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Steven G. Reinhardt, *Violence and Honor in Prerevolutionary Périgord*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018. xii + 330pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1580465830; \$24.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1787441774.

Review by Jill Maciak Walshaw, University of Victoria.

On a winter evening in 1779, a group of inhabitants of the south-western province of the Périgord were shelling walnuts at a *veillée*, a traditional type of rural gathering in which villagers shared warmth, light, and stories while working companionably side by side. This particular gathering, however, turned somewhat less companionable when a bourgeois became nervous that another man, a *valet de ferme*, was showing interest in his servant girl. The bourgeois tried to hit the *valet* with his baton; “in response, the *valet* grabbed his assailant’s cap and threw it to the ground, drew his knife, and cut the cap into pieces.” In his fury, the bourgeois insulted his servant girl, calling her a “*f. gueuse* [beggar] and a worthless *vesse* [fart],” and ordered her to return to his house. As historians, we know about this incident not because of the violent interaction over the hat, but because the servant girl, prompted by the “gravity of the insults and the large number of persons present,” brought a suit against her master in the *sénéchaussée* court of Sarlat.[1]

This kind of occurrence, argues Steven Reinhardt, indicates that while a culture of honor was alive and well in the French south-west in the last decades of the Old Regime, the inhabitants were increasingly bringing their disputes to the court rather than resolving the conflict through extra-judicial action. Published in the *Changing Perspectives in Early Modern Europe* series edited by Jim Collins and Mack Holt for the University of Rochester Press, *Violence and Honor in Prerevolutionary Périgord* takes us back to the world of the Sarladais of the 1770s and 1780s, a world that Reinhardt first introduced us to in his celebrated 1991 book, *Justice in the Sarladais*, published with Louisiana State Press.[2] Returning to the same body of sources, he has chosen to delve more deeply into the significance of honor, a topic on which he touched only briefly in his first book.

Scholars of justice in eighteenth-century France will be familiar with Reinhardt’s deep knowledge of these archives; he is in his element when retelling the stories of ordinary people’s experiences and sharing his insight into historical mindsets that can be difficult to imagine. However, his claims to broader significance in this second book are less convincing, and the details of occurrences situated in a narrowly-defined time and place sit somewhat uncomfortably with a broad-ranging synthesis of the literature on violence and honor.

After a concise and helpful introduction, the book gathers speed slowly. [3] Chapters one through three explore relevant themes and debates, such as the commonly accepted notion of an overall decline in violence from about 1500 onwards and the existence of a pan-European “culture of honor” (p. 28). In the fourth chapter, which sets the scene, we find ourselves immersed in the world of south-eastern Périgord, a rugged land of hills and winding valleys, of truffles and chestnuts, described in terms of its geography, economy, demographics, and the social organization and behavior of the inhabitants. Some of the material in this chapter seems extraneous even to a description of the *moeurs* of the inhabitants of the Sarladais. It is not clear, for example, why it is necessary in a book about violence and honor to know about the custom of feeding newborn babies a spoonful of wine or that intestinal cramps were treated with a mixture of wine and walnut oil (p. 79). That said, information about the integration of the region into the commercial economy centred in Bordeaux (pp. 81-82) provides some foundation for the argument that economic modernization was at the heart of the cultural shift away from honor-related violence.

The strongest chapters are those in which Reinhardt uses the judicial archive to investigate his central questions on violence and honor more directly. Particularly compelling are chapter five (regarding *excès* and *injures* related to honor) and chapter ten (on murder and retaliation), which bookend four chapters (six through nine) that focus on such issues as gender, sexual misconduct, and the shame associated with pregnancy out of wedlock. Throughout the last two thirds of the book, Reinhardt paints a rich portrait of the types of situations in which honor was at stake and violent retaliation might ensue. Those familiar with Old Regime court documents will appreciate the teasing out of the changing meaning of “insult,” a nuanced charge seen so often in the archive (pp. 95-97) as well as a discussion of the categories of homicide (pp. 221-22). Insufficient attention to markers of status (such as dress, language, and manner of saluting) could cause offense, as could assaults on symbols of male power, such as hair or hats (pp. 100-4).

