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Steven Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. xviii + 199 pp. Illustrations, plates, bibliography and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4426-0477-3.

Review by Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico.

In the waning years of the fourteenth century, Margarida de Portu, a resident of Manosque, stood accused of murder. After her husband, Johan Damponcii, had breakfasted on a bowl of stew that she prepared, he went to work in the nearby fields. Johan shortly complained to a servant about feeling ill. Returning home, he crawled into bed and died soon after. Raymon Damponcii, a local notary and the uterine brother of Johan, pounced and claimed Margarida was a malevolent, fickle, and devious woman who found herself in an unhappy and unconsummated marriage. To escape it, she killed his brother using poison, sorcery, or some combination thereof. So accused, Margarida fled to her own brother, the deacon, for assistance and safety while she prepared to defend herself against Raymon's charges. Thus unfolds the main dramatic event around which Steven Bednarski centers his microhistory.

Manosque in 1394 is the perfect setting for Bednarski's absorbing book. It was a bustling, cosmopolitan commercial center, home to Italian merchants and Jews, and served as a magnet for Margarida, among others. Although Margarida was an outsider, hailing from the small Provençal village of Beaumont, in marrying Johan, she joined the larger Manosque community. Furthermore, Margarida was hardly a loner, as evidenced in the details of the notarial and court records at Bednarski's disposal. From a sixty-four-page criminal trial and a forty-five-page civil lawsuit, to a number of last wills, testaments, and tax rolls, Bednarski demonstrates complete command over the archival and legal sources he uses for his book. His mastery over these documents lends particular heft to his methodology of teasing out the quotidian details of Margarida's, Johan's, and Raymon's lives to craft a compelling narrative. In so doing, he reveals the degree to which Margarida had been integrated into the larger community of Manosque. From the moment of her accusation, she was not without allies. In addition to her deacon brother, who housed Margarida in a religious cloister to protect her, some of Raymon's own relatives rallied around this woman who married into their family, testifying on her behalf and isolating their kinsman in his legal wrangling with Margarida.

Before he launches into his narrative, however, Bednarski uses his first chapter to trace the origins and development of microhistory as a genre of historical writing. From its 1970s origins in the pages of the Italian journal *Quaderni storici*, Bednarski charts the adoption of the microhistorical method in France, Iceland, Canada, and the United States. He discusses the controversies that arose within the larger historical discipline in response to this form of writing that privileged isolating moments to track historical progress, focused on the deep reading of a select number of texts, and sought to reconstruct the lives of the lower ranks of society (p. 4). This introduction to microhistory will be most useful for the beginning student, since much of the discussion will already be familiar to those already acquainted with the contours of the field.

In his second chapter, Bednarski lays out the scenario surrounding the death of Johan, the various characters involved within the larger drama, and the lessons gleaned from investigating the details of

Margarida's criminal trial. He brings to light the testimonies of various friends and relations of Margarida and Johan. Besides negotiating the legal systems of late medieval Manosque, Bednarski also analyzes the parameters of then contemporary medical and scientific knowledge, especially in his discussions concerning Margarida's *morbum caducum*—her epilepsy—and Vivas Josep, the Jewish physician who served as an expert witness in Margarida's criminal trial. Josep's testimony bridged the theory and practice of medicine in the later Middle Ages as seen, for instance, in his request for more information regarding the quality and consistency of Johan's vomit, if any remained. According to Ibn Sina, the eleventh-century Muslim physician known in the Latin West as Avicenna, in investigating a purported poisoning, one could use the victim's vomit to ascertain the composition of the poison used to kill.

