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Susanna A. Throop and Paul R. Hyams, eds., *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. ix + 232 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-6421-5.

Review by Geoffrey Koziol, University of California, Berkeley.

In his “Afterword” to *Vengeance in the Middle Ages*, Paul Hyams eschews the attempt to force its essays into order or synthesis, and with good reason: not only are the articles unusually varied in topics and periods, they also adopt wildly different scholarly discourses and sometimes implicitly contradictory models. Yet I found this heterogeneity to be the volume’s greatest virtue. Medievalists often read widely only in their particular field. *Vengeance in the Middle Ages* gives us a pied treasury of scholarship. And in place of broad syntheses, the articles provide dense and full analyses of discrete texts or genres that offer grist for readers’ own thoughts.

A good example is Jackson W. Armstrong’s “The ‘Fyre of Ire Kyndild,’” a close narrative of an ongoing conflict in the fifteenth-century Scottish Borders. Any medievalist who works on feud (or law) will come away from Armstrong’s account appreciating the complete inadequacy of our usual sources in accurately representing medieval conflict. For Armstrong has the kinds of sources that allow him to trace in detail political relationships and agendas in ways that are impossible for most of the middle ages. As a result, his account makes it apparent just how important such relationships and agendas are for understanding conflict. At the same time, it is still somewhat gratifying to see that many of the models recently used by medievalists to interpret “feuds” are borne out in this well-documented case. For example, we see that contemporaries really did perceive a sequence of disputes as elements in a single, long-term conflict, despite periods of quiescence and a changing cast of characters. There really was a tendency for grievances between two parties to escalate in ways that dragged in more important leaders until the dispute could be definitively settled. In fact, a final settlement was not possible until such leaders became involved. Final settlements really did need to restructure the entire relationship between parties, so that the “friendship” established by such settlements was not a fiction but a publicly recognized state of affairs, with multiple cross-cutting marital ties between the parties and compromises over rights and patronage that knit the parties together in mutually beneficial, ongoing relationships. “Borders” really did generate more “feud-like” conflicts, because such regions were characterized by unstable and competing sodalities and lines of authority. The local and the supra-local were not mutually exclusive arenas but tightly knit together, local conflicts tapping into supra-local competition and vice-versa.

An entirely different perspective is offered by François Soyer’s study of what seems to have been a feud among fifteenth-century Muslims in the Portuguese city of Évora. Soyer begins with a particular kind of royal privilege of the period, one giving Muslims (and Jews) the right to bear arms in public. This discussion is interesting enough in its own right, for Soyer shows that Jews and Muslims could participate in military campaigns (usually in supporting, logistical roles), that they accordingly did bear arms, and that the civil restrictions imposed on their bearing arms were not about owning weapons but about carrying them in public. However, the heart of Soyer’s argument is that Muslims sought such privileges not to display their status before their communities (as he suggests was the case with Jews) but to protect themselves from

vengeance from other Muslims. To that end, he reconstructs the lineaments of just such a conflict within the Évoran Muslim community over the civil leadership of the community (the *alcalde*) and the power it gave Muslims over Muslims.

I am generally not a fan of Kristevan literary analysis, but I would make at least a partial exception for Marina S. Brownlee's interpretation of the *Historie of Aurelio and Isabell*, a sixteenth-century translation of Juan de Flores' fifteenth-century *Grisel y Mirabella*. I had never heard of either text before, but the *Historie* turns out to have been one of the most popular stories of the period, and was frequently published in parallel translations to aid readers in learning foreign languages. In Brownlee's interpretation – deconstructionist in language and intent but still persuasive overall – the issue in the poem hinges on the King's scarcely veiled incestuous desire for his daughter Isabell and his ensuing refusal to allow her to marry, leading her to take a lover, Aurelio. When the couple is found out, a panel of judges cannot decide on which was responsible, so they stage a “War of the Sexes” debate between Afranio and Hortensia, each advocate cynically arguing that the opposite sex deceives and that love is nothing but manipulation. In the end, Afranio bribes the judges to side with him, leading Hortensia to decry the injustice and argue that women would be better off killing their infant sons rather than see them grow up to “laugh at our tears.”

