

from description to analysis in the concluding chapter will be most welcome for scholars interested in affect studies and in exploring the affective stakes of various types of word-images that can strike and even subjugate the reader. By analyzing a wide range of theoretical texts and rhetorical exercises devoted to description, Romagnino achieves his goal of “placing before the eye” the rich domain occupied by ekphrasis within the larger territory of descriptive writing.

Kathrina Ann LaPorta. *Performative Polemic: Anti-Absolutist Pamphlets and their Readers in Late Seventeenth-Century France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2021. xiii + 322 pp. + 1 illus. \$39.95. Review by IVY DYCKMAN, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR.

Focusing only on the two-word title of Kathrina Ann LaPorta’s recently published book, the reader might gather that it concerns the current vitriolic attacks from partisan ideologists, who urge their audiences to adhere to and act on their spoken and written assertions of purported truths about a targeted governmental system that goes against their grain. Modern technology, especially social media, has opened up ideas and opinions to vast numbers of people all over the world, who, not that long ago, were restricted to receiving this sort of information by word of mouth or in print. Continuing on to the subtitle, the reader discovers that in her work, LaPorta is referring to the political assertions of the anti-Louis Quatorzean pamphlets distributed inside and outside of France in the latter part of the seventeenth century. To allege governmental injustices at any point in time requires not just objections but also calls for performing the necessary actions to realize justifiable change. Not surprisingly, her arguments and examples presented from selected texts have relevance to our present-day sociopolitical realities.

By way of introducing the illicit trade of anti-absolutist propaganda during this period, LaPorta opens her study with a compelling story. She describes how, in 1701, the defrocked priest Antoine Sorel smuggled several texts, known as *libelles* or *pamphlets*, into France. Pamphlet writing that either justified or condemned actions perpetrated by the French State had begun well before the advent of Louis

XIV and continued long after his demise. During his personal reign, however, there was much to denounce, such as the interminable military conflicts; the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes; the great costs in monies and lives wasted on wars; and the lavish lifestyles of the upper classes, all of which illustrate egregious offenses at the expense of the people. Pamphleteering communicated these injustices and many others with the purpose of arousing the masses to vociferously object. As an individual of conscience, Sorel paid for his audacity with a lengthy prison sentence in the Bastille.

In *Performative Polemic*, LaPorta dissects carefully chosen French anti-absolutist pamphlets, circulated during the years 1667–96, from a literary and linguistic perspective. Although significant historical events served as catalysts for their publication and considerable distribution, she attributes their wide appeal throughout France—indeed, throughout Western Europe—to the styles, tropes, and phraseology, for example, culled from various genres. For her, language does matter. It represents a significant weapon of dissent. LaPorta divides her investigation into two parts, both of which contain examples of pamphlets that leveled criticism at Louis XIV's political performance. In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, the author highlights language as the means by which the pamphleteer aimed to prod the reading audience to react for the purpose of challenging the French Crown's actions. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how the pamphlet attracted the attention of the masses by burlesquing authority. This was achieved as a result of incorporating literary elements from the theater, historical novels, and periodicals, all of which were popular with the public. Generally speaking, the content of these later texts became less refined.

The first three chapters metaphorically put the Sun King on trial. Each of the pamphleteers showcased in this first section attempted to fire up readers through distinctive writing styles and language manipulation. In Chapter 1, LaPorta shows how the Habsburg diplomat François-Paul de Lisola advocated justice in his pamphlet *Le Bouclier d'état et de justice* (1667). Although it was published anonymously, as was the practice of the times for obvious retaliatory reasons, Lisola's authorship was confirmed. His background in law and diplomacy served him well in presenting his case against the king prior to the War of Devolution, Louis XIV's first military conflict during his personal

reign. Lisola's eloquent, rational language assured the public that he sincerely cared for their welfare, and in so doing, called upon them to judge for themselves their sovereign's bellicose intentions against the Spanish Netherlands. In the subsequent two chapters, the charges directed against the French monarch only intensified. Whereas Lisola used reason to galvanize the reader into judgment of the king's actions, in Chapter 2 the anonymous author of *Le Miroir des princes* (1684) relied on memory to evoke emotions triggered by the French monarch's injustices perpetrated during the Dutch War (1672–78). The pamphleteer fashioned the text as a figurative mirror that reflected the horror inflicted by Louis XIV and his military machine. Vivid images of atrocities challenged the authoritarian reality. The pamphlet examined in Chapter 3 deviates from attacking the French monarch as a warmonger and threat to Western European peace. The nameless author of *Les Soupirs de la France esclave* (1689–90)—whose publication history extended into the eighteenth century—takes aim at the internal policies of the French government. Surprisingly, the writer was not in favor of the overthrow of the monarchy but rather of political reform. He may have had an enlightened view of government, but he was deaf to the revolutionary rumblings of the future.

The final two chapters of LaPorta's investigation are darkly serious yet entertaining. She examines pamphlets published during the mid-1690s and observes how they evolved from formalized argumentation to grossly satirical criticisms. Taking their cue from contemporary literary forms and theatrical works, the pamphleteers of this period utilized humor to lampoon Louis XIV's absolutist performance. The texts are characteristically blasphemous and vulgar. The subject of Chapter 4 is the anonymously written *L'Alcoran de Louis XIV* (1695). The author of this pamphlet used a trendy literary device, the dialogue of the dead, to present improbable exchanges. An example of one such conversation occurred between Pope Innocent XI and Cardinal Jules Mazarin, major Roman Catholic power players who interacted with Louis XIV at various times during his long reign. Their encounter took place in Hades, of course. Integrating fiction with reality allowed the pamphleteer the freedom to incorporate monarchical attacks within a framework of biting humor, a successful ploy to at once draw readers and expose a decaying regime. The subject of Chapter 5 is even more

outrageous. In her analysis of the three-hundred page pamphlet the *Conseil privé de Louis le Grand* (1696), LaPorta takes the reader from the underworld to the most private, exclusive spaces of Louis XIV. She opens with a description of the frontispiece, the only illustration to appear in her entire study. The empty title cartouche under the stagnant image of the French monarch's Privy Council reinforces the notion of political impotence. The reader witnesses his waning performances in the bedchamber and confessional as well. Ridicule is merciless retribution for a despotic, tyrannical leader. Satire and parody were the *coups de grâce* to the Sun King's public and private persona. The anonymous pamphleteer dealt one more death blow to absolutism.