

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.

Response Essay by Chloé Hogg, University of Pittsburgh

Ellen Welch begins her review of *Absolutist Attachments* by noting that reading a book about the affective and media connections of Louis XIV's subjects to their sovereign felt oddly pertinent at a time of heightened online connectivity during the weeks and months of adapting to the pandemic. I want to use this observation as a springboard into my response to the generous, incisive commentaries of Mathilde Bombart, Jennifer Tamas, Hélène Visentin, and Ellen Welch on my book. And I'll make the jump—springboard style—from Welch's focused observation to a more diffuse appreciation of the “old regime moment” that I've been feeling and witnessing recently. Much of what I can adduce here is squishy and subjective and political, like the running “Louis XIV Alert” Twitter feed I've had scrolling through my head and that started with President Trump's verbal tic, “We'll see,” which sets off “Je verrai” bells for me (Louis XIV's favorite response to courtiers—leaving the asker destabilized, wondering, hoping, hanging on royal whim or pleasure).[1] Hearing Louis XIV name-checked as I was listening to the impeachment testimony before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee was another such moment.[2] My mental Louis XIV Alert Twitter account is capacious; it catalogues social media references to the French Revolution—guillotines, mostly, but also more recondite allusions (a Twitter mention of tumbrils that I wish I had screen-captured—unnerving to scroll through). The recent series of statue removals and dismantlings cannot be reduced to an old regime “moment” but rather includes and indicts old regime France in a history of violence, enslavement, racism, and colonization that, as Marlene Daut shows, connects Louisville, Kentucky, and Louis XVI.[3]

Old regime redux aside, my jump from Welch's observation lands me nearer to my book, and the mix of media practices, emotional ties, and monarchy that it studies. *Absolutist Attachments* tracks elite subject-sovereign connections mediated through art, literature, and news during the reign of Louis XIV. In what follows, I'll address some main critical points from my readers—Visentin on news and ceremony; Bombart on literature; Tamas on passions/emotions/affect; and Welch and Tamas on “feel good” absolutism. Not only do I agree with their critiques, as we'll see, but I feel as if Bombart, Tamas, Visentin, and Welch have given me a roadmap to better understanding my book. *Absolutist Attachments* owes so much to so many scholars that it is fitting that I continue my debt to these scholars as readers. Thank you, then, to my reviewers and to David Harrison for inviting me to participate in this H-France Forum.[4]

Visentin highlights the book's lack of engagement with questions of spectacle, ceremony and theatricality. Let me respond in a few ways. First, yes, theater (with some exceptions) and court spectacle are absent, and markedly—I hope productively—so. I took my inspiration from

Katherine Ibbett, who writes of being interested not in the dazzle of monarchy but in the “humdrum” business of staging the early modern state.[5] Following her lead, but veering away from theater and spectacle, allowed me to propose news—understood as media, discourse, and mode of readerly engagement—as another place, perhaps *the* other place, for analyzing the originality of the subject-sovereign relation during Louis XIV’s reign. In this way, I join scholars including Allison Stedman, Deborah Steinberger, and Christophe Schuwey in bringing to the fore the media innovations of Donneau de Visé’s *Mercure galant*. [6] Yet I also risked setting up the too-tendentious opposition that Visentin homes in on: “news as ceremony versus news as media.” Reading Visentin reading me, I had a moment of writerly flashback. I remember struggling with the phrase she cites as I tried to express the dynamic that I was interested in: a movement away from the “body ceremonies” of the French monarchy, royal ceremonies and court rituals focused on the presentation and rhythms or lifecycles of the royal body (or its effigy), towards the ways in which subjects “consumed” their king as news and information. As Visentin notes, however, the ceremony of the royal entry afforded both moments of affective connection between subjects and their sovereign and the mediation of these scenes in print (no “versus” needed). Visentin’s important corrective—the royal entry as enacting “a strong relational connection between the king and his subjects” as well as a media event—brings to mind Anna Rosensweig’s fascinating work on royal entries and civic pride. [7] Visentin writes that my thesis “might have benefited from greater consideration of public ceremonials within a historical frame”; I think she’s right—and I would add, I quailed before the larger historiographical question of the ceremonials of the French monarchy. My engagement was more local, a kind of admiring riff on Michèle Fogel’s study *Les Cérémonies de l’information*, and a desire to put some movement and tension around those two terms, “ceremony” and “information.” [8] In my telling, royal ceremonies participate in, but do not define or contain or even dominate, the affective and media connections between subjects and sovereign that are forged through and alongside of the panoply of traditional royal ceremonial.

