The Calamity of Violence: 
Reading the Paris Massacres of 1418

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The biggest problem facing the historian of medieval political culture is how to access the consciousness and beliefs of those outside the nobility and clergy. Even when members of the lower orders are given voice in sources, such as judicial records, or when their actions are described at length in chronicle accounts of revolt or town ceremonies, this version of their experience is mediated not only by the fact that it passes through a text, but further by the fact that this text was written by someone from a literate minority, generally from a position of power and often hostile to the concept of an active and politically engaged populace.¹ Many scholars are content to allow elite expressions of a political ideal to stand in for the whole of medieval society and, thereby, incorrectly characterize the commons as essentially apolitical or as eager participants in the maintenance of the authoritarian ideology that undergirded

¹ In this paper, I use phrases such as the commons, lower orders, and populace almost interchangeably. This practice reflects a vagueness present in the medieval sources themselves, in which the definition of who constitutes the common people shifts according to the context, sometimes including the urban patriciate and sometimes not. See Pierre Boglioni, Robert Delort, and Claude Gauvard, "Preface," in Le Petit Peuple dans l'Occident médiéval: Terminologies, perceptions, réalités. Actes du Congrès international tenu à l'Université de Montréal 18-23 octobre 1999, ed. Pierre Boglioni, Robert Delort, and Claude Gauvard (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002), 7-8. However, with regard to violence, the bourgeoisie were lumped with the rest of the lower orders, as they were outside the nobility and thus excluded from legitimate displays of force.
most medieval political texts. However, the numerous outbursts of violence by common people in the late Middle Ages, which include major revolts in 1306, 1356-1358, most of the 1360s and 1370s in Languedoc, from 1380-1383, 1413, and 1418 as well as chronic smaller-scale resistance to tax collectors and royal officials, expose the idea of a passive commons presented in these texts as wishful thinking. Any scholarly analysis that uncritically accepts elite texts as constitutive of the whole of medieval political culture is telling a drastically incomplete

2 Even the finest analyses of late medieval French political culture gloss over the absence of a perspective from the lower orders. Colette Beaune argues that the "conception of nationhood" described in her book "accurately reflected the values of the society that had created it. It was monarchist, clerical, and aristocratic." She then admits that there may have been a gap between ideal and reality: Colette Beaune, The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late Medieval France, trans. Susan Ross Huston, ed. Frederic L. Cheyette (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 311-2. Jacques Krynen acknowledges that he can offer no details of the mechanisms for the diffusion to the masses of the "official" version of royalist ideology that he expertly describes: Jacques Krynen, Idéal du prince et pouvoir royal en France à la fin du moyen âge (1380-1440): étude de la littérature politique du temps (Paris: Picard, 1981), 333.

3 For a general survey of these movements, see the outdated but still useful Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, Les Révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles (Paris: Flammarion, 1970).

4 A July 1388 ordinance stated that "every day there are committed and perpetrated many crimes, excesses, evils, and ill deeds; and that many times and often it has occurred and occurs that some of our Officers and Deputies . . . when the case requires it, to make rulings, enforcements or other matters of Justice, have rebellions, defiance, obstacles and disobediences given to them; and what is worse, many of our Officers, Procurers, and Sergeants, in exercising their said Offices and Duties, and otherwise, in hatred or contempt of them, have been greatly injured and cursed, and very badly beaten, mutilated, and wounded, and some dead and killed": Ordonnances des roys de France de la troisième race, ed. Denis-François Secousse, 21 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1723-1849), 7:197. For more on these incidents, see Claude Gauvard, "Les officiers royaux et l'opinion publique en France à la fin du Moyen Age," in Histoire comparée de l'administration (IVe-XVIIIe siècles): Actes du XIIème colloque franco-allemand, Tours, 27 mars-1 avril 1977, ed. Werner Paravicini and Karl Ferdinand Werner (Munich: Artemis, 1980), 583-93.
story. Understanding the commons' violent resistance, therefore, must be at the center of a wider, more inclusive late medieval political-cultural history that has yet to be properly told.

