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Suzannah Lipscomb, *The Voices of Nîmes: Women, Sex, and Marriage in Reformation Languedoc*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xiv + 378 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0198797661.

Review by Allan Tulchin, Shippensburg University.

Ecclesiastical records have already been used in England, Switzerland, and Germany to shed light on gender relations in early modern Europe.<sup>[1]</sup> Dr. Lipscomb has now written an excellent book on gender relations in late sixteenth-century France using the records of Protestant consistories, especially those from Nîmes. Her choice of Nîmes was dictated by a simple fact: the records are the most complete and detailed of any French community, comprising eighteen volumes covering from 1559 to 1685, with one significant gap (1564-1578). The consistory functioned not only as the governing body of the church, but also as a morals court, punishing infractions and in the severest cases turning the guilty parties over to the civil authorities. The consistorial records were transcribed (and even indexed!) in the late nineteenth century by a local pastor, Louis Auzières, and were the focus of Philippe Chareyre's 1987 thesis,<sup>[2]</sup> although Professor Chareyre did not focus on issues of gender. (I am also extremely familiar with these records since I used the first volume heavily in *That Men Would Praise the Lord*, my study of Nîmes during the Reformation.<sup>[3]</sup>) Lipscomb has chosen to focus her study on the period before 1615. She also uses the consistory records of other French towns, especially those of Montauban.

Lipscomb's approach is dictated by the nature of the sources and the subject. Since there are few studies focusing on gender using the French Protestant consistories, Lipscomb spends most of her time analyzing her sources rather than comparing Nîmes to other places and times or discussing other secondary sources. At the same time, it would be surprising if there were significant changes in women's status or role over the approximately fifty years covered by this study, and Lipscomb did not find any. She therefore adopts a thematic rather than a narrative approach.

*The Voices of Nîmes* consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and seven chapters. The introduction discusses theoretical issues and briefly surveys the literature. The first two chapters provide background. Chapter one gives an overview of Nîmes, its history, and its geography. It has sections on the rise of Protestantism in the region and the Wars of Religion, for example. Chapter two discusses the consistory and its procedures, so that readers can understand how the records Lipscomb analyzes were generated. The body of the book is divided into five substantive chapters, on religion, social relations, love and marriage, sex, and marital disagreements. In each chapter, Lipscomb's procedure is to narrate many examples to show what the attitudes of the

people involved were, as well as those of the consistory that judged the case. I somewhat regret that Lipscomb has chosen to present almost all quotations in translation, and I did find some transcription errors. (Tanequin Finor is recorded as Fixor, for example.) That said, sixteenth-century handwriting is quite difficult to read, and I found no errors that affected the analysis.

Chapter three, “Faith,” examines women’s religious attitudes. Lipscomb argues that among converts, “Details of doctrine go unmentioned, but there is a clear distinction between the right (the ‘truth’ of the Protestant faith) and the wrong (‘papisty and idolatry’). ... This language suggests a vocation and the attraction of Calvinism’s moral fervour” (p. 113). Of course, not all women converted, and some Catholics used similar language in reverse. While the overall impression is of a high level of piety, this is to some extent a reflection of the source—people testifying before a Calvinist court with the authority to punish them—while at the same time there is plenty of evidence of misbehavior. Women attended Mass, got married to Catholics, and so on. Even Catherine Teissière, a generous donor to her church, visited fortune-tellers (p. 145). Lipscomb concludes that despite the evidence for Protestant fervor, ordinary women (and men, I would add) were stubbornly independent, and did not simply swallow what the consistory told them to think.

Sixteenth-century Nîmes was a small town. Houses did have back yards, so there was some space to spread out; but it is not surprising that in chapter four, “Social Relations,” Lipscomb finds that through gossip, arguing, and sometimes even physical violence, women got into other people’s business. She argues that women were particularly prone to gossip, that sexual insults were common, and that women were also quite likely to engage in violence (p. 148). So, for example, in May 1582 Honorat Cany’s wife punched Jehanne Coderque, “drawing blood” (p. 172). I was surprised to see the examples of women hitting each other that Lipscomb provides, although I am not sure exactly what percentage of assaults Lipscomb thinks women committed. Most of the literature has concluded that men were overwhelmingly responsible (as is true today).<sup>[4]</sup> Although Lipscomb found forty-one different insults in the records, *putain* (“whore”) was the “non-specific, go-to invective” (p. 157). Women were the recognized “moral guardians of the community” (p. 179), and “patriarchy was fully internalized” (p. 180). This strikes me as too strong, in the sense that Lipscomb provides relatively few examples of women telling other women to be subservient to their husbands. They certainly criticized women for adultery, for example, but they also criticized male adulterers. Women were a key part of social order, however, trying to keep their wayward brothers and sisters in line to maintain the fragile ties that made life livable. As Lipscomb also notes, “women were far from meek and submissive” (p. 180).

When it came to marriage, Lipscomb argues (in chapter five, “Love and Marriage”) that women had considerable ability to pick their own spouses. Loise Borrette, for example, testified that Martin Solignac had “come after her for a long time talking to her of marriage,” and that she had responded that “if her mother and relatives wanted [it] she would agree” (p. 193). The consistory criticized Solignac for not talking to the parents first, and Borrette’s response suggests a concern for her parents’ wishes in the matter, but this could hardly be said to be an arranged marriage. I also found that dowries in Nîmes, were relatively low, which suggests that parental control over their daughters’ marriages was limited.<sup>[5]</sup> Even the consistory was willing to accept that young women over twenty-five and young men over thirty did not need consent, nor did they if the parents were far away (pp. 195-196). In general, the consistory saw marriage as a contract, and

if it had been contracted, wanted to see it fulfilled (p. 214), which did not prevent men or women from attempting to escape from engagements that they no longer wanted to see end in marriage.

