



**James Richard Farr.** *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. xiv + 225 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3459-0; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3471-2.

**William Johnston.** *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan (Asia Perspectives: History, Society, and Culture).* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. viii + 245 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13052-3.

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Published on H-Law (July, 2006)

## Murders for Love: Imperial Japan Meets Bourbon France

William Johnston and James Farr each chose a gripping murder trial, one in Japan in the 1930s and the other in France three hundred years earlier, to present a profound and perceptive analysis of society. Two very different murder stories, they nevertheless share a conceptual framework in which the authors narrowly focused on a *cause celebre* as a portal into the changes in, and contradictions of, culture, values, gender, power, and law. With a generous dose of tantalizing details and riveting tales, skillfully told to keep the readers enthralled, these scholarly accounts of the two notorious crimes provide fine examples of microhistory.

William Johnston's topic is the infamous Abe Sada murder. Abe, a thirty-two-year-old former geisha and prostitute, murdered her lover, Kishida Ichizo, in a Tokyo inn in 1936. The couple had been indulging in sexual escapade for several days, before Abe wrapped her kimono sash around Kishida's neck and strangled him while he was asleep. She then cut off his genitals, carved her name into his body, and fled, carrying the body parts along with her so she could be close to them. Abe was arrested the next day. Convicted of premeditated murder, she was sentenced to six years in prison. The Abe saga has captivated the popular curiosities and imagination as no other crimes had, and has been made into numerous movies and novels, including Oshima Nagisa's 1976 film, *In the Realm of the Senses*. Johnston decided to write a scholarly book on this incident because he found that it revealed, in a striking way, "changes in boundaries of sexual moralities and behaviors, of gender roles, and of love attachments between women and men in modern Japan" (p. 5). The author lets Abe's voice be heard as much as possible, drawn from the police interrogation records, which he translated and appended to the book.

James Farr's tale is an equally lurid murder account steeped in lust and love. In 1638, Philippe Giroux, president at the Parlement of Burgundy, the province's highest court, was accused of murdering his cousin, Pierre Baillet, president at the Chambres des comptes, and Baillet's valet. According to rumor, Giroux had been carrying on a passionate affair with Baillet's wife, Marie Fyot. Moreover, Giroux's own wife had died under suspicious circumstances. Involving some of the most powerful and influential figures in the region, the incident instantly aroused widespread controversy. Furthermore, Giroux was a trusted client of the governor of Burgundy, Henri II de Bourbon, the prince of Conde. Conde was the godfather of Giroux's son, and it was this prince, Louis XIII's first cousin, to whom Giroux owed his rapid rise to power. But, as it turned out, the patron-client bond between Conde and Giroux had been fraying by the time Giroux was suspected of the murders. (Is Pierre Baillet related to the Parisian magistrates in the sixteenth century, such as Thibault Baillet and Rene Baillet, presidents at the Parlement of Paris? It will be interesting to know.) Once abandoned by his patron, Giroux had little prospects. Although he adamantly claimed his innocence till the end, Giroux was found guilty by his parlementaire colleagues and executed in 1643. The whole affair, pieced together from voluminous archival materials, demonstrated "how power worked, both formally through the law and informally through patron-client relations" (p. ix).

Power (although a very different kind) figures prominently in Abe's drama as well. It is "an inescapable asymmetry of power" between gender and class relations in prewar Japan that defined Abe's case (p. 14). Abe became a victim of acquaintance rape at the age of fifteen by a

friend's brother whose family belonged to a higher social class than hers. This incident "put her on the fast track to moral marginality" (p. 48). The author discusses how a new notion of sexuality had appeared in Meiji Japan by the turn of the century: "those who yearned to make Japan 'civilized' and 'enlightened' did their best to re-work social norms into a model they believed fit those qualifications. Women's sexuality, a cornerstone of the society they envisioned, did not fall from their gaze" (p. 29-30). Certain contemporary western ideas proved to be "politically useful" for the former samurai wishing to impose their values on the rest of Japanese society (p. 3). Thus a new ideal of sexuality emerged from "a confluence of feminine moral codes, one based on aristocratic Confucian themes of chastity and filial piety, the other based on European—or more specifically Victorian—values" (p. 30). The imposition of the elite culture required the suppression of centuries-old sexual values and practices that governed the urban working classes and rural peasantry.

It was this "contemporary sexual politics," contends Johnston, in a reservedly plaintive tone, that "established circumstances that pushed [Abe] toward murder" (p. 14). Squarely put in the "fallen woman" category as the result of rape, Abe found it "difficult for her to live by the definitions of right and wrong that a young woman of her station was expected to follow" (p. 47). What was remarkable about her, however, was that "rather than trying to cover up her victimization or consigning herself passively to the category of 'damaged goods,' she actively pursued the role of misfit.... Then she unknowingly crowned herself as the ultimate misfit, a woman who through murder and mutilation attempted to gain sexual equality with men" (p. 48). Here Abe emerges as a victim-turned-feisty-rebel, banging her head against social boundaries. The author's deep sympathy for Abe is undisguised. He fully embraces Abe's claim that she killed her victim not out of jealousy or sexual deviancy but out of love, wanting to control him in the same way a man could control a woman; it is an argument that has "an undeniable logic" (p. 14).

