

Review Article

The Value of 'Narrativity' in the Appraisal of Historical Documents: Foundation for a Theory of Archival Hermeneutics

by RICHARD BROWN

Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales And Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France. NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, 217 p. ISBN 0-8047-1412-6.

Over the course of the past twenty years, Natalie Davis has rightfully earned a reputation as one of the most brilliant and innovative scholars of early modern Europe. Her influence on the understanding, methodology and writing of social and cultural history has been profound, and is all the more remarkable given her comparatively limited exposure in print. She is perhaps best known through her collection of eight historical essays published in 1975 (*Society and Culture in Early Modern France*), a partial retrospective of earlier works which appeared in the pages of various scholarly journals, in conjunction with several original monographs written to bring her research up to a (fortunately temporary) conclusion. Her range of historical inquiry is extremely broad, but nevertheless principally focused on the period of sixteenth-century France. It is distinguished by a central discourse on the role and status of women in their socio-cultural environment, a subject upon which Davis has lectured extensively and about which she has compiled several important analytical bibliographies. Professor Davis has also achieved a rather signal status among historians through the successful translation of her work not only to the field of literature, but also to the world of the cinema. In collaboration with the scenarist Jean-Claude Carrière and the director Daniel Vigne, she wrote the screenplay for the critically acclaimed film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a story of ordinary people set in a rural village in the Languedoc ca. 1560. She inverted the conventional creative succession of book and screenplay by later transforming the film project into a highly successful historical novel under the same title.

In this book, her latest foray into sixteenth-century French society, Professor Davis demonstrates once again an ingenious capacity for reconstructing from archival documentation particular details of everyday life, and placing them within the synthetic context of larger social and cultural patterns. Her work has always been lauded for its originality, based on an intimate knowledge of the contemporary archival **fonds** and their distillation into the nectar of historical insight. On this occasion, however, she has permitted her analysis and interpretation of an indigenous phenomenon to be partially guided by a strain of philosophic reasoning which has recently gained powerful currency

within the academic historical community, the so-called “new historicism.” In light of her previous historical writing and interests, this is a wholly natural progression, and less a matter of peer conformity than one might suspect. Professor Davis has been for years at the “cutting edge” of the hermeneutical critique of historical texts, and in fact this book represents a significant but logical step in her personal evolution as an interpreter and writer of history.

The subject of the book is one of the richest sources of contemporary documentation available to the social historian of the Renaissance and early modern Europe — the letter of remission, or “pardon tale.” These letters were in common use throughout the judicial systems of Western Europe, especially during the second half of the fifteenth and during the sixteenth century, and were generally written by *litterati* in the employ of the state (secretaries or notaries), on behalf of the lower echelons of society, as pleas to sovereign authority for relief from the imposition of penalties in respect of certain crimes, usually capital offences, ranging from confiscation of goods and perpetual incarceration to death. In essence, pardon tales were fictional accounts of the particular circumstances which attended the commission of crimes, narrative “stories” mixed with elements of formal, judicial speech, designed to invoke the intervention and dispensation of the sovereign’s grace. In the past, Professor Davis has often exploited this kind of documentation within the conventions of social-scientific analysis by peeling aside its fictive or other intrinsic evidential layers in order to bring an historical perspective to contemporary systems of law, customs and holiday behaviour, the image of rulership, ritualized violence and vendetta, communal living conditions, and the social and cultural problems endemic to the central conflict among gender, age and class. Without either rejecting or neglecting the obvious historical worth of this methodological approach, Davis’s study nevertheless reveals a very different treatment and interpretation of the archival texts. It contrives to peel away the informational value of the documents in order to concentrate on the evidential qualities of the discourse implicit in their narrative. Basically, it attempts to analyse letters of remission as media of literature, using the selection of their contextual language, the forming, shaping and order of their narrative detail, and the crafting of their discourse by the “tellers” (the writers and the accused), in order to present an interpretive reading of the documents which is more faithful and explanatory of the inspiration of their original creators and intended audience.

