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A Fool and His Money

Ann Wroe

About the Author

Ann Wroe is the Special Features Editor of *The Economist* and has a doctorate in medieval history from Oxford University. She is the author of three previous works of non-fiction, including *Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*, which was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Award and the W.H. Smith Award, and, most recently, *Perkin: A Story of Deception*.

ALSO BY ANN WROE

Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair
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A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

Life in a Partitioned
Medieval Town

Ann Wroe



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To Pierre Vincent: priest, organist, friend, and son of
Rouergue

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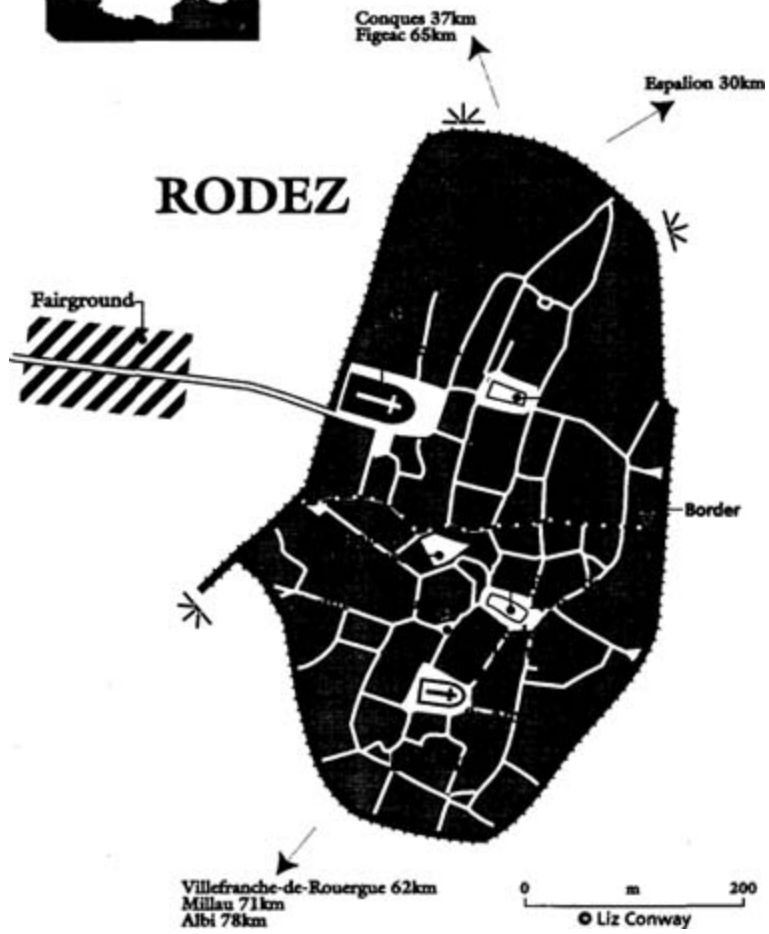
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Cast of characters

THE MARQUES FAMILY

Peyre Marques, cloth-seller
Alumbors Marques (formerly Rostanh), his wife
Johan, his son
Guilhema, his daughter
Gerald Canac, his son-in-law
Barteleme Marques, his uncle
Huc Rostanh, his brother-in-law, cathedral canon
Ramon Griffé, priest, his minder

BUILDERS, NEIGHBOURS, CREDITORS, FRIENDS

Deodat Segui, merchant, Bourg consul
Johan Manha, City consul
Huc del Cayro } builders
Stefe Cayrosa }
Johan Gasc } master-builders
Galhart Guisardo }
Marti Barbier } labourers
Marot de Namaria }
Dona Guizas, lime-kiln operator
Peyre Valeta, count's treasurer

Guilhem Camboulas	}	local rascals
Bernat Camboulas		
Huc Serras	}	border-dwellers
Johan Gabriac		
Berengar Seyrac	}	trespassers
Peyre Jalenca		
Helias Porret, notary		
Johan Girma	}	creditors
Berengar Natas		
Aymeriga Guasanha	}	Marques's tenants
Guirbert Engles		
Andreas Formis		
Pons Aldebal, sergeant and tenant		
Alamanda Fromenta	}	friends and neighbours
Huc Farcel		
Bernard Rigaldi, lawyer's clerk		
Bernard Claustas		
Peyre Combas	}	sergeants
Peyre Corbes		
Ramon Valeta		
Johan Brau		

A note on currencies

The principal system of currency in Rodez was livres, sous and deniers. As in the old British money, 12 deniers made one sou, and 20 sous made one livre. Rodez added a complication: these coins were sometimes weak local issue minted by the count (livres, sous and deniers *rodanes*), and sometimes livres, sous and deniers *tournois*, a stronger and more centralised currency which was also the official currency of account. Unless otherwise specified, the *tournois* currency is the one used here. The denier was also worth two obols, or halfpennies.

