Introduction

Richard W. Kaeuper as Historian

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In the prologue to his 1999 book *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, Richard Kaeuper draws his reader into the timeless nature of violence in society with a quotation from one of his favorite authors- Mark Twain- and one his favorite works- *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (published in 1889). Maintaining what he always called “a left-handed interest” in the culture of nineteenth century America, Kaeuper offers Twain's incisive critique of the romanticization of the Middle Ages so prevalent in the late-Victorian era as a foundation upon which to consider the issue of knightly chivalric violence. He writes, “If the Yankee thus drops substantial weights onto the pans swinging on each side of the scales of judgement, the balance arm tips heavily toward the negative. His early conclusion is that Camelot must be an insane asylum, its denizens virtual savages who can be dismissed as ‘white Indians’.”

While Kaeuper points out that Twain was making the mistake of judging the past through the eyes of his own period, biases, and prejudices, he also uses the quotation to demonstrate one of his most important and salient arguments regarding chivalry (and in a broader sense, History) and our desire to read it in the opposite manner to Twain. For Dick, this is the primary danger in studying chivalry, that we will read it as what we want (or rather, our late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century predecessors wanted) it to be rather than as it was. He writes, “we must not forget that knighthood was nourished on aggressive impulses, that it existed to use its shining armour and sharp-edged weaponry in acts of showy and bloody violence. As Twain reminds us succinctly, we must not forget to shudder.”

This story and introduction from *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* has a special meaning for me. As a fresh new Ph.D. student working under Dick's tutelage in 2004, my first graduate course with him was his “History from Myth: King Arthur and Robin Hood”. By reading Arthurian texts from the (likely) eleventh century Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen* through Chretien de Troyes, Malory, and finally Twain, Dick brought to life the major themes and arguments that have underscored his research into social order, violence, and knighthood over the last thirty years. I watched as he guided the

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2 Ibid, 2.
undergraduates away from the Victorian-inspired Disney concept of medieval kingship and knighthood to a more nuanced and complex understanding of the tensions inherent within chivalry, knighthood, and the medieval state—a discussion that harkened back to one of the most important publications of his doctoral advisor, Joseph Strayer’s *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (1970). Dick did this through rigorous analysis of the sources, erudition, and an infectious enthusiasm that made it seem perfectly reasonable for students to come to class excited to debate the finer points of thirteenth century chivalric literature. While this level of interest is not uncommon among graduate students, it is altogether more impressive to inspire that level of devotion among undergraduates and thus hardly surprising that Dick has received four separate awards for teaching excellence while at the University of Rochester. As a new doctoral student, I saw first-hand how symbiotic Dick’s research and teaching approaches are, and how important it is to always bring rigor and enthusiasm (and more than a little humor) to your work.

If one reads through the scholarly reviews of Dick’s work, several themes (including those above) become immediately apparent. In his review of *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, Steven Muhlberger wrote that, “Its appeal will reach beyond specialists, even beyond medievalists. Kaeuper’s elegant prose, efficient organization, and willingness and ability to summarize background material combine to make the book one from which an intelligent beginner can gain a real appreciation of the issues and the relevant evidence.”3 Muhlberger saw in the book the same virtues that I saw first-hand in the course. Dick gave students the chance, and indeed, thrust them forward, to engage directly with literary sources both (seemingly) familiar and foreign. His interest in bringing the tools of the historian to bear on literature—a source that many students associated only with English courses—opened up new and important imaginative vistas and avenues of contemplation for his audience.

Whether in print or in person, Dick is able to break down complex concepts in new and invigorating ways, often forcing readers and students alike to re-examine their preconceptions and assumptions. In a review of *War, Justice, and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages* (1988), Roger Little commented that the book was “subtle and illuminating” and that it “will be valued by historians and students alike, not least for its tendency to stimulate new debate by moving away from increasingly stale ‘crisis’ debates in analysis of the fourteenth century.”4 Kaeuper’s medieval world is anything but stale,

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3 Steven Muhlberger, Review of *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, in *The International History Review* 22 (Dec., 2000), 886.