Aside from its evident merits as a work of socio-cultural history and its many revelations concerning contemporary human behaviour, this is an important book for archivists. In a highly readable and practical application, it affords us an opportunity to see how historians are using hermeneutics, the philosophical concern with the theory of understanding and interpretation, to bring out features of historical texts which are commonly passed over by traditional epistemological theories of knowledge; to see how historians are presently redefining and re-evaluating the meaning and value of archival documents. One version of this hermeneutic approach to textual analysis actually disposes of the “thick” in favour of the “thin” description of meaning. Though not without some methodological linkages, it rejects the notion (Skinner, Pocock, Dunn, *et al.*) that to locate a text in its appropriate normative context is to equip ourselves with a way of gaining greater insight into its meaning than we can ever hope to achieve from simply reading the text itself. Rather than impose layers of interpretive context on to the vocabulary and information content of archival documents in search of the factors

linking events in a chain of cause and effect, the hermeneutic intention is to pare down documents to their primary discursive encoding; to test the historical truth-value and meaning inherent in the production and composition of their narrative discourse, against the capacity of their information to yield such historical explanation. In the place of functional communications theory, which suggests that narrative historical discourse is simply a vehicle to transmit a message, that the narrative code itself adds nothing in the way of information or knowledge to its interpretation, some historians have begun to substitute an alternative reading of texts based on the analysis of their narrative discourse as an apparatus for the production of meaning. It is the multi-level complex of narrative discourse, its crafting as an instrument of information, and its capacity to bear a variety of explanatory glosses, that illuminate the meaning of historical texts. In pure archival terms, this hypothesis allows that it is an analysis of documents in reference to their evidential value, rather than a meditation upon the value of their informational content, which embraces true historical comprehension.

For Professor Davis, the rereading of pardon tales as narrative discourse is clearly integral to their historical interpretation and understanding. She begins by offering us a text, a petition from one Thomas Manny, a poor plowman, aged about 36 and living in Sens, who has murdered his unfaithful wife and languishes in prison awaiting trial. Manny's story eventually convinces the king to release him from his incarceration without further legal proceedings, "without penalty, and without infamy." This letter is similar to many thousands of petitions conveyed to the kings of France during the sixteenth century, although their judicial aftermath was not always quite so fortunate. What then, she asks, is the documentary value of these remission tales? To answer this question, the point of analytic departure is the crafting or production of the narrative. We are thus introduced to a creative literary process, partly legal and formulaic, partly interpretive, partly "storytelling," and involving several or more authors in the composition, which resulted in the presentation to the king or his representatives of a document requesting the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy.

This process of literary composition included the narrative input of at least three authors. Aside from the supplicant, who naturally had a pre-eminent role in its production through the recital or "telling" of the tale, there was of course the necessity of having the letter drafted for formal presentation, which meant that a royal notary or secretary and his clerk would be involved. These officials were responsible for listening to the story and recording its detail in "all truth and loyalty," translating from regional dialect rough vernaculars, and applying the requisite preambles and concluding formulas in which was contained the actual justification for soliciting the king's grace. In some instances, the supplicant's agent was also implicated, usually an advocate or an attorney, who may have advised his client during the interview recital, offered consultation on the substantive points of law required for pardon, or even furnished to the accused a preliminary draft in the form of a judicial plea, and thus helped to shape the story. The remission narrative was, therefore, a composite production in which a number of different hands participated; it emerged from an exchange among several people about events, points of law and chancery style. Consequently, Professor Davis directs our attention to specific inputs of narrative encoding by examining the roles and motivations of the contributors to the creative process, their social background, their education and their literary skill, all factors crucial to the production and meaning of the final version of the document.

When we proceed from the scheme of production to the literary discourse of the texts, we begin to encounter other levels and sources of narrative encoding. For instance, wider historical contexts or events beyond the immediate lives of the actors in the story were frequently used by the authors as a framework to explain motive or give coherence to the action. As is the case with many documents written during this period, one of the principal points of reference in remission narratives is the time element. The calendar year was punctuated by certain temporal sequences of celebration and devotion, an annual cycle of feast and fast, of ritual and festivity, of prescriptive and promiscuous behaviour, which impinged upon communal, local, confraternal, ecclesiastical, corporate and individual behaviour. The most obvious example was Carnival, the period running between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, during which time various forms of deviant, "world turned upside down" activity were tolerated by civic authority. Petitioners often drew upon the liturgy of these special occasions to establish a path to pardon, sometimes in conjunction with specific historical events. Rituals of misrule and organized chaos, the mortification prescribed by occasions of fasting, the celebration of a saintly patron, together with a host of local, national and religious quarrels were commonly enlisted to help excuse and make sense of what had happened. Thus we read of the Maitre Jean de la Fargue, who, during a transvestite carnival conducted in violation of the decrees of the Parlement of Toulouse, headed a troop which marched through the streets beating up and wounding all those who stood in its way, or Bertrand de Pulveret, captain of a royal château, who feared a storming of the house during the celebration of a religious feast and so had two of his guests murdered in their beds, on the grounds that they were involved in a riotous conspiracy. Both of these storytellers were honourably acquitted of their crimes. Contemporary listeners and readers of these tales were clearly attuned to a wholly different interpretation of time and events from present-day conventions. They responded to a different set of social and cultural reference points, and they encoded them in a complex of narrative discourse peculiar to their immediate environment. Thus considered, it is the fiction of the discourse which endows events with meaning, which encodes the sequence of events into interpretive patterns. Hence it is the task of the historian to identify and decipher these codes; the stories must be reread and questioned afresh to uncover their strategy, the assumptions on which they rested, and their relation to constituted authority.

