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### The French Official Mistress: Fashioning Female Political Power in the *Ancien Régime*

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The French Official Mistress:  
Fashioning Female Political Power in the *Ancien Régime*

An Honors Paper for the Department of History  
By Samantha Brown

Bowdoin College, 2024  
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### Introduction: The French Official Mistress as Political Actor

The Oxford English Dictionary provides fifteen definitions of the word mistress. The first definition of “mistress” is “a woman having control or authority.” However, a mistress could also be “a woman other than his wife with whom a man has a long-lasting sexual relationship.”<sup>1</sup> We see here precisely the complexities that characterize the identity of the mistress. “Mistress” signifies at once a woman with power and a woman whose identity is wholly defined by her relationship with a man. This contradiction has characterized the term since its known origin in the French language in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the OED cites it as already having four separate definitions.<sup>2</sup> It is within this paradox, of mistresses simultaneously in control and defined by others, that the study of the *maîtresse-en-titre* or the official mistress to the French king is situated. This study is focused on three official mistresses – Diane de Poitiers (1500-1566), Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), and Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764) – as case studies to better understand the range of possibilities and responsibilities for the women who held the inherently contradictory position of the official mistress to the French king, as both women in power and women defined by the men at their sides.

While the term mistress today is multivalent, a *maîtresse-en-titre* or *maîtresse déclarée* refers to a specific role at French court spanning from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century until the rise of Louis XVI in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For over three hundred years, the *maîtresse-en-titre* was a position recognized by the court as a companion to the king, typically given a salary and a coveted set of rooms in the king’s quarters of the palace. What set these women apart was precisely this recognition, being “official” as opposed to one of the many mistresses or sexual partners that a king had the power to acquire. This status allowed the official mistress a longevity

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<sup>1</sup> “Mistress.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, [www.oed.com/dictionary/mistress\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#36404550](http://www.oed.com/dictionary/mistress_n?tab=meaning_and_use#36404550).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

at court, since the king was sufficiently invested in their relationship to grant them the title, as well as the recognition and the visibility of their connection to the king. In an increasingly absolutist monarchy, such proximity to the king was a means of political influence, as it provided access to the ear of the single individual with the power to change favor and fortune at court, and in France more broadly. From this position, the role of the mistress extended far beyond that of a sexual companion. Indeed, for many long-term official mistresses, including Madame de Pompadour, though the sexual elements of their relationship with the king ended, their position of *maîtresse-en-titre* remained intact. For others, including Madame de Maintenon, it is unclear how large a role sexual relations ever played in the position. While outwardly the official mistress was a sexual companion, in practice these women encapsulated the role of advisor, confidant, diplomat, and friend to the king.

Charged with unofficial political responsibilities alongside their official sexual role, official mistresses held an inherently subversive position that granted them the possibility of accessing modes of power traditionally reserved for men, but specifically through the guise of performing female societal roles. The position of *maîtresse-en-titre* was tolerated as a reflection of the king's virility, which in turn was seen as tantamount to his capacity to rule and to succeed in battle. Beyond the sexual characteristics of the role itself, individual mistresses performed femininity in their actions and image creation. From its beginning, with King Charles VII recognizing Agnès Sorel as his mistress in 1444, the position of official mistress extended beyond those roles deemed fitting for a woman at court – those of lover and mother.<sup>3</sup> In the words of historians Christine and Tracy Adams, the power of the *maîtresse-en-titre* constituted an “open secret” at court, where her sexual role was known and recognized while her political role

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<sup>3</sup> Tracy Adams and Christine Adams, *The Creation of the French Royal Mistress: from Agnès Sorel to Madame Du Barry*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 18.

was known but obscured. The position's roots in accepted female means of social participation empowered the mistress to act in conventionally masculine ways, in political and diplomatic settings. In a society that legally barred women from power, the official mistress was able to access this power by concealing her political role, to varying degrees, behind the sexual nature of the title. Through art, theater, or pedagogy – spheres deemed acceptable for women due to the cultural acceptance of female refinement and intelligence, dating back to Christine de Pizan – each mistress was able to perform power in settings that did not outright upset gendered roles, in order to then have access to what was barred from their gender: political power.

If the position of official mistress was defined by a woman's relationship with the king, this role also interwove and interacted significantly with the court and the royal family, notably the king's children and the queen. As we will see with both Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henri II (1519-1559), and Madame de Maintenon, the mistress of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the official mistress's power and responsibility extended past the king alone to embed itself in the framework of his family. As the mistress was often tasked with, or took it upon herself to guide, the upbringing of the king's children, she could be seen as a counterpart or aide to the queen. This childrearing in itself was a political act, as she was caring for and protecting the children who would go on to inherit the wealth, influence, and even the throne of their father. In many ways, the official mistress could then be constructed as a third member of a monarchical triangle that comprised the king, the queen, and the *maîtresse-en-titre*. Even contemporaries noted this reality, as accounts describe not just the official mistress's relationship with the king, but also her relationship with the queen and their children. The importance of these female relationships is further worthy of study because it was appreciated during its time as an indicator of the mistress's place within the complicated social hierarchy of court.

In some ways, the differences between the queen and the official mistress directly led to the mistresses' capacity for power. Since French royal marriages were performed on the basis of political alliances, French queens were typically foreign-born, leading the French court to view a queen's opinion or advice as biased towards her home country. The mistress, in contrast, was always of French descent. The *maîtresse-en-titre* was therefore seen as less likely to hold the interests of any country besides those of France. The expectations for the queen and the official mistress also differed in important ways. The queen was expected to bear heirs for the future of the monarchy, setting procreation as the highest priority of her role at court. Mistresses were free of this necessity – while they often also bore children, these children were never considered to be in line for the throne. Where the queen faced the anxieties and health risks of bearing heirs, the mistress was free to use this time in other ways that pleased the king, such as through art and conversation. In some ways this allowed the *maîtresse-en-titre* a greater range of roles than it allowed the queen, who would appear negligent if she did not quickly and sufficiently produce heirs. Finally, and perhaps of greatest significance to court dynamics, the official mistress was chosen by the king himself, who could then dismiss her from the role at any point. Where the queen was typically chosen by others during the king's childhood for political and diplomatic reasons, the *maîtresse-en-titre* was a direct reflection of the king's desires and needs, meaning that any perceived traits of the mistress could be understood as those that the monarch most valued.

Like the queen, the official mistress was an individual of heightened visibility at court, as she was at once a symbol of beauty and of power. Mistresses were not passive in the creation of their image. In discussing the ways in which they took control over their own image, I employ literary historian Stephen Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning as "the power to impose a



shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity.”<sup>4</sup> Official mistresses employed a range of techniques to display the qualities they wished to project. They were particularly capable of self-fashioning as the position of *maitresse-en-titre* brought both financial and social resources that allowed them access to the great artists and writers of their time. They frequently used these connections to commission paintings, sculptures, and poetry that contributed to forming the image that they wished to project to court or to wider French society. Their ability to shape their own image is clear in the differences between the images with which each mistress affiliated herself. Mistresses’ different choices of depiction and association reflects a significant level of control over the production of their own identity or, in Greenblatt’s terminology, their self-fashioning.

The known association of these women with the monarchy meant that their images further reflected on the monarch himself. As mistresses portrayed themselves as intelligent, virtuous, or pious, they projected these traits as those representing and prioritized by the king. Because the *maitresse-en-titre* was a woman who gained and maintained her position directly by the king’s favor, she came to represent his desires to the court at any given time. This takes on added meaning when considered alongside the strength of mistresses’ image formation, as in constructing the traits in themselves that they most wished to be seen, they in turn had significant influence over what would be seen as valued by the king. Whether they be cultural intelligence, religious piety, or beauty and power, these traits had significant effects on the reputation of the king, as it was these traits that came to represent the goals of his reign, so long as he kept a given mistress by his side. This gave official mistresses the power of image creation both for themselves and for the monarch.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Jay Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

The ways in which these mistresses grasped forms of power typically considered impossible for women in France can also be read through the lens of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's idea of social tactics. Bourdieu's analysis of power is structured along three axes: capital (power in resources), symbolic violence (power in symbolic legitimacy), and fields (power in specific arenas).<sup>5</sup> All three of these frameworks can be applied to official mistresses, who gained capital through the monetary benefits of the position, and legitimacy through their own self-fashioning within the position, and then shaped this legitimacy to their specific surroundings at court. Even the distinction between mistresses generally and the *maitresse-en-titre* can be understood through Bourdieu's conception of a *titre* or title as "socially symbolic capital."<sup>6</sup> Where the influence of official mistresses can be read through their hand in political decision-making, it can also be read in "the more subtle and influential forms of power that operate through cultural resources and symbolic classifications."<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu rightfully points out that power functions not only through military might, but also through a myriad of social tactics that can be nuanced and harder to define. It is precisely these tactics of power, based on cultural capital and symbolic legitimization, that official mistresses used to anchor their power beyond what was given to them by society based on gender and class alone.

It is also important to understand the position of the official mistress within the older philosophical framework set forth by Christine de Pizan (1364-1431). Christine de Pizan is one of the most influential female philosophers of French history, as Gerda Lerner describes her *Book of the City of Ladies* as the first known written example of "a woman defining the tension every

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<sup>5</sup> David L. Swartz, "Bourdieu, Pierre." *Encyclopedia of Power*, edited by Keith Dowding, SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bowdoin-ebooks/detail.action?docID=996924>.)

<sup>6</sup> "...Le cas du *titre* – nobiliaire, scolaire, professionnel -, capital symbolique socialement..." in Pierre Bourdieu and John B. Thompson, *Langage et Pouvoir Symbolique*. (Éd. Du Seuil, 2014), 309.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

thinking woman has experienced – between male authority denying her equality as a person and her own experience.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Christine de Pizan recognized the system of male authority under which French women lived and refuted it by comparing it to the realities she had seen in life, in which women stood as individuals capable of intelligence. Christine de Pizan’s ideas are additionally important in contextualizing the position of the official mistress due to their timing, with her life ending only a decade before the position of official mistress was first constructed in France. This suggests that these ideas were fresh in contemporary dialogue at the same moment that a woman was first accepted as a suitable companion to the king. Christine de Pizan’s insistence on female intelligence is also significant in relation to the existence of Salic law in France, which dictated that political power, such as the throne, passed solely from male to male. Contemporary conversation surrounding both Salic law and the writings of Christine de Pizan resulted in a French conception of gendered hierarchy where “women were as competent as men of their same rank but legally inferior to them.”<sup>9</sup> This notion of the female role in society is crucial in understanding how official mistresses could be at once respected as intelligent and cultured, and criticized for their attempts to access political power.

While the existence of mistresses was not unique to France, their place in a larger conversation of female political power has taken unique forms in France, both historically and as fodder for feminist debates today. A 2020 special issue of French Politics, Culture & Society discusses the link between “l’exception française,” or the “Gallic singularity,” and the idea that “French men and women have a distinctly different way of organizing social and political

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<sup>8</sup> Edward M. Wheat, “Now a New Kingdom of Femininity Is Begun: The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of The City of Ladies*.” *Women & Politics*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1999, pp. 23–47, <https://doi.org/10.1300/J014v20n0402>, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy Adams, “The Gallic Singularity: The Medieval and Early Modern Origins.” *French politics, culture and society* 38.1 (2020): 21–43, 23.

relations between men and women than the men and women of other countries.”<sup>10</sup> The collection of historians involved, including Christine and Tracy Adams and Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, make the case for how French cultural identity has come into being in conversation with the perceived uniqueness of gender relations in France. While Salic law has been present for centuries, it is becoming newly weaponized in today’s feminist discourse as a justification for French actress and producer Catherine Deneuve’s denunciation of the American #MeToo movement.<sup>11</sup> Deneuve and others argued that American feminism has gone too far, as there are benefits to considering men and women as equals, but different.<sup>12</sup> The history of French official mistresses ultimately undermines this flattening conception, which argues that women should be satisfied with and protective of some form of feminine or female power, as these mistresses performed female power out of social necessity while constructing complex tactics to gain access to masculine roles barred from them by the “equal but different” gender framework.

The first histories of official mistresses were written by a wave of French historians in the nineteenth century who parroted many of the critiques contemporaries used against them: that they were too powerful, too political, especially for women.<sup>13</sup> For example, where Jean-Edme Dufour praised Madame de Pompadour’s wit in his 1760 history, he characterized this wit as “mischievously or dangerously employed, and thus [worthy of] rather a reproach than a merit.”<sup>14</sup> Dufour mimics here centuries worth of dialogue in which official mistresses were portrayed as

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<sup>10</sup>Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, “Representations of Women in the French Imaginary: Historicizing the Gallic Singularity.” *French politics, culture and society* 38.1 (2020): 1–20, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Collectif, “Catherine Deneuve : « Nous Défendons Une Liberté d’importuner, Indispensable à La Liberté Sexuelle ».” *Le Monde*, 9 Jan. 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle\\_5239134\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html).

<sup>12</sup> Pederson, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Laurent de la Beaumelle, *Memoires Pour Servir a l’Histoire de Madame de Maintenon et a Celle Du Siecle Pensee*. Jean-Edme Dufour et Phil Roux, 1778; *The History of the Marchioness de Pompadour, Mistress to the French King, and First Lady of Honor to the Queen. Part the Third*. (printed for S. Hooper, at Caesar’s Head, the Corner of the New Church, in the Strand, 1760).

<sup>14</sup> Dufour and Roux, 21.

manipulative or power-hungry, rather than what may have been considered, for their male counterparts, politically savvy. This trend continued with histories written in the nineteenth century: Angelo Rappaport claimed Madame de Maintenon “never loved with true love, she never shed true tears” and that “Maintenon’s political influence was almost nil.”<sup>15</sup> Only recently, with scholarship such as Kathleen Wellman’s 2013 *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* and Christine and Tracy Adams’ 2020 *The Creation of the French Royal Mistress: From Agnes Sorel to Madame Du Barry*, have historians begun to grapple with the complex political actors that inhabited the role of official mistress, and how the institution of the *maitresse-en-titre* itself adapted over time, according to the needs of the monarch.

Wellman discusses the mechanisms of power of both queens and mistresses during the French Renaissance. She points out how this pairing is justified as the two “occupied complementary positions.”<sup>16</sup> Whether acting as rivals or friends, the queen and mistress were indelibly tied together through their relationships of power to the king. In addition to analyzing their enacted power, Wellman also explores the ways in which both queens and official mistresses were used symbolically by contemporary courtiers and diplomats to critique society and the monarchy. Wellman largely relies on the accounts of diplomats and chroniclers, along with various contemporary artforms, to explore the perception of mistresses and queens. However, in doing so, she sometimes overemphasizes the critiques against these historical women, rather than acknowledging the complex ways in which their positive traits were seen to reflect back onto the monarch. In other words, Wellman beautifully articulates the

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Dubreuil, *Quelques Mots Sur Diane de Poitiers*. (Chartres, 1876); Marcelle Tinayre, *Madame de Pompadour*. (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926); Angelo S. Rappoport, *Royal Lovers and Mistresses*. (Greening, 1908), 302; 303.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Anne Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 6.

complementary nature of the queen and the mistress, but overlooks the complementary nature of the mistress and the king, which I argue is equally significant in the conception of the *maîtresse-en-titre*.

Christine and Tracy Adams' work differs from Wellman's in terms of scope and sources, as opposed to central claims. The Adamses similarly discuss the range of embodiments of the official mistress in how they performed their role and how they fit into the wider framework of the monarchy. The Adamses' work traverses a much greater timespan, beginning in the early fifteenth century and continuing until the late eighteenth. Within this long period, they focus more closely on the mistresses' mechanisms of power as opposed to the ways in which their images were adapted and coopted by others. In focusing more on the mistresses' autonomy, the Adamses incorporate the women's personal letters alongside the accounts of diplomats and chroniclers to allow the mistresses their own historical voice. While the Adamses are more successful at centering the women in their own stories, their point of departure maintains distance from the individuals themselves, as in tracing the development of the official mistress, their focus is ultimately structural: "What was it about France?"<sup>17</sup> In focusing on the "trajectory of the position as it developed over time," Christine and Tracy Adams fail to recognize the extent to which each of the women was able to adapt how they fit into these structures and, perhaps most importantly, to shape them according to their own identity.

