

One may regret likewise the overstated assertions that the doctors of both kings were ignorant and pretentious, for this does not add much to the argument. For historical purposes, Assaf retains the original texts with their spelling and punctuation, which can make the reading challenging at times. If the choice of keeping the links (“ligature”) may be questionable, the desire to preserve these writings as presented is commendable and valuable for specialists.

Despite a few misgivings, Assaf’s book has an undeniable historical importance: it brings together documents that are not easily accessible; it presents those documents clearly and accurately; and, most of all, it separates what is fact and what is fiction. Assaf’s knowledge of the time period, its culture, and its people contributes greatly to the understanding of the events and the texts presented. The work of a specialist, this text is meant for an audience of specialists.

Peter Sahlins. 1668. *The Year of the Animal in France*. New York: Zone Books, 2017. 491 pp.+ 13 color illus., 135 b&w illus. \$25.39 Review by DENIS D. GRÉLÉ, THE UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS.

1668, France is victorious in Flanders; Condé takes the Franche Comté; and the animals make “a dramatic entrance onto the stage of French history” (11). In this most recent book from Peter Sahlins, the reader is taken back to the decade of Louis XIV’s seizure of power, not on the back of a war horse but on the wings of the birds of the royal Ménagerie. In this well documented and richly illustrated volume, Sahlins explores the role of animals and their influence on literature, the arts and sciences at a turning point in France’s history. Alive in a cage, lying on a dissection table, or drawn on paper, animals take over in the newly redesigned gardens of Versailles, at the royal library in Paris, and in the salons of the Parisian elite. Divided into three parts, the book opens with a preliminary section that looks at the source of “the year of the animals” in the literary accounts of the now-demolished Ménagerie of Versailles. The two chapters focus on the living animals, and on the civilizing influence they exerted upon literature, in particular on La Fontaine and Madeleine de Scudery.

The second part is dedicated to “the afterlife of animals.” Three chapters consider how animals continued to influence French culture after their death. Chapter 3 revolves around the influence on the Manufacture Royale des Gobelins, well known for its tapestry, in particular through the drawing of Pieter Boel and their renditions by various artists on the tapestries. Chapter 4 examines the scientific afterlife of animals and how they were at the center of scientific debates, especially around the figure of Perrault. Chapter 5 plays on the link between humans and animals in the description of passion and physiognomy with the exploration of the works of Charles Le Brun.

The third part revisits the world of science, literature and art but by the light of a new conception of absolutism, what Sahlins calls Absolutism 2.0. If the second part of this monograph toyed with the idea of the blurred relation between humans and animals, the following part shows how, if there is still play between the two, the tone is now more oppositional and belligerent. As the royal power of Louis XIV asserts itself, rather than seeing the positive and social qualities of animals in human beings, humans are increasingly understood as beasts with their own ferocious and unsocial nature. Chapter 6 shows how Jean Denis’s experimentation on blood transfusion from animal to animal and then from animal to human is quickly brought to an end by the royal power, bringing order into the world of science. Chapter 7 looks through art and essentially literature at the chameleon, an animal that was believed to nourish itself just by breathing air (a symbol of purity) and which becomes a metaphor for the perfect courtier (a symbol of vices and dissimulation). Chapter 8 at last, comes back to Versailles and to one of the now-disappeared fixtures of the gardens, the labyrinth. If the first chapter gave the reader a rare opportunity to look at one of the vanished treasures of Versailles, la Ménagerie, the last chapter contrasts it with the labyrinth. Sahlins demonstrates the ambivalence of the two places and how they display their oppositions and their inherent contradictions: the Ménagerie, with all its animals and its noises, represents a place of beauty, grace, and peace while the labyrinth, set in the peaceful royal gardens, embodies the violence and brutality of human nature. Here, the ferocity inherent in animals and humans is recalled through stories and scenes inspired by Aesop. One loses oneself in a chaotic world deprived of its center,

calling for a supreme authority to restore peace and order. And Racine with Poussin to conclude: the judgement of a dog in the comedy of *Les Plaideurs*, highlights human madness while *Eliezer et Rebecca* sees animals disappear altogether from History.

Through the unusual lens of the history of animals and their representations from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, Peter Sahlins illustrates impeccably the conflicts and tensions that occurred between 1660 and 1670, going from the assertion and rejection of the Cartesian idea of animals as beast-machines to the classic quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, then to the relations between the subjects and their sovereign. Sahlins never falls for the easy over-symbolization, in particular for Versailles. He is very quick to challenge in a playful and often humorous way overreliance on allegory. The book so admirably links the text with the quotations and pictures the reader never gets lost trying to find from outside sources a picture mentioned in the book. One reservation is that, while all titles and short quotations are in French and English, Sahlins sometimes makes use of long quotations in English without giving the French original. For a bilingual reader, it feels at times that, despite the author's concerted effort to render the text as close to the original as possible, some of the power of the words and the playfulness of the original text are lost. In addition, if Sahlins is at ease with the canon of American historical criticism, in particular with the German Norbert Elias and his vision of the beginning of the reign of Louis XIV as a domestication of nobility, it is unfortunate that French historians, even the most established such as Jean-Christian Petitfils, Daniel Dessert or even the more controversial François Bluche, find no place in the arguments, especially that dealing with Nicolas Fouquet. Sahlins tends, indeed, to send Fouquet, *the surintendant des finances* around 1660, to the dungeon of History without giving him a fair trial. This being said, those few debatable judgments should not diminish the brilliance of this work. Sahlins is able to bring to life Versailles and its history without falling victim to over-theorization. Indeed, if Sahlins makes initial use of modern critics such as Foucault and Derrida, the reader is only too happy to see them disappear quickly after the introduction.

This book is addressed to all from the casual reader interested in Louis XIV and Versailles to historians, art historians, philosophers and

literary critics. Sahlins is remarkably able to demonstrate an impressive knowledge of the time period without ever falling into pedantry or obscurity. The argument is fully documented and clearly presented. Even for the non-animal lover, one finds intense pleasure in reading this important page of French history through the stories of the animals.

Élodie Bénard. *Les vies d'écrivains (1550–1750): Contribution à une archéologie du genre biographique*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2019. 440 pp. \$57.60. Review by IVY DYCKMAN, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR.

The notion of writers writing about the lives of renowned writers is neither a current nor unusual practice. These works attract a diverse audience. Authors might glean insight into the process of constructing a literary biography. Readers might be drawn to the intimacies of a writer's life. Others might view a critical biography as a cultural, political, and/or social barometer of a discrete historical moment. All might simply be both intrigued and inspired by the life of a remarkably talented person and thus consider the biography a tribute, a way to honor brilliance despite character flaws. The American author, poet, and critic Jay Parini wrote on this very topic in the September 16, 2015 international edition of *The Guardian*. Having just completed a non-fiction account of the life of Gore Vidal, he was prompted to draw up a list of his ten preferred literary biographers since the post-World War II era. As he noted in that brief piece, "important lives make for Important Lives." The author of *Les vies d'écrivains* would most surely concur.

Élodie Bénard's treatment of French literary biographies over a two-hundred-year period is a reworked version of her doctoral dissertation on this topic. The original subtitle, "*développement et mutations d'un genre (1570–1770)*" (7), more accurately describes the way in which she tackled her investigation, notwithstanding the slight modification of the time frame. Although the seventeenth century is the primary focus of this journal's readers, the changes that occurred during this period do not begin and end within the confines of an arbitrary time designation. The biographical form of the sixteenth century impacted its successors in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and all of the following