

Véronique Meyer, Pour la plus grande gloire du roi. Louis XIV en thèses, Rennes (Presses universitaires de Rennes) 2017, 370 p., 99 fig. (Histoire), ISBN 978-2-7535-5464-1, EUR 23,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Tony Claydon, Gwynedd

The last few decades have seen a renaissance in examination of royal propaganda in early modern Europe. Fired by the revival of court studies, the interdisciplinary integration of art history into political and cultural history, and interest in print and popular culture, this trend has extended beyond descriptions of how monarchs presented themselves, to attempts to understand how these messages were received by audiences, and to growing understanding of how subjects used interaction with regime propaganda to pursue their own agendas and construct their own identities. This has all led to a much better appreciation of the wide range of actors involved in establishing the image of rulers before the 1800. Véronique Meyer's volume, »Pour la plus grande gloire du roi«, makes an important contribution here. It provides a comprehensive overview of dedications of academic thesis to Louis XIV of France, and in particular of the pictorial frontispieces that often decorated copies of these works.

The book is admirable in its thoroughness. It explains the academic structures that allowed students to present their scholarship to their king; it describes the rituals of the oral defence of the dissertations that created the formal moments for advertising the dedication, and which expanded the context and meaning of the writings themselves with a range of ceremony, speeches, and ritual display; it outlines the artists and engravers involved in producing the pictorial elements; and it covers the print forms that described and expanded the audience for these academic productions. Once into close analysis of the visual elements, Meyer provides an account of the development of historical and allegorical depictions of Louis XIV as his reign progressed (particularly noting how this evolved in the early years, before he took personal and individual command of the kingdom in 1661); and a narrative of changes in the presentation of the king's actual portrait (though noting this was sometimes somewhat conservative, given that artists relied on a relatively small number of official images as the basis for their pictures, and the king was reluctant to spend very much time sitting for updated paintings which might serve as templates for other depictions).

Finally, and very usefully, there is a catalogue of all known thesis dedicated to Louis between 1638 and his death. Throughout, the volume is magnificently illustrated, so that the reader can instantly see the images that are being deconstructed in the text. Meyer also sets this form of royal image making in the context of others – for example the writing of verbal panegyrics, and the iconographic schemes of royal palaces.

In the analysis, a number of important themes are explored, beyond the inherent interest of the sources and their immediate context. Meyer shows, for example, how Louis' public image emerged alongside his real power, as he made moves towards personal control of the kingdom in the years before 1661; and the author makes a strong case for examining a broader range of propaganda media and genres of praise, to get a better



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

sense of how Louis' presentation was disseminated and understood outside court circles. The work also suggests that different ideas could be emphasised in different media. For instance, Louis' claims to be a defender of the Catholic Church and a scourge of heresy received quite slight attention in the iconography of his royal palaces, but were a major focus of the thesis illustrations, particularly in the 1680s, around the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Again, Meyer is alive to possible counter-productive elements in propaganda. Overblown panegyric gave rise to satire, and to concern that praise could make itself ridiculous – as well as to direct protest by foreign powers and criticism by persecuted Huguenots. Supporting the work of Hendrik Ziegler and others, this book suggests Louis himself became aware of these possible problems, and guided propagandists towards a more modest style of presentation in the later parts of his reign. For example, from the 1680s, French military triumphs were celebrated for the benefits they brought to subjects, but did so without depicting the humiliation of enemies.

So impressive is all this, that this reviewer mentions some disappointments with the book only reluctantly. One is that the prose spends a great deal of time analysing the details of the images one by one. This is important work, but it sometimes gets a bit repetitive: and – more importantly – it may squeeze out space for some slightly deeper questions. One such question is how, exactly, the relationship between dedicatees and dedicators worked. There is some useful comment on this. For example, Meyer considers whether dedication earned favour which might result in the advantageous direction of patronage by the king; and the author notes that ceremonies of dedication promoted the interests of dedicatees as much as Louis – for instance allowing Rennes to celebrate the return of the *parlement* of Brittany to the town.

However, there is much anthropological and sociological theory on how gifts and their reception function to allow societies to operate, and this is not really used here. Adopting a more interdisciplinary approach, and considering some of these ideas, might have deepened the insights into how academic theses bound together the elites of the ancient regime. Also, there perhaps needed to be more consideration of changes in time. The whole of the period 1661–1715 is treated together in the survey of historical and allegorical pictures (albeit divided into themes that are shown to be more popular at different points), so any clear sense of development over those decades is blurred.

Most frustratingly, there is not very much comment on the fact that the practice of dedicating theses to the king went into steep decline in the 1690s, and then ended altogether in the last decade of the king's reign. The reflections on why this might have happened in the conclusion (shifts in cultural sensibilities and artistic fashions) seem too slight. This is a particular shame, as the idea of a »Third Reign« of Louis XIV has been gaining ground recently. A recent collection edited by Julia Prest and Guy Rowlands – »The Third Reign of Louis XIV« (Abingdon 2017) has argued for a series of turning points from 1682 that altered the whole character of the period, and could have been discussed as context for shifts in thesis dedication. The collapse of Louis' health, the death of Colbert, the intensification of religious tensions, the retreat to Versailles, the souring of opinion in an expanding public sphere as the costs and failures of warfare became more obvious, the increased influence of Madame de Maintenon, and the king's new dedication to catholic piety, might all help



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

to explain why the often hyperbolic vision of Ludovician rule that marked the 1660s, 1670s, and 1680s faded in the final decades.

In the end, however, these are minor blemishes on a work which will be hugely useful to historians of visual culture in the seventeenth century, and to scholars of Louis' XIV's regime, and its interactions with society.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)