

*French History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2011)

doi:10.1093/fh/crr063

Advance Access published on 3 November 2011

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES: WOMEN'S GOSSIP, INSULTS AND VIOLENCE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB\*

**Abstract**—Using evidence from cases recorded in the registers of the consistories of southern France, the author investigates the way in which Languedocian women policed each other's behaviour, enforcing a collective morality through gossip, sexual insult and physical confrontation. In contrast to case studies by other historians, it is argued here that gossip does appear to have been a peculiarly female activity, but far more than simply being an outlet for malice or prurience, it gave women a distinctive social role in the town. No less evident is the involvement of women in physical violence both against each other and against men, violence which, though less extreme than its male counterpart, nonetheless occupies a significant role in the proceedings of the consistories.

Robin Briggs' writings on women, families and communities in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic France contain some of the most significant and pioneering insights into the lives of ordinary people in recent early modern scholarship. This article, which focuses on three examples of sociability among ordinary urban women in the south of France in the late sixteenth century, attempts to use approaches pioneered by Briggs to further our understanding of women's interactions and behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, a close look at the literature reveals that, apart from the work of scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis, James Farr, Susan Broomhall, Jacques Solé and Briggs himself, there is still relatively little archival research on poor to middling French women from around 1540 to 1660, especially research

\* The author is Lecturer in Early Modern History at the University of East Anglia and may be contacted at [s.lipscomb@uea.ac.uk](mailto:s.lipscomb@uea.ac.uk). She wishes to thank Sarah Apetrei for commenting on an earlier draft, and I. Romein and G. van Rietschoten at Koninklijke Brill NV for permission to reproduce some of the material in her chapter 'Refractory women: the limits of power in the French Reformed church' in *Dire l'interdit: The Vocabulary of Censure and Exclusion in the Early Modern Reformed Tradition*, ed. R. A. Mentzer, P. Chareyre and F. Moreil (Brill Series in Church History, 2010), 20–22.

<sup>1</sup> As my former doctoral supervisor, Robin Briggs' approach has been inspirational in my work on women, gender and family in early modern Protestant France.

that draws on the realities and narratives of women's lives.<sup>2</sup> The historiography of early modern French women has, for the most part, focused on elite women, the structures that shaped women's legal and economic position, demographic trends and evidence from the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This is because for late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France evidence of ordinary women's narratives about their experience is limited, and so prescriptive, literary and legal sources have filled the gap.<sup>4</sup> A significant deficiency has been in court records, which have been so fruitful for English studies but are largely missing for France in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Records from the *officialités*, the Catholic episcopal tribunals, are a case in point: as André Burguière—who used the Troyes *officialité* records up to 1540 and then again from 1667—makes clear, there is a hiatus in these records for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and elsewhere; the fragments of *officialités* records that do survive tend to be for the eighteenth century only.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, apart from that by Farr and Julie Hardwick, much of the significant work on criminal courts is either from considerably earlier or later periods than that under study, again because of poor survival of records.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> R. Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London, 1996, 2002), *The Witches of Lorraine* (Oxford, 2007); N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987), *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tellers and Their Tales in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford, 1987), *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard, 1983), 'Women in the crafts in sixteenth-century Lyon', *Feminist Stud*, 8 (1982); J. Farr, *Authority and Sexuality in Early Modern Burgundy (1550-1730)* (New York, Oxford, 1995); S. Broomhall, '“Burdened with small children”: women defining poverty in sixteenth-century Tours', in *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion*, ed. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (Aldershot, 2005), 'Identity and life narratives among the poor in later sixteenth-century Tours', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 57 (2004), 439-65, 'Understanding household limitation strategies among the sixteenth-century urban poor in France', *Fr Hist*, 20 (2006), 121-37; J. Solé, *Être femme en 1500: La vie quotidienne dans le diocèse de Troyes* (Paris, 2000). For eighteenth-century women's narratives, G.'A. Cattelona, 'Control and collaboration: the role of women in regulating female sexual behaviour in early modern Marseille', *Fr Hist Stud*, 18 (1993), 13-35.

<sup>3</sup> For example, S. Hanley, 'Family and state in early modern France: the marriage pact', in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present*, ed. A. J. Boxer and J. H. Quataert (New York, 1987); E. Berriot-Salvadore, *Les Femmes dans la société française de la Renaissance* (Geneva, 1990); E. Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (London, 1990); E. Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2001); J. Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> A problem identified by Briggs, who pointed out the difficulty of using prescriptive Catholic material such as episcopal ordinances, confessors' manuals, works of devotion and sermons, produced by those distanced from practical realities, as evidence of family behaviour: 'The church and family in seventeenth-century France', in *Communities*, 236.

<sup>5</sup> A. Burguière, 'Le rituel du mariage en France: pratiques ecclésiastiques et pratiques populaires', *Annales: E.S.C.*, 33 (1978), 637-48; A. Lottin, 'Vie et mort du couple: Difficultés conjugales et divorces dans le Nord de la France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles', *XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 102-3 (1974), 59-78, *La désunion du couple sous l'Ancien Régime: L'exemple du Nord* (Paris, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Farr, *Authority*; Hardwick, 'Seeking separations: gender, marriages, and household economies in early modern France', *Fr Hist Stud*, 21 (1998), 157-80. For earlier: B. Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 1987). For later: Z. A. Schneider, 'Women before the bench: female litigants in early modern Normandy', *Fr Hist Stud*, 23 (2000), 1-32 and N. Castan, 'La criminalité familiale dans le ressort du Parlement de Toulouse, 1690-1730', in *Crimes et criminalité en France 17<sup>e</sup>-18<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. A. Abbiateci et al. (Paris, 1971), 'Les femmes devant la justice: Toulouse, XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Femmes et pouvoirs sous l'Ancien Régime*, ed. D. Haase-Dubosc and E. Viennot (Paris, 1991).

Therefore, the sources used here— the consistorial registers of the Reformed churches of southern France— provide an important new resource for the study of early modern women and gender. Whilst the consistorial records have frequently been used to explore the application of Reformed discipline, they have not been used before to answer the lacunae in the gender history of early modern France, and yet, for insight into the events, relationships and mental world of the past, and especially into the thoughts and feelings of ordinary men and women, these registers rival the best surviving court and inquisitorial records in richness and detail.

Exploring the lives of women through the consistorial depositions has meant reading the registers against the grain, and it is surely for this reason that other scholars have used the consistories to write primarily about the ecclesiastical discipline itself, looking at the mentalities of the interrogators, not of those interrogated. The registers have an inherent male filter, a patriarchal prism through which women's voices are received. Nevertheless, the consistory remains extraordinary in gathering, recording and validating female testimony, including that of lower-class women such as servants, in an age when a woman's testimony had limited status in many courts. As such, these registers allow unparalleled access to lowly French women whose stories made it into few other historical records. In addition, as I have explored elsewhere, one interesting result of the consistory's tendency to accord women's gossip and insult sufficient weight to take them seriously was that women were able to exploit the consistory's authority to their own ends.<sup>7</sup> Women's words could set the full process of Reformed discipline into motion, potentially to their own advantage.

