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KINGS AND COURTESANS:
A STUDY OF THE PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF FRENCH ROYAL
MISTRESSES

By

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B.A. The American University of Paris, Paris, France, 2006

Thesis

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Kings and Courtesans: A Study of the Pictorial Representation of French Royal Mistresses

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This thesis explores the development in the pictorial representation of four important French royal mistresses. It looks at works depicting Agnès Sorel, mistress to Charles VII; Diane de Poitiers, mistress to Henri II; Gabrielle d'Estrées, mistress to Henri IV; and Madame de Pompadour, mistress to Louis XV. By placing the portrayals of these women within a historical context, it becomes apparent that there are links between the strength of the crown and the depictions of the mistresses. This thesis traces the development of the imagery associated with these women and demonstrates that as the crown became more and more powerful, the portraits of the kings' mistresses became bolder and less disguised.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Agnès Sorel	5
Diane de Poitiers	16
Gabrielle d'Estrées	22
Madame de Pompadour	29
Figures	36
Bibliography	46

INTRODUCTION

In today's society the idea of royalty seems quite foreign. Much of the world has shifted from rule by one to government by many. Yet many countries used monarchies as their form of government for centuries. France used a monarchical system from the time of Clovis, who, during his reign at the end of the sixth century, united the different Frankish tribes and created the beginnings of modern-day France.¹ This system was followed until the late eighteenth century, when the Revolution broke out in France and King Louis XVI was guillotined.

Prior to Louis XVI's demise, the French crown enjoyed a great deal of power. The Sun King, Louis XIV, was known for exercising absolute power in his kingdom. However, this had not always been the case in the history of the French monarchy. France endured centuries of change before emerging as a major European nation. Dukes, counts, and princes all vied for power as the monarchy tried, initially in vain, to unite the Frankish people. Although the tribes had been united under Clovis, the Franks were nonetheless separated by regional dialects and customs.² There was a real threat of powerful dukes competing for the French throne or breaking away as autonomous nations.

As France emerged from the Middle Ages, the monarchy began to establish itself as a more stable institution and a curious development took place: the French kings began to install official mistresses at court. With this official status these women became parallel members of the royal family. They lived like queens, with various estates granted to them by the kings. In many cases, they played a role in the kings' political as well as

¹J. R. Moreton MacDonald, *A History of France*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915, 38-39.

² *Ibid.*, 34-37.

personal lives. With such an important position, it naturally followed that royal mistresses began appearing in art.

The depictions of royal mistresses reflect the relative strength of each ruler with which they were associated. As the king became a stronger, more stable monarch, the depictions of his mistresses also became bolder and more daring. There is a progression in pictorial representation that evolves from the mistress being disguised as a divine entity, to her being able and allowed to eventually shed her costume and emerge as, simply, herself, and more actively use art to shape her persona.

This thesis will explore this progression by looking at four different women, chosen because they are associated with some of the most compelling depictions of French royal mistresses. The progression happened in four stages. In the first, Agnès Sorel (figure I) was disguised as the Virgin Mary, the holiest of holies in late medieval France. Later, with Diane de Poitiers (figure III), the mistress was depicted as Diana, a pagan goddess of chastity. This is more fitting of the Renaissance mindset, but continues the earlier preoccupation with purity. With Gabrielle d'Estrées (figure VI), the divine disguise was dropped and we are presented with a woman shown as what she was, a mistress pregnant with the king's baby. Finally, with Madame de Pompadour (figure VII), the mistress was depicted simply as a respectable lady of the court. She was no longer required to emphasize her carnal function, and emerged as more of an equal to the king.

Before we begin to examine Agnès Sorel and the French court under King Charles VII it is critical to understand the foundations of the French State. To fully appreciate the status of each monarch it is important to examine the roots of French

civilization. This civilization has ancient origins, but really began to emerge as a powerful European force in 768 when Charlemagne became King of the Franks. He expanded his kingdom to include not only present-day France, but much of central Europe. In 843, Charlemagne's Carolingian Empire was divided into three parts by his grandsons at the Treaty of Verdun. Louis the German ruled the Eastern Frankish Realm and Lothair was granted the central portion called Lotharingia. Charles the Bald became the ruler of the Western Frankish Realm, which included all of the territory west of the Rhône River. These lands eventually developed into modern-day France.³

During the late Carolingian and early medieval period, it was difficult to unite large expanses of territory. Poor communications and lack of information, low population densities, small revenues, and the absence of salaried officials contributed to this problem. Perhaps the most important factor, though, was that France used the feudal system, which inevitably engendered a decentralized government. This system developed from the ninth century through the twelfth century and left a lasting mark on France.⁴

In the feudal system, lords, dukes, counts, and princes held fiefs, which were plots of land granted by the king. These noblemen were the king's vassals, owing the king soldiers in return for the lands. The noblemen had their own vassals below them, forming their army and labor force. The peasants who lived on their lands were required to pay their landlord a *cens* in money or produce, serve as soldiers, help construct fortifications, and work the land in exchange for protection. Peasants were thus more closely tied to their regional lord, to whom they looked for protection. These lords became increasingly independent; by the tenth century they could impose taxes on their subjects and run their

³ Roger Price, *A Concise History of France*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 30.

⁴ Ibid.

own courts.⁵ Although the king carried the highest title in the aristocracy, he was in many ways similar to a powerful duke.

One of the great problems which had a lasting effect on France was a symptom of this feudal system. William the Conqueror was the Duke of Normandy and as such was one of the king's vassals. In 1066 he invaded England and deposed England's King Harold. William the Conqueror was thus simultaneously the Duke of Normandy, a subordinate to the French monarchy, and the King of England, a separate sovereign. His descendents inherited both the English crown and William's French territories, which increased over time through marriage. This created the Angevin, or Plantagenet Family, which posed continual problems to French stability for centuries after William the Conqueror was dead. By 1165 the English King Henry II controlled half of France, with territories a mere 60 kilometers from Paris.⁶ The French and English had continual conflicts through the 1400s which tried the strength of the French crown.

In the fifteenth century princes were not expected to be faithful.⁷ Marriages were arranged for reasons of convenience by the fathers; the two newlyweds had no choice in the matter. Whether or not a couple was likely to actually love each other was not a concern. Marriage was a means of gaining territory, possessions, and titles. Princes were thus not expected to be chaste because their wives were not intended to be real love interests. "At a period in which marriages at this social level were often arranged, bought and sold without the consent or even knowledge of their victims, it was hardly surprising that sexual satisfaction would be sought outside wedlock."⁸

⁵ Ibid., 32-33.

⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁷ M. G. A. Vale, *Charles VII*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974, 90.

⁸ Ibid.

