



Hannele Klemettilä, *Epitomes of Evil: Representations of Executioners in Northern France and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages* (Studies in European Urban History 8), Brepols: Turnhout 2006. 388 pp.

Scholars of late medieval and early modern Europe have long sought to explain the development of 'the state' as a potent political and social force. Studies have called attention to the importance of the gradual monopolization of violent agency by rulers and their officials. During the 'judicial revolution' between c. 1450 and 1750, the state slowly became the ultimate arbiter and punisher of crime and disorder. The state's array of public punishments not only meted out justice to offenders but also proclaimed to those in attendance that the state alone possessed the right to use violence as a means of dispute-resolution. Yet, it is not always clear to scholars what men and women thought about this burgeoning social control. By exploring the same region and eras as the great cultural historian, Johann Huzinga, Hannele Klemettilä has produced a very interesting and lucid study that, on one level, illumines the many ways that executioners, the manifestations of the state's claim to power, were perceived in France and Burgundy, and, on a deeper level, reveals a great deal about the underlying culture that could have allowed for, adapted to, or resisted heightened social control on the part of political and religious authorities. By doing so, Klemettilä adds to an understanding of the culture, timing and factors involved in the 'civilizing process' in European history.

Early in the text, Klemettilä provides a very clear overview of the intent, scope, methodology and historiography of her study. As medievalists often

have to do, Klemettilä employs many types of sources (court records, chronicles, illuminations, memoirs, legal treatises, drama and poetry, a source that Klemettilä argues has been neglected by scholars) in order to glean what late medieval men and women thought about executioners. Klemettilä argues that in general, late medieval folk yearned for the justice and order that the state's penal system provided, yet the executioners, who were so integral to the administration of 'justice', were regarded as cruel, sinful and evil 'lowlives'. She then sets forth to detail the many ways that executioners were linked to such negative qualities as well as why such links existed.

In the second chapter, Klemettilä provides a thorough overview of the historical context of hangmen, both as real men and as caricatures. The "forms and contexts" where people would have encountered hangmen are brought into relief (p. 45). Within this early section, Klemettilä begins to lay the groundwork for her broader conclusions about late medieval culture. She justly takes umbrage with the views of some scholars who consider late medieval men and women to be lacking in empathy when confronted by violent spectacle. While she clearly recognizes that in many instances, medieval men and women considered violence to be an acceptable means of dispute-resolution, Klemettilä strongly argues that "it would be a serious error to think...that violence and a convict's pain evoked only seldom compassion or negative thoughts or feelings" (p. 42). Indeed, Klemettilä believes that there is evidence pointing to a sense of shame, concern and distaste, such as the distance that authorities maintained from their hangmen (due to blood taboos as well as social hierarchies). She further contends that the intolerance toward the hangman (both his person and his actions) as well as his negative depictions in various media reveal a "profound dislike of the death penalty, of harsh punishments of mutilation and of expressions of cruelty in late medieval culture....hangmen were the targets of spectators' wrath...because the patient's suffering surpassed the boundary of moderation and ruined the ideal of the equivalence of punishment and crime" (p. 45). Klemettilä may be both wrong and right in such an assertion. Physical reprisal is often integral to the maintenance of order in honor cultures, and therefore there is little reason to think that late medieval men and women deeply "disliked" the death penalty. However, when one considers the sense of balance in honor cultures (e.g. the

law of talion), as explored so well in William Ian Miller's *Eye for an Eye*,¹ Klemetilä appears to be on more sure footing in arguing that late medieval men and women may often have disliked the *enactment* of the death penalty because it exceeded normative notions of 'just reprisal'.