This article uses consistorial records from southern France (specifically, the Languedoc, stretching from Nîmes in the east to Montauban in the west) to explore issues of women's neighbourliness and sociability, specifically through cases of gossip, insult and violence. Previous studies (of France, but also from elsewhere in Europe where French material is scant) have concluded:

- (a) that gossip was not a particularly gendered activity. David Garrioch for eighteenth-century France, Bernard Capp for England and Ulinka Rublack for Germany have stressed the role played by both men and women in gossip;<sup>8</sup>
- (b) that sexualized insult was only 'obliquely related to actual sex', as Laura Gowing concluded for early modern England, and really represented concerns about financial extravagance (Gowing) or economic independence (Rublack);<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lipscomb, 'Refractory women', 23 ff.

<sup>8</sup> D. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris 1740-1790* (Cambridge, 1986), 19-27; U. Rublack, *The Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 1999), 26; B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 272-73.

<sup>9</sup> L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), 59, 90-91, 93, 115, 118; Rublack, *Crimes*, 26.

(c) that female physical violence was rare. Stuart Carroll's otherwise excellent study of violence in early modern France barely mentions female violence, and Robert Muchembled concludes that women 'sont très rarement agresseurs ou victimes' of interpersonal violence, either vicious verbal exchange or physical assault.<sup>10</sup> Davis too noted how few women were prosecuted for violent crimes (beyond infanticide and witchcraft), and that the notion of women's anger was unacceptable in pardon tales (although her findings may indicate that French society found women's ferocity unpalatable, rather than suggesting that such ferocity did not exist).<sup>11</sup> This contrasts with findings from early modern Rome and eighteenth-century France that women were quick to anger and aggressive—though their violence tended to be more about 'bruit et fureur' than causing serious or fatal injury.<sup>12</sup>

This article suggests that none of these hypotheses holds for late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century southern France, and that the reason is because women in sixteenth-century Languedocian society (and potentially throughout French society) assumed an important role in maintaining the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The idea that women themselves policed morality, in itself, plays into a contested historiographical debate. For a later period, historians have noted the tendency for women to regulate morality: Georg'Ann Cattelona found women acting as witnesses before the Refuge in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Marseille; Roderick Phillips found women intervening in their neighbourhoods more than men in late eighteenth-century Rouen; and Nicole Castan asserts that, for the eighteenth century, women played an important role in exercising social control.<sup>13</sup> This is also true of England and Germany.<sup>14</sup> Yet, although Broomhall hypothesizes as such, on the basis of one example (drawn, incidentally, from the consistorial records of Nîmes), Hardwick and Garrioch describe French neighbours as reluctant to intervene in the lives of others, and

<sup>10</sup> S. Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 2006), 244–46; R. Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles): essai* (Paris, 1978), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, *Fiction*, 81, 85, 102.

<sup>12</sup> E. S. Cohen, 'Honor and gender in the streets of early modern Rome', *Jl Interdisciplinary Hist*, 22 (1992), 597–625, here 616, 623; N. Castan, 'Criminelle', in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 3: *XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. N. Z. Davis and A. Farge (Paris, 1991), 475; Y. Castan, *Honnêteté et Relations Sociales en Languedoc (1715-1780)* (Paris, 1974), 172.

<sup>13</sup> Cattelona, 'Control', 17, 21; R. Phillips, 'Women, neighborhood, and family in the late eighteenth century', *Fr Hist Stud*, 18 (1993), 1–12, here 5; N. Castan, *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. P. Ariès and G. Duby, 5 vols (Paris, 1985–87), vol. 3: *De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, ed. Ariès et al. (Paris, 1986), 427.

<sup>14</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 101; Rublack, *Crimes*, 149, 220.

Daniel Fabre concludes that women rarely assumed roles of symbolic censure.<sup>15</sup> The evidence from the consistories suggests that sixteenth-century French women did indeed act in ways to censure and interfere with the lives of others, and appropriated responsibility for defending the physical, social, moral and sexual boundaries of Languedocian society. When these boundaries were crossed, it was women who deployed either direct or indirect means to restore them.

## I

As in any small, densely packed community, gossip was an important feature of sixteenth-century urban life in Languedoc. This was partly an inevitable consequence of geography: Nîmes in 1600, for example, had approximately 12,000 people crammed into the small walled city, and was spilling beyond its gates. Gossip—the exchange of information about the personal lives of third parties—was not merely ‘tattling’ or idle talk, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it.<sup>16</sup> In societies with few other means of exchanging information, gossip could certainly be diverting and informative. Martin Ingram noted, for early modern England, how malice and amusement combined with a voyeuristic interest in other people’s lives, and that ‘a feature of early modern English society was endemic gossip about sexual reputation, which served . . . as an outlet for the prurience and spite of the bored and sexually repressed’.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if gossip was titillating—as it almost certainly was—it also had great significance and intent. Anthropologists have posited that gossip can too easily be dismissed as pernicious, ungoverned banter of minor importance, when in fact, rather than having a marginal role in community life, gossip is ‘part of the very blood and tissue of that life’, and ‘maintains the unity, morals and values of social groups’.<sup>18</sup> Peter Wilson has concluded that gossip has an essential role to play in reaffirming common bonds and social norms, reinforcing what F. G. Bailey has described as the ‘quality of intimacy’ in small-scale communities.<sup>19</sup> Rather than being damaging to social unity, gossip can instead preserve a sense of community identity. In addition, through defining the morals of the group, these anthropologists have found that gossip acts as a mechanism for controlling

<sup>15</sup> S. Broomhall, *Women and Religion in Sixteenth Century France* (Basingstoke, 2006), 40; J. Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania, 1998), 102–03; Garrioch, *Neighbourhood*, 79; D. Fabre, ‘Familles: Le privé contre la coutume’, in *Histoire la vie privée*, vol. 3, 556.

<sup>16</sup> ‘gossip, v.’, OED Online, June 2011, available at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80198?rskey=Zr9mpH&result=2&isAdvanced=false> (accessed 4 Sept. 2011).

<sup>17</sup> M. Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), 305.

<sup>18</sup> M. Gluckman, ‘Gossip and scandal’, *Current Anthropology*, 4 (1963), 307–15, here 308.

<sup>19</sup> P. J. Wilson, ‘“Filcher of good names”: an enquiry into anthropology and gossip’, *Man*, 9 (1974), 93–102, here 98; F. G. Bailey, ‘Gifts and poison’, in *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation* (Oxford, 1971), 5.

immoral and socially harmful conduct by bringing individuals' behaviour under the scrutiny of the group: it can police behaviour.<sup>20</sup> This is exactly what can be seen as happening in sixteenth-century Languedoc.