Prostitution was also highly tolerated. Although a prostitute is different than a mistress, both serve similar functions. The tolerance of fifteenth-century France concerning extra-marital affairs is reflected in the fact that brothels were publically owned and in some instances were protected by the king. In 1425 Charles VII took the public brothel of Toulouse into his protection because the workers were being terrorized by the brothel owners. The women themselves were not seen as having done anything wrong and the city recognized the business as an important financial asset and did not want to lose the income provided by the establishment.⁹

AGNES SOREL

Against such a backdrop, France was introduced to its first official mistress, Agnès Sorel. The most famous and intriguing portrait of Agnès Sorel depicts her as the Virgin Mary in the *Melun Diptych*. The altarpiece was commissioned after 1452 and is made of two panels, *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels* (figure I) and *Etienne Chevalier and Saint Stephen* (figure II). According to Frank Hamel, a leading scholar on Agnès Sorel and Charles VII, “Chevalier asked him [Fouquet] to paint a scene representing himself in company with his patron saint, Saint Stephen, on his knees before the Virgin, saying he wished to implore the intervention of Heaven for his protectress, Agnès Sorel.”¹⁰

The left panel, *Etienne Chevalier and Saint Stephen*, shows the patron kneeling in prayer next to his name saint. The pair is in a fancy interior, with intricately carved pilasters and marble revetments decorating the walls. Fouquet constructed a naturalistic space using linear perspective to lead the viewer’s eye from the left side of the work,

⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰ Frank Hamel, *The Lady of Beauty (Agnès Sorel)*, New York: Brentano’s, 1912, 232.

across the two figures, and down the hallway to the right. On the corner of the wall one can make out the letters “ER,” presumably referencing Chevalier’s last name. Next to this one sees the letters “ESTIEN,” Etienne’s first name partially covered by his own head. He kneels, with his hands in prayer position and a somber expression on his face. Chevalier wears a red, velvet coat, its sleeves and collar lined with fur. Next to him stands Saint Stephen, dressed in a blue and yellow dalmatic. He holds a book, on which rests a large stone. The stone is a typical attribute of Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death after his sermon in Acts 7:2-56 in which he accused the Jewish legislative council of murdering the Messiah.¹¹ Both figures look to their left, towards the right panel where the Virgin is depicted.

The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels shows the Virgin in glory as the Queen of Heaven. She wears a lavish costume, which Claude Schaefer, the leading scholar on Jean Fouquet, states has been identified as sharing aspects with the clothes worn by Sorel.¹² The Virgin wears a large crown adorned by pearls in the manner of Flemish Madonnas¹³ and is seated on a throne also decorated by pearls, but the space of the picture is shallow and it almost appears as if the Virgin were actually standing. The Virgin gracefully directs her gaze downward, while the Christ child points and looks over toward the left panel. Surrounding the holy pair are six red seraphim and three blue cherubim set against a blue background. Fouquet’s strong use of arbitrary color clearly places the scene in a celestial realm where our earthly rules of space and form do not

¹¹ James Hall, *Hall’s Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1974, 290.

¹² Claude Schaefer, ‘Fouquet, Jean,’ *Grove Art Online* [Accessed 1 August 2007], <<http://www.groveart.com>>.

¹³ Hamel, 235.

apply. The panels, when seen together, thus differentiate starkly from one another, contrasting the terrestrial world and the celestial sphere.

The royal household consisted not only of the king and queen, but also included Charles VII's mistress, Angès Sorel. Sorel was the 'favorite' that a king dared introduce officially at his court."¹⁴ She was the daughter of Jean Soreau, lord of Coudun and Catherine de Maignelais. It is speculated that she was born in Picardy, but little is known of her early life.¹⁵ She occupied a low position in the household of Isabelle de Lorraine, queen of Sicily and sister-in-law to Marie d'Anjou. A record exists of ten *livres* being paid to 'Agnès Sorelle' between 1 January and 31 July 1444 for services to Isabella.

Sorel and Charles VII most likely met in March 1443 when Sorel accompanied Isabelle de Lorraine to Toulouse and then to Saumur in April 1443. Charles VII joined the group in Saumur in September 1443 and remained there until February 1444. M. G. A. Vale, an important biographer of Charles VII, speculated that Sorel bore the king's illegitimate daughter, Marie, in the summer of 1444. By the end of 1444, at the age of twenty-two, Sorel was installed as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Marie d'Anjou. All of her contemporaries agreed on her beauty and she became known as the "Dame de Beauté at Charles VII's court."¹⁶

King Charles VII was married to Marie d'Anjou and together they had fourteen children. Marie did not play any political role; she did not even follow the king on his travels from castle to castle, choosing rather to live at Tours and Amboise. Her main occupation was thus bearing and raising children.¹⁷ Four of these children died between

¹⁴ Kermina, Françoise. *Agnès Sorel – la Première Favorite*. Paris : Editions Perrin, 2005, 9.

¹⁵ Vale, 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

the years of 1436 and 1439, causing the queen to adopt the color black as her choice of attire. Despite these losses, Charles VII and Marie d'Anjou enjoyed the assurance of having produced a legitimate male heir, Louis XI.¹⁸

Sorel suffered an untimely demise, dying on 9 February 1450 at the age of twenty-eight. Suspicions of poisoning immediately arose after Sorel's death. Charges were brought against Jacques Coeur, a merchant who had been appointed master of the mint. Vale suggests that Charles VII had been looking for an excuse to arrest Coeur. Indeed, the charge of poisoning Sorel was never substantiated and Coeur was instead charged with aspiring against the king's person, although no evidence was provided for this charge either. On 29 May 1453 he was formally condemned and his possessions were seized and auctioned, the proceeds going to Charles VII.¹⁹

When Sorel's tomb was moved from the royal lodge at Loches in 2005, her remains were studied by the forensic scientist Philippe Charlier. Charlier determined that Sorel indeed died of mercury poisoning, but it cannot be determined whether or not this was a deliberate act or a mistake on the part of Sorel. Mercury was used in cosmetics and also as a treatment for worms, although the amount of Mercury detected in Sorel's remains far exceeds the prescription for worm treatment.²⁰

Although her life was brief, Agnès Sorel played an important role in the French court. She was able to place family member in important positions at the court; by 1446 her brothers Charles and Jean were both members of the king's household. Her other brothers Louis and André were part of the royal bodyguard, and her uncle Geoffroy

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 129.

²⁰ Kermina, 13-14.

Soreau was made bishop of Nîmes in 1450.²¹ In addition Sorel encouraged the king to rise up against the English. Finally, once she was installed at court, Sorel became close friends with some of the most important people in Charles VII's entourage, including Etienne Chevalier.

Etienne Chevalier was the king's secretary and in 1452 became the treasurer of France as well as the Secretary of State. He was an important friend of Agnès Sorel, being described as her "right-hand man in the king's absences...he kept the king informed of everything that happened to her."²² Sorel's friendship with Chevalier influenced the latter's famous commission of the *Melun Diptych* from Jean Fouquet, one of the most intriguing and complex extant depictions of Charles VII's lover.

Chevalier commissioned works from Fouquet on several occasions. Other than the *Book of Hours* that Fouquet painted for Chevalier, the *Melun Diptych* was arguably his most notable commission. This diptych was placed in Chevalier's hometown of Melun in his chapel at Notre Dame de Melun and hung above the tomb of his wife Catherine Budé who had been buried there in August 1452; Chevalier himself was buried there in 1474.²³

Jean Fouquet was born around 1425 in Tours. Little is known of Fouquet's earlier life. It is speculated that he may have received training from Jacob de Litemont, who was Charles VII's official painter. Litemont was likely from the Netherlands; this would explain some of the Northern Renaissance features of his work, such as his interest in depicting lavish textures and minute details. Fouquet's work also attests to an Italian

²¹ Vale, 93.

²² Hamel, 229-232.