Yet it was the intersection of gender and sexuality which was central to honor-related violence, as the household was the core unit of society, and the control and maintenance of morality was the responsibility of its head. Reinhardt’s extensive treatment of the gendered rural world does justice to this importance. Women were not passive participants in the system of honor—they could be plaintiffs as well as perpetrators, playing “a formidable role in enforcing community standards” (p. 7). That said, the question of female honor undermined by sexual impropriety looms large: the archives are full of cases of adulterous adventures, illegitimacy, and infanticide. Some of these triggered honor-related violence, while others merely serve to paint a clearer picture of the cultural milieu. Chapters six and seven in particular delve into fascinating territory. Information on early modern birth control is sure to liven up undergraduate lectures on gender and sexuality in the eighteenth century, for example (pp. 173-78) and the opposite attitudes towards women as property in cases of abducted (or escaped) wives versus the underreporting of rape surely warrants further attention (pp. 134-40 and 150-62).

Returning to the impact of the book as a whole, however, it is worth remembering that Reinhardt’s main argument, following sociologist Emile Durkheim and the recent work of Michel Nassiet, is that the overall decline of violence from about 1500 onwards can be explained by a shift from a traditional, community-oriented, kinship-based society to a more individualistic, contract-based one. [4] In the former, the values of family ties, loyalty and above all, honor were primary in importance, which led to incidents of verbal and physical violence as parties sought to redress insults to their honor or to the honor of a member of their household. In the scenario

proposed by Reinhardt, the growth of “modernity” in the form of liberal individualism and a capitalist, commercial economy was concurrent with a diminishing of close family ties and loyalty to the group (p. 10). This, in turn, meant members of society “shared less in that collective sense of honor that fueled so much interpersonal and group conflict,” leading to fewer acts of violence (pp. 9-15; citation p.12).

Yet in several ways there are flaws in this argument and in the way that Reinhardt goes about proving it. Firstly, as the author himself acknowledges, Stuart Carroll and others have argued that the decline of violence did not follow a steady linear path from 1500 to the present day.[5] As just one example, the period of religious warfare resulted in an upswing in violence, proving that political and social events needs to be taken into account alongside longer-term trends such as the shift to modernity or even civility (if we were to follow Norbert Elias rather than Emile Durkheim). Moreover, in order to make his case for an individualization of conflict resolution and a growing tendency to turn to official justice, Reinhardt finds himself arguing that violence did not decline: “in the Sarladais...cases stemming from violent offenses against persons--far from declining--constituted a growing proportion of the court’s caseload”, fuelled by a rise in private suits (p. 99).

Indeed, considering the premise that French society was shifting away from a kinship-based community-oriented model towards a more modern, individualistic one, and that, therefore, the importance of honor was on the wane, it is surprising how frequently Reinhardt asserts that this was not the case. Thus we read, on page 8, that this was “a society whose values were dictated by a strict code of honor,” and on page 20, that this period shows both a “rising importance” of the justice system and “the dogged persistence of the alternative (unofficial or popular) methods of dispute settlement that existed in this largely self-policing society in which a culture of honor was still operative.” And if, as the author admits, that it is impossible to know how many cases of ruffled honor were handled informally outside of the courts (p. 16), how is it possible to claim that people were “increasingly” turning to royal justice to resolve their disputes?

These inconsistencies in the argumentation stem, I would suggest, not from a lack of validity of many of the concepts Reinhardt advances, but from the fact that the region and period under study are too narrow to support such far-reaching conclusions. Centered around the court and administrative functions of the town of Sarlat, the Sarladais represented approximately one-third of the province of the Périgord, which coincides roughly to the present-day department of the Dordogne. Reinhardt says the right things about how his conclusions regarding this small territory do not necessarily apply more broadly, describing his study as a microhistory and citing Giovanni Levi in his claims that it is a “series of vignettes or ‘snapshots’ that illuminate ‘moments’ in time.”[6] Yet, at the same time, he implies that his conclusions *can* be applied more broadly. Thus we read that the “inhabitants of the Sarladais--and presumably elsewhere in France--made explicit and conscious efforts to remedy ordinary and everyday breaches of honor less by resorting to traditional means of violence and more by making use of the royal justice system” (p. 5, my emphasis). In fact, the discussions of the Sarladais (pp. 15-20, 71, 81-82) seem to suggest it was a region that was more traditional, more isolated and less “modern” than other possible case studies (p. 4). “The growth of the state and the spread of capitalism” were perceptible there, “but to a lesser degree than elsewhere in France,” Reinhardt suggests; in fact, its “marginal location and rugged terrain may have meant that its place in the commercial network of the Bordelais was limited” (p. 15).

