

**Regula Forster and Nequin Yavari (eds)**, *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 234 pp., ISBN: 9780674088276, £19.95

In an endeavour to discuss and re-establish the foundational aspects of the literary phenomenon *specula principum*, or ‘mirrors for princes’, *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* approaches this written tradition across its geographic, cultural, and temporal divides. The term ‘mirrors for princes’ here refers to a long-standing tradition of advice literature, usually dedicated to or commissioned for the education of kings or princes. This tradition – or genre as it is sometimes also referred to – has been the subject of considerable controversy, and several definitions have been proposed. There is not sufficient space in this essay to explain these debates fully,<sup>1</sup> but for the benefit of the reader I refer to Otto Eberhardt’s definition of a *speculum principis* as ‘a conclusive work which discusses the proper behaviour of a ruler as exhaustively as possible with regard to his special position’.<sup>2</sup>

The eleven chapters each investigate differing ideas and concepts of specific mirrors, with the overarching objective to showcase the mirrors’ potential for future research rather than to seek resolutions or conclusions. A central question that is raised in the introductory section addresses the disputed existence of a global history of political thought in the premodern period, and suggests that the often neglected and complex backgrounds of ‘mirrors for princes’ demonstrate such a comparative and global political thought (pp. 1-10). This ambitious query constitutes the framework for the collection, in which each author illustrates the potential and value of one or more mirrors and their respective contexts. As editors Yavari and Forster conclude in their introduction, the aim is to ‘explore [the] possibilities for a genuine comparative framework to study

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth approach to the scholarly discussion of the problematic terminology and definitions of the *specula principum*, see Matthias Haake’s chapter in this book (pp. 58-82).

<sup>2</sup> Otto Eberhardt, *Via Regia. Der Fürstenspiegel Smaragds von St. Mihiel und seine literarische Gattung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977), p. 280.

the works of authors from disparate cultural origins and in the distant past' (p. 7). Whereas previous approaches often made transmission and translation the main theme, *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* emphasises the importance of context, global history, networks, and translations being 'enriched with cross-cultural and transnational comparisons in the medieval past' (p. 7). The contributors come from broad, interdisciplinary backgrounds. The collection makes for a solid contribution to the field of political thought, as well as ultimately supporting the notion of a global or transnational level of political philosophy and literature between the East and the West – the Christian and Muslim worlds respectively. A study of *speculum* literature in light of such a wide geographical and cultural framework endorses the application of comparative methodologies within the field of medieval studies, and it makes a revealing attempt to reconcile the often-estranged research fields of the medieval East and West.

To summarise the book's contents systematically, one can imagine the contributions separated into five sections. The first is written by scholars Stefan Leder and Hans-Joachim Schmidt, who investigate notions of kingship and government in light of the literature's Islamic and European backgrounds. Leder's chapter, 'Sultanic Rule in the Mirror of Medieval Political Literature' (pp. 94-111), examines the diverging understandings of mediation and negotiation in the study of primarily Arabic and Persian mirror literature. His study ultimately showcases how these corpora are interlaced through translations and borrowings, and how this relates to concurrent ideologies of kingship and ruling. Schmidt's contribution, 'The King's Beautiful Body: On the Political Dilemmas of Ideal Government' (pp. 122-133), continues on the theme of governance, but in the European rather than Islamic setting, and gives an in-depth approach to the well-known analogy of the *body politic* as presented in Giles of Rome's mirror, *De regimine principum* (c. 1280). From the perspective of the reader, these chapters together cover the theme of kingship and ruling between

the Eastern and Western mirrors by comparatively underlining the differences and similarities that exists between them.

The second group takes a different angle, assessing the genre critical aspects of specific Western mirrors. Charles F. Briggs analyses the intellectual practicality in late medieval mirrors, in a chapter entitled ‘Scholarly and Intellectual Authority in Late Medieval European Mirrors’ (pp. 26-41). Having previously published a monograph on intellectual culture in a study of *De regimine principum* specifically,<sup>3</sup> Briggs’ chapter is especially useful for readers not already familiar with the *specula* tradition. It offers a brief introduction to the historiography of the European mirrors, and subsequently puts forth a case study of four specific texts that he maintains belong to a sub-category of the mirrors for princes tradition (p. 27), namely Enrico da Ramini’s *De quatuor virtutibus cardinalibus ad cives venetos* (*On the Four Cardinal Virtues to the Citizens of Venice*); Engelbert of Admont’s *Speculum virtutum* (*Mirror of the Virtues*); Luca Mannelli’s *Compendium moralis philosophiae* (*Compendium of Moral Philosophy*); and Michael of Prague’s *De quatuor virtutibus cardinalibus pro eruditione principum* (*On the Four Cardinal Virtues for the Instruction of Princes*) (p. 29). Briggs traces this literature’s influences back to classical sources, and considers these texts in light of the overarching theme of political thought. Matthias Haake then takes on the disputed question of the mirror tradition’s basis in Greco-Roman antiquity in ‘Writing to a Ruler, Speaking to a Ruler, Negotiating the Figure of the Ruler: Thoughts on ‘Monocratological’ Texts and Theirs Contexts in Greco-Roman Antiquity’ (pp. 25-82). Haake’s chapter is an equally excellent read for audiences unfamiliar with the ‘mirrors for princes’ and a much-needed guide through the field’s confusing historiography and terminology. In short, he addresses the question that all those who deal with the ‘mirrors for princes’ at some point must ask themselves: are the ‘mirrors for princes’ a universal phenomenon?

