



---

**Lapalus (Sylvie), *La mort du vieux. Une histoire du parricide au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle***

Paris, Tallandier, 2004, 638 pp., ISBN 2 84734 1013.

**Pieter Spierenburg**

---



**Édition électronique**

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/chs/78>

DOI : 10.4000/chs.78

ISSN : 1663-4837

**Éditeur**

Librairie Droz

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 1 avril 2008

Pagination : 121-123

ISBN : 978-2-600-01237-9

ISSN : 1422-0857

**Référence électronique**

Pieter Spierenburg, « Lapalus (Sylvie), *La mort du vieux. Une histoire du parricide au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [En ligne], Vol. 12, n°1 | 2008, mis en ligne le 14 janvier 2009, consulté le 23 mars 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/78> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.78>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 23 mars 2022.

© Droz

---

# Lapalus (Sylvie), *La mort du vieux.* *Une histoire du parricide au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Paris, Tallandier, 2004, 638 pp., ISBN 2 84734 1013.

Pieter Spierenburg

---

## RÉFÉRENCE

Lapalus (Sylvie), *La mort du vieux. Une histoire du parricide au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Tallandier, 2004, 638 pp., ISBN 2 84734 1013.

- 1 The author delineates her subject by adhering to the definition of parricide in the *Code Pénal* of 1810: the murder of one's legitimate father or mother, natural or adoptive, or any other legitimate ancestor. Since there are obvious demographic limitations on the range of ancestors that you can kill, the book deals overwhelmingly with offenders who had murdered either their father or their mother. The *Code Pénal* further stipulated that, next to the existence of a parental relationship, two conditions had to be met: those of «voluntary» homicide and of criminal intent. Lapalus remarks that Oedipus, who did not know his assailant's identity and was ignorant of the parental lineage, would not be guilty of parricide under French law. Throughout the nineteenth century parricide was considered the gravest of all crimes, in accordance with the patriarchal values and principles of the age. Thus, until 1832, the offender had his or her right fist cut off before execution (apparently, this applied to left-handed offenders as well). In our less patriarchal age, the top of the criminal hierarchy has been usurped by «crimes against humanity».
- 2 The book has 540 pages of text, which is too long. Perhaps the original thesis was even longer. Whatever is the case, I would strongly recommend that, in countries where a thesis must be over 500 pages, the author considerably shortens the text for a book publication. In this book version, every conceivable line of inquiry related to the subject has been followed. This may be necessary to convince a thesis jury of your qualifications, but readers whose time is precious want a more focused discussion. For

example, the book opens with two long chapters on parricide in literature and journalistic writing and the medical view of parricides. While informative, these chapters contain little that surprises. Popular literature mixed moral condemnation with a love of sensation. Medical opinion centered around Esquirol's concept of monomania at the beginning of the period studied and switched to that of degeneracy at the turn of the century. Particularly superfluous is the confrontation of the author's evidence about the perpetrators with the characterization of the offenders in question in contemporary criminology. The reader hardly cares whether a particular finding proves Lacassagne wrong and neither does the exercise contribute much to the history of criminology, because, as Lapalus admits, the theme of parricide occupied a marginal place in it.

- 3 On the other hand, the reader gets less information than he would wish in a few cases, such as the discussion of the attitudes of neighbors and the community. People were not always ready to denounce the act if they knew about it. Sometimes a parricide had to do something else that annoyed his neighbors, theft for example, before they denounced him for both offenses. The community acted, we are told, according to its own notions of justice and fairness, but we do not learn in which kind of situations (a very tyrannical father? a mother who had always neglected her children?) a community tended to justify the killing. But I haste to add that most questions do get an answer in this book. For example, the motivation for the offender's siblings and other relatives in covering-up the crime was more straightforward. The family reputation was always at stake. As a proverb said, you should not turn one *malheur* into two. Avoidance of shame and loss of honor led families to try to keep the murder silent or, if this was not possible, to proclaim that the perpetrator was insane. These are all pertinent observations. Another informative chapter deals with the various stages in the trial procedure, from the first investigation to the execution. That chapter includes an analysis of three autobiographies, among which that by Pierre Rivière, notorious because of the book Foucault devoted to his case.
- 4 In the study of murder, both historical and contemporary, the killer-victim relationship is an important variable. Here, this variable is largely given by the crime. Only the sex, of offenders and victims, can vary; in over half of the cases it concerned sons killing fathers. The analysis can be refined in several ways. In the key chapter of the second part of her study, Lapalus first presents statistical profiles, of the offenders and the victims separately. Both came from a rural world, for example, but in the nineteenth century this was true for all violent crime. Most of the accused were small property owners rather than agricultural workers, which suggests that typical conflicts produced by farm life and the transfer of property played a role. Caring for sick and elderly parents constituted another problem, as the author suggests when she notes that the mean age of the victims was just over seventy. On the other hand, there were also numerous cases (about a third, according to the author) which involved an aggressive son or daughter who had beaten the parent for years before dealing the final blow. Such instances of previous maltreatment were seldom reported to the magistrates. Were these children so aggressive out of a defiance of authority in general, regardless of the behavior of the parent in question? In an earlier chapter the author suggests that authority conflicts played an important role: the victim often had suffered head injuries; the parental head symbolized parental authority. The murder weapon, on the other hand, was rarely chosen for its ritual quality. The killers chose whatever was closest at hand: a kitchen knife, an axe or any farm utensil that would

smash the victim's head. It was an impulsive moment, despite the fact that the decision to kill had often been taken long before and that threats to that end had been uttered many times.

- 5 Arriving at the end of part two, many readers will think: Yes, but we really need a profile of the entire relationship and its dynamics; the behavior and attitudes of both parties, parent and offspring, were intertwined. It turns out that Lapalus has held the reader in suspense. The third part, entitled «the exacerbation of family tensions,» depicts a kaleidoscope of all types of conflicts reflected in the parricide cases. This reviewer's conclusion is that every relationship which might go wrong, sometimes went wrong: resentment of paternal correction; revenge for maltreatment or confinement in a correctional institution; parental veto of a marriage partner; criticism of dissipation; annoyance at forced cohabitation; conspiracy with the victim's spouse; conflicts within the family economy; domestic theft; parental avarice; conflicts over the succession as head of a farm, the transference of goods or the inheritance. This is only a selection of the detailed list of strained relationships, all amply discussed by the author.
- 6 In her conclusion Lapalus explains that certain elements of parricide observed in contemporary psychology, such as that of a closed family tending to minimize the importance of internal aggression, are equally valid for the nineteenth century. She also agrees with most modern psychologists that it is too simple to consider the crime as acting out the Oedipus complex. We should not confuse a few people's offenses with a universal fantasy. This is an interesting contribution to the history of crime and justice.

---

## AUTEURS

**PIETER SPIERENBURG**

Erasmus Universiteit, Rotterdam, [spierenburg@fhk.eur.nl](mailto:spierenburg@fhk.eur.nl)