Recent historians of violence have provided excellent methodological tools to penetrate textual biases and explain the cultural and historical contexts for violence, but they leave us short of understanding the act of violence itself. Medieval thinkers understood violence as a force with dangerous transformative power. Their conception of violence preserved its essential nature as an act, connected to but independent of its context, an interjection in the flow of events that led up to it. The Paris massacres of 1418 and the discussions that surrounded them provide materials for a rich and varied case study of this concept. The commentaries written about these events reveal some of the fundamental ways that late medieval people understood and explained the nature of violence.

The prelude to the massacres began on the night of 29 May 1418. The city had been brutally occupied for five years by the

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Armagnacs, the ruling junta hostile to both the Parisians and the populist Burgundian party that the vast majority of the capital's residents favored. That night the residents of the city rose up and, with the assistance of a small force of Burgundian knights, snuck over the city walls, overwhelmed the Armagnac defenders, and reclaimed Paris for their own. So sudden was this surprise attack that in the coming days the Burgundians were able to apprehend almost all of the principal Armagnac leaders, including the de facto ruler of France, the count of Armagnac, and throw them into city prisons. They also secured control of the king, Charles VI, an invalid who was a mere symbol of authority because the severe schizophrenia that had afflicted him for twenty-five years had left him incapable of exercising any real power. Crucially, however, they had failed to grab the king's eldest son, the fifteen-year old Dauphin Charles, who was whisked out of the city in the nick of time by the Armagnac knight, Tanguy du Chastel, an event now commemorated by a plaque on the rue Saint-André-des-Arts. The "rescue" of the dauphin would allow the shattered remnants of the Armagnacs to rally around this new symbolic holder of authority and reassemble as the dauphin's party, the group that would, thirteen years later, reclaim power in France with the assistance of Joan of Arc. While the English occupation of most of the realm after 1420 would make the dauphin the popular embodiment of a sort of national identity in the time of Joan of Arc, it is important to remember that in 1418 Paris, the Armagnacs were a minority faction in the civil war that had gripped the realm since 1407 and the long-time foe of the populist Burgundian party whose radical wing was dominated by Parisians.
The civil war's opposing parties each had a princely titular head, but the conflict that was then entering its second decade was less about princely ambitions than it was about fundamental divisions within French political society as a whole. Michel Pintoin, the chronicler of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, was clear that party identification had penetrated deep into the kingdom's communities: "in villages and cities, all royal subjects, moved by the spirit of sedition and divided into Armagnacs and Burgundians, were in open war and called one another cursed traitors." Feelings ran so high that "Burgundian" and "Armagnac" became insults in common speech. Nowhere was this deep-seated animosity more intense than in Paris, which had been the epicenter of the bloody contest for power throughout the civil war. Parisians had been the most zealous advocates of the Burgundian party, which they saw as a protector of their ancient community privileges. After the downfall of the Cabochien Revolt of 1413, in which a populist wing of the Parisian bourgeoisie had allied with the University to enact reforms of the government and conducted brutal purges of "corrupt" ministers, the city had been subject to a draconian occupation and heavy taxation by the Armagnacs, whose forces were from southern France and thus were "foreigners" to the Parisians. Because of this history, Parisians "were most joyous and supportive" of the Burgundian takeover of the city in May 1418, but their delirium was mixed with deep anxiety over the security of the capital and the fear of retribution.

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6 Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis, 6:64.
7 Pintoin describes how, during the campaigns of 1411, townsfolk hurled insults of "Armagnac, rebel, and exiled traitor" at Armagnac troops outside town walls; see ibid., 4:480; in Nov. 1414, a poor laborer in Saint-Lubin-de-la-Haye named Jean Fagner was remitted for the murder of a fishmonger named Jean Noël who had, a year prior, publicly insulted him as a "brigand and a Burgundian"; see Archives Nationales, Paris [hereafter AN] JJ 168 #17, fol. 13; for another example of insults, see AN, JJ 167 #234, fol. 354.
8 For more on this episode, see Alfred Coville, Les Cabochiens et l'ordonnance de 1413 (Geneva: Slatkine-Megariotis Reprints, 1974).
9 Journal de Clément de Faquembergue, 1:128.
These anxieties rose to a fever pitch following a barely unsuccessful attempt by a 1,400-man Armagnac shock force to take back the capital at three o'clock in the morning of 4 June. The Armagnacs had been allowed in the city through the Bastille by a handful of duplicitous Parisian conspirators, and they penetrated deep into the city shouting "Kill them all!" The Parisian militia repelled them and killed 160 of their knights and captured many of the rest, placing them in the city's various prisons. The Parisians, "heated up" by this attack, went through the city rounding up and dragging suspected Armagnac sympathizers into the streets and killing them with axes, leaving their bodies in the mud. According to the *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris*, for the next few days "women and children and powerless men, who could do no worse to them," cursed their corpses and asked God to visit the same fate on all the Armagnacs. Soon after, a rumor spread through the town of an Armagnac plot to distribute a special insignia, a red cross on a black background, to 16,000 Armagnac Parisian partisans (about one-eighth of the city's population) to serve as markers for those who would be spared in the impending takeover and massacre of the city's inhabitants that the Armagnacs were supposedly devising.