Farr's sympathy for his subject is more subtle. He does not take a position on Giroux's guilt or innocence. The Giroux affair remains on the whole much more mysterious and baffling than the Abe tale. After all, the poor judges at the Parlement of Dijon had the unenviable task of trying the sitting president of the Parlement, one of their own, with neither confession nor, nearly to the end of the trial, the *corpus delicti*. Giroux was in a sense a victim, like Abe, of the hardening of elite culture. According to Farr, seventeenth-century France witnessed a

remarkable rise of authoritarianism and an attempt to restore "an order of morality," following the chaos of civil war in the previous century. In this new order, sexuality was construed as "the epitome of disorder and subversion, a primal force to be controlled and regulated at all cost" (p. 19). Bourbon authoritarianism meets the Japanese oligarchs' gaze. Farr explains that, within the class of judges like Giroux and his peers, "the humanistic virtues of individual self-control and social discipline inspired by the social philosophy of neostoicism, and the godliness inspired by the Catholic Reformation, came to the fore" (p. 115). Men in power "exerted considerable energy in constructing and maintaining a new authoritarian definition of the nature of the polity, and of the role that king and magistrate would play within it. Public law and royal justice would be among their most important tools in the building of the new edifice" (p. 202). When Giroux, a royal magistrate, heedlessly subjected himself to the suspicion of murder allegedly arising from "concupiscent appetite," his colleagues at the Parlement understandably had deep misgivings.

Faced with the prospect of their public image as godly magistrates marred by the lurid accusation lodged against one of them, the judges solemnly reasserted their roles as guardians of justice and social order. Of course it did not help Giroux that he had been involved in a prolonged family feud with his archenemy Pierre Saumaise de Chasans, conseiller at the Parlement. The murder trial was really the continuation of a deadly feud, in which "the law became a public tool for family vengeance and private interest" (p. 201). Patrons like Conde had to heed the loyalties of the men who mattered, constantly shuffling favors. Giroux had the bad fortune of losing the prince's patronage when he needed it most. Farr plainly states that it was within this "tangled thicket of power and influence that legal judgment took place" (p. 198). In cases like this one, "guilt, innocence, power, and influence could not be separated" (p. 201).

The crucial irony is, according to Farr, that the Giroux trial took place at a pivotal moment when "impartial law and disinterested justice—what we call the rule of law" were emerging in European politics (p. ix). Farr convincingly argues that in the seventeenth century "the chaos of civil and religious war in the previous century prompted many French men and women of the upper classes to welcome a more authoritarian form of government that historians somewhat uncomfortably call 'absolutism,'" and that this authoritarianism "grew from a reorientation of how men understood the meaning of order in general and their place in securing it" (p. 201).

Here of course one should not place too much emphasis on the emergence of new judicial culture in the seventeenth century. The significance of royal officeholders as the nobility of robe, the judges' exalted view of their roles as guardians of law, and their jealous efforts to gird their heightened status and privileges all date to the sixteenth century. There is a sense in Farr's account that the judges renewed their resolve to impose moral and judicial probity on the French society, distancing themselves from the troubles of the previous century. But is it not that royal magistrates in the seventeenth century, increasingly assailed by the "absolutist" tendency of the crown, rather became relatively subdued partners of this new authoritarian order? The judges' self-perception and representation did not change much from the sixteenth century, regardless of the havoc caused by the religious wars. What changed perhaps was that they became more docile and wary participants in the new kind of political culture forced down by Richelieu, Mazarin, Louis XIV and the like. As the author points out, politics and the law in the seventeenth century were viewed "as processes whereby one gained or lost influence through managing the perceptions of others" (p. 200).

So here is the "paradox of power": judges went about their work, safely ignoring the conflicted relationship between patrimonial and public justice that resided at the heart of the system. In seventeenth-century France, the Giroux murder trial "laid the paradox bare" that "defined

political culture in this age of absolutism" (p. 204). The Abe trial in its turn bared and "lit up the sexual skeletons in many a Japanese family's closet," telling the Japanese "something they needed to learn about the boundaries that governed women, gender, and sexual power in their own society and culture" (pp. 156-157). For Johnston, the mild punishment by the government, six years in prison for premeditated murder, illuminates "its attitudes regarding gender relations and sexual mores at that time" (p. 17). Rejecting an insanity defense (presented by Abe's lawyer, we are told, "much to her chagrin"), the court instead focused on her "habituation to sexual excess, which led to an extreme mental impairment" (p. 140). Johnston writes that the judge thus never "grasp [ed] completely the social and cultural implications that her case presented" (p. 142). Abe "was not pleased with the court's reasoning with regard to either the verdict or her sentence" (p. 141), and nor was the author. Some readers may find a bit overreaching Johnston's claim that "few Japanese women in modern times have done more to raise awareness of the issues of sexual and gender inequality" (p. 13).

*A Tale of Two Murders* and *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* are captivating works of excellent scholarship. Both authors admirably succeeded in bringing these extraordinary murder stories to life and persuasively brought forward their theses. If only all history books were this much fun to read.

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**Citation:** Marie Kim. Review of Farr, James Richard, *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France* and Johnston, William, *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan (Asia Perspectives: History, Society, and Culture)*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

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