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La naissance d'une thalassocratie

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répperi” but pulls all his punches when it comes to saying what this structure might signify: “here the aggressively irregular rhythm, combined with the ugly sibillation of *cistis fractis*, does embody the derangement of order, but more to the point, it conveys Usk’s experience of expectation defeated in a clause curtailed without stylistic announcement” (125). The passage, in other words, is not a veiled critique of Bolingbroke’s rapaciousness; it is just a description of Usk’s “subjective” experience of suddenness.

Justice argues that textual details that seem pregnant with possibility, political or otherwise, such as the peculiar manner in which Usk records the date of the execution of William Clark (“Mardi Gras 1401”), are not anything more than what they “simply” are. In this case, the unusual use of a dating convention is not a parody of specificity, nor a bitter commentary on the carnivalesque; it is not the product of fantasy, not part of the atmosphere of the political world, and most definitely not a symptom. It is “just one of those transient acts the world is made of” (38). The historians and literary scholars who find themselves in the corresponding notes to this passage got it all wrong. More broadly, academic analysis itself has failed.

“Symptomatic” reading comes in for much of the blame here, but most everyone else is a target as well: literary critics (especially psychoanalytic and new historicist readers); historians (especially Marxists); exceptionally capable Latinists (including Chris Given-Wilson); and anyone naïve enough to seek meaning from Usk’s text. The overall effect is a kind of poke in the eye to almost everyone who may have an interest in reading *Adam Usk’s Secret*. While some scholars may read the book and take offense, many will be so utterly baffled by its rhetorical moves as to miss its belligerence.

Justice rejects traditional academic argumentation in favor of a highly idiosyncratic, enigmatic prose style. Quite purposely, nothing will be made plain. As is often true in works by high priests of cultural analysis, such as Jacques Derrida or Slavoj Žižek, clever obfuscation is here a main facet of rhetorical strategy. Those who are fans of Justice will enjoy the riddling around, the masterful play of feint, partial disclosure, and non-revelation with the Latin; but they will be disappointed in the ultimate gist of the argument, which is not so much a fiery call for new reading practices as it is a downright crotchety harangue on the topic of old ones. This is an unfortunate development for one who not so long ago gave us the gift of *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (1994), a brash book that encouraged fresh perspectives on medieval chronicles and provoked us to read them more carefully. *Adam Usk’s Secret* would seem instead to tell us we are fools to try.

We still need a book that places Adam of Usk in the context of early-fifteenth-century textuality, including analyses of the relationships between secular and monastic chronicling, chronicles and other Latin and vernacular creative texts, Welsh and English perspectives on contemporary political controversies, and Oxford and court views on reformist impulses. Such a book would not have to claim that Usk was afraid to speak his mind out of fear of reprisal; it could simply show how the text operated and what it was up to. Justice would seem to see such an at-

tempt at elucidation as grossly wrongheaded. But in shutting down all possibility of interpretation, he has boxed himself into a dark corner. *Adam Usk’s Secret* is a work of criticism that declares criticism invalid: it is in this way, as Justice asserts of Usk’s *Chronicle*, markedly “constrained by its own perversity” (142).

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LOUIS SICKING. *La naissance d’une thalassocratie: Les Pays-Bas et la mer à l’aube du Siècle d’or*. (Histoire Maritime.) Paris: Presses de l’université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015. Pp. 350. €26.00.

The development of the Low Countries as a maritime power during the sixteenth century, especially during the period before the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt, has long been relatively ignored. This is caused both by the dominance of the “long seventeenth century” as the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic as a historical subject and by the way in which the Revolt itself functions as a watershed in historiography. In fact, the events from 1568 onward obliterates the approach, valid for the period before that year, of seeing the Northern and Southern Low Countries as a cohesive entity. Moreover, the late Burgundian era has attracted more attention than the early Habsburg period into which it grew. This leaves the age between roughly 1480 and 1580 underrated. Recently interest in the period of Emperor Charles V has grown, but studies describing the essential developments defining the structural changes still are scarce. This excellent book, written by Louis Sicking, who in previous publications already demonstrated a mastery of the field, tries to bridge the gap, and does so in an elegant French, thus rendering a great service to a French audience. In *La naissance d’une thalassocratie: Les Pays-Bas et la mer à l’aube du Siècle d’or*, Sicking has opted for a multifaceted approach. The period chosen offers the great advantage that the development of both commercial and naval maritime activities can be studied for the whole of the coastal provinces of the Netherlands for a time when they still formed a relatively integrated political and socioeconomic conglomerate of counties and duchies, for the greater part united in a personal union. The author analyzes both the changes and continuities that preconditioned the Revolt and the spectacular rise to power of the rebellious United Provinces.

