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## Review of Samuel Claussen, *Chivalry and Violence in Late Medieval Castile*

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**Claussen, Samuel A. *Chivalry and Violence in Late Medieval Castile*. Warfare in History Series, Vol. 48. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2020. 244 pp.**

Henry II Trastámara came to power in 1369 by putting a dagger into the face of his half-brother, Peter I “the Cruel” (29-30). This was a violent coup—the successful assassination of a legitimate monarch. Thus, when they set out to rule Castile, the Trastámara usurpers had a legitimacy problem. Making new nobles out of their co-conspirators (such as the Mendoza) and then cultivating a positive relationship with the nobility as a whole were central strategies to the Trastámara taking and holding power. To do so, they would need to fruitfully engage with chivalric ideas, which were at the foundation of nobles’ worldview. Tracing the development of this story, Samuel A. Claussen’s *Chivalry and Violence in Late Medieval Castile* is a fascinating and significant intervention in the interpretation of Castilian history from 1369 to 1474, a period often ignored by medievalists and early modernists alike.

At the heart of the book is the key role of the martial nobility in Castile’s political and cultural history. They claimed both the right to “traditional knightly autonomy” as well as “a voice in government” (30). They used a discourse of loyalty to the crown to couch any political actions they took as acts of chivalric virtue, even if those actions were to depose a specific king through violence (32, 51). The nobles were a major political force, and so Claussen blames the many civil conflicts of this period on the Trastámara being “slow to recognize the power of chivalry” (144). Knights were willing to kill kings, peasants, and townsmen; they killed Muslims as well as their fellow Christians to pursue power and defend their personal honor. The first four chapters of the book, “Knights and Kings,” “Knights and Commoners,” “Holy War,” and “War against Christians,” all lay out this argument, with key examples from the chronicles.

Building on his analysis of abundant chronicles, chivalric biographies, literary sources, and royal correspondence, Claussen paints a complex picture of noble and royal *mentalité* in late medieval Castile. In the chapter on “Holy War,” Claussen turns a critical eye to the way fifteenth-century chroniclers employed the stories of King Rodrigo and the fall of the Visigoths to craft a royal origin myth as well as an impetus for expansion southwards during their own era (116-118). In the chapter, “Chivalry, Men, and Women,” Claussen uses a late-fifteenth-century Castilian chronicle that compared Isabella of Castile to Joan of Arc to show how female leaders embraced violence and holy war and were celebrated for it. This chapter will be of great interest to historians of gender and queenship. It identifies *La Ponce de France* as a revealing text which deserves more scholarly attention (196-204). *Chivalry and Violence* ends with the fall of Granada in 1492 and Isabella’s dreams fulfilled, the launch of Columbus, and the sending of other violent conquistadors to continue similar expansion abroad. By connecting the Catholic

Kings to their Trastámara forebears, Claussen has filled a major gap among English-language political and cultural histories dealing with Ferdinand and Isabella.

In the debate between Maurice Keen and Richard Kaeuper over the essence of medieval chivalric culture (Keen, 1984, Kaeuper, 1999, 2009), Claussen stands squarely with Kaeuper, extending Kaeuper's religious ideology of chivalry from twelfth-century France and England to fourteenth and fifteenth-century Castile. Claussen and Kaeuper do not see chivalry as a set of ideas controlling or channeling violence in any way, originating in the Peace and Truce of God of the early Middle Ages. Rather, they identify chivalry itself as the catalyst for violence because it encouraged knights to defend their honor (31). While Joseph O'Callaghan in *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (2004) saw Iberian crusading as periodic, opportunistic, and tied to a relationship with Rome, Claussen argues that the "Reconquista" was a pervasive part of the late medieval Castilian chivalric *mentalité* (115). In fact, since Claussen sees holy war as a fundamental aspect of chivalry, he calls Juan II's choice to maintain a truce with Granada his "failure to embrace chivalry" (134). From another angle, Juan's relationship with his new vassal Yusuf IV (r. 1431-1432) might be considered deeply chivalric—*Abenamar*, *Abenamar* was a frontier ballad written to glamorize it to his contemporaries. Other scholars, not cited by Claussen, have also analyzed the ways Iberian Muslims and Christians shared both chivalry and aesthetics. These include Jerrilynn D. Dodds, María Rosa Menocal and Abigail Krasner Balbale, 2008; Barbara Fuchs, 2009; and Ana Echevarría, 2009.

In his conclusion to *Chivalry and Violence*, Claussen argues that it was Isabella of Castile's adept employment of female chivalric culture and her enthusiasm for the crusade against Granada that pacified the Castilian nobility and led to the ultimate success of her unifying political project with Ferdinand of Aragon. The Catholic Kings had "reckoned with chivalry and its practitioners" and *that* was what allowed for Spain to have a Golden Age (211). Significantly, the other factors that John H. Elliott and others have pointed to (John H. Elliott, 1963 and 2002)—Ferdinand's take-over of the military orders, his and Isabella's employment of the Inquisition or the *hermandad*—any of their institutional reforms—are not highlighted as causes, just that the rulers improved the crown's relationship with the Castilian nobility. The argument that the crown's relationship with the nobles and noble chivalric culture was alone responsible for the success of the Catholic Kings is certainly thought-provoking.

Claussen connects Castile's *Irmandiños* revolt with the English Peasants' Revolt and the *Ciompi* in Florence—but considering these, I wonder if "from a social standpoint, knights exercised a near monopoly on violence" (103). England, France, and Spain all emerged as new monarchies in the early sixteenth century, after a period of late medieval instability and civil war—England's conflict between

crown and country certainly took even longer than this to sort out. Claussen argues Ferdinand and Isabella successfully joined with the chivalric priorities of their nobility. But technological change is also part of this story, and the domestication of the nobility is a long-term process which may not have even been complete in Louis XIV's bedchamber in Versailles. Claussen could have engaged with several significant historiographies here: the concept of "courtierization," the infantry revolution, and the artillery revolution, post-1450, which a "siege strategist" (198) like Isabella used to her advantage, as well as overall debates regarding the military revolution of early modern Europe, a revolution which had deep roots in the late Middle Ages.

Opening up a number of avenues for further research, *Chivalry and Violence in Late Medieval Castile* is a critical intervention in both the political and cultural history of Castile, as well as in the histories of chivalry, queenship, and the nobility. The book points to a lively continuation of the Keen vs. Kaeuper debate and will be of great interest to historians of Spain and of European chivalry alike.

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