Fed by these anxieties, on Sunday, 12 June, around midnight, the town's population exploded in the first of the two prison massacres. Led by a potter named Lambert, an armed group of about four thousand "of the commons of Paris" amassed in the heart of Paris' civic space in the Place de Grève,

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10 *Journal d'un Bourgeois*, 110.
11 These details are taken from two letters written to John the Fearless in Troyes by some of his underlings in Paris: Vielliard, 131-6.
12 *Journal d'un Bourgeois*, 111.
13 Ibid., 107-8.
14 Lambert is only named in Juvenal des Ursins, 542.
15 "Los vilains de Paris" in letter from Aragonese envoy to king of Aragon in Vielliard, 143; "men of low status" (gens de petit estat) in *Journal de Clément de Fauquembergue*, 1:135; "most vile and abject men" (viles et abjectissimi homines), in *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis*, 6:244; and "menus gens," in *Mémoires de Pierre de Fenin*, 95.
where they took a "horrible oath." Shouting "To arms! We are betrayed!" and "Peace! Peace! Long live the king and the Duke of Burgundy!" they raided all of the city's several "public prisons," while Burgundian lords in nominal charge of the city stood helplessly by.\textsuperscript{16} The count of Armagnac, who two weeks prior had been the ruler of France, was butchered in the prison at the Palais Royal along with the chancellor of France and several other notables. The count's body was taken to the marble table in front of the Palais where court cases and petitions were traditionally heard. There the Parisians flayed a band of skin across his torso to resemble the Armagnac party sash and propped his corpse up where for three days Parisians would pass by and curse it, and "little Parisian children would drag [the corpses] around" like toys.\textsuperscript{17} At the Châtelet, the Parisians stripped the prisoners naked, then threw them out of the windows into the awaiting mob's pikes and spears. No group in Paris' prisons – not prison guards, clergymen, women, petty debt prisoners, not even Burgundian sympathizers – was spared. Throughout the city, Parisians raided the houses of suspected Armagnacs and killed them on the spot. They also targeted foreigners such as Italian bankers\textsuperscript{18} as well as the Armagnac-

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys}, 6:244-6; and \textit{Journal d'un Bourgeois}, 116. There is some dispute about the degree of duplicity of the Burgundian notables. Some of the more extremist Armagnac chronicles claim the duke of Burgundy's men were responsible: see \textit{Chroniques de Perceval de Cagny}, 113; and \textit{Chronique de la Pucelle ou Chronique de Cousinot, suivie de la chronique normande de Pierre Cochon}, ed. M. Valet de Viriville (Paris: Delahays, 1859), 172. Judging by the assessment of most chronicles and by the various activities of some Burgundian lords to minimize the slaughter, Burgundian notables did not favor the massacre. This is the scholarly assessment of Françoise Autrand, \textit{Charles VI: la folie du roi} (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 551-2; and Bertrand Schnerb, \textit{Les Armagnacs et les Bourguignons: la maudite guerre} (Paris: Perrin, 1988), 189-93.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys}, 6:250; and \textit{Mémoires de Pierre de Fenin}, 97.

\textsuperscript{18} Vielliard, 144-5; and Juvenal des Ursins, 543.
leaning College of Navarre of the University. The victims' bodies were left to rot on the streets for days, then rounded up in wheelbarrows and hauled out to the trash ditches, which became mass graves just outside the city walls.

