

H-France Forum
Volume 15 (2020), Issue 4, #3

Chloé Hogg, *Absolutist Attachments: Emotion, Media, and Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century France*. Rethinking the Early Modern series. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019. xii + 276 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 (pb) ISBN 978-0-8101-3941-1.

Review Essay by Jennifer Tamas, Rutgers University-New Brunswick

Absolutist Attachments is a thought-provoking study that challenges our perceptions of Louis XIV's rule in original ways. This well-written and highly documented study is an extremely pleasant read. Hogg bridges multiple fields of inquiry and examines diverse media such as paintings, memoirs, epistolary correspondence, literary texts, newspapers, treatises, and historical archives. Hogg not only excels in literary close reading, but she also guides the reader through the contemplation of a painting by Le Brun, and the architecture of the Porte Saint-Martin. Her study moves seamlessly from the visual arts to literature with an ease that any humanities scholar should envy. Such dexterity in using the sources makes her book fascinating, inspiring, and bold in ways that foster discussion.

Absolutist Attachments is among the first, full-length studies to explore the *subject* perspective on absolutist authority. Hogg joins a new trend of scholarship [1] that debunks the previously authoritative ideas of Louis Marin, whose notion of representation leaves almost no independent agency to the subject.[2] This shift in focus is even more striking because the subject's attachment and adhesion to the royal figure is nonetheless key to understanding not only the "fabrication of the king" but also its reception.[3] Instead of examining how Louis XIV ruled his people, Hogg is questioning their "*servitude volontaire*," a concept forged by La Boétie (a reference surprisingly absent from the bibliography), and still debated during the eighteenth century (by Montesquieu among others). More specifically, Hogg examines how the subject—defined as a "feeling subject"—agrees to be subjugated by the absolute monarch. The answer lies in the nature of the *attachment* that links a king and his subject.[4] Instead of deriving the modernity of Louis XIV's reign from the separation of the state and the subject, *Absolutist Attachments* maps out their intimate points of convergence. Hogg uncovers the various mediations that define those attachments. The very structure of the study explores these layers of "connections" (p. 10) between the king and his subjects and reveals how the subject's agency finds a new expression in receiving, contemplating, buying, using, or, in short, "consuming" objects such as painting (chapter 1), architecture and correspondence (chapter 2), newspapers (chapter 3), poetry and historiography (chapter 4), and representations of wounded bodies along with notions of the king's healing powers (chapter 5).

The first chapter stresses the importance of a loving king (Alexandre le Grand) through the media of literary works (Racine and Scudéry), paintings (Le Brun), and their commentaries (Félibien). Le Brun's painting entitled *Les Reines de Perse aux pieds d'Alexandre* (1660) showcases a misprision since the conquered subjects prostrate

themselves at the feet of the wrong man. The misrecognition of Alexandre portrayed by Le Brun helps Hogg theorize the *absolutist subject* as an active and creative spectator, who becomes engaged in a process of “election” by the very fact of recognizing—or not—the king. The first chapter presents copious examples of political affects—such as generosity, admiration, wonder—as emanations of the subjects’ feelings. Hogg breaks new ground in promoting a subject’s “sentimental choice,” an idea borrowed from Scudéry in *Clélie*, instead of relying on the monarch’s power to foster political adhesion.

The second chapter questions the transformation of the loving king into a military king. Hinging on an in-depth examination of architecture (Blondel), panegyric discourses, correspondences, and literary novels, Hogg explains the Dutch War (1672-1678) as “a media born war” (p. 68) fostered by the emergence of a news culture informed by new print practices. She boldly asserts that Louis XIV invaded Holland mainly because the printed mockery and insults challenged his authority. This emotional response from the king stresses the importance of the “navigation of feelings” induced by the power of words.[5] Since literature should be devoted to royal celebration, Louis XIV’s successful war gives him the perfect occasion to read laudatory lines about himself. As seductive as this theory may seem, I think Hogg overemphasizes the importance of media and underestimates national rivalries in terms of their military and naval influences in the region.[6]

That said, Hogg offers her readers a way to understand the emergence of modern news by devoting an entire chapter to Donneau de Visé and his many martial accounts as a “war correspondent” (p. 103). Her keen attention to the *Mercure Galant*, coincidentally launched during the Dutch War, alerts us to a new trend: the absolutist subject participates in the king’s celebration as a media consumer and as a reader. The *Mercure* becomes the perfect *mediation* as it mixes information with literary entertainment “to target a socially diverse, mixed-gender readership.” (p. 109) [7] Theorizing a “space of mediation” (p. 111) enriched by the emotional participation and contribution of the subjects, Hogg defines war coverage as a “public service” (p. 107). Her treatment of information contrasts with Michèle Fogel’s reading of the “ceremony of information” orchestrated by the king.[8] Louis XIV’s 1709 appeal asking for his subjects’ approbation of a political decision—the first of its kind—exemplifies how Hogg ties the dissemination of information to emotion.