In any proceedings at law, the truth-value of the testimony is paramount. The "story" of the accused must contain an essential core of moral and legal veracity. For Professor Davis, the ultimate expression of truth in the remission narrative is the relation of the accused: the confession of the crime. Here again, we find a variety of narrative encoding at work, marked most notably by a discourse endemic to gender, between the self-defence of "angry men," and the bloodshed attending the "woman's voice." That she should devote individual chapters to these two subjects in what amounts to a large essay is indicative of the significantly different impact which the gender of the narrator had upon the nature and composition of the tales. Men were generally guided in their confession by an environmental tolerance of their aggression. They were sometimes morally and legally permitted to hit, beat, chase and run down, to rape, to commit murder in revenge, to bear arms, to fight in defence. Women, on the other hand, suffered in relative passivity. Without recourse to a natural-cultural outlet of aggression, they protected their homes, their reputations and their bodies; they rejected illicit sexual advances, resisted domestic violence and plotted against "home-wreckers."

Categorically removed from the acceptable legal excuses of drunkenness and temper (hot anger or rage), they were sexually jealous, driven to quarrel or in the throes of despair. In many cases, the stories assumed the relevant gender postulations. Men chose the language of honour and outrage; women chose the language of humility and subjection. Not only was this expected of and played upon by the petitioners, but it was integral to a judicial process which sometimes pursued a different line of inquiry based on gender, tending to concentrate on the facts of the matter in the case of men, and on the state of mind and degree of suffering in the case of women. The plots of the gender narratives are encoded further by certain themes and assumptions which seem to cluster around social types. "Anger plots," for instance, can vary with social location, especially when they come from men. Peasant's tales are remarkably diverse, but they may be clearly distinguished from the tales related by "gentlemen," while artisan's stories are generally different from both of these narrative types. The sheer variety of the tales based on gender, age, social status, sexual practices and other religious-regional-customary referents alone suggests that their contextually different narrative encodings should be regarded as a primary source of historical inquiry, and the key to their meaning and understanding.

For Professor Davis, this line of inquiry inevitably draws us to a single contemporary discourse on the theme of violence and its pacification. What we have in the remission narrative is not an impermeable "official culture" imposing its criteria on "popular culture," but rather "a cultural exchange conducted under the king's rules"; a convergence among supplicants, listeners and pardoners, all of whom had different stakes and motivations in the construction, relation and outcome of the story, but all of whom were implicated in a single and central process of social reconciliation. This is a part of "society's account of itself," its *nouvelles*, a narrative discourse of information, values and language habits which flowed across class and culture. Clearly, this is not the radical grammatology of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which, among other things, suggests that there can be no single coherent unity of interpretation and understanding of a document owing to the essential "undecidability" of textual meaning at the syntactical level. For Derrida, in any critical reading of a text, words "have a double, contradictory, undecidable value that always derives from their syntax," hence no single interpretation can claim to be the final one. The true nature of historical inquiry lies in the infinite interplay of a document's syntactical connections rather than the semantic dimension of its reference and truth-value. Instead, Professor Davis has adopted a methodological approach more akin to the theories of discourse explored in the writings of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Barthes and especially Hayden White, and has thankfully avoided the intellectual paralysis which currently afflicts deconstructionist hermeneutic historiography. This is an approach which attaches primary value to the 'narrativity' of archival documents in its representation of the integrity, coherence and fullness of real events; which assigns meaning and interpretation to documents through the production of their narrative discourse and the encoding of their memory. It is tempered, too, by a very healthy dose of traditional historical analysis and perspective. As Professor Davis freely admits in several passages, she cannot resist entirely the social historian's temptation to locate and elaborate on the environmental context of the narration. Altogether, this is a wonderfully stimulating book, full of fresh ideas on the historical assessment and use of archival texts. There are many important messages here for archivists as they go about the business of identifying, appraising and selecting records for permanent retention.