Next up, Tamas, and what she astutely diagnoses as my less-than-complete attempt to distinguish between the vocabulary of emotion in historical or theoretical terms; Tamas speaks in this context of a “mixture of terms.” Part of this mixture was, perhaps, pertinent to my project, as I sought to pick up critical tools across emotion and affect studies that I found useful (notably Ann Cvetkovich’s “archive of feelings” but also Sianne Ngai’s notion of “ugly feelings” and Sara Ahmed’s analysis of emotions as forces of stickiness, alignment and orientation) and which allowed me, as a literary scholar, to access texts that were otherwise flat or opaque to me. [9] Tamas’s observation that I did not use the history and vocabulary of rhetoric for the task of conceptualizing, in a historically grounded way, the political and affective attachments that I sought to study, allows me to see a bit more clearly through my methodology. Looking back at certain moments in my book, I realize how much I relied on a critical vocabulary of affect and feeling exogenous to the seventeenth century—I couldn’t have read the political and aesthetic implications of the badness of Boileau’s “Ode sur la prise de Namur,” for example, without Ngai. Yet as I reached for concepts in contemporary affect theory—and even, occasionally, the language of contemporary feelings and emotions—I aimed at doing the kind of grounded, contextualized, localized reading of texts and emotions modeled by the essays gathered in Hélène Merlin-Kajman’s important special issue of *Littératures classiques*, “Les Émotions publiques et leurs langues à l’âge classique.” [10] (Merlin-Kajman’s analysis of the “Patratras Monsieur de Nevers” anecdote tucked into Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*, the violence and

trauma that she unpacks around the public display of emotions—an old woman’s mockery, a duke’s humiliation and rage, and an entire town laid to waste—haunts me.) What Tamas identifies as a failure to adequately define and historicize my emotional vocabulary might also be the mark of critical opportunism—my way in and around a disparate body of texts made navigable, thinkable to me through emotion and affect studies. More generally, Tamas’s point about my missing engagement with rhetoric strikes home to me, now, as I regularly turn to Jennifer Mercieca’s rhetorical analyses to help me understand the political communication of President Trump.[11] Tamas’s point about rhetoric, in other words, might also be a point about power, about a failure to fully reckon with the power dynamics of the affective and media attachments that shaped the subject of absolutism. More on this shortly.

Bombart’s response brings a trenchant synthesis and order to my book which I can only sit back and admire. I appreciate in particular Bombart’s attention to my engagements as a literary scholar—and a scholar of that strange thing, “littérature classique.” Bombart identifies in my book an effort to extend the boundaries of where and what we read as literature in seventeenth-century France; I can attest that I often wished that my corpus of texts was more crisply bounded, more easily identified, better known than the occasional pieces, military-themed texts, or mixed-genre “literature of news” that I kept finding myself studying. My hope is that *Absolutist Attachments* helps notice some of the messiness of literature under Louis XIV. I mean “messy” in the sense of medial transference or interference, as news circulated with and as literature, and literary texts were consumed as and with news as part of what Florence Boulerie calls the early modern processes of “la médiatisation du littéraire.”[12] “Messy” too might comprehend—if more precisely articulated—the ways in which literary texts circulated through, were compromised by and contended with, a growing awareness of the mediatization of the subject-sovereign relation. So it’s not that printed Dutch insults spurred the Franco-Dutch War (my apologies here to Tamas if my words got away from me), it’s that some seventeenth-century commentators felt like they did, and that sentiment indexes a media awareness which inflects, I think, the literary experience as well. Thus, something as seemingly straightforward as celebrating a successful military event in poetry (the passage of the Rhine or the first siege of Namur) breaks down into a stream of alternative affects, accusations of bad taste, and attempts to integrate factuality and timeliness into royal praise—tributaries, perhaps, of what José-Luis Diaz terms the “contre-communication” of literature.[13] Bombart further highlights the dynamic of the polarization of the literary—and the literarization of politics—during the reign of Louis XIV (“la politique littéraire se fait intrinsèquement critique politique”). I’m thinking here of Kathrina LaPorta’s work that brings new attention to the interpenetration of literature and politics under Louis XIV through the “poetics of diversion” that mixed political polemic with literary strategies: hence a military rout and political embarrassment inspires spin-off novels and plays, as well as a wave of parodic poetry that crosses the wires of political critique and literary-cultural debates on the sublime.[14] I also want to acknowledge—as Bombart does—my debt to Christian Jouhaud’s study of Fronde literature.[15] Jouhaud’s analysis of the corpus of Mazarinades as prompts to action, a series of activating, polarizing media scripts, feels even more pertinent now, as I react or try not to react to the incitements of social media, as it did when I first read it.

Let me circle back to Welch, whose central question—where and who is the subject of absolutism in this study, and how to comprehend “the absent presence of the subjects” of my

argument?—was unnerving to process, given the (ostensible) subject of my book. Welch finds an approach to this question with a useful invocation of Michael Warner’s analysis of the “devices of reflexive circulation” that help create a public and thus offer a way, as Welch writes, “to think about the significance of the media audience without having to speculate about the possible responses of individual media consumers.”[16] Welch goes on to distinguish moments where my book, in her helpful phrasing, demonstrates “a greater variety of discursive strategies through which seventeenth-century media imagined its consumers.” Yet I return to Welch’s point about the “absent” subject and I hear it resonate more broadly. My formulation of the “feeling subject of absolutism” or “feeling publics of absolutism” may risk becoming as much an ideological construct as André Félibien’s construction of the ideal subject of art and sovereignty in his description of Le Brun’s *Les Reines de Perse*. Félibien works a flattening out of the diversity of ranks, nationalities, races, and sex/genders represented in the painting as he zooms in on the Greek woman gazing at Louis/Alexander to propose her aesthetic and affective reactions as the ones good subjects will adopt. Likewise, my “feeling subject of absolutism” both indexes local readings yet eventually abstracts categories of religious, racial or ethnic, and gender orientations—perhaps in a very Louis Quatorzian way, expressing what Todd Reeser calls “a kind of universalism yet to come.”[17]

