



*Violence and
Honor in
Prerevolutionary
Périgord*

STEVEN G. REINHARDT

VIOLENCE AND HONOR IN
PREREVOLUTIONARY PÉRIGORD

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Steven G. Reinhardt



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In memory of Edith L. Reinhardt (1922–2014)

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What initially led me to write this book was the sense that I was under a kind of moral obligation to recount the stories of the Périgourdin people upon whose private lives I had eavesdropped while reading the criminal court records. I felt their stories merited recognition not only because they served as examples and illustrations of phenomena within the larger historical narrative that I wished to relate but also because their stories deserved to be told for their own sake. I hope my work will, in a way, bear witness to their own travails.

A scholarly work is necessarily a collective enterprise; my own rests upon the work of the many previous and current researchers and writers working in the field. I have especially relied on the scholarship of Julius R. Ruff of Marquette University, from whose work I have drawn extensively during our years as “partners in crime.” His honest professional appraisal has guided me throughout the arduous process of improving my manuscript. Other colleagues upon whose work I have greatly depended are James R. Farr of Purdue University, Albert N. Hamscher of Kansas State University, and the late Ralph Gibson, reader in French history at the University of Lancaster. I first met the latter in the departmental archives of the Dordogne, and he subsequently shared his own work and insider’s knowledge of working-class bars and restaurants in Périgueux. My wife, Joan, and I also accompanied him to some of his favorite haunts in the Périgourdin countryside. After my return to the United States, we continued to correspond, and I even had the opportunity to serve as his host when he visited New Orleans. Early on, I discovered that we shared an affinity for “slow reading” and for exploring the hidden lives of ordinary people who, he wrote to me, so often “struggle to give meaning to their own lives and to help others find such meaning—perhaps all the more because I suspect the quest is ultimately futile.”

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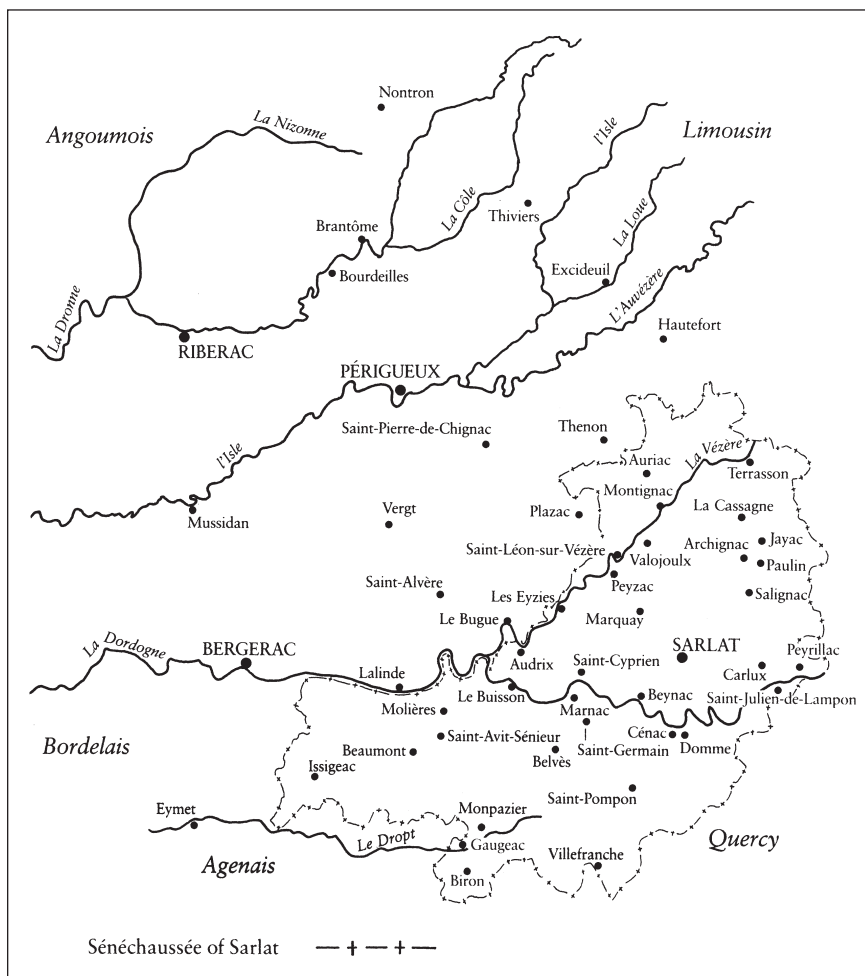
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MAPS



Regions of Old Regime France. Steven G. Reinhardt, *Justice in the Sarladais, 1770–1790* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 5. Reproduced by permission of Louisiana State University Press.



The Périgord in the eighteenth century. Reinhardt, *Justice in the Sarladais*, 1770–1790, 8. Reproduced by permission of Louisiana State University Press.

INTRODUCTION

“THE SAINT OF HONOR”

Following almost a half-century of turmoil after the Revolution had begun, the bishop of the Diocese of Périgueux asked the curés in 1838 to report on the *mœurs* of their parishioners. In response, curés remarked that the inhabitants of the former province were “peu civilisés” and not very interested in religion; some few conceded that the inhabitants could be remarkably peaceful, *honnêtes*, welcoming, and hospitable.¹ Overall, however, the experience of most Périgourdin curés inclined them to be less generous; they emphasized that their parishioners’ pugnacious conduct left much to be desired: “In general, the people are very proud and very demanding. Barely civilized in their mores, [they are] often vindictive, and almost always jealous of their relatives and neighbors. Moreover, they are excessively avaricious and never help anyone without expectation of personal gain.”² Several curés commented on the peasants’ litigiousness, but the curé of Berbiguières reported that many of his parishioners preferred mediation by the curé or mayor.³ The curé of Notre-Dame-de-Sanhilac (commune of St.-Pierre-de-Chignac) did not perceive these alternatives as mutually exclusive and concluded, “The *mœurs* of the inhabitants of Notre Dame are crude, very crude. Envy, jealousy, and hatred dominate them; avarice is their master. Their habits and customs are obviously irreligious. One recognizes among them only a very mechanical observation of religion.” Nonetheless, he acknowledged that they were basically “docile.”⁴

In Cubjac (Périgueux), the parish priest characterized his parishioners as “proud, irascible and extremely jealous.” These traits “strongly incline them towards vengeance, but their fear of pecuniary fines causes them to search judicial means of gaining satisfaction for their resentments. They are as litigious as Normans, and there are few communes that keep the tribunal at Périgueux as busy as does Cubjac.”⁵ Likewise, the curé from Miallet (Nontron) considered his parishioners to be proud, short tempered, truculent, and extremely solicitous of their honor.