Furthermore, according to Bednarski, the connection between epilepsy and toxicity was strong within a larger medieval Christian culture that considered the disease a divine punishment, rendering the body, particularly women's bodies, inherently unclean. Margarida's epilepsy prevented her and Johan from consummating their marriage, a situation that witnesses both for and against Margarida testified was the genesis of more than a few serious fights between her and her husband. A toxic imbalance of humors therefore developed and wrapped themselves around her husband's heart, causing fatal cardiac arrest. Josep suggested that although Margarida had not poisoned Johan, her larger medical condition scarcely rendered her guiltless. The physician used larger contemporary ideas of illness and women's bodies to damn her within the court of public opinion.

Raymon's use of his legal training as a notary to make life miserable for anyone who crossed his path is the subject of chapter three. When Johan died intestate, creditors and family members alike began pressing their claims. Raymon, as half-brother of Johan, would have none of that. In this situation, Margarida was not the target of Raymon's legal wrath, but rather, Johan's paternal uncle, Bartomeu Damponcii. Bednarski's extensive familiarity with the complex legal system of Manosque convinced him to depict Raymon as a repellent person, though he admits that another scholar, reading the same documents, might choose to depict Raymon differently (p. 64). The importance of this lesson to the beginning and/or student researcher cannot be understated and fits precisely within Bednarski's pedagogical mission.

Margarida's honor and reputation lie at the heart of the fourth chapter, and Bednarski analyzes at length the parameters of women's honor in the Middle Ages. The bedrock of Raymon's accusations against her lay in his repeated sully of her character. Time and again, Raymon used the law in an attempt to punish Margarida, but, when the law routinely exonerated her, he resorted to slander. As Bednarski notes earlier in his book, it was his rumor campaign that Margarida was a wicked killer that began the criminal inquest against her, rather than any formal legal denunciation (p. 27). True to form, Raymon used all his knowledge of the law to obstruct smooth legal functioning, making the process of accusing and trying Margarida as excruciating and convoluted as possible. Yet another reference to Raymon's scurrilous character was seen in his last-ditch attempt to have Margarida physically tortured. Yet, Margarida's honor was also tied up within the legal system. She was a fierce opponent to Raymon and appeared as her own legal agent. In addition to denouncing Raymon *in absentia*, she petitioned the court to order Johan's heirs to pay her a widow's pension, the *alimentum*. By 1396, Margarida and her supporters sought arbitration for the *alimentum*, but also began litigation against Raymon to restore both her honor and her finances after his attacks.

In his fifth and final chapter, Bednarski sketches the rest of Margarida's life, the details of which he reconstructs based on his extensive analysis of the extant notarial and court records. After being found innocent in her trials, Margarida remarried and had five children. Her second husband, Antoni Barbarini, was her staunch ally and defender in her subsequent conflicts with her former brother-in-law, whom she outlived. By the time she notarized her last will and testament in 1450, she was the victor. Having lived a long and healthy life, she "died in her seventies surrounded by family and friends," (p.

109). Bednarski also explicitly details his methodology for the reader interested in pursuing medieval archival research in this chapter. In showing how he was able to reconstruct the hidden details of the rest of her life through his use of detailed databases constructed in his investigation of more than 1,600 archival sources, he reveals the power behind intensive archival research. He is particularly honest and open in providing details about his choices for the categories for his databases.

Bednarski's appendices are handy. A family tree situating the principals, their supporters, and their detractors within larger networks of kin and society in late medieval Manosque is most useful in keeping track of the various characters that populate the study. He also includes a "working transcription" of Margarida's criminal inquest, housed in the Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône in Marseille. This will be very useful for the student who has begun her or his forays into late medieval legal culture. Bednarski even admits his own methodological concerns and deficiencies in transcribing that inquest. This is simultaneously refreshing and important, since any investigator with experience working in notarial and court records will recognize the limits that Bednarski faces, yet few would be so daring as to state them outright. Bednarski always shares the process by which historians work, including the setbacks and methodological limitations that appear within the course of research, which will be illuminating to beginning and advanced scholars alike. The final appendix is the translation of the criminal inquest, which follows the Latin transcription's text closely.

