

## Blood and Violence in Early Modern France

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Penny Roberts

France in the early-modern period presents us with a range of striking images, from its bloody civil wars to its fabulous court at Versailles, from its swashbuckling musketeers to its mistreated peasantry, all of which feature in the pages of this impressive monograph. For Stuart Carroll it is noble violence, especially in its vindictory aspect, that ties together and explains these contrasts. Taking as his time-frame the fifteenth through to the eighteenth centuries, and using evidence drawn from memoirs, court records, and letters of remission, he disentangles the changes and continuities in, and the myth and reality of, elite behaviour. In particular, he sets out to challenge the prevailing historiography that associates the early-modern period with a process of the 'civilization' and subjugation of the nobility. In part, he attributes previous misunderstandings to a lack of precision about the use of contemporary language, for instance, the failure to recognize the development of duelling in all but name over a much greater than usual timespan. It is often stated that early-modern French society was peculiarly violent; Stuart Carroll's book confirms this hypothesis and goes much further than any previous work in explaining why this was so.

The subject matter treated here reminded this reader of a quotation regarding a quite different historical context: 'Aristocrats were brutal in all periods; it was one of the signs of aristocracy' (1). Whilst this is a crude simplification of what this book is about, at the same time it is peculiarly apt since Carroll makes so much of the continuity of the medieval inheritance of noble violence and the conventions of the blood feud in particular. The public defence of a kin group's honour lay at the heart of many an episode as it had done for centuries. The concept also encapsulates the sheer nastiness of much of the violence perpetrated, although Carroll demonstrates that it was usually far from gratuitous and uncontrolled, or, indeed, the

preserve of the aristocracy. Whilst nobles continued to defend their right to seek satisfaction for the injuries committed against them, social mores and public opinion demanded the careful observation of codes of behaviour which involved reconciliation as well as bloodshed. Like the more intensively-studied popular violence of the French religious wars, Carroll instructs us, noble disputes were ritualized and symbolic, not mindless and cynical. They encompassed obligation and exchange, calculated risk, and, at some point, resolution. Nevertheless, French nobles fell victim to, and perpetrated, a far higher rate of killing than even the most violent modern society. And, just as with popular religious violence, the symbolism of these acts could lead to excessive abuse of the victim's corpse.

Part I of the book discusses the origins and common causes of feud between and within noble kin groups: disputes over marriage; division of property and inheritance; status and precedence; and hunting rights. It also dissects the conventional stages of a dispute and its escalation, from verbal insults or intimidation through to attacks on an opponent's property, animals, servants, and associates (the cutting of ham-strings a speciality). Killing, however, was not always, or even usually, the end result. The extent of the revenge to be undertaken had to be carefully judged against the seriousness of the offence, the relative status of the parties involved, and the support they could attract, as well as the fortuitous opportunities which presented themselves. Certain locations, such as the parish church, lent themselves to public confrontation, although acts of revenge could, and did, take place anywhere. Ambush and disguise were common methods used to obtain the advantage, and Carroll is particularly good at demonstrating that all kinds of underhand methods were exploited to outmanoeuvre an opponent and were viewed as legitimate. Although cold-blooded killing ran contrary to conceptions of chivalric fair play, it seems that such considerations were routinely flouted. Often murders were presented in the courts as acts of unpremeditated self-defence. The routine carrying of an increasing range of lethal weaponry and the wearing of concealed mail armour, however, reveals how ready the nobility were for combat and how easily incidents could turn bloody. As a result, more fatalities occurred, whilst magistrates became more adept at analysing wounds to confirm or negate a defendant's story. However, it was the rise of duelling from the 1520s, reaching its heyday a century later, which exacerbated this trend in French society. Indeed, Carroll argues that duelling was a 'peculiarly French disease' among all social groups, and far more brutal than elsewhere, which the authorities could do little to curb (p. 153). It is the evidence from post-mortems, he concludes, rather than conduct books, that are the real guide to the effects of duelling and its more unpleasant and destructive aspects.

In Part II, Carroll takes us away from the theatre of the duel to the drama of the courts and the notoriously corrupt French judicial system. Nevertheless, justice was heavily weighted in favour of the social elite and nobles favoured litigation as another means of attacking rivals and deflecting condemnation of their own behaviour. Many were skilled in manipulating the system of proliferating courts to suit their own ends, and to frustrate those of their adversaries, through flexing their financial muscle and exploiting patronage networks. Even if convicted, nobles were rarely executed and other punishments were often evaded. The legal process did not preclude resorting to violence; a duel could offer a cheaper and swifter resolution. Ideally neither the courts nor the duel should have been preferred to the path of reconciliation with an enemy, and it was the crown in particular that claimed its traditional right to mediate between the parties. At the highest level the king and his council could intervene, with pardons acting as a widespread form of crown patronage, but other bodies and individuals also oversaw the process. However, negotiations and mediation could easily break down, especially at a time of political instability, and the reputation of the king as dispenser of justice and peacemaker could suffer, as it did during the religious wars. Thus, peace could become as politicized as violence. Finally, in this section, Carroll discusses the role of women in the feud. Control of female sexuality was paramount in defending the honour of a kin group and generated many disputes. He asserts, however, that women were not just passive victims but active participants in encouraging and restraining acts of bloodshed. Furthermore, despite the usually negative interpretation of edicts reinforcing patriarchy in the period, they often served to protect women's interests by prohibiting abduction and allowing legal separation in cases of domestic violence.

