

Review: A Virtuous Knight Defending Marshal Boucicaut (Jean II Le Meingre, 1366 - 1421) by Craig Taylor. York Medieval Press. 2019

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Craig Taylor, *A Virtuous Knight: Defending Marshal Boucicaut (Jean II Le Meingre, 1366–1421)*, (York: York Medieval Press, 2019). 203 pp. £60.00.

Older scholarship persistently claims that the anonymous chivalric biography *Le Livre des fais du bon Messire Jehan le Meingre* was designed to instruct and criticise contemporary French knighthood through the example of its main hero, Jean II Le Meingre or Boucicaut. With careful attention to both its manuscript composition and its historical context, Craig Taylor's latest monograph, *A Virtuous Knight: Defending Marshal Boucicaut (Jean II Le Meingre, 1366–1421)*, suggests that the biography in question is a much more complex and interesting text than scholars have previously allowed it to be. Rather convincingly, he argues that the text was intended to work as a defence for Boucicaut against his critics in the French court circles; specifically, to explain his somewhat dubious actions as governor of Genoa, his failed crusading enterprises in the Eastern Mediterranean, and his unsuccessful efforts to solve the Papal Schism. *A Virtuous Knight* is divided into six parts (including an introduction): the first two chapters focus on Boucicaut and his biography, *Le Livre des fais*, and provide an historical context for understanding Taylor's final three chapters which attend to the thesis proper, that the manuscript was intended as a defence for Boucicaut. There is also an extensive bibliography that will be essential to any new or seasoned Boucicaut scholar.

The first main chapter, 'The Life of Jean II Le Meingre, dit Boucicaut (1366-1421)', combines existing scholarship with new historical evidence to produce a re-furbished account of the life of Boucicaut. With ease, Taylor makes frequent reference to contemporary historical records such as Froissart's *Chroniques* and Michel Pintoin's *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis le règne de Charles VI* to fill out a complete picture of both Boucicaut's personal and military lives. This all works as a pre-text for understanding his next chapter, 'The *Livre des fais du bon messier Jehan le Maingre*', which addresses the main subject of his monograph, *Le Livre des fais*. Here, Taylor discusses the evidence surrounding when the *Livre des fais* was written, who it was intended for – presumably an audience at the French royal court – and who wrote it. Taylor claims that Nicolas de Gonesse was probably the writer of Boucicaut's biography given his expert familiarity with Valerius Maximus; however, Taylor doesn't completely rule out the possibility that the biography may have been a collaborative project where a military companion such as Jean d'Ony could have played an important role in its composition. Crucially, Taylor questions what *Le Livre des fais*'s purpose was in its French court context, which is where he turns to in his next chapter.

'Defending the Marshal' serves as a fulcrum point in the layout of Taylor's study as it uses the historical context of the previous two chapters to show how *Le Livre des fais* justifies Boucicaut's failed military actions before yielding to the final two chapters which re-read Boucicaut's biography through the lens of Taylor's thesis: that the text offers a sustained defence for Boucicaut's controversial military actions. Where the biographer celebrates Boucicaut's 'glorious career' and paints him as 'a worthy role model for future generations' (74), Taylor argues that this all serves to promote Boucicaut's case before the French royal court. Taylor's thesis is made plausible through his ability to consistently place the *Livre des fais* in conversation with evidence from its historical context.

The final two chapters, 'A Flower of Knighthood' and 'The Virtues, the Good Habits and the Good Disposition of the Marshal', step back from the political and military narratives presented thus far in Taylor's study to focus instead on the ways in which Boucicaut was presented as a marshal who was much more than an 'idealised vision of French knighthood' (100). Where scholars have argued that *Le Livre des fais* responds to the crisis of 15th-century French knighthood by championing 'moral order and the ancient virtues of knighthood and courtliness' (101), Taylor, in Chapter 4, suggests that the biographer focuses on Boucicaut's 'eternal fame and glory' (129) as a way of masking Boucicaut and his companions' anxieties about Boucicaut's reputation in the French courts. The *Livre des fais* is odd for its genre as it deals with a living individual, whereas chivalric biographies usually dealt with deceased or fictionalised characters. Chapter 5, therefore, looks at how the ending of *Le Livre des fais* departs from its generic conventions by turning inward to offer an analysis of Boucicaut's purported 'virtues, morals and good habits' (130). Taylor compares this to the writing style of Christine de Pizan who similarly analysed the 'behaviours, virtues and morals of princes and knights' (131) but notes how Boucicaut's biographer is careful not to fantasise Boucicaut's life too much in an effort to make his defence more plausible. Further, Taylor shows how Boucicaut's biographer focuses heavily on the role of Fortune and the jealousy of Boucicaut's enemies as causes for any of the misfortunes and disasters that Boucicaut encountered. This all bolsters Taylor's thesis that *Le Livre des fais* was indeed a defence for Boucicaut's past, and even future, actions.

As Taylor notes, the biography of Boucicaut was written during a time when 'aristocratic men were increasingly involved in literary culture' (156). A connection is made here between text and context, and *A Virtuous Knight* highlights this connection by effectively showing how a text like *Le Livre des fais* is capable of both reflecting as well as playing an active role in attempting to shape the realities of its particular historical context. What is most evident from this study, however, is how effortlessly Taylor distills an immense number of hours spent consulting both *Le Livre des fais*, its contemporary texts, as well as old and recent scholarship on this subject. His thesis is contentious but well-argued and challenges how historians will approach *Le Livre des fais* in the future. To that end, Boucicaut scholars will need to carefully consult *A Virtuous Knight* before making any new claims about *Le Livre des fais*.

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