Readers will also encounter florins, francs, marks and other foreign coins. These were interlopers, but in time of war any coin was acceptable if its pure-metal content was high enough. Rates of exchange were too variable to mention.

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about a divided town, with a political frontier running through it. We know such frontiers well in the late twentieth century. We know that they can run through villages, houses, even kitchens; and that they can divide people of the same race, the same language, the same religion, the same family. Racial and tribal frontiers, the sort that produce ghettos in cities, are of another kind; they may often be natural or voluntary. Political frontiers are always imposed by the authorities for reasons of power, rivalry or convenience of rule; and men have then to decide whether to live with these artificial constraints, or find a way round them.

The story focuses on the strange case of Peyre Marques, a merchant who forgets where he has buried his gold. When, in 1370, two workmen discover a hoard of coins while unblocking a drain, Marques's pathetic situation becomes for us the centre of a detailed canvas that takes in the history of the town and lights it up against a background of compassion and brutality, cruel justice and individual acts of kindness, shadowed by the ever-present threat of attack.

Peyre Marques, the chief character in this book, is the man I have singled out to tell this tale of partition. He is the thread that runs through the whole fabric: together with his wife, his son-in-law, his neighbours, his tenants, his brother-in-law and his creditors. These people lived with partition every day, and partition in turn worked on them; they were its victims and in some ways, also, its perpetrators. They are the guides we need.

The story of Marques was preserved quite accidentally. We know about him only because a pitcher of gold was found buried in the floor of his shop. His son-in-law took it away, and ownership of the money was disputed in court. The result was a full-scale inquiry — detailed character references, anecdotes, gossip — about a man who was perfectly ordinary: just a middling businessman trying to support his family, stay solvent, keep his wife happy, keep his wits together. For that reason alone, this case is precious. History keeps memorials of the great, the saintly or the vicious, but we may pine for the chance to hear about men and women more like ourselves: common folk. Marques was preserved, in effect, in the tittle-tattle of his neighbours. Reading the documents about the jug of gold, we hear the ancient equivalent of lace curtains being moved aside.

To the modern eye, Marques — with his confusions and obsessions, his steady loss of business acumen, his sharp long-term memory and vagueness about the present — seems likely to be one of the earlier recorded sufferers from mental illness, possibly Alzheimer's Disease. That may provide another reason, together with political partition, for twentieth-century readers to involve themselves in such a distant story. But we shall never know for sure what Marques suffered from. All we can say is that his case is like an archaeological section that allows us, by concentrating on a tiny area, to go down deep through the layers of medieval life and the peculiar pressures of a partitioned place.

The background to this story, beyond partition, is war: the Hundred Years War, fought for sovereignty and land between two powers which were both essentially foreign to Rodez, England and France. This war had been going on, in an intermittent succession of truces, pitched battles and wild skirmishes, since 1337. The Treaty of Bretigny, in 1360, gave King Edward III of England lordship over all the lands he had formerly held as a vassal of the King of France,

including, at the furthest eastern edge, 'the City and castle of Rodez and the *pays* of Rouergue'. This, and the broad area stretching westwards to the sandy Atlantic coast of Aquitaine, fell under the charge of the Black Prince, Edward's eldest son, who thus became the suzerain of Rodez. But in 1364 the new king of France, Charles V, re-opened hostilities; and the Count of Rodez, Jean I of Armagnac, who had always been opposed to the Black Prince for his own local reasons, began to gravitate to the French cause. By 1369, the town could be counted in the French camp — but only just.

