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Without any hesitation, Benoît Grévin’s »Rhétorique du pouvoir médiéval« must be considered as a masterpiece and a landmark in the field of medieval political history as well as in the domain of Latin rhetoric and diplomatic. This is the book version of his thèse nouveau régime, which in this case surely is of the level of the former thèse d’État. It offers the results of deep research about Pierre de la Vigne, one of the great actors in Emperor Frederick II’s government and the foremost figure of his chancery. Ranking among the best Latinists of its time, Pierre de la Vigne has been the author of a great number of Emperor’s letters and the promoter of a specific style (altus stylus) which was considered to be the most appropriate to express the greatness and the majesty of Frederick II. After his death, collections of letters written by Pierre de la Vigne and other followers like Nicolas de la Rocca were compiled and circulated widely in European chanceries as de la Vigne’s Summa dictaminis.

Benoît Grévin’s voluminous book is divided in two main parts. The first part starts with the study of the origin and the constitutions of the different collections of de la Vigne’s letter. This question is a very complicated one since from the beginning the content of the collection varies from one manuscript to the other. Grévin succeeds in giving coherence to this complex literary history. The second section of the first part is devoted to a rhetorical analysis of the corpus. Grévin begins by evaluating de la Vigne’s contribution to medieval artes dictaminis and its own place in this important literary tradition. He then proceeds to analyse rhetorical techniques he used. He also insists on medieval learning like grammar, dialectic and Roman law on which he relied for letter writing. All this knowledge was dedicated to magnifying the dignity and the greatness of imperial power. Up to that point, Grévin’s study relies mostly on literary and intellectual history. He is well aware that beyond letters there are men. The third and last section of the first part is devoted to Frederick II’s chancery and notaries at the service of the emperor. Even if a genuine prosopographical approach is not possible for such an early period, Grévin gathers as much information as he can about each member of the chancery, his academic training and the systems of social relationship in which he pursues his career. He follows the group nearly all through the century.

The social dispersion of notaries after the death of Frederick II marks the first step in the diffusion of the collections of letters related to his reign.

The second part of the book is devoted to the reception of the collections of Frederick II’s letters. Before starting to track the diffusion of the collections of letters in various XIVth and XVth century chanceries, Grévin devoted the first section of this second part of his book to the condition of the reception of the

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political message carried by Frederick II’s letters. He analyses the place occupied by these letters among
the various media of political communication like philosophical disputations, sermons and annals. He tries
to evaluate their real impact on society through the testimony of two contemporary chroniclers, Salimbene
and Matthieu Paris. Finally, he discusses to what extent the complexity of the style can be an asset in the
process of communication of a political message, stressing that obscurity can contribute to solemnity.

Finally, the last section of the book consists in a survey of the reception of Pierre de la Vigne’s Summa
dictaminis in different European chanceries during the last two centuries of the Middle Ages. Grévin starts
by examining the case of France where the reception of de la Vigne’s work remains very ambiguous. His
Summa has occasionally been an inspiration for the writing of the most solemn king’s charters. But on the
whole, the imperial ideology that permeates the letters made them particularly difficult to be integrated to
royal ideology which stresses on the independence of the king toward the emperor. Pierre de la Vigne was
much more popular in the English chancery where it has been widely used. This is a testimony of the
remarkable quality of the mastery of Latin by the London clerks. However, it is with no surprise that we
learn that Imperial chancery has been the place where Pierre de la Vigne was the most intensely imitated.
Grévin carefully analyses the situation from the time of Rudolf of Habsburg to the time of the Reformation.
Next to Germany, Italy was another major place for the diffusion of de la Vigne’s work. It plays an
important role in the writing activities in the Angevin domain as well as in large cities of the Northern half of
the country. The book closes with some considerations about reception of Pierre de la Vigne in Spain,
Hungary and Poland.

Of course, it is impossible to give an accurate image of the richness and the complexity of Grévin’s
magisterial historical demonstration. But I would like to insist in conclusion on three points which make this
book so exceptional. The first one is the originality of the subject. Frederick II is of course ubiquitous in the
book, but the true purpose of work is the history of the conditions of creation and dissemination of a model
of discourse of power that reflects the unique representation that the emperor has of his own status and
function. The story told by Grévin is not that of a man, but of the words put into his mouth through the
mediation of writing, by his notaries familiar with the discipline of the dictamen and with of Latin rhetoric.
Pierre de la Vigne’s work fascinated ruling authorities all through Europe as well as those working in their
chancery. This explains the sustained success of his Summa dictaminis all through the Middle Ages.
Pursuing the history of a political discourse as thoroughly as does Grévin is unique in the field of medieval
history.

Grévin also innovates in terms of the method by multiplying approaches that scholarly tradition is rather
used to keep separate. His book is at the crossroad of the diplomatic, philology and history. At the end of
the experience, each discipline has learned much from the others. For what concerns diplomatic, Grévin’s
work illustrates the importance of the choice of the language for writing letters. Pierre de la Vigne models
of letters circulated at a time when the use of vernacular language was growing among chanceries.
Nevertheless, Latin remained at the same time the most appropriate language to express the greatness
and the solemnity of the public authority. Philology appears to be the second key discipline for that kind of historical work. Masterly used by Grévin who proves to be an outstanding Latinist, it contributes to demonstrate that in Frederick II’s letters, style contributes as much to the message as the semantic content. Finally, from its contact with the two other disciplines history learns to integrate to its problematic the symbolic power of the written word. Language and rhetorical devices appear altogether as tools at the disposal of the sovereign to gain support to his cause, or to vilify an enemy. The competence of notaries could be a tool of power as strong as power weapons.

To sum up, Grévin’s book introduces his reader to a new historical object: the forms and the way of diffusion of the discourse of political power. It teaches us that the construction and the dissemination of such a discourse during nearly two centuries relied on the artes dictaminis, on the teaching of language disciplines in universities and on the solidarity networks of notaries between themselves. Political discourse elaborated by medieval chanceries must be seen as a collective discourse which is transmitted over time and generations. In this sense, Pierre de la Vigne must be considered as a great rhetorician who lived at the time of Frederick II, as well as the emblematic figure of a chancery style which illuminated Western Europe during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. This probably is the main lesson of Benoît Grévin magisterial »Rhétorique du pouvoir médiéval«.