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<sup>3</sup> Charles F. Briggs, *Giles of Rome’s ‘De regimine principum’ – Reading and Writing at Court and University, c. 1275-1525*, Cambridge Studies in Palaeography and Codicology, 5 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

(p. 58). Haake then elaborates on the many disputed definitions of the *specula principum*, and subsequently discusses these in the context of the tradition's roots in the Greco-Roman period.<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, a large part of the book exclusively deals with eastern 'mirrors for princes'. This section is made up by two conceptual analyses, reading specifically Iranian and Islamic themes in mirrors by Seyed Sadegh Haghghat in 'Persian Mirrors for Princes: Pre-Islamic and Islamic Mirrors Compared' (pp. 83-93) and by Mohsen Zakeri in 'A Proposal for the Classification of Political Literature in Arabic and Persian: Folk Narrative as a Source of Political Thought?' (pp. 174-198). Haghghat's chapter discusses how mirrors in Iranian and Islamic intellectual traditions are 'treatises on governance distinguished from political philosophy and political jurisprudence' (p. 83), and assesses different texts from both groups in order to demonstrate their similar political notions and shared intellectual tradition. Most importantly, Haghghat argues that the Islamic mirrors are not imitations of the Iranian mirrors, albeit the former were largely influenced by the latter (p. 92). Zakeri, on the other hand, presents a new case study of the medieval Persian romance *Samak-i 'Ayyār* (c. 1180) as an example of mirror literature, and raises further questions regarding how Arabic 'mirrors for princes' are not necessarily alike other treatises categorised as mirrors – specifically with the example of Persian popular romance (p. 174). In a way, this study carries forward many of the same questions and problems regarding the genre definition also raised in Haake's and Briggs' chapters, although Zakeri here applies them to the Eastern branch of *specula* rather than the European.

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<sup>4</sup> Much dispute exists in discussions on the so-called Greco-Roman mirrors. Some believe that this literature should merely be considered the precursor of the later mirrors, and that the *specula* as an established literary tradition did not exist prior to the Carolingian mirrors written at the court of Charlemagne. Others, however, claim it is first and foremost a classical genre which is later revived during the medieval period. See amongst others: Hans Hubert Anton, 'Fürstenspiegel des frühen und hohen Mittelalters. Ein editionsprojekt an der Universität Trier', in *Jahrbuch für Historische Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* 2003 (2004), 15-32 (p. 15); Wilhelm Blum, 'Einleitung', in *Byzantinische Fürstenspiegel*, Bibliothek der Griechischen Literatur, 14 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann Verlag, 1981) pp. 5-23; Pierre Hadot, 'Fürstenspiegel', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* VIII (1972), 555-632 (pp. 622-23); Sven Rabeler, 'Fürstenspiegel', in *Höfe und Residenzen im spätmittelalterlichen Reich: Hof und Schrift*, *Residenzenforschung* 15:3, ed. by Werner Paravicini (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2007), pp. 329-46 (pp. 328-32).

The fourth division comprises two studies by Olga M. Davidson titled ‘Aetiologies of the *Kalilah wa Dimnah* as a Mirror for Princes’ (pp. 42-57), and Johannes Niehoff-Panagiotidis’ chapter ‘Avoiding History’s Teleology: Byzantine and Islamic Political Philosophy’ (pp. 112-121). These primarily focus on Indian mirrors and their Islamic and Byzantine receptions. Davidson investigates how the *Kalilah wa Dimnah* (c. 750), an Arabic translation of what was originally an Indian collection of ancient animal fables, functioned as an educational tool for teaching statecraft during the medieval period (p. 42). The chapter provides a good introduction to this text, its historiography, structure, transmission, and translation, but most significantly it discusses the reception of the *Kalilah wa Dimnah*’s narratives in different societies which were all affected by these fables – and which in turn also affected the fables themselves (p. 56). Niehoff-Panagiotidis’ piece is also concerned with literary reception, but in the context of Byzantine and Islamic conceptions of governance (pp. 113-14). The main goal of this chapter is to illustrate how these two traditions can ultimately be traced back to their shared roots in Late Antiquity’s political theology. Briefly put, Niehoff-Panagiotidis concludes that Byzantine writings on the art of ruling were likely spread and circulated in the East, arguing that they therefore must have been known to medieval Islamic intellectuals. This could explain ‘the fact that one of the few translations made from Arabic into Greek was [the] *Kalilah wa Dimnah*’ (pp. 118-19).