²³ Ibid., 236.

influence, even in its subject matter. Fouquet was in Rome in 1446, returning to Tours in 1448.²⁴

The features of the Madonna in the *Melun Diptych* have been identified as being a blatant likeness of Agnès Sorel. It has also been suggested that the model for the Virgin was actually Catherine Budé, Chevalier's wife.²⁵ However when the painting was removed from the wall in 1775, an inscription on the back was discovered which suspends most of the doubt as to the identity of the sitter. The inscription reads "The Holy Virgin/With the traits of Agnès Sorel/Mistress of Charles VII, king of France/Died in 1450."²⁶ The date of the inscription is not known. It is possible that it was added long after the work was completed and was influenced by rumors of the sitter's identity. Despite this possibility, it is almost universally accepted that Sorel was indeed the inspiration for the figure. According to Hamel, "[Fouquet] took Agnes Sorel herself as the model for the Madonna" and by doing so paid her a compliment.²⁷ Although this act seems blasphemous to the modern viewer, there was no objection to inserting contemporaries into holy groups. This was especially true in Italy, where Fouquet had studied. This portrayal also pays a compliment to the Virgin. By giving the Virgin the features of the Lady of Beauty the Madonna gained elegance, beauty and distinction.²⁸

If it seems shocking that Fouquet chose to use the king's mistress as inspiration for a depiction of the Virgin Mary, it appears even more puzzling that he would expose her left breast. This too, however, was not out of the ordinary in Fouquet's day. The

²⁴ Schaefer.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hamel, 234. (La Sainte Vierge/Sous les traits d'Agnes Sorel/Maitresse de Charles VII, roi de France/Morte en 1450.)

²⁷ Ibid., 232.

²⁸ Ibid., 233.

Madonna Lactans was a popular theme from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, to which the many existing paintings of this subject attest. The image was perhaps so widely diffused because it served a number of functions and had several meanings. First and foremost, this image shows the Virgin as a woman to whom all mothers can relate. The act of suckling one's child is one of the most basic and banal tasks that any mother can perform.²⁹ Because the Virgin Mary did not partake in any of the other biological functions associated with childbirth, breastfeeding was all the more important and significant to her cult since it was the only part of her motherhood that women could identify with.³⁰ However, the full significance of the image was more complex than this. Besides being an image that mothers can find comfort in, the representation is also a reassurance to all Christians. Mary offers her milk to Christ and by extension offers nourishment to the entire Christian community.³¹

Showing the Virgin with one exposed breast emphasizes her humanity and her modesty. Nudity in Christian art is typically used to show humility. For instance, Adam and Eve being cast from the Garden of Eden are two of the rare figures consistently represented in the nude in Christian art.³² Thus Mary's exposed breast emphasizes her humility at the same time that her milk guarantees Christ's humanity and gives her the powers of an intermediary between God and the faithful.³³

Margaret R. Miles provides a useful exploration of additional meanings behind

²⁹ Margaret R. Miles, "The Virgin's one Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture," from Susan Rutin Suleima, *The Female Body in Written Culture*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1986, 197.

³⁰ Nancy Yakimoski, "The Virgin's Peculiar Breast: Negotiating Nudity in Devotional Paintings," *Illumine: The Journal of the Center for Studies in Religion and Society Graduate Student Association*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2001-02, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Yakimoski, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

the *Madonna Lactans* images in her article “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast.” In thirteenth century Italy suckling one’s child was extremely important and seen differently than it is today. The practice of wet-nursing was very common, especially in the middle and upper classes, but it was nevertheless frowned upon because in thirteenth century Tuscany it was believed that children acquired certain characteristics from the person who provided their milk. Thus no animal milk was used and employing a wet-nurse was seen as a risk if that person was not proper. These factors left mothers in a difficult moral situation, as a child’s survival rate and character depended on the breast milk that it received. The Suckling Virgin is thus a model for good mothers.³⁴

Although depictions of the Suckling Virgin were increasingly popular, the Christian church had difficulty reconciling nudity with religious imagery. Any type of nudity was suspected of drawing an “unholy” gaze. Female nudity was seen as particularly sinful because it could incite sexual desire.

While the breast, nursing, and the milk itself reflected Christian doctrine, their religious meanings conflicted with interpretations of the exposed female body as sinful and evil. Since female nudity, especially breasts, could encourage lustful thoughts, there was anxiety over any representation of a breast, even the Holy Mother’s.³⁵

Artists such as Fouquet developed several techniques to encourage holy interpretations of the images. One such technique was the denaturalization of the breast. Early examples of *Madonna Lactans* represent the breast in an unnatural form. It is often placed in the center of the Virgin’s chest, higher than a normal breast, and there is no sign of the other breast beneath the Madonna’s clothing.³⁶ Fouquet used a variation of this technique, placing the Virgin’s breast slightly more to her left than is anatomically

³⁴ Miles, 198-200.

³⁵ Yakimoski, 6.

³⁶ Miles, 203-204.

correct. In addition, he painted it perfectly geometrically, giving it a look of artificiality.

Another technique commonly used was the exultation of the Virgin herself. As a regal Queen of Heaven a class distinction between the Virgin and the viewer is established. This distances the viewer from the figure and reminds the viewer of the serious nature of the representation.³⁷ Fouquet has clothed the Virgin like a queen and given her an elaborate crown to emphasize her status.

Fouquet's diptych is an important historical record of the first official royal French mistress. *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels* is enigmatic and shocking, but demonstrates the mindset of fifteenth century France. While Sorel's presence at court was acceptable overall, it nonetheless was the cause for a degree of anxiety. This panel shows Sorel disguised as the Virgin Mary. This disguise suggests the limitations of her position and status, as if she did not have a secure enough situation to pose simply as herself. Instead, she is being likened to the Virgin Mary, the holiest of all women. This peculiar alignment of mistress and virgin betrays a certain amount of weakness in Sorel's position, which is mirrored in the relative weakness of King Charles VII (r. 1422 – 1461).

The weakness of Charles VII's reign was a product of decades of struggles and difficult successions. Although Charles VII played a significant role in French history, marking a transition from his medieval predecessors to a more modern French court, he came from a position of extreme uncertainty. His reign was a success against all odds. Charles VII was born into the House of Valois. He was the fifth son of King Charles VI and Isabeau of Bavaria and became dauphin in 1417. Charles VII's rise to the throne came with a great deal of struggle and contention.

³⁷ Yakimoski, 10.

Although Charles VII was the legitimate heir of King Charles VI and Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, his ascension to the throne was highly contested. The English, thanks to the conquests of William the Conqueror and strategically arranged marriages, owned land in France and had claims to the French throne. In 1314 King Philip the Fair died, leaving three sons. When Charles IV, the last of his three sons, died without a legitimate heir in 1328, the direct Capetian line became extinct. At this point the English and the French both had claims to the French throne and the resulting struggles of succession caused a series of battles collectively known as The Hundred Years' War.

Philip the Fair's daughter, Isabelle of France, was married to King Edward II of England, and their son Edward III was crowned king of England in 1327. Edward III was thus the grandson of Philip the Fair, but his claim to the French throne was weak, as Salic Law prohibited succession not only to women, but also through women. Perhaps for this reason Edward III did not initially make any attempt to vie for the French throne.³⁸

The French clergy and noblemen favored Philip the Fair's nephew, Philip, Count of Valois, as the successor to the crown. At a meeting at Vincennes Philip was recognized as King Philip VI. In 1329 Edward III paid homage to Philip at Amiens, but by 1337 Edward III began contesting Philip VI as the rightful king. He had economic interests vested in his efforts, especially in securing the wool trade with Flanders. In addition, Edward III wished to protect the Plantagenet lands in the southwest of France. A series of battles ensued, and in 1356 Edward III captured Philip VI's successor, King John the Good, at the Battle of Poitiers. In the following negotiations for John the Good's release it was stipulated that nearly half of the French kingdom, including Normandy, would be handed over to the English. Charles V, John the Good's son and successor, did

³⁸ Prince, 43.