The inhabitants of Miallet mix admirable qualities with great faults. They are naturally malicious, but they give themselves over to good as easily as

to harm. Depending on the circumstances, they can be generous, compassionate [and] charitable, just as they can be vindictive, enraged and carried away, but then switch suddenly from hate to love. Simple *honnêteté* makes them supple and easy to influence; they are easily attracted to novelties. . . . They are inclined towards domination. Praise does them good at heart and earns their affection. Mores do not always rule their conduct; often it is self-interest, guile, and love of pleasure. But if they promise something, they are slaves to their word. They adhere to the Saint of Honor. And they will not renege on a promised sacrifice, especially if given before witnesses.⁶

Finally, in Savignac-les-Églises (Périgueux), the curé said of his parishioners, “They give themselves over easily to anger and nurse grudges in their hearts for a long while. Vengeance for them is a pleasure.”⁷

In the *pays* known as the Sarladais (or the Périgord Noir), habits of violence were equally commonplace. In this respect, it was not unique. Historians have long remarked upon the ubiquity of violence in past societies, including Old Regime France. From Marc Bloch’s comments on the pronounced “emotionalism” and violence of medieval civilization, to Norbert Elias’s emphasis on the “civilizing process” spearheaded by the late seventeenth-century state, this historiographical tradition looked to the absence of cultural conventions that restrained individual expression of extreme emotions and a lack of self-discipline.⁸ The dichotomy between reason and emotion, so important in Renaissance and early modern discourse, carried over into historians’ analyses of the changes in behavior they saw as evident by the late eighteenth century.⁹

Historians of the *Annales* school cofounded by Bloch followed his lead in their work on early modern France. Abel Poitrineau, in his portrayal of the eighteenth-century Auvergne as an archaic society,¹⁰ like Robert Mandrou and Pierre Goubert in their syntheses about French society, claimed to see a “great deal of tolerance towards violence,” and toward brutality. Goubert and Mandrou, like Poitrineau, thought this characteristic the sign of “backwardness” related to a combination of economic fragility and cultural isolation. This older historiography viewed acts of violence as sudden and irrational outbursts by people who had not yet learned to discipline themselves; this portrayal unwittingly projected forward the old state authorities’ view of such peasants as children. This “child” metaphor would get carried out of the metropole into dealings with colonial populations: historians of the French Empire rarely recognize that this image began not in the colonies but in the French countryside.¹¹

This older tradition has been cast aside by scholars over the past thirty years. Stephen D. White, for example, follows the lead of discourse analysts and pored over medieval texts, examining the linguistic (and political) context within which gestures of anger among the nobility were narrated. He

cautions that descriptions of such displays of anger must be interpreted within their context. "Contrary to what Bloch implied," he states, "rage is hardly ever represented in such a way as to suggest that it was uncaused; through various narrative devices, it is clearly linked to an antecedent act to which anger is a response, frequently a justifiable one."¹² Abandoning the view of emotions implicit in Bloch's discussion, White concludes that in medieval societies, public displays of lordly anger "do not provide evidence of emotional instability; instead, they reveal the position occupied by displays of anger in a relatively stable, enduring discourse of disputing, feuding, and political competition."¹³ Displays of anger were not uncontrolled emotional responses: "Anger was incorporated into political postures and processes; it was part of an entire discourse of feuding or retaliatory disputing, which provided scripts and schema for representing, interpreting, and experiencing competition for honor among other forms of conflict."¹⁴ These same medieval nobles, however, characterized peasant anger precisely in terms of farm animals who had gone wild and refused the yoke to which they were "divinely destined" or "naturally-suited," or as the tantrums of children needing the discipline of a father.¹⁵ In early modern times, as monarchical discourse turned away from the metaphor of the body politic and toward that of the king as the father of his people, writers and orators regularly suggested the king needed, as a good father, to discipline his unruly children.

Other historians have approached the analysis of popular violence from an anthropological perspective, examining ritualized aspects of the common people's actions and seeking meaning in their collective behavior. Attempts to decipher the cultural code of past societies also suggest that the worldview and actions of the *menu peuple* had an internal coherence of its own, a fact that even elite contemporaries failed to appreciate and that has long eluded many historians. Malcolm Gaskill argues that the tenets of early modern Europeans were "expressed in socially controlled behavior rather than in doctrines." In other words, their worldview or mentality was "actualized, not intellectualized,"¹⁶ and reflected a different view of society and the individual.

Violence was common and, to a degree, tolerated because it was an intrinsic element of interpersonal relations in a culture of honor. In fact, writes Stuart Carroll, historians must remember that "civilization is built on violence."¹⁷ Violence was a vital element of the "language" people used to "converse" and "communicate" with one another. Our task is to uncover the hidden grammar (internal rules and regulations) that governed its use. To understand the conversations of people in the past, one needs to realize that violence was a means of expression that involved the entire body. People used words and gestures to express their emotions, create their identities, and assert their own integrity. Being a normal part of their everyday lives, violence was intrinsic to how people "talked" to one another.

Modern observers have lost the ability to translate that premodern language and are therefore likely to misinterpret their verbal insults and non-verbal gestures. Since discourse is a body of language use that serves as a means of communication and expression, what one “hears” in the criminal court records of the Sénéchaussée of Sarlat is an extended “conversation” about honor. The words and gestures have internal meanings, but, when assembled according to an inner logic, they gain further meaning. The code of honor supplies the internal grammar that governs usage of the various elements of language: where, when, and why the words and acts are deployed or articulated. Using the portals provided by Old Regime criminal cases, one gains insight into the content and form of their “language.”

The intersection of honor and violence in the Sarladais during the final two decades of the Old Regime is the focus of this study, which examines how violence and honor continued to play an intrinsic and essential role in this region. Here we see that the code of honor still found robust articulation in a language of violence that can be understood only when viewed within its cultural context. Occasions of interpersonal conflict between inhabitants—expressed in violent words, gestures, and actions that threatened or exacted retribution—intermittently resulted in official criminal complaints, hearings (*audiences*), and full-fledged cases handled by the lowest-level royal tribunal in the *pays*, the Sénéchaussée of Sarlat. The records show how the court system provided an alternative, and progressively more common alternative, to the traditional means of protecting one’s honor. People in the Sarladais were making explicit, conscious, and substantial use of the royal justice system to resolve their disputes and breaches of honor for at least two decades before the Revolution.¹⁸

In methodology, this work proceeds by first examining the interrelationship between violence and honor within a larger thematic and historical context. Moving from historiographical sources about the social, economic, and cultural contours of southwestern France, this study shifts to a detailed examination of the criminal records that illustrate the enduring significance of honor in the daily lives of inhabitants of the Sarladais. By examining honor’s enduring centrality in the Périgord Noir (Sarladais), this work hopes to (1) convey a better understanding of the day-to-day workings of a larger historical phenomenon, that is, the intrinsic role of violence in past honor cultures; (2) foster a greater appreciation of the personal dilemmas faced by individuals confronting the customary restraints and sanctions of a culture of honor; and (3) understand how the incremental, long-term changes underway in the Sarladais were gradually transforming its culture of honor into a more modern capitalist culture in which community members found greater value in the services offered by royal justice.

