Medieval pardon tales and their tellers have been informing and amusing students of late medieval history for a long time now. This most recent study from two eminent scholars draws on Burgundian ducal letters of pardon to paint a lively and lovely picture of fifteenth-century life in the Low Countries. Weaving together a series of anecdotes drawn from the letters, the authors explore such historiographically resonant themes as honour and vengeance; feuding and peace-making; gender, kinship, and family; and the historicity of emotions. Each chapter is followed by translations of several of the letters discussed in the text.

To a greater extent than Natalie Zemon Davis, whose Fiction in the Archives galvanized the study of pardon letters, Arnade and Prevenier are focused on the social reality they believe recoverable from these texts rather than their narrative logic. [1] Whenever possible, they have gone beyond the text of the letter to find other archival sources that shed new light on the pardon's tale and its teller, embedding them more fully in the social and political world they occupied. The authors are nevertheless mindful both of the literary constraints that crafting a narrative imposed on supplicants and the likely mendacity of some of their stories, which had to seem pardonable no matter how dubious the facts. As they point out, the tales in the pardons often echo the sorts of stories found in the contemporary story collection the Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles. Arnade and Prevenier also pay careful attention to the judicial procedures and political context in which a pardon was enmeshed. One did not simply procure a pardon and skip merrily away; the story had to be verified before ratification and opposing parties could object and sometimes did so successfully. There were also political considerations, which, as the authors repeatedly demonstrate, could tip the balance of ducal favour even in the face of aggravated culpability. The authors' commitment to the careful source criticism of these complex texts is a model for any historian.

This is both a deeply learned book and a richly entertaining one. Footnotes, though kept to a minimum, point toward the extensive historiographical traditions in which the authors are fully conversant and to which they themselves have contributed a great deal. So, although the authors are mostly telling stories in this book, the reader can rest easy that the evidence is not merely anecdotal. And in fact, Arnade and Prevenier have great stories to tell, ranging from the very funny to the profoundly sad. We are introduced to the full social panoply of late medieval Burgundy, from the rich and connected widow of one of the duchy's top courtiers to a poor serving boy of a travelling Italian merchant. Readers will come away from this book feeling like they have been to fifteenth-century Burgundy, to its dirty taverns and raucous public squares, its draughty castles and its cosy inns.

In the four chapters that follow their excellent introduction to late medieval Burgundy and its sources, Arnade and Prevenier use the pardons' stories to "expose the norms of society and lay bare its sinews, its social layers, and its gender expectations" (4). In chapter one, on "Disputes, Vendettas, and Political Clients," they show how violent conflicts and their resolution were embedded in the family, professional, and political matrices that structured medieval Burgundian life. The authors define only very loosely those notoriously protean terms "vendetta" and "feud." This seems fair enough, given medieval sources' own avoidance of strict definitions when it comes to such violence. [2] The authors argue that pardons functioned to resolve these violent disputes when the normal avenues of arbitration and settlement had failed. The importance of this civil function was thus greater than in the French pardons, which usually only remitted the criminal penalties and any civil penalties owed to the state and in many cases depended on the parties having already arrived at a peace settlement. The state's interest in pardons was great though, for pardons not only reified the duke's sovereign prerogative, they were also useful tools for shoring up political alliances and bestowing patronage on loyal clients.

Chapter two continues the focus on dispute, vengeance, and violence, turning especially to adultery and other sexually-connected crimes, like infanticide. In this chapter, Arnade and Prevenier are particularly interested in male honour and how its injury provoked violence. It is perhaps heretical to say this, given how fundamental the concept of honour is to late medieval historiography of the past thirty years, but I did not find the homicidal protection of masculine honour to be as central to the letters published in the book as did Arnade and Prevenier. They assert that the letters "confirm honour's heaviest footprint in disputes centered on male sexual worth and
status, as a term invoked to justify revenge or self-defense after an episode of male humiliation” (89), but the word honour appears in only one of the thirteen letters (as translated) that follow the text of the first two chapters. (There are also another four instances, by my count, in other documents discussed in the text of the second chapter). Now, limiting one's interpretation to the semantic incidences alone is certainly not a defensible strategy, but neither is assuming that honour was the crux of the issue in every case in which violence was preceded by (male) embarrassment or outrage. What does seem clear is that situations causing anger and/or shame could turn easily violent. It is arguable that we might get the same impression of modern life if we primarily read police blotters and divorce court proceedings. Moreover, the emphasis on honour/shame as an exclusively masculine concern seems to me misleading. The distressing story recounted in letter 12 of the noblewoman Antonie van Claerhout, who killed the newborn baby had she had birthed in secret and dumped the body in waste water (watching to be sure it sank) certainly suggests that reputation could be a matter of life or death for women, too.

In fact, one of the most valuable aspects of this book is its attention to women. Women are a major focus of chapter three, on marital conflict, which beautifully illustrates and explains the legal, social, and emotional issues in late medieval marriage, and chapter four, which is entirely devoted to the tale of the first known European actress Maria van der Hoeven and its many tellers. Women received a vanishingly small number of pardons, but in addition to discussing those few remissions with a female recipient, Arnade and Prevenier show how women were simultaneously absent from the letters as protagonists and witnesses but also central to them as the objects of dispute. As is frequently the case in recent historiography, a lot of this discussion is framed around the idea of masculinity and how it was constructed and performed in the workplace, the family, the tavern, etc. The flipside to this, of course, is that the masculine ideal and its social demonstration were predicated on a deep and virulent strain of misogyny, a topic almost absent from the discussion (with only one occurrence in the book's index, compared to 26 for 'masculinity'). This is a widespread feature of scholarship these days, but it is not one that should go unchallenged, especially in a work that gives us such engaging portraits of so many real women and their lives. For if the book confirms some of Dyan Elliott's recently expressed worries about the study of "gender" in medieval history, it also fulfils her hope that we continue to recover knowledge of historical women.

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Obviously, Arnade and Prevenier's is a qualitative approach, not a quantitative one. Sometimes, I wished for some of the stark statistics that make Claude Gauvard's study of the French pardons under King Charles VI so useful, and fewer assurances--no matter how true--that a feature of one letter was present in "countless" others. [4] But this book is doing something different and at least as valuable by weaving together the little stories in the pardons to tell a bigger story about how real people in Burgundy experienced the waning of the Middle Ages. Wearing its magisterial learning lightly, Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble is both a thoroughly informative and a delightfully amusing book.

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