Those *attachments* between the sovereign and his subjects can also result in *disaffection*. In her fourth chapter, Hogg reflects upon the failure of literature, especially Boileau’s panegyric of the “Siège de Namur,” a poem that fell under attack for its lack of good taste. The range of reactions, from irritation to disgust, as well as the diversity of readers, prove how bad and good taste bind together the absolutist subjects and potentially challenge the political representation of the king.

The last chapter delves into disability studies to offer a surprising concept of “pathological absolutism” (p. 184). By reflecting on the *Invalides*, Louis XIV’s hospital for injured soldiers, while also pinpointing the many wounded bodies in the kingdom, and commenting on portraits of disabled subjects (the Comte de Pagan or Claude Berbier

du Metz), Hogg theorizes a new kind of attachment to the king forged through wounding. Once again, Hogg's boldness lies in her challenge to the traditional representation of the king as a "roi thaumaturge" (Marc Bloch) who has the power to heal those whom he touches. This last chapter draws our attention to the vulnerability of the body as a common experience, an idea that stands in striking contrast with the glorious representations of the Sun King depicted by Burke or Marin, and aligns well with recent studies.[9]

Surprisingly, Hogg does not fully engage with the delineation between "passion," "feeling," and "emotion." This amalgamation of terms is all the more striking since the analysis of political attachment could easily rely on a thorough rhetorical examination of *persuasion* versus *conviction* at stake not only in literary works but also in paintings.[10] The absolutist subjects as consumers are *seduced* in different ways by a host of "media" that Hogg brilliantly brings to our attention. As much as I admire Hogg's analysis, I am surprised by its avoidance of rhetorical terms to define the emotions and political feelings that tie subjects to their king. The use of "pathological absolutism" (p. 184) in the last chapter makes me wonder why the key notions of "pathos," "ethos," and "logos" are not used to analyze *discourses* whose different nature (letters, speeches, panegyrics, even paintings) find a common ground in their structural argumentation (logical, ethical, pathological proofs). These Aristotelian notions have the merit of being particularly relevant in the seventeenth century, not only because they belong to a shared body of knowledge, but also because they are required to understand passions such as admiration, generosity, and wonder *in connection with* political feelings. Therefore, the absence of rhetorical treatises bridging passions and politics seems to me to be lacking. Not only would turning to such treatises of the passions tighten the connections that Hogg draws between the many genres of documents, but it would also help readers understand their differences and the significant changes some of them introduce to traditional forms of speech. For instance, the growing influence of the *Mercure Galant* plays an important role in democratizing not only news, but the use of a new writing style itself.

One might justify Hogg's resistance to the use of rhetorical tools by noting that she calls attention to a new language that redefines attachment. Her conclusion, beautifully entitled "a passion without a name" (p. 191) debunks the traditional feelings associated with the king's image (familial love, fear, etc.) to promote something new, "a sort of political tendresse" (p. 191). Delving into the words of Cléandre, one of Madeleine de Scudéry's most famous characters, Hogg reworks the traditional feudal attachment explored by eminent scholars such as Jean-Marie Apostolidès [11]. Feelings such as "tendresse" and "inclination," so vividly depicted in novels, newspapers, or correspondence, counterbalance the power of rhetorical categories to understand literary texts. But it would be interesting to ponder the emergence of such new emotions in relation to the influence of women in the literary field. As *feeling subjects* ruled by absolutism, women redefine the very notion of eloquence traditionally codified through male discourses (Cicero, Quintilian, Aristotle, among others) and create new literary forms, such as Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* or Scudéry's *La Promenade de Versailles*. Thus, while Hogg's resistance to the use of rhetoric is particularly bold, I believe that explicitly justifying her reluctance to use such tools would reinforce her

argument as a whole. In the same vein, her use of anachronistic terms to depict the society of that time (such as “war correspondent” p. 103, “commercial appeal” p. 15, “media event” p. 69, etc.) could be seen as a drawback, especially in the eyes of conservative scholars, but it can also be viewed as a secret weapon to entice students to engage in seventeenth-century studies. I find such terms particularly efficient in my own teaching. Her comparison between absolutist friendship under the Old Regime and befriending Obama nowadays is particularly stimulating. Despite the lack of seamless exactitude, such comparisons and neologisms are thought-provoking and enjoyable.

