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Christophe Regina, *Genre, mœurs et justice. Les Marseillaises et la violence au XVIIIe siècle*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2015. 282 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography. €20 (pb). ISBN 9-791032-000090.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

The voluminous court records of pre-revolutionary France are notoriously difficult to use, but rigorous and skilled analysis may reveal great riches, as Christophe Regina here demonstrates. He has studied nine hundred criminal cases brought before the “sénéchaussée” tribunal of Marseille from 1750 to 1790, held in the 2B series of the Archives Départementales of Bouches-du-Rhône. Indeed, he admits that he was drawn to the dossiers “motivé par le désir de prêter attention à des sources qui ne sont pas d’une approche aisée” (p. 7). We are fortunate that he has such a desire and the requisite skill.

Regina’s central argument is that “la violence ordinaire qui s’exprimait à Marseille au XVIIIe siècle était essentiellement une violence du mot et du geste, violence qui interférait sur le cours du quotidien de façon tout aussi habituelle que la courtoisie et l’entraide” (p. 8). But not all Marseillais women assaulted each other, which is why it was defined as criminal behavior, as an outrage to “bonnes mœurs,” and prosecuted. Marseillaises of all social strata occasionally attacked (but very rarely killed) each other, as well as the males in their lives, when their self-respect was outraged by the behavior of their spouses or of others close to them in matters of respect, property, and fidelity. Marital promiscuity seems to have been quite rare. In fact, Regina found only thirty cases of female adultery brought before the courts, and women were legally powerless to prosecute their unfaithful husbands (pp. 86-8). Rather, the verbal and physical violence of women was above all symptomatic of dysfunction in family relationships circumscribed by assumptions about the proper behavior of males and females in public and private.[1] Far more rarely, women—usually older women or widows—killed themselves or their infants when despair at the prospects of survival became overwhelming.

Regina concludes that similarities in the nature of male and female violence were more important than gendered differences, despite the different assumptions about women’s “nature” and contrasting treatment by the courts. He insists that infanticide was a form of “violence sociale” rather than “le crime féminin par excellence” (p. 254). There was no “guerre des sexes” in eighteenth-century Marseille (p. 256). Certainly, however, there were differences in the sexualized abuse men used towards the targets of their rage (p. 57). There were contrasts, too, in some of the ways men and women used violence: male suicides hanged or shot themselves; women jumped from buildings (p. 197).

Regina’s analyses are always fine, lucid, and judicious. He suggests that the incidence of infanticide had declined significantly since the sixteenth century (p. 258), and that violence had become more “individualized.” But he is cautious about drawing conclusions about change across time or about placing his work in comparative context, despite an evident mastery of an extensive historiography in French and English. There seem to be striking parallels with the seminal work done long ago on Toulouse by Nicole and Yves Castan, emphasizing the cultural importance of individual and family

“honor.” Unlike the Castans, however, Regina does not dwell on the language of insult. In Toulouse it was all the more degrading to be insulted in French rather than Occitan, but we are not told whether a parallel cultural and linguistic order existed in Marseille, nor indeed about the use of Provençal in the court cases.^[2] Nor is there a discussion of whether violent crime in Marseille a century later, recently studied by Céline Regnard, was significantly different from that of the ancien regime.^[3]

This reluctance to place his conclusions in broader chronological or geographical contexts may be explained by the origins of the book as a doctoral thesis completed at the Université d’Aix-Marseille in 2012. For Regina’s more expansive discussions of female violence and its representations, we have to turn to his other recent book, *La Violence des femmes* ^[4] There are great riches here nevertheless, indicated by the titles and sub-titles of his chapters:

Violenter au plus proche

- Les “mauvais traitements”: violences conjugales, espace public et justice
- Confronter les discours: chirurgie d’un interrogatoire

Sexualité et amours clandestins à l’épreuve du genre

- Le genre et l’adultère à Marseille au siècle des Lumières
- Mauvais traitements, adultère et honte sociale: les élites, secret de famille et scandale
- Séduire, jouir, punir. Les rapt de séduction à Marseille au siècle des Lumières, enjeux et pratiques

Les femmes et les violences extrêmes

- Les femmes à l’épreuve de “l’homicide de soy”: suicide et genre
- Morts accidentelles
- Femmes, sociabilité et infanticide à Marseille

Not surprisingly, all of the cases Regina examines are distressing, and many of them are confronting. He tells, for example, the story of Marie Blanc (p. 61), who had the misfortune to marry the sailor Joseph Besson, who had preferred to call her “garce, putain, maquerele, souteneuse de bordel” rather than Marie, and had repeatedly assaulted her with fists and feet as well as menacing her with knives and sticks, causing a very premature birth of a child. He finally beat her so badly she was “laissée pour mort” in the street. Neighbours helped her to her feet and, ultimately, she took legal action.

There is a lengthy (pp. 117-59) and superb analysis of the notorious case of the wealthy Rose Cornet (her father constructed galleys for convicts) and her husband Barthélemy, the Consul for Venice in Marseille. The legal battles over their vast property, which would result in fifty court cases after 1768, including before the Parlement at Aix, involved mutual charges of adultery, sustained cruelty, and intricate deception. Rose was the great loser in these battles, but the Revolution of 1789 opened up new opportunities for her, and she launched into florid appeals to the National Assembly against the “despotes en robes noires” of pre-revolutionary courts and her husband’s “tyrannie conjugale.” Now she was sure the “patriotisme” of “notre auguste Assemblée Nationale” would see her free from her chains, but she was also inspired by having read Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Voltaire’s *Candide*, and especially Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa Harlowe*, translated into French in 1751. Indeed, Rose seems to have identified with Clarissa, the epitome of virtue, beauty, and innocence oppressed by greed.

Cornet’s belief that the judicial and attitudinal changes that were part of the Revolution had opened up an opportunity to remedy her long suffering also points to a limitation in the type of records Regina has scrutinized. Historians have to look to other courts to investigate violent collective protest by women, and whether the Revolution created new targets and strategies for rioters. But Christophe Regina is concerned instead with the resort to interpersonal violence in daily life, and he has created a thought-provoking book which is both sensitive and rigorous.

NOTES

[1] Regina draws on, among others, Anne Verjus, *Le Bon mari: une histoire politique des hommes et des femmes à l'époque révolutionnaire* (Paris: Fayard, 2010) and François Lebrun, *La Vie conjugale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993).

[2] Nicole Castan, *Les Criminels du Languedoc: les exigences d'ordre et les voies du ressentiment dans une société pré-révolutionnaire (1750-1790)* (Toulouse: Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1980); Yves Castan, *Honnêteté et relations sociales en Languedoc, 1715-1780* (Paris: Plon, 1974); Nicole and Yves Castan, *Vivre ensemble. Ordre et désordre en Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Julliard, 1981).

[3] Céline Regnard, *Marseille la violente. Criminalité, industrialisation et société (1851-1914)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

[4] *La Violence des femmes: Histoire d'un tabou social* (Paris: Max Milo Éditions, 2011).

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