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James R. Farr, *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005. xiv + 225 pp. Figures, notes, note on sources, and index. \$74.95 (hb); \$21.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8223-3459-3 (cl); ISBN 0-8223-3471-2 (pb).

Review Essay by Stuart Carroll, University of York.

The *noblesse de robe* will never look quite the same again following the publication of two recent books on murder and the Burgundian magistracy. The nonsense that the *noblesse de robe* was either a sort of proto-bourgeoisie or the alter-ego of the *noblesse d'épée* can now be laid to rest for good. Benoît Garnot's 2004 case study of the gruesome murder of Jean-Baptiste Brunet, *lieutenant particulier* of the *bailliage* of Beaune, and a female servant in 1649 by Nicolas Guyot, *avocat du roi au bailliage*, is now joined by James Farr's brilliant and gripping study of the Giroux scandal.[1] Anyone who has a passing knowledge of the seventeenth-century French legal system, its complexities and nuances, will immediately recognize how masterly and painstaking a piece of historical research *A Tale of Two Murders* is. Weaving these complexities into a convincing and clear narrative is no mean feat, and Farr is to be congratulated for doing it with such brio. He is blessed with a uniquely complete set of records, and the high social position of the actors, their love trysts and political manoeuvring makes for a great read.

Many non-specialist readers will probably read *A Tale of Two Murders* as a murder mystery, and I shall leave it up to others whether it works on this level too. Certainly Farr does a sterling job in keeping the suspense going. Both he and Garnot are not entirely convinced of the guilt of the accused and give their respective pleas of innocence a sympathetic hearing. For my part, I will not shed any tears for Philippe Giroux. One reason being that I have spent the last ten years working in the archives on the everyday violent behaviour of the early modern French nobility. The two main protagonists in *A Tale of Two Murders*, Philippe Giroux and Pierre Saumaise de Chasans, are representative of their class as a whole: nasty, brutal, and egotistical. Maybe the Jacobins had a point after all. What is truly astonishing about the Giroux case is not that a senior judge should commit so brutal a murder, but that he should be executed for it. This is a testimony not only to the collapse of his political support, but to the robustness of the judicial system and the widespread conviction (which I share) that he was as guilty as hell.

What of the book's wider significance? Some will draw comparisons to the *Return of Martin Guerre*, but this would be wrong. *A Tale of Two Murders* is not a quirky, offbeat tale, and the characters are too unpleasant to elicit much empathy. Others will find vindication that the archives contain nothing but fictions. But mere fictions, as Paul Veyne taught us long ago, do not make for convincing historical narratives, and Farr is (as the judges were at the time) able to establish a rough truth from the competing stories that were told. The significance of the Giroux scandal lies not in its uniqueness or in its ability to shock (I doubt contemporaries were), but in its banality. *A Tale of Two Murders* elucidates a structure. Judges were probably less likely to resort to violence to solve their problems than nobles of the sword, but even in Paris there were some notorious cases. Pierre de l'Estoile recounts the case of Jean le Voix, *conseiller* of the Parlement. His mistress was the wife of his colleague, the *procureur-général*. In 1581 she put an end to their relationship, and what ensued was a characteristic consequence of male proprietariness: if he couldn't have her then no one would. On Pentecost Eve le Voix and his lackeys ambushed the woman in the street and, in the presence of her husband, had his men try to slice off her nose with a razor. In the ensuing struggle the victim's face was horribly mutilated. Le Voix fled and was condemned *in absentia*. But as was usual in cases of elite violence, he got the case evoked, a signal to his adversary to reach an accommodation. All prosecutions depended on private funds, and le Voix's pockets were deeper than the victim's: he spent 10,000 *livres* buying the judges of the Parlement of Paris; she

had to settle for 2,000 *écus* in compensation. In the seventeenth century, the amounts one paid in bribes rose in line with the spiralling costs of venal office.[2] In Farr's study, Giroux would never have been beheaded without Pierre de Saumaise de Chasans's resources behind the prosecution.

