

José Antonio Guillén Berrendero, *La idea de nobleza en Castilla durante el reinado de Felipe II*, Valladolid, Secretariado de Publicaciones e Intercambio Cultural de la Universidad de Valladolid, 2007, 262 p.
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This is undoubtedly a work of great interest. JAGB's book is a text of remarkable historiographic value, since it deals with the first time that the grounds underlying the concept of nobility were truly examined in sixteenth-century Castile. *La idea de nobleza en Castilla en tiempos de Felipe II* [The idea of nobility in Castile in the time of Felipe II] is centered upon the conceptual analysis of two concrete texts, one by Francisco Miranda Villafañe and the other by Juan Benito Guardiola, whose works—published in 1582 and 1591, respectively—belong to the context of the profound changes affecting the mentality of noble families. The large number of authors writing treatises on this subject highlights the importance that the discourse legitimizing the nobility as a privileged group had at that time. Names such as Furio Ceriol, Frei Antonio de Guevara, Pedro de Rivadeneyra, Francisco de Gurrea, Juan de Mariana, Juan García, Arce de Otálora, López Madera, Bernabé Moreno de Vargas, Mendoza Bobadilla, Gerónimo de Gudiel, López de Montoya, López de Vega and Gutiérrez de los Ríos represent just a small selection of authors whose works are dedicated to the study of the noble and his place in society during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It makes sense to ask why the essay is centered on the work of these authors and not on that of others. For various motives, in Guillén's mind, Guardiola was an "exaggerated student of the nobility and a great defender of its values," while Villafañe, in his work, underlined the importance of the letters and knowledge of coats of arms. The former upheld the continuation of each and every one of the values attributed to the nobility, defending its exclusive nature. The latter insisted more on the need to define political virtue, claiming that one could ascend to the nobility on individual merit, with which Guardiola did not agree, using a more conciliatory argument between the two realities, despite giving more importance to the question of lineage than to the individual.

The discourse on nobility needed an intellectual framework that could help to legitimize its social prominence. It was precisely this need that gave rise, in a specific conjunctural context, to a broad aristocratic debate about the values that shaped its culture, such as virtue, merit, blood and honor. At the end of Felipe II's reign, significant alterations were introduced into all areas of society, and the discourse about the nobility was not immune to these changes. The death of the old Duke of Alba, in 1582, an unquestionable reference as a courtier and soldier, heralded the end of one era and the resurgence of another, led by a generation of young knights, who, despite accepting the basic tenets of the noble mentality, were encouraged to adapt their conduct to a historical period that

called for new patterns of behavior and new representations. This was the nobility that both authors were discussing.

These works appeared because, as Guillén said, the nobility itself required the recognition and dissemination of a discourse legitimizing its influence and social prominence. It was consequently important that this literature, already bound up with the interests of the privileged, should define the essence of the noble being, so that the nobility might recover its true meaning, something that had been corrupted by the incursions of other social groups that had converted the model of the noble hierarchy into their frame of reference.

Many members of this new knighthood paradoxically received their training from some cultural profiles that were indebted to the ideal represented by the Duke of Alba, under whose patronage the careers were formed of many of the nobles who led the process of transition during the reigns of Felipe II and Felipe III, and who contributed to the redefinition and modernization of the old values. In any case, it is curious that the writers of treatises on the nobility should be people from outside the universe of the nobility. Juan Benito Guardiola was a monk from the Monastery of San Benito de Sahagún, later being linked to the House of Gondomar, which he entered as a preacher towards the end of his life. In his turn, Francisco Miranda Villafañe was a veteran from the wars with the Turks, being ordained a priest at the end of his life when he was able to enjoy the benefits of being the choirmaster of Salamanca Cathedral.

Both authors were contemporaries, although Villafañe was older and was the first of the two to die. The non-noble condition of both authors also defined the fascination that other social groups felt in relation to the role played by the nobility in the government of the realm and in its cultural and economic leadership, as pointed out by José Antonio Guillén Berrendero. If their principles were altered, then it was the social order itself that was affected, so that it became urgent to define the values of the noble estate. In this sense, the pragmatics of courtesies and the regulation of the use and abuse of luxury were nothing more than eloquent measures designed to bring an end to a practice that tended to equalize people, thereby diluting inequalities, at least in appearance. In this way, ostentation was reserved solely for the privileged.

On the one hand, the success of these treatises confirms the exceptional nature of the texts that a small group of aristocrats were involved in personally editing in order to control the formation of their successors. Of the robust group of authors who, in one way or another, were concerned with discussing the leading role played by the nobility in society, only the Duke of Villahermosa, Francisco de Gurrea y Aragón, and the Count of Fernán Núñez, Francisco Gutierrez de los Rios y Córdoba, at the end of the eighteenth century, belonged by right and antiquity to an estate about which they could discourse with the authority that was granted to them by the quality of their blood. This courtly literature, essentially produced by the nobles, to which Nieves Varanda and Fernando Bouza in particular (*Corre Manuscrito*, 2001) have turned their attention, merits greater attention. A wide-ranging study is needed that can bring together all the known testimonies and point to the location of others, analyzing the similarities and differences that result in a discourse of the nobility that is unchangeable, but nonetheless rich in different hues. In this sense, it would have been appropriate to compare the treatises with the instructions given to the heirs and other direct testimonies in the mentality of the nobility to prove whether these writings converged between one another or if, on the contrary, the anxieties of some and the intentions of others were headed in different directions.