Gossip has had this power to influence behaviour because gossips deal in reputations. Gossip takes as its subject the attack and defence of the reputation and 'good name' of its object. A good name is innately vulnerable, being something of no tangible substance and not possessed by its owner.<sup>21</sup> Who gossips, and what they say, is therefore profoundly important. The world of gossip and slander allows for tremendous insight into the mental and social world of sixteenth-century women and men.

Sixteenth-century Languedocian gossip centred on illicit sexual activity and in this, aligned itself, for the most part, with the Reformed Church's agenda of exposing and expunging sexual immorality. The repetition of these moral norms through gossip further cemented and reaffirmed them. Yet, in contrast with the findings of Capp, Rublack and Garrioch, the examples of gossip in the consistorial records suggest that gossip was gendered: in this area of France it was primarily communicated by women. This is an uncomfortable conclusion, as it appears, at first sight, to echo misogynistic sixteenth-century notions about the garrulity of women.<sup>22</sup> Yet, gossip had a profound purpose, and women's words were an important way of defending community boundaries.

As the stereotype of the 'lusty widow' was so prevalent in sixteenth-century France, one of the boundaries that seemed to need defending was the unacceptability of sexual activity by widows. Widows were easy targets for dishonouring slander, and the maintenance of a reputation for sexual purity was even more fraught for widows than for most women.<sup>23</sup> Yet, other women were those who featured in the consistories as the source of such slander. In April 1586, Donne Loyse was accused of spreading the lurid rumour that Monsieur Grisot's widow had spent a night in the mill with three or four men and had been sexually intimate with them all.<sup>24</sup> The rumour came to the attention of the consistory in Nîmes because Grisot's widow was demanding that Loyse make reparation for the slander. By summoning Loyse, rather than investigating the accusation, the consistory indicated that they doubted the truth of the rumour.

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York*, Borthwick Papers no. 58 (1980), 19–20.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, 'Filcher', 100.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Davis, *Fiction*, 88, 90–91, 101.

<sup>23</sup> L. Warner, 'Widows, widowers and the problem of "second marriages" in sixteenth century France,' in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. S. Cavallo and L. Warner (Harlow, 1999), 89; W. Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth Century France* (Basingstoke, 1989), 93–94; Beauvalet-Boutoyrie, *Etre veuve*, 15; J. Poumarède, 'Le droit des veuves sous l'Ancien Régime (XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles) ou comment gagner son douaire', in *Femmes et pouvoirs*, ed. Haase-Dubosc and Viennot, 64–66.

<sup>24</sup> A[rchives] d[épartementales] du G[ard], Nîmes, 42 J 28 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1583–1588*, fo. 222r. I have considered the cases of Donne Loyse, Captain Alphanty's widow, Béatrix Cuérande, Jeanne Parette and Donne Robine briefly before in a different context, see Lipscomb, 'Refractory Women', 20–22.



A similar case occurred in 1595 when Captain Alphanty's widow complained that her mother-in-law had been gossiping about her to Donne Mazellette and other women, claiming that she had a one-month-old illegitimate child. Whilst it is not explicit whether the issue was the existence of the child or its illegitimacy—we do not know when Captain Alphanty had died and it seems likely that a claim of paternity would be more obviously disputable than a birth—when his widow came before the consistory, the mother-in-law denied having said that her daughter-in-law had a child, and asked 'forgiveness from God and from her daughter-in-law for that which would have besmirched her honour'.<sup>25</sup> Female gossipers knew that their words had power to make or break reputations.

The gender of gossips is even more explicit in another example from 1595. Béatrix Cuérande was summoned to the Montauban consistory for spreading the rumour that a single woman called Jeanne had given birth. Béatrix explained, in a rather garbled fashion, how she heard the news:

Madame de Caulet had attested to her that she had heard it from Madame de Gilis, and that the said de Gilis mentioned also that Jean Ampiel . . . told her, so that which Caulet said was supported by the said de Gilis having said it to her and the said Ampiel saying it.<sup>26</sup>

The gossip had travelled from Jean Ampiel via Madame de Gilis and Madame de Caulet to Béatrix herself: the majority of the chain was made up of women. This is a perfect example of gossip that asserted anew at least part of the community's stance towards sexual immorality, and policed the boundaries of socially unacceptable and acceptable behaviour. As these cases make clear, a precious reputation of chastity could be undermined by the words of others, and women were frequently the ones seeking to do so, even though it was other women's sexual reputations that were so fragile.

Gossip was such an influential tool of social control in the sixteenth century primarily because of the terrible instability of one's reputation. Mere words could easily upset the delicate balance of honour and credit that ensured a person's standing in the community, with severe consequences. In December 1598, Drivette Sannyere, the widow of Jehan Privat, reported to the Nîmes consistory that Magdaleine de la Biche had prevented her new marriage by branding her a whore and circulating the story that Drivette had given birth to an illegitimate child five or six years earlier.<sup>27</sup> When questioned, Magdaleine

<sup>25</sup> ADG, 42 J 30 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard)*, 1591-1595, fo. 343r: 'pardon a Dieu et a sabelle fille en ce qu'elle le pourroit avoir interressee en son honneur'. Here, and below, the translations are my own.

<sup>26</sup> Paris, B[ibliothèque de la] s[ociété de l'h]i[stoire du] p[rotestantisme] f[rançais] MS 817/1 *Registre du Consistoire de Montauban (Tarn-et-Garonne)*, 1595-1598, copy made in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries by Capitaine Rey-Lescure and H. Aubert, 8 (this MS is paginated): 'madonne de Caulet luy avoir attesté à elle disant que lad[icte] de Caulet lavoyt ouy dire à madonne de Gilis, & lad[icte] de Gilis disoict aussi que Jean Ampiel . . . lauroict dict, se que lad[icte] de Caulet auroict souste[nu] lad[icte] de Gilis luy avoir dict & que led[icte] Ampiel le disoict'.

<sup>27</sup> ADG, 42 J 31 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard)*, 1595-1602, fos 255v, 258v.

stated ‘that she had heard it said’ that Drivette had had a child outside wedlock, a classic formula to anonymize the source of the gossip.<sup>28</sup> Drivette’s assertion that the rumour had made such a direct impact on her chances of marriage is a testament to the potential gravity of discrediting words. Like many of the cases of gossip featuring in the consistorial registers, Drivette, as plaintiff, hoped that by reporting the affair to the consistory she could reinstate her standing in the community. She was successful in this: Magdaleine was censured in her presence and required to make reparation and demand pardon from Drivette.<sup>29</sup> Drivette had drawn the consistory into this murky and intensely female world of gossip and slander. Once again, the incident exemplifies a pattern of external female interest and interference in other women’s sexual lives.