The key word that people in sixteenth-century Nîmes used to criticize other people's sexual behavior was *paillardise*, from the word for straw--rolling in the hay. The word was strongly negative but there were worse things--I suspect most women would have preferred to be called *paillarde* rather than *putain*, for example. As described in chapter six, "Sex," the consistory saw a lot of it. As other studies have concluded, Lipscomb finds that many couples seem not to have felt guilty about premarital sex, especially if it occurred after the couple had come to an understanding that they would marry (p. 224). Mademoiselle de Campanhan justified having a baby only four months after her wedding by saying that she and her husband had been engaged for two years. Cohabitation by engaged couples also seems to have been widely acceptable (p. 233). No wonder the consistory was suspicious when men and women were alone together, especially if the door was closed (p. 220). But in an age when many young women worked as servants in wealthier people's houses, men and women were frequently behind closed doors together. The consistory saw many cases of masters, or the young relatives of masters, having sex with the servants (p. 242). Lipscomb argues (and I agree) that we should presume, unless there is contrary evidence, that such relationships were in effect rapes (p. 240), although the consistory did not normally see it that way, and even the women involved did not commonly use the word (p. 272). Poor servants would have found it very difficult to refuse the demands of their employers. Three of Pierre Granier's servants got pregnant, for example (p. 230). Lipscomb provides a page or so of testimony by Marguerite Brueysse, who testified that her master, Anthoine Bonnet, had thrown her down and raped her (pp. 253-255). Brueysse stood up to severe questioning from Bonnet, who was a leading Protestant.

Sex is also a key theme in chapter seven, "The Trials of Marriage," which includes a lengthy section on adultery as well as a discussion of domestic violence. According to Lipscomb, women complained that their husbands beat them, while men complained that their wives did not obey them (p. 277). Both husbands and wives accused their spouses of sleeping around. There was ample evidence of this, despite denials--Jacques de la Farelle, a doctor, was brought before the consistory numerous times over a four-year period for frequenting another woman, which he repeatedly denied, before finally being caught in bed with her (pp. 305-306). Occasionally, husbands even said their wives beat them, as Jehan Poudaigne did in 1602 (p. 278). The consistory's main goal was to restore harmony in the household. They disapproved of violence, but Lipscomb concludes that "their response to marital violence was not especially robust" (p. 286). In the end, any pressure on husbands was more in the nature of public censure (p. 292). Still, even church elders could be told to stop beating their wives (p. 95)--so the pressure was real.

The book's two key theses are laid out in the conclusion. First, Lipscomb argues that "ordinary women could exercise power" (p. 328), because the consistory, compared to other French courts with jurisdiction over marital and morals cases, was highly accessible. It met frequently, discussed many cases, and did not charge fees. Many women complained, told tales, made trouble, and generally were forces to be reckoned with. Some men treated them very badly--many battered wives did not get fair redress--but women in sixteenth-century Nîmes were far from passive or obedient. Second, according to Lipscomb, women were not just the subjects of patriarchy, they colluded with it: "Female strategies for resisting authorities supported the patriarchal order on which the authorities' power rested" (p. 329). Women may have wanted men

to behave, but they wanted other women to behave also, which meant telling on them when they cheated on their husbands. Women were anxious to assist the consistory in policing morality, so their efforts tended to encourage conformity rather than to challenge traditional precepts.

I agree with Lipscomb's points, as stated; but (when the records permit it) I would like to see studies like this address women's status more precisely. Even in explicitly patriarchal societies women's status varied, and, in some, women had higher status and greater freedom than in others. Not all societies are equally patriarchal. Despite the real restrictions women faced in England, for example, they ended up inheriting significant assets.[6] My sense of the Nîmes records analyzed here is that most women worked as servants rather than as artisans. So, their husbands were their principal source of income. This suggests that their economic choices were more constricted than those of women as depicted in other studies, such as Clare Crowston's and Sheilagh Ogilvie's.[7] The ability of men to beat their wives with impunity, as Lipscomb describes it, also supports this view. On the other hand, women seem to have had considerable ability to choose their spouses, which should have put notoriously authoritarian men at a disadvantage. As a rough measure, I also suspect that when grooms are on average much older than brides, women's status is lower. These kinds of measures allow for comparisons, which this book largely eschews. Such comparisons would have allowed Dr. Lipscomb to develop broader arguments to explain why women's status has changed over time and across the world. But readers of *The Voices of Nîmes* will come away with a vivid sense of women's daily life in a sixteenth-century French town and will learn much from the book.

#### NOTES

[1] Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jeffrey R. Watt, *The Making of Modern Marriage: Matrimonial Control and the Rise of Sentiment in Neuchâtel, 1550-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2] Philippe Chareyre, "Le consistoire de Nîmes, 1561-1685." 4 vols. Ph.D. Dissertation. Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 1987.

[3] Allan Tulchin, *That Men Would Praise the Lord* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4] I was a bit surprised to see no discussion of either Robert Muchembled, *Une histoire de la violence: De la fin du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008) or Benoît Garnot, *Histoire de la justice: France, XVIe-XXIe siècles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), both of which argue that men were overwhelmingly the perpetrators.

[5] See my "Low Dowries, Absent Parents: Marrying for Love in an Early Modern French Town," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 44.3 (2013): 713-738.

[6] Amy Louise Erickson, *Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[7] Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*; Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). See also Daryl M. Hafter,

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*Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

Allan Tulchin  
Shippensburg University  
[aatulchin@ship.edu](mailto:aatulchin@ship.edu)

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