

Feud, Violence and Practice. Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White

Review Number:

1015

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 January, 2011

Editor:

Belle Tuten

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ISBN:

9780754664116

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

350pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Farnham

Reviewer:

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Stephen D. White is a well-known scholar of the medieval period whose work in the last 30 years has done much to elucidate a wide range of historical topics, from dispute processing to the Bayeux Tapestry. A collection titled *Feud, Violence and Practice* in his honour with essays penned by colleagues, friends and students thus seems entirely appropriate at a time when financial crisis has left large parts of Europe grappling with questions about the practice and legality of anger and violence.

The 15 essays in this collection are divided into three parts. The first part, entitled 'Feud and violence', comprises five essays. In the first – a lively analysis – W. I. Miller discusses the role of threat in medieval society, suggesting that 'threats ... often work when you leave your opponent with the 'advantage' of being able to make choices, and let him know that you have deprived yourself of the same' (p. 11). Miller considers that medieval people were 'masters of threat and spent ... a good portion of their social lives cultivating threat advantage, or undermining that of their opponents and competitors' (p. 14). Miller's reasoning is then amply illustrated with examples from the Icelandic sagas.

Moving on to real acts of violence as opposed to threats thereof, feud has been a much discussed topic among medieval historians yet John Hudson shows in an insightful analysis the difficulty of defining the term precisely. He notes, for instance, that the modern word feud is not simply a translation of a medieval word that stood for a particular medieval phenomenon and concept (p. 33) – a conclusion that complements other studies of related words such as war and peace.⁽¹⁾ Furthermore, surveying specific instances of long-

running violent disputes in England in the 10th to the 12th centuries, Hudson argues that it is difficult in terms both of definition and evidence to say 'how common or how significant feud was in England' (p. 51).

Kate McGrath discusses how texts describing displays of noble anger tended to conform to conventionalised scenarios of expectation and expression of anger (pp. 57–8). McGrath shows that medieval writers, by conforming (or not) to these expectations and expressions, projected notions of shame, honour, and good and bad lordship on the Anglo-Norman nobility. Most importantly, she shows that anger and vengeance were almost always appropriate behaviour as long as there was provocation and as long as the expression of anger was proportionate.

Moving on from lay violence the last two articles deals with violence from a religious perspective. Dominique Barthélemy shows how the *Miracles of Saint Benedict* contain a large number of healings of the insane or 'frenzied'. Unlike the lay anger and violence encountered in the previous essays, this is uncontrolled demonic anger, which can only be remedied by the blessing of a saint. Caroline Bynum turns away from societal anger and violence to explore the late medieval devotion to the wound in Christ's side, in particular the occluding of 'the devotee's sense of suffering as inflicted *on* him' (p. 98). Reflecting deeper religious and cultural changes towards the end of the medieval period, Bynum shows how Christ's wound came to be understood as less the result of violence and more as a 'building' with 'a window or door from which Church emerges ... and through which the devout enter to find protection and salvation' (p. 116).

Part two, under the heading 'Legal culture and feudalism', opens with two fine essays by Frederic L. Cheyette and Elizabeth A. R. Brown. Here, they return to an issue over which historians have spilled much ink, namely feudalism. Cheyette's essay traces the development of the use of the word feudalism and how it has in modern times come to divide opinions among scholars between those who believe in the usage of the term and the concept and those who don't. Cheyette concludes that the origins of the term lie more firmly in the 16th and 17th centuries than in the medieval period and that 'in all its guises, the term feudalism is thoroughly contaminated by the political-ideological polemics' of that period (p. 130). Brown's contribution follows a similar argument and notes in addition that the feudal constructs were devised in the early modern period 'to provide a simple, easily understandable explanation of the origins of contemporary institutions and practices'. Crucially, Brown notes, 'the inventors were for the most part not archival scholars' (p. 141).

Isabel Alfonso Antón investigates the many ways in which disputes were resolved in the medieval period by looking at the practice of negotiation in Castile and León. She highlights the interdependence of 'royal justice, arbitral justice and negotiated resolutions' and how litigants 'strategically use the possibilities available to them' (p. 169). Thus, she argues, contrary to modern beliefs, it was not the aim of every negotiation 'to achieve peace ... rather it serves to reproduce the power relations generated by conflicts, to change them, or simply to limit them' (p. 173–4).

Considering another aspect of legal culture, Paul Hyams gives a thought-provoking analysis of the problem of language and law in England after the Norman Conquest. He highlights the fact that legal practice in this period must reasonably have operated on a tri-lingual basis and then examines the contribution of French to the vocabulary of the early common law, concluding that 'the French elements' of this legal culture may have been stronger than scholars have previously appreciated.

Staying with terminology Robert Bartlett examines the legal status of 'enmity' and shows, through a number of different documents, that enmity was a separate legal category and deeds done against an enemy was treated differently to deeds done against someone who was not an enemy (p. 200). He also examines the difficulties which such categorisation caused in attempting to regulate and limit enmity and violence in the later medieval period and beyond.

