

A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner, by Steven Bednarski. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp xviii+199. ISBN: 9781442604773.

ON A FATEFUL DAY in 1394, Johan Damponcii ate his breakfast in the company of his wife, friends, and servants, then went out to work in the fields, where he fell ill, stumbled home, withdrew to his bed, and died in mid-afternoon. Almost immediately a rumor spread through the town (Manosque, Provence) that his young wife, Margarida de Portu, to whom Johan had been wed only a few months, had either poisoned him or killed him by sorcery. The rumor was spread by her in-laws, or, more specifically, her late husband's half-brother Raymon Gauterii, a litigious citizen of Manosque who happened to be a notary. In *A Poisoned Past* Steven Bednarski uses the ensuing court cases to create a compelling narrative; but that is only part of the package. He expands his material to shape a "pedagogical microhistory" (xiii). Using the legal records and additional archival materials to recount the story of Raymon's and Margarida's battle in the courts, he often interrupts himself "to interrogate how we know what we think we know about Margarida and her world" and suggests alternative interpretations (xvii).

To facilitate the broader discussion, Bednarski provides in chapter 1 a short course in microhistory. He defines it as "a form of historical analysis and writing, a genre . . . that takes a single, focused, historical 'moment' and uses it to shine light on a broader world" (2), then gives an overview of the history of the genre, including the arguments both pro and con that greeted the publications of earlier microhistories such as Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, and Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*. He supplements the text with a map of Manosque; an annotated list of characters, including the families, the townspeople, and the local officials; a timeline of Margarida's life; family trees; a transcription of the criminal inquest (in Latin); and an English translation of the criminal charges against Margarida.

Microhistory is of value as a tool in imagining events and lives characteristically absent from the historical record. Bednarski points out that it came into its own after World War II, and "it was, like the broader concern with social history, also a product of major cultural shifts happening in Western society, shifts that put new emphasis on women, children, minorities, sex, poverty, and class structure" (20-21). Margarida came to Bednarski's attention when he was reading criminal trials for his doctoral thesis. Her inquest was the longest in all

the registers he examined. A colleague also shared with him additional records from the archives, including those involving Margarida's suit for her widow's pension and a defamation suit against Raymon. Bednarski writes: "I saw the potential to write about the status of a young, unattached woman in medieval society; about her illness and life as an epileptic; about the state of medicine and medical training; about family finances, inheritance, and patrimony among the lower ranks of society; about internal family politics; about courts, lawyers, notaries, and judges; about enmity and love; even about the breakfasts of late medieval farmers." He states that "microhistory was the only way to make sense of" the records (21).

His account of the trials is a study in the litigious notary's blindness to Margarida's standing in the community. Raymon apparently believes that as an insider in the courts he will prevail. But the testimonies of the community (including a Jewish physician, a prominent midwife, a female neighbor, the late husband's servant) largely contradict his accusations. And we learn that Raymon omitted a crucial fact in his written accusations, Margarida's epilepsy, which was often quite incapacitating. The contrast between Raymon's assumption that he can manipulate the law to suit his interests and the reality of the community supporting Margarida is striking and informative. As Bednarski states later, her gender did not disempower Margarida (102); indeed, in 1396 Margarida brings a defamation suit against Raymon, and she appears in court determined to speak for herself, although she has brought the suit "with the consent, license, and authority of" a notary and a procurator (98).

Throughout the discussion Bednarski points out the selective nature of his choices in constructing the narrative, suggesting how he might have placed his focus elsewhere, exploring, for example, legal history, medical history, or gender theory. Regarding the law, he describes the law as practiced in Manosque at the time and how it grew out of Roman law, and discusses Raymon's knowledge of the system and how it might be manipulated. Concerning medicine, he might have delved more deeply into attitudes and theories about Margarida's epilepsy and analyzed more thoroughly the physician's conclusion regarding her culpability in her husband's heart attack. Vivas Josep explained that:

Johan had married a tender virgin with whom, after two months, he still could not copulate because of her illness. He was, therefore, extremely worked up by his unspent passion. Since he could not have his way with Margarida, his lust generated in him an evil melancholy. His pent-up sexual passions accumulated and produced a Syncope, which turned his hot passion cold and singed him. Unhealthy humors formed and twisted around his heart, changing

its complexion. The bottom line: “Johan’s sexual frustration led to tendrils of unhealthy humors that wrapped themselves around his heart and constricted. Johan died, literally, of a broken heart” (47).

Regarding gender history, Bednarski notes that the quarrel over Johan’s estate “was inherently gendered. Margarida was entirely absent from the wrangling over her dead spouse’s possessions. Everyone who made a claim in court was a man” (79). The alleged mode of murder—poison or sorcery—is also highly gendered. “Raymon, by calling Margarida a sorceress or poisoner, slandered her feminine honor” (91).

Written in an engaging and accessible style, this book would work well in the classroom, hooking the students with an engaging narrative, complete with a conflict between equally strong and determined litigants, and then challenging their notions of historical “truth” with a wide-ranging discussion of the choices historians make in selecting and arranging research. Beyond the classroom, this stands as a provocative and engaging read. I find the loose ends in Margarida’s story frustrating, but that is the nature of the records. And a gift to a novelist.

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