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Alexander Lee. *Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal in Fourteenth-Century Italy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 464 pp. $105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-967515-9.

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Alexander Lee's book is an analysis of the imperial ideal in fourteenth-century Italian humanism: the aim of this book is to explain, describe, and display how the imperial institution was conceived during this era, as well as to outline the figure of the emperor within the intellectual context of the *regnum Italicum* in its manifold facets. The preface, "A Note on Humanism," provides the reader with the necessary historiographical coordinates and tools to explore Lee's reconstruction of Italian humanism by means of a remarkable variety of sources. As written at the very beginning of this part, "A discussion of humanistic political thought must begin with a definition of humanism itself," an extremely fluid and controversial concept, for which it is difficult to find a unique definition, as experienced scholars in this field know well (p. xiii). After a survey on the perspectives given by major historians of humanism, such as Remigio Sabbadini, Berthold Ullman, Roberto Weiss, Paul O. Kristeller, and Ronald Witt, the author clarifies that his actual interpretation of humanism is close to the one offered by Witt: humanism is an essentially literary—not philosophical—phenomenon born in Padua, raised in parallel in Verona, then developed in central Italy, between Rome and Florence. Florence is the city of Dante Alighieri, one of the loudest and most influential voices of the imperial side, who convinced that Henry VII's authority could restore a durable peace in Italy; Coluccio Salutati represents Florence as well and the political position of the city during the War of the Height Saints, in the name of liberty. In fact, we can say that liberty and peace are two pillars of the fourteenth-century political discussion, together with their counterparts, conflict, civil war, and tyranny. There is no doubt that this study has been conceived for researchers and scholars with a noteworthy experience with humanistic sources: and I am not only referring to the best-known authors, such as Francesco Petrarca, Albertino Mussato, and Salutati, since Lee gives ample space also to less-studied sources, such as the works of Convenevole da Prato, Ferreto Ferreti, Riccobaldo da Ferrara, and Giovanni da Cermenate. The reader's familiarity with these sources and their respective historical contexts is necessary to keep track of the sheer amount of information, thoughts, and interpretative frameworks given by Lee in each page of this book.

However, considering *Humanism and Empire* from a different point of view, this study constitutes a valuable resource also for less knowledgeable readers: a researcher with less familiarity and experience with the aforementioned sources shall find in these pages names, concepts, and places that will push them to further investiga-

tions and studies within a refined conceptual scheme concerning humanistic political thought. As a historiographic category, humanistic political thought in itself deserves more attention than it has received in the past: caught between the medieval philosophical debates and major Renaissance figures—Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini, for example—it has been often lightly dismissed, while new studies and new analyses could exploit the results of the numerous publications of the last decades around the subject. Lee definitely follows this path, sewing together two sides of humanism studies, often perceived as separate, especially among European continental scholars: literature and the political awareness that emerges from chronicles, poems, orations, and letters.

There is a recurring set of issues that humanists keep browsing concerning peace and liberty: How can we achieve peace for our communities? How can Italy maintain a peaceful status quo and reaffirm its liberty at the same time? What is the best form of government to foster peace and prosperity? And how can we defend our liberty from our enemies? The imperial ideal provides a possible answer to this array of questions, but it is never intended as a definitive solution: during the trecento the empire lingers on in the background of Italian politics, coming forward and going back, according to the delicate political balance of the peninsula. As clearly stated in these pages, we are dealing here with a concept of empire forged in the classical sources and principles: Rome—with its symbolic and historical value—represents a point of reference and an impossible model to strive for. Rome is also a mirage for many humanist authors: the possibility of finding a solution to present issues in the sources of the past is an intellectual temptation to which it is far easier to surrender. The empire as universal power, and the emperor as the personification of this power—first Henry VII, then Louis the Bavarian, later Charles IV—could embody the political solution that humanists were looking for. However, the solution envisaged by the supporters of the imperial authority contains a high level of utopian thinking, and it becomes evident every time the emperors try to solve the continuous series of conflicts that characterize almost every Italian area during this time span. And the political turmoil of the cities set the standard: in this perspective we can easily understand the high level of political engagement of chroniclers and their often tragic attempt to explain how the golden age of peace and harmony did become such a troubled present of conflict and civil war.

While the first part of the book, "The Defence of the Empire," describes how humanists conceived of imperial authority, the second part, "The Dynamics of the Empire," presents a more thematic approach: here Lee discusses such topics as the actual boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire, the relationship between empire and papacy, and the institutional identity of the imperial power. The chapter "Imperium and sacerdotium" of this second part challenges more than others the traditional point of view on this subject, which has been commonly considered as a sacred land of philosophical thought. The authors who are usually mentioned and analyzed for this topic, such as John of Paris, Gils of Rome, Jacob of Viterbo, and William of Ockham, lie in the background of the discussion or are absent—with the sole exception of Marsilus of Padua—while such authors as Rolandino of Padua, Ferrara, and Mussato represent the core of the discussion. While this approach may raise some perplexity in scholars who have a more philosophical background, we should keep in mind the methodological premises of this study that conceives of humanism as an eminently literary phenomenon. It is true, however, that the political lexicon of humanism originated also from the Latin translation, the commentaries and the *quaestiones disputate* on the works of Aristotle, namely, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, which since the thirteenth century animated the academic debates among the major university centers of medieval Europe: Oxford and Paris in the first place. This phase constituted a key moment of the

merging process between Christian and non-Christian culture, a process culminating in humanism.

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