Individual local actors played a significant role in modifying the region’s traditional culture of honor. In fact, the key indicator of cultural

modification is the slowly changing composition of the court's clientele and criminal caseload during this brief period. Each time a private individual opted to appeal to royal justice, he or she was simultaneously supplanting (or supplementing) more traditional alternatives such as seigneurial justice or the informal tribunal of public opinion. When many individuals make these same choices, in the same place, and at the same time, historians can try to situate the individual choices within larger frameworks, like the rise of the state or the spread of a more market-driven economy. The Revolution radically altered the French judicial system, so that any assessment of the evolution of the monarchical system of justice has to come to an abrupt end; focusing on the final twenty years of that system can show us its strengths as well as its weaknesses and perhaps help explain some of the directions taken by the new system put in place in the 1790s.

Within larger frameworks like "modernization" or the emergence of capitalism, and its accompanying culture, the records used here help us analyze the nature of "the social relations of humans to humans, the institutional structures of state and society that guide these relations, and the ideas through which those relationships are conveyed."¹⁹ "Capitalism," as used herein, encompasses not simply economic change but a whole bundle of extra-economic developments that cannot be measured solely in monetary terms or in units of goods bought and sold. Indeed, more subtle "forces" were at work. One way to measure such changes is the justice system. Because it was an emerging focal point of the culture of honor, by assessing the nature and number of participants who welcomed the involvement of royal justice in their lives, we can see how they sought to replace traditional forms of redress. The shift can involve both a more positive view of the effectiveness of redress through the courts and a more negative view of the efficacy of the older forms of redress, like violent confrontations, whether in taverns and public squares or on isolated country paths.

Thus, this book will argue that in the final two decades of the Old Regime the inhabitants of the Sarladais—and presumably elsewhere in France—made explicit and conscious efforts to remedy ordinary and everyday breaches of honor less by resorting to traditional means of violence and more by making use of the royal justice system to resolve their disputes. In other words, the ways that men and women made use of the royal courts to settle breaches of honor was a harbinger of a more modern justice system at least two decades before the Revolution.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 examines recent historiography on violence in early modern France and sketches a general picture of the Sarladais and its justice

system. Next, chapter 2 investigates the intersection of honor, shame, and violence in a broader, transcultural context. The early modern, pan-European culture of honor was a resilient tradition that afforded the individual a sense of belonging and integration into a collectivity and placed a premium on group loyalty and integrity. This cultural tradition was not static, however, and its focus may have been gradually shifting toward individuation and away from emphasis on the physical body of men and the sexual integrity of women. As part of that process, validation of masculinity was already becoming less dependent on violent physical confrontations and tests of strength and was increasingly defined more by a man's inner talents, characteristics that enabled a bourgeois to accumulate wealth and thereby wield power by using nonviolent demonstrations of prowess. On the surface, most women accepted the honor code with its respective gender roles; like the great majority of men, they regarded society and its values as "natural" or divinely ordained. Therefore, they generally worked alongside men to maintain and enforce an ethic of personal and collective honor. In the final analysis, the fact that the gender order and cultural code were sustained by force became apparent only in instances of intimidation, verbal abuse, threatened violence, or actual violence against women.

The following chapter surveys the life of people of the Sarladais of the eighteenth century—their physical surroundings, diet and demography, economy and society—exploring the linkages among their material world, the prevailing socioeconomic structure, the distribution of power, and the cultural values that guided interpersonal relations. As for the typicality of the Sarladais and the applicability of conclusions reached for this *pays* to elsewhere in France, we must bear in mind the admonition of Eugen Weber, historian of nineteenth-century rural France, who found that few general truths applied to the entire French countryside, which should be considered more of a mosaic—often contradictory—of local realities.²⁰ At the same time, however, I argue that the changes experienced by the inhabitants of the Sarladais were variations on the larger theme of capitalist modernization that was underway to varying degrees throughout France.²¹

Investigation of select crimes against persons in the fourth chapter reveals how the inhabitants still employed gendered words and gestures, their conceptualization of a man's and a woman's honor, and their attitudes toward the body. What we see in vivid detail are the inner workings of what can be construed as a traditional "discourse" of honor, a body of language practice or a symbol-system comprised of words and gestures (i.e., *paroles*) whose usage is governed by an unconscious, underlying system of rules and regulations. This "grammar" subsequently dictates the articulation of "utterances" or "speech events," in this case, human "enactments" that unconsciously observe the complex code of honor. When people

engaged in ritualized interpersonal relations, they “spoke” the language of honor in what is the equivalent of a particular discursive formation.²² Although this work does not systematically pursue a linguistic methodology, that methodology nevertheless informs its analysis.

The fifth chapter focuses on women’s participation in the system of honor and their role as accused, perpetrators, victims, and (more rarely) plaintiffs, especially in what historians have termed “crimes against morality.” A woman’s involvement in the criminal justice system in whatever capacity not only raised legal issues but also inevitably focused attention on whether her conduct was honorable or shameful to her gender. The courts considered female sexual impropriety to be implicitly subversive of the social and political order. Moreover, women played a formidable role in enforcing community standards and were often at the forefront in insulting, gesturing, and using nonlethal physical violence to defend not only the family’s honor but also the physical threshold of the household. The court, as upholder of the marital ethic, was preoccupied with defending parental (especially paternal) authority and preventing unregulated sexual activity. Therefore, of major concern to the court were cases of *rapt et séduction*—abduction by force or enticement of a daughter or wife for immoral purposes. Families could use this accusation against the suitor of a young woman who eloped against the family’s wishes. Cases in which women responded directly and sometimes lethally to “correction” also bear witness to a high degree of gender solidarity.²³ Wives were also known to abscond with their lovers, despite community efforts to monitor their behavior and thwart their flight. Whether they were victims, accused, or victims-turned-plaintiffs, women demonstrated that they were hardly passive participants in the gender order.

Within a rigid culture of honor and an atmosphere of heightened elite anxiety about public morality—particularly unbridled female sexual passion—sexual license of all kinds was subject to judicial action. Chapter 6 examines the various kinds of sexual misconduct that had been criminalized and punished by French secular courts since the sixteenth century. The Church in tandem with the Crown also criminalized prostitution, illegitimacy, and infanticide—all of which have been categorized by historians as crimes against morality. Ironically, rape was construed as a woman’s crime because it questioned underlying assumptions about a woman’s “nature.” In theory, rape was harshly condemned by Church and Crown and held to merit capital punishment; in practice, however, it was undoubtedly underreported and often tacitly tolerated most often because the standard of proof required a corroborative witness. This chapter explores the reasons for this social myopia and the particular vulnerability of shepherdesses, farm hands, and domestic *servantes* who were often victimized, seduced, and abandoned with little alternative but to suffer their fate.

