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Violent knights in violent times

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Samuel A. Claussen, *Chivalry and violence in late medieval Castile* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020, x + 231 pp., ill., index)

The rise of the Trastámara dynasty in fourteenth-century Spain brought about a turbulent period that greatly affected the political, social, and military history of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon until their union and consolidation by the Catholic monarchs Fernando and Isabel in the 1470s. Internal strife in Castile became almost the norm since the victory of Enrique of Trastámara over his half-brother Pedro the Cruel in 1369 and accompanied a long period of frontier warfare against the kingdom of Granada, which constituted a mere shadow of the splendid history of Muslim rule in al-Andalus. Only when Fernando and Isabel were able to secure their standing did they focus their attention to the finalisation of the *Reconquista* in 1492. Although the continuous internal instability, accompanied by the distinct reality of frontier warfare and violent conquest against Muslim forces in the Iberian Peninsula, greatly affected the image of Castilian society, many of the social and political customs and ideals that characterized Europe north of the Pyrenees penetrated Castilian society and thrived. Like other aspects of medieval political and social trends, chivalry, with its accompanying ideals, functions and practices, was greatly influenced by the unique experience of frontier warfare in the Iberian peninsula, as is clear in the case of the famous and popular *Poema de mio Cid*, for example, but remained very significant to the experience of Castilian politics and society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, nonetheless.

Chivalry and violence in late medieval Castile is the first book by Samuel A. Claussen who, as a student of Richard Kaeuper, one of the most respected authorities on the subject

of knighthood and chivalry, has already published several articles on chivalry in late medieval Europe and seems to be on his way to becoming an authority on the subject in the next several years. As such, Claussen attempts to link the violence that was embedded in the chivalric ethos and the long and destructive civil strife in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Castile. Claussen claims that rather than mainly 'refined courtiers and gentle poets', Castilian knights were 'first and foremost warriors whose primary activity in life was violence' (7). Castilian knighthood's emphasis on its violent function, by which many of the knights promoted and advanced their political and social interests, became, according to Claussen, the heart of the political crisis in late medieval Castile. In a world that revolved around honour, lineage (*linaje*) and the practice of violence as part of a divine plan, chivalric ideals and practice were not in any way, as some scholars claimed, a driving and positive force that helped in building the structures of a more modern society. Claussen sets out to prove that Castilian knights were mostly 'concerned with wielding their swords to protect their honor' (12), rather than with attempts at securing the kingdom or assisting kings with doing so. Focusing on romances, biographies and chronicles, the author seeks to prove that chivalric ideals and practices that highly valorised violence against nobles, knights and commoners alike, was a serious and central destabilising force in late medieval Castile.

Divided into five main chapters, the book explores how the political identity of the Trastámara nobility 'was founded on chivalric violence' (30) and how the nobility's attempts to secure that identity led to violent clashes among the nobles themselves and the Trastámara kings. Regardless of any efforts at checking actual violence, 'chivalric ideology actually encouraged violent behavior' by placing high significance on honour, loyalty, and their preservation by force. From the violent rise of Enrique III in 1369 and well into the second half of the fifteenth century, violence was a major tool in the politics in Castile mainly in connection to the chivalric ethos and the way Castilian nobles and knights preferred to interpret it.

Combined with these violent activities among themselves, the second chapter goes on to claim that Castilian knights (and European knighthood in general to some extent) believed that they had 'a right to commit violence by virtue of their unique ability to possess, defend, and augment honor' and that the elite's violence towards commoners 'caused intense disruption to the common folk of Castile' (70). As knights valued their honour far more than the lives of those who were not nobles or knights, violence towards them was not only accepted, but at times even required for the augmentation of one's honour. One's right to wreak havoc or take place in the chivalric 'game' to begin with was also strongly attached to his *linaje*, a narrative that was highly important in late medieval biographies and chronicles. That reality was clearly detrimental to the social upheavals of late medieval Castile.

The third chapter explores the claim that 'holy war remained theoretically the greatest achievement for late medieval Castilian knights' (107) and that frontier warfare as part of a far less vivacious part of the Reconquista in the period under discussion was also a place where 'knights could *best* (indented in original) win honor' (107). Contemporary sources sharply conveyed the idea that '[f]ighting against religious enemies earns knights not only the honor which they always win while fighting, but merits special recognition from God' (121), whether the fight ended in victory or martyrdom. The expectations of knights from their monarchs to advance holy war against the kingdom of Granada, or at least support it,

were a central theme in the political turmoil of the Trastámara dynasty. Kings who were reluctant to provide their knights with chances of holy war could expect a tougher response from their subordinates in main political crossroads, a response that could entail grave political and social repercussions for Castile.

The fourth chapter delves into the world on violence between Christians and attempts to demonstrate that 'the chivalric ideology of the Trastámara nobility placed such a high premium on honour achieved through violence that a Christian neighbour was a viable target against whom violence could be perpetrated and honour vindicated or won' (146). The will and ability to prove their honour to each other provided strong incentives for noble families and individuals to test their standings in Castilian society through violence and war. While attempts were made throughout the Christian world to mitigate this intra-Christian violence, the knights themselves saw these wars as perfectly compatible with their overall adherence to violence as a basic part of their social and political identities, greatly contributing to the instability of late medieval Castile.

The final chapter deals with the potential role of women in the world of chivalry in late medieval Castile. The fact that women constituted one of the most significant motivations for the gaining of honour, reputation, and status was central to chivalric literature in medieval Europe and Castile was no exception. Chivalry was a masculine domain and women were either the inspiration for acts of violence, or the targets for it. Although chivalry disdained violence towards the weak, women were not exempt from sexual violence by men-at-arms and, as in many cases, a deep chasm separated ideals from reality. The chapter closes with an interesting discussion on the role of Isabel I, Queen of Castile, as a role model for Christian piety on the one hand, but a fierce leader of military campaigns and a main contributor to the war against the enemies of the faith on the other.

While Claussen indeed succeeds in highlighting the interesting link between the political and social turbulences in late medieval Castile and the chivalric ideals that were embedded in the self-perception of Castile's knights and nobles, the somewhat small number of sources employed seems a bit perplexing. The author mentions several times phrases like 'in nearly all our sources' (75), 'in the chronicles' (76), 'most accounts' (133), '[c]hroniclers and knightly writers' (133), 'several different chronicles' (139), 'the pages of romances are rife with examples' (164), but goes on to provide only a few of them, which makes it difficult for the reader to comprehend the actual scope of the literary evidence. At least on one occasion (135), the author employs only one source by Fernán Pérez de Guzmán to offer some important insights on a very interesting discussion of politics and holy war in fifteenth-century Castile. On several other occasions (43, 52, 55, 69, 78, 84, 143, 189, 195) the author suggests that the reader use his/her imagination, which, although far from being inherently wrong, seems to be employed one too many times. In general, and considering the fact that this is not a general narrative or a text-book, the study could have benefitted from the inclusion of a wider range and larger number of primary sources in order to secure the foundations of some of its main, and quite interesting, arguments.

Some aspects will require further investigation, especially with the objective of highlighting the exceptionality of the Castilian experience in mind. The disruption of society, violence against the population, and the inherent dissonance in the ideals and practices of

chivalry can be found throughout medieval Europe and were relevant and highly influential in areas where holy war was not as central to the experience of knights and nobles as it was in late medieval Castile and Aragon. This book demonstrates that Claussen indeed has the will, knowledge, and abilities to delve further into these significant aspects of late medieval Spain.

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