

# Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris

Ann-Louise Shapiro. Stanford:  
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■ Reviewed by: Christopher E. Forth

Australian National University  
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Ann-Louise Shapiro's *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* is a compelling and innovative cultural history of the problem of the female criminal in France at the turn of the century. Shapiro's work is also refreshingly distinct from other histories of this period in that it brings a sense of theoretical rigor to her primary argument that the female criminal was "a code that condensed, and thus obscured, other concerns" (p. 4). In this sense Shapiro's work is reminiscent of Mary Louise Roberts' *Civilization Without Sexes: Restructuring Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago, 1994) and Maria Tatar's *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, 1995), recent works which address historical responses to the problem of dangerous femininity.

Shapiro draws upon a wide range of sources to make her case, including medical and legal texts, newspaper and journal articles, and a number of criminal dossiers from the Archives de la Prefecture de la Police. Distancing herself at once from the urbanist model of criminality proposed by Louis Chevalier and the "law-as-ideology" model generated by Marxists, Shapiro offers qualified praise of the work of Michel Foucault while rightly pointing out its totalizing tendencies and

blindness to gender. Despite these reservations, it is nevertheless clear that the author operates within the methodological space opened up by Foucault and developed by scholars working in cultural studies and feminist theory. Motivated at once by an awareness of the pervasive power of discourse and an unwillingness to disable female agency, Shapiro plots a middle course between these alternatives: "It seems evident that women did not merely accept the cultural information about femaleness that proliferated across such a broad discursive field, but they could not ignore it either. They did not merely act out male fantasies of female deviance, but they did sometimes follow specific cultural scripts" (p. 6). This sensitivity to culture as a space of negotiation between competing interests and representations is one of the strengths of this study, and it is consistently demonstrated throughout its five chapters.

Chapter One, "Crime and Culture," asks why, in a society where women contributed to a small and declining percentage of all crimes committed, discourses about female criminality could become so disproportionately widespread. Shapiro locates the answer to this question at the intersection of two areas of cultural tension:

"new uncertainties about the role and place of women, and concerns about the nature of mass culture" (p. 15). In the writings of medical experts and criminologists, anxieties about the role of women in society frequently revolved around the figures of the proletarian woman, the prostitute, and the decadent bourgeoisie, all of whom represented destabilizing forces in an already unstable Third Republic. These experts, however, lost control over their official narratives through the proliferation of crime stories in popular literature, especially in the theater, the roman feuilleton, and the faits divers, which they blamed for compelling highly susceptible women to commit criminal deeds. This view was lent considerable credence by the number of women who admitted to having committed crimes like infanticide, poisoning, or adultery in partial imitation of things they had read.

In the second chapter, "Telling Criminal Stories," Shapiro uses fin-de-siecle court dossiers to explore the narratives generated by prosecutors and defendants with an eye to the tension-ridden process through which authoritative accounts of female criminality were constructed. Responding to the cultural fears of the time, prosecutors consistently represented criminal women in formulaic terms that conjured up the many ways in which a woman could be considered socially out-of-place. As the causes for such disturbances were frequently cast as exaggerations of tendencies shared by women generally (including irrationality, duplicity, and hysteria), one may share Shapiro's speculation that "woman's crime seemed to be at least in part her sex" (p. 68). In these official documents, women's countercharges of neglect, cruelty, and infidelity were typically silenced as prosecutors pressed their cultural stereotypes; in some instances expert medical testimony was even discounted if it conflicted with the version of the truth being constructed by the accusers.

The accounts given by female defendants, Shapiro argues, were the result of a sort of enforced collaboration between accuser and accused. In many cases, female defendants related accounts which corresponded to the formulae articulated by the prosecution and the stereotypes circulating in the wider culture, and thus they admitted to being out-of-control or mad when their crimes were committed. Yet in other instances women told stories that sharply contradicted the cultural scripts and found ways of including different kinds of information frustrating the representations generated by their accusers. In the case of Victorine Lelong, charged with hurling a pot of vitriol at her unfaithful lover, this took the form of a letter of explanation which brought conventional images of maternal devotion and domestic diligence to bear against the

stock representations of female jealousy and vengeance. While these oppositional narratives rarely had much effect on the official story produced, they vindicate Shapiro's point about viewing these criminal narratives as stories-in-tension.

Chapter Three, "Disordered Bodies, Disorderly Acts," expands at length upon a point made in the preceding chapter: that the problematic bodies of women were considered to be the source, not only of female criminality, but of the range of debilities associated with women generally. Where Chapter Two dealt with the judicial apparatus, this chapter draws attention to the powerful role of medicine in assessing criminal responsibility in the nineteenth century, with special attention given the maladies of hysteria and degeneration. Shapiro shows how, as the scientific counterpart to the narratives spun by prosecutors, the medico-legal report "worked rhetorically to construct in scientific terms the disabilities and incapacities of the feminine" (p. 116). Though these reports did not necessarily impact upon the decisions of juries, they were linked with and contributed to the diffuse cultural assumptions informing jury decisions.

Apart from the links made to a few interesting criminal cases and some rarely cited fin-de-siecle medical experts, this chapter's survey of hysteria, hypnosis, degeneration, kleptomania, and nymphomania does not bring many new insights to what is essentially well-trodden ground. It is nevertheless a useful discussion that resonates well with points made in other chapters. Moreover, it provides a vivid counterpoint to Shapiro's excursus on the medico-legal attitude to women accused of infanticide, a crime which surprisingly did not prompt the authorities to inquire into the disordered bodies of the accused.

"Love Stories," the very interesting fourth chapter, shifts attention to the crime of passion itself to explore the overarching contention that women who committed such acts were at heart women-in-love. Not only did this assumption form one aspect of the criminological scripts rehearsed by prosecutors, but one frequently finds women themselves admitting to having been pushed toward violence out of jealousy. Shapiro situates this discourse about women-in-love in terms of a popular tolerance for crimes of passion as the exercise of a right or as an instrument of justice, a collective moral belief that conflicted with the judicial imperative to punish such acts. The popular legitimacy enjoyed by the crime of passion, Shapiro claims, was thus tied to the common assumption that "only a love that would risk death – either one's own or that of another – was worthy of the name" (p. 143).

Chapter Five, "The Sexual Politics of Female Criminality," reveals the conceptual links bonding the female criminal to the feminist and the lesbian in the fin-de-siecle cultural imagination. Despite the patriarchal attitudes of many in the Third Republic, Shapiro notes the progress of limited reforms in the status of women during this period which produced a new image of the "disordered woman," the independent bourgeoisie whose desire for freedom could impel her toward feminism, adultery, or lesbianism. These unconventional modes of femininity, Shapiro argues, were conceptualized along the same lines as the female criminal, thus revealing the cultural matrix uniting various styles of female otherness.

Shapiro's study is wide-ranging and quite engaging.

While in places the author's use of cultural theory is formulaic and offers few surprises, it is presented in an accessible manner that illuminates rather than obscures the subject at hand. The author's attention to the wide circulation of medical conceptions of criminality and gender also places her study firmly in the tradition of Jan Goldstein, Ruth Harris, and Robert Nye. Yet by viewing hitherto untapped archival materials through the lens of cultural and feminist theory, Shapiro has added greater nuance to this body of scholarship and has made a real contribution to the field. This study will be welcomed by cultural, feminist, and literary scholars of fin-de-siecle France.

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