

---

*H-France Forum* Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 1

**Stuart Carroll**, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2006. xii + 369 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 0-19-929045-8.

Review Essay by Kristen Neuschel, Duke University.

---

This ambitious and prodigiously researched book about elite violence in early modern France will contribute to and help to redirect several historiographies. Perhaps deliberately, the author has blurred the actual focus of his book. The title talks very generally about “blood and violence,” the opening page about “vengeance,” subsequent pages about “feuding,” “duelling” and—his general term of choice—“vindicatory violence.” In fact, one of the feats of the book is that Professor Carroll discriminates among the different categories of violence while, at the same time, he allows the protean quality of elite “vindicatory violence” to remain visible. A duel could be part of a feud, or not; some duels are better described as armed encounters, though they could be difficult to distinguish; feud and vendetta are distinct but can shade into each other, and so on. One result of this nuanced approach is that the book makes a major contribution to the history of duelling. Duelling, he argues, cannot be reduced to a single set of motives or causes, but was, in the main, one of the several varieties of vindicatory behavior. In short, duelling was violence. It was not an irrelevant show, an insignificant remnant of violence which had largely been repressed. Indeed, neither duelling nor any other vindicatory behavior can be bracketed off as private in the sense of inconsequential or, above all, as a compensatory practice whereby violence was somehow “contained.” The sheer fact of widespread political violence by French elites throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries emerges as undeniable from Carroll’s work. The nobility was never “tamed,” as traditional historiography claims.

This is a dramatic conclusion with many implications for our understanding of state formation, the relationship of war to state building, and the cultural transformation of the elite. Among other things, Carroll’s evidence directly challenges Norbert Elias’s thesis, and its recent adherents, which argues that state formation coincided with the development of shame and self-restraint in ruling elites.[1] Carroll argues that violence did not automatically abate as central authority grew in France and that the quashing of violence was a more complex process than, he believes, Elias’s thesis allows. Louis XIV’s regime did not so much repress violence in the provinces as successfully arbitrate it; nobles themselves sought help in ending feuds and private conflicts. Thus, absolutism itself looks different in Carroll’s hands—ever more like a cooperative venture between crown and elites, both of which were responding to circumstances.

Carroll identifies many circumstances that affected the nature and the level of elite violence over the two centuries he studies. As he does so, his arguments question, modify or reinforce established work on a range of issues. For example, his analysis of the slow waning (but not, he is emphatic, disappearance) of vindicatory violence late in the seventeenth century rests in part on an appreciation of social distinctions within the elite. He argues that the growth of the army under Louis XIV helped control violence in part because it so dramatically transformed relationships among the petty nobility: bonds of loyalty to kin and region were replaced by loyalty to regiment. Here, his own evidence of the prevalence of violence among the lesser nobility allows him to make profitable connections to Guy Rowlands’ recent work on Louis XIV’s army.[2] Though he does not explicitly make the connection, Carroll’s insistence that elite violence could be both a spontaneous outcome of bravado as well as carefully premeditated and plotted echoes much recent work on medieval warfare, which stresses that both the choice to fight and particular methods of fighting could be rational choices in many circumstances.[3] His sources reveal evidence about the use of armor and firearms, on the other hand, which challenges received knowledge about early modern weapons and tactics; he thus reveals some of the limitations inherent in studying

warfare in isolation.[4] Some of the circumstances that shaped patterns of noble violence were true historical contingencies, according to Carroll—the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII and his successors, the personality and abilities of Henri III and Henri IV, the periods of royal minority, and so forth—and he sketches their “synergy” with more enduring factors. The result is a complex explanation of the ebbs and flows of elite violence which avoids reductionism and allows us to see a number of historical problems afresh.

It will be hard for any scholar to overlook Carroll’s conclusions or the implications of his work, given the rich base of evidence on which it rests. Carroll mines letters of remission and records of trials regarding elite violence before, particularly, the Parlement of Paris; he follows individual cases into departmental archives to learn as much as possible about the families and circumstances involved. He uncovers significant contextual details about individual duels, vendettas, and encounters, which might appear as random episodes otherwise. The depth of his evidence, in other words, as much as his ability to quantify noble violence, helps him steer clear of the kind of essentializing he criticizes in Elias. The warrior culture we see in *Blood and Violence* is complex and multi-faceted. It is influenced by expanding literacy and education, by the impact of printing, by multiple strands of religious sensibility, by family rivalries driven, in turn, by myriad local conditions, and by larger political circumstances around it.

Nonetheless, some naturalizing of elite culture creeps into Carroll’s argument. When weighing the contribution of Renaissance culture (such as the cult of ancient heroes) to elite violence, he speaks of it “reinforce[ing] *martial instincts*” (p.267, my emphasis). He asserts that it is possible to “peel away the encumbrance of chivalric and Christian self-justification and glimpse the *naked warrior* beneath (p.160, my emphasis.) While I do not doubt both chivalry and Christianity could function as self-justifications (as he amply demonstrates), I do not think we can glimpse the “naked warrior,” whatever we do. There is no warrior shorn of culture any more than there is a woman or a man shorn of culture – at least one who is the purview of the historian. My point here is not to criticize a limitation of the work as much as it is to draw attention to the persistence of this interpretive stance, which much work on warfare still supports.[5] One of the contributions of Carroll’s book is precisely that it depicts multiple “props” for warrior culture; his work will, happily, make essentializing warrior culture much harder.

