

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (October 2018), No. 212

Timothy Verhoeven, *Sexual Crime, Religion and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France: The Flamidien Affair*. Series "Genders and Sexualities in History." London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018. xi + 122. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$54.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-3-319-74478-0. \$39.99 U.S. (eBook). ISBN 978-3-319-74479-7.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

On Wednesday, 8 February 1899, the corpse of twelve-year-old Gaston Foveaux was discovered in a side room at the Notre-Dame de la Treille school for boys in Lille. The previous Sunday, the boy had spent the afternoon at the Catholic school's youth club. When Gaston failed to return home for dinner that evening, his parents went to the school to fetch him. Despite the assistance of Brother Flamidien, one of the Lasallian schoolteachers, the boy could not be found. On the fourth day of searching, Gaston's body was discovered, stretched out on a rug in a room near the school's entranceway. A handwritten apology to Monsieur Foveaux for the boy's murder, brought on by an "impure passion," was signed by an "ardent socialist." The same day, investigating magistrate Charles Delalé gathered the school's teachers together and had them gaze, individually, upon Gaston's dead body. Each exhibited a measured sadness. Only Brother Flamidien broke down emotionally at the sight of the dead child, crying inconsolably and calling out to the saints. Interpreting Flamidien's overwrought display as a sign of guilt, Delalé had him arrested, and over the next five months the state prepared its case against him. On 10 July, however, a joint tribunal declared there were insufficient grounds for a trial, and Brother Flamidien was released.

Timothy Verhoeven has transformed this *fait divers* into a microhistory. Like Edward Berenson's *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* and Aaron Freundschuh's *The Courtesan and the Gigolo*, Verhoeven draws upon key individuals associated with the crime and subsequent legal proceedings to address larger social and political conflicts that riddled fin-de-siècle France.[1] Verhoeven frames this history as the "War of Two Frances" as it played out in the northern industrial city of Lille, one nation Catholic, conservative and antisemitic, the other Republican, secular and anticlerical. The principal site of contestation in this account was over whether public education was best delivered by Catholic teaching congregations, such as the Lasallian *Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, established in the seventeenth century, or by the newly instituted secularized state schools, started under the Jules Ferry Laws of 1881-1882 and strengthened by legislative acts over the subsequent decades. Verhoeven also discusses differing conceptions of masculinity among Republicans and Catholics. The Republican *juste milieu* notion of masculinity, Verhoeven emphasizes, depended upon a natural and virile heterosexual body, capable of producing citizens for the nation, and tempered by self-control. Deemed essential to the regeneration of the nation, this was a masculinity threatened by fears of emasculation and pederasty. The Catholic ideal of masculinity, by contrast, valued piety, ecclesiastical celibacy, and the heroism of suffering. Verhoeven also finds parallels between the Dreyfus and Flamidien affairs, a Catholic versus Republican national drama echoed on the local level with political extremism based on religious intolerance flipped. Even Émile Zola was drawn into the fray, "solving" the Flamidien affair in his final and posthumously published anticlerical novel, *Vérité* (1903). However, Verhoeven's mirroring of injustices in the Dreyfus

and Flamidien affairs is muddled and draws attention to this microhistory's shortcomings.

In the introduction, Verhoeven emphasizes the “War of Two Frances” over whether national identity should be Catholic or Republican. Despite Pope Leo XIII’s appeal for French Catholics to rally to the French Third Republic, the military tribunal conviction of Captain Dreyfus for political treason in 1894 refueled political antipathies in France between antisemitic Catholics and anticlerical Republicans. In February 1899, both the National Assembly’s call for Dreyfus’s retrial and Brother Flamidien’s arrest for the murder of Gaston Foveaux made newspaper headlines. In the book’s first chapter, Verhoeven examines the localized aspect of this conflict in Lille, principally over whether elementary education should be delivered through teaching congregation Catholic schools, such as the Lasallian Brothers, or by secularized state schools. Catholic schooling had been given a boost in 1850 through the Falloux Law, which favored religious education and qualified teachers on the basis of a “letter of obedience” from a Church superior. Over the next quarter-century, teaching congregations saw their market share of elementary education grow at a significantly higher rate than secular communal schools. Under the early Third Republic, the Ferry Laws of 1881-1882 and the Goblet Law of 1886 emphasized civic instruction, made public elementary schooling mandatory, and required state approved certification of schoolteachers. In Lille, Catholic elementary schooling had flourished under the Falloux Law, with congregation teachers outnumbering communal educators two to one. Catholic-based schools in Lille enjoyed the patronage of the city’s economic elite of industrialists and businessmen as well. Despite a rapid rise in political socialism at the end of the century among Lille’s impoverished working classes, local elites held sway and Catholic congregational schools enjoyed greater favor in the city than they did nationally.