The book is structured into parts that reflect the influence of a Braudelian approach, in the tradition of French historiography: “Spaces,” “Interests,” and “Powers.” The first part describes the geophysical and infrastructural setting, the position of the main island of Zeeland—Walcheren—as a key region between north and south in the coastal system, and the way in which coastal defense (the inner coast of the Zuiderzee included) was conceptualized. One of the very few flaws of the book is that the author remains silent about the role of Iberian (both Spanish and Portuguese) merchants and sailors in Zeeland, as studied, for example, by Raymond Fagel in and since his Ph.D. thesis, “De hispano-vlaamse wereld. De contacten

tussen Spanjaarden en Nederlanders 1496–1555” (1996). To some it may be surprising to find that the Habsburg regime mainly looked south when thinking about coastal defense, and thus in a way neglected the northern coasts. In the second part, Sicking starts describing the involvement of the Low Countries in (East) Atlantic commerce, and the changing relations with the Hanseatic-Baltic system. Special attention is paid to the defense of individual and group interests and the clever combining of the trade of low-valued bulk goods and of other, high-valued commodities, which formed the backbone of the success of navigation and commerce at the time. Highly interesting is the analysis of the costs of protection of the herring campaigns and the competition between fishers of the coastal provinces in relation to the profitability of the herring trade as such. It turns out that the ideas about the effect of the costs of protection as described by Frederic Chapin Lane when analyzing the fate of the Venetian Republic in his *Profits from Power: Readings in Protection Rent and Violence-Controlling Enterprises* (1979) are applicable to the Dutch case. In the third part, the author traces the origins of military use of naval potential back to the early fifteenth century. He also describes how international political developments, especially the growing tensions between the Habsburg-German and Valois-French monarchs, and the activities of French pirates, corsairs, and a French marine, led to a kind of naval cooperation, or at least rapprochement, which on the one hand took the form of a “national” admiralty, and on the other prefigured the activities of the admiralities of the rebellious estates of the late sixteenth century. When describing the symbolic representation of naval power, Sicking has a keen eye not only for economic and political conditions but also for the role of ostentation. In the last chapters of the book he shows how the success of the control of the sea by “marines” from Holland and Zeeland on the one hand contributed to the success of the revolt, but on the other hand could not prevent the “Spanish” commander Alexander Farnese from capturing Antwerp in 1585, which was a decisive moment in the separation between north and south. The events resulted in a seemingly counterproductive particularism in naval organization, which proved to be relatively optimal, since financing the fleet was best realized through regional organization. Consequently, Sicking shows, through a very convincing reasoning, that the *longue durée* from the Burgundian period onward led to the birth of the northern Low Countries as a thalassocracy as the involuntary outcome of the Revolt.

The well-composed text, with its repetitive chronological (semi-concentric) structure, is followed by a few short appendixes, which mainly offer a short chronological survey of data between 1367 and 1674 (especially useful to those not particularly familiar with this region and period), and a list of governors, admirals, and stadtholders of the Low Countries between 1482 and 1640. Last but not least, a rich bibliography composed of publications mainly in Dutch, English, and French (completed by some German publications) proves that this book opens up the content of a wide range of sources and analyses usually hardly accessible to foreign readers.

This book is an innovative contribution to the debate about the origins of the heyday of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century and deserves a translation into English.

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TOM NICKSON. *Toledo Cathedral: Building Histories in Medieval Castile*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015. Pp. xiv, 304. \$89.95.

Alfonso VI, King of Castile and León, laid siege to the city of Toledo for seven years, beginning in 1078, all the while cajoling, squeezing, and taxing its witless ruler, Yahya II bin Isma‘il bin Dhi al-Nun, whom Alfonso himself had re-installed on the throne after a public uprising following the brief reign of Yahya’s father Isma‘il and the assassination of Yahya’s formidable grandfather. In exchange, Yahya, who gave himself the risible regnal title “al-Qadir bi-Allah” (He who possesses ability—or power—through God), was forced to pay Alfonso enormous amounts in specie and grain, as well as to endow Alfonso with real estate, thus impoverishing himself and the notables of the city. Alfonso played the long game as Yahya foolishly dismantled the apparatus of state, favoring families his grandfather had disdained and assassinating credible advisors. At least, that is what we are told by a contemporary observer, ‘Abd Allah bin Buluggin bin Ziri, ruler of Granada. Finally, having exhausted Yahya’s usefulness in Toledo, Alfonso installed him as the puppet ruler of the recently conquered city of Valencia and took Toledo for himself on May 25, 1085.

It might be argued that if it were not for the wiles, manipulations, and greed of Alfonso VI, Toledo and all of its richness, its multi-confessional society, masons, smiths, poets, scribes, and jurists, and the great libraries of the Dhi al-Nun family would not have fallen to Latin Christendom. The enthusiastic production of translations from Arabic to Hebrew, Latin, and Castilian presumably from manuscripts in that library during the heady twelfth and thirteenth centuries would not have revealed to Western Europe the Greek Classics and medieval Arabic thinkers to whom are attributed the intellectual foundations for the Renaissance. And the conquest would not have inspired the taking of Jerusalem from the Fatimids during the first Crusade in 1099, a great Christian triumph, but an undertaking perceived by Muslims as a frightening twinned catastrophe on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Locally, Alfonso’s conquest of Toledo raised Castilian and Leonese aspirations in the Peninsula: it became a model for how Muslim territories could be taken successfully and profitably under Christian administration. There was no city in the north of the Iberian Peninsula that was as large or populous, or as complex with regard to its fiscal structure of endowments linking tangible payments from countryside to urban institutions. Under Alfonso, these endowments were redirected to the Church in Toledo, which from the beginning struggled to establish itself as the primatial see in the Peninsula, as it had been under