not recognize these conditions, and war thus continued between the two countries until a new truce was reached in 1388. The English broke this agreement in 1412 by devastating Normandy and Anjou, and in 1415 when England's King Henry V led campaigns in France in Agincourt. At this time Charles VI was king of France and was known for suffering bouts of psychosis, creating an easy target for Henry V. Finally, in 1420 the Treaty of Troyes was signed, bringing relative peace to the two countries.³⁹

The Treaty of Troyes arranged the marriage of King Henry V of England to Catherine de Valois, Charles VI's daughter. Through this marriage Henry V was recognized as the heir to the French throne. In 1422 Henry V died and his son, Henry VI, was crowned king of England and France. However, the French dauphin, Charles VII, rejected this agreement and sought to win back France. Although the French crown was extremely weak when he came of age, he was able to play an instrumental role in stabilizing it. He already controlled the west, center and Midi regions, and with the support and encouragement of Agnès Sorel, Charles VII eventually pushed the English completely out of France, with the exception only of Calais.⁴⁰

Charles VII made an important mark on French history. His reign was one of change and transformations within the royal state. He was stronger than his predecessors, who had been nearly overrun by the British. It is no surprise, then, that Charles VII was the first king to publicly recognize his mistress. There were, however, limitations to his power. Charles VII remained in a somewhat delicate position, where dukes and other powers within the state were still extremely powerful. For this reason we see limitations in the degree of confidence with which the royal mistress was represented. Although the

³⁹ Ibid., 45-51.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 51-53.

striking *Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels* dared to portray the royal courtesan, it did so indirectly. Both the fact that the piece was not commissioned by Sorel or by the king, but by Etienne Chevalier, and the fact that Sorel is shown in disguise, demonstrate the lack of power held by the mistress, due to the lack of power asserted by the king. In spite of any flaws or weaknesses on the part of Charles VII's reign, he nonetheless left the French monarchy with the precedent of having official mistresses, a standard which most subsequent kings continued.

DIANE DE POITIERS

Some 100 years after Charles VII and Agnès Sorel, Diane de Poitiers graced the court of Henri II and left the history of art some important and telling images. The statue of *Diana with a Stag* (figure III) is a significant example. This work disguised the sitter once again as a deity and underlined her important relationship to the king.

The sculpture was commissioned by Diane de Poitiers from an unknown artist. It has often been assumed that the sculptor was Jean Goujon, whom Diane did employ, however no clear evidence can be found linking the sculpture with this artist and most sources now disregard this as a possibility. The statue was meant to sit atop a large fountain in the gardens of Anet, sculpted by Philibert de l'Orme.

The marble work portrays an elegant, elongated nude woman, clearly identifiable as the goddess Diana by her bow, dogs, and stag. The stag sits erect, moving one leg as if he were about to stand up. The dogs, Phrycyon and Cyrius, walk around the central pair. They are identifiable as a greyhound and a terrier. The face and body of Diana are idealized and generic, although somewhat elongated. Diana is depicted as a young adult,

in her prime. Certainly the work is meant to evoke the idea of the goddess Diana; Diane de Poitiers was in no way attempting to portray herself.

In portraits and statues of Diane she is often shown disguised as the Roman goddess Diana. Diana was the equivalent to Greece's goddess Artemis. She was the daughter of Jupiter and Latona and was Apollo's twin sister. She was one of the twelve original gods of Olympus, representing the hunt. Diana was a virgin goddess and personified chastity. Diana was typically represented carrying in a bow and quiver, or javelin. She is often accompanied by dogs or a stag.⁴¹ As the goddess Diana, Diane was very often idealized. According to the biographer Edith Sichel, Diane de Poitiers was *not* a beauty; Henri himself did not even describe her as beautiful⁴² (figure IV). The works that she commissioned in this guise were intended to be idealized portraits. Diane de Poitiers' contemporaries would have easily understood, however, that by calling to mind the goddess Diana, de Poitiers was also aligning herself with this sovereign and was depicting her close relationship with the French monarch.

It is important to note that the goddess Diana was associated with chastity. It seems obvious that a large part of the reason for which Diane de Poitiers chose to portray herself as the goddess Diana was because they happened to share the same name. In addition, the king was fond of hunting, which was a sport reserved to the nobility.⁴³ But even if her choice of Diana, goddess of the hunt was somewhat programmed, the fact that Diana was a virgin goddess also added to its attractiveness. Like Sorel, being shown as

⁴¹ Hall, 101 – 102.

⁴² Edith Sichel. *Catherine de' Medici and the French Reformation*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1905, 44.

⁴³ Valérie Montalbetti, *Sculptures : Italie, "La Nympe de Fontainebleau,"* Paris, Louvre, 2007, [Accessed 15 April 2008]. <www.louvre.fr>.

the Virgin Mary, Diane de Poitiers was being pictorially likened to a holy, pure woman, when in reality she was a mistress.

Such a comparison also spoke to neo-Platonist thought; Diane fully embraced the Renaissance and was an advocate of neo-Platonist thought. Platonism recognized that because marriage was a union of convenience, one's chosen partner was the person who counted for everything. This person, unlike a spouse, was selected for his or her immaterial qualities:

The marriage-bond, usually formed for reasons of convenience, did not count except as a dull obstacle to a spiritual existence; while the friend-elect, chosen for the affinity of the soul, counted as everything – as the embodiment of all that was noble, all that should be striven for.⁴⁴

This mindset provides an almost spiritual justification for extra-marital affairs, giving them a nearly divine nature. The quasi religious nature of this neo-Platonic relationship is then echoed in the being of the divine Roman goddess.

In addition to being a great lady of the court, Diane de Poitiers was also an important patron of the arts. At the Château d'Anet, which was given to her by Henri II,⁴⁵ she employed artists and architects such as Philibert de l'Orme and Jean Goujon. Diane de Poitiers used art deliberately to construct a positive image of herself.

In addition to commissioning works, Diana also appropriated sculptures which predated her reign because of their reference to the goddess Diana. One such sculpture is Benvenuto Cellini's cast iron sculpture of the *Nymph of Fontainebleau* (Figure V). Cellini, an Italian artist working in King Francis I's court from 1540 – 1545, was commissioned to make this sculpture for the king in 1542. Although Francis I had intended to place it above the so-called Golden Door, or the main entrance to

⁴⁴ Sichel, 54-55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

Fontainebleau, the sculpture was never actually installed. The relationship between Francis I and Cellini deteriorated, causing Cellini to leave France in 1545. Francis I died shortly thereafter, in 1547. Philibert de l'Orme, working for Diane de Poitiers, hung the relief sculpture in the tympanum of the entrance to Diane de Poitiers's castle, the Château d'Anet, in the mid-fifteen hundreds.⁴⁶ Diane de Poitiers's act of appropriation effectively transformed Cellini's nymph into Diana, goddess of the hunt, and by extension referred to Diane de Poitiers, proprietor of the Château d'Anet.

The sculpture, which depicts a nymph, could easily be understood as a figure of Diana. The sculpture actually represents the legend from which Fontainebleau got its name. It was said that during a hunt one of the royal dogs came upon a spring called the Fountain of Bliaud, hence Fontainebleau. The woman here is a personification of this spring. The green statue shows an elongated, mannerist nude figure reclining in a stream. A stag, intended to represent Francis I, according to Cellini, looks out of the relief sculpture toward the viewer. This central pair is surrounded by various wild beasts including boars and deer. Such iconography is close enough to that of the goddess Diana to easily blur the lines between nymph and deity.

