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Stuart Carroll. *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 384 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-929045-1.

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Noble Feuds, Ignoble Violence

Stuart Carroll's challenging book is a study of what he calls "vindicatory violence" as perpetrated by French nobles between the late fifteenth and the late seventeenth centuries. It is a social and cultural history based primarily on the archival detritus of legal institutions. He believes that a study of this sort will serve to correct misleading interpretations of noble violence, especially of the duel, generated by historians who rely exclusively on printed sources such as pamphlets, treatises, and memoirs. If Stuart Carroll is right, and I think he is, then Norbert Elias was wrong. Elias viewed the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the most important period in the "civilizing process" in Europe. This is when the still barbarous medieval knight was transformed by the cultural power of dynastic states into the self-controlled aristocrat polished to a high sheen by courtly etiquette. France, and especially the court of Louis XIV, played a privileged part in this process, facilitating the birth of the Enlightenment and civil society. Such an interpretation simply cannot be sustained in the light of Carroll's evidence. French nobles had no idea that they were supposed to be taking a teleological path to civility. Quite the contrary. The duel, which first gained popularity in the late sixteenth century, did not so much ritualize and regularize noble violence, as provide a fig leaf for the naked slaughter of one noble by another. Equally, the blood feud, so often taken as proof of societal primitivism, actually flourished for a hundred years (1560-1660). The decline of dueling and feuding in the late seventeenth century did not result, therefore, from the "civilizing process," but from the militarization of the nobility for the purposes of

foreign war. This satisfied the nobles' penchant for using public displays of violence to justify and defend their elevated status. Thus, military service to the king finally took the place of "vindicatory violence" in the construction of noble identity.

Carroll's use of the term "vindicatory violence" offers some elasticity in the range of actions he includes in his analysis. Although his opening discussion of concepts attempts to distinguish vindictive violence (based on a passion for vengeance) from vindicatory violence (based on social norms governing retribution), the distinction is far from apparent or even meaningful in most of his evidence. Even trying to distinguish between unmeasured revenge and calculated retribution would have been largely impossible considering the nature of the sources. Thus, the claim that "feuding in early modern France was characterized by exchanges of violence, in which responses were carefully calibrated according to the affront" (p. 107) owes more to model-building anthropologists than it does to the abundance of new evidence Carroll deploys in his book. In fact, elsewhere Carroll takes pains to demonstrate—importantly—that duels, encounters, and feuds rarely conformed to the ritualistic patterns described in contemporary pamphlets and repeated by historians. Rather, protagonists generally sought to establish some form of advantage over their opponents, including that of surprise, numbers, weaponry, or sheer ruthlessness once blood lust took over. Therefore, though the title *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* fails to indicate Carroll's exclusive focus on

the nobility, it is certainly more appropriate for his wide-ranging analysis than using the rebarbative phrase “vindicatory violence.” There is a great deal of blood and violence in this study, but how much it really conformed to notions of ritual, reciprocity, and retribution remains an open question.

The role these factors played in specific incidents of noble violence in the period is difficult to determine due to the nature of the sources on which this study rests. Carroll has done impressive archival research. He began by looking for cases of elite violence in the prosecution files compiled by the Parlement of Paris. He complemented these with the abundant series of royal pardons registered by the chancery, which offer significantly more cases for the sixteenth century. With several hundred cases in hand, Carroll moved to provincial archives, private papers, and antiquarian publications in order to track down family connections, fill in social context, and discover related acts of violence. This ambitious and painstaking research yielded vital evidence about many aspects of noble violence, including how feuds were pursued over several generations, the mechanics of escalation, the frequency of conspiracy on one hand or unplanned encounters on the other, the deadly effects of changing weaponry, the inflammatory power of sexual norms, and the role of judicial institutions in either ignoring, abetting, or repressing conflict.

Carroll’s single most important source remains royal pardons. These pardons were based on letters of remission written by individuals accused of murder. Such a source has to be treated with special caution. In order to be effective in obtaining a pardon, these letters needed to provide a narrative framework for a particular act of violence that would greatly ameliorate the perpetrator’s criminal culpability. Natalie Zemon Davis understood the danger of taking these narratives to be true and so used them only to explore cultural norms and expectations.[1] Carroll is more daring, and for a good reason. Letters of remission did not lead to pardons until victims’ families had been given an opportunity to challenge the perpetrators’ version of events and until these challenges had been investigated, however superficially, by local courts. If elements of the narrative turned out clearly to be fictional, the perpetrator was compelled to revise his narrative. Nonetheless, the very structure and purpose of letters of remission (so-called pardon tales) encouraged their authors to exaggerate the role played by defending noble honor or exacting righteous retribution. After all, the most legitimate form of violence is that committed in self-defense, even when culturally construed.

Thus, the actual balance between outbursts of anger, unregulated revenge, religious hatred, or other inspirations for killing, and the more politically and judicially acceptable motives that defined “vindicatory violence” is tilted in favor of the latter by the nature of the sources. The willingness to accept such justifications at all levels of the judiciary also explains the profound failure to control noble violence. Even the ostensibly draconian Grands Jours (here translated as the Great Assizes) de Poitou of 1634 and the more famous Grands Jours d’Auvergne of 1665-66, executed very few nobles despite being prompted by widespread lawlessness among provincial *hobereaux*.

Judicial records provide the only useful source for quantifying noble violence. All the same, Carroll openly admits that he is unable to generate any scientifically sound statistics because they depend more on the survival of records than on actual levels of violence. And yet, his attempts at quantification strongly suggest that violence between nobles declined significantly in the late medieval period, revived dramatically with the collapse of royal authority during the Wars of Religion (1560-1600), remained high in the early seventeenth century, spiked again during the domestic anarchy of the Fronde (1648-53), and only began a gradual decline during the personal rule of Louis XIV (1661-1715). During the worst of these phases, homicide rates among nobles far exceeded any such rates in contemporary capitalist societies. Far from acting as avatars of civility, therefore, nobles in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France generally offered deplorable examples of solipsistic violence to social inferiors, all the while justifying their actions as necessary to defend their vaunted honor and exalted status.

It is regrettable that a book so full of fascinating material and stimulating arguments should be so marred by its publisher. Oxford University Press should be ashamed of itself for charging such an exorbitant price for such a shabby product. The dustjacket and binding are certainly of high quality, and it is a pleasure to have actual footnotes as well as a full bibliography. However, the obvious pixelation produced by low resolution digital printing has robbed the sixteen images of their original clarity and vivacity and even made the text blurry. Worse yet, is the sloppy copyediting which has left the text dotted with homonym errors, pronoun reference disagreement, fluctuating verb tenses, dropped words, and missing punctuation. Stuart Carroll’s scholarship deserved better from a press that once led its industry. Those who buy this book may be disappointed by the artefact, but those who read it will find it both richly evocative and rightly provocative.

Note [1]. *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

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