There is one aspect of warrior culture, in the work, which is not as fully explored as it might be: the construction of memory, or, more broadly, the relationship of event, narrative, and identity. Carroll states at the outset that he wants to extract “facts” from the tales told to elicit pardons; he considers a “literary” appreciation of them, which he identifies with Natalie Zemon Davis’s work on the tales, too likely to miss important evidence about elite culture.[6] Partly because he presents so many cases of violence and partly owing to his determination to discover the “facts” of individual cases, the narrative strategies used by the authors are not fully exploited. These tales told for legal purposes do present difficulties, but could there not be clues there, as well as in many of the other narrative sources Carroll deploys, to address the issue of how elites’ memories of wrongs were carried forward? And of how closely action, symbol, ritual and memory were tied together? Just below the surface of his rich analysis, but not directly stated, is the awareness that maintaining elite identity was a continuous process; maintaining enmity was too. Both were punctuated by, “remembered” by, events—verbal events, ritual, violence—and by symbols, such as coats of arms affixed to the wall of a contested parish church. More insight into how those processes were structured would have advanced our understanding of both the “rules” that governed the episodic nature of violence as well as of the ways in which noble identity depended on this process of constant recognition through encounters and symbols. The constituents of elite identity changed over time but so, too, I would argue, did habits of memory and structures of identity-formation.[7]

In the chapter “Women, Sex and Vindictive Violence,” Carroll explores some of the changes over time in the sexual economy of elite society with the attention to the complexities of change and to the wide array of explanatory factors that distinguishes the work as a whole. He notes, for example, the roles of

---

Reformation moralism and, in the short term, of Henri IV's personal libertinism in affecting power and gender relations among elites. But here he also stumbles rather more fully into essentialism which limits his analysis of the play of gender ideology and gender roles in the world of elite violence. I was disappointed by the catch-all nature of this chapter, which includes violence relating to marriage (fighting over partners as well as domestic violence), men's sexual reputation as an arena for honor, and female retaliatory violence. Trying to contain "women" as a topic, particularly when connected to "sex," in a single chapter distorts the activities of women and leaves unexplored the sexuality of men. (Both women and men are sexual beings, and both women and men are gendered beings.[8]) Carroll ties honor to masculinity early in the work, and he notes the existence of male homosexuality (p.90), but he does not connect those observations to his discussion of male sexual prowess which appears in this chapter. Similarly, the author's own evidence (here and in other chapters) reveals women's activities as peacemakers and as agents of violence in their own right, but because women are largely discussed as sexual objects in this chapter, the implications of Carroll's evidence of these other activities remains unexplored. That is, how does what we know about women's many activities--managing property, carrying weapons themselves, making peace--affect our understanding of elite violence as a whole? If we think of warriors as members of families made up of both women and men, how does that change what we can see? Or, to put it more baldly, if we imagine warriors to be a class -- if warriors are both men and women -- are we not able to see more?[9] For example, could we not see how women's allegiances to two lineages could have had an impact on feuds? A work as rich as *Blood and Violence* leaves many unanswered questions and makes us impatient for an even greater understanding of its subject.

---

#### NOTES

[1] For example, he criticizes the work of J. Fletcher, *Violence and Civilization: An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

[2] Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[3] For example, R. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[4] He argues, for example, that the adoption of pistols can be explained in part because of the needs of private violence: they were easy to conceal. Cf. Bert S. Hall, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[5] For example, John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

[6] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

[7] I am thinking of the work of medievalists Patrick Geary and Amy Remensnyder, for example, concerning the ways in which memory was constructed around objects, texts and events in the central Middle Ages. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Amy L. Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasure at Conques: Reliquaries and Imaginative Memory," *Speculum* 71 (1996): 884-906 and *Remembering Kings Past* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[8] And why, above all, make an ideology of gender appear a timeless truism, such as when he says "contemporaries [who read classical works] were aware that revenge has a female face (p. 233-34, my

---

italics). If it is anachronistic of us to judge early modern people for these positions, as Professor Carroll urges, then it is ahistorical of us not to acknowledge them *as* positions, as ideology.

[9] Professor Carroll could have made use of much published work on elite women to aid him here, for example: Robert J. Kalas, "The Noble Widow's Place in the Patriarchal Household: the Career of Jeanne de Gontault," *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 24 (1993): 519-39; Kristen B. Neuschel, "Noble Women and War in Sixteenth-Century France," in Michael Wolfe, ed., *Changing Identities in Early Modern France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996): 124-44; a helpful perspective on women and lordship is provided by Kimberley Loprete, "The gender of lordly women: the case of Adela of Blois," in Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless, eds., *Studies on medieval and early modern women: parwns or players?* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003): 90-110.

Kristen Neuschel  
Duke University  
kneusche@duke.edu

See also the Review Essays on this book by David Parrott, Jonathan Dewald, and James Collins, as well as Stuart Carroll's response to all four Review Essays.

Copyright © 2006 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum* Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 1

ISSN 1557-7058