Richard E. Barton continues the focus on language and terminology whilst at the same time providing a nice conclusion to part two by returning to the debate around feudalism and the so-called feudal revolution or mutation. Here, Barton investigates the concept and practice of 'clamor' in western France, arguing that by the year 1000 this word had come to be understood as 'one of several appropriate words for any legal

complaint made in public to some sort of authority' (p. 219). Legal clamors, argues Barton, were relatively common, reinforced 'local political and personal bonds between litigants and their lords and neighbors', and were expected to lead to a non-violent settlement of the dispute (p. 229). Clamors, like violence, were thus part of 'a spectrum of strategic options' open to all parties (p. 233). With this Barton concludes that western France did not necessarily see a model of judicial collapse and chaos, i.e. a 'feudal mutation', instead justice could be obtained provided that one made a 'clamor' to the right people and backed it up with proof (p. 234).

The third and final part of this *festschrift* is entitled 'Reading, re-reading and practice' and starts off with an essay on how to date a work of art, and thereby focus the investigation, in the absence of inscriptions, cartulary entries or references to the life span of a donor. Through a case study of the Miracles of St Andrew window in Troyes cathedral, Elizabeth Carson Pastan shows how it is possible to tease out a crusading context for the subject of the window with a connection to Count Thibaud IV of Champagne and his interest in the relics and cult of St Andrew.

In the second essay of this final part, Cynthia J. Johnson returns to expressions of anger (*ira*) and the practice of disputing by looking at one particular case from the south of France. As noted by Johnson, studies of disputes tend to focus on noble males and thus her contribution, involving a mother and a daughter from a family of town notables, is a welcome one. Johnson shows that the dispute went through a very clear process ending in a 'ritualised' public event. This is particularly interesting because here we can see two women participating in behaviour – promises on bent knees sealed with the kiss of peace – usually only found between men (p. 271). Here, Johnson clearly draws on and complements Stephen White's own work on dispute resolution in western France and concludes that the same framework of peacemaking operating as a process of self-regulation with negotiation, compromise and the intervention of friends looming large, can also be seen in this particular case from Arles.[\(2\)](#)

The penultimate essay by Annette P. Parks highlights the much neglected topic of female hostages in the medieval period. Through two case studies, Eleanor of Brittany and Beatrice the 'Damsel of Cyprus', Parks follows the fate of the two women during their captivity at the hands of successive kings. The focus is, perhaps inevitably given the nature of our sources, on the women's importance as bargaining tools in diplomacy; that is, they were repeatedly offered up for marriages. This is a good discussion of which the only downside is that it does not clearly set out how these two case studies fit in with the broader context of hostages in the medieval period.[\(3\)](#)

Finally, this collection of essays ends with a study of treason by Karen Bosnos. Her investigation shows that treason was not only a problematic legal concept in 12th-century England and Normandy, it was one that was usually solved through arbitration rather than punishment due to the powerful influence of aristocratic communities and the reliance upon personal relationships of friends and kins (pp. 298–9). Only in the rarest of circumstances, Bosnos argues, did high-status nobles suffer the most extreme penalties (death or mutilation) for their acts of resistance (pp. 301–2). She concludes that treason trials were thus decided by noble peers 'on a case by case basis following legal custom and political expediency, without obvious recourse to prescriptive law', and those unfortunate few who suffered the harshest treatment, did so 'when their social connections failed them' (p. 305).

This is a fitting tribute to Stephen D. White, many of whose contributions to scholarship are essential reading on most university undergraduate courses on medieval Europe. In years to come this *festschrift* should also find a place there as many of the contributors provide new perspectives on well-known historiographical problems or highlight hitherto neglected topics. Most of the contributions to this collection are, moreover, easy to follow, and written in a lively and engaging way. For instance, I defy anyone not to enjoy and recognise themselves in Miller's description of the behaviour one goes through to indicate to others that you have a legitimate purpose for standing around on a street corner while 'waiting to be picked up ... and your ride is late': looking at your watch, making faces of impatience, pulling out your mobile phone, and intermingling all three while over-acting (p. 11). Most importantly, this is a well-edited, organised, and thought-out collection with 15 strong essays.

Notes

1. R. I. Moore, 'Postscript', in *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000*, ed. Thomas Head and Richard Landes (Ithaca, NY, 1992), p. 308; Gina Fasoli, 'Pace e guerra nell'alto medioevo', *Settimane di studio del centro italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo*, XV, *Ordinamenti militari in Occidente nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 1968), repr. in *Scritti di Storia Medievale*, ed. G. Fasoli et al. (Bologna, 1974), p. 80; J. E. M. Benham, *Peacemaking in the Middle Ages: Principles and Practice* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 3, 190–5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Many of White's essays dealing with these issues have now been collected in Stephen D. White, *Feuding and Peace-Making in Eleventh-Century France* (Aldershot, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The best introduction on hostages is still Adam J. Kosto, 'Hostages in the Carolingian world (714–840)', *Early Medieval Europe*, 11 (2002), 123–47.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The editors thank the reviewer for her insights and have no wish to comment further.

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