In this provocative new biography of Louis-Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon I and emperor of France from 1852 to 1870, Baguley adopts an interpretive strategy inspired by a thorough-going postmodern skepticism about historical writing. How does one write a biography that proceeds from White’s assumption that the boundary between writing history and literary narratives is artificial, or from Barthes’ claim that the historian “assembles not so much facts as signifiers and links them together” chronologically and causally to establish “positive meaning and to fill the gaps [‘le vide’] in the series” (5)? Baguley’s solution is to deploy the notion of the artificiality of history and the fabrication of historical meaning to structure the very story that he relates. The subject of his biography becomes not the man and his life as it unfolded but the variety of representations of him and his actions in histories, political satires, court ceremonies, official portraits, memoirs, works of fiction, and the emperor’s own writings.

The diversity of sources required for this approach makes for a richly textured narrative that also draws attention to the author’s own devices as a storyteller. After a brief historiographical section on the conflicting assessments of Louis-Bonaparte’s achievements by earlier biographers, Baguley opens his account with three famous satirical attacks on Louis-Napoleon by Victor Hugo, Karl Marx, and Emile Zola for his coup d’état of December 2, 1851, which set the stage, first, for an authoritarian presidential system under France’s Second Republic and, then, one year later, for the proclamation of the Second Empire. Baguley sketches out the satirical strategies of each of these famous foes of the regime in relation to each other though not in relation to the discursive moment in which each wrote, which might have shaped their individual satirical genres or their preferred types of villainy. Baguley remains largely inside texts with minimal historical context to explain the selection of polemical devices. His refusal to provide an interpretive chronological framework for the representations that he describes, far from an oversight, reflects the largely ahistorical logic of his method.

The two biographical chapters that follow the opening section offer one key to this curiously ahistorical approach. Baguley’s brilliant psychological portrait of Louis-Napoleonic shows him as a man detached from lived experience—an enigmatic figure whose fantasy about his destiny, inspired by his mother and the memory of his uncle, blocked the development of any greater understanding of his personality—by himself or anyone else. Lacking a sense of individuality to project, he became, in Baguley’s words, “a floating signifier, his essence bound up in his name, available for any scheme or role, a buona parte more usurped

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than usurper, more impersonated about than impersonator. A man of many parts and causes, most of which were not his own” (136). What Louis-Bonaparte also becomes for Baguley is a perfect vehicle for a postmodernist biography organized around the variety of his representations.

Nonetheless, Baguley manages to present an interpretive perspective on Louis-Napoleon’s failed imperial project. Twice over the course of his political career, Louis-Napoleon made disastrous political decisions. Both sprung, according to the author, in keeping with the classic plot of tragedy, from failings intrinsic to Louis-Napoleon’s character. In 1852, he succumbed to his own Napoleonic myth by proclaiming himself emperor, when he might have remained as president in an authoritarian republic, introduced his program of social reform, and then exited with dignity, once the pressures for political liberalization forced a constitutional reform. Later, in 1870, trapped by his own Napoleonic legend once again, he yielded to popular anger and the Empress Eugenie’s insistence and declared war on Prussia, despite his own misgivings about the outcome.

According to Baguley, the first error set the conditions for the second. What was really at risk in 1870 if France did not go to war was the survival of the dynasty. Dynastic rule, in Baguley’s view, was the Achilles heel of the regime. He is certainly right to make that claim, but that the vacillating Louis-Napoleon was so deeply conflicted about his coup that he might have opted afterward for something less than dynastic rule strains credulity beyond reasonable limits. The persona that Baguley himself constructs is unimaginable without dynastic ambitions, and the massive repression of the democratic-socialist movement before the coup and of the secret societies responsible for the peasant insurrection after it, all of which Baguley leaves out of his account, hardly suggests a vacillating policy on the part of an ambivalent president. What historians may miss most in this imaginative spectacle of representations by opponents, supporters, and interested observers of Louis-Napoleon is the author’s disinclination to trace an evolution in those representations in any venue or medium. For most historians, convincing historical arguments still require linking evidence causally and temporally, even after the postmodern turn.

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Speaking of Slavery: Color, Ethnicity and Human Bondage in Italy. By Steven A. Epstein (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001) 215 pp. $32.50

Epstein adopts a diachronic, and, by his own admission, even a polychronic, approach to the study of the Middle Ages and the issue of slavery in Italy. His study proposes to show “that the language used centuries ago to sustain a relatively unknown system of slavery still has pro-