The third chapter presents a thoughtful exploration and analysis of the official and popular terminology for hangmen, especially the pejorative term *bourreau*. Klemetilä even explores silence – i.e. narratives in which at least some mention of an executioner ought to occur, yet does not – as a way of showing just how much society considered executioners to be polluted and problematic administrators of justice. Indeed, Klemetilä shows not only that hangmen were derided in popular terminology but also that the diction of legal scholars and officials reveals an, at best, ambiguous attitude toward executioners. Both elites and lower classes generally used negative terms for hangmen, and, remarkably, neither a hangman's job performance nor his connection to friends or foes mattered in their choice of terminology. Even if one argued that in sources from the second half of the fifteenth century, the interspersing of the term *bourreau* with what Klemetilä calls neutral terms such as *maistre de haulte justice* (which I think could be considered a reputable label as much as a neutral one) was a sign of the decline in the pejorative value of *bourreau* – to the point of it morphing into a neutral synonym for executioner – one would still have to agree with Klemetilä that officials took great pains to distance themselves from the lowly servants of their penal codes. Klemetilä insightfully notes that, like numerous nicknames for the Devil, such distancing and reliance on pejorative terms reveals a deep-seated need to abate the fear induced by the personage and practices of the hangman.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine visual evidence of the representation of hangmen, from their clothing to their physical features and gestures. In these sections, the contention that 'artistic freedom' was limited by the demands and intentions of patrons and by conventional iconographic rules is integral to the soundness of Klemetilä's analysis. Though scholarly arguments based on artistic evidence can often be quite tenuous, Klemetilä does, all in all, present a preponderance of sound evidence that almost invariably depicts these executors of 'justice' as menacing, idiotic, immoral and impure reprobates. (This depiction is bolstered further in the sixth chapter

¹ W.I. Miller, *Eye for an Eye*, Cambridge 2006.

through Klemettilä's examination of the language of hangmen as imagined by poets and playwrights and her seventh chapter on the 'mentality' of executioners).

Klemettilä adeptly maintains a sense of purpose and clarity throughout this study. She is very careful to detail the intent of each chapter and section, yet she commendably does not sacrifice the breadth of her conclusions for the security of narrow assertions. In her final section, Klemettilä addresses how her study both manifests and adds to our understanding of some very important and very broad historical processes: the process of state monopolization of the right to punish, most famously examined in Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*, the depth of anxiety and fear over sin and death, as explored in Jean Delumeau's *Le péché et la peur* and lastly, the notion of a 'civilizing process', as outlined in the groundbreaking work of Norbert Elias. Klemettilä's addition to our conception of a 'civilizing process' in European history deserves particular attention. As some medievalists have recently and rightly contended,² Klemettilä argues that while Elias' conception of a 'civilizing process' has merit, his depiction of medieval society as cruel and wholly lacking in emotional and physical restraint is erroneous. Instead, we ought to regard the cultural and judicial developments of late medieval society as an example, not a foil, of the civilizing process in motion, for Klemettilä (p. 322) proves that both

the emergence of the institution of the hangman and unfavorable views about executioners in general...formed an inseparable and essential part of a larger process that aimed, and aims fundamentally and in the long run, at the pacification of society, at the exclusion of violence, pain and death from the everyday experiences of ordinary people and at the automatic adaption and increase of individual self control.

Klemettilä asserts that the institution of the executioner removed the right to violent agency from most people while the tainting of his person and actions

² See, for example, M. Meyerson, D. Thiery and O. Falk (eds) *A' Great Effusion of Blood'? Interpreting Medieval Violence*, Toronto 2004; D. Thiery, *Polluting the Sacred: Violence, Faith and the 'Civilizing' of Parishioners in Late Medieval England*, Leiden 2009; R. Kaeuper ed., *Violence in Medieval Society*, Woodbridge 2000; B. Rosenwein ed., *Angers Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca 1998; E. Cohen, 'The Animated Pain of the Body', *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 36–68.

slowly helped to stigmatize the use of physical force as cruel, bestial and disreputable. While the majority of *Epitomes of Evil* is devoted to a deft display of how executioners were disdained and degraded through a wide variety of media, it is such final assertions about the cultural relevance of those degrading depictions that make Klemettilä's study all the more commendable and all the more worth reading.

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