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*H-France Forum* Volume 1, Issue 2 (Spring 2006), No. 1

**James R. Farr**, *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005. xiv + 225 pp. Figures, notes, note on sources, and index. \$74.95 (hb); \$21.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8223-3459-3 (cl); ISBN 0-8223-3471-2 (pb).

Review Essay by Mack P. Holt, George Mason University.

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Writing in the tradition of Natalie Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, Jim Farr has written a microhistory based on trial records from a single case he discovered in the archives.<sup>[1]</sup> Like them, he has constructed a narrative and analysis of a single trial in order to illuminate a much larger subject. Unlike Davis and Ginzburg, however, who focused on peasant culture in their respective studies, Farr's book examines the lives and careers of some of the most distinguished and exalted inhabitants of seventeenth-century Dijon, the capital of Burgundy. Thus, this is a microhistory about elite society and the avenues of power at the very top of early modern urban society. The author knows the Dijon archives extremely well, having already published two monographs based on their rich holdings.<sup>[2]</sup> And he has taken advantage of all this local knowledge to construct a narrative that is at once riveting and compelling as well as enlightening and engaging. In short, it is a murder mystery that keeps the unsuspecting reader guessing until nearly the very end before finding out the identity of the murderer.

On the evening of 6 September 1638, Pierre Baillet, a nobleman and presiding judge in the *Chambre des Comptes* in Dijon, along with his valet were let in to the home of another nobleman, Baillet's first cousin, Philippe Giroux, one of the presiding judges in the *Parlement* of Dijon. They were never seen alive again, and Giroux was eventually arrested and charged with their murders. It soon came out that Giroux had been carrying on a secret affair with Baillet's wife, Marie Fyot, which seemed to provide a motive for the murders. But two relevant facts continued to impose difficulties for a speedy trial. First, there were no witnesses and no bodies, as no one was able to find the corpses of the alleged victims. Second, Giroux had a royal protector, as he was a client of Henri II de Bourbon, Prince of Condé, royal governor of Burgundy and first cousin of the king, Louis XIII. In fact, the prince of Condé had served as godfather to Giroux's eldest child. For his part, Giroux maintained his innocence and claimed he was actually being framed by an old rival in *Parlement*, one Pierre Saumaise, who was himself an assisting judge in the court. Thus, as Saumaise assisted the prosecutors in searching out any evidence no matter how circumstantial to convict his enemy, Giroux remained imprisoned in the castle keep in Dijon for several years, forever maintaining his innocence and seemingly secure because of his close connections to Condé. The tide turned abruptly against Giroux by 1643, however, as first Condé withdrew his support for the alleged murderer and eventually threw his weight behind Saumaise and the prosecution. And almost magically, the remains of Baillet and his valet were eventually discovered by Saumaise in the spring of 1643. It was leaked to him that he ought to investigate an old trunk stored in a closet of a certain Madame de Vigny, who just happened to be Giroux's elderly godmother. She claimed Giroux had given her something to store for him, but that she did not know what it was. When Saumaise and the other court officials finally opened it, they found the bones of Baillet and his valet, as well as what was left of their clothes. Indeed, the bones were positively identified as being Baillet's because his tailor identified a waistcoat that he had made for him, which was found with the bones. Giroux's luck had run out, and he was duly executed on 8 May 1643. Within a week a very ill Louis XIII died, and Condé's son, Louis de Bourbon, led French troops to victory over a Spanish army at Rocroi, turning the tide of the Thirty Years War.

This is a very dramatic story, and Farr tells it extremely well. Although it is a bit difficult to keep so many characters straight at the beginning—a list of principal characters in this drama at the beginning of the book helps enormously—the narrative begins with the grisly murders in the opening pages and

builds from there as Giroux is eventually charged, arrested, and imprisoned. Farr is especially good at analyzing the evidence from various points of view, including Giroux's, as Saumaise and the prosecutors try to build a case based on circumstantial evidence without either witnesses or corpses of the victims. All the while, Giroux claimed that he was being framed by his enemy Saumaise, and Farr takes these claims seriously enough to weigh the evidence in their favor. Indeed, Farr keeps the reader guessing whether Giroux was the real murderer or not, right up until the dramatic climax when the remains of Baillet and his valet are discovered hidden in a trunk in Giroux's godmother's house. I will not spoil the reader's fun by giving everything away here, but suffice it to say that a single playing card—a king of spades—turns out to be the key piece of evidence that seals Giroux's fate.