The seventh chapter considers the fate of unmarried women (and minors) who engaged in forced or consensual illicit sexual relations, which were anathematized (at least in theory) in a society whose values were dictated by a strict code of honor. This chapter also examines the prophylactic measures women (married and unmarried) took to prevent pregnancy, the abortifacients they hoped would terminate pregnancy, and the extreme options to which unwed mothers were driven to conceal the pregnancy and delivery of a bastard child. Via close examination of select cases, we shall see how the opprobrium and shunning to which “fallen women” were subjected made the commission of infanticide (or newborn child murder) seem the only feasible alternative for some. In the eighth chapter, I shall examine two exceptionally detailed cases in which young women pregnant out of wedlock incurred the risk of murder by their lovers, especially when the latter were already married and anxious to suppress news of their transgression.

The last chapter examines other instances of interpersonal lethal violence in the Sarladais. Here as elsewhere the criminalization of homicide was slow to occur as violent acts carried out by *honnête* men still tended to be viewed as permissible when taken in defense of honor.²⁴ By the late eighteenth century, however, intentional homicide (murder) appears to have been generally recognized by the populace as lying well within royal jurisdiction. But as long as society regarded the measured, nonlethal use of violence as a normal response to questions of honor, people were inclined to tolerate the occasional accidental death of a combatant because they were perhaps reluctant either to create grounds for a feud or to see homicide criminalized. Many in society still objected to a man of honor, who acted in self-defense or retaliation for a reproach to his honor, being degraded by being hauled before a royal court. But not everyone in society was so indulgent and tolerant of personal violence or wished to be governed by popular conceptions of justice. The final chapter adumbrates the emerging inclination on the part of certain segments of the population to renounce violence in interpersonal relations and instead have recourse to justice. In retrospect, one can see how the Sarladais was slowly moving from being a society of status guided by the imperatives of an honor code to being a modern, capitalist society in which all interpersonal relations—not just commercial—were becoming more numerous and frequent, more anonymous yet predictable, and increasingly guided by contracts and the strict rule of law.

CHAPTER ONE

VIOLENCE AND HONOR

The fact that violence in the West has been declining since 1500 has long been recognized by scholars; they have debated the reasons for the shift since the late nineteenth century, when pioneering sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber posited fundamentally different causes for this shift.¹ Weber provided the dominant paradigm of the middle of the twentieth century, in large measure because the “civilizing process” theory of Norbert Elias had such a broad impact, one easily seen even today in textbook treatments of early modern Europe.² Elias wrote his doctoral dissertation under the direction of Alfred Weber, Max’s brother.³ Durkheim’s theories have returned to prominence, as the Elias hypothesis has suffered from the empirical research it helped inspire. With respect to France in particular, Michel Nassiet’s *La violence, une histoire sociale: France, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles*, as its title suggests, has tried to provide a more holistic understanding of the shift in violence.⁴

More recently, scholars like the psychologist Steven Pinker, from outside the two disciplines most involved in this debate—history and sociology—have entered the fray.⁵ Pinker focuses on exogenous forces—essentially cultural—that have led to a decline of violence in the West. As Gregory Hanlon points out, in a review essay, Pinker’s thesis builds on a foundation of sand: he relies heavily on Elias’ civilizing process and, far worse, on inaccurate crime statistics for the early modern period.⁶ Hanlon balances this criticism with a strong endorsement of Pinker’s larger premise: that we need to combine research in the social and so-called hard sciences to reexamine historical phenomena. Modern cognitive research, for example, raises fundamental doubts about rational choice theory in economic history. Grand theories built on assumptions about what constitutes “modern” behavior in a “capitalist” economy thus become dubious assertions about why eighteenth-century Frenchpeople changed their attitude toward violence.

Assigning primacy for the decline of violence to a single aspect of a society’s evolution—be it intellectual, economic, cultural, or political—is ultimately misguided. In studying such phenomena, Hanlon rightly argues

we need a more integrated approach, one that combines behavioral and social sciences with insight from historical investigation.⁷ His call for a more holistic approach resembles that of Eric Wolf, who in the 1980s criticized the scholarly tendency to divide the study of human life into separate disciplines. Wolf explains that this fracturing began in the mid-nineteenth century, when the social sciences divided the study of humankind into segments, thereby denying, for example, the obvious linkage between economic activity and its sociopolitical context.⁸ Today, a similar compartmentalization separates the natural sciences from the social sciences and prevents us from better understanding social phenomena such as the decline of violence. In this respect, Hanlon echoes Nassiet's 2011 call for combining the study of violence, honor, and kinship (*parenté*).⁹ Accordingly, my own study follows a multidisciplinary approach and thereby hopes to contribute to the debate.

Rather than examining the intersection of honor and violence from the top down or quantitatively, I utilize a more descriptive, microhistorical approach that examines small-scale, human interest stories to illustrate larger-scale trends that might otherwise be treated as abstract generalizations.¹⁰ Using as an example the *pays* of the Sarladais in the Périgord during the last two decades of the Old Regime (1770–90), I examine how violence intersected with honor in a largely traditional society that had begun to show elements of what we often loosely call modernity. The Sarladais was on the fringes of the rapidly expanding commercial network of Bordeaux and was clearly in transition, in terms of the nature of its economy.

The nineteenth-century legal scholar Henry Sumner Maine analyzed the jurisprudence of traditional, kin-ordered societies and observed that it was based primarily on customary law just as their culture was based on the values of group honor. The idea behind the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” makes obvious that post-1789 French society reoriented law toward the rights of individuals, not the obligations to the group. Maine, drawing from his experience in imperial India, contrasted societies of “status” with those of “contract.” In the former, a person's place in the extended family or clan determines his or her social and legal status, whereas in the latter individuals are “free” of the claims of the extended family and can “chart their own life course.”¹¹ These two extreme types mark the outer edges of the space within which the two concepts overlap in so many diverse ways: real societies, like the Sarladais, often combine elements of both.