My work aims to expand upon this existing historiography by exploring the ways in which official mistresses made conscious efforts to mold the power of the role to fit their individual intentions, and in doing so shaped the ways that the king and the monarchy were seen by and interacted with the court around them. The position of the official mistress is inherently

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<sup>17</sup> Tracy Adams and Christine Adams, 13.

individual, dependent on the personal realities of both the mistresses and the kings, yet it is precisely the differences in how each of the mistresses wielded their influence and image that allows us to see the extent to which they *were* wielding them. In studying the similarities regarding the means of power and image production among these women, and yet the differences between what was being produced, it becomes clear that official mistresses played a conscious role in creating their own identity at court. Rather than discuss how they were seen by others, I instead study how they constructed what was seen, and the complex artistic and interpersonal means by which they enacted this formation of identity and power. The three women who are the focus of this project – Diane de Poitiers, Madame de Maintenon, and Madame de Pompadour – were chosen for several reasons stemming from their complex use of tactics of power in the position. Each of the women performed the role of official mistress for nearly twenty years, and was removed from court not by loss of favor but by death. They represent the only three French official mistresses who fit these conditions, making them stand out as particularly successful official mistresses, specifically in their capacity to maintain and protect their role beside the king. While they share this degree of success, these women also all differ in the images they created, and the subsequent effects of these images on their place at court: Diane de Poitiers as the goddess protecting art, Madame de Maintenon as the purveyor of Catholicism, and Madame de Pompadour as an entertainer and a political figure.

This study takes into account a range of primary and secondary sources that help elucidate both the women's choices in the role and how these choices were in turn perceived by those around them. For each of the mistresses, a collection of their original letters provided a key point of access their voices. In no case do the extant letters seem to represent all of the letters written by each of these women, and so must be read as only part of the picture. However, they

are a crucial tool to allow the women their own say in how they inhabited the role. In addition to the mistresses' letters, reports from foreign ambassadors and the letters of other members of court were at times consulted to understand the impact of the women's self-fashioning. In the case of Diane de Poitiers and Madame de Pompadour, the epistolary record is understood in conjunction with an artistic record that reflects similar goals of self-fashioning in visual form. Where the artistic record for Madame de Maintenon is scarcer, her writings on education instead stand as a projection of her personal beliefs and identity to continue the self-fashioning she began in word and action. In studying both the media that mistresses produced themselves and the media created by others about them, it is possible to analyze them for moments of consensus. In all cases, I aim to prioritize the voices of these women themselves as a means of privileging how they understood their own role.

Chapter one focuses on Diane de Poitiers, a noble woman who lived from 1500 to 1566, and served as *maîtresse-en-titre* to King Henri II (1519-1559) for the latter half of her life. As the chapter title, "Carving Her Own Seat of Power at the King's Side," implies, the discussion focuses on the ways in which an official mistress possessed significant political power, and the specific actions that Diane de Poitiers took to secure and expand this power. Diane de Poitiers became the king's mistress when he was a teenager and she was nearly twenty years his senior. As she remained by his side for his entire reign, Diane de Poitiers expanded her power outward from the king to stabilize it in factors other than his affection. She positioned herself as an authority over the king's children, and as a powerful ally for those at court who desired access to the king's ear. Perhaps the most long-lasting of these stabilizing efforts was Diane de Poitiers' ability to self-fashion through her support of the arts, creating an abundant artistic record combining her image with that of the goddess Diana. In her efforts to stabilize, validate, and



valorize her position of power at court, Diane de Poitiers created an image of intelligence and virtue that reflected back on the king and the monarchy. At a moment of cultural revival through the French Renaissance, it was crucial that the relatively young Henri II be seen as an individual of cultural refinement, capable of ushering France into the future. Diane's association with the monarchy allowed her image of artistic virtue to be projected onto Henri, thereby strengthening his authority as king as well.

The second chapter analyzes the unique position of Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), the final *maîtresse-en-titre* and morganatic wife of King Louis XIV (1638-1715). Madame de Maintenon entered the king's life when his mistress at the time, Madame de Montespan, chose her to act as governess for their illegitimate children. Entering court in this capacity, Madame de Maintenon constructed her life at court around key relationships with those who surrounded the king (his wife, his mistress, his children) before eventually marrying the king in a private ceremony. While a morganatic marriage meant that Maintenon would never be considered queen, it contributed to her fashioning of piety, both her own and that of the king, as their relationship could be seen as acceptable by God rather than adulterous. In a time of religious revival at French court, Maintenon consciously projected her identity as a devoted Catholic, in letters to friends, family, and her confessors. While this religious self-fashioning did not manifest through art and self-imagery, Maintenon performed her own kind of legacy-building by founding a revolutionary school for girls at Saint-Cyr. Just as Diane de Poitiers' proximity to the king resulted in her self-fashioning reflecting back onto him, the foundation of the school at Saint-Cyr extended past Maintenon to reflect onto the monarchy as one valuing education and the noble class it strove to support. Maintenon thereby projected positive attributes onto herself and the king, choosing religion over art as the vehicle of her image projection, and in turn revealing a

shift in courtly priorities from the artistic promise of the Renaissance to the religious pressure of the French Catholic Revival.

The third and final chapter centers on Louis XV's (1710-1774) mistress, Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764), as a woman who stands out both for her middle-class origins and for her acceptance of a high degree of visibility. As a member of the bourgeoisie, Madame de Pompadour rose to the title of official mistress only upon acquiring a noble title, which was conferred on her with the help of those who foresaw the benefits of having an ally attached to the king. Pompadour took on more visible political power than any of the official mistresses before her, and in doing so opened herself up to more outward criticism. In an age of increased information circulation, cartoons and songs spread throughout Paris critiquing the power Pompadour held. Madame de Pompadour attempted to counteract these issues of image by commissioning her own artwork. Over time, this depiction shifted according to what she wished to project: the beautiful mistress or the wise and pious companion. In addition to creating her image, Pompadour invested her time and energy in supporting and entertaining the king using dinner parties and plays to create for him the love and the simpler life that he seemed to crave. Pompadour could rely on the king's absolute power to maintain her position at court, and even share in that power, yet her inability to control the narratives circulating in Paris reveals the widening gap between the monarch and the public and how that gap came to be reflected onto the position of the mistress. Pompadour's choice to cater solely to the king, rather than the wider court, reflects a belief in the absolute monarch as her sole avenue of influence, while the criticism against her hints at the rise of public resentment against this absolute authority.

By taking a deep look at the epistolary and artistic record of these three official mistresses from across France's modern history, the extent of their autonomy and political

maneuvering becomes clear in their tactics of power and how they projected their identity in the role through self-fashioning, and the ways in which this projection of identity reflected back onto the monarchy. Diane de Poitiers, Madame de Maintenon, and Madame de Pompadour all existed in unique eras for the French monarchy and constructed their own methods of fulfilling the role of the official mistress, revealing both changes in the monarchy and their impacts upon it. In striving to understand the political reality of women in France under Salic law and today, the position of *maîtresse-en-titre* is a crucial framework to recognize the significance of female power structures at court and in the monarchy, and the degree to which women were able to shape these structures themselves.

## **Diane de Poitiers: Carving Her Own Seat of Power at the King's Side**

### A Member of the King's Court

In the early sixteenth century, a French aristocratic widow became the mistress of a prince nearly twenty years younger than she. Her name was Diane de Poitiers, Grande Sénéchale, Duchesse of Valentinois (1500-1566). She served as the *maîtresse-en-titre* or official mistress of Henri II, King of France (1519-1559), from 1534, before his ascension to the throne, until his death. More than a sexual companion, Diane inhabited, “between Henri II and Catherine de Medici, the place of a third member of the Royalty,” in the words of historian Paul de Saint-Victor.<sup>18</sup> Diane was Henri's “most trusted advisor” throughout his reign, creating for herself a position of power and leverage within the French court.<sup>19</sup> By purposefully involving herself in the production – and reproduction – of the monarchy, she maintained her role at the king's side throughout his life and had a remarkable personal impact on the monarchy.

Diane de Poitiers was born to a wealthy Parisian family of noble blood. By the age of fifteen, Diane was married to Louis de Brézé, the grand sénéchal or judicial administrator of the region of Normandy. This advantageous marriage to a powerful member of the French aristocracy gave Diane access to a new rung of French society – that of the king's court.<sup>20</sup> From the connections her marriage to Louis de Brézé provided, Diane de Poitiers entered the circles of the king, François I, as a member of his court and as a lady-in-waiting to his mother, Louise de Savoy.<sup>21</sup> Her position at court, enhanced by that of her husband, was so near the king that in 1523 she was able to secure a royal pardon for her father, who had been punished over

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<sup>18</sup> “Maîtresse en titre, Diane de Poitiers tenait, entre Henri II et Catherine de Médicis, la place d'une troisième personne de la Royauté” in Paul de Saint-Victor and Ligarán, “XIII - Diane de Poitiers.” *Hommes et Dieux : études d'histoire et de Littérature*. (Belgium: Ligarán Éditions, 2015), 167.

<sup>19</sup> Wellman, 188.

<sup>20</sup> Tracy and Christine Adams, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Didier Le Fur, *Diane de Poitiers*. (Perrin, 2022), 72.

accusations of complicity in Charles de Bourbon's rebellion.<sup>22</sup> From this relationship with François I, Diane de Poitiers went on to take an active role in the life of his second son, Henri. In 1526, when Henri was only seven years old, Diane was among the women who accompanied him to the border of Spain to begin his time as a political hostage after the French loss at the Battle of Pavia – making her perhaps one of the few familiar faces he saw before beginning his effective imprisonment. Upon his return to France, François I elected Diane to take charge of Henri's court socialization.<sup>23</sup> Henri was eleven when Diane started preparing him for the realities of court life. What began as a close relationship based on courtly education and advice morphed into a sexual affair when Henri was sixteen, and extended until his death at forty.

Diane de Poitiers' impact on France went far beyond her socialization of the future king, just as her relationship with Henri expanded past that of either lover or tutor alone. She carved for herself a place in court power dynamics that provided a seat of power outside sexual performance, based on her place in the king's family and the French court, as well as her own image of cultural accomplishment and respectability. In doing so, Diane's actions benefited the king, the queen, their children, and the monarchy as an institution, while leaving an indelible mark on the history of public image and art in France.

### **A Role in the King's Family**

Diane de Poitiers took up roles that enmeshed her in the fabric of the king's family, allowing her to become deeply involved in the lives of his children and even his wife, Catherine de Medici. Since childbearing is historically the role of the queen, Diane de Poitiers'

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Strage, *Women of Power : the Life and Times of Catherine Dé Medici*. (First edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Wellman, 197.

involvement in the upbringing of the king's children reflects a sharing of female duties between Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de Medici – in other words, how the queen and the mistress shared power over the future of the monarchy. Historians Amy and Tracy Adams assert that “Diane’s role...was imagined not as rivaling but as complementing that of Henri II’s queen.”<sup>24</sup> Diane attached herself to the power of the royal duo by involving herself in the reproduction and continuation of the monarchy.

Diane’s role in raising Henri II’s children is especially clear in the large collection of letters between her and Monsieur and Madame de Humyeres, the couple charged with the care of the children. Diane gave direct instruction to the de Humyeres, placing herself in a position of authority over the children. In 1550, Catherine de Medici and Henri II’s second-born son, Louis de Valois, died before the age of two. In the important matter of the death of the second heir, Diane de Poitiers was the one to contact the de Humyeres to coordinate details following his death. In her letter from November 8, 1550, two weeks after the death of Louis de Valois, Diane claimed that she had spoken to the king and queen and that they communicated their wishes to her.<sup>25</sup> She then gave instructions on what was to be done about Louis’ personal belongings. Her claim to intimate knowledge acted to stress her access to the king’s emotions, while her instructions projected a sense of inherent authority. In giving instructions, Diane assumed the power to make decisions regarding the heirs of the French monarchy. This pattern continues in a letter sent on June 3, 1551, in which Diane de Poitiers once again acted as intermediary of the desires of the king and queen. In this case, Diane wrote to the de Humyeres regarding the wet nurse of the king’s children. She praised the wet nurse’s good work and made a personal offer to reward her— again placing herself as the primary benefactor for those working with the heirs to

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<sup>24</sup> Adams and Adams, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 73.

the crown.<sup>26</sup> Diane's epistolary exchanges reveal her to be capable of making decisions regarding the royal children and privy to the personal desires of the king. In positioning herself with the authority of the king's confidant, Diane implicated herself into the workings of the king's family while strengthening her role as the king's advisor.

One letter in particular, addressed from Diane de Poitiers to Madame de Humyeres on August 27, 1552, reveals Diane's positioning as an ally to the caretakers. After mentioning the previous letter she received from de Humyeres detailing the recovery of the dauphin after a bout of illness, Diane expressed relief before stating that she had passed on their excuses to the king ("j'ay fait voz excuses au Roy").<sup>27</sup> Effectively positioning herself as defending their role in the dauphin's recovery, Diane thereby characterized herself as an advocate on behalf of the de Humyeres, inserting herself between them and the king. Diane instructed the caretakers to write frequently to the king, the queen, and Connétable Montmorency to assuage their fears. However, perhaps the most telling portion of the letter is the manner in which Diane referred to herself. After insisting that Madame de Humyeres write the children's parents, Diane described herself as de Humyeres' "meilleure amye" – in other words, their greatest ally.<sup>28</sup> By highlighting her loyalty and service to the de Humyeres, Diane suggested that while correspondence would be shared with the king and queen, it was Diane who should be prioritized with information regarding the king's children.<sup>29</sup> She safeguarded her position as intermediary, and her hand in the upbringing of the king's children, by creating and highlighting a favorable relationship with their caretakers. In forming an individual relationship with the de Humyeres, Diane ensured that they

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Diane de Poitiers, *Lettres Inédites de Dianne de Poytiers Publiées d'après les Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Impériale avec une Introduction et Des Notes par Georges Guiffrey*. Paris: Chez Vve Jules Renouard, 1866, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 106.

would not easily replace her with another, and that her relationship with the royal family extended beyond Henri alone.

While Diane's relationship with the king's children was clearly one of oversight and protection, her relationship with the king's wife was more ambiguous. Diane implicated herself in the duties of the queen beyond her role as one of Catherine de Medici's ladies-in-waiting. Diane's self-inclusion in the matter of the king's offspring is reflected even in the conception of the royal children. Henri failed to produce an official heir for the first ten years of his marriage to Catherine de Medici. This lack of offspring is more likely due to his existing sexual relationship with Diane de Poitiers than issues of fertility, as he went on to produce ten children with Catherine over the next thirteen years.<sup>30</sup> Contarini, a Venetian diplomat visiting the French court, reported that it was at the urging of Diane de Poitiers herself that Henri II was pushed to reproduce with Catherine de Medici.<sup>31</sup> According to historian Sheila ffolliott, Diane may have seen her involvement in the life of the queen and the royal children as a means of legitimizing her own power in the government, and carving out a more formal role for herself outside the whims of the king. While Diane did not produce any heirs for Henri II herself, she made her involvement clear by "openly displaying concern about Catherine's fertility problems, consulting with physicians, and sending the king to sleep with his wife."<sup>32</sup> Diane's contribution to the process of producing an heir was considered so substantial that she was even granted a sum of money in return for the "goods and recommendable services that she here did for the queen."<sup>33</sup> By encouraging reproduction, Diane relieved some of the pressure from Catherine de Medici, a

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<sup>30</sup> Strage, 59, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Sheila ffolliott, "Casting a Rival into the Shade: Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers." *Art Journal*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1989, pp. 138–43. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/776963>, 140.

<sup>33</sup> "...il lui accorder aune gratification de 5 500 livres au titre des 'bons et recommandables services qu'elle a cy-devant fait à la reine'" in Ivan Cloulas, *Diane de Poitiers*. (Fayard, 1999).



foreign queen responsible for producing a male heir, while formalizing her own power within the monarchy.