By the reign of Henri II (r. 1547 – 1559) the French crown had gained considerable strength. However, powerful dukes still played an important role in French society. Any time there was a weak king, a regency, or a problem of succession, the most powerful dukes took advantage of the situation and sought to gain back power that was diminished during the time of strong kings.⁴⁷ Nevertheless the crown had gained authority. The monarchy encouraged the notion that the king was the emperor of his

⁴⁶ Montalbetti.

⁴⁷ Price, 58.

kingdom and the supreme guardian of church and state. This was supported by the precedents set in the emperors of France's Roman heritage, and with Charlemagne and the Bible.⁴⁸

Henri II's mother died while he was a young child and his father, Francis I, preferred Henri II's brother, Francis III, Duke of Brittany.⁴⁹ Francis I was an important Renaissance king, developing an extremely cultured court at Fontainebleau with artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Benvenuto Cellini, and Primaticcio. Despite his power, Francis I's reign was marked by his defeat and capture by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. Henri II and his brother Francis were held hostage in Madrid for three years as a condition of Francis I's release. Henri II thus had an unusual childhood, without the close attention of his parents and tutors that one would normally expect for a person of such high status.⁵⁰

One of the challenges faced by Henri II upon his coronation was the rise of Protestantism. Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the Schlosskirche in 1517, and by the time Henri II was crowned king of France Protestantism had spread in Europe. The reformed faith was based solely upon the Bible and sought deliverance from what was seen as the oppressive clerical institution. As the Lord's anointed representative, however, the king was charged with defending the established social order by defending the established religious and moral standards. Henri II was a practicing Catholic and also recognized the Church as a political instrument and a significant source of revenue. He was keenly aware of the importance of maintaining the Catholic Church.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁹ Sichel, 46.

⁵⁰ Price, 57-59.

⁵¹ Ibid., 59.

It was against this complicated personal and political setting that Henri II became king of France. Without the traditional training afforded a prince, Henri II was mostly educated by Diane de Poitiers. She “found him a morose and tongue-tied boy, [and] evoked the man of force and the monarch. Perhaps no woman before or after has so completely formed a king...”⁵² Diane de Poitiers had been in the household of Francis I and was seventeen years older than Henri II. Despite their age difference, Diane became his mistress in 1536 and remained as such for the rest of Henri’s life. She acted almost as a mentor and helped form him into a powerful king. She was an important influence in the decision-making process. From time to time Diane acted as an ambassador and Henri consulted with her before making important decisions.⁵³ She was so important in his life that she was even present in the lives of Henri and his wife Catherine de Medici’s children, choosing their nurses and medicines. Occasionally the children even stayed with her at her château at Anet.⁵⁴

It is clear that Diane de Poitiers was a stronger mistress than Agnès Sorel. She was also tied to a stronger monarch. Unlike the portrait of Sorel, commissioned by a third party, Diane de Poitiers was much more directly involved in the shaping of her own image. She was able to commission works herself, to be placed in her castle. However, Henri II was not an absolute monarch. He came to power as a weak, unsure king, and was faced with social unrest which manifested itself in religious turmoil. Likewise, Diane de Poitiers was similarly restricted in what she was able to commission. Like Sorel, she was caught between justifying her presence at court with her position, and elevating herself above a regular courtesan. To this end she aligned herself pictorially with a chaste deity,

⁵² Sichel, 44.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57 and 63.

but was nonetheless pictured nude in the *Diana with a Stag*. Diane de Poitiers was obliged to emphasize her carnal role while simultaneously vying for her purity and worth as a lady.

GABRIELLE D'ESTREES

At the end of the seventeenth century, all religious disguise was finally dropped in the fascinating portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées and one of her sisters. The painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses soeurs* (figure VI) provides a pictorial record of Estrées and Henri IV's failed attempt to become married. The painting was finished around 1594 by an unknown artist, and represents the School of Fontainebleau. The details of the commission are mostly unknown. It is unclear who made the commission and where the painting originally hung.⁵⁵ Nevertheless the work speaks indirectly of the complicated situation d'Estrées and Henri IV were in.

Gabrielle d'Estrées and one of her sisters, who Katherine B. Crawford has identified as the Duchess of Villars,⁵⁶ are seated nude in a bathtub. Large curtains hang on either side of the pair, as if they had recently been pulled open. Gabrielle, on the viewer's right, holds out a ring while her sister pinches her right nipple. Both women look out of the picture with a slightly averted gaze. Behind the sisters lies a large room in which a woman is seated over her needlework. In contrast to the d'Estrées sisters, this woman is fully clothed and seemingly indifferent to the scene taking place in front of her. She is seated next to a large fireplace, over which hangs a painting of presumably erotic subject matter. One can only see the bottom left-hand corner of the work, which displays a figure's naked legs spread apart with only a small drapery covering his genitals.

⁵⁵ Catherine B. Crawford, "The Politics of Promiscuity : Masculinity and Heroic Representation at the Court of Henry IV," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2003), 234 – 235.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

The Duchess of Villars' strange gesture indicates that d'Estrées was pregnant, and moreover, as Crawford has pointed out, that she was pregnant with a son. The right side was associated with males,⁵⁷ and Gabrielle was indeed pregnant with César at the time. D'Estrées holds out a ring, as if reminding the king of his promise to wed her if she bore him a son.⁵⁸ Her pregnancy is underscored both by the woman seated in the background, who could be knitting a garment or blanket for the baby, and the burning fireplace, symbolizing her fertile womb.

It is unfortunate that more is not known about this enigmatic painting. It is difficult to determine the exact message portrayed here without knowing who ordered the work and where it was hung. It could have been directed at Henri as a reminder of his promise, or intended for the court as an explanation and justification of d'Estrées' hopeful marriage to the king. In any case it certainly presents a bold depiction of a royal favorite. Unlike Agnès Sorel and Diane de Poitiers, Gabrielle d'Estrées is shown as herself, without any disguise. Instead of being likened to the mother of God or the chaste hunting goddess, d'Estrées is shown as she is, a human mother deserving the attention of the king.

The painting of Gabrielle d'Estrées and her sister represents a major shift in the pictorial representation of French royal mistresses. Unlike Agnès Sorel and Diane de Poitiers, who took on a holy appearance, d'Estrées was shown without a disguise. This bold move reflects the strength and solidification of the French throne which took place under Henri IV and attests to a certain amount of independence and strength enjoyed by d'Estrées.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 232.

Although the painting of d'Estrées is extremely different from the depictions of Sorel and de Poitiers in that it does not seek to disguise or sugarcoat d'Estrées' identity, it is nevertheless similar in its emphasis of her very sensual, physical function at court. The picture does not represent a complete revolution. It remains a step towards this pictorial emancipation and also shows limitations on both the king's and the mistress's power. The picture shows d'Estrées as a fertile, sensual woman. The nature of the relationship between king and mistress is clearly laid out for all to see, but d'Estrées is only depicted as a sexual partner and a fecund, maternal woman. She is not allowed any other identity.

The ambivalent nature of this work is once again a symptom of the king's position. Henri IV was ultimately a strong ruler, but his ascension to the throne was wrought with struggles. Most of these hardships centered on the problem of religious reformation and its political implications.