The dispute between Pierre Baillet and Philippe Giroux was a classic confrontation: in France disputing parties were often cousins. The factions that cleaved the Parlement of Dijon were also replicated elsewhere, engendering violence. Lawyers in particular were keen duellers. The Giroux case was only exceptional in that, despite Farr's protestations to the contrary, I doubt that contemporaries would have seen Giroux as much of a man of honour. If he really wanted Marie Fyot then there were plenty of ways to go about killing Baillet and plenty of precedents to show how one could get away with it. Killing an enemy had to be done in public in order to conform to the laws of honour. Most commonly men claimed they had acted in self-defence. Giroux made the mistake of killing his man in private and, worse still, feebly trying to cover it up. Suspicions that Giroux was a man without honour, and therefore not to be trusted, were confirmed by the numerous accusations that he had had his enemies poisoned. Poison was the weapon of women and the dishonourable. No wonder the prince de Condé dropped him like a brick.

The prince himself comes out of the affair with little credit. The first principle of good lordship was to maintain harmony and equilibrium among one's followers. Condé failed to intervene in his clients' squabbles and showed no inclination to uphold his Christian obligation to make peace. He comes across as aloof and distant from events in Burgundy: he made demands of his clients but provided little leadership in the locality. Other princes were more active. In 1583, seven years after the assassination of Michel Vialar, president of the *Grand Conseil*, Henri duc de Guise brokered a marriage between the victim's daughter and the killer's family, in which the dowry was offset against the price of reparations for the murder. The Giroux affair makes clear that violence among the social elite, which became endemic during the Wars of Religion, continued to be thought of as a solution to problems until well into the seventeenth century. The origin of the dispute between Giroux and his archenemy requires further consideration. Farr tells us that Saumaise de Chasans was a querulous individual, but was their dispute simply the result of a defamation suit? Farr reveals another important element in the structure of vindictive violence: the role played by social mobility in the dispute process. On several occasions he refers to their relationship as a blood feud and at other times describes it as a vendetta, which he assumes to be a synonym for feud. I would have liked to have known how they described their own relationship. It may have been a feud in the sense of dispute, but it was certainly not a blood feud as anthropologists understand it, and the word vendetta is wholly misplaced.

Finally, we come to politics. Farr's relative novice as a historian of political society proves to be a great strength, ensuring that his astonishment at the tale he tells is refreshingly conveyed to the reader, and as a result the story of factional infighting and intrigue is told with verve. In a previous book Farr was seduced by the power of legal discourse and the reach of prescriptive legislation.[3] In his new book he has discovered that the law works very differently in practice. It was always political. The political world of the *Tale of Two Murders* was brutally labyrinthine, where the law was for sale, deep-seated enmities the stuff of politics, power measured by violence, and passionate outbursts coexisted with cruel reason. Farr's conversion to political history is particularly welcome because he has succeeded in doing something original. By getting into the minds of his protagonists, he is pointing the way to a new type of political history, *Alltagspolitik*, an everyday politics far removed from the rarefied atmosphere of high society. This micro-politics revolved around issues of economic advantage and social and class relations, only occasionally inflected by wider political discourse and events. James Farr has exposed the underbelly of Ancien Régime politics.

NOTES

[1] B. Garnot, *Intime conviction et erreur judiciaire. Un magistrat assassin au XVIIe siècle?* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2004).

[2] On the unseen costs of justice: S. Carroll, 'Acheter la grâce en France du XVe au XVIIe siècle', in B. Garnot ed., *Justice et argent: les crimes et les peines pécuniaires du XIIIe au XXIe siècle* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2005).

[3] *Authority and sexuality in early modern Burgundy (1550-1730)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Mack P. Holt, Sarah Hanley, and Benoît Garnot, as well as James R. Farr's response to all four Review Essays.

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