Two months later, it happened again. In the intervening months, harsh penalties and patrols as well as the arrival of John the Fearless, the duke of Burgundy himself, had done little to assuage Parisians' fears. Rumors of an Armagnac plot to exterminate the city's population continued to circulate, and an Armagnac siege that effectively cut off Paris commerce created a claustrophobic atmosphere and intensified misery in the capital. Rumored peace negotiations between the duke of Burgundy and the dauphin were also a cause of concern, since Parisians considered the talks a Dauphinist ruse. Occasional sallies outside the city and further denunciations of potential traitors within it had once more filled Paris' prisons, again placing a sizeable enemy population within the city's walls. At four o'clock in the morning on 21 August, three to four thousand Parisians "of the vile mechanical arts" rose up, led on horseback by the city executioner, Capeluche. They repeated the pattern from the first massacre, invading the Châtelet and dragging those inside into the streets, where they executed them all. This time, their wrath extended to the homes of the upper bourgeoisie, two hundred of whom were killed and their houses ransacked. According to several accounts, one of the victims was a pregnant woman who was stripped and beheaded, after which her killers mocked the baby struggling inside her. Capeluche then led the mob to the Bastille, where a few notable prisoners were being kept.

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19 Vielliard, 144-5; Juvenal des Ursins, 543; and Nathalie Gorochov, Le collège de Navarre de sa fondation (1305) au début du XVe siècle (1418): histoire de l'institution, de sa vie intellectuelle et de son recrutement (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), 560-72.

20 Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis, 6:262.

21 Ibid., 6:264.

22 The story of the execution of the pregnant woman appears in almost every chronicle; the anecdote about the mockery of the struggling fetus kicking inside the dead mother is only in Juvenal des Ursins, 543.
held. When the duke of Burgundy intercepted the mob, demanding that they disperse, the Parisians produced a foreign standard, which they claimed they had found in their sack of noble houses. In their eyes the standard indicated a continuing Armagnac presence among the city's population, and they defiantly ripped it up in front of the duke. The duke refused to hand over the prisoners lodged in the Bastille, but the Parisians threatened to "take apart" (desmachonner), the building and forced him to relent.\textsuperscript{23} Calling the duke "brother,"\textsuperscript{24} Capeluche shook his hand to cement a deal not to harm certain prisoners. However, as soon as the Parisians returned to the Châtelet with the prisoners in tow, Capeluche reneged, beheading them all except one "because of the commons' demands."\textsuperscript{25} To buy time to end the violence, the duke had it announced that the Armagnacs were amassing troops at nearby Montlhéry for an assault on the city and the Parisians were needed to attack the Armagnac garrison there. The ploy worked: the Parisians were led outside the city gates, and Capeluche and two co-conspirators were captured and executed. Realizing they had been deceived, the Parisians angrily rushed back to the city some days later, but the gates were closed on them, allowing them only angry protests. The duke and bourgeois elites restored order in the coming weeks, and the entire city was compelled to take a loyalty oath to the duke of Burgundy in which they swore "not to consent or allow any assembly of people without the permission of the king or duke of Burgundy."\textsuperscript{26} The death toll from the two massacres was anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000, with around 2,500 being the most likely figure.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{23} Chronique des Cordeliers, 263.
\textsuperscript{24} Chronique de Jean Raoulet, 163.
\textsuperscript{25} Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis, 6:266.
\textsuperscript{27} Casualty figures vary widely. The Chronique des Cordeliers (260) provides the 5,000 figure; Perceval de Cagny and Cousinot give a 3,500 figure for the casualties (see Chroniques de Perceval de Cagny, 112-4; and Chronique
As is typical in medieval sources, chroniclers describe the Parisian "men of low status" as alternately mindless or motivated by the base desire to pillage the rich. To illustrate their state of mind, chroniclers associate the rioters with chaos and insanity: Pintoin describes them as a "confused congregation" swearing "terrible oaths," and the Bourgeois of Paris says the June rioters were led by "warped Frenzy." The rioters were "inhuman" and "diabolical" "ministers of iniquity." Their actions had all the marks of sacrilege in a world of inverted social and religious imagery: the stripping of the victims' clothes, which in the Middle Ages were an important emblem of rank and status, the swearing of the oath, the dark sacrifice of the count of Armagnac, the denial of a Christian burial to the victims, the violence against the innocent and unborn, and the absurd figure of Capeluche, riding on horseback and consorting with the duke as though a knight rather than a lowly executioner were all indicators of an inversion of the social order.