The restriction of the study to this small region also means that Reinhardt has only examined the trials from one court—the lowest level of royal court, the *sénéchaussée*. It is not that this does not provide a significant body of material; for the period from 1770-1790, Reinhardt has 474 cases at his disposal, of which 282 were for violent crimes against persons and a further twenty-one were for crimes against morality (pp. 97-8). However, the *sénéchaussée* court was not competent to judge the nobility; members of the second estate had the right to be judged by their peers at the Parlement. Although noblemen do appear tangentially in some of Reinhardt's cases, the study might have benefited from broadening the number of courts examined to include cases involving nobles from the Sarladais that were heard at the Parlement of Bordeaux. The size of the sample is also somewhat misleading; despite a total of 303 cases involving violence or morality, only thirty-odd of these are directly referenced. In fact, Reinhardt states that he has selected those cases “that best demonstrate the manner in which violence intersected with honor,” an admission that begs the question of the representativity of the sample (pp. 11, 49). There is little statistical treatment of the broader sample reminiscent of the quantitative thrust of his first book. I would have appreciated seeing, for example, an appendix surveying the 303 cases under consideration, indicating such details as charges, plaintiffs, and outcomes.[7]

Finally, the time span covered by the book seems too brief to allow for a meaningful contribution to an argument regarding the decline of violence over centuries. The first few chapters which lay the groundwork for the book draw examples from far and wide, from the medieval period to the twentieth century and bringing in studies outside of France. Many of the key turning points regarding the decline of honor-related violence seem to be located in the first half of the seventeenth century (pp. 13-14), making the 1770s and 1780s appear as a footnote at the end of a much slower change. Interpretations drawn from modern anthropological and sociological studies, such as the use of Erving Goffman's notion of “facework” (face-saving or face-granting gestures) and Georg Simmel's description of a personal sphere, need more direct connection to the eighteenth-century Sarladais to be useful (pp. 90-91). The central argument of the book—that increasing numbers of people were making use of the justice system to resolve disputes—needs to be contextualized with evidence of change over a longer time-span. The fact that Reinhardt can only say that people were doing this “at least two decades before the Revolution” is not very helpful (p. 4). Commoners were certainly using the justice system prior to 1770, and the balance of cases brought by private plaintiffs (71 percent) compared to royal prosecutors (29 percent) does not seem out of the realm of normal for the eighteenth century—twenty years is simply too short a time span to observe a meaningful change.

In sum, *Violence and Honor in the Prerevolutionary Périgord* is an illuminating read, pointing to important themes of changing cultural norms and the intersection between the private sphere and the increasing encroachment of the state and criminal justice. Steven Reinhardt shows sensitivity to “eavesdropping” on the stories he found preserved in the archives (p. ix); he well knows the gap that separates modern historians from eighteenth-century French peasants, and his use of anthropological and linguistic methodologies helps to bridge it. While a study spanning twenty years in a small province of south-western France might not on its own answer our questions about the decline of violence and the role of honor in rural society, it can point us in the right direction.

NOTES

[1] Archives Départementales de la Dordogne, B 1570; Plainte de Marguerite Cabanet (November 6, 1779) and Information (November 24, 1779); retold in Reinhardt, *Violence and Honor*, p. 105.

[2] Steven Reinhardt, *Justice in the Sarladais, 1770-1790* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1991).

[3] Readers should note however that there is an error in outline of chapters (pp.5-8); chapter four has been left out of the description, while the content described as being in “the final chapter” comes in the conclusion.

[4] Emile Durkheim’s ideas are drawn from Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and Michel Nassiet, *La Violence, une histoire sociale: France XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2011).

[5] Reinhardt cites Carroll’s *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); see 252n1.

[6] Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory”, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 2nd edition (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 97-119.

[7] Only a brief discussion of the socio-professional status of those who initiated private cases is given on pp. 23-24.

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