in the decision to kill Parker.) Queen Victoria immediately commuted the death sentence to six months imprisonment, but the verdict set a major legal precedent by rejecting "defense of necessity" in favor of a more "honorable," though perhaps less practical, moral code. Simpson, professor of law at the University of Kent, explains this legal development as an offshoot of "Victorian parlor morality." He refers to contemporary editorials, letters, ballads, and sea chanteys to show how popular sentiment (which condoned the sailors' decision) differed from that of genteel society. Though cannibalism at sea is all but unheard of today—the invention of the steamboat resulted, for one thing, in far fewer shipwrecks —*Regina* v. *Dudley & Stephens* is still cited by American and British lawyers and judges in cases of killing under extreme provocation.

Arts & Letters

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ:
A Life and Letters
by Frances Mossiker
Knopf, 1983
538 pp. $22.95

The letters of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné (1626–1696), have long provided historians, including Mossiker, with an insider's view of the glittering court life of Louis XIV, the Sun King. Here, Mossiker weaves a narrative of Madame de Sévigné's life into the correspondence, permitting her subject to speak for herself. The wit that fills these letters (many of which were devotedly written to her "cold, aloof" daughter) was, it seems, a paternal legacy; her noble ancestors were so deft at verbal exchange that *rabutinage* had become, by the 17th century, synonymous with repartee. Wealth came from her mother's family, newly rich members of the Paris bourgeoisie. Marie's husband, the marquis, might have squandered it all had he not been killed, in 1651, in a duel. Madame de Sévigné bloomed during the 1650s, the years in which Louis consolidated power by turning once-independent noblemen into petty court intriguers, desperate for royal favor. Sévigné's wit and beauty were both assets at a court so viciously competitive that men vied

to have their wives or daughters selected as the royal mistress. Describing one mistress who was on her way out, Sévigné sharply observed, "So much pride and so much beauty are not easily reconciled to second place." Nor were military affairs beyond her ken: "The courtiers here seem to think the battle [the siege of Orange in 1673] will be fought out with baked apples." A close friend of the moralist duc de La Rochefoucauld and the novelist Madame de La Fayette, in whose novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, she appears, Sévigné gained, by her own epistolary eloquence, a lasting place in French literature.

HOW NEW YORK STOLE THE IDEA OF MODERN ART: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War
by Serge Guilbaut
translated by Arthur Goldhammer
Univ. of Chicago, 1983
277 pp. $22.50

What accounts for the growing dominance of abstract expressionism in American art between 1946 and 1951? Not, as is often claimed, its aesthetic value or its "inevitability," argues Guilbaut, an art historian at the University of British Columbia, but its political suitability. Guilbaut shows how an art style expressing the impossibility of representation was made over into one that proclaimed the possibilities of a liberal version of the "American way." Left-leaning, avant-garde artists had been dismayed by political developments during and after World War II—notably the failure of Stalin's Soviet Union to become a worker's paradise and the revival of anticommunism in America. Many had been, during the '30s, Marxists and creators of "realist" paintings for the Works Progress Administration. But they heeded the postwar calls of artist-publicists such as Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb for a "de-Marxized" aesthetic of freedom. Abstraction was proposed as the only artistic means of withdrawing from the madness of polarized world politics, which had already led to the Cold War and the threat of an atomic Armageddon. This vague, ambitious program of dissent happened to fit with the American art world's hopes for a new national style of painting, one that would be sophisticated but clearly home-grown and that would make New York, rather than Paris, the cultural cap-