Late eighteenth-century Sarladais society was evolving away from a society that tilted strongly toward status and the group, toward one focused more on contract, and the individual. Cases drawn from the criminal court archives of the lowest-level royal court in the region, the Sénéchaussée of Sarlat, illuminate the behavior and attitudes of people caught up in this

long-term process. Between 1770 and 1790, the court heard 477 criminal cases (474 with known charges). Of this total, 336 were initiated by private plaintiffs and 138 by public (royal) prosecutors. Analysis of the 282 violent “crimes against persons,” along with the 21 “crimes against morality” (prostitution, rape, abduction, etc.) that appeared before the court during these decades suggests that violence remained a quotidian feature of interpersonal relations.¹² What kind of violence was it? Why did the courts get involved to a greater degree than in early times?¹³

In this microhistorical study, I analyze cases selected from the criminal archives of the *sénéchaussée* that best demonstrate the manner in which violence intersected with honor. This study is inspired by practitioners of microhistory, who have tried to strike a balance between the “structuralists,” who emphasize the “big picture” and the relative insignificance of humans, and the “voluntarists,” who emphasize the role of human volition and agency.¹⁴ As Giovanni Levi, one of the pioneers of microhistory, has explained, the work of microhistorians

has always centered on the search for a more realistic description of human behavior, employing an action and conflict model of man’s behavior in the world which recognizes his—relative—freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems. Thus all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms.¹⁵

By their nature, microhistories are composed of a series of vignettes or “snapshots” that illuminate “moments of time” that occurred in what were essentially *longue durée* developments. As Levi suggests, the microhistorian looks to the particular, not the general; aggregating such individual cases can help historians see the outlines of patterns of change.¹⁶ Placed in the appropriate context, “an apparently anomalous or insignificant fact” can assume new meaning. With respect to attitudes toward crime and violence in the late Old Regime Sarladais, this study seeks “to link the microsocial with the macrosocial, experiences with structures, face-to-face relationships with the social system or the local with the global.”¹⁷

The immediate larger pattern being identified by contemporary historians of early modern French violence has to do with shifting ideas about honor. Michel Nassiet’s synthesis on this issue provides a convenient general framework for the particular case treated here, so a brief digression about Nassiet’s findings is in order at the start of our journey. Nassiet follows a Durkheimian path; he asserts that the growth of individualism in early modern Europe is largely responsible for the transformation of honor and the decline of violence. He argues that the gradual detachment of members

from collectivities (primarily kinship groups) that previously sheltered and protected them also meant the diminution of honor-related violence, especially killings. Because honor was primarily collective, the weakening of family ties meant the motives leading to violence, specifically honor-related violence, also weakened.¹⁸ Nassiet, like Pinker, views the rise or fall of violence not as inevitable but as a result of strategic human decisions.¹⁹

Men and women in past societies felt a keen sense of loyalty and allegiance to the collectivity that guaranteed their safety, and they were obliged to make their behavior conform to their social status. Hanlon specifically develops the gender implications of this code of collective “honor”:

All women were expected to behave chastely in order to be able to call upon the support of their relatives. The conjugal bond was fairly weak, relative to that between brothers and sisters. The vulnerable woman was one who had no brothers to protect her from her husband and his blood kin. This protection by brothers was not based on law, but was merely a “*trait de mentalité*.” This collective sentiment of honour permeated society from top to bottom.²⁰

As members gradually felt less need for the group, they shared less in that collective sense of honor that fueled so much interpersonal and group conflict. Nassiet concedes that rates of violence may have declined, in part, because institutions like the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and the state encouraged mechanisms of self-control; the state also increasingly intervened to restrain violence. But he emphasizes that violence declined primarily because the motives that led individuals to act violently were fewer and less intense.²¹

Here we see Nassiet taking the Durkheimian point that homicides declined because “homicidal impulses” and “stimuli to murder” were “less numerous and less intense.” For Durkheim, as for Nassiet, “these stimuli are collective sentiments, which attach us to elements foreign to humanity and individuals, that is to say, which attach us to groups.”²² In other words, violence declined precisely because the traditional attachments and collective sentiments that bound the individual to kinship groups and religious collectivities—those that were the strongest and least tolerant—gradually weakened. Therefore, the intensity of violent passions likewise declined as interpersonal relations became less collective and more individuated. Durkheim posited a dual shift in perception of crime: on the one hand, the view that the aggrieved party was an individual, not a group, and the other hand, a shift in which the “religious quality” of the offense became secularized sacrilege against the state.²³

In a society in which tight kinship groups provided protection, individuals had to preserve a strong sense of collective honor, loyalty, and solidarity. Nassiet argues that in early modern France, as the power and reach of the

state grew, it not only usurped from the kin group the right to use violence to defend the collectivity and enforce its justice but also gradually modified the collective sentiments associated with the group.²⁴ His approach borrows from Durkheim the emphasis that violence declined because of a lessening of the intensity of collective sentiments but accepts the Weberian point that growing state control helped achieve internal pacification. In France, from the 1660s onward, the state also provided effective protection against external threat: the days of marauding bands of soldiers, who infested France during the Wars of Religion, were long gone, and the violence associated with them lessened, too. At the same time as collective allegiance weakened, the ties that bound the nuclear family strengthened.

In this work, I affirm that the structural modifications entailed in modernization worked synergistically to alter human life in various ways. The spread of capitalism and capitalist culture also contributed to the decline of extended family solidarity, hastened the weakening of what Durkheim called the traditional *collective conscience*, and led to its replacement—well after the period examined here—by the “cult of the individual.” By the mid-seventeenth century, the gradual consolidation of the state and the internal pacification of the kingdom under Louis XIV led to the decline of vindictory violence; significantly, however, the violent actions that were most resistant were those involving familial vengeance, and regions in which the state had the least effective control continued to be the ones with the most traditional honor-based violence.²⁵

Nassiet asserts that interpersonal violence dropped in the countryside of northern France by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resulting in homicide being committed less frequently.²⁶ For example, murder in cases of adultery discovered *en flagrant délit* disappeared after 1620, and after the Fronde the duel had nearly disappeared into anonymity. The rate at which the decline of other kinds of violence varied, of course, depending on a region's distance from its *parlement*; but military-style violence had been extirpated everywhere in the realm by 1665. By the eighteenth century, he concludes, most physical violence was of a limited intensity: “Violence still impregnated social relations, but confrontations seldom resulted in bloodshed. Most often they were conducted without weapons, with batons.”²⁷ From the second half of the seventeenth century, the usage of edged weapons such as the sword or dagger drastically declined. Among the elites, the more dignified cane tended to replace the plebian baton. In the countryside, guns were more common, but they were normally used to ward off adversaries by firing a warning shot in the air; if mortal shots were nonetheless fired, it was only by accident or clumsiness. In several provinces, adversaries were satisfied with verbal injuries alone.

In eighteenth-century quarrels of honor, one almost never sought to kill but instead settled for inflicting publically witnessed symbolic violence.