Gossip, often, therefore, seems to have been about women seeking to convey their disapproval, and through this to delineate the acceptable boundaries of behaviour, especially sexual behaviour. The case of Jeanne Parette in 1597 illuminates this rationale, and makes it clear that something more purposeful than mere malice was at work. Jeanne came to the Montauban consistory with a case against a group of five people, made up predominantly of married or widowed women together with one male relative—Monsieur Lacrete, his wife Beatrix de Cieuran, Naisson’s widow and her daughter, and Jeanne Nancelles, the wife of Pierre Lacoste. Jeanne claimed that they had maligned her by calling her a ‘public’ *putain* (or prostitute) and alleging that a young foundry worker from her estate came to visit her in secret.<sup>30</sup> Jeanne’s marital status is unknown, but the story that emerged suggests that she was widowed (that it was remarked that she was visited by a ‘young’ man suggests she was not merely young and single, and she evidently lived alone). The story was that Panse Peyre had knocked on Jeanne’s door and, discovering it closed and seeing a man inside with her (an indication that the structures of houses made complete privacy unfeasible and a closed door was enough to start tongues wagging), he had cried out to a group of women congregating on the street—including Naisson, her daughter and Jeanne Nancelles—to alert them that Jeanne Parette had locked the door from the inside. The response of the women is instructive. According to their testimony before the consistory, they approached the door and finding that what Panse had said was true, they then cried out to Jeanne,

that she didn’t act well to be with a man all alone, and to have closed them in, and that they could not think anything good of her, and that they did not want to put up with such assignations, and that if she continued they would have to expose the matter to the magistrate.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> ‘quelle avoyt ouy dire’.

<sup>29</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 259r.

<sup>30</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 439, 449: ‘putain publique’.

<sup>31</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 450: ‘qu’elle ne faisoict pas bien de demeurer avec ung homme toute seulle, et se fermes derriere et que on ne pourroit consederer rien de bon d’elle, et que si on ne vouloit endurer telles frequentations, et que si elle continuoict que on le denonceroict au magistrat’.



At that moment Beatrix de Cieuran passed by, and asked the assembled group what was happening. Her rejoinder epitomizes the female response to perceived misconduct: 'that it was not necessary to endure that'.<sup>32</sup> The scolding reproof of these women illustrates their assumption of a right to involve themselves in the personal lives of other women, and, above all, of a prerogative to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Those failing their test were to be reported to the authorities. These women had arrogated to themselves the role of moral guardians of the town.<sup>33</sup>

It is a recurring pattern. In May 1562, it was four women who reported Donne Robine to the consistory for allegedly keeping a loose woman in her house. The tale-tellers were Catherine Moldine, Jehane Buissonete, Agnes Servente and Catherine Pastre. Catherine Pastre is specifically recorded as the wife of Monsieur Anth[o]in[e] Sigalon—an interesting detail as Anthoine Sigalon had been one of the elders of the Nîmois consistory in 1561 (as his son, Mathieu, would go on to be in 1584, 1591, 1604 and 1607-09). Surely her family connections gave her increased credibility before the consistory, as well as adding to her own sense of justification in informing on Robine.<sup>34</sup>

Women's gossip could also mobilize them into action. In May 1588, after the consistory in Nîmes had compiled a list of prostitutes to be expelled from the town and instructed the pastors to preach from the pulpit against 'whoring', a group, mostly of neighbourhood women and led by the wife of Guillaume and her neighbour, Marguerite, gathered outside the house of Vidal Raymond, a maker of packsaddles living in the Arènes (the Roman amphitheatre in Nîmes which was converted into dwellings in the sixteenth century). They beat their fists against the door and cried out to Vidal to let them in, saying they knew that he kept a woman inside. Vidal refused, saying there was no one inside, so the women forced an entry and found a woman trying to hide herself under the straw. The women chased her out, saying that she was a *putain*.<sup>35</sup> In late June, Marguerite and Guillaume's wife then went on to report the matter to an elder of the consistory.<sup>36</sup> In the exchange of disapproving gossip, and occasionally in the direct action following it, there was obviously a strong sense of the power and virtue of the female collective and their prerogative to watch over and regulate the sexual behaviour of others.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 450: 'qu'il ne falloiet endurer cela'.

<sup>33</sup> This is an extreme example of the behaviour Cattelona finds for eighteenth-century Marseille: 'Control', 17, 21. R. A. Mentzer emphasizes the sense of moral obligation felt by voyeurs, but his examples chiefly involve groups of men, and he does not highlight the large role played by women: 'Morals and moral regulation in Protestant France', *Jl Interdisciplinary Hist*, 31 (2000), 1-20, here 14.

<sup>34</sup> [Bibliothèque] nationale de France], Paris, Ms. fr. 8666 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes. Registre du consistoire de l'église chrestienne de la ville de Nîmes (Gard), 1561-1562*, fo. 117v.

<sup>35</sup> ADG, 42 J 29 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1588-1591*, 28, 32-33. This case is also cited by P. Chareyre, "'The great difficulties one must bear to follow Jesus Christ': morality at sixteenth century Nîmes", in *Sin and the Calvinists: Morals Control and the Consistory in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. R. A. Mentzer (Missouri, 1994), 75.

<sup>36</sup> ADG, 42 J 29, 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> Women's role in hunting out immorality among other women in early modern England has been noted by Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 101.

## II

The consistory was aware that insults breached the peace of the community, shocked public sensibilities, could ruin reputations, and, frequently, transgressed commonly held notions of respect and deference. Accusations of slander and reports of publicly exchanged insults therefore litter the registers. Like English defamation cases, the cases in the consistory registers indicate that the terms of insult used against women were often sexual.<sup>38</sup> Mary Beth Norton noted that in seventeenth-century Maryland women were the target of sexual slander, took sexual slanders seriously, and were more often defamed by men than by other women.<sup>39</sup> In Languedoc, as in early modern London, sexual insults were directed primarily at women, but unlike in seventeenth-century America, women frequently insulted each other. Jacques Brun Moier's widow and Cotias' widow were summoned to the Nîmes consistory in May 1578 for having called each other *putains* (whores).<sup>40</sup> The widows of Seranguere and Bernard Belgon in 1580s Pont-de-Camarès publicly labelled each other *putain*.<sup>41</sup> Evidently, this term was used as an insult because a woman's honour and worth was bound up in her sexual status.<sup>42</sup> Such insults proffered by women had an inherently comparative claim: by calling another woman *putain*, the accuser asserted her own purity.<sup>43</sup> Yet, Gowing has asserted that in early modern London, the use of the equivalent term, 'whore', rarely referred to actual sexual misbehaviour, and instead, often alluded to fears of economic dishonesty and extravagance.<sup>44</sup> For early modern Germany, Rublack found that the insult 'whore' also had economic associations, but here, conversely, of financial independence and sterility, whilst Farr describes name-calling as 'formulaic'.<sup>45</sup> For Languedoc, sexualized insults do seem, by contrast, often to have been linked to allegations of actual sexual misconduct, and were part of a more general context of women objecting to the conduct of others. In addition, probably because the term *putain* was used for both fornicators and prostitutes, there is little evidence to suggest any real connection to money in the deployment of this insult, and instead, a supplementary range of non-sexual insults fulfilled this lack more directly.