Armand Baschet, the historian to transcribe the writings of Venetian ambassadors on the mid-sixteenth century French court, suggested that in the case of Diane de Poitiers, “it was the Mistress who took into protection the Queen.”<sup>34</sup> In this framing, it is Diane who had a stable seat of power and the queen, Catherine de Medici, who maintained her privileges thanks to the will of the mistress and, through her, the king. Contarini created this impression in claiming that “without a doubt the king loves and prefers” Diane de Poitiers.<sup>35</sup> When Catherine de Medici entered the French court from her native Italy, Diane de Poitiers had already held a place at court for nearly two decades – and had known Henri for much of his childhood. Coming from a powerful family of the French aristocracy, Diane de Poitiers held a more established position of power at court than Catherine, the foreign queen arriving without ally. Yet she did not use her position as mistress to challenge Catherine’s authority. In the early days of their marriage, Henri was considered to be exceptionally loyal to Catherine, with Venetian diplomat Marino Cavalli stating in 1546 that Henri “is hardly given to women; his wife is sufficient for him.”<sup>36</sup> At 28-years-old, Henri would have already been pursuing a sexual relationship with Diane de Poitiers for over ten years – yet through the eyes of the court, theirs was a relationship of conversation and advice. For Catherine de Medici, this meant that she was perceived as a successful wife for having retained the attention of her husband. Catherine herself seemed to allude to the respectful manner of Henri’s relationship with Diane in a 1582 letter to her son. In a letter of reproach for

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<sup>34</sup> “C’était la Duchesse, la *Maîtresse* qui prenait en protection la Reine, l’Épouse” in Armand Baschet and Henri Plon, *La Diplomatie Vénitienne. Les Princes de l’Europe Au Xvie Siècle. François Ier - Philippe II. Catherine de Médicis. Les Papes, Les Sultans, Etc., Etc.: D’après Les Rapports Des Ambassadeurs Vénitiens*. (Henry Plon, Imprimeur-Éditeur, 1862), 440.

<sup>35</sup> “Mais la personne, dit-il, que sans nul doute le Roi aime et préfère, c’est madame de Valentinois” in Baschet, 438.

<sup>36</sup> “Il n’est guère adonné aux femmes : la sienne lui suffit” in Baschet, 431.

the disrespectful conduct and language of her son and his advisors, Catherine referred to the example of Madame de Valentinois as being in “all honor,” a preferable alternative to the company that her son kept.<sup>37</sup>

Yet to claim that the relationship between Diane and Catherine was inherently positive or supportive would be an oversimplification. In a letter of advice for her daughter upon her marriage in 1584, Catherine asserted that “never has a woman who loved her husband loved his whore.”<sup>38</sup> Long after the death of both Henri II and Diane de Poitiers, Catherine alluded to a lack of affection for Diane de Poitiers despite the ways in which she benefitted from Diane’s involvement. The intentions of this help can equally be called into question. While Diane’s urging for Henri to produce an heir with Catherine had unquestionably positive effects on the stability and future of the monarchy, the reasoning behind Diane’s suggestion may have been more complex, as her suggestion coincided with Henri taking an additional mistress. In the early years of Henri’s marriage to Catherine, prior to them producing an heir, Henri had his first child with an Italian woman with whom he was having an affair. Diane’s decision to suggest reproduction with Catherine may then have had the additional goal of distracting Henri from other sources of female companionship, consolidating the female power of the monarchy in herself and Catherine, with whom she shared a mutually beneficial relationship.

Diane de Poitiers used her influence with the royal children to support the duties of the king and queen, ensuring her impact and source of power went beyond Henri II alone. Her support of Catherine de Medici likewise allowed her to further consolidate power and decrease potential rivals for the king’s affection by limiting the presence of other mistresses. While the

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<sup>37</sup> “De Madame de Valentinois, cestèt, comme de Madame d’Estampes, en tout honneur” in Catherine de Medici and Hector De La Ferrière. *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*. (Imprimerie Nationale, 1890), 36.

<sup>38</sup> “...car jeamès fame qui aymèt son mary n’èma sa puteyn” in Catherine de Medici, 181.

mistresses before her had acted as companion to the king, Diane acted as a companion to the *monarchy*, integrating herself so completely into the fabric of the family that even long after her death, Catherine referenced her in letters to two of her children.

### **Interactions with the Court**

Beyond the confines of the king's immediate family, Diane deeply integrated herself into the workings of the French court. From the existing record of her correspondence, Diane's letters primarily served to negotiate the complicated social networks of the king's court. It is likely that her upbringing made her particularly suited to this skillset, as she is reported to have been raised under the tutelage of Anne de Beaujeu, sister of Louis XI.<sup>39</sup> Here she would have learned the intricacies of court life and social negotiation as part of her preparations for marriage. Following her marriage to Louis de Brézé, Diane would have had the chance to practice these skills at court as a member of the entourage of the king's mother. While her upbringing and court experience provide some explanation for her skills in careful communication, historian Susan Broomhall suggests that her strong epistolary performance was due in part to the precarious nature of her role as a mistress, dependent on the whim of the king. Possessing informal power, Diane chose to pay "particular attention to rhetorical positioning that made explicit the intimate and emotionally powerful nature of the relationship that Diane shared with the king."<sup>40</sup> Her negotiations with the nobles of the court pertained to a wide variety of subjects, and allowed Diane to rhetorically project her personal position of authority and power.

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<sup>39</sup> Le Fur, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Broomhall, "The King and I: Rhetorics of Power in the Letters of Diane de Poitiers." *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018, 351.

In analyzing Diane's position at court through her letters, it is important to recognize the limitations to epistolary analysis of Diane de Poitiers' life due to the dearth of surviving letters. The collections of letters which remain date from 1547 to 1559, with only a handful of letters existing from each calendar year.<sup>41</sup> The letters favor certain aspects of Diane's correspondence, such as those referring to her relationship with the de Humyeres and the wellbeing of the king's children. Additionally, no record exists of a letter sent from Diane to Henri. Given that there are some examples of existing letters from Henri to Diane, and the nature of her broader aptitude for correspondence, it can be assumed that Diane wrote letters to Henri that were then destroyed as a means of censorship, either by Diane and Henri themselves or posthumously. As this is a certain gap in the record of Diane's correspondence, it is reasonable to assume that the full extent of Diane's correspondence likely extended far beyond what is accessible today – in time frame, content, and recipient. Examining the letters that can be accessed, however, can provide valuable insight into the patterns in her correspondence, and how she used this correspondence to project and mold her position of power at court.

Diane's projection of power manifested in gentle reassurances in a letter to the Duc de Guise on September 15, 1552 regarding an upcoming battle. When Henri II redirected defending troops away from the Duc's homeland of Metz, the Duc complained about the shamefully few troops sent by the king to support him.<sup>42</sup> Diane de Poitiers entered into this delicate negotiation with a gentle tone, stating that the king continued to deliberate, but adding that "I assure you that your lord the King thinks only of saving you."<sup>43</sup> While Diane de Poitiers did not take on the role of announcing the king's decision directly, she helped lay the groundwork for a peaceful

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<sup>41</sup> Marot, 255.

<sup>42</sup> Diane de Poitiers, 109.

<sup>43</sup> "Je vous assure que ledict seigneur Roy ne pense qu'à vous secourir in Diane de Poitiers, 109.

resolution of hostilities between the Duc de Guise and the king by assuring mutual respect. Diane's willingness to reveal the king's opinions in other letters suggests that she chose to distance herself from this decision in order to maintain her personal negotiating capacities with the Duc, all while continuing to allude to her emotional proximity to the king. Diane further implicated herself by stating that she was happy to perform any services that the Duc may find helpful. She repeated this claim twice in the short letter: "If in this there is a service that I may do for you," and I would be "happy to do things that would be agreeable to you."<sup>44</sup> In addition to an emphasis on their amicable relationship, these offers of service "suggested in themselves her powerful capacity to achieve favors," according to Broomhall.<sup>45</sup> Diane attempted to bolster the king in the eyes of the powerful Duc by stating that he had the Duc's interests in mind, before going on to offer service which would not only bring her closer to the potential detractors of the king, but also render them in her debt.

In addition to appeasing disgruntled members of the court, Diane de Poitiers received direct requests for favors through her relationship to the king. This reflects both her central political position – that she was reputed to hold enough political sway to be able to aide in questions of appointments and favors – and her ability to successfully negotiate the political aspirations of the king's court. In a letter to Monsieur de Nevers in December of 1552, Diane referenced his previous request for her and the king's consideration. In response, she claimed her role in having relayed the message, and stated that the king looked favorably upon him and his service: "[he] assured me of the great contentment that he has for you, and the good work that

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<sup>44</sup> "Sy par de ça il y a service que je vous puisse faire" and "heureuse de faire chose qui vous soit agréable" in Diane de Poitiers, 109.

<sup>45</sup> Broomhall, 344.

you do in service to him.”<sup>46</sup> Diane used this form of reassurance and flattery to foster the continuation of a loyal relationship between the king and a member of his court, even while she did not guarantee the success of his request. As the context of this letter is once again the threat of attack on Monsieur de Nevers’ estate, these reassurances are especially crucial to ensure that he remained loyal to the king, rather than defect to the side of the enemy army if the king would not come to his defense. Diane de Poitiers’ pleasantries therefore played an important role at a crucial moment of alliances and negotiations for protection amidst conflict.

Diane’s correspondence further suggests her reputed proximity to the king, as she received requests for actions only possible through the will of the monarch. It is difficult to pinpoint exact moments of contribution, likely due to the possible backlash if such direct influence was publicly recognized. However, it is clear from what information is available that Diane de Poitiers was consulted on many of the king’s political decisions. One of the greatest supports of this claim comes again from Contarini in 1552. In the words of the diplomat, “[Diane] is kept up to date on everything, and every day, ordinarily, the king visits her after his dinner and spends an hour and a half discussing with her, and he tells her of all that happens.”<sup>47</sup> This report makes it appear that Diane had regular opportunities to provide her input on political affairs, just as an official advisor would. Interactions with one of the king’s chief advisors, the Connétable Montmorency, reveal the extent of Diane’s implication in the king’s political actions. In response to Montmorency’s captivity in conflict, Henri and Diane jointly wrote a missive reassuring him of their aide.<sup>48</sup> The physical intermingling of their epistolary voices suggests

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<sup>46</sup> “M’a assure de grand contentement qu’il a de vous, & du bon devoir que vous fêtes pour son service” in Diane de Poitiers, 114.

<sup>47</sup> “Elle est au courant de tout, et chaque jour, pour l’ordinaire, le Roi après son diner va la trouver et demeure une heure et demie à raisonner avec elle, et il lui fait part de tout ce qui arrive” in Marot, 439.

<sup>48</sup> Broomhall, 345

Diane's close involvement in the king's royal duties. This particular performance of proximity may also reveal Diane's insistence on highlighting her role as advisor to her main opponent for the king's ear, Montmorency. The extent of Diane's influence is again revealed in another interaction with Montmorency, in which, while desperate to be released from his captivity, Montmorency wrote not only to the king, but also directly to Diane – implicitly believing that she might be able to help his plea with her access to the king.<sup>49</sup> The letters between Diane and Montmorency suggest that even those closest to the king viewed Diane as having significant sway on his positions, confirming her political role at court.

Diane's ability to project both power and favor in her correspondence allowed her to maintain friendly relations between Henri II and his court, and fortify her own powerful position within the social maneuvering of the French nobility. While Henri II was said to have begun his study of court mechanisms late in his education, both due to his unfavored status as the second son and his time as a captive in Spain, Diane's upbringing and long duration at court allowed her to manipulate her rhetoric to shape the broader court at hand, protecting her own power and the power of the monarchy.<sup>50</sup>

### **Producing Art and Image**

Diane's skills of courtly manipulation extended past individual correspondence to image creation and projection. In this aspect, Kathleen Wellman credits Diane with "the construction of the monarch's myth, and the production of the lasting cultural legacy of his reign."<sup>51</sup> Diane de Poitiers performed a remarkable form of self-fashioning for her time by creating an

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<sup>49</sup> Adams and Adams, *The Creation of the French Royal Mistress*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Strage, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Wellman, 15.

iconographical lexicon that allowed her reputation to go far past her physical person. Diane was singular in her ability to create a recognizable image of herself by representing herself as Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt. Through sculpture and portraiture, Diane was able to so completely intertwine her image with that of the Roman goddess that she took on the virginal and holy qualities of Diana, even while performing the role of the official mistress. In order to create this artistic allegory, Diane employed chief artisans of her time and fashioned herself into a patron of the arts well-recognized even by her contemporaries. Such support of the arts further strengthened her individual place at court, by fulfilling the traditional expectations of the nobility as the class of cultural innovation and refinement. Diane's skillful artistic commissioning and patronage thereby served to present her as a virtuous noble woman of refinement, rather than limiting her to a sexual figure at the king's side.

One of the most noted examples of Diane's image-building through art is *Diane Chasseresse*, a painting commissioned by Diane from the art school at Fontainebleau between 1540 and 1560. The painting depicts Diane de Poitiers as the goddess Diana in the midst of a hunt.<sup>52</sup> *Diane Chasseresse* reflects many of Diane's choices surrounding how she wished to be portrayed. Not only did this portrait show Diane as a great beauty, pale and athletic, but it also transformed her into a goddess exempt from popular forms of criticism. As a goddess, especially the fierce yet chaste Diana, Diane de Poitiers was able to insinuate her own virtue without directly acknowledging her relationship with Henri II. Diana the huntress represents a vision of chastity based around female power and virtue, which Diane could hope to successfully wield as an apparently grieving and loyal widow. Diane could be both maternal and virginal by reclaiming the chastity of widowhood, as her life could be conceptualized within and without the marital

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Carmoy, "Diane Chasseresse." *Musée Du Louvre*, 15 June 2022, [collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010064749](https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010064749).



bed. Diane began to call upon this chastity as soon as her husband died, prescribing his epitaph to describe his “very loyal wife, as she was to him in the conjugal bed, as she will be to him in the tomb.”<sup>53</sup> Diane’s emphasis on respectability also bolstered her power by ensuring she retained the position of nobility she gained in her marriage to Louis de Brézé. While her role as mistress elevated her power to that of a member of the royal family, her personal position as a member of the landed class provided her power that could not be taken away as long as she did not lose the respect that came with it. *Diane Chasseresse* presents this respectability by showing a Diane naked and desexualized, with the muscularity of her body nearly resembling that of a boy. The symbols surrounding her, both the hound and the bow and arrow, are typically masculine icons that are linked to the goddess Diana, furthering the desexualization of Diane’s body. Diane’s placement in the woods presents even her power as a thing of nature, granted to her due to her position as the goddess Diana, rather than through her relationship with the king.



Fig. 1. Charles Carmoy, *Diane Chasseresse*, 1540-1560.

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<sup>53</sup> “Elle te fut inseparable et très fidèle épouse. / Autant elle le fut dans le lit conjugal / autant elle le sera dans le tombeau,” quoted in Cloulas, 81.

Diane thereby fashioned her power through analogy to exist outside of the sphere of the king's affection, while insisting upon her innocence and therefore courtly respectability.

Diane's representation as Diana can be seen as a conscious choice, as the norms of courtly art at the time revolved around guided flattery and the creation of an image desired by its subject. The presentation of Diane as chaste and asexual was thereby used as a means of concealing or masking the nature of her relationship with Henri in order to safeguard her position of respect and power in the French court. It appears to have worked exceptionally well, especially during the early period of her mistressdom when Cavalli reported that "we think that there is nothing lascivious there, and that this affection is such as that between mother and son."<sup>54</sup> Diane's insistence on the projection of chastity and innocence may have derived from her shared time at court with Anne de Pisseleu, the Duchesse d'Etampes and the official mistress of François I. Co-existing in a court fraught with divisions, Anne and Diane were frequently characterized as rivals at court. Rather than romantic rivals, Adams and Adams suggest, the two women were political rivals pushing for the monarch to support separate factions.<sup>55</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Diane strove to set herself apart from Anne in her interpretation of the role of mistress. Diane "tended not to make herself as available" as Anne, meaning that she hid her sexual relationship with the king to a far greater extent than Anne did.<sup>56</sup> The greatest reflection of Diane's heightened emphasis on secrecy is the notable decrease in ambassadorial mentions of Diane compared to Anne during her time as official mistress – although it is clear that this does not mean Diane was any less involved in the decisions of the king.<sup>57</sup> The metaphorical construction of impeachable virtue was crucial to these attempts at secrecy. Art historian

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<sup>54</sup> "...On pense qu'il n'y a rien de lascif, et que dans cette affection c'est comme entre mère et fils" in Bascet, 431.