Welch’s second point of concern—that I “overemphasize the capacity of subjects to freely choose their mediated affective attachments”—is also one that I recognize. I think I tried to stave off this critique, apotropaically, by quoting a colleague’s query—was I proposing an “emancipatory” reading of absolutism?—at the end of my introduction. Welch’s vocabulary of “nudging” here is a useful corrective, as is her suggestion that we attend to the aesthetic prompts and prods that shape a “normative emotional framework for the absolutist subject.” Indeed, putting Welch’s insight together with Tamas’s designation of *Absolutist Attachments* as a “feel-good book” makes me wonder if, in wanting to turn my gaze from the cultural productions and critical effects of “spectacular absolutism,” I did not sufficiently account for the power and subjugation effects of absolutist attachments.[18]

I felt this lack keenly after watching *Hamilton* for the first time—a moment of pandemic sociability, rendered painful and potent, joyful and urgent and insufficient and necessary, after weeks of nationwide and global protests against police brutality and systemic racism. At first, I wondered why Lin-Manuel Miranda gave King George III such a catchy tune—why wasn’t it imposing, fusty, silly? Then I got it: that’s the point. The catchiness, the toe-tapping swingy light-hearted rhythm, the soaring voice (ironically, on the line “Empires fall”): monarchy is catchy. In studying the affective and media attachments that helped create Louis XIV’s absolutism, I might have done more to undo the catchiness.

## NOTES

[1] Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, ed. Yves Coirault (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1985), vol. 5, p. 528. This reference is thanks to David Harrison.

[2] Jonathan Turley, Written Statement, “The Impeachment Inquiry into President Donald J. Trump: The Constitutional Basis for Impeachment,” United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary, December 4, 2019, p. 27,

<https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016e-d0e8-dc46-a9ff-ffeb787a0000>.

[3] Marlene L. Daut, “The Statue of Louis XVI Should Remain Forever Handleless,” *Mail & Guardian*, June 2, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/opinion/2020-06-02-the-statue-of-louis-xvi-should-remain-forever-handleless/>. On the Louis XVI statue in Louisville, see also the informative Twitter thread by Jennifer Sessions, May 30, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Laprofemme/status/1282411544689741824>.

[4] I am grateful to Claire Goldstein, Denise McCoskey, and Todd Reeser for reading and giving me suggestions on this piece; and I must thank David Harrison, again and again, for his supportive editing.

[5] Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660: Neoclassicism and Government* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 3.

[6] See Allison Stedman, *Rococo Fiction in France, 1600-1715: Seditious Frivolity* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013); Deborah Steinberger’s work, including “*Le Mercure galant* and Its Student Body: Donneau de Visé’s Inclusive Pedagogy,” *Cahiers du dix-septième* 17 (2016): 41-56 ; and Christophe Shuway’s work, including his new book, *Un entrepreneur des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Donneau de Visé, de Molière au Mercure galant* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020).

[7] Anna Rosensweig, “Structures of Sovereignty and the Public Good,” SE17 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, October 11, 2019.

[8] Michèle Fogel, *Les Cérémonies de l’information dans la France du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[9] See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004) and *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[10] Hélène Merlin-Kajman, ed., “Les émotions publiques et leurs langages à l’âge classique,” Special issue, *Littératures classiques* 68 (2009).

[11] See for example Jennifer Mercieca in “Is Donald Trump a Rhetorical Genius? Video Explainer,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2019/apr/10/is-donald-trump-a-rhetorical-genius-video-explainer?fbclid=IwAR0MOczWJFjyDGWGG6u44yxITGHZDJ-sWpar0aYQQcnyjKv8WwS9ZDx-Pj0Y>.

[12] Florence Boulerie, ed., *La Médiatisation du littéraire dans l’Europe des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Tübingen: Narr, 2013).

[13] José-Luis Diaz, “Quelle histoire littéraire? Perspectives d’un dix-neuviémiste,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 103 (2003), p. 35, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-d-histoire-litteraire-de-la-france-2003-3-page-515.htm>.

[14] Kathrina A. LaPorta, “Diverting the Reader: Novel Strategies in the *Conseil privé de Louis le Grand* (1696),” *Early Modern French Studies* vol. 37, n. 2 (2015): 135-46.

[15] Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 1985).

[16] Welch quotes Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 67; see also Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* vol. 14, n. 1 (2002), p. 67, [https://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/fwa\\_mediawiki/images/9/96/WarnerPublics&Counterpublics.pdf](https://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/fwa_mediawiki/images/9/96/WarnerPublics&Counterpublics.pdf).

[17] Email exchange with Todd Reeser.

[18] On the critical tendency to reproduce the subjugating effects of absolutist cultural production, see Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures, and Accidents that Made Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 23.

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