Joël Blanchard, *La Fin du Moyen Âge*. Paris: Perrin, 2020. 342 pp. Figures, table, chronology, notes, bibliography, and indexes. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-262-06851-6.

Review by Charles F. Briggs, University of Vermont.

A century after the publication of *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*, Johan Huizinga's seminal study of elite culture in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century northern France and the Low Countries continues to cast a long (and for the most part beneficent) shadow over the historiography of late medieval Europe. The centenary has been marked most explicitly by the appearance of a volume of essays and of a new English translation of *Herfsttij*.[1] However, reading Joël Blanchard's *La Fin du Moyen Âge*, it quickly becomes apparent that here is the true spiritual heir of Huizinga's *Herfsttij*, suitably renewed and recast to account for recent scholarly trends and to express the anxiety and uncertainly of our present moment. Blanchard is up-front about his study's complicated relationship with Huizinga, recalling, in the first paragraph of the preface, the Dutch historian's "impressionniste et colorée" representation of the late Middle Ages, while going on to state that he does not buy into *Herfsttij*'s reigning metaphor of a "waning" ("crépusculaire") Middle Ages (p. 7). Such a metaphor, after all, presumes an organic medieval millennium (formative youth, vigorous maturity, senescent decline), as well as some kind of unitary linear progression between the death of the western Roman Empire in the 400s CE and the birth of modern Europe in the sixteenth century.

The past couple of generations of historical scholarship on the European Middle Ages have, however, revealed the flaws in this model, and have posited instead a more discontinuous and contingent process (or processes?) of repeated (and locally varied) periods of breakdown, reordering, and consolidation. Blanchard's France of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is one of these times of breakdown and attempted reordering following a period of consolidation that reached its height in the thirteenth century. What characterized the period of consolidation, in France as in Europe more generally, was a prosperous and reasonably stable economy, demographic growth, and institutional expansion both in church and state. The disruption that followed had many aspects, ranging from a changing climate, to pandemic disease and demographic collapse, to economic contraction, to social and political instability and disharmony. And while Blanchard takes all this into account, his gaze throughout remains fixed on France's long crisis of political authority and legitimacy, beginning with the repeated failure of the Capetian dynastic line in the years 1316-28 and ending with the Valois monarchy's successful suppression of the territorial principalities, finally achieved in 1488-91.

However, this is not a traditional political and institutional history by any means. First of all, Blanchard is careful not merely to inscribe the story he tells within the trajectory of the "genèse et développement de l'État moderne" (p. 8), so amply explored in, for example, the works of Jean-Philippe Genet and Boris Bove.[2] Nor for that matter does Blanchard center his narrative on the long series of conflicts with England between 1337 and 1453, collectively referred to as the Hundred Years War. Although Blanchard does not say he rejects these approaches, he has made it his purpose here to avoid the impression, born of hindsight, of inevitable linear progress toward the unified, centralized, modern French state. Instead he wants to explore the intellectual and emotional experiences of the "consciences des acteurs de ce Moyen Âge agonisant, effervescent, tourmenté et en crise" (p. 30). Viewed from this perspective, the history of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France is a broken, halting, back and forth one of "cycles, de brusques secousses, d'à-coups, d'accélérations, suivis de tentatives de repli" (p. 283). This is the uncertainty of those in the moment--those in, as Blanchard puts it, "l'heure de danger" (p. 13)-- of, that is, those writing contemporaneously with events, most of them closely tied to the royal court and the entourages of princes, who bear witness to the events of the time, and who express their fears and hopes, displeasure and contempt, judgments and criticisms, explanations and advice. Like Huizinga, Blanchard privileges the voices of these contemporary observers in the "champ littéraire" (p. 9). But he does so not in order to illustrate what Huizinga called "forms of life and thought," but rather because they eloquently express the nature of late medieval France's political crisis as well as the complex interplay of crisis with intellectual and political culture.