<sup>55</sup> Adams and Adams, 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Françoise Bardon interprets the wealth of art and poetry conflating Diane de Poitiers with the goddess Diana as reflecting the fact that Diane “wanted to be assimilated with the chaste and austere deity...so as to not be confused with the subaltern race of royal mistresses.”<sup>58</sup> Diane employed her self-fashioning as the goddess Diana to set herself apart from other mistresses by creating an image and a personal glorification that was impervious to moral attacks. The allegory of Diana’s chastity thereby worked in two distinct ways, by safeguarding her existing position as a powerful widow at court through her perceived respectability and by distancing her from her predecessor and rival.

The iconography of Diane de Poitiers as Diana goes beyond portraiture to even more visible representations. The frontispiece of Diana on the inner courtyard of the Louvre continues these depictions of Diana as Diane. Among images representing the harvest, victory in war, and even the importance of education for the king’s progeny, the sculpture of Diana is given superiority by being placed in the highest location on the building, and therefore the space of greatest honor. Commissioned by Henri II as a part of his contribution to the Louvre, the most visible of the royal castles due to its central location in Paris, this frontispiece acts as a statement to the court of his dedication to Diane, as well as of her virtue and value. The king’s ties to Diane de Poitiers are equally represented in his royal insignia, an interwoven H for Henri II and C for Catherine de Medici. However, viewed differently, the Cs of the insignia resemble far more closely the D of Diane de Poitiers. As the symbol of the king’s involvement and legacy, the H and D were stamped upon all of Henri’s architectural and cultural contributions. As such, they were repeated often on the wing of the Louvre constructed during his reign, as well as his other

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<sup>58</sup> “Diane voulait être assimilée à la déesse austère et chaste...pour ne pas être confondue dans la race subalterne des maîtresses royales” in Françoise Bardon, *Diane de Poitiers et Le Mythe de Diane*. (Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 50.

castles such as the Chateau de Fontainebleau. Henri physically interlaced his reputation, and the legacy of his reign, with that of Diane de Poitiers, projecting their relationship as a significant element of the court during his time as king. His preference for this physical reference to his relationship with Diane was clearly understood, as during a victorious entrance and parade in Lyon after returning from Italy, the king was met with an abundance of the D and H insignia on the décor produced to greet him.<sup>59</sup> Diane and Henri's relationship was therefore widely enough recognized so as to warrant representation in the royal visit to Lyon, far from the city of Paris where the insignia first took form.

The symbolic connection of Diane and Henri's legacy continued in the form of portraiture. Contemporary portraits extended the depiction of the innocence of Diana to her relationship with Henri. François Clouet's *Le Bain de Diane*, painted around 1565, provides a contemporary reflection of the significance of Diane's self-fashioning, both for her own legacy and that of Henri II.<sup>60</sup> While Diane de Poitiers stands as Diana in the foreground, surrounded by nymphs helping the goddess bathe, Henri II approaches in the background. Henri is easily recognizable in Diane's preferred black and white clothing scheme. Following Louis de Brézé's death, Diane wore exclusively black and white long after the respectable duration of mourning. It acted as a visual symbol of her widowhood, her loyalty to her husband, and therefore her chastity. Her wardrobe of "mourning and dignity" was one of her most "remarkable personal emblems" and was reflected onto the king himself as he began to wear black and white to signify his loyalty to Diane.<sup>61</sup> The inclusion of this wardrobe in Clouet's painting therefore represents the relationship between Henri II and Diane de Poitiers as one of piety and virtue. Rather than a

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<sup>59</sup> Cloulas, 181.

<sup>60</sup> "The Bath of Diana." *Musée Des Beaux-Arts*, 18 June 2013, mbarouen.fr/en/oeuvres/the-bath-of-diana.

<sup>61</sup> "Le deuil et la dignité" in Sigrid Ruby, "Diane de Poitiers : veuve et favorite," *Patronnes et mécènes en France à la renaissance*. 2007, 381-399, 384.

king coming to meet his mistress, this painting shows their relationship as a holy one, imbued with both the virtue of Diane's widowhood and the innocence of her transformation into Diana. Bardon goes so far as to claim that the art of Diane as Diana "presents the king as a reflection of some divinity," thereby adding to the divine nature of the monarchy through its association with the Roman deity.<sup>62</sup> Diane's self-fashioning led to her being linked to the positive traits of a goddess, and linked these traits with the monarchy, strengthening its reputation through her own.



Fig. 2. Claude Gouffier, *Le Bain de Diane*, 1565.

Diane consciously created her self-image through her role as a patron of the French arts, while her part in the French Renaissance further expanded her projected virtues. According to Wellman, "Diane's case urges us to consider the royal mistress as a patroness of the arts."<sup>63</sup> Chief among instances of her artistic patronage, her Chateau d'Anet stands as a testament of her support of architects, sculptors, and artists alike. As the "work that most coherently expresses the splendor of the courtly art and personal glorification," it reveals how Diane's patronage and image went hand-in-hand.<sup>64</sup> Diane first came to reside at the Chateau d'Anet upon her marriage

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>63</sup> Wellman, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Bardon, 50.

to Louis de Brézé, but it was not until she began to undertake renovations of the chateau in 1543, after Louis's death, that the chateau became an emblem of artistic advancement. As of the 1560s, French poets such as Joachim du Bellay, Olivier de Magny, and Pierre de Ronsard had all referenced the beauty of Anet, with du Bellay even likening it to heaven itself.<sup>65</sup> In 1875, Anet was described as one of the most beautiful specimens of the French Renaissance.<sup>66</sup> In employing Philibert de L'Orme as her principal architect, Diane knowingly embraced elements of the Italian Renaissance style, as De L'Orme credited himself for having "brought the style of the Renaissance from Italy to France."<sup>67</sup> Beginning with the entryway of the chateau, Diane chose to emulate the Italian style, creating the first Renaissance style entry in France, as characterized by the horizontal ornamentation of the entry rather than the vertical spires typical to French medieval architecture. The entryway additionally features sculptural work which is indicative of Diane's self-fashioning, as it represents Diane de Poitiers as the goddess Diana.<sup>68</sup> The motif itself reflects the love of antiquities consistent with the Renaissance, while such adornment reflects a respect for the advancement of the arts, both in sculpture and in architecture. Diane's Chateau d'Anet also served to fund great artisans of her time, as the project drew from both her impressive fortune and the gifts of the monarchy to employ skilled workers and create a precise and artistically driven architectural work, as opposed to the solid and war-focused castles of the medieval style. Diane therefore designed her chateau to highlight her image as Diana, her monetary support for the arts, and her forward thinking. By being the first to introduce the Renaissance styles into her chateau, Diane carved a place for herself in contemporary artistic

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Pierre Désiré Roussel and Rodolphe Pfnor, *Histoire et description du château d'Anet depuis le dixième siècle jusqu'à nos jours*. (Paris: Imp. par D. Jouaust, pour l'auteur, 1875), 10.

<sup>67</sup> Hubertus Günther, "Philibert de l'Orme and the French Tradition of Vaulting." *The Heidelberg Document Repository*, 1 Jan. 1970, [archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/7138/](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/7138/), 119.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Désiré Roussel and Rodolphe Pfnor, 50.

circles, placing her ahead of the trends of her time. Her reputation as a supporter of the arts further protected her position at court as it fulfilled traditional expectations of the cultural sophistication of the nobility, apart from her role as official mistress.

Diane de Poitiers invested in the fine arts as well, with her commissions of both portraits and sculptures representing her likeness. Perhaps the most famous of these is the *Fontaine de Diane*. Originally attributed to Jean Goujon, a leading sculptor of the French Renaissance, its origins have come into question yet its significance remains.<sup>69</sup> The sculpture representing Diane de Poitiers as the Roman goddess Diana is seen as a masterpiece of the early French Renaissance, once again stressing the important role that Diane took in ushering in a new wave of artistic trends.<sup>70</sup> Diane de Poitiers commissioned this sculpture to be placed in front of the Chateau d'Anet as the central fountain decor sometime between 1540 and 1560. Diana lies naked next to a stag, her bow in hand and her hunting dogs at her feet. With opulent gold plating and textural detail, the sculpture was a symbol to visitors of Diane's links to Diana and to the fine arts. Just as notable is the sculpture's projection of Diane's relationship with Henri. The base of the fountain features the entwined D and H of the royal insignia, linking Diane's own power and wealth to that of the monarchy, and ensuring that her close bond to Henri II would not be forgotten while at her country estate. The *Fontaine de Diane* therefore provides a prime example of how Diane's molding of her own self-image and her contribution to the arts go hand-in-hand.

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<sup>69</sup> "Diane Appuyée Sur Un Cerf." *Musée Du Louvre*, 28 June 2023, collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010091864.

<sup>70</sup> Anatole de Montaiglon, *Diane de Poitiers et Son Gout dans les Arts*. (Paris: A. Detaille, 1879), 23.



Fig. 3. *Fontaine de Diane*, 1540-1560.

Art historian Henri Zerner highlights Diane’s ability to mold her public appearance, claiming that “thanks to a brilliant entourage of artists and intellectuals, she knew how to model her character, and project a grandiose image into the court imagination.”<sup>71</sup> By surrounding herself with the chief artisans of her time – architect Philibert De L’Orme, sculptor Jean Goujon, and artist Jean Cousin representing some of the more notable – Diane produced a form of self-fashioning that allowed her to set herself apart from the ordinary nobility while maintaining the cultural refinement so treasured among the upper class.<sup>72</sup> Diane was able to create and present a public image that likened her to a goddess rather than a sexual deviant, in turn leaving a lasting association of the divine in the public portrayal of both Henri II and Diane de Poitiers herself.

<sup>71</sup> “Grâce à un brillant entourage d’artistes et d’intellectuels, elle a su modeler son personnage, projeter une image grandiose dans l’imagination, image qui aujourd’hui encore continue de fasciner et de séduire.” in Henri Zerner, “Diane de Poitiers : Maîtresse de son image ?” *Albineana, Cahiers d’Aubigné*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, pp. 335–343, <https://doi.org/10.3406/albin.2002.944>, 342.

<sup>72</sup> John Goldsmith Phillips, “Diane de Poitiers and Jean Cousin.” *Bulletin - Metropolitan Museum of Art* 2.3 (1943): 109–117, 109.



The remarkable nature of her artistic image, and the Chateau d'Anet in particular, led to contemporary recognition of Diane's artistic contributions, and allowed her to create a place for herself in artistic discussion that was independent of the political power she gained through Henri II.

### **Her Own Seat of Power**

Diane de Poitiers has been singled out for myriad reasons, from holding “more influence than any previous mistress” to being “recognized for being one of the most remarkable characters of her time.”<sup>73</sup> Diane stands out as a mistress who held her position for the entire reign of a king, and during that time filled a variety of roles that provided her with power and image outside of the king himself. Diane successfully manipulated her relationships with members of the court through her letters, and her own image through her support of the arts. In projecting her power socially and artistically, Diane created for herself a base of power that found stability outside of the potential capricious whims of the king. Through his household and his court, Diane made for herself a seat of power that lasted for the duration of his reign, and could not be fully uprooted following his death, as Diane maintained the wealth she gained as the mistress even while his widow ruled as regent.<sup>74</sup>

As historian Patricia Thompson explains, “even though numerous authors have explained her place in history by the favor of Henri II, she is in fact an important personality in her own right.”<sup>75</sup> Diane de Poitiers is inarguably an important political figure of her time, through her

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<sup>73</sup> Wellman, 188; Le Fur, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Cloulas, 305.

<sup>75</sup> “Même si de nombreux auteurs ont expliqué sa place dans l'histoire par la faveur d'Henri II, elle fut en fait une personnalité importante par elle-même” in Patricia Z. Thompson, “De Nouveaux Aperçus sur la Vie de Diane de Poitiers.” *Albineana, Cahiers d'Aubigné*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, pp. 345–360, <https://doi.org/10.3406/albin.2002.945>, 357.

direct role in and impact on the monarchy under Henri II.<sup>76</sup> In her efforts to create her own seat of power, Diane made individual contributions to the monarchy that impacted both its contemporary standing and its legacy. Diane therefore exemplifies a dialectic of power: she gained power as *maîtresse-en-titre*, and in performing this role reflected power back at the monarchy itself – all the while maintaining her position as an individual actor and member of the French nobility. Her self-fashioning as Diana revealed new possibilities about image in a time of greater artistic and social movement in France, while creating a style of art and myth that went hand-in-hand with the coming of the Renaissance to French artistic circles. Diane de Poitiers is especially remarkable for her capacity to understand the changes occurring around her and wield them in a way that made her both invaluable and irreplaceable for the French monarchy.

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<sup>76</sup> Adams and Adams, 87.

## Madame de Maintenon: Connecting the Sun King to Heaven

### A Mistress to Be Respected

In 1666, while living as a widow in Paris, Madame de Maintenon wrote Mademoiselle de Lenclos that “the happiest marriage need not be delicious” but that “liberty” was.<sup>77</sup> She went on to say that as a widow, her “heart is perfectly free, wants to always be free, and will be free forever.”<sup>78</sup> Yet in 1683, Maintenon married the king in an unofficial morganatic ceremony.<sup>79</sup> Why is it that a woman who so clearly valued the freedom of widowhood, of specifically not being married, would be the only official mistress to marry a king?

Roughly a hundred years passed between the time of Diane de Poitiers and Françoise d’Aubigné, referred to as Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), the final *maîtresse déclarée* of King Louis XIV (1638-1715). Over this time, the official mistress had become an “expected and recognized” presence at court, according to Tracy and Christine Adams.<sup>80</sup> Where Diane de Poitiers and Henri II treated their sexual relationship as a secret, as much as they were able, Louis XIV considered the official mistress such an open fact that he legitimized eight children born to him by his mistresses. As a woman who inhabited the space at his side for over thirty years, it is perhaps telling, then, that Madame de Maintenon lived much of her life in secret rather than allow the court, or the public, access to her intimate thoughts and moments.

Maintenon desired to be an “enigma to the world” even while she stood beside the Sun King,

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<sup>77</sup> Je l’ai trop éprouvé, que le plus heureux mariage ne saurait être délicieux; et je trouve que la liberté l’est.” in François d’Aubigné Maintenon. *Extraits de ses Lettres, Avis, Entretiens, Conversations, et Proverbes sur l’éducation*. 5th ed., Hachette et Cie., 1899. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/ASQRIY099591224/NCCO?u=brun62796&sid=primo&xid=ae7a229d&pg=26](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/ASQRIY099591224/NCCO?u=brun62796&sid=primo&xid=ae7a229d&pg=26), 38.

<sup>78</sup> “Mon coeur est parfaitement libre, veut toujours l’être, et le sera toujours.” in Madame de Maintenon. *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon*. Chez Deilleau, imprimeur, 1752. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/WGBAAC242083419/NCCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=5f6ebf61&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/WGBAAC242083419/NCCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=5f6ebf61&pg=1), 38.

<sup>79</sup> Jacqueline Martin-Bagnaudez, *Regards Sur Madame de Maintenon*. (Desclée De Brouwer, 20 Oct. 2011), 45.

<sup>80</sup> Adams and Adams, 132.

known for his ability to create and project a powerful self-image.<sup>81</sup> Maintenon herself, in a letter to Mademoiselle d'Aumale in 1716, said her life “would be very boring to those who are looking for intrigue.”<sup>82</sup> Her desire and ability to maintain privacy in a public role reveals both her own power over her image and the changing priorities of the king and the position of official mistress.