In Part III, the chronology of duelling is more closely scrutinized including what conclusions can be drawn from the rough-and-ready statistics provided by problematic and incomplete sources. Nevertheless, a pattern

does seem to emerge that suggests that traditional noble violence not only continued into the early-eighteenth century, but at certain times increased in intensity and fatality—particularly in the seventeenth century. The religious wars added a further dimension to existing animosities, but the violence was checked to some degree by the crown up until 1589 (after the assassination of the Guise brothers by order of Henri III in December 1588). Each of these periods is treated in turn beginning with the wars.

Although the conflict did not initiate vindictory violence, which also continued after the wars had finished, nevertheless it ‘turned the feud into the blood feud; revenge killing into vendetta’ (p. 267). The demobilization and return of French troops after the Italian Wars and the legitimating ideology of religion combined to devastating effect. Aristocratic involvement also increased and culminated in the ongoing feud between the respective kin and clients of the Guise and Montmorency families. At first the Guise struggled to win support for their cause, but by 1572 popular and royal animosity toward the Calvinist noble leadership coincided with the Guise obligation for revenge in the murder of Admiral Coligny. The constraint exhibited by the duke of Guise during the ensuing St Bartholomew’s Day massacre underlines the personal nature of his actions. Under Henri III (1574–89) a lid was kept on animosities for a time, but they became intensified as a result of the rise of the Catholic League, the king’s own vindictory acts, and the increase of duelling. Here Carroll’s argument might have benefited from engagement with that of Xavier Le Person regarding the tensions and dissimulation of Henri’s court which would reinforce many of the points he makes (2). Thereafter, Henri IV’s martial proclivities, and the instability of his widow’s regency after his own assassination, did nothing to improve the situation in the early-seventeenth century. The 1620s saw a peak in duelling, and, although Richelieu managed to rein in these activities for a time, they returned with a vengeance during the subsequent minority of Louis XIV. In addition, it was not just the sword nobility but also that of the robe which adopted the duelling ethos. Despite this overlap in behaviour, however, antagonism between robe and sword remained. Fiscal officials in particular, as well as the intendants, attracted hostility from both provincial nobles and the people because of their encroachment on local sensibilities. The reinvigoration of royal authority under Louis XIV’s personal rule from the 1660s, and his more conciliatory approach and active opposition to duelling, did most to mitigate violence against his officials. Accompanied by a growing enthusiasm among the elite for a vigorous Catholic Reformation piety and a strong and stable monarchy, Carroll asserts, feud became more successfully conciliated and noble violence channelled into, and legitimized through, service to the state in the army.

The overall thesis is well structured and coherent, the prose is assured and fluent, and the arguments are carefully calibrated like the violence they describe. Although Carroll tries to bring some balance to the unremitting tales of bloodshed supported by detailed examples drawn from his primary sources, the horror of life held so cheap remains. In particular, he wants to take to task the notion that the nobility became better behaved from the Renaissance period on, weighing the pros and cons of Norbert Elias’s influential analysis of court culture. On the contrary, he demonstrates that political instability and the rise of duelling rendered encounters and disputes more vicious and bloody than before. Furthermore, he argues that increased civility and brutality were able to coexist, especially at the court of Henri III. The myth of duelling as a polite pastime for gentlemen in which respect and courtesy overrode vengeance and animosity is shattered. Equally, the association of the rise of the state with teleological assumptions about the decline of the feud and noble autonomy is vigorously challenged. Noble codes of honour were so deeply entrenched in the aristocratic psyche and understanding of who they were that official strictures could only go so far in inhibiting public displays of aggression and bravado that could, but did not always have to, lead to violence. Ultimately, the nobility are presented as victims as much of the obligations that the defence of honour placed upon them as of the vindictiveness of their neighbours and peers.

The immense coverage of this book rewards careful digestion, such as its revealing insights into many aspects of noble culture (not just its brutality), and the vicissitudes of royal authority. It also challenges our understanding of the social and political role and continuing relevance of violence, for instance that it can be a sophisticated strategic device for establishing status and identity. It ranges widely, both in its chronological and historiographical awareness, providing thoughtful reflections on the changing notions of vengeance and civility, and the literary representation of elite violence. As befits any study of the French kingdom in this

period, it also has a strong sense of provincial variation and local circumstances. Whilst drawing comparisons with the feuding culture of medieval Iceland or Renaissance Italy, at the same time this is a work that is specifically addressed to the peculiarities of the politics, in its widest sense, of early-modern France. Carroll is keen to make some, usually well-judged, swipes, both at historians who focus only on high politics and those who dismiss the value of any political approach. One of the book's greatest strengths is its questioning of the neat generalizations that have coloured our understanding of this period of French history, which makes the tidy conclusion that under Louis XIV the nobility finally realized how counterproductive its behaviour was, and its subsequent willingness to acquiesce to the admonishments of the sovereign, somehow less satisfying than the discussion that precedes it. Nevertheless, this is a minor quibble with a work that represents a significant scholarly achievement, the conclusions of which deserve wider dissemination than among those early-modern French historians who will undoubtedly profit from its many insights and rethinking of the political culture of their period.

## Notes

1. C. Wickham, 'Debate: The "Feudal Revolution"', *Past and Present*, 155 (1997), 197. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. X. Le Person, *Pratiques' et 'practiqueurs': La vie politique à la fin du règne de Henri III (1584–1589)* (Geneva, 2002). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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