There are some instances among the French cases when *putain* was used with little direct reference to actual sexual misbehaviour. In 1581, Anne Vallate called Olivier Latuelle's wife a *putain*, and was overheard by witness Estienne

<sup>38</sup> Sharpe, *Defamation*, 15; Ingram, *Church Courts*, ch. 10; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, chs 3–4; M. B. Norton, 'Gender and defamation in seventeenth-century Maryland', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (1987); R. Thompson, "'Holy watchfulness" and communal conformism: the functions of defamation in early New England communities', *New England Quarterly*, 56 (1983), 504–22.

<sup>39</sup> Norton, 'Gender', 10.

<sup>40</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667 *Le livre du Consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1578–1583*, fo. 7v.

<sup>41</sup> BN, B[ibliothèque de l']A[rsenal], Ms. 10434 *Registres des délibérations de L'église Réformée de Pont-de-Camarès (Camarès, Aveyron), 1580–1596*, fo. 126r.

<sup>42</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 87; Rublack, *Crimes*, 149.

<sup>44</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 59, 90, 91, 93, 115, 118.

<sup>45</sup> Rublack, *Crimes*, 218; Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550–1650* (Ithaca, 1988), 161.

Paris, but Anne stated that although she did not specifically remember calling her *putain*, she had insulted Latuelle's wife because of her role in inciting her brother to do his worst in the suit that he had against Anne.<sup>46</sup> A similar disconnect between word and meaning seems likely when Marguerite Blanche approached the consistory in Nîmes to complain that Donne Mingaude had called her *putain* when she had asked Mingaude for one of her chickens.<sup>47</sup> That the link between the insult and sexual conduct could be tenuous is best illustrated by examples of women using the term *putain* to insult their female relatives, as when, in 1581, Couroural's wife was reported to have used this abuse against her mother, and Jehan Goubin's widow against her mother-in-law.<sup>48</sup> Yet, that Anne Vallate disowned her use of the word, and that Marguerite Blanche sought justice in the light of the insult, still suggests, however, that the term drew power precisely from its close association with misconduct, and retained important ambiguity: it just might refer to illicit sexual behaviour. Something in the forbidden, taboo nature of the insult added to its potency and ability to shock, whilst the very fact that this term could be used both as a general insult and as a specific reference to sexually immoral behaviour made it dangerously ambiguous and hence disproportionately powerful. As a result, *putain* was not taken lightly by those so defamed, and women appealed to the consistory to contest the slur on their character. Marguerite Gautiere presented herself at the consistory in Montauban in November 1595 to complain, for instance, that Matile de Bartholot had called her a *putain*.<sup>49</sup> The use of this term by women demonstrates, as Gowing points out for the use of 'whore' in sixteenth-century England, that women had internalized the notion of female unchastity.<sup>50</sup> Just as in their role as purveyors of gossip, this is one of the many ways in which women used their speech to uphold patriarchy and define acceptable boundaries.

Unlike the English use of 'whore' as charted by Gowing, however, the use of *putain* in France often did relate specifically to incidents of sexual misbehaviour, which had the impact of making the term more potent. Here, let me allude to just two among the significant number of cases in the records that reflect women's profound interest in the sexual behaviour of others. In April 1596, Marguerite Doumergue and her neighbour Ane Rebouille were summoned to the consistory. Marguerite had called Ane a *putain*, and had accompanied the insult by the specific behavioural allegations that Ane had given birth to an illegitimate child and continually entertained young male servants at her house at night.<sup>51</sup> The second case involves a man called Pierre Tinelly, who complained in 1602 that Mademoiselle de Vachières had accused his wife Anne Nouvelle of being 'a shitty whore', whilst the Sieur de Vachières (Mlle de Vachières' father)

<sup>46</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 189r, 17 Mar. 1581.

<sup>47</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 195r, 24 Mar. 1581.

<sup>48</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fos 206r, 210r, 213v.

<sup>49</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 1, 65, 101.

<sup>51</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 58v.

had called Pierre 'a knave, good-for-nothing cad, and an idle do-nothing'.<sup>52</sup> Vachières stated that this was in response to initial insults to his daughter by Pierre and Anne, as they had called her a 'Provençale villain from the devil' and a 'harlequin' (meaning an insignificant person).<sup>53</sup> Why had Mlle de Vachières' responding insult to Anne Nouvelle been sexual? Investigations with other witnesses brought more specific behavioural allegations to substantiate the affront (whilst also illustrating the Chinese whisper-type nature of the process of reporting and defamatory gossip more generally):

Monsieur de Saliens, elder, has informed himself about the truth of the above comments on the basis of the inquisition that he has made with Mademoiselle de Chambrun, and with one called Pellonnye: who told him that a Provençale woman told them that Mademoiselle de Vachières had said that if she wasn't careful Monsieur de Vachières, her father, would take his pleasure with Tinely's old bitch.<sup>54</sup>

Here, again, the pointedly sexual nature of the insults by one woman towards another, in contrast to the non-sexual, though demeaning, words directed towards Pierre, sprang from Mlle de Vachières' convictions about Anne's sexual propensities.

Although *putain* was the most common, it was not the only way for women to cast sexually insulting aspersions on other women. In August 1614, Jeanne Chastelane, the wife of Thomas Cancallie, and Sire Jacques Rolland's wife were in dispute over Jeanne's complaint that Rolland's wife had defamed her at the Madeleine Fair, a huge festival in late July that had been running annually for 400 years in the nearby town of Beaucaire. Jeanne said that, at this very public gathering, in the presence of her husband and several others, Rolland's wife had addressed a man named Pellet with the words 'Pellet, there's your daughter', pointing to Jeanne's five-year-old daughter.<sup>55</sup> This scandalous insinuation, made by the wife of an elder of the church, and therefore someone whose word had considerable weight, derived strength from its public airing, testifying anew to the dangerous power of words and the potential fragility of reputations. In recognition of this, Rolland's wife denied having said these words, claiming she had in fact said 'Pellet, here's your wife', and that she considered Jeanne 'a good woman of honour, and beyond reproach'.<sup>56</sup> To remove any remaining hint of disgrace, the consistory required her to declare her disavowal in the presence

<sup>52</sup> ADG, 42 J 32, fo. 74v, 10 July 1602: 'une putain de foire', 'couquin, bellitre . . . feneant'.

<sup>53</sup> 'villaine provençalle dou diable', 'arliquyne'.