The treatises, just like peerage books and genealogies, were mainly the result of the talent of authors linked to the crown or the noble houses, thus defending a biased discourse, which was not at all spontaneous but always comprehensive seeing that the people for whom these works were written were knights, most of whom were supported

with the money of noblemen. At a different level, although sometimes set against this group of undoubtedly important texts, we can situate the instructions given to the heirs, the biographies, lives, relationships, mirrors, warnings, discourses and memories, mostly in the form of manuscripts written with the aim of serving as manuals of appropriate conduct both in and outside court. They are fragments of a courtly literature whose authors were exclusively noblemen and which were written from a personal point of view. The person who generally wrote in them was the lord himself, the magnate, who wished to leave a testimony of his practices as an example for his descendants. These questions have been worked on by Fernando Bouza, whom the author quotes in much of his work. Perhaps the debate might have been enriched—going into greater detail about the concept of nobility that arises from the everyday practices of its members—with the introduction of an analysis of the information contained in that kind of informal and clearly aristocratic treatise writing, which the author knows so well. The absence of such an analysis does not, however, diminish the appeal of a work that represents a relevant contribution to the study of the mentality of noblemen.

As the author clearly reminds us, the nobility, as the highest social, political and cultural force in society as a whole, and despite the burgeoning influence of other power groups, succeeded in maintaining their primacy throughout much of the modern age, remaining firmly placed upon a podium that was greatly debated and subjected to constant attacks. To be more precise, it was during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries that, in Guillén's opinion, the real *age of the nobility* was to be found, when noble values exercised an irresistible attraction over the other social groups and were converted into a code of conduct that served as a reference for a wide range of different sectors. One might ask to what extent the so-called crisis of the aristocracy (Stone, *La Crisis de la aristocracia*, 1976) affected the actual values of the noble estate. Perhaps it had some influence on its regeneration or it was simply a rationalization of their behavior or an attempt to cut back on expenses (Yun Casalilla, *La Gestión del Poder*, 2002). There is no doubt that the modernizing process of the administration of the Spanish Monarchy called into question the participative role that the secular tradition had attributed to the nobility in the government of the Realm. The wide-ranging and highly polemical debate began during the reign of Felipe II about the place that corresponded to the nobility, in view of the growing preponderance of non-noble men of learning in the upper echelons of government.

Otto Bruner's pioneering essay (*Vita Nobiliare e Cultura Europea*, 1982) belatedly opened up the study of the culture of the nobility to historiography, and in Spain this area has seen a remarkable increase in interest in recent decades thanks to the arrival on the scene of eminent scholars. Bearing in mind the essential work of António Domínguez Ortiz, the values of the nobility in modern Spain, seen from a cultural viewpoint, have been one of the preferred subjects of study of Adolfo Carrasco Martínez. In turn, Concepción Quintanilla Raso has centered much of her historiographic output on the analysis of the values of the Castilian nobility in the low middle ages, especially with regard to the exercise of their political legitimization. Other historians such as Beceiro Pita, Córdoba de la Llave, Fernando Bouza and Bartolomé Yun Casalilla have reflected upon the nobility from a variety of different points of view.

With his latest research, Guillén opens up a new avenue for debate. According to the research that he undertook for his doctorate, the noble concepts of honor and virtue had not yet been a target of interest on the part of the Spanish historiography dedicated to the study of nobility, nor had it given rise to a very significant number of approaches within the scope of this theme. Nor indeed had it been the subject of specific study by Portuguese historiography—the exception being the article by António M. Hespanha, “A nobreza nos tratados jurídicos dos sécs. XVI a XVIII” (*Penélope*, 12 (1993), 27–42)—which,

notwithstanding, has given rise over the last few decades to various essential works for our knowledge of the Portuguese noble elites in the Ancien Regime—Nuno G. Freitas Monteiro, Mafalda Soares da Cunha and Maria P. Marçal Lourenço, amongst others. Guillén will fill in this gap with his doctoral thesis, the defense of which is imminent. In it, a significant role is afforded to the comparative analysis of historical, legal and genealogical texts that supported the idea of nobility in the crowns of Portugal and Castile at the time of the kings Filipe.

J. A. Guillén Berrendero's excellent work has made it possible to decipher aspects that were previously unknown about the formation of the ideal of the nobility in sixteenth-century Castile. This and possible future studies that the author himself points to must be welcomed with the expectation felt by someone waiting impatiently for a more profound and rigorous analysis about a theme that is transcendental for our knowledge of the foundations of the sociopolitical prominence enjoyed by the Iberian nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We believe that such a fascinating contribution will manage to generate new lines of research in a historiographic debate that, in recent years, has gained greater vitality thanks to studies that represent a significant advance in our understanding of the complexity of the group of noblemen.