Religion cannot be overlooked in its importance in French society and culture. Although some members of the court embraced neo-Platonism during the Renaissance, the principle, enduring theological thought centered on Catholicism. The Catholic Church had been a fundamental influence in France since Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan in 313. The religious unrest which began with the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century erupted during the time of Henri IV (1555 – 1610). The Wars of Religion plagued his reign, made ever more complicated by the fact that Henri IV was himself Protestant.⁵⁹

Henri de Bourbon, prince of Navarre, was the son of Antoine de Bourbon and Jeanne d'Albret. Henri IV was not initially a likely candidate to become king; he was the

⁵⁹ Maurice Andrieux, *Henri IV, I*, Ottawa: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1955, 34.

ninth cousin, once removed, of his predecessor King Henri III.⁶⁰ Although Henri's father later converted back to Catholicism, both of his parents had at one time embraced Protestantism. Henri's mother raised him in a strict Calvinist manner, forbidding him to attend Mass.⁶¹ In an effort to show unity King Louis IX married his sister, Marguerite de Valois, a devout Catholic, to the Protestant prince. The ceremony took place in Paris on 18 August 1572.⁶² Just six days later, on 24 August 1572 the Saint Bartholomew Day's Massacre broke out in Paris and around France, resulting in the bloody killing of at least 2,000 Protestants in Paris and 20,000 victims throughout France.⁶³

In 1574 Louis IX was succeeded by his brother Henri III. Like Louis IX, Henri III was unable to produce a male heir. The dauphin had been Henri III's remaining brother, François Duke d'Alençon, however he died in 1584. As Henri III's closest male heir, Henri de Bourbon became the heir to the throne and was made king in 1589. In 1593 Henri IV converted to Catholicism, but up until that time he faced continual difficulties and opposition by Catholic powers such as the Holy League, the Pope, King Philip II of Spain, and others.

After his conversion, Henri IV remained more tolerant of religious differences than was the custom. In 1589 he signed the Edict of Nantes, which granted a degree of liberty to French Calvinists. This treaty gave Protestants the right to hold services in certain towns, mostly in the south of France, where Protestant nobles held fiefs. It recognized the Protestant universities in La Rochelle, Nîmes, and Montélimart and provided for six out of the sixteen counselors in the Parliaments of Paris, Rouen and

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² P. F. Willert, *Henry of Navarre and the Huguenots of France*, New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1893, 69.

⁶³ Ibid., 83 – 84.

Rennes to be Protestant. The edict was intended overall to grant Protestants the same civil liberties that Catholic Frenchmen enjoyed.⁶⁴

Apart from religious turmoil, Henri IV's other great challenge was his wife's inability to have children. Without a male heir, Henri IV could not control who his successor would be and rivalry between princes of the blood was inevitable. Henri IV's predecessors François II, Charles IX, and Henri III had all been without children. Henri IV's reputation as the *Vert Gallant* was in some ways motivated by this necessity of producing an heir. His mistress Gabrielle d'Estrées succeeded in bearing him children, but legitimizing them as heirs proved to be more difficult.⁶⁵

Gabrielle d'Estrées, Marquise de Monceaux, was the daughter of Antoine Comte d'Estrées and Françoise Babou. She had already been seen in the court of Henri III, usually in the presence of the Duke of Bellegarde, one of the court minions. Dreux de Radier, one of her contemporaries, described her beauty:

[Gabrielle d'Estrées] was the most lovely woman without dispute in France; her hair was a beautiful blonde; her eyes were blue and full of fire; her complexion was like alabaster; her nose aquiline and well-shaped; she had pearly teeth, lips upon which the god of love perpetually dwelt; a stately throat and perfect bust, a slender hand. In short she possessed the deportment of a goddess. Such were her charms, which none could gaze upon with impunity.⁶⁶

The king met Gabrielle d'Estrées during the summer of 1590. He was introduced to her through her friend, the Duke de Bellegarde, at her home at the Château de Coevres near Soissons. Although the king, twenty years Gabrielle's senior, was immediately smitten by her charms, d'Estrées, originally preferred Bellegarde.

⁶⁴ Quentin Hurst, *Henry of Navarre*, New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1938, 144-145.

⁶⁵ Crawford, 232 – 235.

⁶⁶ Henry Dwight Sedgwick, *Henry of Navarre*, London: D. Appleton-Century Company Incorporated, 1938, 208.

Eventually the king's persistence won her over, and d'Estrées' family benefited greatly from the relationship.

Gabrielle's father, Antoine d'Estrées, had been the governor of Le Fère, located in the Ile-de-France. He was, however, driven out by the Holy League in 1588. Gabrielle's uncle, François de Sourdis, had also been driven out of his post as governor of Chartres. Even Gabrielle's aunt's lover, Cheverny, had been chancellor under Henri III only to be turned out of his office in 1588. The family's future seemed to rest on Gabrielle's beauty and charms. During the summer that Gabrielle and Henri IV met, the king reinstated d'Estrées' family to their former posts.⁶⁷

Henry IV was jealous of Bellegarde and to avoid the possibility of Bellegarde and d'Estrées getting married Henri IV had d'Estrées married to the Nicolas d'Amerval, seigneur de Liancourt.⁶⁸ Later d'Estrées became Henri's mistress and, according to George Slocombe, a leading biographer of Henri IV, reigned as the uncrowned king. The two went everywhere together, to balls, ballets, masquerades, suppers, and even to the hunt, where Estrées dressed in green and rode on horseback in the manner of a man.⁶⁹

Gabrielle d'Estrées fulfilled one of Henri IV's most fervent wishes by bearing him children. Her first child by him, César, was born in 1594 and was named the Duke of Vendôme. In 1596 d'Estrées gave birth to Catherine Henriette and in 1598 to Alexandre. The king was extremely fond of his lover. In her he had found his "friend-elect" that the neo-Platonists spoke of. In the summer of 1596 he bought the duchy of Beaufort for his lover, raising her status to that of the Duchesse de Beaufort. While Henri was away on

⁶⁷ Ibid., 209.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁹ George Slocombe, *The White Plumed Henry, King of France*, New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1931, 273.

military campaigns he wrote fervent letters to his beloved. In one such letter the king included verses which he had written to Gabrielle:

Charming Gabrielle,
Pierced by a thousand darts,
When glory calls me
To the flags of Mars.
Cruel parting!
Luckless day!
Why am I not without life,
Or without love?

Share my crown
The reward of my valor,
I receive it from Bellona
Take it from my heart.⁷⁰

King Henri IV was determined to marry his mistress and make their son César the dauphin of France. Henri was advised against this and encouraged instead to consider marrying the Italian princess Marie de Medici. In addition, the Pope was not supportive of granting the French king an annulment so that he may marry his mistress. Nonetheless, Henri sent the Cardinal d'Ossat and the envoy Sillery to Rome in January 1599 to try to obtain the annulment. Henri had such confidence that he would marry d'Estrées that he told his intimates that the two would be getting married the first Sunday after Easter.⁷¹ Indeed, Henri's arrangements seemed to be going as planned because on 7 February 1599 Henri's wife Marguerite issued a full consent of their marriage annulment and the Pope, Clement VIII, also finally agreed.⁷²

The king and d'Estrées were to spend Easter apart from one another, Henri IV at Fontainebleau and Gabrielle in Paris. On her journey to Paris d'Estrées fell ill and went

⁷⁰ Sedgwick, 247 – 248. “Charmante Gabrielle,/Percé de mille dards,/Quand la gloire m’appelle/Sous les drapeaux de Mars./Cruelle departie!/Malheureux jour!/Que ne suis-je sans vie,/Ou sans amour!/ Partagez ma couronne,/Le prix de ma valeur;/ Je la tiens de Bellone/Tenez-la de mon cœur.”

⁷¹ Hurst, 277.