That is precisely why the baton became the weapon of choice; associated with thrashing inferiors, the baton effectively caused blood to flow from open wounds yet usually without serious injury. As seen in thirty-three letters of remission from Anjou, studied by Nassiet and Aude Musin, eighteenth-century homicides were seldom the consequence of ritualized quarrels of honor. Maladroitness in the use of firearms or drunkenness combined with irascible behavior was more likely than honor to be the cause of homicides. In fact, the disjunction of honor from the act of killing is a prime indication of the changing sensibility toward it. Nassiet hypothesizes that the notion of honor itself had weakened.²⁸ At a time when the level of violence had already moderated, the grounds for forgiveness most often cited in the supplicants' letters were accident and self-defense. In fact, they were no longer reluctant to plead simple drunkenness and anger as exculpatory reasons for their actions. Royal justice—no longer needing to further pacify the population—was not afraid to show mercy.²⁹

Nassiet asserts that other indicators also point to the slow process of individuation that was underway, especially in the northern provinces. In the realm of criminal justice, more attention was being paid to the individual's pain and suffering. Fathers whose sons were involved in family quarrels were less inclined in the eighteenth century to seek vengeance out of reflexive solidarity; instead, they often sought to determine the facts of the encounter and to initiate legal action.

Nassiet offers hard empirical evidence about Hanlon's point with respect to gender and violence. The strengthening conjugal bond placed married women more in the protection of their husband than of their brothers:

This mutation of honor into a more individual phenomenon was directly caused by the weakening of kinship relations and by the sexual freedom of spouses that made itself evident beginning in 1620. This weakening of ties beyond the conjugal family diminished both the feeling of belonging to a larger group and the sense of obligation felt towards the latter, especially vengeance. This weakening of kinship ties, notably consanguinity, was caused by the strengthening of conjugal ties. . . . It culminated with the independence of the private sphere. As for the tightening of conjugal ties, it was reinforced by the elevation of wives, which was called for by both the Council of Trent and Protestantism.³⁰

Honor had traditionally condoned the killing of an adulterous wife, but Nassiet found evidence that spousal murder was no longer tolerated or even considered an option; in fact, it may even have been replaced in some places by a relative tolerance.³¹

In premodern societies, Durkheim argued, honor is intensely felt precisely because it is linked to collectivities; in modern society, where honor is centered on the individual, it is felt less intensely. Therefore, according

to the line of reasoning proposed by Durkheim/Nassiet or Maine, the gradual transition of traditional societies based on kin groups into “progressive”/liberal societies based on the individual has involved the weakening of family ties and freeing of the individual from what were increasingly considered to be old-fashioned, arbitrary, and artificial constraints.³²

The Sénéchaussée of Sarlat

The judicial archives of the Sénéchaussée of Sarlat afford an intimate view into the workings of its culture of honor, one in which interpersonal relations and cultural values were slowly changing. Although the Sarladais by the late eighteenth century can no longer be considered a clan society or one dominated by kin-based factions, the *pays* did share many cultural characteristics with traditional cultures where the imperatives of honor persisted.³³ The rule of the clan was once “an essential fact of life on the European continent,” and its lingering presence could long be felt.³⁴ Scholars such as Weiner and Pinker have brought forward the old Weberian hypothesis, giving special importance for the shift to the state and the emergence of a capitalist economy built on peaceful exchange.³⁵ Yet Miller rightly asks, “Is a nation that has a low homicide rate at home but is a brutal aggressor abroad more or less violent than another that is rough and tumble at home but too unorganized to export its violence?”³⁶ Western civilization perhaps managed its own creation by exporting—not diminishing—violence in modern societies. Miller characterizes this exchange as more of a “trade-off”: transforming the style of violence from occasional barbaric ferociousness to a style of constantly intrusive disciplinary control.³⁷

Both the growth of the state and the spread of capitalism (and capitalist culture) were perceptible in the Sarladais, but to a lesser degree than elsewhere in France. In this transitional zone, official (royal) justice coexisted in a largely symbiotic relationship with a rival system of popular (self-help) justice and with seigneurial justice; together, all three shared in the adjudication of conflicts. The region’s marginal location and rugged terrain also may have meant that its place in the commercial network of the Bordelais was limited.³⁸ But the relative weakness of both exogenous forces did not mean that the region was characterized by economic autarky, cultural stagnation, and lawlessness. Indeed, the increased participation of clients drawn from a wider range of the population attests otherwise.

Other official tribunals in the Sarladais undoubtedly heard grievances that involved real or threatened violence. The *prévôté* courts connected to the *maréchaussée* brigades stationed at Sarlat, Montignac, and Belvès possessed jurisdiction over violent crimes (among other offenses) committed

in certain places, such as royal roads, in roughly the same overall geographic area. The mounted constabulary had responsibility for keeping soldiers in line, for policing the highways and marketplaces, for escorting convicts to the galleys, and for bringing tax revenues to Bordeaux and then to Paris.³⁹ Twenty-two percent of all *sénéchaussée* cases heard between 1770 and 1790 originated in seigneurial tribunals, of which the Sarladais alone had 109.⁴⁰ In general, the relative gravity of an offense begun at this lower “ordinary” level influenced whether the case would be continued upward to the extraordinary (royal) level. Finally, an unknown and unquantifiable number of violent incidents were settled personally, or *infra-judicially*, and therefore were never “criminalized.”⁴¹

My earlier work, *Justice in the Sarladais, 1770–1790*, was more quantitative in approach and began by analyzing the entirety of the criminal caseload and its clientele in the aggregate. It then focused on individual instances of *infra-judicial* dispute settlement and examined cases illustrating how “popular justice” functioned. In contrast, the current project employs different criteria of selection. The sample used here has been chosen for the richness and detail of each case’s documentation and for the light it sheds on the behavior of those involved.⁴² This study concentrates on those cases relating to honor, violence, and sexual impropriety—particularly female sexual misconduct and its implications for a woman’s honor.⁴³ A deeper reading of the cases illuminates how the populace used both spoken and physical violence that was not only gender specific but also measured, proportionate, and symbolic in order to defend their individual and familial honor. Because of the exemption of nobles from the *sénéchaussée* court’s jurisdiction, criminal records illuminate the lives and culture primarily of lay commoners (*roturiers*).⁴⁴

Although violent conflict today is seen as a rupture or breakdown in social relations, in the late eighteenth-century Sarladais the use of physical and verbal violence to balance the scales of honor was still widely considered normal and acceptable by the majority of the popular classes. Legal historian Mark S. Weiner has emphasized that honor cultures in societies of status are essentially cultures of violence. In staunchly kin-ordered societies, he observes, the blood feud is commonplace but not “synonymous with anarchy; instead, feud is a highly structured cultural practice that ingeniously maintains social harmony.”⁴⁵ As William Ian Miller observes of medieval Iceland, people in classic honor-based cultures tend to subsume honor and shame into the structure and logic of the systems of reciprocity that govern the feud and gift exchange: the idiom of gifts, repayment, and requital also serve as the idiom of honor and feud. A shame is, above all else, something that is given or paid and that needs to be returned or repaid or avenged.⁴⁶ In a similar fashion, the equilibrium of honor has to be maintained through a series of

adjustments. In this way, dishonor or shame is considered a negative gift that also demands repayment in equal measure.