Built into the framework of political structures, relations, and assumptions that coalesced during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were many of the elements that contributed to this crisis, the most important being: 1) the monarchy's political legitimacy being so closely tied to the "Capetian miracle" of centuries of unbroken patrilineal succession; 2) a fiscal system predicated on the idea that royal government should largely finance itself from the income of its ordinary domanial revenue, with the corollary that taxes on subjects should be light and infrequent; 3) an unwieldy system of military recruitment based on the old feudo-vassalic summons of the nobility (the *ban*) and the general levy of commoners (the *arrière-ban*); 4) an exclusive (and expanding) claim to sovereignty on the part of the monarchy; and 5) an upper nobility, chief among them the great territorial princes, with a fierce sense of independence and privilege. Not only did these elements prove themselves ill-equipped to deal with the problems confronting late medieval France, their inherent contradictions often made things worse. Thus the harrowing unfolding of events--succession crises, English invasions, murderous court factionalism, civil war, princely rebellions, etc.--and the seeming inability of ruling elites and institutions to ever establish order and equilibrium.

Blanchard identifies several moments that most exemplify this unstable and often poisonous state of affairs. The first involved the failures of Philip IV's sons to produce viable male successors in 1316 and 1328, leading to the election of Philip VI of Valois on the latter occasion, but also to a weakening of royal authority and the opening of a space for opposing claims to the throne through female lines by Edward III of England and Charles of Navarre. The second, from 1356 to 1358, was precipitated by the devastating military defeat and capture of King John II by the English at Poitiers, which set off, in turn, a set of crises including the machinations of Charles of Navarre, the peasant uprising known as the Jacquerie, and the threat to royal power posed by the Paris commune led by the provost of merchants, Étienne Marcel. With the first onset of King Charles VI's madness, in 1392, France was beset by a decades-long political crisis featuring dysfunctional kingship and court factions leading to civil war between Armagnacs and

Burgundians (punctuated by the assassinations of Louis, duke of Orléans in 1407 and of John the Fearless of Burgundy in 1419), English invasion and conquest, including the tragic loss at Agincourt in 1415, and the disinheritance, at Troyes in 1420, of the French royal heir Charles in favor of Henry V of England. The two final crises were both princely rebellions, first (1465-68) against the "tyranny" of Louis XI by a group of nobles, the so-called League of the Public Weal, headed by John II, duke of Berri, Louis XI's brother Charles of France, and Charles the Bold, future duke of Burgundy, and second (the "Guerre folle" of 1485-88) by a number of princes against the regent Anne of Beaujeu, sister of the boy king Charles VIII. Neither succeeded in its aims, and indeed the Guerre folle turned out to be the last gasp of territorial princely power against the monarchy. Once the heiress to the last independent principality, Anne of Brittany, had been safely married off to Charles VIII in 1491, the long political crisis had finally sorted itself out, according to Blanchard, and France passed over the threshold "d'une nouvelle histoire qui s'inscrit dans le cadre de la montée et, pour finir, du triomphe de l'État royal" (p. 30).

The crisis and its causes is only half of the story Blanchard wants to tell. More interesting for him are the responses to crisis by "l'ensemble des forces intellectuelles et spirituelles qui ont dénoncé les faiblesses et porté les espoirs d'une société éprouvée par le malheur" (p. 7). To find a useful framework for thinking about these responses, Blanchard borrows a definition of "crisis" used by medieval physicians: the crucial moment in the course of a disease when the patient hovers between recovering or dying. The impact of this kind of crisis is not only felt during the crucial moment itself. It begins at the very first instant when the disease takes hold and continues long after in the form of "mémoire traumatique" (pp. 9–10). Blanchard, who has devoted most of his scholarly career to the careful editing and close reading of works by several fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French writers (especially Philippe de Commynes, but also Christine de Pizan, Philippe de Mézières, Thomas Basin, and Jean de Roye), knows whereof he speaks when he tells us that these very texts are the means to us comprehending the impact of this crisis and its implications. The deepest and most widely felt emotional response was melancholy, a state of sad pensive reflection and recollection so well expressed in the poems of Charles of Orléans, son of the murdered Duke Louis and long a captive of the English after Agincourt. True, the melancholic was given to dwelling in an imagined past, but self-reflection and recollection also encouraged awareness of and the construction, through writing, of one's "self." Moreover this time of crisis was also a "temps 'gris,'" (pp. 276, 283) at once unstable and imbalanced but also offering an intermediary space open to imagining something better, considering alternatives, and providing salutary advice, all with the aim of restoring equilibrium to the imbalanced body politic.