⁷² Slocombe, 279.

into labor on Thursday, 8 April 1599. The next day she gave birth to her fourth child, who was still-born. Finally on Saturday, 10 April 1599 Gabrielle d'Estrées was dead. Word had been sent to Fontainebleau as soon as d'Estrées became sick and Henry set off on horseback towards Paris. Before arriving, however, word of d'Estrées' passing reached the unfortunate king.⁷³ Five days later the king wrote to his sister, "the flower of my love is dead, and will never blossom again."⁷⁴

The portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées marks an important shift in the pictorial representations of royal French mistresses. Although mistresses continued to be portrayed as Greco-Roman goddesses, the use of disguises was no longer the standard. Little by little royal French mistresses began to gain notoriety and power as the French kings became more and more powerful.

MADAME DE POMPADOUR

The use and manipulation of portraiture reached its apogee in the eighteenth century with King Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Some of the most notable works commissioned by Madame de Pompadour are portraits of herself. The portraits of the marquise can be divided into two categories. The first group depicts Madame de Pompadour as a *femme savante*. She commissioned these from several artists, the most important being Maurice Quentin de La Tour (figure VII), François Boucher (figure VIII), and François-Hubert Drouais (figure IX). These pictures show a confident, comfortable, aristocratic woman amongst carefully placed props reflecting her high culture. She is commonly shown with books, musical instruments and lavish furniture.

⁷³ Sedgwick, 254.

⁷⁴ Hurst, 154.

Maurice Quentin de La Tour's pastel picture of *Madame de Pompadour* (figure VII), dated from 1748 – 1755, shows the marquise in all of her splendor. She is dressed in a lavish gown and seated on a fashionable chair. She is looking up from reading a score of music. There is a globe and stringed instrument carefully placed in the picture. Next to Pompadour on an elaborate desk stand books attesting to her great culture. They include the *Treaty on Engraved Stones* by Pierre-Jean Mariette, *Pastor Fido* by Guarini, Voltaire's *Henriade*, the third chapter of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, and the fourth volume of the *Encyclopédie*. This careful selection suggests that Pompadour was well versed in art, literature, and philosophy.

With this portrait the marquise was showing that she belonged at the French court. Her bourgeois origins are completely cast aside and forgotten. In addition, her position as royal mistress is also glossed over. As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth has demonstrated in her article "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation,"⁷⁵ Pompadour's body is not at all the emphasis of the work. It is the objects, rather, which Pompadour used to define herself and her status. This kind of portrait was usually reserved for male sitters; Madame de Pompadour adapted this type to meet her needs of self-definition.⁷⁶ Pompadour had advanced far from depictions like *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses soeurs*. Here she shows that she can be the king's intellectual equal, making her more than a simple mistress.

Madame de Pompadour adopted this formula in many of her portraits. François Boucher's later *Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour*, also known as the Munich portrait (figure VIII), dated to 1756, shows Pompadour in a similar setting. The portrait

⁷⁵ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations*, No. 73, (Winter, 2001) 65-67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

was commissioned to mark Pompadour's appointment as a supernumerary lady-in-waiting to the queen⁷⁷ and was displayed at the Salon of 1757.⁷⁸ The large work serves as an official portrait reflecting her newly-acquired status.

The so-called Munich portrait shows Madame de Pompadour dressed in another lavish gown covered in bows and flowers. She is seated in a room, looking nonchalant amidst an array of fancy furnishings and curtains, with books, papers, sheets of music, a folded map, a portfolio of drawings and prints, etching tools, and roses strewn about.⁷⁹ Pompadour holds a book in her hand, but Boucher has chosen to depict a moment when she has set the book down for an instant and is looking off in the distance, a look of pure contentment on her face.

Madame de Pompadour continued to use this portraiture formula until the end of her life. François-Hubert Drouais' portrait of *Madame de Pompadour* (figure IX) from 1763 – 1764 shows Pompadour in the last year of her life, and in fact the picture was finished after she passed away. She is shown as a matron working at a tapestry, which was the manner in which she often received courtiers and ambassadors.⁸⁰ She once again is presented in a fancy dress, which billows under the tapestry frame. Elaborate pieces of furniture decorate the room, and although Pompadour's cultural intellect is less stressed here, there is nevertheless a bookshelf in the background filled with volumes.

A second category of portraits shows Madame de Pompadour as the allegory of Friendship (figure X). Sometime after 1750 King Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour

⁷⁷ Donald Posner, "Mme. de Pompadour as a Patron of the Visual Arts," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Mar., 1990), 98.

⁷⁸ Lajer-Burcharth, 59.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁰ Melissa Hyde, "The 'Makeup' of the Marquise: Boucher's Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), 462.

ceased to be sexual partners.⁸¹ Pompadour remained in the court as a special friend to the king, and these pictures of her as Friendship defend her continued presence and importance in the court.

Madame de Pompadour was thus keenly aware of the importance of art in transmitting a certain image of herself and used it consciously to show herself as one of the most important women in France.

Madame de Pompadour's radical depictions go hand-in-hand with the heightened power enjoyed by King Louis XV, which had been set up for him by his predecessor, Louis XIV. When King Louis XIV died in 1715 the French monarchy was at the pinnacle of its power. The Sun King enjoyed absolute authority. In 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes which Henri IV had so diligently worked for. Louis XIV did so on the grounds that there was "one faith, one king, and one law."⁸² The tension created by the Wars of Religion and the Edict's attempt at tolerance were dissolved in this new, united France.⁸³

Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was born on 21 December 1721 in Paris to François Poisson and Louise Madeleine de la Motte. Her family was bourgeois; her father was a steward to the Pâris brothers, who were important financiers. Relatively little is known of Poisson's early life, although we do know that he father was forced to flee to Germany when she was four in relation to a corn supply scandal. Poisson and her mother and brother Abel were left to their own misery before being helped out by M. Le Normant de Tournehem, a wealthy tax collector and director of the Compagnie des Indes. It is sometimes assumed that this man was actually Jeanne-Antoinette's real father, however

⁸¹Katherine K. Gordon, "Madame de Pompadour, Pigalle, and the Iconography of Friendship," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (Sep., 1968), 249.

⁸²Price, 71.

⁸³Nancy Mitford. *Madame de Pompadour*. New York: Random House, 1953, 5.

Mitford points out that if this had been the case he likely would not have waited months after François Poisson had left to rescue Louise Madeleine de la Motte's family.⁸⁴ At the age of nine Jeanne-Antoinette is said to have gone to a fortune-teller who told her that she would "reign over the heart of a king."⁸⁵ The young Jeanne-Antoinette was educated in everything that a cultivated young woman of the time needed to know. She was taught to act, sing, and dance, she played the clavichord, knew botany and natural sciences, and collected exotic birds. She also painted, drew and engraved precious stones. Poisson's only imperfections were her bourgeois birth and her poor health.⁸⁶

On 9 March 1741 Jeanne-Antoinette Poissons was married to M. Le Normant de Tounhem's nephew, M. Le Normant d'Etioles. She reportedly told him that she would never leave him, except for the king. In that same year she bore M. Le Normant d'Etioles a son who only lived nine months. Two years later in 1743 Madame d'Etioles gave birth to a daughter, Alexandrine, who only lived until 1754.

Jeanne-Antoinette was very present in the public eye from early on. As a highly cultivated lady she wished to maintain a *salon* and succeeded in attracting Voltaire and the *philosophes*, in addition to other important thinkers of her day.⁸⁷ Jeanne-Antoinette also attempted to catch the attention of the king. Often Jeanne-Antoinette's mother drove her through the king's royal forest at Versailles in hopes of catching the king's eye. By 1745 the fortune-teller's prediction became a reality, as Jeanne-Antoinette was installed at Versailles.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 24 – 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 30 – 32.

