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Review of: Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco, *Order and Chivalry: Knighthood and Citizenship in Late Medieval Castile*

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Rodríguez-Velasco, Jesús. *Order and Chivalry: Knighthood and Citizenship in Late Medieval Castile*. The Middle Ages. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 292 pp.

*Order and Chivalry* is Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco's take on the rise of an urban aristocracy in late medieval Spain, and how this new class, or *ordo*, used the language of chivalry – traditionally the possession of the landed, military nobility – to secure new connections to royal power and demand new privileges for itself. He does this by examining the foundational documents of several military orders, including some, like the Cofradía de Santiago de Burgos, founded by and for the urban elite, and comparing them with the fantasies of ennoblement found in contemporary chivalric literature. One constant theme is the “poetics of the *ordo*,” or how the rising bourgeoisie crafted language and ritual in such a way as to try to shape a new reality of power in Castilian government and society.

Rodríguez-Velasco begins by describing the tension in the ritual of knighthood. The king wanted knighthood to be a political rank, conferred by him, making the new knight his subject, while the nobility argued that knighting was a quasi-sacramental act, with one knight welcoming another into an equal status without any implication of lordship. He goes on to describe the creation in 1315 of an urban knightly fraternity in Burgos, consisting of bourgeoisie and minor nobility from cities throughout Castile, with the goal of inserting themselves into the royal administration and especially on the regency council of Alfonso XI. This *hermandad* was unusual in lacking a royal or papal sponsor, instead the urban elite used traditional chivalric language to establish legitimacy for their new, self-created institution. He then turns his attention to the establishment of two knightly confraternities in Burgos, representing a bid by the newly assertive elite for local preeminence. Meanwhile Alfonso XI, now an adult, created the first monarchical order of chivalry in Europe, the Order of the Sash, as an attempt to sideline the autonomous military orders with a prestigious order under his control. Rodríguez-Velasco then considers the heraldry of the Order of the Sash and of the Burgos confraternities, whose heraldic signs differed from that of the traditional nobility because they were meant to launch new lineages, rather than root already well-established families in a mythical heroic past.

Or at least I think that is what Rodríguez-Velasco argues, but it is hard to tell, since the book is full of convoluted writing and theoretical jargon. This is the kind of book that cites Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Certeau, Derrida, Foucault,

Habermas, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Rorty, Sartre, and Weber, but not Simon Barton's work on the medieval Castilian aristocracy or the work of James Amelang and James Casey on Spanish urban elites in a later period. The results are passages like this one: "The poetics of the chivalric *ordo* has its own inchoate character, is always reinventing itself, articulating new theses of monarchical power. Each regulation is also a thesis on the amplitude of monarchical power and the strategies to extend it. It is a *movement*, a *displacement*, the occupation of a space and a territory. A political space, a geographic territory. This centrifugal movement that departs from the legal voice and the royal chamber where the body of the king resides is an investigation of the very monarchical jurisdiction." (135).

This could have been done well, as Rodríguez-Velasco invokes cutting-edge ideas about archival practices and the occupation of space. But his evidentiary base is thin: just a handful of foundational documents and romances, and he labors over concepts that are not capable of bearing the weight he puts on them. For example, when discussing the ritual practices described in the foundational books of the confraternities of Burgos, he describes the urban geography of the rituals in a way that comes across not as path-breaking, like the work of Carol Symes or Daniel Lord Smail (he cites the work of neither), but clumsy and over-interpreted: "There inheres a deictic link between the book and the city: the text of the book identifies, ordains, and configures the city itself." (93). He is over-committed to the notion that the written word shapes reality; it seems more likely that the founders of the confraternity planned their urban rituals in person and wrote the text as a memorandum than that writing the book was itself a constituent act. As to "archival practices," all he really means by invoking this phrase is simply that the confraternities in Burgos wanted to control their own membership. In the end, Rodríguez-Velasco is more interested in engaging with twentieth-century theorists than with fourteenth-century writers and actors.

One might object that, as a historian, this reviewer is prejudiced against a style of writing that is common in literary studies. But the author and the press have positioned *Ordo and Chivalry* as a historical monograph, hoping to speak to readers such as myself. Unfortunately, the language chosen and the theories applied in this book obscure much more than they illuminate.

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