But the two true lovers contradict this practice of power and deception. When Isabell is about to be cast onto the pyre, Aurelio jumps into the fire instead, while Isabell throws herself into a den of lions who rip apart her flesh – thus being killed by the emblem of her father's royal identity. But now come further deception and violence: Afranio feigns love for Hortensia simply to be able to boast of a conquest. Hortensia uses the opportunity to destroy him, she and other women capturing him when he enters her chamber, binding him, burning him with hot tongs, and tearing apart his flesh with their nails and teeth. Borrowing interestingly and productively from Bakhtin, Brownlee argues that the entire story teaches that the language of authority and justice is a counterfeit. The king's justice masks incest, rewards bribery, fosters deception, and fails to recognize true love. Brownlee concludes that the *Historie* exemplifies “a new attitude toward language,” one found in a variety of works that presage the Bakhtinian novel, whose hallmark is “a negative, skeptical, nominalist recasting of the early medieval discursive principle” that had presumed identity between signifier and signified.

I have spent the most time on these three articles because I found their inclusion in a volume on medieval vengeance so unexpected – and so unexpectedly rewarding. Of the other articles, some are excellent, some less than convincing, but many are interesting and important, and one learns from all of them. Máire Johnson examines the vengeance of Irish saints, concentrating especially on the earliest Latin and vernacular lives. She first provides a typology of saintly vengeance: the conjuring of vengeance by prayer alone; by prayer and fasting; by outright malediction; and the prediction of vengeful punishment by prophecy. She then discusses the frequency of such different actions by period, genre, and above all gender, and traces the precedents and allusions associated with each type. She finds that vengeful acts by male Irish saints tended to be compared to vengeful acts by Old Testament figures (particularly Moses and Elijah) and figures of the New Testament apocrypha (Peter and Paul). However, a female saint like Brigit tended not to curse but to pray and fast, while her prayer and her fasting were almost exclusively modelled on the words and actions of Christ. In further contrast to the male saints, Brigit's prayer leads to acts of penance by sinners and acts of forgiveness by the saint herself. Equally noteworthy are the early appearance of the “cursing psalms” in the first lives of Patrick, and the way rules of fasting and hospitality in early Irish law find clear echoes in the lives' treatment of the saints' fasting and expectation of hospitality.

If Jonathan Riley-Smith taught us that crusading could be “an act of love,” Susanna Throop examines it as an act of vengeance. Most historians have assumed that as a “primitive” motivation, vengeance appeared more frequently in First Crusade narratives than in later ones. Throop finds the exact opposite: crusading as vengeance became a more common trope in the course of the twelfth century. This was due to the growing sophistication of twelfth-century discussions of “zeal,” as the church tried to both increase and take advantage of religious fervor – against heretics and to an extent against Jews and Muslims, but also in support of a spiritually awakened Christian life of *imitatio Christi*. As part of the discourse of *imitatio Christi*, zeal accordingly had a strongly sacrificial component. Yet while promoting zeal, the Church also needed to limit its possible excesses. This it did by promoting two restraining principles: zeal had to be tempered by knowledge, and it had to be oriented to a good end. All this could be and was harnessed for crusading propaganda, the crusades being touted as acts of self-sacrificing vengeance performed in zeal against those legitimately regarded as the enemies of Christ. Far from being a “primitive” justification limited to the early crusades, vengeance was integrated into an increasingly sophisticated understanding of Christian lay piety and a more precise discourse of alterizing.

Dominique Barthélemy provides a perhaps overly schematic summary of work that has already appeared in French, though by virtue of being schematic it is also very suggestive and makes one eager to read more. Examining the tenth-century chroniclers Flodoard and Richer, Barthélemy finds that both narrate conflicts in ways that are broadly suggestive of a feuding mentality without either ever explicitly describing those conflicts as feuds. Richer in particular seems keenly aware of lay values that shaped such conflicts—perhaps having absorbed them from his father, a military technician in Louis IV’s household—for his accounts consistently highlight the importance of vengeance and honor, and also the importance of public meetings in which narratives of vengeance and honor were shaped to justify acts of violence and disloyalty. Nevertheless, examined closely, not even Richer seems to be describing what modern historians would understand as feuds, that is, the avenging of personal wrongs through acts of violence against individuals. Rather, in both Flodoard and Richer violence was directed against castles, vengeance exercised on the lands and peasants of rivals. This displacement of violence is Barthélemy’s real concern, as he argues that the language of “vassalage” had “a true social function”: that is, it deflected attention away from the sufferings of peasants who bore the brunt of violence and instead focused attention on the putative virtues of the aristocracy that perpetrated the violence.