In the kin-ordered societies of status that formerly prevailed in Europe, members of families, extended families, and clans derived their status and shaped their behavior to conform to the values and needs of the collectivity. David Nirenberg explains that in traditional societies like medieval Valencia, "attacker and victim were tightly bound in a variety of relations that enmeshed moments of violence and gave them meaning."⁴⁷ He asserts that although violence was commonplace, it did not mean that everyday life was characterized by disorder. Instead, the example of Valencia confirms that traditional societies tended to be self-policing and employed orderly systems of popular justice: their members routinely used finely calibrated acts of violence to adjust the "pecking order" and observe the imperatives of honor.

Although the Sarladais on the eve of the French Revolution was hardly a classic culture of honor, the ethic of honor lingered. Understood in this context, violence was not unusual, nor was it indicative of lawlessness. Commoners (as well as nobles) were known to proudly and tenaciously guard their traditional right to handle their own affairs privately without the intervention of outside, "official" justice. But closer analysis of the royal court's clientele does show that private plaintiffs drawn from a broader spectrum of the population elected to initiate criminal proceedings (at their own expense) in the 1780s. Most significant is the growing participation of plaintiffs from the agricultural sector—proprietors, leaseholders, and even sharecroppers (*métayers*)—who joined with "the middling sort," especially members of the liberal professions, to comprise a broader "legal community." The greater participation of better-off peasants also suggests that in the last decade of the Old Regime occurred an expansion in that segment of the populace that was willing to have recourse to royal justice.⁴⁸

By the end of the eighteenth century in France, the persistence of violence among the inhabitants of the Sarladais may have shown signs of eroding. Some individuals were evidently inclined to appeal to official (royal) justice to settle disputes; in effect, they were opting out of participation in the system of popular justice. Although such individuals rarely separated themselves entirely from the prevailing culture of honor, they slowly came to regard private recourse to violence not only as unproductive but also as uncivilized.⁴⁹

Convincing people of the advantages of state ascendancy and the acceptance of official justice rather than taking personal vengeful action was (and continues to be) a centuries-long process. The advantages of state justice have always varied depending on one's social class, and the modernizing and civilizing process even today has not entirely eliminated the lure of

a violent culture of honor, the vestiges of which have persisted throughout time and across cultures. Honor may play a diminished role in our lives, Miller concludes, but even today it has not entirely vanished.

Examples of violent words and deeds drawn from the criminal court records depict, however, the extent to which the majority of inhabitants still adhered to an honor code. In the Sarladais, indeed, throughout the southwestern French provinces of Languedoc and Guyenne, retaliatory violence was commonly practiced and, to varying degrees, still considered a normal means through which the cultural values of honor found articulation.⁵⁰ Therefore, criminal cases logically illustrate the convergence of these two thematic elements and permit us to gauge the relative degree to which the populace had been influenced by the advance of the King's Law and the "judicial revolution." Of course, not *all* crimes of violence—regardless of whether they were felonies or misdemeanors, verbal (spoken/written) or physical—perforce involved honor. And, likewise, not all affairs of honor involved violence that resulted in criminal cases. But the two were intimately associated. In fact, in almost all criminal cases of personal violence, the litigants' honor was called into question and was at least a secondary motivation for their actions, guiding their decision making unconsciously if not consciously.⁵¹ A close reading and analysis of cases provides privileged insight into the lives of those persons who either chose to appear before the court or appeared because summoned by an opponent. Finally, we must recognize that although a case may not be "typical," it does possess intrinsic meaning and serves as an instance of what actually did happen at this time and place, providing a kind of "local knowledge."⁵²

One of the main goals of this study is to deepen the modern reader's understanding of how honor and violence intersected and actually functioned in the everyday lives of the French. By focusing on criminal cases (both private and royal) that involved violence against persons, we gain insight into the centrality of both in interpersonal relations. Although collectivities such as youth groups were also known to take action on behalf of perceived community interests (e.g., *azouades* and *charivaris*) and to act in defense of their shared sense of honor or professional and geographic "territory," they will not be the primary focus of the current study.⁵³ I will focus instead on the ways individuals aggressed in private affairs of honor and the manner in which their behavior was shaped by gender representations.

The connection between the sentiment of honor and the habit of recourse to violence is complex. An individual's sense of pride or honor survives in modern society, but it increasingly is associated with the possession of internal virtues such as fortitude, prudence, and self-control, rather than the external virtues of muscular strength and skill with the knife. Moreover, honor is more individuated and less associated with the family or clan, yet it remains attached to larger collectivities such as the nation.

As Pinker observes, an individual's reputation, personal identity, and self-esteem have always been intimately linked to the identity and reputation of the group, whether it be a tribe, village, band, kinship network (real or fictive), or, eventually, the nation. Therefore, adds Pinker, "Nationalism can be understood as an interaction between psychology and history. It is the welding together of three things: the emotional impulse behind tribalism; a cognitive conception of the 'group' as a people sharing a language, territory, and ancestry; and the political apparatus of government."⁵⁴

Group members are motivated by a social-dominance orientation that is, ultimately, biologically/neurologically grounded. According to Pinker, competition between groups encourages us to play out vicariously our instinct for dominance. Since an individual's reputation or honor rises and falls along with that of the group, the honor of a group must necessarily be defended in contests. In fact, the transfer of the sentiments of honor and loyalty to the larger group also plays an essential role in a nation's internal pacification by minimizing conflict between compatriots. In such circumstances, human conflict and aggression do not decrease, but the habit of expressing them through physical violence between individuals slowly becomes attenuated. In modern cultures, people learn that the impulse to act violently must be suppressed entirely or at least channeled into safer realms of expression such as sports that are experienced either directly or vicariously or expressed through formalized legal combat.⁵⁵ At the least, citizens learn that only state-sponsored or approved violence is permissible. Extending one's circle of empathy, channeling aggression, and controlling violent urges are all modern cultural traits that most have gradually come to accept. In the areas of modern societies in which these normative cultural traits have not taken root, however, older patterns of honor-based violence—such as gang warfare—still prevail.

