



Karine Lambert, *Itinéraires féminins de la d*

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viance. Provence 1750-1850

Aix-en-Provence, Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2012, 312 pp., ISBN
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- 1 The book *Itinéraires féminins de la déviance. Provence 1750-1850* by French historian Karine Lambert is a very welcome addition to the history of criminal women. After the excellent (in some cases translated) works of Arlette Farge, Nicole Castan and Nathalie Zemon Davies about women's crimes in various parts of early modern France, there seems to have been a decline in the French research on female crime during the *Ancien Régime*. At least, despite the lively French tradition in the history of crime, not many scholars have devoted a monograph to female delinquency of the early modern period.
- 2 Drawing on the findings of her thesis about female deviance in eastern Provence during the early modern era, Lambert explores the ways in which deviant women were able to develop strategies of resistance and survive despite their deplorable situations and the social control which was imposed on them. Her main sources are 300 trials from the archives of the *départements* of Var and Bouches-du-Rhône in the south of France between 1750 and 1850. Lambert distinguishes three – partly overlapping – 'cycles' of female deviance. Each of these cycles more or less represents different types of criminal live styles of women appearing before the courts in Provence : 1. Women who

conceal their crimes and lead rather withdrawn lives, 2. Assertive women who lead more public lives, and 3. Women who commit crimes within the context of the family.

- 3 The first part deals with typical female crimes : seduced women who are pregnant and have been abandoned by their lovers, as well as young mothers committing infanticide. As in other parts of Western Europe, most women who were accused of infanticide were young, single women migrating from rural areas to the town or travelling between villages in search of a better life. Lambert's material displays the ways in which the perceptions of contemporaries failed to correspond with the reality of women's lives. The profile of women killing their babies led contemporaries to believe that most of these women were leading dissolute lives and earned their money through prostitution, although Lambert does point out that the vast majority of these women were not working as prostitutes. In the nineteenth century, contemporaries believed that it was the adverse influence of urban life which would drive female servants and day labourers to desperate and criminal actions, but in fact most infanticide was committed in villages. Abortion, on the other hand, was a typical urban crime.
- 4 The long-term approach of her study reveals important changes in the attitudes of judges towards infanticide : in England after 1750, murderers of new-born children were treated with more leniency and the punishments imposed were less harsh. After 1824, no woman charged with infanticide was sentenced to death by the assize court of the *département* of Var. A totally different group of women appearing before the courts, were those who were imprisoned on the grounds of insanity. They bear remarkable resemblances to the profile of women who were accused of infanticide : both groups were poor women, alone, living harsh lives, often abandoned and far away from their home town or village.
- 5 Lambert's study presents a clear profile of the female criminal appearing before the courts ; she provides information about their age, marital status, occupation, living circumstances and place of origin. In the second part of the book she describes in detail the most important features of the prostitutes in eighteenth-century Toulon : they were single women, between the ages of 18 and 25, often having migrated from nearby places, and working as domestic servants or in the textile industry. These women were tried for prostitution, but that did not mean that prostitution was their main source of income. In most cases, women gathered an income by combining various types of occupations and activities ; prostitution was only one of these sources of earnings. Lambert paints an even more detailed portrait of the lives of domestic servants committing theft, and emphasizes that a significant proportion of the urban population earned their living as a domestic servant. Some 85 percent of these girls were migrants who left their villages or small towns to find a better life in the city. Lambert describes the data and figures in her text comprehensively, but it would have been helpful if some of these numbers were presented in tables or graphs that would provide clear overviews of the profiles of women and changes over time. Nevertheless, Lambert raises an interesting point when she (implicitly) calls for a review of the general assumption that urban life may have caused innocent rural women to lead autonomous and dangerous lives and to behave more criminally than they would have done at home. In fact, the opposite was true ; the accused women themselves were attracted by the towns and saw them as places of refuge that enabled them to move away from their place of origin and live a more independent and anonymous life.

- 6 Unlike the women who were charged with infanticide, prostitution and theft, women committing domestic violence tended not to lead independent or disrupted lives, but were living at home and were still very much a part of a family. In the third part of the book, Lambert discusses the ways in which women were involved in violence against their family members and husbands, and she argues that the family setting may explain best why some women chose to follow deviant or atypical paths in their lives. Throughout the period, women's opportunities to defend themselves against domestic violence improved because they were allowed to divorce. Between 1793 and 1803, 75 percent of all divorce cases were initiated by wives who were abused and battered by their husbands. Before divorce became an option, some wives were so desperate that they killed their husbands, though such cases were rare.
- 7 The strength and value of Lambert's book lies in her careful reconstruction of the strategies and options of deviant women between 1750 and 1850. Domestic servants play a crucial role in her study, because, as Lambert argues, they were the ones who were most prominent in everyday urban life. They also dominated the judicial records that involved women. Lambert points to the fact that many deviant females were single women who had to cope with a complex reality, not only because most of them had to survive on their own without family or a husband, but also because they could not live up to contemporary expectations about women's behaviour. It is to Lambert's credit that she so clearly explains the link between the singleness of women and the criminal path that they followed. However, for those scholars who have closely followed the international debates about gender, migration and poverty in the early modern period, this will not come as a surprise. In their excellent works about poor women and migrants, historians such as Lesley Page Moch and Olwen Hufton showed as early as the 1970s that in eighteenth-century European cities, migrant women with the least social support were more likely to raise infants without the support of husbands and – as part of their survival strategies – to undertake criminal activities. In his introduction to the history of crime in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1987, 4th edition 2010), Clive Emsley concluded that it were primarily servants who were brought before the courts, and charged with infanticide and other offences.
- 8 The fact that Lambert does not mention any of these works shows the weakness of the book. The list of literature includes one of Hufton's articles, but here she is referred to as 'Orward Hufton'. Of course, no author should be judged on such seemingly insignificant errors, but Lambert's focus on the French literature and her disregard of the English-language literature on female crime (even if the examinations concern France) reveals an important shortcoming of the book and a missed opportunity. The author does not in any way compare her findings with the international literature on infanticide, prostitution, single women or female crime in general. This would have given her the opportunity to demonstrate how valuable her findings are and in what ways her research contributes to the broader international debate about women's crime in the early modern period.
- 9 Lambert has written a beautiful book in which she presents a very careful and well-thought-out analysis of the lives of criminal women in the eighteenth century in the *départements* of Var and Bouches-du-Rhône, but it is regrettable that she did not take the opportunity to position her work within the context of the international research on female crime. To formulate it differently, Lambert's study deserves to be brought to a wider scholarly audience.

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