In studying Madame de Maintenon, it becomes clear that while she held the same role as Diane de Poitiers, the outward appearance of their legacies differs greatly. Similar to Diane de Poitiers' connections to the king's family and conscious efforts at image projection, Madame de Maintenon used her connections to the king's wife, children, and other mistresses to hide her relationship with the king, and the political role inherent in it, and instead project that which she most wanted to be seen: her religious piety. But unlike Diane de Poitiers' creation of her own image, Maintenon worked to limit others' view of her and her role at court. In the words of historian Jean-Christian Petitfils, the “political role of Madame de Maintenon is all the harder to define as she knowingly maintained secrecy,” protecting her role and her private thoughts, insofar as she could, from the public gaze.<sup>83</sup> This obscurity should be read not as a weakening of the position, but as a reflection of Maintenon's power, in being able to obscure herself as an individual while projecting her religious purity onto the king. Where Diane de Poitiers could justify her grandiose imagery with her high noble background, Maintenon had relatively humble noble roots which, at a time of religious revival at court, made her religious belief far more respected than her noble heritage alone.

Maintenon's deliberate creation of secrecy and limited projection of her lived realities also impacts the capacity of historians today to understand her true thoughts on the events of her

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<sup>81</sup> Maintenon, xx.

<sup>82</sup> “...Seroit fort enneureuse à ceux qui y chercheroient des intrigues...” in Maintenon, vol 2, 186.

<sup>83</sup> “Le role politique de Madame de Maintenon est d'autant plus malaise à cerner qu'elle a sciemment entretenu le secret autour d'elle...” in Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Louis XIV*, 52.

lifetime. The majority of what is known about Maintenon is the information that she wished to be known, meaning what she projected in her letters and educational writings. This view of herself can be complicated by the accounts of those around her during her time at court, yet even this is flawed as for the most part they, too, only saw what Maintenon wished to be seen.

Maintenon's preference for secrecy began early in her life. Although she was a member of the nobility, Maintenon lived much of her childhood destitute due to her father's involvement in a variety of illegal activities. The majority of Maintenon's education likely came in the form of tutoring following her marriage to the sharp and chronically ill poet, Paul Scarron. Maintenon began to attend and host salons with many of the brightest minds of Paris, where Scarron extolled her "spirit" and praised her epistolary skill as far above his own, even as early as 1650.<sup>84</sup> Through these salons, Maintenon befriended women of both the bourgeoisie and the nobility, leading to her eventual relationship with the king's mistress, Madame de Montespan, and finally the king. It is during this time that Maintenon began to cultivate a reputation for avoiding the flirting and adultery that were commonplace in salon circles, presenting herself as "noble and chaste," in the words of historian Jean-Paul Desprat.<sup>85</sup> Following Scarron's death in 1660, the necessity of an honorable reputation only increased for Madame de Maintenon, whose livelihood came to rest on the benevolence of the queen mother, Anne of Austria, who provided her with sufficient annual funds to rent a room in a convent. From this early stage in life, then, Maintenon learned the importance of consciously maintaining and projecting an image that would suit her social needs. With her somewhat tenuous position in the poorer nobility, Maintenon relied on respect as the social capital upon which she secured both her living and her relationships. Had

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<sup>84</sup> "La lettre que vous avez écrite à Mademoiselle de Saint Herman test si pleine d'esprit..." in Maintenon, vol 1, 4.

<sup>85</sup> "Elle est devenue expert en noble et chaste galanterie..." in Jean-Paul Desprat, *Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719) Ou Le Prix de La Réputation*. (Librairie Académique Perrin, 2003), 85.

she lost this reputation of respectability by behaving in any way that might neglect the social norms of court, she could have lost not only her friendships at court, but also her means of acquiring a pension, giving her significant incentive to paint herself as a perfect, respectable member of Parisian society.

Maintenon's life again shifted through her friendship with Madame de Montespan. Madame de Montespan was living as the mistress to Louis XIV – even while Louise de la Vallière held the title of official mistress, having already given birth to two legitimized children by him.<sup>86</sup> Rather than also legitimize his children with Montespan, Louis chose to maintain uncertainty over his sexual activity by ferreting the children out of the palace.<sup>87</sup> In need of a caretaker for them, Montespan turned to Maintenon, likely for her reputation among salon circles as a respectable intellectual. Maintenon's introduction to the king was through these meetings, yet the king himself said he did not appreciate her overly pious attitude early on in their relationship.<sup>88</sup> This status changed in 1673 when, after returning victorious from the conquest of Holland, Louis named Montespan his official mistress, legitimized their children, and moved them all, including Maintenon, into the palace.<sup>89</sup> Over her next forty years at court, Maintenon would shift from caretaker to mistress to wife of the king, yet she would strive to maintain her coveted privacy and respectability throughout.

Rather than use her position to extend an image of beauty and glamor through art, Maintenon projected pious respectability through her religious beliefs. Her reputation as caretaker and educator, her morganatic marriage to the king, and her close contact with high-

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<sup>86</sup> Desprat, 122.

<sup>87</sup> Petitfils, 308.

<sup>88</sup> Christine Adams, “‘Belle Comme Le Jour’: Beauty, Power and the King’s Mistress.” *French History* 29.2 (2015): 161–181, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Éric Le Nabour. *La Porteuse d’Ombre: Madame de Maintenon et Le Roi Soleil*. (Editions Tallandier, 1999), 126.

ranking members of the Catholic Church all contributed to a conscious self-fashioning as a woman of religious virtue, and thereby negated the traditional critiques of the position of official mistress as one of sin. This image was particularly important in a time of increasing Catholic fervor at the French court, as the 1685 revocation of the historical protection for Protestant practice in France, the Edict of Nantes, meant that Protestants were no longer welcome in the French court.<sup>90</sup> While it is impossible to see diplomatic involvement in her letters to the extent it was clear in those of Diane de Poitiers, Maintenon nonetheless had an important impact on the reputation of the monarch through her own pious respectability during a time of Catholic revival.

### **Caring for Those Who Surround the King**

Maintenon's initial role at court was catering to the king's children, to his mistress, and then to his wife, Marie Thérèse, before shifting into the role of official mistress and catering to the king himself. While in part these relationships were genuine friendships, they also served Maintenon's desire to cultivate her respectability. Where Diane de Poitiers expanded her power outwards from the king after becoming the official mistress, Madame de Maintenon derived her power from those who surrounded the king before consolidating it in Louis XIV himself. Maintenon's position allowed her a legitimate reason to exist at court rooted in the traditional female role of caretaking, and in turn gave her increased access to form a relationship with the king.

Many of the traits exhibited in caretaking lent themselves to her garnering power, and influence, over the king. For example, Maintenon's early role in keeping the king's children secret suggested that she was both loyal and trustworthy. The importance of this secrecy is

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<sup>90</sup> Susanne Lachenicht, "1685 : Date de Mémoire." *Diasporas (Toulouse)*, vol. 40, no. 40, 2022, pp. 129–32, <https://doi.org/10.4000/diasporas.9566>.

reflected in a letter Madame de Maintenon wrote in December of 1670 to Monsieur d'Heurdicourt in which she recounted, and likely embellished, a conversation between the king and one of the nursemaids of his illegitimate children. He asked her who she believed fathered the children, to which she responded, "some duke or some president of parlement."<sup>91</sup> While this level of ignorance was unlikely, seeing as she knew of the king's visits, Maintenon's choice to include this story in her letter suggests her desire to project her aptitude for secrecy. Knowledge of the king's illegitimate children would go against his insistence on personal privacy and could be used to manipulate the king or his advisors at court. Maintenon's emphasis on her ability to safeguard the identity of the children therefore suggested to the king that she could be a worthwhile ally to have within a court of immense political and social scheming.

In addition to trustworthiness, Maintenon fashioned herself as an intelligent and compassionate caretaker, traits that would be valuable for an individual at the king's side. Maintenon showed great love towards the king's children, and even took to calling one of his sons her "mignon" or "pretty one" as she grew close to him.<sup>92</sup> Maintenon referred to this love in a 1674 letter to her confessor in which she described the pain of "loving with excess a child who is not my own."<sup>93</sup> On the king's visits to see them, this compassion was surely noted, as maternal care was not often openly displayed at court.<sup>94</sup> Traditionally, noble women hired nursemaids and nannies to cater to the children's physical and social needs rather take on a more personal role. In contrast, Maintenon gave the children "a 'maternal' affection that the [biological] mother, Madame de Montespan, was incapable of providing."<sup>95</sup> Through her role as governess to the

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<sup>91</sup> "...Je m' imagine que c' est quelque duc ou quelque president du parlement" in Maintenon, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Desprat, 153.

<sup>93</sup> "Rien n' est si sot que d' aimer avec excès un enfant qui n' es pas à moi." in Maintenon, quoted in Desprat, 153.

<sup>94</sup> Desprat, 137.

<sup>95</sup> "...Et leur prodiguant une affection 'maternelle' que la vraie mère, Madame de Montepan, est incapable d' éprouver." in Constant Venesoën, *Madame de Maintenon, sans Retouches*. (BoD – Books on Demand, 2012), 23.



illegitimate children of Louis XIV, Maintenon highlighted and projected many of the traits desirable of an ally – loyalty, intelligence, and a caring nature – and solidified her position in the future of the king’s family.

Maintenon’s influence at court ultimately stemmed from her early friendship with Montespan, as is evident in her choice as caretaker. Maintenon’s friendship with Montespan furthered her created reputation of respectability, as it suggested she did not aim to replace Montespan as mistress, even as she apparently spent hours with the king “in long conversations.”<sup>96</sup> As late as 1676, long after tensions surrounding the king began, Maintenon described her and Montespan as the “greatest friends in the world.”<sup>97</sup> Despite this outward projection of friendship, Maintenon’s letters suggest that the relationship between these two women had suffered over time, likely due to Maintenon’s growing relationship with the king. In a 1671 letter from Madame de Maintenon to her confessor, l’Abbé de Gobelin, Maintenon described the “horrible things happening between Madame de Montespan and me, as the king witnessed yesterday.”<sup>98</sup> Madame de Maintenon testified again to an altercation in June of that year, when she noted that Madame de Montespan “gave a summary of the fight to the king in her fashion.”<sup>99</sup> Not only was Madame de Maintenon bothered that the king was present for her fight with Madame de Montespan, but also that the narrative he heard was Montespan’s. This perhaps speaks to Maintenon’s preference for privacy, but also likely reflects her desire to control her own image in the eyes of the king. Yet both Maintenon and Montespan actively constructed the

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<sup>96</sup> Louis Francois de Bouchet, *Mémoires Du Marquis de Sourches Sur Le Règne de Louis XIV, Publiés Par Le Comte de Cosnac (Gabrile-Jules) et Arthur Bertrand*. (Hachette, 1882, <https://archive.org/details/mmoiresdumarq09sour>, 1: 20).

<sup>97</sup> “Madame de Montespan et moi nous avons été les plus grandes amies du monde.” in Maintenon, quoted in Desprat, 173.

<sup>98</sup> “Il se passe des choses terribles entre Madame de Montespan et moi ; le Roi en fut hier témoin” in Montespan, volume 1, 55.

<sup>99</sup> “...Elle a rendu compte au Roi à sa mode.” in Montespan, volume 1, 57.

appearance of friendship for their individual aims: Montespan to maintain her power as mistress and Maintenon to maintain her respectability.<sup>100</sup> Maintenon therefore recognized both the deteriorating nature of her friendship with Montespan, and the importance of maintaining the appearance of friendship for her political and social goals. The correspondence surrounding Maintenon and Montespan therefore simultaneously reveals the rivalry that existed over the opinions of the king and their mutual desire to conceal this reality.

Maintenon's projected innocence also functioned through her interactions with the king's wife, Marie-Thérèse. Madame de Maintenon formed a relationship with the queen in the years leading up to her death in 1683, and Maintenon's subsequent marriage to the king in the same year. Her friendship with the queen both gave her access to one of the most officially powerful women at court and served to turn the king's attention away from Madame de Montespan by redirecting it towards his wife. The queen herself apparently claimed that "God has sent Madame de Maintenon" in order to "return the King" to her.<sup>101</sup> This portrayal of the queen's relationship with Maintenon demonstrates the efficacy of Maintenon's self-fashioning, framing Maintenon as an aide to the queen rather than a threat for the attention of the king. In turn, Maintenon's visible friendship with the queen furthered the projection of her religiosity and the innocence of her relationship with the king. In October of 1682, when Maintenon had lived at court for nearly a decade, she wrote to her brother confirming that the "queen did me the honor of giving me her portrait."<sup>102</sup> A gift such as a portrait is significant in that it has the inherent ability to project the nature of their relationship. The physical image of the queen in Maintenon's household would

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<sup>100</sup> Desprat, 173.

<sup>101</sup> Cited in Jacques Bénigne Bossuet and Jacques Truchet. *Oraisons funèbres*. (Ed. corrigé et augmentée d'un sommaire biographique mise à jour 1987, Garnier, 1988), 217; Buckley, 229; Théophile Lavallée, *Madame de Maintenon et La Maison Royale de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)*. (H. Plon, 1862), 26.

<sup>102</sup> "Il est vrai, que la Reine m'a fait l'honneur de me donner son portrait..." in Maintenon, volume 1, 185.

have stood as a signal to all those visiting that she and the queen had a highly amicable relationship. Maintenon's friendship with the queen had the further effect of supporting her religious urging of the king to pay more attention to his wife and less attention to mistresses, who she claimed would endanger his salvation.<sup>103</sup> By pushing the king's attention towards his wife, Madame de Maintenon effectively unraveled Madame de Montespan's power over him, limiting her time with him and his attachment to a mistress who might have put his eternal life in danger.

Madame de Maintenon built her relationship with the king through her relationships with all those around him and concealed it via the same means. In doing so, Maintenon grounded her power in Madame de Montespan, her children, and Queen Marie-Therèse, providing stability to her place at court. The outward projection of these relationships further replicated her identity as confidante and friend, and grounded her relationship with the king in respectability. Both Diane de Poitiers and Maintenon reflected a desire to diversify power by maintaining key relationships with those at court, providing a stability that could not be found solely in their potentially ephemeral position as companion to the king.

### **Religion and Respectability**

While Maintenon used similar tactics to those of Diane de Poitiers in terms of the king's family, she insisted on the near opposite in terms of image in projecting respectability through attempting her own invisibility. Although her morganatic marriage to the king was never officially declared, historian Jacqueline Martin-Bagnaudez asserts that it was "known by all," acting as an open secret that allowed Louis XIV to further his representation as a king chosen by God.<sup>104</sup> While her actual religious beliefs cannot be known, the effects of how she embodied

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<sup>103</sup> Venesoen, 102.

<sup>104</sup> Jamais officiellement déclaré, le mariage, canoniquement régulier, est connue de tous." in Martin-Bagnaudez, 13.

these beliefs can be clearly seen in her creation of her own image at court. In the context of Catholic revival at court context, the visible projection of Catholicism was crucial to the consolidation of monarchical power. This likely contributed to Madame de Maintenon's embrace and projection of religiosity in much of her life, from her actions to her correspondence, while keeping secret other facets of her life.

While this secrecy stemmed in part from Maintenon's desire for personal privacy, it also catered to Louis XIV's desire for political privacy. This was partially a response to his first romantic affair, in which he was widely criticized for the amount of visible power he gave Marie Mancini, which Jean-Christian Petitfils argues pushed him to "separate his personal life and his public life."<sup>105</sup> The importance of keeping secret who was his true favorite, even as Louis XIV had a declared mistress, perhaps indicates an awareness of the power inherent in the role of the official mistress. If the court did not understand who truly had the king's ear, then they could not attempt to use her, or negotiate with her, in order to manipulate the king to their own aims. Louis XIV's insistence on secrecy further reflects his increased insistence on despotic rule, as a mechanism of maintaining the upper hand in all the machinations of court. Madame de Maintenon equally used this concealment to deny her relationship with the king and maintain her own personal influence outside of the king as a respectable member of court. Until her morganatic marriage to the king in 1683, Maintenon consciously downplayed her relationship with the king and rendered their relationship nearly invisible. Maintenon acknowledged this choice directly in a letter to her brother from May of 1684, stating that "women must desire to be forgotten."<sup>106</sup> Maintenon clearly recognized the wider societal pressures to minimize the outward visibility of female power, and so protected herself in rendering herself forgettable.

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<sup>105</sup> Petitfils, *Louis XIV*, 313.