In the social and cultural environment of the Sarladais, new values may have been making headway among the literate, educated echelons of society, but they were meeting stubborn resistance from uneducated commoners as well as obdurate rural nobles who clung tenaciously to their customary ways. The fact that more individuals perceived the utility of written contracts (as opposed to handshakes) and decided to have recourse to royal justice to settle civil and criminal affairs—or at least to incorporate formal legal action into their arsenal of private adversarial tactics—means that those members of society were losing confidence in the efficacy of the older culture with its reliance on personal, more direct, often violent methods.⁵⁶ But appreciating and adopting a new set of interpersonal habits better suited to making one's way in a more modern cultural, social, and economic world, and then negotiating the intricacies of the legal labyrinth, takes time. This long-term process also would involve a subtle change in *mentalité*, the internalization or redirection of aggression, the redefinition

of honor, the decline of violence, and the overall spread of capitalist culture and values.⁵⁷

“Unfamiliar Acts in Faraway Places”

At first glance, this twenty-year period in the Sarladais appears static, more of an extended “snapshot” or composite picture that illustrates how a royal court related to its clientele during these decades.⁵⁸ Closer analysis reveals subtle changes in the composition of the court’s caseload and its clientele. The Sarladais, although by no means one of the more dynamic economic regions of eighteenth-century France, showed signs of integration into the wider market economy of the Bordelais. The Sarladais demonstrated in this period both a rising importance of the royal, official judicial system and the dogged persistence of the alternative (unofficial or popular, as opposed to official) methods of dispute settlement that existed in this largely self-policing society in which a culture of honor was still operative.⁵⁹ Methodologically, instead of a quantitative and institutional focus, here the emphasis will lie with an examination of select criminal cases that involve the changing relationship between violence and honor. First, we must, to the extent possible, engage in “capturing of facts and bringing them back” for display, but then we must try to decode meaning, clarify intent, and “reduce the puzzlement over unfamiliar acts in faraway places.”⁶⁰

In exploring the interconnections between the workings of royal justice and the dynamics of village *sociabilité*—the totality of interpersonal relations encompassing mutual hostilities and solidarities—the criminal records demonstrate how individuals defended or challenged each other’s honor, effectively dramatizing rivalries and affinities, thereby revealing values that might otherwise remain veiled. These cases illuminate not only tensions and feuds, allegiances and loyalty, but also compliance with or challenge to gender roles. We can assess the inner logic that governed the inhabitants’ behavior, to “read” the multiple “texts” contained in the archives. The richest cases for such an inquiry revolve around gender: criminal cases that pertained to honor and interpersonal violence between men and women, husbands and wives, masters and servants, lovers and neighbors, with particular attention to “crimes against morality” that directly affected a woman’s honor: *rapt et séduction* (elopement, either consensual or forced), infanticide, rape (*viol*), child abuse, and prostitution. When people attacked each other verbally, which words did they use and what was their content? If they assaulted each other physically, which portions of the anatomy did they target? Of paramount interest were incidents that directly or implicitly involved honor or *honnêteté*, in which opponents professed that their integrity or “honor” had been compromised and needed to be restored.⁶¹

Although the ultimate “truth” of what occurred is inaccessible, one can know with reasonable certitude who said what before the magistrates. Likewise, we cannot know which (if any) of the accused or witnesses were telling the truth or lying. Nor, for that matter, do we know whether the scribe completely understood the inhabitants’ patois and accurately rendered it into official French.⁶² Long familiarity with these archives suggests that the magistrates were generally cautious, scrupulous in following legal procedure, considered in their judgment, far from arbitrary, and generally moderate in the verdicts they reached. Given this inevitable uncertainty, my goal could not be the discovery of “what really happened” but instead could only be the ascertainment of people’s words and actions regarding honor and violence.⁶³

The incidents generated petitions, reports, inquests, and interrogations that dramatize interrelations among the inhabitants in this period. By reading the documents, one can see how the magistrates attempted to assemble the fragmentary information revealed to them. In turn, plaintiffs attempted to construct plausible stories in which they—acting alone, with their attorneys, or in conjunction with a royal prosecutor—labored to cast their adversaries as villains and themselves as victims. Sometimes, however, the magistrates were clearly stymied and concluded that neither the plaintiff nor public prosecutor had compiled sufficient information to build a viable case against someone; that is, they did not have the crucial plot elements needed to construct a plausible narrative.⁶⁴

As for the courtroom dramas documented in the archives, we know that the procedure unfolded according to judicial guidelines that must be clearly delineated.⁶⁵ Pleas or petitions, for example, usually followed a formula, and the decision reached by the court or the cases’ extralegal resolutions are often unknown. What we perceive is that although violence was still a normal and enduring part of social relations, signs of change are apparent. The incidents therefore bear witness both to the enduring role of violence in this culture of honor and to the ways that it was gradually being transformed.

A modern ethnologist is likely to have the opportunity to grasp the *mentalité* of a people by directly observing group behavior and even by asking participants to articulate what they thought or valued. But the historian dealing with past participants can “observe” them only indirectly, when they appeared before royal judges, and can “hear” their words only when they were arrested and interrogated or summoned as witnesses. As already noted, even then their testimony was refracted through an elite prism, that is, the court scribe (*greffier*) entrusted with the translation and summary of their responses (which were often in patois). When words failed these past actors, their behavior often “spoke” for them.⁶⁶

The Criminalization of Violence

Another important question—one specific to dealing with criminal court records—is, how typical or representative were those persons involved? Garnot states that criminals in the Old Regime were, in general, unrepresentative of the general population; more so than others, they were likely to be drawn from the lower social classes, young (age fifteen through forty), and male.⁶⁷ He concedes, however, that this profile does not apply when we are focusing on crimes of violence involving honor. In general, under the Old Regime interpersonal violence remained relatively common and did not become widely criminalized. Aside from dueling, which drew the attention of royal authorities in the seventeenth century, the repression of interpersonal violence became a high priority for magistrates only if it went beyond being a private affair and thereby jeopardized the authority of the state. In the eighteenth century, however, elite mentality on this issue transformed, as the magistrates themselves shunned public displays of violence, took more aggressive legal action to protect private property, and sought (in vain) to inculcate in the *peuple* more pacific habits. The extent to which the common people shared in this change of *mentalité* remains hotly debated by historians and, in fact, clearly varied sharply from region to region.⁶⁸

By definition, criminal cases focus on the exceptional, and violence occurred only episodically, usually in taverns/*cabarets*—for the most part, places perceived as havens of pleasure and relaxation—and in the streets, fairs, markets, or within families, that is, sites normally given over to peaceful sociability. “Violence was certainly part of human relations,” Garnot concludes, “but it represented only a single ephemeral spasm in an otherwise peaceful context.”⁶⁹ Jean Nicolas identified more than 8,500 affairs of collective violence in France between 1661 and 1789, evidence that aggression, as Russell G. Geen has written, seems to be a real and important part of the human condition.⁷⁰

Returning to Garnot’s question about the “typical” nature of perpetrators of violence, we might ask, in instances of violent crime that came before the courts, how typical were the persons involved? What can we learn about “normal” people by examining the actions of people accused of violence? The question itself is premised on the dubious assumption that the accused or convicted is somehow different from the rest of the population. Today we tend to assume that those guilty of murder, for example, are “diseased” or suffering from some pathological condition and therefore must be essentially different from the rest of the population. In fact, most of the harm that people cause one another comes from motives found in every normal person; the truth, concludes Pinker, is that “evil is in fact perpetrated by people who are mostly ordinary, and who respond to