Ascribing excessive emotionality and diabolical madness to the motives underlying violence committed by common people is typical of medieval sources.  

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29 Juvenal des Ursins, 542, 544-5;  
30 Juvenal des Ursins, 542, 544-5; and Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys, 6:248, 266.  
31 On the denial of Christian burial, see Juvenal des Ursins, 543. Juvenal des Ursins mocks Capeluche for carrying himself "as boldly as though he were a lord" in the duke of Burgundy's presence: ibid., 544.  
32 Several scholars have described chronicle accounts of popular violence as employing a discourse of insanity and chaos: see William TeBrake, A Plague of Insurrection: Popular Politics and Peasant Revolt in Flanders, 1323-
Although several prominent historians of the period essentially accept the chroniclers' depictions of the mad crowd at face value, we need not do so, as there were reasonable political motives for the violence.\textsuperscript{33} The fear of having a large body of enemies within the city walls was real: medieval prisons were not secure, escapes were frequent, and the prisons had been a strategic target of the 4 June Armagnac raid, indicating their vulnerability.\textsuperscript{34} Another of the major grievances the Parisians expressed through their actions was frustration over the execution of justice and the increasing role of the closed court as the location of power. In their confrontation with the duke of Burgundy in the August uprising, they complained – accurately – that rich prisoners could buy their freedom.\textsuperscript{35} The Parisians were claiming to be the true executors of justice, enacting the rites of justice in the open, public space of the street and tacitly counteracting the increasingly opaque backroom dealings of the


\textsuperscript{34} Louis de Carbonnières, \textit{La Procédure devant la chambre criminelle du Parlement de Paris au XVe siècle} (Paris: Champion, 2004), 231-6.

\textsuperscript{35} According to the \textit{Journal d'un Bourgeois} (127), the Parisians "said that those placed in the said castle [the Châtelet] were always freed by means of money, and that they are booted into the fields, and afterwards commit more evils than before." Claude Gauvard notes that it was much easier for the wealthy to afford the various fees that were required to receive a pardon letter: see Claude Gauvard, \textit{"De Grace Especial": Crime, état et société en France à la fin du Moyen Age}, 2 vols. (Paris: Sorbonne, 1991), 1:36, 68-9.
courts, in which prestige and wealth ensured better treatment. They were also defying the aristocratic code of ransom, which had repeatedly allowed hated enemies to gain their freedom. The stripping of the victims' clothes, which observers saw as a shocking disgrace, removed outward indications of status and placed all those judged on an equal plane.\footnote{36 The Bourgeois of Paris calls the removal of the victims' clothing "one of the greatest cruelties and Christian inhumanities" in \textit{Journal d'un Bourgeois}, 116. The removal of the count of Armagnac's clothing before his murder was seen as an affront to his honor; the \textit{Pastoralet}, an allegorical political poem written for the Burgundian court in the 1420s, refers to "Lupal [the count of Armagnac] who without his shirt/lay in death most dishonestly." \textit{Le Pastoralet}, ed. Joël Blanchard (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 232.} That the city executioner, who as a low-born man symbolized the popular will in the judicial rite of execution, would lead this effort to reclaim justice for the people was no accident.\footnote{37 For more on popular attitudes towards the city executioners, see Schnerb, "Caboche et Capeluche," 124-5; Bruno Paradis, "De petits serviteurs de l'État: les bourreaux de Provence au XIVe siècle," in \textit{Le Petit Peuple}, 311-22; and Bronislaw Geremek, \textit{Les Marginaux Parisiens au XIVe et XVe siècles} (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), 345-6.} The rioters were also trying to short-circuit the negotiations between the duke of Burgundy and his nephew, the dauphin. The common people suffered the brunt of the conflicts of the civil war. The Parisians' stake in the political process was a matter of survival itself, and they did not want to see their interests betrayed by the genteeel court-based negotiations among aristocratic peers in which they could not play a direct role. Pillage was an incidental, rather than a primary, motive for the revolt as well; as the party of hierarchy and centralized authority, the Armagnacs tended to attract Parisian bourgeois elites, while Burgundian populism appealed to the Parisian popular classes.\footnote{38 The Burgundian chronicles say that the rioters "would not have taken a single man for ransom for all the money in the world, and indeed common people are of such a nature when they are so moved, that they would prefer the death of a man to anything anyone could give them," in \textit{Livre des trahisons}, 137. For typical party membership, see Autrand, 458-66.}