<sup>106</sup> "...J'ai toujours oüi dire que les femmes doivent desirer d'être oubliées." in Maintenon, volume 1, 204.

Amidst this secrecy, Maintenon's religious beliefs stand alone as uniquely visible. Maintenon's influence and responsibilities at court extended far past that of a religious advisor, but the continued projection of this aspect of her identity testifies to her conscious choice over what she wished to project and what she wished to conceal. Maintenon modeled her piety in action and in word, with its projection largely taking place through her letter writing to members of the court and the church. Historian Marianne Charrier-Vozel refers to this as an "epistolary art" creating "the image of a virtuous woman, a being of value."<sup>107</sup> In a letter to l'Abbé Gobelin in 1676, Maintenon described her ideal life as one in which she is able to "pray with her servants," "visit the poor," and "dress very modestly."<sup>108</sup> The frequency of such correspondence with her confessor, asking for religious advice and assuring him of her devotion, aligns with her own self-imagery as a woman dedicated to her faith. Such rhetoric repeats in a letter to l'Abbé Gobelin in the following year, in which she stated that "all that pleases God will come" and that she would "follow the will of God in all that is the opposite of my nature."<sup>109</sup> Such assertions acted as a projection of religiosity that constructed Maintenon as a woman devoted to God.

Maintenon's projection of discretion, especially regarding her relationship with the king, extended even to those closest to her. Historian Lise Leibacher-Ouvrard argues that the nuances of Maintenon's letters reveal at once her "art of dodging, her taste for secrecy, the spirit of (auto)-irony and of taunting" that all coexist in her epistolary method of self-fashioning.<sup>110</sup> Her

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<sup>107</sup> Marianne Charrier-Vozel, "Le Commerce Épistolaire à l'Épreuve de La Civilité : Madame de Maintenon, Madame de Caylus et Madame de Dangeau." *Toute La Cour Était Étonnée*, by Collectif, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 31 May 2022, 13; 11.

<sup>108</sup> "...faire la priere avec mes domestiques. ...Visiter les pauvres... Etre habillée très modestement..." in Maintenon, volume 1, 112.

<sup>109</sup> "Il en arriver ace qu'il plaira à Dieu; ...si sa volonté m'étoit connuee, je la suivrois dans tout ce qui est le plus oppose à mon humeur." in *ibid*, 133-134.

<sup>110</sup> "Laisse en effet sourvont entrevoir son art de l'esquive, son gout du secret, l'esprit d'(auto)-ironie et de raillerie..." in Lise Leibacher-Ouvrard, "Madame de Maintenon Ou "Le Portrait de L'équivoque."" *Toute La Cour Était Étonnée*, by Collectif, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 31 May 2022, 3.

assurances to her confessor around 1792 that she is full of “too much sincerity” are undermined by her own insistence on the innocence of her relationship with the king.<sup>111</sup> While she assured him of the innocence of the relationship all the way until her morganatic marriage, historian Jean-Christian Petitfils argues that by 1680, Maintenon’s “favor was complete,” as she was spending every evening in the apartment of the king.<sup>112</sup> In this, Petitfils insinuates that it is in this year that Maintenon and the king became sexually active, potentially contradicting her claims to her confessor. Her epistolary secrecy extended to her friend Madame de S.G. In a letter from 1679, Maintenon described how Madame de Montespan “accuses [her] of loving the king,” to which she laughed and responded that that was ridiculous since she had “often prayed to him to give [her] permission to retire” from her position at court.<sup>113</sup> She again insisted on the innocence of her relationship with the king in a letter to Madame de S.G. in June of 1684, where she claimed that she “loves the king in the same way that [she] loves her brother.”<sup>114</sup> Considering the fact that she and the king married in 1683, it is almost certain that Maintenon was being facetious in her own characterization of their relationship in order to further her double self-fashioning, projecting her secrecy to the king and her religious piety to the court. Maintenon’s insistence on privacy and her pious reputation resulted in an epistolary record rife with incongruities, yet constant in its insistence on her religious worth.

From the beginning of her time at court, Maintenon projected her piety onto the king by encouraging him to renounce mistresses in the name of his wife. As historian Philip Riley claims, Maintenon’s “greatest influence over Louis was in matters of morality not statecraft.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> “Je lui parlai, avec trop de sinérité peut être : vous savez qu’il m’est impossible de parler autrement...” in Maintenon, volume 1, 74.

<sup>112</sup> “...Après 1680 sa faveur est ‘totale’” in Petitfils, *Louis XIV*, 309.

<sup>113</sup> “Elle m’accuse d’aimer le Roi...que je l’avois souvent priée de m’obtenir la permission de me retirer...” in Maintenon, volume 1, 146.

<sup>114</sup> “J’aime le Roi de la même manière que j’aime mon frere.” in Maintenon, volume 1, 207.

<sup>115</sup> Riley, 100.

Maintenon's mission of bringing the king closer to God was key to her image and her ascension at court. In a 1682 letter to her confessor, Madame de Maintenon described the joy of attending the king's mass before wishing that he would "give glory to God alone," rather than his mistresses.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, in a letter from 1683, shortly after the death of the queen, Madame de Maintenon urged Louis to be "as good of a Christian as you are a king."<sup>117</sup> In centering their relationship, and her appeals, around the king's eternal salvation, Maintenon was able to not only portray herself as a religious figure, but also extend this projection to the king. Intentionally or not, this religiously based prompting had additional effects of increasing Maintenon's access to the king, on one hand by distancing him from his other mistresses and on the other hand by presenting herself as integral to his life and his eternal salvation. There is no doubt that these encouragements were in part the cause of their subsequent marriage, which could also be seen as a sign of their shared religious devotion. This worked outwardly as well, as Louis XIV's relationship with Maintenon could be read as one of religious education, with the king's image becoming more pious with additional time spent by Maintenon's side.

When her relationship with the king finally came to be more widely known through theirmorganatic marriage, Madame de Maintenon maintained and even furthered her respectability in the eyes of the court. Within the context of the increasing religiosity of court, the choice to be morganatically married reflected the desire to protect their salvation by limiting their mortal sin, as while the wedding would not affect their official positions, it would grant their relationship religious legitimacy. The marriage signaled the end of the king's adulterous relationships with mistresses in favor of holy matrimony. It was especially symbolic in that his chosen wife described herself as the "instrument of God" sent to ensure that Louis XIV led a religious and

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<sup>116</sup> "...Je voudrais bien qu'il en rapportât la gloire à Dieu seul." in Maintenon, volume 1, 180.

<sup>117</sup> "Soieuz, Sire, aussi bon chrétien que vous êtes grand Roi." in *ibid*, 189.

moral life.<sup>118</sup> In embodying the image of a woman of God at the king's side, especially in the accepted moral position of wife, Maintenon extended her projection of virtue to the king, reinforcing "the divine character of kingship" and legitimizing his role as king both to the court and to his subjects by reinforcing his identity as a monarch chosen by God.<sup>119</sup>

By the time the Abbé Gobelin wrote to Maintenon in March of 1692, "all Paris had eyes on [her]," reflecting her inevitable visibility beside the king.<sup>120</sup> Yet this visibility was again constrained to the religious aspects of her life. The difference between Maintenon's projected image and her highly political reality is clear in her incoming correspondence, which testify to a widespread awareness of her proximity to the king. Powerful individuals ranging from foreign monarchs to high-ranking church officials to the king's own children reached out to Madame de Maintenon to seek her favor. While her own letters maintain the distance of discretion and secrecy, the progression of these forms of favor-seeking flattery can be used as a means of mapping Maintenon's visibility, to some degree circumventing her projected discretion. By December of 1689, four years after Maintenon's marriage to the king, the queen of England wrote to assure Madame de Maintenon of her friendship and to wish that God would make her "a grand saint."<sup>121</sup> The queen's letter testifies both to Maintenon's visibility at the royal level, and the effectiveness of her projection of religiosity, as Queen Mary II chose to replicate Maintenon's religious rhetoric. Her high degree of recognized influence is again reflected in a 1693 letter from the Dauphin, where he assured Madame de Maintenon that he "counts [her] as the best friend that he could have."<sup>122</sup> As discussed regarding Diane de Poitiers, this usage of the term

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<sup>118</sup> Théophile Lavallée, 253, quoted in Philip F. Riley, *A Lust for Virtue : Louis XIV's Attack on Sin in Seventeenth-Century France*, (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2001. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bowdoin-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3000708>), 98.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>120</sup> "... Tout Paris a les yeux sur vous..." in Maintenon, volume 2, 32.

<sup>121</sup> "Je prie Dieu pour l'amour de vous, qu'il vous fasse une grande sainte..." in *ibid*, 19.

<sup>122</sup> "Je vous assure, que je vous compte pour la meilleure amie que je puisse avoir..." in *ibid*, 40.



“best friend” is likely more indicative of an ally or one relied on for their aide and loyalty. In return, the Dauphin asked Madame de Maintenon to “think of [him] as the best of [her] friends.”<sup>123</sup> The reciprocal nature of this proposed relationship reflects the extent of Maintenon’s power, as even the future king called on her for her powerful allyship at court. While her early letters are formed mostly of correspondence with her friends, confessor, and brother, her later correspondence include a wide variety of powerful individuals, indicating her far-reaching, if unwanted, visibility.

These letters also illustrate the efficacy of Maintenon’s self-fashioning as a pious and religious woman even amongst officials in the French Catholic Church. In one example, Cardinal Ottoboni addressed a 1693 letter to the “very illustrious and very excellent lady whose merit acts as the quality our king recognizes in your excellence.”<sup>124</sup> The heavy-handed flattery suggests a recognition of Madame de Maintenon’s power and of her projection of faith. The flattery also implies that Ottoboni saw Maintenon as capable of providing favor, while his emphasis on “merit” over beauty reflects an awareness of Maintenon’s intended image as virtuous over beautiful. In another letter from the Cardinal Gualterio in July of 1695, he asked her to act “with all absolute authority” to “honor him with [her] orders,” in the same way that a king would order his subjects.<sup>125</sup> The rhetorical use of “absolute authority” makes reference to the absolute monarchy under Louis XIV, transcribing the increasing authority of the monarch directly onto Maintenon. The culmination of Maintenon’s religious projection comes in a letter from Cardinal Janson in May of 1696, where he described how Maintenon “touched” the pope and added to the

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<sup>123</sup> “Je vous prie de me croire le Meilleur de vos amis...” in *ibid*, 40.

<sup>124</sup> “Tres illustre et très excellente Dame, le mérie égal à la qulité que notre Seigneur reconnoit en Votre Excellence...” in *ibid*, 38.

<sup>125</sup> “Je vous supplie de vouloit bien m’honorer de vos ordres...avec totue l’autorité absolue.” in *ibid*, 55..

“infinite esteem” he had for her “person and for [her] virtue.”<sup>126</sup> While these words come secondhand, they reflect an incredibly high opinion from the pope of a woman who inhabited the position of official mistress. Maintenon’s access to the pope shows that she was considered to be notable enough to merit the attention of the most powerful religious figure in the world, and that she maintained enough religious respect to ensure her continued access to the church apparatus.

Madame de Maintenon was skilled at activating religious rhetoric to produce an image and reputation of respectability, while concealing all other realities of her life with the king. Maintenon’s emphasis on secrecy did not undermine her successful self-fashioning as a woman of God, formed through action and letters rather than through the artistic means used by Diane de Poitiers. Her morganatic marriage to the king allowed Madame de Maintenon more legitimized power than any previous mistress and contributed to her image creation, as well as the projection of that image onto the king: a woman of God married to a king chosen by God.

### **Saint Cyr: A Legacy of Reason and Religion**

Madame de Maintenon did not exert her political power through direct favors or appointments to political positions, yet her influence is evident in the scope and impact of her educational doctrine. Maintenon chose to enact her political shaping through caretaking and education, which allowed her to perform a role accepted for her gender even while it had significant effects on the political landscape of France. Using education as a means of influence also served to continue Maintenon’s self-fashioning, in creating an institution that could be seen to reinforce the Catholic upbringing of the nobility. Madame de Maintenon’s position of social influence lent her the capacity to have far-reaching educational impacts which shaped how

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<sup>126</sup> “...Il a été touché : il m’a témoigné une estime infinie pour votre personne et pour votre vertu.” in *ibid*, 58.

French educational doctrine developed into the future, and set a precedent for the monarchy's support of the nobility through education.

It follows the religious ideology of her time that the greater one's personal wealth, the greater one's charity must be to deserve the admiration of both God and peer.<sup>127</sup> Madame de Maintenon's high position both empowered her and essentially required of her to perform a laudable good for the public, in so far as whoever she chose as her "public" of interest. The creation of a school at Saint-Cyr would perfectly benefit her own reputation formation at court, as the school would work to uplift the financially poor girls of the nobility and could be portrayed as a good Catholic mission. Just as Madame de Maintenon projected her religious image onto the king, so too could she project it onto her mission of education. It should also be noted that the school brought Maintenon joy, as in a letter to Madame de S.G. from October 1685, she reflected warmly on the "spectacle of seeing two hundred young women raised in [her] care" the day of the opening.<sup>128</sup> In another letter to Madame de S.G. the following year, she referred to Saint-Cyr as her "grand passion."<sup>129</sup>

In addition to letters relating to all manner of aspects of maintaining the school and structuring the girls' education, Madame de Maintenon also produced a wide variety of texts in the form of speeches and short plays that expanded upon her educational philosophy.<sup>130</sup> Maintenon's ideas in many ways differed from the conventional pedagogy of the time, most obviously in the techniques employed by strict personal tutors and by the solely religious education of convent schools. Madame de Maintenon believed in a "dialogical method of

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<sup>127</sup> Yukako Sora. "Power and Charity within Local Government in France under the Old Regime." *Shigaku Zasshi*, vol. 125, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–38, doi:[https://doi.org/10.24471/shigaku.125.2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.24471/shigaku.125.2_1), 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Ce m'est un bien agréable spectacle de voir deux cens jeunes filles élevées par mes soins." in Maintenon, volume 1, 220.

<sup>129</sup> "C'est ma grande passion." in *ibid*, 235.

<sup>130</sup> Maintenon, *Lettres*.

education” in which a “personalized knowledge of each student’s temperament and history” would be used to guide educational approaches.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, in the case of young women of the lower nobility, education typically focused on things deemed needed for marriage, like dancing and needlework, with literacy left at a low level and mathematics widely overlooked. Madame de Maintenon overturned these popular ideas in favor of teaching young women skills that were useful in a more independent life, valuing “blessed liberty” alongside “charity” and “modesty.”<sup>132</sup> Maintenon wrote in 1686 to the instructors, a group of forty lay women from the community, that “all we wish to inspire” is “Christianity and reason.”<sup>133</sup> Maintenon furthered this approach by directing them to teach the women to be “capable of handling all of the good and the bad that it pleases God to send them.”<sup>134</sup> In encouraging an appreciation for female independence through education, Maintenon never lost sight of her overall religious goals and rhetoric, and instead combined the two to inspire the image of an independent, yet Catholic, female upbringing. While Maintenon did not go so far as to argue that women should hold the same positions as men, she did argue for the advancement of female education in a way that provided other women the opportunity to pursue a level of independence.

The importance of Maintenon’s educational doctrine rests in its widespread dispersion and influence throughout France. Following the opening of Saint-Cyr, hundreds of schools were founded across France purporting to follow the methods imposed by Maintenon.<sup>135</sup> Its reputation was so widespread that Tsar Peter I visited the school, and Madame de Maintenon who lived

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<sup>131</sup> Conley, *Dialogues*, 7.

<sup>132</sup> “Mais que la douceur, la sainte liberté, la simplicité, la charité, la modestie, règnent en tout” in Maintenon, *Lettres*, 30.

<sup>133</sup> Virginia Simmons Nyabongo. “Madame de Maintenon and Her Contribution to Education.” *The French Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1949, 246; “Mais le christianisme et la raison, qui est tout ce que l’on veut leur inspirer...” in Maintenon, *Lettres*, 7.