These grand strategies, however, hardly touched men like Marques. Two other problems bothered them more. The first was that the war had become an endless series of guerrilla eruptions, interrupting trade and travel, terrifyingly unpredictable. The people of Rodez, though physically almost untouched by fighting, were scared of it almost all the time. The town stockpiled food and weapons, and watch duties were organised to involve as many people as possible, even down to teenagers and friars. But the main effect of war, an indirect one, was crippling taxation. It could be said that Marques was ruined by the war between England and France as surely as any traveller who met with mercenaries on the road. And that, too, is part of the story.

The case of Peyre Marques is found in court registers which go into considerable detail. It is possible to hear him talking (in his own words), to hear his neighbours talk, and so to derive a great deal of information about him, his wife, his relations, and the main characters. It is possible to reconstruct dialogue and even to recover chance remarks, and I have tried to do this wherever possible: but only when the material allows it, and where no violence is done either to fact or to the integrity of the actors. History may need the zip of fiction, but any *frisson* it delivers must come from the

fact that what is related really happened, or was really said. So if dialogue occurs in this book, it is as it was spoken then and recorded at the time, and it is not in any way invented; if incidents are recounted, that is because they took place, and I have added nothing to embroider them.

There remains what might be called the careful use of imagination. We are dealing in fact, not fiction; so there is much we can never reconstruct, including what the characters looked like, precisely how they dressed, how most of them talked, the rooms they lived in, their private thoughts. All this must remain unknown. Yet it is no offence to historical truth to describe such things as the blossoming of a pear tree, the stench of rotting meat, the heft of a building stone or the breathlessness of a running man, if these things (as they do) come into the evidence. And they can transport us very quickly. Similarly, if we know the path a man travelled to go home (as in one case we do), and what lay along it, it seems no offence to historical truth to retrace his steps. And if a man makes his opinions clear, it seems fair enough, from time to time, to try to derive from that a little of his character and his state of mind.

Of course, no re-telling of history can be absolutely truthful. Inevitably, certain matters are emphasised, others left out; events may be made more important, or poignant, or funny than they actually were. There is no way round this — round the fact that we live in the twentieth century, with all the judgments and attitudes that modern life implies, and the people whose lives we are reconstructing lived in the fourteenth — except to note that attitudes may not be so different as we imagine. We sometimes suppose, for example, that medieval people were inured to death and less affected by it. And often the evidence will support that. But one witness to a court case, in 1296, when asked how he knew that the accused, one Berengar, was not yet twenty-five years old, replied: 'Because on the feast of St Michael next coming it will be twenty-five years since my

own father died, and then Berengar was still less than a year old and being suckled.' That painful memory was keen enough.

We sometimes imagine, too, that it was a time of casual brutality, when men and women were not particularly squeamish about capital punishment or mutilation. But one court witness around 1350 remembered a man being hanged in a village outside town, rather than on the town gallows, 'at the request of his friends, so that they shouldn't see him'.

In short, the voices in this book are often surprising, and the attitudes unexpected. It may seem unnecessary to get in so close to examine the effects of partition on the way a medieval town organised itself. A strictly academic view might do the job just as well. But towns are the sum of the people who live in them. The advantage of approaching so close to fourteenth-century Rodez is that, when one does so, the medieval crowd splits up into its individual elements; each man or woman can be seen as the neighbour in our street, the passenger on our train, the worker in our office, a human soul, despite the mists of the past.

The place, the sources and the story

I NEVER MEANT to go to Rodez. When I first hit upon the idea of spending three years between Oxford and Somewhere Nice Abroad, I hoped it could be the picture-postcard part of southern France: plenty of vineyards and orchards, cypress trees, the Mediterranean near at hand. But the academic map of medieval France, just like the political map, revealed it as a huge collection of overlapping fiefs in which certain professors already sat in jealous possession. I wanted to study the Albigensians, but was told these were 'spoken for'; to look at the hinterland of Toulouse, but this was already someone's intellectual back yard; to scratch around a little in Perpignan, only to find that both town and region were a domain already conquered, plundered, and carved up.

My supervisor, Peter Lewis at All Souls, suggested I go first to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris to look up the printed catalogue of town records, the *Inventaire Sommaire*. It was a wet spring; Paris, which I never liked because I had learned my French in the south and had an accent Parisians mocked me for, looked frowsy and unlovely; and the *Inventaire* proved disappointing. I wanted to go to the south-west because I knew it and liked it, had friends there, and could think of nothing more appealing than studying under that intense sun, among the red Roman tiles, in an atmosphere thick with garlic, Gitanes and Ricard. But it became slowly clear that I would not be going there; the

treasures were going to be hidden in harder places, even places that, at first sight, I might not like much.