Studying Orderic Vitalis’ treatments of vengeance in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Thomas Roche (rightly) finds two clearly different narrative strategies. In recounting events of the distant past, Orderic tends to narrate conflicts in ways that clearly delineate them as feuds: they extend over a long period of time, across multiple generations, with acts of violence retaliating for earlier acts of violence. The closer Orderic comes to his own period, the less this feuding structure is in evidence. Instead, acts of violence are “one-offs,” tactical or strategic actions taken for immediate political advantage. The question is whether this difference represents a real change in patterns of violence or simply a different narrative strategy by Orderic – more distant events being given sense and a kind of heroic stature by being represented according to an epic narrative form. Wisely, Roche only poses the question, recognizing that a definitive answer is hard to come by on the basis of Orderic alone.

For other questions he does hazard conclusions. Incidentally offering support for Barthélemy’s argument, Roche finds that the more knowledgeable Orderic is about events (that is, the more he is writing about his own times), the less violence is committed against persons and the more it targets lands and peasants. Roche also point out that Orderic describes the emotions associated with vengeance in baldly schematic terms: the emotions seem to be acting as demonstrative

signifiers that justify and therefore publicly legitimate the acts to be taken. Crucial, then, was the public's judgment about the legitimacy of an act of violence. Parties therefore expended a great deal of effort trying to mold that judgment. Hence, after acts of violence, both perpetrators and victims quickly acted to shape public interpretation of the violence as an accident, as a rebellion, as vengeance. Given such strategies, Roche concludes that it is hard to speak of any "objective offense" giving rise to vengeance. Rather, there was "a process of the social assessment of particular acts."

Finally, in a kind of postscript to his own *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (Ithaca, 2003), Paul Hyams addresses the competing view of Guy Halsall ("Violence and society in the early medieval west," in *Violence and Society in the Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall [Woodbridge, UK, 2003]). Halsall argued for a heuristic distinction between "feud" and "vengeance." "Feud" was reciprocal, tit-for-tat, and therefore on-going. "Vengeance" was a "one-off" retaliation that effectively ended conflict. Armed with these definitions, Halsall further argued that although one can find true feuds in the middle ages—particularly in Icelandic sagas but also in William the Conqueror's Norman minority (though both assessments might be contradicted by Roche's argument that "feuding" could be an epic narrative emplotment)—they are exceedingly rare. Ordinarily, disputes were ended by acts of "customary vengeance," so that no feud ensued. As to the compensations common in early medieval law codes, Halsall believed that their payment was seen as an honorable way to end a dispute, whereas in true feuding societies accepting compensation was shameful, the response of those who lacked the power (or, one might add, public standing) to sustain a true feud. Hyams accepts Halsall's point that many acts of vengeance in the middle ages did not lead to ongoing feuds.

Yet he also believes that Halsall's distinction between true feud and customary vengeance is a little specious—"a distinction without a difference." In the societies under discussion, no true one-off act of vengeance existed, for where people knew each other and could not escape continuing interaction, future retaliation always remained a possibility. More important, Hyams argues that feuding was a "discourse," and that Halsall's "customary vengeance" has no meaning outside of it. That is, even when acts of vengeance were "one-offs," vengeance was still retaliatory and retaliation part of a *system* of retaliation. Feuding was a process, a practice. Feuding and vengeance alike involved perceptions (and strategies to shape perceptions in others): the judgment, for example, that an act of violence had brought dishonor to an individual and required vengeance; that the offense had damaged the honor not just of an individual but of a group; that their retaliation had been calculated in terms of a "rough equivalence" between act and counter-act; that emotions like anger and shame and their public display were what William Reddy called "emotives" that pointed a public to the justifiability of retaliation; that to end a possible cycle of violence, a settlement required the establishment of both an all-encompassing peace and the conditions that would guarantee its durability. While not summarizing or synthesizing the other articles, Hyams' own essay takes into account many of their findings, even when not always fully agreeing with them. In particular, feuding is a narrative strategy, not just of chroniclers but of participants. The strategy involves notions of honor and shame, not just of individuals but of groups. Resolution requires not just punishment but a settlement seen as final because it establishes the conditions of lasting peace.

Before beginning this volume, I thought I understood medieval feuding quite well. After finishing it and wrestling with its contradictions, I realized I did not understand it nearly as well as I thought. That is the mark of a successful collection.

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Susanna A. Throop, "Introduction: The Study of Vengeance in the Middle Ages"

Máire Johnson, "'Vengeance is Mine': Sainly Retribution in Medieval Ireland"

François Soyer, "Living in Fear of Revenge: Religious Minorities and the Right to Bear Arms in Fifteenth-Century Portugal"

Dominique Barthélemy, "Feudal War in Tenth-Century France"

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Geoffrey Koziol
University of California, Berkeley
gkoz@berkeley.edu

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