<sup>134</sup> “...Elles seront capables de soutenir tout le bien et tout le mal qu’il plaira à Dieu de leur envoyer.” in Maintenon, *Lettres*, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Conley, *Dialogues*, 21.

there following the death of the king, in order to explore “what had become Europe’s model academy for the education of women.”<sup>136</sup> While Maintenon’s political influence was largely concealed, her societal impact radiated outwards from Saint-Cyr to impact both contemporary and future French students. It is clear, too, that this educational impact was her intended legacy. In a letter to Madame de S.G. in July of 1686, she describes her “only worry” being the future of Saint-Cyr after her death.<sup>137</sup>

This legacy equally spread to the king, whose funds and name were tied to the school at Saint-Cyr. The school was considered to be due to the goodwill of the king, and benefitted from his physical presence at events like a production of *Esther* put on by the students.<sup>138</sup> Saint-Cyr allowed Madame de Maintenon to further the projection of her religious belief, which, when reflected in the king’s involvement, reinforced his claim to a divine right to the throne. In many ways, Saint-Cyr followed in the path of the Invalides, the institution founded by Louis XIV fifteen years earlier to support the religious life of soldiers returning from war.<sup>139</sup> However, in this case Saint-Cyr would represent the rehabilitation of the nobility, rather than the military. By giving a respected education to the daughters of the poor nobility, Saint-Cyr, and by extension the king, provided an institution dedicated to the promotion of the noble class.<sup>140</sup> The education associated with Maintenon and the king was seen as a sign of a good potential wife, allowing these girls to form advantageous marriages and effectively elevate their poorer noble families. Maintenon’s work at Saint-Cyr therefore not only contributed to her own legacy, but also that of Louis XIV and the monarchy as one of generous support for its nobility. While her political

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>137</sup> “Ma seule inquiétude, c’est de sçavoir ce que deviendra cet établissement après ma mort.” in Maintenon, volume 1, 233.

<sup>138</sup> Maintenon, *Lettres*, xxx.

<sup>139</sup> Desprat, 244.

<sup>140</sup> “De plus en plus Saint-Cyr deviant le foyer utile au soutien et à la promotion de l’aristocratie.” in *ibid*, 430.

impact is difficult to clearly pinpoint in the realm of diplomacy, her impact on the realities of the nobility had inherently political repercussions, even as it took shape in the historically feminine role of caring for children.

Madame de Maintenon's legacy is seen most directly in her impact on education, as a reflection of her religious dedication and as a means of political change outside of visible diplomatic interactions. Maintenon's writings on education have been judged ideologically impactful by French philosophical historian John J. Conley, who counts her amongst the overlooked female philosophers of French history.<sup>141</sup> Upon forming her school at Saint-Cyr, Maintenon herself constructed its wider implications; as she said in the opening sentence of her "Instruction to the teachers of Saint-Louis" in 1686, its creation was due to "God having wanted to utilize me to contribute to the establishment the king has made for the education of the poor young noble girls of his kingdom."<sup>142</sup> By foregrounding her educational framework with this phrase, Maintenon painted her school as resulting from the will of both God and king, and reflected the socially uplifting and religious aims of the school back onto Louis XIV.

### **Power in Piety**

Madame de Maintenon stands in contrast to most official mistresses in how she came to inhabit the role and how she chose to affect her self-fashioning once in the role. On the eve of the king's death in 1715, it is said that Madame de Maintenon uttered "I am a nothing."<sup>143</sup> At once a statement of faith and devotion, it is above all clear that while Madame de Maintenon tried to

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<sup>141</sup> John J. Conley, "Suppressing Women Philosophers: The Case of the Early Modern Canon." *Early Modern Women*, vol. 1, 2006, pp. 99–114. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23541458>, 99.

<sup>142</sup> "Dieu ayant voulu se servir de moi pour contribuer à l'établissement que le Roi a fait pour l'éducation des pauvres demoiselles de son royaume..." in Maintenon, *Lettres*, 1.

<sup>143</sup> "'Je suis un rien.'" quoted in Martin-Bagnaurez, 93.

minimize her historical presence to nothing, she held a role that went beyond the bounds of her own lifetime. By hiding her relationship with the king, even to some degree after they were married, Madame de Maintenon made it far more difficult for others at court to accuse her of the immorality that they had used to accuse others, even so recently as Madame de Montespan. Yet Maintenon's attempt at secrecy was once again a projection, catering to the king's long-held preference for discretion. In reality, Maintenon's position was inherently visible, leading various diplomats and religious leaders to appeal to her influence.

At a time when the court was undergoing a religious renaissance, Madame de Maintenon fashioned herself into a reflection of the king's faith. Likewise, in marrying his mistress, Louis XIV effectively broke with the traditions of the official mistress and magnified his kingly authority stemming directly from God. The subject of Maintenon's image was therefore twofold. She at once directed her self-fashioning towards the king – by projecting her own secrecy – and towards the wide court and church – by projecting her religious respectability. In this dual production, Maintenon split her sources of power and stability between the two, and protected herself from many of the critiques used against the mistresses before her.

Madame de Maintenon's impact on the image of the monarch is additionally complicated by what she envisioned as her most visible legacy: her efforts to reform education. Madame de Maintenon's school at Saint-Cyr was a projection of her power, backed by the resources and support of the monarchy, that had lasting impacts on the ideology and methodology of education in France. Because of its specific focus on young women's education, it also made steps to change the conception of women in France as capable of independence outside of widowhood. Madame de Maintenon's empowerment as a wife of religious respectability, as opposed to a mistress, reflected the rising potential for female empowerment in a society built increasingly

around salon-based intellect and religious piety. It was precisely these qualities that allowed Maintenon to stand by the king's side as a sign of his divine providence, rather than a source of moral critique.



## **Madame de Pompadour: The Vulnerability of Visibility**

### **A Monumental Rise**

Jeanne Antoinette Poisson (1721-1764), commonly referred to as Madame de Pompadour, said herself that she had “proven more than once that women can be right and give good advice.”<sup>144</sup> Her role as advisor and mistress to Louis XV (1710-1774) lasted nearly twenty years, from 1745 to her own death in 1764, giving her ample time to leave an indelible mark on the monarchy through this advice. Even her contemporaries were surprised by the longevity of her position, as historian Thomas Kaiser claims that they “time and again predicted, incorrectly, her dismissal.”<sup>145</sup> Some of this dismissal undoubtedly stemmed from the belief that she overstepped what was considered an acceptable role for women at court, as she performed the political more visibly than the mistresses before her. Doubt also likely stemmed from her identity as an outsider at court, as a member of the bourgeoisie who only came to court upon becoming the mistress of the king. Yet, in spite of these doubts, Pompadour maintained the position of official mistress until her own death from lifelong health complications. The longevity of her position attests both to Pompadour’s ability to fulfill the diverse needs of the king, including entertainment and diplomatic support, as well as his desire to exercise his complete authority to choose his companion, regardless of the wider attitudes at court.

While official mistresses were historically members of the *noblesse de robe*, a respected noble class, Madame de Pompadour was born into a middle-class family without noble title and raised in a relatively modest section of Paris. Pompadour’s mother was known as one of the most

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<sup>144</sup> “J’ai éprouvé plus d’une fois, que les femmes peuvent avoir rison et donner de bons conseils” from a 1754 letter to Monsieur de Berrier in François Barbé-Marbois and Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, *Lettres de Madame la Marquise de Pompadour: depuis MDCCLIII jusqu’à MDCCLXII, inclusivement. En deux tomes econd.* (Vol. 1, chez G. Owen; et T. Cadell, dans le Strand, MDCCLXXI. [1771]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0113084906/ECCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=80fb2940&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0113084906/ECCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=80fb2940&pg=1)), 14.

<sup>145</sup> Thomas E. Kaiser, “Madame de Pompadour and the theaters of power.” *French Historical Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1996, pp. 1025–1044, <https://doi.org/10.2307/286662>, 1026.

beautiful women in Paris, and was also believed to have had a number of extramarital affairs – causing the identity of Pompadour’s father to be brought into question.<sup>146</sup> Despite the scandal of her birth, Pompadour was afforded an elite education with notable tutors in all things fitting a future wife of the bourgeoisie: literature, music, embroidery, and social pleasantries.<sup>147</sup> While living with her somewhat eccentric mother, she was brought to a fortune teller who predicted that she would be the lover of a king. Pompadour was already called “Reinette” or Queenie by her family, as her mother told her she was to be “fit for a king” – a narrative that undoubtedly placed pressure on Pompadour to secure the social and financial advances that would come with the actualization of this prophecy.<sup>148</sup>

Pompadour finally lived up to her nickname at the age of twenty-four, after Louis XV’s previous mistress, Madame de Chateauroux, died. The sudden and mysterious circumstances of Chateauroux’s death suggest that it may have been a deliberate act, stemming from those who wished to overrule the influence of the official mistress. Prior to Pompadour’s rise, dissenters blamed Madame de Chateauroux for the king’s lack of success on the battlefield, as by following him to battle she denied him the motivation of having a mistress waiting for him at home.<sup>149</sup> With war again on the horizon, the king’s advisors saw the appointment of a new mistress as an issue of importance for the monarchy, as Christine Adams has argued that having a mistress was believed to increase the king’s virility, and in turn his capacity to act at war.<sup>150</sup> This was reflected by the Austrian ambassador to French court, Prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg, who reported that the French court was concerned after the death of Madame de Chateauroux, when

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<sup>146</sup> Christine Pevitt Algrant, *Madame de Pompadour, Mistress of France*. (HarperCollins, 2003), 6.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>148</sup> Lever, 13.

<sup>149</sup> Tess Lewis, “Madame de Pompadour: Eminence without honor.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2003, pp. 303–314, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3853245>, 311.

<sup>150</sup> Christine Adams, “The Gallic Singularity and the Royal Mistress.” *French politics, culture and society* 38.1 (2020): 44–66, 46.

the king “plunged into a profound melancholy that affected even his health,” leading members of court to “search for a new object to charm his sadness” – this “object” being a new mistress.<sup>151</sup> The court’s desire to find Louis XV a new mistress suggests the extent to which mistresses had become such an integral part of court tradition that Louis XV being without a mistress during such a crucial period was seen to be a threat to the monarchy.

Pompadour was a particularly unlikely choice for this position, as she lacked the noble title necessary to reside at Versailles. It was Louis XV, rather than his advisors, who chose her to be his mistress, as he was rumored to come across her alongside a road he frequently traveled.<sup>152</sup> While the details of the initial meeting of King Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour cannot be verified, she was introduced at court during a ball in which the king, dressed as a yew tree, entertained Pompadour rather than any of the members of court.<sup>153</sup> Louis XV subsequently left court for battle, which he won, leaving Pompadour a summer to prepare before welcoming Louis XV back to court as his official mistress.

As a member of the bourgeoisie, Pompadour had to learn the court norms that previous mistresses already possessed by being born into the nobility. The ability of Pompadour to replicate the norms of court was crucial for her capacity to gain allies, as she recognized that “the court ladies would be lying in wait for the ‘petite bourgeoisie’ to make her first mistake.”<sup>154</sup> Pompadour was able to bridge the social divide through her guardian Charles François Paul Le Normant de Tournehem, a wealthy tax-farmer who may have been her biological father. Tournehem in turn linked Pompadour to the well-connected Abbé de Bernis, who acted as her

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<sup>151</sup> “...Le Roy étant plongé dans une profonde mélancholie qui influait même sur sa santé, les courtisans jugèrent indispensable de chercher un nouvel objet pour charmer sa douleur” in *Revue de Paris*, 449.

<sup>152</sup> Évelyne Lever. *Madame de Pompadour : A Life*. First American edition, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 13.

<sup>153</sup> Adams and Adams, 140.

<sup>154</sup> Algrant, 39.

courtly tutor to inform her of the vocabulary and etiquette of court.<sup>155</sup> Pompadour's ability to access the information needed to perform this transition suggests she benefitted from a level of social fluidity that had not previously existed in France.

Even with these tutors, Pompadour entered court as an interloper, rising to the position held by some of the most powerful (noble) women to ever exist at French court. Pompadour began her time at court trying to secure her own place among the nobility, beginning with the king's family. Upon her formal introduction to court, Pompadour extended a notable olive branch by "[using] the moment to assure the Queen of her respect and her desire to please her," according to the account of the Duc de Luynes.<sup>156</sup> As the presentation occurred before all of the king's court, it acted as a sign of positive relations between the queen and the royal mistress. In return, the Saxon ambassador, Count Loss, described how "the Queen showers [Pompadour] with polite gestures."<sup>157</sup> To some extent, the queen could be seen as Pompadour's first and most significant ally at French court. The queen's favor had an impact on Pompadour's image projection outside of the realm of court as well, as Thomas Kaiser claims that the "public particularly approved of Pompadour's efforts to maintain harmony within the royal family."<sup>158</sup>

However, Pompadour's efforts to please the king ultimately harmed her amicable relations with the queen and attracted the ire of the queen's faction of court, which referred to itself as the *parti dévot*. Pompadour herself seemed taken aback by this reversal of favor, as she referred to the queen's hatred as a "grand flaw" breaking the "law" of understanding between mistress and queen set by her predecessors.<sup>159</sup> While the position of official mistress had

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> In Algrant, 45.

<sup>157</sup> Lever, 80.

<sup>158</sup> Kaiser, 1028.

<sup>159</sup> "Un grand défaut ; c'est qu'elle me hait" in Pompadour, 18.

historically been open to critique, the loss of the queen's friendship led Madame de Pompadour to face especially strong critiques from the queen's faction at court. The queen's children also particularly disliked Pompadour, even referring to her as "maman putain" or mother whore.<sup>160</sup> Pompadour's inability to maintain an amicable relationship with the king's family is reflective of her wider difficulty of finding lasting allies at court, leaving her to rely solely on the king.

Pompadour's common birth set her at a disadvantage in her entrance at court, and her open involvement in the king's political agenda made her vulnerable to critiques on the level of war and alliances. The public production of scathing images and song in the *Poissonades* – personal attacks that centered around her low birth, in reference to her maiden name Poisson, and her involvement in the political sphere.<sup>161</sup> Her visibility, more so than her power itself, set her apart as a particularly easy scapegoat for complaints about Louis XV's rule. Pompadour attempted to counteract these narratives through art, like that of Diane de Poitiers, first in portraying herself as a beautiful young woman and then as a pious companion. Ultimately, the rise in public opinion left Pompadour as a pressure release valve for a king who was not particularly popular among his people.

### **Allowing the Political to be Seen**

In her efforts to fulfill the king's desires, Pompadour supported his political needs by performing tasks historically reserved for the king. Pompadour was clearly not the first official mistress with political influence; however, she differed in that this influence was projected in direct letters and meetings with advisors and foreign dignitaries alike, rendering her role more visible to both the court and the influential inhabitants of Paris than that of any previous mistress.

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<sup>160</sup> Lewis, 312.

<sup>161</sup> Lewis, 303.

This rise to visible power occurred rapidly after her appointment, as historian Christine Algrant attests that “after eighteen months at court, the influence of Madame de Pompadour was already dominant.”<sup>162</sup> By 1750, five years after she became official mistress, her political prowess was such that a book of political philosophy by author Ange Goudar was “dedicated to Madame la Marquise de Pompadour.”<sup>163</sup>

Historian Tess Lewis describes these responsibilities as “willingly ceded,” meaning that her increasing diplomatic involvement reflected Louis XV’s wishes by relieving him of the parts of his life that he enjoyed the least. By catering to the king’s desires, especially those outside of his royal life, Pompadour ensured the singularity of her role in his life and, in turn, her irreplaceability.<sup>164</sup> Comte Dufort de Cheverny reflected on the apparent willingness of the king in his memoirs, where he said “as soon as he could evade his kingly duties, he would go to her rooms via a secret staircase and dispense with the role of the king.”<sup>165</sup> In this conception, Pompadour took on a visible political role so that the king may be relieved of his. Pompadour herself emphasized this goal in a letter to Monsieur d’Argenson in 1747: “I do not like politics...the singularity of my fortune makes its study necessary.”<sup>166</sup> Pompadour painted her involvement in politics as simply an extension of her support for the king rather than her own bid for increased political power, while in reality this likely combined with her political ambitions.

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<sup>162</sup> Algrant, 68.