The recent scholarly consensus around "banalized violence" is ill-equipped to describe fully the 1418 massacres. In the past
forty years several scholars have outlined approaches to the politics behind acts of mob violence in the pre-modern period, providing some of the critical tools necessary to penetrate the existing accounts. These scholars have seen violence as constituting its own "text," and they read acts of violence for the political and cultural attitudes they express distinct from the editorializing embedded in hostile chroniclers' and other observers' accounts of them. In his classic 1974 analysis of early modern rural revolts in France, Yves-Marie Bercé describes both the problem and the approach clearly:

The patterns [of revolt] only express themselves through indirect discourse, from the pens of borrowed witnesses. Their will and their ideologies remain unformulated. They must be reconstituted by the collection of their actions and attitudes . . . because popular movements express themselves less by their utterances and discourse than by their acts and the unfolding of their acts.\(^\text{39}\)

Like Bercé, Natalie Zemon Davis, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and David Nirenberg read violent action like a text, and they apply anthropological methodology to uncover how acts of violence emerged from and reflected deep-seated cultural beliefs about religion, justice, hierarchy, sex and the body, and the ownership of urban space.\(^\text{40}\) An argument popular in recent studies of medieval revolt has been that communities used violence as a negotiating tactic rather than to force change in the social order. In his analysis of peasant revolts, Hugues Neveux inscribes the taking of arms within a range of tactical

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possibilities that included other forms of protest. In his thesis on the Tuchin rebels of fourteenth-century Languedoc, Vincent Challet says that violence was but one choice within a "language of contestation" that was part of the dialogue between ruler and ruled. The common thread in these studies is that they include violence within a continuum of intelligible cultural behavior, closing the gap between violence and other social acts. As Davis puts it, "violence is explained . . . in terms of the roles and patterns of behavior allowed by [people's] culture. . . . [V]iolence is related here less to the pathological than to the normal."

The methodological issue of how to assess accounts of violence critically was not the only inspiration for this violence historiography. These scholarly efforts were connected to a more general trend to demystify violence as a historical force. These ideas should be seen in part as a rejection of early twentieth-century crowd theory, which described mob violence as pathological behavior originating in collective psychosis. More generally, they also participate in the Arendt-ian challenge to the exaltation of violence found in Fascism's cult of power and the Marxist belief in violent revolution as the motor of history, exemplified by Frantz Fanon's idea of the transformative power of revolution.

43 Davis, 186.
These violence revisionists not only embed acts of violence within the course of history and human life, they subordinate these acts to the cultural forces and rituals that supposedly produced them. The act of violence itself is less important than the cultural context in which that act became permissible.

The studies of the violence revisionists have provided methodological tools to penetrate the textual biases described in the beginning of this paper and explained the cultural and historical contexts for acts of violence. They leave us just short of understanding the act of violence itself, however. We go too far if we say that violence is reducible to the cultural forces that create a space for its possibility. While outbursts of violence borrow form and meaning from ritual aspects of culture, the acts themselves are inherently not ritualized or usual. For both its perpetrators and victims, violence is a point of no return, a step across the threshold, a moment in which survival itself is the factor in question. Seen from the position of the historian, violence can be lumped with its aftermath as part of a unified, intelligible whole, but this is to confuse the process of reconciliation with violence. At the moment of its commission, violence is wholly concerned with rupture. In the last paragraph of his book on violence, Nirenberg acknowledges that "there were clearly moments . . . when rituals of violence were transformed in meaning, manifestation, and effect. We can even say that those moments indelibly altered the world in which they occurred, refiguring the field of meaning of their ritual lexicon." The purity of the act endows violence with a transformative potential that anthropological models capable of understanding only ritualized action are not equipped to describe.