Rodez certainly had treasures, as far as I could judge; pages and pages of fourteenth-century town documents. When I broke the news to my friends in Montauban, the grandfather proffered me a ready explanation. 'Of course it has lots of stuff left. It's such a God-awful place that no-one would want to go there even to sack it.' He turned to his neighbour for confirmation; the neighbour, underlining his words with a wide sweep of ash from a spent cigarette, replied in a growl. 'Rodez? Bé, c'est un assez sale coin.'

My friends agreed to drive me up there in the same cramped 2CV, with flapping side-windows and an armchair for a back seat, in which we had made a joyful pilgrimage to the Roussillon the year before. This journey was different indeed. The road ran north-east and uphill away from broad red fields, peach orchards and baking river beds; it became narrow, winding and grey. The hills closed in; the dry-stone walls began. We crossed limestone moors, bare except for heaps of stones, solitary thistles and sheep that carried the wind in their fleeces. In the villages not a soul stirred. The houses became tall, with slate roofs dark as the rain. Their shutters were no longer to keep the sun out, for there seemed to be no sun in these high valleys. They were evidently closed to keep secrets, like grim old mouths.

Over the two years I spent there, I approached Rodez in a variety of ways; but each time there was the same sense of a journey deep into the interior. If I went by train from Paris I would always seem to reach Cahors, where I had to change, in the middle of the night. The little two-coach train to Figeac, where I had to change again, did not run after ten; I remember half-sitting, half-lying in the waiting room, stiff with lack of sleep, until the buffet opened in the morning for coffee and bread. From Figeac, another small train travelled on to Rodez. By now the track ran in the mountains, through impossibly narrow cuts and rock walls glistening with water,

round improbable bends, into gardens full of cabbages and marigolds, under washing lines, up the backs of grey stone barns. Geese honked on the verges, and trees pinioned to cliffs of rock brushed against the windows. This, at least, is how I remember it, as if it were a train in dreams.

On one summer journey it stopped midway, and we were told that another train would arrive in a couple of hours. I had no idea where we were; the stop seemed to have no name to it. Nothing lay beyond the station but steep meadows high with grass and ox-eye daisies, with a lane on one side and a lazy river on the other. I left my suitcase, which was on the point of disintegrating, and walked out into the sound of birds and flies.

At the top of the lane, under a cliff, was a shabby little bar the colour of the cliff-stone, with dark green paint and awnings, where I was served a bright red grenadine by a surly man with a tea-towel over his arm; and then I walked out into the hayfields. For an hour I sat in company with the shining river and the flies. Once a grey horse came out of nowhere, swishing his tail and tearing thunderously at the grass with a swivel of long teeth. It was an hour when time sat suspended, like a still leaf from a branch: present, past and future coming seamlessly together between the coughs of two small trains.

Journeys like these became a way of acclimatising myself to the isolation of Rodez, like a diver habituating himself to the pressure of the sea. But the town itself remained mysterious. Its history seemed as hidden as its personality. Rodez did not put on airs; it had no pretensions. Its first claim to fame, the huge red sandstone cathedral, was a peculiar mishmash of styles, Gothic, fanciful, fortified and classical; nothing matched on it, and it sat, uncompromisingly, right in the middle of the town. The town's medieval walls had mostly been demolished, and its older buildings had often been bashed about a bit, or hollowed out to take modern shops. This was twenty years

ago; they tell me that the place has now transformed itself, with everything that is old carefully done up and repainted. But Rodez seemed less ambitious then. Around 1974 the town adopted a motto for itself: 'Rodez: Ville Moyenne'. An average place which, like an average woman, would occasionally try to tart itself up by, for example, 'pedestrianising' with livid bricks the alley that led to the Codec supermarket; but which was generally content to stay much as it was.

