

Margaret McGowan. *Harmony in the Universe. Spectacle and the Quest for Peace in the Early Modern Period*. Brepols Publishers NV, 2026. ISBN 978-2-503-59967-0 (hardback), 978-2-503-59968-7 (eBook) 192 pp, illustrated

Harmony in the Universe is both the culmination and a distillation of Margaret M. McGowan's decades of research into the intellectual and artistic culture of the Renaissance in western Europe. In one sense her aim in this her last, posthumous, publication is simple: an examination of the quest for peace in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the role spectacles – court festivals and princely entries – played in the attempt to bring about this peace. The contemporary context of this quest, however, was not straight forward: it was complex and delicate, requiring continual negotiation and adjustments in a continent riven with conflicts and wars. McGowan does not shy away from these complexities, and the reality of war. She bases her thesis on the writings of a wide range of contemporary humanists, poets, philosophers, festival planners, lawyers and politicians, who were all united in their belief in the benefits peace could bring to a country, and who recognized peace “as a necessary condition of life, not [just as] some abstraction that could be bandied about between philosophers or moralists” [p. 16]. They argued that peace brought about civic unity, which in turn allowed for the promulgation of good laws, and prosperity, as well as harmony, a lack of disorder and conflict. Once harmony and prosperity were established, then “progress in the arts, better education, and the possibility of a lasting concord between nations” would follow [p. 16].

In the six chapters of this book, McGowan clearly states the central argument of the chapter, then supports her thesis by quotations from contemporary and ancient writers. Descriptions of festivals further illustrate her arguments, which are clear, logical and easy to follow, especially as all quotations are provided in the original language with an English translation. Those who wish to read more deeply on the subject under discussion are well served by the detailed footnotes of contemporary sources, and by references to modern scholarship on each subject. Sixty-four illustrations, mostly black and white with some in colour, aid readers in their understanding of her text, as well as allowing them a glimpse into the highly visual nature of the spectacles under discussion. Brepols has produced a high quality publication, with the text and illustrations printed on glossy paper, ensuring that readers can see the details in each illustration that the author is discussing in the text.

The book opens with a discussion of the prevailing view of the universe in Renaissance Europe, and on how the universe was maintained by the harmony between concord (order) and discord (disorder). While it was commonly recognized that such a balance was constantly being broken by incessant wars, political writers, artists and festival organizers sought ways to restore peace – concord – and to influence others to maintain a world in which peace flourished. As McGowan states, “the most impressive demonstrations of harmony were to be found in sixteenth-century shows of magnificence” in which “concord consistently triumphed” [p. 38]. The author then discusses how concord was expressed in princely entries, by triumphal arches and chariots, in dancing and in music.

After a chapter dedicated to an examination of the representations of war, its violence and the reasons why war was such a constant at that time, the author returns to the subject

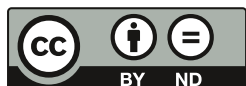
of music and dance and the power and effectiveness of these two arts in presenting concord in festivals. She discusses technical advances in stage machinery, and an increase in the size of theatrical spaces for dancing, which, she argues, opened opportunities for choreographers to create compositions for larger numbers of dancers than previously, both on the floor of the stage and above the stage in the ‘heavens’. McGowan argues that “these festivals paved the way for dance and music to play more significant roles, able to carry the burden of more complex narratives and to give impressive physical expression to their creators’ beliefs” [p. 95].

The fourth chapter focuses on princely entries and the means by which “city planners sought to persuade both the princely visitor and the citizens themselves of the value of establishing ... concord and subsequently peace” [p. 101]. In the fifth chapter McGowan focuses on the ballets, masques and intermezzi found in so many of the court spectacles, in which spectators were confronted and immersed in a “world of excitement and astonishment” [p. 123]. Yet in spite of the distance between the everyday lives of the audience and the world they were viewing on stage, such spectacles were closely concerned with “contemporary ideas and aspirations” [p. 123], since the ballets and masques actually demonstrated harmony in action. “They show its [harmony’s] preservation, its benefits, its transformative powers, and the ways in which it could bring civic concord and union in states disturbed by wars and revolts” [p. 123]. After setting out her argument, the ensuing discussion of individual danced spectacles from Italy, France and England from the early sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century provides depth and supporting evidence for the Renaissance desire to promote peace.

In her final chapter ideas discussed earlier in the book return, as the author sets out how peace, and the benefits it could bring, moved from being addressed in written texts to being presented as visual expressions of persuasion by the use of symbols of peace, especially the lute and the crow, architectural sculptures and temples of peace in princely entries, along with additional persuasive forces such as spoken eloquence, music, striking scenic effects, and having the finale of a spectacle end with “an enduring vision of peace” [p. 162]. In early modern Europe peace was regarded as an active force which had the power to combat and overcome evil. The search for peace provided hope to the citizens of Europe during the many wars they had to endure, and its achievement was one of the purposes of spectacular festivals on which so much time, money and effort was spent. In closing, McGowan naturally recognizes that today festivals no longer hold such a purpose or power, even though the existence and establishment of peace is just as necessary now as it was four centuries ago.

One cannot hope to do justice to the wealth of detail which McGowan provides in *Harmony in the Universe* in a review of this length. Even though her book’s foundation is ideas, her writing, and numerous examples, mean that the reader is provided with a compelling and vivid picture of how these ideas were presented in the spectacles of early modern Europe and why these ideas mattered.

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