The next three chapters focus on differences in Republican and Catholic constructions of masculinity.<sup>[2]</sup> Was the accused murderer, Brother Flamidien, a sexually insufficient man, a pervert even, or was he a male hero and martyr? To address such questions, Verhoeven highlights key individuals who expressed a range of beliefs about masculinity in the late nineteenth century. Adhering to the Republic conception of masculinity, interrogating magistrate Charles Delalé interpreted Flamidien’s emotional outburst at the sight of Gaston Foveaux’s corpse as evidence of the brother’s culpability and the basis for his arrest. While the other teaching brothers at the Notre Dame de la Treille school were by no means Republicans, the stoical sadness they displayed at the sight of the dead boy adhered more closely to the masculine performance of civic duty and self-control than the “nervous excitability” exhibited by Flamidien. That Flamidien might be a sexual predator also seemed plausible to Delalé. On two occasions over the previous five years, teaching brothers in the neighboring suburb of Roubaix had been charged with sexual abuse against boy pupils. In addition, circumstantial evidence gathered at the school led Delalé to believe Flamidien was the killer.

Delalé called upon Dr. Jules Castiaux, forensic examiner for the local judiciary, to determine whether Flamidien was sexually perverse. As the scholarly literature over the past thirty years on gender and sexuality in France has shown repeatedly, nineteenth-century “scientific” writings by social psychologists, medical doctors, and criminal anthropologists about male homosexuals as sexual inverts (“a female soul in a male body”), born criminals, and the bearers of hereditary madness were suffused with dubious claims.<sup>[3]</sup> Sexual abstinence and ecclesiastical celibacy, many of these experts concurred, were unnatural and unpatriotic due to their failure to produce new citizens for the state and for fostering sexual perversions in men. Yet such notions failed in the light of evidence. While medical experts claimed that repeated acts of pederasty became inscribed upon a man’s body as deformations of the penis and anus, Castiaux failed to find such signs on either Flamidien’s body or Foveaux’s corpse. Flamidien similarly failed to exhibit secondary symptoms of sexual crimes, neither the “spermatorrhea” of seminal leakage due to periods of prolonged abstinence, nor the “satyriasis” of an uncontrolled erection that seizes the mind with morbid hallucinations. The circumstantial evidence against Flamidien was tendentious as well. While Foveaux was most likely murdered on school grounds, rather than killed elsewhere and his corpse surreptitiously returned, it was a nearly impossible to prove that Flamidien was the only person with the opportunity to commit the act. Handwriting experts who

analyzed the confessional note discovered next to the corpse, crudely written with a left-handed slant, initially concluded that Flamidien was the author, but that judgment was later challenged in court. Flamidien's crimes of failed masculinity might be assumed, but they were impossible to demonstrate.

Against Republican masculinity, articles in *La Croix du Nord* penned by "Cyr," the pseudonym of editor Abbé Henri Masquelier, extolled the virtues of the Catholic clergy. Priests were not enervated but hardy men, who would hit, slap, or beat those who raised slurs against Flamidien in the street. While sexual abstinence might produce involuntary nocturnal emissions, the mental boost experienced by priests who stuck to their vow of celibacy redirected their "vital energy" toward the selfless service of their congregations. Catholic medical experts found no evidence of physical or psychological maladies among retired priests and nuns, and instead praised their lifelong celibacy as a triumph of religious discipline over bodily desire. Above all, ecclesiastical celibacy constituted a kind of male heroism, a steadfast ability to endure bodily suffering in adherence to one's Christian vocation. This was the kind of masculinity Brother Flamidien exhibited, his defenders emphasized, whose assertion of innocence grew stronger during his months of imprisonment, as did his resistance to Delalé's demands for a murder confession.

When it came to bringing Flamidien to trial, however, disagreements between Republicans and Catholics over what constituted proper masculinity had little bearing on the outcome of the legal proceedings. The Lasallian Brothers engaged lawyer Pierre Chesnelong, scion of a prominent Catholic family, to defend Flamidien. Chesnelong's strategy was to assure the case never went to trial. Before the indictment court, Chesnelong challenged Delalé's case piecemeal: procedural errors were committed at the time of arrest; the veracity of testimony by boys gathered against Brother Flamidien was called into question; the handwriting experts who examined the confessional note had acted on behalf of the prosecution; Dr. Castiaux's forensic report was contested by another physician; Flamidien delivered the same praise and punishment to Foveaux as he did to the other boys at the school; psychological expertise was little more than personal opinion; alternate murder suspects had not been ruled out. Although the affair continued to drag out in the press for five months, in July 1899 a joint session of judges from both indictment and appeals courts concluded the prosecution had provided insufficient grounds for a trial, and Brother Flamidien was released from prison. Who murdered Gaston Foveaux remained a mystery.