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46 Nirenberg, 249.
While in these studies the acts of the mob provide a methodological tool for penetrating hostile texts, violence as a particular kind of act is obscured. In 1418 the Parisians were not engaged in violence within a "language of contestation" or rituals that included an implied process of reconciliation; they were seeking utter finality. Pintoin says that as they rallied in the Place de Grève, they exclaimed "unless we finish with these Armagnac traitors, neither the bourgeois nor the city will ever have rest."  

The Parisians' cry of "Peace! Peace!" as they went about committing acts of brutality seems at first to be grimly ironic, but it speaks to the conviction that the only end to the war was through extermination of the enemy infecting the body politic. Repeated treaties forged between the aristocratic party chiefs since the outset of the civil war had, in the Parisians' view, forestalled the Burgundians' victory. After the Treaty of Auxerre in 1412, the Bourgeois of Paris, expressing the typical Parisian extremist view, lamented that, if not for the treaty, "they would have cleaned the realm of France of those traitors in less than a year" – in fact the Parisians had to wait until 1418 to realize his desire.  

The extreme violence of the massacres, the interruption of the life cycle as represented by the elimination of women and children, and the "us-or-them" conviction borne of the rumors of a plotted Armagnac massacre suggest an apocalyptic, final violence. The Bourgeois of Paris commented that, after the first round of killing in 1418 had littered the streets with bodies, "it rained that night such that no one could smell any bad odor, and by the force of the rains [the corpses'] wounds were cleaned, such that in the morning there was no foul blood or filth on them."  

Nature itself sanctioned the extermination of the Armagnacs, assisting in the long-awaited "cleaning" of the realm of traitors.

While the massacres were its most extreme expression, they were consistent with the pattern of violence established during

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47 Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys, 6:244.  
48 Journal d'un Bourgeois, 54.  
49 Ibid., 112.
the civil war. On its face "factionalism" appears to be the root cause of the civil war, but this is an over-simplification of the matter. The parties' ability to make the rhetorical claim that they represented the common good and the entirety of the French political community universalized the experience of the war, intensified extremism and violence, and made it a zero sum struggle for supremacy. The appropriation of expanded royal authority developed in the late Middle Ages allowed parties to totalize their claims to power and, conversely, to condemn the opposing side as outside the legitimate political community and therefore worthy of extermination. 50 Within this newly potent version of the realm as a society of subjects all uniformly obedient to the theoretically total power of the king, there was no room for political or ideological diversity. In truth, this intense, proto-nationalist "royal religion" as described by Ernst Kantorowicz and others was not a unifying bulwark against the civil war but was in fact its primary cause. 51 In a sense, then, this was "state" violence, but common people had appropriated it. They could argue that they were active participants in the newly conceived and expanded political society of the late Middle Ages.

The commons' wielding of this awesome power of violence alarmed contemporaries. Violence was a nobleman's prerogative in the Middle Ages: as Georges Duby says it was part of the nobleman's "genetic qualities" to be a warrior. 52 Non-nobles

were expected to stick to work, and their industriousness was a sign of peace. As Christine de Pisan states in one exemplary passage, "justice requires that . . . the people [be] in peace, without occupying themselves in anything but their labors and trades, as political laws mandate." Even a legal, stalwart, and organized fighting force such as the Paris militia was derided for its lack of discipline, ragtag weaponry, and failure to respect the rules of war. In the medieval conception of history, noblemen were the public figures, the antagonists whose birthright it was to impose their will on the flow of events, often by means of violence. As William Brandt states, "for the medieval aristocrat a line of action was not complete until it had been located in a particular human will." As the ultimate manifestation of the decisive will, the exercise of violence was central in defining the public actor in politics and history, while peace was connected to passivity. The agency of the mob, however, was not that of a "particular will," and as such it represented an affront to the aristocratic concept of history and the public man. It was as if history was acting of its own accord rather than the particular will of the nobleman acting upon history.

The Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris, whose anonymous author was clearly in awe of the 1418 events and endowed his description of them with an epic grandeur, repeatedly connected the massacres with the play of Fortune on human affairs. In his account, Fortune was an active agent. Just when the Armagnacs

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54 Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys, 6:478-85, 676; and Juvenal des Ursins, 464. The marking of city-dwellers' violence as illegitimate or inferior was not solely a textual conceit but also operated culturally; knights besieging Paris in 1411 taunted the guardians of the city walls, saying "come out, you truants, bourgeois, butchers, and tripe-sellers," and a misfiring cannon in this same war was dubbed "The Bourgeois" by its frustrated handlers in 1414, a reference to its battlefield unreliability. Chronique de la Pucelle, 412; and Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys, 5:372.
were at the summit of their power in their tyrannical oppression
of Paris in May 1418, Fortune intervened: "But God, who knows
hidden matters, looked with pity on his people and so awoke
Fortune, who with a sudden leap arose like a startled thing, and
tucked her shirt into her belt, and gave bold strength to the
Parisians."\textsuperscript{56} In the \textit{Journal}, the Parisians are Fortune's agents in
overturning the Armagnacs. Certainly, God approves the
Armagnacs' downfall, as it is He who becomes alarmed at their
concealed wicked designs. But his intervention is not direct, as it
works through Fortune, who then in turn "emboldens" the
Parisians to assist her in the sudden reversal that is about to take
place. In this chronicle, their violence is a manifestation of the
play of contingency on human affairs and reflects a new late
medieval acceptance of the role of the contingent – as opposed to
the unfolding of God's plan – within history.\textsuperscript{57} Violence, which
was completely a part of the human sphere, was intimately
connected with contingency in the late medieval notion of
history. Nowhere was Fortune more operative than on the
battlefield. That violence was able to play this role was entirely
because, in the medieval consciousness, it had an essential
transformative power.

The enemies of the Parisians saw the massacres as defying
comprehension. Gauvard has pointed out that intellectuals
considered the massacres as a demarcation point for the end of
an era.\textsuperscript{58} Writing to the dauphin's head councilor soon after the
massacres in an effort to come to grips with what had just
happened, Pierre de Versailles called them "the homicides
perpetrated by the popular furor, inconceivable and unheard of in
our times," and Robert Blondel, a Dauphinist theorist and poet,
said that "such butchery/ever seen by eye or heard by ear/has

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Journal d'un Bourgeois}, 108.
\textsuperscript{57} The finest articulation of the increasing role of contingency in the late
medieval worldview comes in John Bowlin, \textit{Contingency and Fortune in
\textsuperscript{58} Gauvard, \textit{De Grace Especial}, 1:55.
never, I believe, been equaled." The massacres were the final straw in the dauphin's rejection of Paris as the capital of the realm, and he would not return even after his reconquest of the city in 1436.

Parisian popular resistance to the Armagnac/Dauphin party, of which the 1418 massacres were the culmination, compelled pro-dauphin thinkers to articulate a conception of the right to royal authority that explicitly opposed the notion that this authority lay in community consent. Because the popular classes were so untrustworthy, according to these theorists, it was important that allegiance to the king not have any of the implied contractual or voluntary element of the feudal model but be based on "natural" affiliation. For the Dauphinist theorist Jean de Terre-Vermeille, rebellion represented an active will that defied the primordial, transrational community, and since the preservation of that natural order was paramount, rebellion was an abomination. Extending this thought, Jean de Terre-Vermeille even declared that "the majority of the realm are rebels," thereby implicitly justifying the political righteousness of the embattled minority to which he belonged, based as it was on firm, natural laws. The political theories that emerged partly in response to the massacres justified the dauphin's right to rule based on custom and law, which transcended any immediate justifications for rule and would serve as a direct influence on Jean Bodin and the theorists of absolutism.

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61 Barbey. 262-4.

62 Cited in ibid., 97.

63 Ibid., 380-3.
Certainly the 1418 Paris massacres cannot be understood merely as an extreme version of normal behavior; they were in fact a conscious interjection into the flow of history, understood as such by all observers. For these reasons merely inscribing medieval violence within a continuum of its surrounding cultural expressions fails to get at an essential aspect of the phenomenon. This observation can be extended to analyses of non-medieval violence as well. Acts of violence are conditioned by historical factors that define their parameters and determine their form, but they possess a quality that transcends their contexts, and when they occur, they force changes in the existing cognitive vocabulary to define them. We need not exalt this transformative power à la Fanon, but the bloody events of 1418 should compel scholars of violence to re-evaluate the power of violence to defy and alter routine comprehension as it did for those who experienced it.