The alley by the Codec supermarket led also to the archive building; and it was there I uncovered my first secret, the passion of many Rodez folk for the history of their place. At the back of the archives was a grassy yard. This yard was the preserve of one Canac (a name I was to encounter again), a taciturn, dark-skinned young man who wore blue overalls. Canac's job was to fix the erratic plumbing and to move the many objects in the archives that were too heavy for others to shift: bundles of nineteenth-century newspapers, pieces of farm equipment, huge paintings of *notables*, bits of stone. But he spent most of his time sitting on the back step, cigarette in hand, surveying the yard, which was strewn with pieces of column and column base and bits of reddish rock. I asked him about them once. 'They're Monsieur Trémouillé's collection,' he told me. Then, wonderingly: 'You know, it's really old, all that stuff.'

How old was that? Trémouillé himself, who haunted the archives like a busy wasp, had no doubt: these artefacts were Roman, and he turned them up continually. You would see him trotting through the town and up the archive stairs, a cardboard box under his arm, in his scoutmaster's shorts and socks turned over at the top, with his hair crew-cut like a boy's. Out of his box he would tip small mounds of treasures: bits of pot, slivers of column, murky corners of glass. Each piece, with its reddish dusting of mud, would be lifted lovingly between dirty thumb and forefinger to be

brushed and scrutinised. These were the bits and pieces which, I was soon to learn, the people of fourteenth-century Rodez turned up in their gardens too, and decided belonged to the Saracens; but Trémouillé knew better. 'Romain! Romain!' he would mutter, bending over them, giving the word its long southern twang, like a breeze of anisette in the Forum. You could stop him sometimes in the street, in mid-trot, box under arm; he would invariably find time to say 'Such beauties! And Roman!' before he fled away.

Apart from Trémouillé, searching for physical signs of the town's past was a hit-or-miss affair. Sometimes, out in the country, I would notice a place-name that spoke of old aristocracy, but find there was little more to it than that. Châteaux could be seen from the road, half-ruined, or blighted by outcrops of stained cement holding aerials and washing. The shutters were often down, the hedges uncut; they were pieces of old extravagance that pleaded not to be looked at. I went with a friend to trespass on one once, through a scrubby wood and a meadow of long grass. We came out, unexpectedly, on an avenue of limes standing in the same long grass, with a small temple at the end of it. Somebody had smashed the temple, but it still contained paintings of nymphs and shepherds between grey triangles of damp; and we stood for a while there, uncertain whether to feel monarchist regret or Jacobin relief, while the blue Dyane sat brazenly at an angle in the middle of the drive.

But I wanted humbler evidence, too. Going home to my basement flat in the evenings, I would pass certain low arched doorways below the level of the street, sometimes closed with iron grilles, smelling of potatoes and drains; and I would surmise that these were perhaps medieval shops, burrowed into the hill like rabbit warrens. In the cathedral, I would search for medieval remains among the later layers of pious ornament, such as the Christ praying in the Garden on a mat of greengrocer's grass; and it was always a thrill to find those older pieces, whether gargoyle or carving or

tomb, like a touch from far away. But to know the folk of medieval Rodez, as to know their modern counterparts, was going to require much more time and much more digging than that.

The people in the archives, researchers and staff alike, were unfailingly friendly. We were all having fun. Even Madame Fabre, who fetched the documents to the reading room and battled constantly, against the barrage of noise from the school playground outside the window, with her *rhumes* and her *migraines*, seemed positively to enjoy complaining. I would find her often in the ladies' room (which was guarded by a bust of Voltaire) pouting, sighing, adjusting her earrings, and washing down tablets with the iron-tasting tap water. The documents were *putains*, her colleagues *cons*, her children probably the death of her. Beyond the tiny window, out of which she directed her glances and her sighs, lay a grey crowd of rooftops; beyond them the Place de la Cité, lofty, haughty and austere, surrounded by tall grey buildings and loomed over by the cathedral. The square's centrepiece was a statue of a local bishop killed on the Paris barricades in 1848, who now held back with imploring hand the crowds of pigeons that wheeled round him. The motto on his pedestal, *Que mon sang soit le dernier versé*, 'may my blood be the last to be shed', seemed to sum up the martyred air of the fashionable in Rodez, trapped like Madame Fabre in a *ville moyenne*, their high heels impossible in the steep streets, as the wind blew out their hairpins.

The chief archivist himself, a sweet and shy young man, stayed most of the time in his office, for the reading room was a rambunctious place. The deputy archivist, Noël, was a communist. This was in the days when communism still had some glamour in it; and Noël, with his sharp face and little tufted beard, gleaming eyes and polo-necked sweaters, was