<sup>54</sup> ADG, 42 J 32 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1602-1604*, fo. 74v, 10 July 1602: 'M de Saliens antien sest informe de la veritte de dessus, et par linquisition quil en a fait avec Madamoiselle de Chambrun et avec une nommee Pellonnye lesquelles luy auroient dict que une provençalle leur auroit dict que Madamoiselle de Vachieres avoit dict que su elle ne se feust prins garde que Monsieur de Vachieres son pere auroit jouy de la soire de Tinely.' Note, the use of 'jouir' to refer to sexual intercourse; 'soira' is Occitan for an old female dog.

<sup>55</sup> ADG, 42 J 35 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1613-1619*, fo. 100.

<sup>56</sup> 'femme de bien, d'honneur et sans reproche'.

of Chastelane's husband and confirm that she had never heard such a rumour. A similar euphemism was used in the quarrel between Sire Pol Delicat's wife, and her niece, Marguerite Pinette in 1606. Delicat's wife had intimated, again in public, that Marguerite was loose-living and 'the reason why she [Delicat's wife] was fighting with her husband', thereby inferring a sexual relationship between her niece and husband.<sup>57</sup> This accusation, which bears a striking resemblance to the contemporary English insult of 'my husband's whore', constituted a seriously damaging claim.<sup>58</sup>

Even less obviously sexual insults very probably had crude connotations. The quarrel between Madame de Cavaignac and Madame de Brélie centred on de Cavaignac's assertion that de Brélie's daughter, who was on the point of marriage, wet the bed every night. De Brélie had responded by calling de Cavaignac 'a *putain* from Salitot', and telling her that if she had something to say to her she should say it directly and not disparage her daughter. Defiantly and maliciously, de Cavaignac repeated in front of the consistory her assertion that the daughter 'urinates in her bed every night', inciting de Brélie to utter a stream of insults, including *putain* and 'drunkard', and several others which the scribe noted 'for honour are not written down'.<sup>59</sup> Although de Brélie's use of the ubiquitous *putain* was most obviously sexual, she was responding to a derogatory suggestion that was in fact sexually dishonouring: de Cavaignac had implied that de Brélie's daughter was not mature enough to marry because her genitalia were only functional for childish toilet habits. This choice of insult was not unique, and was clearly offensive. When Magdalene Blanche complained to the Nîmes consistory in July 1597 that Jacques Corrazie had hung a placard on the door of her house defaming her daughter Marie Auriole as a 'drunkard, pork-eater and a bed-wetter', his offence was considered sufficiently defamatory that to 'repair. . . the honour' of Blanche's daughter, he was publicly suspended from the Eucharist.<sup>60</sup>

None of these insults bear any trace of financial connotations, although, as we will see below, there was a link between sexual dishonour and the management of the household. French women, however, drew on a range of other insults when they wanted to highlight other transgressive, but non-sexual, behaviour, specifically drunkenness and theft. Donne Mingaude had responded to Marguerite Blanche's charge of *putain* by calling her a drunkard (*ivrogne*) in 1581.<sup>61</sup> In September 1581, Catherine Plane sought consistorial justice because Marguerite Advocate had demeaningly labelled her a drunk. Marguerite retaliated that Catherine had called her a thief (*larrone*).<sup>62</sup> Whilst *ivrogne* and *larrone*

<sup>57</sup> ADG, 42 J 33 *Registre de délibérations du consistoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes (Gard), 1604-1608*, fo. 95: 'malvivant', 'la cause quelle est en rixe avec son mary'.

<sup>58</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 115.

<sup>59</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 204, 12 April 1596.

<sup>60</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 180v: 'yvrogne, roisgue cambajon, pisse au lit . . .'. The Occitan for 'to eat' is *rôisser* or *rôguer*; 'cambajon' is Occitan for 'ham' (although 'roisgue' could also possibly be 'rogue', meaning haughty or arrogant).

<sup>61</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 195r.

<sup>62</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 244v.

were evidently stock insults, they were potent vitriol because they insinuated questionable behaviour, and both implied the sort of disorderly consumption and financial dishonesty associated with 'whore' elsewhere. The deployment of the charge of 'thief' was particularly common. The quarrel between widow Donne Cordilhesse and Pierre Anthoine's wife was initiated by Cordilhesse's complaint that Anthoine's wife had robbed her of 10 *sols*, an accusation that prompted strong retaliatory insults from Anthoine and his spouse.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in May 1562, a woman called Gratiane said Pierre Pue's wife had falsely accused her of having stolen a shirt, whilst Pue's wife said that Gratiane had called her 'lice-ridden' (a sexual insult, as it carried the sense of having pubic lice).<sup>64</sup> In a quarrel between Jehan Jacques' wife and Anthoine Martin's widow, the latter complained that Jacques' wife had called her a thief, adding 'that she knows money'.<sup>65</sup> The widow responded with the sexually insulting claim that Jehan Jacques was 'jealous', in other words, that his wife gave him reason to be.

All these insults were effective because they marred reputations and in the terminology of the day, as Jacques Quet said in 1596, insults 'went against' honour.<sup>66</sup> Yet, insults directed by women at women also, like gossip, sought to define the community's moral boundaries. Whilst such incidents undoubtedly represented only a snapshot in the ongoing saga of unneighbourly interactions, the cases came before the consistory because defending one's honour against these slurs mattered. These altercations were part of women's constant tussle to negotiate their position on the right side of these invisible boundaries.

### III

Sixteenth-century France seems to have been a strikingly disputatious society. Yet, the conclusions of other historians have questioned the applicability of this to women.<sup>67</sup> This raises a real question about women's behaviour in sixteenth-century France. What light can the rich evidence of the consistorial registers shed on the question of women's violence?

The consistorial records suggest that ordinary French women were commonly involved in violent argument and physical attack. Whilst the unavoidably skewed picture offered by the tales of social breakdown in the consistorial records may be thought to be misleading, even brief references, such as that in the registers of Pont-de-Camarès for May 1580, that Jehanne Broussonet and Jehanne Pine touched hands in sign of their reconciliation and asked God's pardon for their quarrel, suggest a world of disharmonious scenes enacted

<sup>63</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 158v, 4 January 1581.

<sup>64</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8666, fo. 124r: 'pezollouer'. According to 'Le petit dictionnaire français-argot, de aigmots, de brigands chauffeurs de 1800' in *Histoire des brigands chauffeurs et assassins d'Orgères*, ed. P. Leclair (2006), 'pezouille' means 'pesoulh' or 'pou', meaning louse or pubic louse, crabs.

<sup>65</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 223v, 28 June 1581: 'quelle cogoist les ecus'.

<sup>66</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 72v: 'desrogeant'.

<sup>67</sup> See above.



outside the consistory.<sup>68</sup> The lengthier cases offer greater insight into the catalysts and causes of quarrels, and broader themes of honour, hostility and neighbourly relations. What caused women's fights? If a pattern can be found in these disputes, it is of lines overstepped: interference over mundane, quotidian issues sparking the exchange of dishonouring insults, which commonly erupted into the exchange of violence.