In July of 1745, while the king was away on military business, Madame d'Etioles received a letter from the king addressed to Madame la Marquise de Pompadour. The king had purchased the marquisate of Pompadour and enclosed in his letter the certificate for the mistress's new title. In order to be presented to the court, this bourgeois lady needed to have a title. She had much to learn that summer before being officially presented. In fact many people considered there to be too much to learn if one was not born into the court. Louis, on the other hand, said that it would "amuse [him] to undertake her education."⁸⁸

In 1745 Madame de Pompadour also became involved in the arts and public policy. Her unique status gave her the opportunity to wield a certain amount of influence on public affairs. Although she did not hold any governmental offices herself, due to the fact that she was a woman, Madame de Pompadour was influential in making certain appointments. She helped place family members in important positions, ensuring that she would have some power in public affairs. She was able to place her uncle, and later her brother, into the post of the Directeur Général des Bâtiments. This person was in charge of government expenditures for the arts.

The marquise also began commissioning a great deal of art from the most prominent French artists of the day. During the nineteen years that she was with King Louis XV she had fifteen residencies, all of which needed to be decorated. Pompadour had so many possessions, in fact, that upon her death it took two notaries and seven experts the better part of one year to draw up an inventory of everything she owned.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁹ Posner, 74.

All four of the women discussed in this study are interesting figures in their own right. All four were faced with the complex position of being the royal favorite and defining what this meant to their court. When seen together, Agnès Sorel, Diane de Poitiers, Gabrielle d'Estrées, and Madame de Pompadour form a progression from a relatively weak mistress, to a strong, independent partner. Pictorially, they are associated with some of the most compelling works of art in the history of French art. Each work tells a story about the state of the monarchy with which the women were associated. As the monarchy became stronger, the depictions of the royal favorites also gained strength. The political developments and relative strength of the French monarchy affected the king's relationship to his mistress and the way she was represented. As the king's position became more secure, the royal mistress was able to carve out an identity of herself through the use of images. She was able to go from being disguised as a Christian and Greco-Roman deity, to being the king's explicit sexual partner, to finally being shown as the king's intellectual and social equal. While a more exhaustive study of each king and his mistress(es) will add additional nuances to this progression, the main structure can be clearly seen in the examination of the four women chosen here. They each stand out as major turning points in the history of the French monarchy and helped to develop and define what it meant to be the king's favorite.

FIGURES

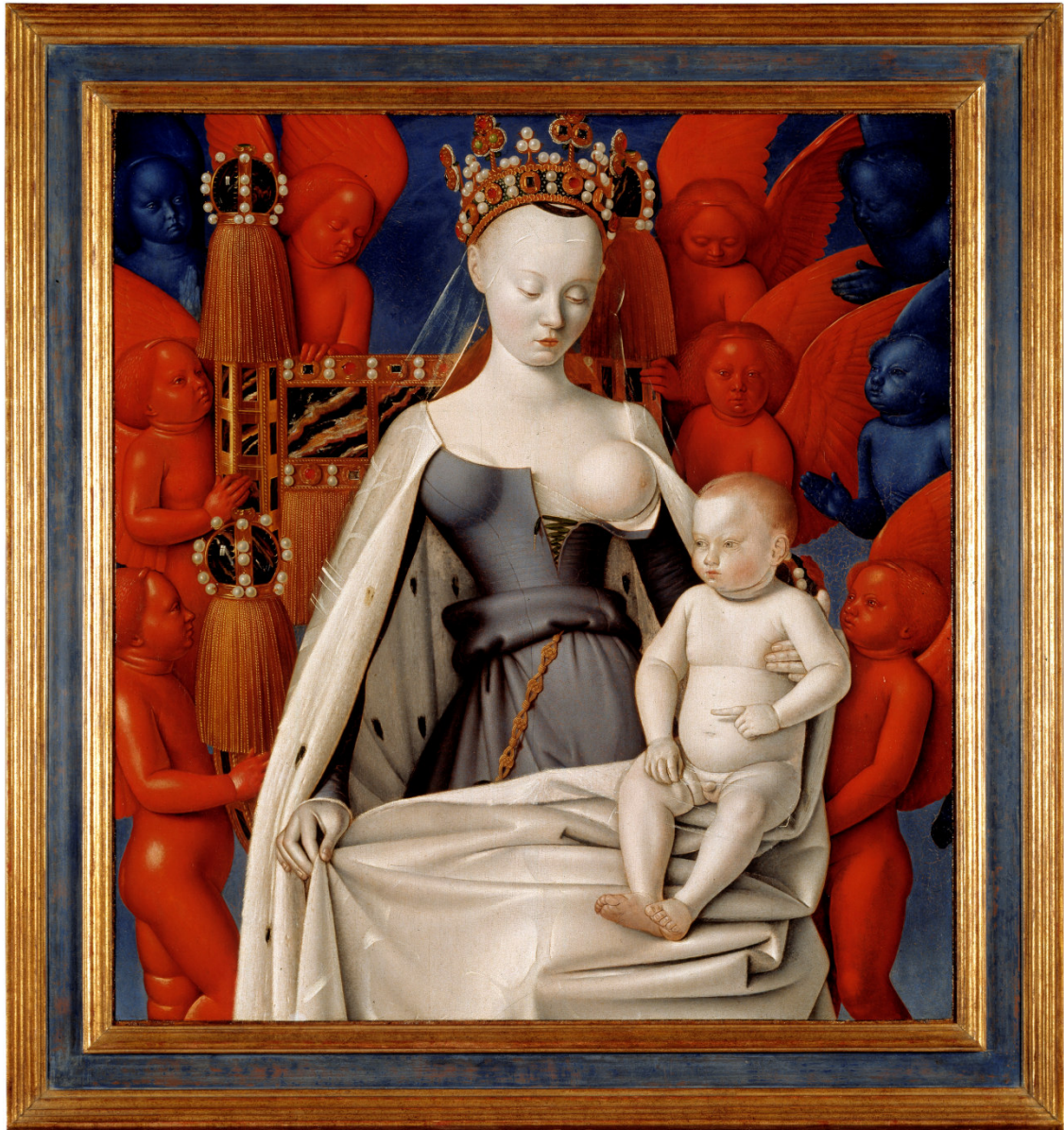


Figure I

Jean Fouquet, *Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels*, right wing of the Melun Diptych, after 1452, tempera on wood panel, 36.6 x 33.5 inches, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium, ©KMSKA- Lukas Art in Flanders / www.lukasweb.be.



Figure II.

Jean Fouquet, *Etienne Chevalier and Saint Stephen*, left wing of the Melun Diptych, after 1452, tempera on wood panel, 36.6 x 33.5 inches, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin--Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany.



Figure III

Attributed to Jean Goujon, *Diana with a Stag*, from the *Fountain of Diana*, c. 1940s, marble, 6.9 x 8.46 feet, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure IV

School of François Clouet, *Diane de Poitiers*, c. 1565, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.



Figure V

Benvenuto Cellini, *Nymph of Fontainebleau*, 1543-1544, bronze, 6.7 × 13.4 feet, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure VI

School of Fontainebleau, *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses sœurs*, c. 1594, oil on wood, 3.15 x 4.1 feet, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure VII

Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1748-1755, pastel on blue paper, 5.74 x 4.2 feet, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure VIII

François Boucher, *Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour*, 1756, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.



Figure IX

François-Hubert Drouais, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1763-1764, oil on canvas, 7 x 5.15 feet, National Gallery, London, Great Britain.



Figure X

Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Madame de Pompadour as Friendship*, c. 1753, marble, 5.46 feet, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

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