In the fifth and final group, Hinrich Biesterfeldt, Isabel Toral-Niehoff and Edwin P. Wieringa also consider cases from the eastern corpus exclusively, but they focus on texts that do not entirely conform to the literary pattern of advice literature. These chapters illustrate the complicated problem of defining the *specula* as an individual genre,<sup>5</sup> and how numerous mirrors are, in fact,

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that some reject the notion that *specula principum* literature constitutes a literary genre all together. See Einar Már Jónsson, ‘Les ‘miroirs aux princes’ sont-ils un genre littéraire?’, *Médiévales* 51 (2006), 153-66 (p. 164).

characterised by diverse literary components and can occasionally have a foothold within a multitude of genres.<sup>6</sup> Biesterfeldt's study, 'Ibn Farīghūn's *Jawāmi' al-'ulūm*: Between Classifications of Sciences and Mirrors for Princes' (pp. 11-25), explores an unconventional *speculum* from the tenth century called *Jawāmi' al-'ulūm*, written in the form of a tree diagram (*tashjīr*), and how this text 'integrates its vision of the perfect ruler and his rule into a larger categorization of the arts and sciences' (p. 8). Toral-Niehoff's contribution, 'The 'Book of the Pearl on the Ruler' in *The Unique Necklace* by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih: Preliminary Remarks' (pp. 134-150), considers the concept of governance as interpreted in *The Unique Necklace*, a compilation aimed to teach everything that an intellectual, cultured and refined individual should know (p. 134). The chapter discusses different aspects of this text, such as its authorship, origins, contents, narrative features, composition and reception. Toral-Niehoff then ties this discussion together in a reading of *The Unique Necklace* as a so-called 'hybrid mirror',<sup>7</sup> which ultimately refers to texts that are a mixture of different forms of literature (p. 140). Finally, Wieringa's 'A Scholar's Claims on Practical Politics: Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī's Seventeenth-Century Malay *Bustān al-salātīn*' (pp. 151-173) deals with an early modern Arabic tome which partly can be considered a 'mirror for princes' due to its descriptions of ideal manners that kings ought to have. This case study is yet another good example of how the application of *specula principum* definitions include certain difficulties. Wieringa illustrates how in this text it is specifically the 'the rule of scholars over princes is laid out in meticulous detail [...] to plot the use of mirrors in effecting social change' (p. 8).

*Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* should be of crucial interest to anyone researching this literary tradition. The collection explores a new and refreshing approach to the literature. By

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<sup>6</sup> For further critical approaches to the mirrors for princes genre definition, see amongst others Anton, 'Fürstenspiegel', pp. 15-32; Hadot, 'Fürstenspiegel', pp. 555-632; Einar Mar Jónsson, 'La situation du *Speculum regale* dans la littérature occidentale', *Études Germaniques*, 42 (1987), 391-408 (pp. 392ff); Jónsson, 'Les 'miroirs'', pp. 164ff.

<sup>7</sup> Louise Marlow, 'Surveying Recent Literature on the Arabic and Persian Mirrors for Princes Genre', *History Compass* 7 (2009), 523-38 (p. 526).

pairing viewpoints of scholars across disciplines, methodologies, and themes, the book perfectly exemplifies the problematic application and appropriation of the ‘mirrors for princes’ terminology. The work creates a platform for non-experts who want to obtain an understanding of this broad, disputed and loosely defined ‘genre’. As mentioned in the book’s synopsis, ‘mirrors for princes’ comprise a field of history and literature that is defined by its non-synchronous, geographically and culturally vast scope. With this in mind, it is perhaps understandable that this field’s current scholarship often suffers from being inaccessible and diffuse, and indeed, the mirrors’ conceptual vagueness adds to this confusion (Haake, p. 68). *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered*, however, constitutes an excellent guide to this wide and complex literary phenomenon. The title of the book, as well as the introduction, reveals the historically comparative objective of the editors. Yet each essay contributes something distinctive towards the overall discussion. As a result, the reader is left with a thorough introduction to the roots of the mirror literature, as well as its differing cultural and conceptual expressions.

Simultaneously, the work focuses primarily on the Eastern branch of mirrors as distinct from the Western. In relation to the overall methodology and framework which, as previously mentioned, seeks to support the notion of a comparative global history of political thought, this emphasis on the Eastern mirror corpus creates a certain imbalance to the work as a whole. By comparison, the Carolingian mirrors are curiously underrepresented – which can arguably be considered to constitute the very core (and occasionally even inception) of the western branch. The smaller and peripheral groupings of *specula*, such as the Irish and Scandinavian representatives, for example, are not discussed in any detail at all. However, this critique is partially anticipated and addressed, as editors Yavari and Forster point out that a recurring problem in studies of *specula* is the lack of terminological consensus and mutual historical foundation between East and West (p. 3). This idea leans on a previous study by Linda Darling, who maintains that comparative analyses on the two

types of mirrors has been heavily compromised by a ‘historiographical or critical tradition [that] has taken two extremely similar phenomena and rendered them incommensurable’.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the numerous similarities found between the Eastern and Western mirrors, a clear divide separates the two categories. During the medieval period, the Western branch transformed itself into a progressively philosophical and prosaic form of literature that is anchored in an increasingly theoretical and normative type of narrative.<sup>9</sup> The Eastern mirrors, on the other hand, require a broader definition which includes different types of wisdom literature, both ethical treatises, testaments, or fictional literature as long as these ‘serve an advisory purpose and address a royal recipient’.<sup>10</sup>

Briefly put, the ‘mirrors for princes’ is a loosely defined type of text which discusses a noble person’s conduct in a thematic and structurally unspecified frame. The *specula* are usually prose texts such as treatises and letters, specifically from the medieval period onwards, but the older, classical texts are less characterised by their form and contents. As a result, the ‘mirrors for princes’ terminology needs to be treated with a certain caution, and some background knowledge of the tradition is ardently advised to those studying this literature. In this regard, *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* is an advantageous place to start, especially for those with little or no previous familiarity with it. However, criticisms should be anticipated towards such a comparative approach across the Eastern and Western mirror corpus. The most severe critique is perhaps that one cannot determine a shared inception between the two, let alone a mutual, universal political thought – it

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Darling, ‘Mirrors for Princes in Europe and the Middle East: A Case for Historiographical Incommensurability’, in *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times – Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 223-242 (p. 225); Yavari and Forster, *Global Medieval*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Blydes, Justin Grimmer and Alison McQueen, ‘Mirrors for Princes and Sultans: Advice on the Art of Governance in the Medieval Christian and Islamic Worlds’, research paper from Stanford University, <[http://stanford.edu/~jgrimmer/BGM\\_final.pdf](http://stanford.edu/~jgrimmer/BGM_final.pdf)> [accessed 3rd April 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Louise Marlow, ‘Mirrors for Princes’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. by Gerhard Bowering, *et al.* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 348-50 (p. 349).

seems an overambitious venture to state that a literary tradition as undefinable as the ‘mirrors for princes’ indicates a global phenomenon. Yavari and Forster state in the introduction that ‘in both form and content, mirrors are exemplars of comparative and global political thought’ (p. 1), but this statement is not elaborated any further. The editors briefly mention that the integration and influence of Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian, Indian, and Arabic texts and thought is the basis for this claim – but should not the individual *specula* authors’ intentions and circumstances also be considered? Can one really say that the textual, philosophical and cultural exchange between texts is proof that these attitudes existed in reality? And if so, to what extent? Working with this literature in a comparative context is thus problematic, especially considering that the *specula* are of a normative rather than cognitive quality – they portray a reality of how things *should* or *ought* to be, and do not necessarily depict how they actually were. One can accept that the exchange of literature from the pre-medieval period leading up to the Carolingian era was fruitful and influential in many ways, both culturally and politically, but it might be too extreme to maintain that the ‘mirrors for princes’ constitute exemplars of a global thought; it is a literary tradition where one cannot often determine if the author knowingly adapted to the specific genre characteristics, or whether or not they were merely influenced by or imitated other texts and authors that were accessible to them at the time. Another related, potential issue with this approach is the usage of the word ‘global’, which has a very modern presence and gives the readers very particular associations. Darling’s article, as previously mentioned, demonstrates how troublesome comparative approaches between the Western and Eastern mirrors can be, so to claim that they together represent a global political thought is, unfortunately, not convincing.

Aside from these potential problems with the volume’s overall thesis, there are few criticisms to be raised in regard to the individual case studies themselves. The book is a good introduction to the ‘mirror for princes’ literature – both to scholars and to students who wish to explore the field.

As the result of a conference held in 2013, the work adopts a multidisciplinary approach and should consequently appeal to scholars of medieval and early modern studies, comparative literature, literary criticism, history of political thought, and religious studies. In addition, *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* also offers extensive and useful bibliographies, making it easier for readers to find their way through the otherwise inaccessible and – at times – confusing secondary literature that otherwise exists on this topic.

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