Female disputes arose from the circumstances of neighbourhood proximity, which were so full of potential for resentment and bitterness to flourish. Tension between neighbours, which could easily flare into crisis, could simmer for a long time. A simple note from January 1593 states that a woman called Brunelle had complained about her neighbour, Anthonye Royayes, saying that three years previously, Anthonye had beaten and insulted her, and ever since had wanted to do her harm.<sup>69</sup> The women were required to promise in the name of God not to look for quarrels, but to live in peace and friendship, and the consistorial ceremony of embracing as a sign of reconciliation appears to have functioned to dissipate their hostility. Such short references to neighbourly squabbles are common, but some cases provide much greater insight.

One particularly fruitful example indicates that female disputes among neighbours arose from the transgression of boundaries that could so easily result from such intimately lived lives. Marie Paniesse complained in June 1593 that her neighbour, Donne Saumete Gauffreze, had called her a *putain* and sent her son, Pierre Chantozel, round to beat her. In response, Saumete stated that lately Marie's male servant had been complaining that Marie beat him, and Saumete had found Marie and told her 'that she who'd beat her servant was a *putain*'.<sup>70</sup> Marie was questioned about whether she had not called Saumete 'a villain, a drunkard and a witch'—she admitted to 'drunkard' and *putain*, but explicitly denied 'witch'—and Pierre, Saumete's son, said he had beaten Marie because she had insulted his mother.<sup>71</sup> This litany and profusion of insults, and the subsequent violence on Saumete's behalf, stemmed from the central issue of the appropriate boundaries of spheres of authority. The debate over Marie's 'right' to discipline her servant and Saumete's neighbourly 'right' to interfere questioned how much of life was open to public scrutiny and intervention, and how great an authority a housewife had over her *ménage*. This is worthy of note because, as seen above, both Hardwick (for late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Nantes) and Garrioch (for eighteenth-century Paris) suggested a reluctance by neighbours to interfere in the lives of others.<sup>72</sup> In contrast to this, Saumete clearly assumed a right to intervene in her neighbour's life. The focus of her indignation is clear: upholding patriarchy, Saumete objected to Marie's discipline

<sup>68</sup> BN, BA, Ms. 10434, fo. 10v.

<sup>69</sup> ADG, 42 J 30, fo. 139.

<sup>70</sup> 'celle qui fist battre son vallet estoit une putain'.

<sup>71</sup> ADG, 42 J 30, fos 195v-196: 'vilaine, vyrogne, masque', 'embraigue'. 'Embraigue' is Occitan for 'drunkard'.

<sup>72</sup> Hardwick, *Practice*, 102-03; Garrioch, *Neighbourhood*, 79.

of her male servant and the disorder it brought to social and gender hierarchy. Saumete connected the inappropriate handling of household power and gender relations with sexual dishonour, a link that contemporaries would have found familiar. Perhaps this is the closest French equivalent to Gowing's observation that the 'vision of whoredom that was the touchstone of sexual insult had such strong resonances in the area of household and economics'.<sup>73</sup> *Putain* appears to have carried with it connotations of disorder and slovenliness, particularly in regard to household management. Marie's fury sprung from her sense that Saumete had overstepped her prerogative as a neighbour. The crux of the altercation between these women was therefore, for both, that the other had misappropriated authority. It illustrates that neighbours, living in such propinquity, could hold markedly different conceptions of the appropriate boundaries of their power, creating circumstances in which any infraction of these contested boundaries might prompt a clash.<sup>74</sup>

The limits of power and the right to interfere were frequently questioned. Jehanne Odol, and her sister, Gabrielle Odol, fought because Gabrielle had beaten and insulted Jehanne's daughter.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Monsieur Foulc's and Monsieur Capdur's wives were quarrelling and exchanging insults in December 1596, to the extent that Capdur had beaten Foulc in her own house.<sup>76</sup> The reason was that Foulc had chastised Capdur for allowing an adulterous couple to conduct their affair in her house. Capdur denied it, but Foulc testified to having seen Capdur waiting for the man's wife to leave his house before calling him to come to hers to meet his lover. Capdur attacked Foulc because she resented Foulc's intrusion in the activities of her household and the discrediting of her reputation.

Household boundary infractions and reputational slights were so familiar a theme that they were even appealed to when it seems other issues might have been at stake. Honorat Cany's wife drew blood when she punched Donne Coderque and her daughters in the street. The reason for the attack was—according to Coderque—that Cany's wife had just discovered her husband with Coderque's young niece. Cany's wife had apparently yelled, coarsely, at her husband: 'he would just as soon have congress with the rear end of a cow', and, in her fury, as she left, lashed out at Coderque and her daughters who were in the road outside.<sup>77</sup> Cany's wife denied having found her husband with the niece, and said instead that, overcome by anger when Coderque and her daughters had called her a bad housekeeper she had hit them.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, sexual defamation also undoubtedly led to female conflict, and the deeply dishonouring nature of sexual insults explains why such cases were particularly marked by physical violence.<sup>79</sup> Blanche Garniere, known as *La*

<sup>73</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 119.

<sup>74</sup> Garrioch, *Neighbourhood*, 34.

<sup>75</sup> ADG, 42 J 28, fo. 127v, 19 September 1584.

<sup>76</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 145v.

<sup>77</sup> 'il vouldroit aultant baizer le cul duune vache'.

<sup>78</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 325v, 2 May 1582: 'maulvaise mesnagiere'.

<sup>79</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 112.

*Broquiere* (suggesting her association or that of her (possibly late) husband with woodwork), and Marie Maurine Fourniere were known to have been fighting, verbally and physically, in September 1562, for this very reason.<sup>80</sup> Marie said that she had been on her way to the wheat market when Blanche had openly called her a 'harlot', a 'slut' and other insults, and both Blanche and her brother had hit Marie. Blanche denied this, instead accusing Marie of liberally abusing both her and her brother, specifically by chastising her brother for permitting the fornication of his sister with Marie's husband, which Blanche said was a false accusation.<sup>81</sup> Their different accounts of the incident make it difficult to reconstruct the event, but it appears possible that Blanche was committing adultery with Marie's husband. Both women framed their narratives in order to appear as the wronged party, but violence was only alleged by Marie, which is perhaps surprising in that it suggests that the physical conflict arose not, as might be expected, from a wife's sense of sexual betrayal, but instead, from a mistress who sought to save her reputation by attack.

As this case suggests, disputes involving women in early modern Languedoc often degenerated into substantial physical violence, in contrast to Muchembled's conclusions.<sup>82</sup> There seems to have been a latent violence underlying women's disputes which could easily be catalysed. The examples multiply: Marguerite Clote and Alys Borrette were reconciled in April 1583 following a great argument in which they had hit and insulted each other.<sup>83</sup> Jehanne Laudane and Jehanne Liborde fought in October 1562: Laudane said she had attacked Liborde with a stick because Liborde had punched her, and although they apologized to each other and were reconciled, the consistory threatened them with excommunication if it happened again, suggesting that it was perhaps not the first time these two had come to blows.<sup>84</sup> Violence among women appears to have been thought natural and was permissible because it carried less grave risk than fights between men, which seem to have been much more combative, commonly involved arms, and potentially had far more serious consequences.<sup>85</sup> This difference in ethos between male fights and those involving women was articulated in a violent fight between Madame Régine and her daughter Anne Mossoze and son-in-law, Deloncle. Having called Deloncle a coward, a scoundrel, and other insults, Régine was punched in the throat by Anne, and was told by Deloncle 'that if she were a man saying these words to him, he would kill her'.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> 'Broquier' is Occitan, translating into French as 'boisselier', one who makes household utensils out of wood.

<sup>81</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8666, fo. 156v: 'paillarde', 'trainée'.

<sup>82</sup> Muchembled, *Société*, 67.

<sup>83</sup> ADG, 42 J 28, fo. 6r.

<sup>84</sup> BN, Ms. fr. 8666, fo. 162v.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. swordfight or combat between men: ADG, 42 J 28, fo. 87v; Archives nationales, Paris, TT234 6 *Registre de Consistoire de l'Eglise Reformée de Bédarieux (Hérault), 1579-1586*, fos 14v, 5v; BN, Ms. fr. 8667, fo. 169r; BN, BA, Ms. 10434, fo. 92; Carroll, *Blood*.

<sup>86</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 230, 22 May 1596: 'coyoul, patous, pentions' ('coyoul' is 'coyon' meaning coward or scoundrel); the other insults are unclear. 'que sy elle estoict ung homme luy disant ses propos, il la tueroict'.

As Nicole Castan found for the eighteenth-century, violence between women or across the gender divide seems to have represented a predictable, acceptable method of handling disagreement, without the fatal consequences threatened by inter-male aggression.<sup>87</sup> Women's violence, where the risks were minor, instead seems to have provided an acceptable social pressure valve for community tension. When Baroys' wife hit Captain Beufin's wife to alleviate her anger at Beufin's defamatory insults in May 1589, and then was reconciled with her before the consistory, the pair were enacting a much-rehearsed, standard mechanism for defusing hostility, without any threat of permanent damage.<sup>88</sup>

Violence was always less serious when women were involved, but it is worth noting that women's violence was not always directed at women. In September 1587, Jehan Costeplane asserted that his daughter-in-law had hit him on the head with a stick, drawing blood, in response to something he had said, although she denied this and said he had hurt himself.<sup>89</sup> Women were beaten by men — besides their husbands—too. According to Marguerite Reynaude, in October 1590 Theophile Ralli had punched her, after she had called him a 'villain' when he accused her of stealing his handkerchief.<sup>90</sup>

Inter-female brutality was often directed against the members of one's own family, reflecting the 'intense hatred' between women observed by Solé, Briggs and Farr.<sup>91</sup> Nande de Rossel and her daughter, Marqueze de Bruette, engaged in a violent fight because of a difference of opinion over a bedcover. Nande complained that her daughter had scratched her face and hit her, which Marqueze admitted when she asked her mother's forgiveness before the consistory in August 1595.<sup>92</sup> Anthoinette de Carmaing complained against her mother, Clavariolle, in November of the same year, saying Clavariolle had tried to stab her.<sup>93</sup> Marchette and her mother-in-law were known to fight 'ordinarily'.<sup>94</sup> Petit's wife and her niece, Martin's wife, threatened to kill each other in response to their mutual exchange of insults.<sup>95</sup> It is not too hard to understand why this occurred. In a culture where violence by women was acceptable, members of a family, who often shared living space, faced the greatest challenges to harmonious coexistence. Unsurprisingly, the majority of familial conflict occurred between women of different generations, especially between mother and daughter.

#### I V

It seems that sixteenth-century Languedocian women policed each other's behaviour, especially arrogating the right to intervene in each other's lives and

<sup>87</sup> Castan, 'La criminalité', 93.

<sup>88</sup> ADG, 42 J 30, fo. 198.

<sup>89</sup> BN, BA, Ms. 10434, fo. 107, 17 Sept. 1587.

<sup>90</sup> ADG, 42 J 29, fos 514-15, 517, 518.

<sup>91</sup> Solé, *Être femme*, 153; Briggs, *Witchbes*, 231-33; Farr, *Hands*, 160.

<sup>92</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 48-49.

<sup>93</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 100, 103, 107.

<sup>94</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 43, 9 August 1595: 'ordinairem[en]t'.

<sup>95</sup> ADG, 42 J 31, fo. 44, 18 March 1591.

enforce morality through gossip, sexual insult and physical confrontation. Gossip does appear to have been a peculiarly female activity, born of prurient interest in the lives of others, but it was not simply driven by malice or amusement. It had serious intent, and expressed women's disapproval of, and judgement on, the morality of others. In this age where honour and reputation counted for so much, there was great power in women's words to regulate social behaviour, either directly through the mechanism of the consistory or outside it. Women commented on how others ran their households, their relationships with men, use of power, and the extent to which they enabled the immorality of others, relating sexual dishonesty to poor housewifery. Through this, gossips and defamers painted a picture of the ideal woman. By suggesting that other women fell short in these matters, they reaffirmed their own vision of what it meant to be a 'good woman of honour' (*une femme de bien et d'honneur*), and asserted their own claim to that status.

The evidence of pernicious gossip and violent disputes suggests that early modern French women were often outspoken, objectionable and troublesome. Women were not shy in spreading malicious rumours and scandal, and their assumption of the right to judge others volubly, often through a colourful and varied vocabulary of invective, testifies to their vocal participation in community life. In addition to uninhibited speech, women could often be physically aggressive, and violence was easily sparked as a common part of everyday dispute. The cantankerous, spirited and pugnacious nature of all these interactions and responses suggests a world in which confrontational self-defence was necessary, and women were far from meek and submissive, despite the best efforts of the consistory to suppress such effrontery. Mauret's widow, in February 1597, in the boutique of Philip the tailor, voiced her opinion

that men who are not able to have children and yet do it with their wives six or seven times a night deserve to be taken to the square and there be crucified with a stake up their backsides.<sup>96</sup>

Such a coarse and sexually belligerent remark epitomizes all the violence and judgement of sixteenth-century Languedocian women's speech and behaviour.

<sup>96</sup> BSHPF, Ms. 817/1, 360: 'que les hommes qui ne pouvoient avoir des enfens et que ne faisoient à leurs femmes six ou sept fois la nuit meritoient d'estre admenés à la plasse et illec estre cruciffiés avec un pal par le coul'.