Verhoeven spends the final two chapters of the book speculating on the larger meaning of the Flamidien affair. On the "School Question" over public education, historians already know the answer; in Lille, as nationally, secularization prevailed and Catholic schools were forced into accepting compromises to conform to national educational requirements. On the question of collective guilt by group association, Verhoeven criticizes both Catholics and Republicans for bigoted and inflammatory rhetoric hurled at one another, painted with a broad brush: "one camp screamed 'Down with the Jews' and the other 'Down with the priests'" (*Le Journal des débats*, quoted p. 84). In Lille, Verhoeven suggests, Republicans attacked *les Flamidiens* and Catholics *les Dreyfus*. Yet the latter was not a term recognized by anticlerical Republicans, but an antisemitic one coined by the Catholic daily newspaper *La Croix*, which belies the implied binary opposition. As historian Ruth Harris has noted in the stereotyped exchanges of political invective between antisemitic Assumptionists and anticlerical Republicans during the Dreyfus Affair, "to show the similarity between the opposing sides is not to equate them."<sup>[4]</sup>

For while *les Flamidiens* may be readily understood as the brother's Catholic supporters under attack from Republicans, *les Dreyfus* can only be a stand-in for "the Jews."<sup>[5]</sup> Verhoeven does not shy away from recounting virulent antisemitic articles published in *La Croix* throughout the Flamidien affair, but the implication that anticlericalism among supporters of the Republic constituted the inverse of Catholic antisemitism—"Were not republicans now acting in the same reprehensible manner?"—skews the situation (p. 86). The conflict between teaching congregations and a universal national education program had a basis; anticlerical Republicans were committed to limiting Catholic political influence on the national stage and to forcing religious schools to adhere to secularized educational requirements.

Articles published in the Assumptionist newspaper *La Croix* about Jewish conspiracies infiltrating the government and military, or in this case being behind the prosecution of Brother Flamidien, were not real; they were only antisemitic diatribes. Verhoeven credits Socialist leader Jean Jaurès for making a crucial distinction between the Dreyfus and Flamidien affairs; one was conducted through a secretive military tribunal without oversight and the other in an open judicial process, and Jaurès affirmed Flamidien's right to the latter. However anticlerical some Republicans may have been during the Flamidien affair, the accused brother benefitted from due process. Rabid antisemitism in the Catholic press in support of Brother Flamidien as an unjustly accused cleric was not the "flip side" of the Dreyfus Affair, but its continuation at the local level.

A confused hybridization of the Flamidien and Dreyfus affairs also runs through Émile Zola's final novel, *Vérité* (1903). Verhoeven suggests the novel offers a fictional solution to the identity of Foveaux's murderer. Inspired by the Flamidien affair, in *Vérité* the killer of a schoolboy named Zéphérin was not the emotionally distraught Brother Fulgenes, but the "sinister and sensual" Brother Gorgias: "Here, in a nutshell, is Zola's theory. Transfixed by Flamidien's strange behavior, Delalé let a more calculating and composed brother slip from his grasp" (p. 101). Yet to suggest that Zola's story provides a "solution" for Delalé's failures as an investigator not only substitutes a fictionalized scenario for actual circumstances, it mischaracterizes Zola's project. *Vérité* is the third novel in Zola's *Les Quatre Evangiles*, a proposed four-novel series promoting a "social gospel" of national health through population growth, economic prosperity through productive labor, everyday life enlightened by science, and universal peace.[6] While *Vérité* drew upon the Flamidien incident as inspiration for the novel's setting, it was actually a retelling of the Dreyfus Affair, substituting a wrongly accused Jewish schoolteacher in the place of Captain Dreyfus, and the Catholic teaching brothers for the French military in their antisemitic persecution. As Zola's English translator noted at the time, the grafting of the Dreyfus Affair onto Flamidien's criminal case produced a prejudicial story with unfortunate results for both the novel's plot and character development.[7] Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of *Vérité*, "solving" the Flamidien affair seems to have been less of a concern for Zola than the novel's place within the *Quatre Evangiles* tetralogy.

As a microhistory, *Sexual Crime, Religion and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France* is most successful at showing how conflicts between Republicans and Catholics played out in Lille at the end of the nineteenth century. The prosecution of Brother Flamidien on shaky grounds, for displaying gendered behavior judged insufficiently Republican and too Catholic, failed. Publicizing Catholic antisemitic invective in the defense of Flamidien was less the inversion of the Dreyfus Affair than its local manifestation. Verhoeven's book replays variations on received ideas from fin-de-siècle France, more than it contributes new perspectives on a fraught epoch.

## NOTES

[1] Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Aaron Freundschuh, *The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Montaigne and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[2] On French masculinities, Verhoeven cites Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014) and Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] The scholarship on nineteenth-century "scientific" literature on sexual inversion with its attendant criminality and madness is overwhelming. For a concise yet comprehensive treatment, see Susan A. Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy: Anatomies of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[4] Ruth Harris, "The Assumptionists and the Dreyfus Affair," *Past and Present* no. 194 (February

2007): 209. In the course of the article, Harris mentions the Flamidien affair as a local expression of extreme clashes between antisemitic Catholics and anticlerical Republicans.

[5] *Les Dreyfus* only refers to the Dreyfus family. Supporters of Captain Dreyfus were *dreyfussards*, not “*les Dreyfus*.”

[6] Zola’s *Les Quatre Evangiles* novels were *Fécondité* (1899), *Travail* (1901), *Verité* (1903), and *Justice* (not completed). The tetralogy is detailed in the literary biography by Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), pp. 777-91.

[7] Alfred Vizetelly, *Émile Zola: Novelist and Reformer* (1904), reprint edition (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), pp. 498-502.

Robin Walz  
University of Alaska Southeast  
[rrwalz@alaska.edu](mailto:rrwalz@alaska.edu)

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172