

2013

Review of Michael A. Ryan, *A Kingdom of Stargazers: Astrology and Authority in the Late Medieval Crown of Aragon*

Jessica A. Boon

University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, boon@fake.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Boon, Jessica A. (2013) "Review of Michael A. Ryan, *A Kingdom of Stargazers: Astrology and Authority in the Late Medieval Crown of Aragon*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol38/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Michael A. Ryan. *A Kingdom of Stargazers: Astrology and Authority in the Late Medieval Crown of Aragon*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. 232 pp.

Medieval preconceptions about astrology linked it strongly with magic and the occult, on the one hand, and with scientific understandings rooted in Arabic treatises translated and disseminated in part by Jews, on the other. With astrology linked to both the devil and to the religious and political “others” of medieval Europe, it is not surprising that medieval theologians and the educated elite were concerned about its popularity bridging across regions, class divides, and lay/religious boundaries. Michael A. Ryan’s book, *A Kingdom of Stargazers*, explores this preoccupation in a manner at once broad and highly focused. Acknowledging the range of ideas and practices that drew on astrological information – apocalyptic texts, magical works, spiritual trends, political decisions, prophecy, divination – Ryan mines this variety to illuminate the widespread impact of astrology and the elite’s repeated critique of it. He then uses this panorama to contextualize a particular phenomena: three Aragonese kings whose sequential reigns spanned the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century had variable relationships with practitioners of astrology. Ryan’s analysis reveals their attitudes towards astrology to be strongly linked with their political aims and opportunities.

Part One maps how astrology’s overlap with the occult was critiqued or recuperated by the Church (chapter 1), the university and royal courts (chapter 2), and the Jewish, Muslim and Castilian Christian occupants of the Iberian peninsula (chapter 3). Eminent theologians (Augustine, Aquinas, William of Auvergne) were preoccupied with the offense astrological practices posed to core Christian beliefs (how can God or human free will be constrained to follow the dictates of the stars?) and with the fear that it invoked demons. However, practices producing prophecy such as divination were sometimes deemed revelatory rather than irreverent or heretical, thus making it possible for the prophetic works of Beatus of Liebana, Joachim of Fiore, John of Rucipessa, and the Catalan Père l’Enfant to have widespread impact. Turning to secular venues, belief in astrological forces was often cast as a characteristic of the lower-class due to the fact that peasants bore the brute of natural and political calamities, leading to a thirst for information about the future. Yet those among the elite did not escape this thirst for knowledge, as their ambitions likewise led them to calculate astrologically the right times for war and other political maneuvers. On the Iberian peninsula, the continuum between astronomy, astrology, divination, prophecy, and magic evoked a similar range of reactions from caution to outright hostility in Arabic scientific treatises and among Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides. The Castilian tradition concerning astrology was likewise complex in the time of Alfonso X, as

his law code, the *Siete Partidas*, punished those who used astrology and necromancy against the civil good. Yet a lengthy Castilian translation of an Arabic astrological treatise, known as the *Picatrix*, was dedicated to Alfonso.

Part One is critical to the book, establishing the array of texts, topics, and authorities with which astrology intersected, including prophecy and magic. The wide range, however, is not always handled in a balanced manner: some figures such as William of Auvergne get such short shrift it is unclear how their inclusion shapes the overall argument, and some texts are summarized even when they are not evidently referencing either astrology or its related arts. Another imbalance appears in the level of contextual detail: the discussion of Joachim's impact on prophetic traditions would be unclear to someone not already familiar with his oeuvre, while Rucipessa's life history is provided at greater length than necessary for the analysis. Finally, the book's title leads one to expect extensive interaction with astrological treatises themselves, yet the first one discussed at any length is the *Picatrix* at the end of part one. While this fits the aim of Ryan's book – to understand astrology's continuing presence and impact on medieval mentalities – an introductory overview of an astrological text like the *Picatrix* would have made the study more accessible.

In Part Two Ryan turns from the late medieval panorama to the varying fates astrology had in the courts of the last three kings of the first house of Aragon, Pere el Ceremoniós, Joan el Caçador, and Martí I. By highlighting each king's relative emphasis on – or suspicion of – astrology, Ryan produces a thought-provoking encapsulation of the political circumstances unique to each reign. As it turns out, the strongest of the kings was able to dabble in astrology with impunity, while the weakest was harshly criticized for similar pursuits because they seemed to draw him away from important aspects of leadership. And yet it was the weakest king who put the greatest emphasis on the foreknowledge of the future that astrology promised, precisely because he believed it to lend political weight to his endeavors. Throughout Part Two, Ryan's careful and extensive analysis of texts by court astrologers as well as court critics provides a textured and fascinating window into the preoccupations of these kings and their subjects. Even for those who have little interest in the specifics of Aragonese royal history, Part Two provides an outstanding interdisciplinary model for how to explore astrology at the intersection of medieval thought and politics. Ultimately, Ryan makes a strong case for reconsidering the liminal yet continuous influence of astrology across other reigns and eras in medieval Europe.

Jessica A. Boon
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill