
Sometimes one of the hardest concepts for students to grasp when studying history is that the systems and structures laid before them by historians do not always reflect the reality of a functioning system. History is not science. People are always people and cannot be expected to act according to a neat trajectory. *A Tale of Two Murders* by James Farr is an excellent resource for illuminating this point. In it, he provides full details of the actual functioning of one of the most complex structures of Early Modern Europe, the judiciary. Sometimes these details come close to overwhelming in their tedium, but that is part of the point: justice was never concise, nor swift in seventeenth-century France, and wading through evidence and counter-evidence was as tough a job then as it is now. Farr’s major point in this regard comes towards the very end of the work, in the section titled “Analytical Essay” (pp. 195-204), in which he discusses the task of the historian to use whatever documentary evidence survives to sift truth from fiction. Farr highlights the role of the historian not as discovering truth for its own sake, but as a way of understanding how “facts” were presented at the time in order to best represent their reality, either as they believed it was, or perhaps as they wished it was: the “management of perceptions” (p. 200). As such this book is a useful teaching tool for students first approaching history as a discipline, aided by its easy reading style and the drama of its subject.

The basis for *A Tale of Two Murders* is a series of documents Farr came across in the departmental archives in Dijon. Two men vanished in the autumn of 1636, Pierre Baillet and his valet Neugot. Baillet was one of the most prominent men in Burgundy, as a Président of the Chambre des Comptes and a major landowner. The chief suspect was his cousin Philippe Giroux, also a senior official in the provincial judiciary. The two men represented the pinnacles of power in seventeenth-century Burgundy, and were linked via blood, politics, and an alleged passion for a woman. Marie Fyot, wife of Baillet, was herself a member of one of Burgundy’s leading robe families, and a key player in this murder drama. Farr makes the point early on that this is a matter of
family, and puts it in perspective within the context of the newly emerging sense of obedience to ‘rule of law’ in early modern society. There is a contrast here between a developing ‘modern’ sense of disinterested justice, and the tenacity of the medieval concept of loyalty to dynasticism above all else.

The other pertinent issue Farr highlights in this book is that justice was not blind. The legal documents he uses are riddled with contradictions between witnesses, sometimes recanting testimonies depending on which party was in the ascendant. Overall it was the power of patron-client relations that oiled the wheels of justice, and both parties in this case attempted to use this fact to their advantage. “No family stood alone in the constellation of power” (p. 150), and the complex web of Baillets, Giroux and Fyots had strands reaching into most areas of Burgundian politics, society and culture. Chapter five, “The House of Giroux” stresses the importance of family networks, and in particular the growth of the prestige of the judiciary families in France known as the noblesse de robe. This chapter alone is worth assigning to undergraduate students, with a wealth of detail that makes this trial particularly real, not an abstract legal treatise or a collection of statistics—what Farr calls “concrete, lived situations” (p. ix). The notes section is extensive and useful, though its sources mostly date from the 1980s.

The details also point out the terrible unfairness of justice in seventeenth-century France, from witnesses being crippled for life by the moine de camp (leg boot), to well-connected suspects getting let off because of royal connections. The key personage in this context was Henri II de Bourbon, Prince de Condé, first prince of the blood and governor of Burgundy. Farr makes a point of introducing him as a character in this drama early on, but fails to adequately explore the position played by Condé in Burgundy. He is portrayed as head of an all-powerful patron-client network, through which the entire province was controlled. Despite citations of Katia Béguin’s important work on the princes of Condé, Farr could have gone further in his exploration of Condé’s weaker side, in particular his dependence on Richelieu, an embarrassment in the eyes of many at court for a prince of his rank.2 A Tale of Two Murders is primarily about the members of the judiciary, but neglects their connections with other major elite groupings such as the old military nobles,

2 Culminating in the mésalliance of Condé’s son in 1641 to the Cardinal’s niece, against the protests of his relatives and contemporaries. Béguin, p. 41.