After providing a brief historical overview (entitled "Temps forts") that identifies the key events and trends of the period, Blanchard adopts a thematic approach, with five chapters devoted to different "levels" ("niveaux") of reading and meaning, which he labels "politique, sémiotique, anthropologique et juridique" (p. 10). The first chapter ("Dialogues, contestations, réformes") focuses on four moments of political crisis and the dialogues of resistance and reform that attended them, either in meetings of the Estates or in popular revolts and princely rebellions. Here the reform programs more often than not look back to the "âge d'or" of good St. Louis and target what they see as fiscal abuses or encroachments on princely prerogatives. Repeatedly the reforms sought the opportunity for dialogue between subject and sovereign. Different forms of discourse and their meaning ("sémiotique") are examined in chapter two ("Le temps de l'engagement"). For Blanchard a key feature of late medieval France is its rich discursive environment (written and oral, Latin and vernacular). Here he identifies different forms of and

occasions for discourse. These include: 1) the stock of political ideas shared by lawyers and theologians, chief among them being the common good, the connection between knowledge and power, and the naturalness of political life for human beings; 2) prophecy as complaint and expression of dissidence; 3) preaching and theater as forms of political speech seeking to create a public forum or, in the case of the latter, as a means of asserting political authority and legitimacy; 4) poetry as political complaint, consolation, and advice; and 5) history and memoir as both props to royal power and the means of critiquing it. Chapter three ("Déplacements, glissements, retournements") explores a vast field of literature generated within, focused on, and seeking to distance itself from the "anthropological" context of the Court, whether royal, princely, or papal, and commenting on subjects including (but limited to) flattery and favoritism, the cultivation of the self and of groups of friends (here think Petrarch and the early French humanists), oaths and oath-breaking, the multiple dangers of diplomatic engagement, the proper and improper uses of love, and leisure's connection to good kingship (when properly moderated, as in the case of Charles V) and to tyranny (when immoderate and vile, as imputed to Louis XI).

With war and government, the subjects of the final two chapters ("Heurs et malheurs du guerrier" and "Légitimité politique et majesté lésée: le pouvoir juste?"), the narrative turns to topics that seem more in keeping with much of the scholarship on late medieval French political history. Blanchard's debt here to the important contributions of such scholars as Philippe Contamine, Jacques Krynen, Colette Beaune, and Claude Gauvard is evident. Nonetheless he still manages to present a sophisticated analysis of the militarization of French royal power in the fifteenth century and to connect this with the extremely fraught and contingent course of the development of royal sovereignty. Most compelling to my mind are two discussions in chapter five. The first has to do with the fashioning of the legal concept of "invalidating constraint" as a means of protecting, and indeed fortifying royal sovereignty in response to treaties imposed on the monarchy (Troyes [1420], Conflans [1465], and Péronne [1468]) by its princely enemies; the second is Blanchard's nuanced treatment of how the monarchy tried, with varying success, to find the proper balance between rigor and mercy in the exercise of justice, especially in relation to the granting of pardons.

In closing, it must be said that even as long a review as this cannot begin to convey the narrative richness, theoretical subtlety, and profound erudition of this book. Those looking for information about late medieval social or economic history or for a straightforward survey of the political history of late medieval France will not find it here. But for those who want to immerse themselves in the world of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century elite French intellectual and political culture and then come away with a far deeper understanding of it, they can find no better guide than Joël Blanchard.

NOTES

[1] Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, ed., *L'Odeur du sang et des roses. Relire Johan Huizinga aujourd'hui* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2019); Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages: A Study of Forms of Life and Thought of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries in France and the Low Countries,* trans. Diane Webb, ed. Graeme Small and Anton van der Lem (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

[2] Jean-Philippe Genet, "La genèse de l'État moderne: les enjeux d'un programme de recherche," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 118 (June 1997): 3-18; Boris Bove, *Le Temps de la guerre de Cent Ans, 1328-1453* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2009).

Charles F. Briggs
University of Vermont
charles.briggs@uvm.edu