What may seem very surprising to academic readers, however, is that there are almost no endnotes or formal references of any kind (merely six notes identifying the source of long quotations for 193 pp. of text). Indeed, Farr and Duke University Press have taken the brave decision to publish the book for a student audience rather than for specialists. Although there is a short note on sources at the end of the book, there is also no formal bibliography. This is hardly popular history (in its negative sense), however, as Farr has spent just as much time in the archives for this book as for his other monographs, and it is just as thoroughly researched. All the witness depositions and other evidence are easily found in the Dijon archives should specialists want to look at them. But the book is clearly designed for students and classroom use, a decision I have no problem with at all. If anything, I wonder why Duke University Press did not go one step further and make this a really student-friendly volume by creating a companion web site for the book. English translations of the principal court records and witness depositions could be posted, not to mention more images and a much larger map of the city than the one published in the book on page seven, thereby creating an entire range of sources for students and their teachers to use for short paper assignments. All in all, however, aiming the book primarily at students is completely justified.

Farr has even written a short analytical essay at the end of the book called "The Paradoxes of Power, Law, and Justice"—and unlike the main text, it does have formal references—which spells out very explicitly for the student what is significant about this dramatic story. This is another novel idea, and it makes it almost impossible for students caught up in the narrative itself to miss the significance of what they are reading. Farr stresses three main points. First, the Giroux-Baillet affair makes it very clear just how much the actors in the narrative truly believed that maintaining the favor of the Prince of Condé was just as important to the outcome of the trial as any evidence or witness. Indeed, the inner workings of power are explicitly illustrated in this narrative. Not only did both Saumaise and Giroux's father appeal directly to the prince and, in the latter's case, even to the king, in an effort to sway the outcome of the case, but they both also issued public appeals for favor and support through published factums. Farr lays bare the rough and tumble of the patron-client system, which was neither static nor necessarily reliable as a support system for clients in trouble. Indeed, Giroux's case shows just how quickly Condé was willing to drop a client who was no longer an asset and, in fact, had become a detriment, to his service. Here was political power at its most naked and obvious.

Second, Farr's book also has a great deal to say about the workings of the criminal justice system in early modern France. Above all, one is struck by how methodical, systematic, and ultimately fair the judges tried to be in reaching a verdict. This might at first glance seem antithetical to the point just made above, that political power was engrained throughout the entire criminal justice system; but for the judges, justice was more than some vague and ambiguous ideal. Judges routinely recused themselves from hearing cases in which they might be perceived to have an interest, especially pertinent in a case in which the accused was a fellow judge. Without modern forensic evidence or DNA, prosecutors strived as best they could to make a case against Giroux without witnesses or bodies of the victims, all the while making every attempt to achieve justice in their proceedings. Conflicting testimony, political interference, interested parties on both sides, alleged poisonings, as well as a capital murder charge against one of the most powerful men in the city of Dijon: this case had it all.

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Finally, Farr's story gives us an insider's view on the social climbing, political maneuvering, and alliance seeking of the urban *noblesse de robe* in seventeenth-century France. Unlike Molière's bumbling and comic Monsieur Jourdain, Philippe Giroux was a *bourgeois gentilhomme* of a more tragic sort. Smugly unworried about being convicted because of his superior social rank and estate, not to mention the protection of his patron, the Prince of Condé, Giroux's marriage alliances and political connections might just have saved his neck if the remains of Baillet and his valet had not been inopportunistically discovered. His social station and patronage connections counted for naught, however, when the remains were positively identified as belonging to the two murder victims. Though the entire criminal justice system may have been infused with politics, Giroux learned the hard way that no one was above the law in the Ancien Régime. Now students and teachers of the Ancien Régime have a riveting murder mystery to illustrate "the sinews of power—law, patronage, ambition, interest, vengeance—that defined political culture in the age of absolutism" (p. 204).

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#### NOTES

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms; The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[2] James R. Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988; and *Authority and Sexuality in Early Modern Burgundy, 1550-1730* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Stuart Carroll, Sarah Hanley, and Benoît Garnot, as well as James R. Farr's response to all four Review Essays.

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ISSN 1557-7058