. Consequently, the print, in modelling itself on David’s famous painting, denies while inevitably calling attention to the gulf between Brutus’ Rome and Cicero’s, between a republic in its inception and one in its death throes.

Moitte’s choice of subject matter, given its relationship to David’s *Brutus*, thus appears poignantly ironic: in reprising the latter’s patriotic conviction, the print risked presenting itself, at the Salon of 1793, as a prophecy of the decline of the republic of Rome, and by extension of France. For on the one hand, Cicero’s salvation of the republic revisits fundamental aspects of the Brutus story: the exiled Tarquins conspire with Brutus’ sons to retake the throne; proof of their intentions is intercepted in the form of letters; so unveiled, the conspiracy is crushed. Moreover, both events furnished French Revolutionaries with ‘a staple of radical language’, inspiring visions of an aristocratic émigré population of Tarquins and Catilines alike. On the other hand, the very resemblance between the two renowned episodes rendered all the more vexing the question of which precedent the Revolution was following. In effect, Moitte’s tribute to David reminds viewers that letters saved the republic – but only by postponing its downfall. In place of Brutus’ epistolary proof, Crassus’ letter raises unanswerable questions. ‘Quo usque tandem? How much longer?’ The inscription functions as an affirmation of transience, a harbinger of impermanence.

*The Catiline Conspiracy*, I have argued, offered one instance of an artwork fundamentally grappling with what it meant to found a republic on contingencies of trust – that is, on paper. *The Death of Marat* posed another (Fig. 11). Just as Moitte’s composition had debts to *Brutus*, David, in turn, may well have been aware of his friend’s drawing when he painted his homage to the murdered journalist in 1793. (In 1792, David had intervened to secure an atelier for Moitte in the Louvre, a privilege reserved for artists who possessed ‘pronounced patriotism’). In David’s painting, Marat assumes a bodily disposition (the outstretched left arm, the outstretched lower limb) not unlike that of Crassus. So too does the work show Marat clutching a letter, though here its contents are legible. In place of the actual letter sent by Marat’s counter-revolutionary assassin, Charlotte Corday, promising him information about traitors to the republic, David has substituted one in which the author duplicitously proclaims herself *malheureuse* so as to secure a rendez-vous with the journalist.

It is constructive to consider *Marat* in relation not only to Janinet’s print but also to Peyron’s composition (Fig. 10). In the latter, Fulvia plays the part of a would-be Corday, revealing the machinations of conspirators against the republic. For his part, Peyron’s Cicero takes on the character of David’s Marat: a classical, seated, pen-in-hand saviour of his patrie. Such a comparison would have pleased the assassinated journalist, who carefully cultivated a reputation

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69 Cassius Dio, *Roman history* 47.8.4 (n. 4, above) V 131–33.
72 See Gramaccini, *Jean-Guillaume Moitte* (n. 25, above) 70.
for ‘dogged persistence in unmasking plots’. The graver the threat of conspiracy, the more popular Marat’s persona as a ‘man of virtue’: David’s painting confirms this formula by lending substance to both sides.73 Anticipating Peyron’s pairing of credulous male and disreputable female, David contrasts Corday’s connivery with the depths of Marat’s selfless compassion. Signifier of his benevolence, a note on top of the wooden crate bears instructions that the accompanying assignat is to be delivered to a widowed mother.74

Together, the painting’s paper items – Corday’s letter, Marat’s note, and the assignat – conjure an economy of patriotic belief, implicitly conflating the journalist’s trustworthiness with that of the assignat. The inscription at the base of Marat’s makeshift writing desk – À Marat, David – turns the painting into an epistolary instrument itself, completing its paean to trust. Like a letter, the painting strives for depthlessness, for frieze-like shallowness in place of the illusion of spatial recession. Paper, as David well understood, readily lent itself to Revolutionary metaphor: to ennoble the frailest and flimsiest of visual experience was to honour the unexpected rise onto the stage of history of the lowly and impoverished. Yet as evidenced by Marat’s fatal trust in a fraudulent letter, to invest credulity in such provisional media was also to court inordinate risk. David’s painting manages this risk by incisively isolating the signs of sincerity from those of

74 On the significance of this note and of writing in general in David’s painting, see T. J. Clark, Farewell to an idea: episodes from a history of modernism (London 1999) 38–53; more recently on the painting see G. Mazeau, Le bain de l’histoire: Charlotte Corday et l’attentat contre Marat, 1793–2009 (Seyssel 2009).
deceit. The earnestness embodied in the artist’s signature and the journalist’s pen finds its opposite in the blood-stained letter and the assassin’s dagger. As we have seen, such clear-cut categorizing of trustworthiness and treachery is refused by Moitte’s composition. What made the Catiline conspiracy problematic as a source of revolutionary propaganda also rendered it an appropriate subject of representation in ‘the papered century’. Namely, it verified that the trade in modern media of exchange required the melding of belief and incredulity.

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