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Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages

Richard Barber

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Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages. By Richard Barber. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78327-471-0. xxiv + 382 pp. £30.00.

Richard Barber's *tour d'horizon* of the central and later medieval princely court will find its place on library shelves alongside classic studies such as Malcolm Vale's *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe, 1270-1380* (2001), or wide-ranging collections including Christian Freigang and Jean-Claude Schmitt's *Hofkultur in Frankreich und Europa im Spätmittelalter/La culture de cour en France et en Europe à la fin du Moyen-Age* (2006) and Murielle Gaude-Ferragu, Bruno Laurioux, and Jacques Paviot's *La Cour du Prince. Cour de France, cours d'Europe, XIIe-XVe siècle* (2011). Major scholars of medieval court life and culture such as Werner Paravicini, Etienne Anheim, and Joachim Bumke all find their place in the book's extensive, if sometimes inconsistently presented bibliography. Barber's expert command and passionate enjoyment of his subject is evident throughout the luxuriously illustrated text.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Princely Splendour," introduces the traditional ceremonies and cultures of medieval kingship with an emphasis on the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The second section of the book, "Magnificence," outlines Aristotelian theories of magnificence as developed from the late thirteenth century onwards, in Giles of Rome's *On the Government of Princes*, first written for a Capetian readership (51). The intellectual formation of the late medieval concept of magnificence forms a prelude to Barber's comprehensive overview of all facets of princely and courtly life in late medieval Europe, from coins, seals, and dress, to castles, music, and tournaments. While there is an emphasis throughout the book on England, France, and Burgundy, Barber consistently brings in courts and territories from beyond northern Europe, such as Bohemia, Spain, and Sicily. His lengthy discussion of Windsor Castle, for example, is followed by a close discussion of Bellver castle in Mallorca and the patronage of Jaime II of Majorca (168). He is also prepared to look back, delving as necessary into Roman, Carolingian, or Ottonian precedents (11, 130, 150) and providing short summaries of topics that could be remote to non-specialist readers, such as the origins and evolution of the medieval cult of relics (174–176). The book's third and final section, "The Management of Magnificence," explores the practicalities of staging ambitious courtly spectacles, from the cooking of festive feasts (234–244) to the financial credit provided by bankers and entrepreneurs, such as Dino Rapondi and Tommaso Portinari (280–283). The epilogue reviews the varying audiences for these spectacles and their political instrumentality. Barber concludes that "Magnificence is propaganda, sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle" (305).

In a book of this richness, range, and breadth, all specialist readers will find their quibbles and caveats. This reviewer found the book's treatment of women somewhat brief. Barber argues that the "two Joannas who ruled Naples are the only figures who might have had some claim to the essentially 'male' Aristotelian virtue of magnificence, male only because independent female kingship is so rare during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (93). Quite apart from the rarity or otherwise of medieval queens regnant, this

reviewer was not convinced that magnificence was perceived as an essentially male virtue. Chapter thirty-seven of Anne Flottès-Dubrulle's edition of Durand of Champagne's *Speculum Dominarum*, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century for Jeanne of Navarre (d. 1305), is dedicated solely to "Magnificence." The chapter outlines the concept in abbreviated but quite similar terms to those used by Giles, again combining Aristotelian and Ciceronian notions of personal moral virtue, action, and expenditure. For Durand, (female) magnificence can be expressed through great works and particularly, pious actions before God, such as the construction of churches, giving of alms, and adorning of altars. There is much here that connects with Barber's understanding and translation of the ideas of Giles of Rome (56, 307), and could have prompted more detailed consideration of the role of women in creating courtly magnificence. Chapter six surveys ceremonies of coronation, intercession, and *adventus*, highlights queenly expenditure on dress and then focuses on "Weddings and Dowries" (100-103). There is a brief discussion of the inventory of Margaret III, Countess of Flanders (d.1405) before the chapter closes with an account of the marriage of Isabella of Aragon to the duke of Austria in 1313. Her "story was the reverse of the golden coin of magnificence, a fate repeated all too often by the daughters of ambitious princes" (105), presumably that of being voiceless pawns in male political manoeuvrings. Much more could have been said here about female agency, cultural patronage, and 'soft power', beyond Barber's note on the supposedly lavish spending of Isabeau of Bavaria (98), essentially a coda to his detailed discussion of her 1389 *adventus* into Paris.

One reason for the relative absence of women may be the secular focus of the volume. Barber limits his consideration of royal tombs and mausolea (43–46, 88–90) and religious foundations (130–133, 174–179). Due to the special female responsibility to ensure the commemoration and salvation of dead kin, the result of this understandable constraint in scope is to sideline an enduringly important arena of female courtly patronage and activity. Beth Williamson's assessment of the "fundamentally religious character" (252) of medieval conceptions of magnificence, in her essay in *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music* (2010), underscores the complexity of the topic and term. Greater engagement with these debates might have enhanced Barber's discussion of the relic collecting of Louis IX of France and the Emperor Karl IV (176–178), and indeed his wider characterization of *speculum principis* texts as providing "secular guidance" or forming "a secular code of conduct" (51, 54).

These caveats do not detract from the scale of Barber's achievement in creating such a rich and accessible synthesis. All readers will find new and fascinating details in these pages, from the porcupine in the menagerie of Henry I (150) to the 11,500 oranges required for a festive mock battle hosted in Tortosa in 1358 (266). Readers new to the Middle Ages will be charmed and engaged by the warmth of Barber's tone, as he interweaves analysis of documentary sources with confessions of scholarly difficulties (34, 54), lucky chances in his fieldwork (25), work on *Time Team* excavations (166), and a blunt assessment of the monstrance displayed on the throne of Martí I at Barcelona Cathedral

(76). The book offers much to enjoy and will prove a valuable addition to course reading lists.

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