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H-France Review Vol. 3 (December 2003), No. 139

**Gérard Sivéry**, *Philippe III le Hardi*. Paris: Fayard, 2003. 359 pp. 22.00 € ISBN 2-213-61486-5.

Review by Nathaniel L. Taylor, Brown University.

Why a biography of a king who was, by both contemporary estimation and modern judgment, one of the least fit for the job in eight hundred years of Capetian monarchs? For Gérard Sivéry, the answer is compelling and simple: Philippe was the last subject left to cover in a multi-volume meta-biographical *oeuvre* on the immediate ancestors and descendants of Philippe's father King Louis IX, or Saint Louis.

Retired from the University of Lille, Professor Sivéry is widely praised for a significant body of research focused in the thirteenth century, both on the political and economic history of Northern France (especially Hainault), and the fiscal machinery of the Capetian administration. Landmarks in the latter category include *L'économie du royaume de France au siècle de Saint Louis* (1984) and *Les Capétiens et l'argent au siècle de Saint Louis* (1995). As a complement to his work on the machinery of government, Sivéry has also written a readable, popular series of royal biographies of the kings and queens of the *siècle de Saint Louis*, with a clear focus on the important and compelling figure of Saint Louis himself.

Beginning with a sort of overview, *Saint Louis et son siècle* (1983), Sivéry has covered the extended family with biographies of Saint Louis' consort *Marguerite de Provence* (1987), his mother *Blanche de Castille* (1990), his grandfather *Philippe Auguste* (1993), his father *Louis VIII* (1995), and now his son and heir: *Philippe III le Hardi* (2003). Sivéry has also recently produced another volume on Saint Louis: *Louis IX: Le roi saint* (2002), part of a series of lavishly-illustrated coffee table books on French kings, titled *La France au fil de ses rois* (Éditions Tallandier). So the present book simply rounds out the *siècle de Saint Louis*. Yet Philippe languishes in obscurity beside his father Saint Louis—who has always been an enormously popular subject both for erudite history and popular remembrance. This biography is only the second book on Philippe III, and the first in over a century (something which was also true of Louis VIII when Sivéry's biography of that king appeared in 1995).

Sivéry's Philippe III is an anti-biography—and not just in the sense typical for a medieval subject, where over-eager modern biographers speculate and generalize about the 'life and times' of an inaccessible minor historical figure. After all, we are well served with apparently trustworthy testimony about the character and career of Philippe III, and minute detail of the royal administration in his time. Rather, we are treated to a completely unsympathetic portrait of a man who seems almost to have been an embarrassment for Sivéry, devoted as he was to the family of Saint Louis. In a common opening for a medieval biography, Sivéry carefully demonstrates that our current unfavorable assessment of this king dates back to unsympathetic contemporary chronicles. But rather than attempt to rescue him from a wrongful historical conviction—a tactic which has been tried on the likes of Richard III and Caligula—Sivéry declares himself in agreement with the negative judgment of the chronicles, which is matched by the disappointment Sivéry discerns even in Philippe's own parents, Saint Louis and Queen Marguerite. Saint Louis, we find, carefully arranged for the future of his kingdom and his deficient son so that both

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could prosper after their own fashion, with minimal risk to the apparatus of state that Louis had so carefully nurtured.

Because of this critical stance, the heart of Sivéry's narrative is not only Philippe's life and career as prince and king, but also the personalities of his principal surrogate rulers, including his mother, Marguerite of Provence; his chamberlain Pierre de Brosse (elsewhere usually known as Pierre de la Broce); and Pierre's nemesis, Matthew of Vendôme, abbot of Saint-Denis. The biography's subject might be understood to be the machinery of government itself, which triumphed by transcending its infancy under the thoughtful royal hand of Saint Louis and by asserting its continuity, robustness and self-sufficiency under a non-ruler such as Philippe.

Yet this book still remains rooted in old-fashioned narrative biography, deriving many of its critical nuances closely from the narrative chronicles of the era. To this traditional approach Sivéry adds a veneer of contemporary psycho-history, which comes forth strongly when one understands that his use of the word 'family' always refers to the nuclear families of the monarch and his parents, spouse or children. Through Sivéry's eyes it is fascinating to experience the royal family as a modern one—with function and dysfunction, expectations and disappointment, stresses and rivalries, always at the center of the broader political storms of the day. Through Sivéry's intimate acquaintance with Louis IX we are first introduced to Philippe III as his disappointed parents struggle to make the best of this flawed child who became heir following the death of an elder brother. This nuanced view of a dysfunctional family or dynasty is fascinating, though one suspects that Sivéry may be channeling too blithely twentieth-century moral and psychological constructions of family life into his vision of the thirteenth-century Capetians.

Unfortunately, Sivéry's obviously deep technical understanding of the machinery of Capetian government is insufficiently evident in this biography. He is clearly sympathetic to the prosopographical, fiscal, and legal minutiae of Capetian government, threads that were followed to such good effect by American scholars of Capetian government such as Joseph Strayer (Philippe IV) and John Baldwin (Philippe Auguste). Yet these themes are barely present in the biography. A telling example is the career of Pierre de Brosse, royal chamberlain and effective surrogate for Philippe III, which occupies three chapters. Pierre de Brosse benefited from the combination of an evolving bureaucracy of royal government and the sudden absence of a strong royal presence, to step into place as the first true 'minister' of the French state with the official title of 'Great Chamberlain' to the king. With Sivéry's background in the study of Capetian administration, one might expect a systematic exploration of Pierre de Brosse's ministerial power. But Sivéry leaves this avenue largely unexplored, opting to dwell more on the juxtaposition of personalities. He includes a series of speculations about the role of women (Philippe's second wife, and Pierre's own) in the relationship between Pierre and the king, and even an obligatory passage exploring the (unsupported and uncredited) hypothesis that Pierre may have had a homosexual relationship with the king.

These provocative characterizations show that Sivéry has offered a narrative biography to appeal to a casual reader interested in personalities, rather than a more systematic administrative history of which he is also certainly capable. Despite this disappointment of a road not taken, *Philippe III le Hardi* remains informative, provocative, and highly readable. Taken with Sivéry's other biographies of the dynasty, it forms a compelling meta-narrative. His take on the family dynamic of the dynasty may be tainted with anachronistic assumptions about family dynamics, but Sivéry's psycho-analysis is based on intimate knowledge of the sources, and is still seductive.

Finally: what sort of man do we meet through this interesting lens? Not a sympathetic one, except perhaps in the sympathy one may feel—as Sivéry certainly does—for an unfit or insufficiently glorious monarch and his inglorious end. Philippe's only kingly enthusiasm was warfare, but his only significant military campaign was his final act, the ill-fated crusade of 1285 against Aragon. The French army

invaded Catalonia, taking the city of Gerona, but then retreated in the face of a hard winter and the onset of an epidemic of dysentery, which claimed the king's life. Sivéry speculates that the curious equivocation of some sources about the precise date of the king's death might show that Philippe, recrossing the Pyrenees in a closed litter, may already have been dead before arriving back on French soil: a king unfortunate and unfulfilled even in death.

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