Along with charting the history of microhistory in his first chapter, Bednarski expresses his hope that his book will have a significant pedagogical impact. He repeatedly references the methodologies and intellectual choices that scholars make in shaping their own narratives of the distant past. The "spirit of...methodological transparency" (p. 117) permeates the entirety of the study and provides yet another strength. Thus, Bednarski's book is more than a microhistory; it is fundamentally a teaching tool. As strong and significant is his analysis, this is where Bednarski truly shines. He notes early on that he wrote his study precisely for the classroom as a way to give back to the people whose taxes funded fellowships and grants allowing him the opportunities to travel to Manosque and Marseille to conduct the extensive research for much of his scholarship (p. xv).

Beyond his unparalleled knowledge of the source documents and his devotion to the pedagogy of the historical enterprise, one of the greatest strengths of his book is his writing style. Throughout, Bednarski beautifully and vividly evokes life in late medieval Manosque. Crucially, in reconstructing the quotidian details of Margarida's and Johan's intertwined lives, he permits the reader to gain a degree of familiarity with them, despite being separated by more than six centuries. In the hands of a lesser writer, such an approach could be disastrous. Bednarski, however, is able to tease out the intimate details of these remote medieval lives from the archival sources to craft a gripping tale.

As strong as Bednarski's book is, there are a few issues. Perhaps due to the nature of his microhistory or the intended student audience for his work, he occasionally glosses over historical realities. Significantly, he fails to engage with more recent scholarship that would have strengthened his fine study. I was surprised to see no references to the scholarship of Marie Kelleher, who has done much for the advancement in knowledge of women's legal agency in medieval Europe.^[1] Although Kelleher's scholarship focuses on the Iberian kingdom of the Crown of Aragon rather than Manosque, the strong cultural similarities between the regions would have helped refine Bednarski's assertions further. Although Margarida was a woman whose networks of friends and family protected her in her fight against Raymon, she was also a legal agent in her own right as Bednarski shows, and the lack of engagement with more recent scholarship in that field is a problem.

Furthermore, his treatment of magic in the later Middle Ages is a bit troublesome. Even though Raymon accused Margarida of poisoning, he also accused her of sorcery. Poisoning and sorcery were closely linked under the charge of *veneficium* in the later Middle Ages. Bednarski correctly identifies the connection between poisoning and sorcery, yet gives the latter quite cursory treatment, devoting only a

single paragraph to it (p. 47) despite the significance of the charge. More problematically, Bednarski reinforces a rigid late medieval/early modern division of understandings regarding magic. Regarding the impact the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* on early modern witch hunts, he writes: “But Manosque circa 1400 was still medieval and not yet affected by growing concerns about religious hegemony and diabolism” (p. 110). This reinforces an overly rigid and anachronistic separation that more recent scholarship, in particular the work of Michael D. Bailey, has discounted.[2] Later concerns about diabolism were, in fact, rooted squarely in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and not solely the domain of the early modern period.

With *A Poisoned Past*, Bednarski has written a book that is engaging, entertaining, and learned. His study is geared more toward the advanced undergraduate student or beginning graduate student of medieval history, but novice and established scholars who work in the field of late medieval legal and social history and, to a lesser degree, medieval science, medicine, and magic, will find useful material between its covers. It would also serve quite well for graduate seminars focusing on microhistories, the intersection of gender and legal culture, and late medieval history writ large. Bednarski has also produced a book that is perfect for the classroom, the graduate seminar, and for anyone interested in how historians work. He has written a solid study and scholars and teachers who adopt his book for their own research and classes will find the life of Margarida de Portu to be valuable. For both the high quality of Bednarski’s scholarship and his unwavering dedication to transparency and pedagogy, this book needs to be read far and wide.

NOTES

[1] Marie Kelleher, *The Measure of Woman: Law and Female Identity in the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[2] See Michael D. Bailey, “A Late-Medieval Crisis of Superstition?” *Speculum* 84 (2009): 633-661 and, most recently, *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

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