Another area that merits attention by Hogg is in her discussion of seventeenth-century theater. In the spectacular first chapter, Hogg reflects upon the notion of (mis)recognition in Le Brun’s painting in order to stress the generosity, the “grandeur” and the forgiveness of Alexandre le Grand. Her pictorial analysis—reminiscent of Louis Marin’s style and approach—is very well structured: she renews the perception of the reader each time she uncovers a new perspective on the painting. But in drawing a parallel between Le Brun’s work and Racine’s *Alexandre le Grand*, based on their common endeavor to picture a loving king, Hogg would be even more persuasive if she avoided oversimplifying Racine’s play to a certain degree. Racine reveals what Le Brun hides: the duality of the king who is already both a lover and a warrior: “Il sortait du combat. Et tout couvert de Gloire [...]” (III. 3, 849). War casualties, wounds, and even crimes drip like fresh blood from these lines. Despite the accusation of *galanterie* waged against the young Racine at that time, it seems to me that the playwright’s goal is to *force* the belligerents (Taxile, Porus, and Axiane the warrior queen invented by Racine) to *recognize* Alexandre’s grandeur. Racine’s appreciation of the Aristotelian concept of “agnition” is particularly powerful to understand the outcome of the play. Alexandre’s conquest, inspiring both admiration and hate, is both military and sentimental. Cléofile (his lover) actually fears with good reason that she will be a trophy among others. Despite her social inferiority, Cléofile’s argumentation relies on a *rhetoric of accusation*—“la rhétorique du blâme”—as she strives to condemn Alexandre’s appetite for (feminine) conquests (see III, 6). It would strengthen Hogg’s argument, and make her Racinian interlude essential, to insist on Racine’s art in depicting a king that fosters complex and contradictory feelings. A secret search for *recognition* is at stake—a *recognition* that Aristotle helps conceptualize. Misreading signs, Axiane, in the form of Le Brun’s Persian Queen, blinds herself to the grandeur of Alexandre. Her fear of becoming a slave obstructs her ability to *recognize* Alexandre as her king. The beginning of the play highlights the mis-recognition of Alexandre as a faux pas that could lead to death. At the end of the play, Alexandre’s generosity forces both Axiane and Porus to admire him: “J’admire le grand Cœur d’un héros qui vous aime” (l. 1594) and to recognize him as king: “Je me rends. Je vous cède une pleine Victoire” (l. 1601). They surrender to his generosity only once Alexandre returns their territories to them, thus making them *ruling* subjects. This “affectionate submission” induced by the king’s clemency and generosity is well portrayed in Le Brun’s painting. In Racine’s words, it relies on rhetorical artifices and verbs of knowledge that are so typical of Racine’s style, such as “reconnaître en vous plus de vertus qu’en moi” (l. 1600). While my interpretation of Racine’s play differs slightly from Hogg’s, her comparison between Le Brun and Racine helped reshape my

understanding of affective submission and convinced me that Hogg's work is endowed with the rare power to question and renew our conceptions of canonical texts.

I would like to conclude in celebrating the boldness of this study. Hogg challenges and discusses in intellectually elegant ways the ideas of the most famous seventeenth-century scholars. She does so, not by abruptly opposing them, but in developing her ideas in a personal and witty manner. Reading this monograph procures a vivid sense of dialogue both stimulating and exciting. I admire the way she takes part in analyzing not only the canon but also a host of primary sources whether they have occasioned much spilled ink or, on the contrary, been left aside. Through her meticulous study of the period, Hogg offers tremendous material for the next generation of scholars to consider.

Absolutist Attachments also has mimetic effects in uncovering our perhaps not "absolutist" but "democratic" attachments to a community of seventeenth-century specialists united in the aspiration to understand absolutism, passions, attachments, and their relationship to the arts. In this sense, Hogg's analysis is a "feel-good book" because it helps us recognize how lucky we are to be connected—especially in the isolating context of a pandemic—with a community of scholars. Her reading of absolutism and "feeling subjects" also explains why we are still so powerfully "attached" to this glorious past, both far and close from us.

NOTES

[1] See Katherine Ibbett, *Compassion's Edge: Fellow Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[2] Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi*. (Paris, Minuit, 1981).

[3] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

[4] See Hogg's discussion of "The Ties That Bind (Feeling Absolutism)" pp. 11-14.

[5] William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] See for instance Tony Corn, "Global Colbert," *Le Débat* 2019/3 (n° 205), p. 164-177.

[7] See Deborah Steinberger, "Le Mercure galant and Its Student Body: Donneau de Visé's Inclusive Pedagogy." *Cahiers du dix-septième* 17 (2016): 41-56.

[8] Michèle Fogel, *Les Cérémonies de l'information dans la France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle*. (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[9] Ellen McClure, *Sunspots and the Sun King: Sovereignty and Mediation in Seventeenth-Century France*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[10] See Marc Fumaroli, *L'École du silence: le sentiment des images au XVII^e siècle*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), as well as Stella Spriet and Gilles Declercq, eds. *Fascination des images. Images de la fascination*. (Paris: Presses de Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2014).

[11] Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le Roi-machine: spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV*. (Paris: Minuit, 1981).

Jennifer Tamas
Associate Professor of French
Rutgers University-New Brunswick
jt723@french.rutgers.edu