<sup>163</sup> Ange Goudar. *Pensées diverses, dédiées à Madame la Marquise de Pompadour*, par M. Ange Goudar. Chez Mr. P. Vaillant in the Strand, M.DCC.L [1750]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0101416834/ECCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=5436db17&pg=12](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0101416834/ECCO?u=brun62796&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=5436db17&pg=12).

<sup>164</sup> Lewis, 312.

<sup>165</sup> “...de sorte que dès qu’il pouvait se dérober à la représentation, il descendait chez elle par un escalier dérobé, et y déposait le caractère de roi” in Dufort de Cheverny, Jean-Nicolas. *Mémoires du comte Dufort de Cheverny ...* Edited by Robert St. John de Crèveœur, Plon-Nourrit et cie., 1909, 319. Translation in Adams and Adams, 142.

<sup>166</sup> “Je n’aime pas la politique: mais puisque la singularité de ma fortune m’en rend l’étude nécessaire, je vous prie de continuer à être mon guide” in Pompadour, 49.

The most outwardly visible of these political responsibilities was Pompadour's official meetings with advisors, ambassadors, and generals, in the king's stead.<sup>167</sup> Pompadour served as official mistress during a time of shifting alliances for the French monarchy as France participated in the Seven Years War. During this period of flux, factions formed at court over preferred wartime alliances. Pompadour's influence over who had access to the king's ear had significant repercussions for national allegiances, even more so because Pompadour directly interacted with military leaders. These meetings were of an official capacity and therefore widely visible to those at court, which was further increased by Pompadour's direct acknowledgment of them in her letters to acquaintances at court. In a letter to the Maréchal de Bellisle as early as 1747, Pompadour reflected on how she "often has conferences with these serious minds," referring to French ministers. She even went so far as to hint that they were "not as admirable" as she had once imagined.<sup>168</sup> Pompadour outwardly referred to her involvement in direct affairs of state, and critiqued the high-ranking officials of the French government, breaking accepted convention. In return, Charles Duclos described how Pompadour "knew too well the opposition" of the ministers.<sup>169</sup> While Diane de Poitiers or Madame de Maintenon may have had pleasant conversation with ministers that led to political ends, what Pompadour described are official meetings to decide the political fate of France. In doing so, Pompadour bypassed the need to effect change through the king by fashioning herself into an extension of him, assuming direct forms of masculine power rather than hiding behind acceptable female roles. Pompadour thereby breached accepted norms of conduct at court and greatly increased her vulnerability to critique.

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<sup>167</sup> Lewis, 312.

<sup>168</sup> "J'ai souvent des conférences avec ces têtes graves, qui ne me paroissent pas aussi admirable que je me les figurois avant de les voir de près" in Pompadour, 15.

<sup>169</sup> "Elle connoissoit trop l'opposition du ministère..." in Charles Duclos. *Oeuvres complètes de Duclos, historiographe de France, secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie française... T. 6 / recueillies pour la première fois, rev. et corr. sur les ms. de l'auteur, précédées d'une notice historique et littéraire par L.-S. Auger*. Colnet (Paris), 1806, 298.

In addition to her impact on decisions and appointments at court, Pompadour had a direct role in international affairs. In one such example from 1747, only two years into her time as mistress, Pompadour responded to a letter from the Dutch ambassador to France by stating that it would be more appropriate for him to contact a minister of the court, but that she would help him, nonetheless. She then shared military details of the conflict between the Netherlands, England, and Austria, further illustrating her advanced diplomatic knowledge.<sup>170</sup> Pompadour's performed reservations suggest an effort, albeit minor, to project herself as humble or deferent to the French ministers. Ultimately, however, Pompadour was willing to discuss political matters with the foreign diplomat, suggesting that she saw it as within her rights or even as an expectation of her role in supporting Louis XV. By 1755, Pompadour no longer projected this modesty, as she herself instigated communication to harshly critique and instruct the Duc de Mirepoix, who served as the French ambassador to Britain.<sup>171</sup> Pompadour accused the Duc de Mirepoix of having "tricked us...because you were the first to be tricked" by the duplicity of the British king.<sup>172</sup> In this example, Pompadour does not hold back from giving advice to and then critiquing the king's own ambassador, while employing the royal "we" in the process, linking her criticism to the voice of the king. The shift in Pompadour's own self-fashioning shows her capacity to project modesty, and her subsequent choice to perform her political responsibilities visibly.

The distinct visibility of Pompadour's political responsibilities is reflected in the testaments and critiques of members of court. For example, the Comte de Stainville recognized in 1754 that "Louis XV acquired the habit of letting himself be guided by her advice."<sup>173</sup> The

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<sup>170</sup> Pompadour, 7-8.

<sup>171</sup> Pompadour, Vol. 1, 28-33.

<sup>172</sup> "Vous nous avez enfin trompés, monsieur le duc, parceque vous avez été trompé le premier" in Pompadour, 31.

<sup>173</sup> Comte de Stainville, quoted in Algrant, 165.



centering of Louis XV in this phrase suggests that Pompadour's power was seen as a result of Louis XV's weaknesses – a king letting himself be guided by a woman weakened his own claim to masculine forms of authority. By 1754, Louis XV consulted her on every ministerial change, resulting in the controversial appointment of Jean-Baptiste de Machault as Minister of the Navy, despite his chief experience being in finance.<sup>174</sup> Unfortunately for the monarchy, this was just one of a series of appointments of inexperienced and unqualified members of court. Pompadour “had the greatest influence in the awarding of favors,” according to the Duc de Cröy in 1755, meaning that when court appointments failed to meet the aspirations of their roles, it was all the easier for members of court to blame these failures on the woman they already believed to hold too much sway.<sup>175</sup> In a letter to the Duchesse de Duras, Pompadour critiqued her own part in this trend, referring to the Secretary of State who had “no other merit besides being amusing.”<sup>176</sup> Pompadour then compared the choice to one of Louis XIV, who chose a Minister of War because he “played well at billiards.”<sup>177</sup> Pompadour herself was therefore aware of the negative impacts her choices could have, and the ways that they might reflect onto herself and the king, as it did onto Louis XIV.

Maintenon's visibility resulted in even more political responsibility as she became a quasi-official intermediary for the king. When Empress Maria-Theresa of Austria wished to discuss alliances with Louis XV as Europe geared up for war in 1755, her advisor to the French court, Kaunitz-Rietberg, chose to contact Pompadour first in order to have the Empress's suggestions passed to the king from the voice of a trusted advisor.<sup>178</sup> This example is indicative

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<sup>174</sup> Algrant, 165.

<sup>175</sup> Duc de Cröy, quoted in Algrant, 170.

<sup>176</sup> “Il n'avoit d'autre mérite que celui d'être amusant, et il est actuellement secretaire d'état” in Pompadour, 61.

<sup>177</sup> “...Chamillard, que Louis XIV fit Ministre de la guerre, parce qu'il jouoit bien au billard” in Pompadour, 61.

<sup>178</sup> Algrant, 178.

of a broader pattern of Pompadour as political intermediary. In effect, this placed Pompadour as an equal to the official ministers of the king, or even to the king himself who would traditionally receive diplomats. Pompadour herself reflected on the importance of social performance in politics in a 1760 letter to the Marquis de Beaufort, where she said “often a good negotiator is more useful to a state than a good general.”<sup>179</sup> While official mistresses had long been recognized as a means of accessing the king’s ear, Pompadour did not conceal her political involvement behind acceptable female roles of cultural or religious education. Instead, she openly interacted with foreign officials as a diplomat and intermediary, roles historically reserved for men at court.

Pompadour held significant political responsibilities during her time as official mistress, ranging from advice on the appointment of ministers to meeting with foreign diplomats and negotiating alliances. While previous mistresses had political roles, they performed them largely as an “open secret,” borrowing the terminology of Christine and Tracy Adams.<sup>180</sup> This means that the political role of mistresses was historically hidden behind their sexual and social capacity. Pompadour’s refusal to limit or hide her involvement in the affairs of government therefore broke from the accepted practice and presented her as a scapegoat for all of the political missteps of the monarchy.

### **Attacks From All Sides**

Pompadour’s political visibility led to scathing critiques of her place at court, particularly stemming from her bourgeois background. As a member of the Parisian bourgeoisie who came to embody the grandeur and excess of the monarchy, Madame de Pompadour was uniquely

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<sup>179</sup> “Souvent un bon négociateur est plus utile à un état qu’un bon general...” in Pompadour, 140.

<sup>180</sup> Christine Adams. “The Gallic Singularity and the Royal Mistress,” 46.

positioned to represent the rising tensions between the bourgeoisie, the nobility, and the absolute power of the monarch. Critiques of Pompadour spread throughout Paris in the form of songs and cartoons, referred to as the *Poissonades*, that criticized Pompadour for everything from her low birth to her political power.<sup>181</sup> These circulating critiques suggest a broader trend in eighteenth century France of public opinion as “a current of hostile opinion becoming continually stronger,” as historian Arlette Farge argues.<sup>182</sup> Where in the time of Diane de Poitiers, the official mistress’s image construction was aimed at the king and the court, by the time of Madame de Pompadour, she was contending with the will of the public alongside that of the court. The negative public image of Pompadour’s relationship with Louis XV “fed fears of an impending monarchical despotism,” according to Thomas Kaiser, and contributed to criticisms of his regime.<sup>183</sup> Rhetorically, Pompadour was made to be synonymous with the degradation of the monarchical government, by the concerted efforts of the *parti dévot* and the Jesuit church, and by the culmination of public prejudices against her.

Pompadour’s negative public image ultimately stemmed from her struggles to find allies at court. Pompadour’s letters to acquaintances at court repeatedly stressed her dislike of both the men of court who flattered her for political gain and the women of court who refused to view her as an equal. As she described in an undated letter to the Marquise of Fontenailles, she saw herself as “alone in the middle of this crowd of small lords who hate me.”<sup>184</sup> While Pompadour was automatically isolated because of her background and her position at court, she increasingly reproduced this isolation through her own actions. Her creation of selective dinner parties and

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<sup>181</sup> Colin Jones et al, *The Saint-Aubin Livre de Caricatures : Drawing Satire in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. (Voltaire Foundation, 2012).

<sup>182</sup> Arlette Farge. *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*. (Polity Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>183</sup> Kaiser, 1026.

<sup>184</sup> “Je suis seule au milieu de cette foule de petits seigneurs qui me haïssent” in Pompadour, 13.

theatrical productions, as well as her open resentment of other women at court, reinforced her social isolation. By 1760, Pompadour was so isolated that she had the head of the Paris police, Nicolas-René Berryer, send all of the mail of court through her to ensure that others were not speaking behind her back (which, of course, they were).<sup>185</sup> This information, however, only led her to resent and distrust those around her even more, while public critiques of her character and her position spread. Yet despite the tide of public opinion largely turning against her, she did not lose her position of power, suggesting both her and the king's imperviousness to the sentiments of wider French society, even as they grew louder and louder.

For those interested in undermining Pompadour's political power, employing public preference was a way to perform outward dissent without incurring the direct anger of the king. Her main party of adversaries, who referred to themselves as the *parti dévot* and was constructed around the queen and her family, was determined to have Pompadour stripped of her title as official mistress. As the title *parti dévot* suggests, these dissenters aligned themselves with the church by painting themselves as the "devout" at court, and in turn received help from the church towards their slanderous goals. The mechanism of this public persuasion was largely through the Jesuit establishment, with priests praying for the king's "conversion" or his relinquishing of his ties to Pompadour.<sup>186</sup> In addition to these public prayers, members of the Jesuit church were credited with circulating songs defaming the character of Pompadour. From here, word of mouth seems to have carried songs and jokes criticizing Pompadour through Paris. In the words of René de Voyer de Paulmy in 1747, the goal of Pompadour's enemies was to convince Louis XV of the "inconvenience of having a mistress of such low birth" by creating "disgust by the way of

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<sup>185</sup> Algrant, 129.

<sup>186</sup> D'Argenson in Kaiser, 1030.

shame.”<sup>187</sup> Only two years after her rise as official mistress, this reflection reveals the rapidity with which court favor galvanized against Pompadour. While they couldn’t outright criticize Pompadour to the king, her adversaries could employ other means of creating this disgust. By painting Pompadour as unfit for a king and turning public sentiment against her, Pompadour’s adversaries at court associated her image with the monarch’s shame.

Many of these critiques stemmed directly from Pompadour’s political visibility, blaming her for military defeats, increased taxes, and unpopular alliances. The *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, a collection of degrading cartoons by Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, reflects many of these critiques of Pompadour. One such image, “Passe partout de la Bastille,” is an allegory both attacking the king’s weakness and Pompadour’s political power.<sup>188</sup> The image depicts a crowned heart sitting upon a pedestal with Pompadour’s coat of arms, across from a fictionalized version of the Bastille. According to art historian Humphrey Wine, the sketch claims that “through his heart she was able to abuse that authority,” meaning the power behind the carceral institution of the Bastille.<sup>189</sup> While it is true that she was associated with the French government, she was not directly involved with the Bastille, reflecting the inaccuracy employed to deepen the critique of Pompadour. The extension of critique past Pompadour’s actual actions further highlights the degree to which Pompadour was singled out as a scapegoat for all of the perceived failures of Louis XV’s government. It further undermines Louis XV’s authority by claiming he was ruled by his heart, as opposed to his intelligence or royal responsibility, and in doing so gave his crown away with it.

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<sup>187</sup> Paulmy in Kaiser, 1029.

<sup>188</sup> Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, “Passe partout de la Bastille,” 1774-1775. Watercolor, ink and graphite. In Jones, Colin, et al. *The Saint-Aubin Livre de Caricatures : Drawing Satire in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Voltaire Foundation, 2012, 186.

<sup>189</sup> Humphrey Wine, “Madame de Pompadour.” *The Saint-Aubin Livre de Caricatures: Drawing Satire in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, by Colin Jones et al., Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 2012, pp. 179–190, 182.

Pompadour was also employed as a symbol of the crumbling of aristocratic tradition. In another of Saint-Aubin's drawings from 1757, "La verité surmonte l'autorité," a satyr is depicted as the artist creating one of Pompadour's more famous portraits. In order to reach the portrait, the satyr steps on a book of French societal norms. Its disrespect of these norms references the perception of Pompadour as breaching societal norms through her visible involvement in the masculine realm of court, as through her the traditions of court were overturned.<sup>190</sup> Her refusal of the French societal norms is equally reflected in her low birth not corresponding with her high place at court. Judgement of her social striving is symbolized also in the grandeur of the portrait painted of her, as portraits of that nature were commonly reserved for high nobility and royalty.<sup>191</sup> Finally, by suggesting that Pompadour herself is fashioned by a satyr, the artist shows Pompadour as a product of debauchery and sexuality, with these being in turn the traits that allowed her to reach an unjustly high position at court. In this sketch, wider anxieties about societal change amongst the norms of court became embodied in Pompadour's portrait.

These visual cartoons circulated Paris alongside derogatory songs about Pompadour. One surviving song presents a stinging rebukes of Pompadour's character: "Daughter of a leech, and leech herself, / Poisson, with an extreme arrogance, / Displays in this chateau, without shame and without dread, / The substance of the people and the shame of the King."<sup>192</sup> In this short tune, Pompadour's excess and common birth are both cited as a source of national shame. As a "leech" or a "fish," as her bourgeois maiden name Poisson means, Pompadour's excesses were seen as in particularly poor taste: not only was she exhibiting "arrogance" in her "chateau," but she was

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<sup>190</sup> Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, "La verité surmonte l'autorité," 1757. Watercolor, ink and graphite, 189. See figure six.

<sup>191</sup> Wine, 187.

<sup>192</sup> Barbier Edmond-Jean-François, *Journal D'un Bourgeois De Paris Sous Le Règne De Louis Xv*. Union Générale d'Éditions 1963, 235 as cited in Algrant, 110.

also going beyond the bounds of her birth, making these traits more shameful than if she were born into the chateau as a member of the nobility. This song replicated the claims of the church, which critiqued Pompadour for her lack of Christian humility and for the shame she brought to the nation. It also emphasized the direct relation between Pompadour's public image and that of the king, as the song equated Pompadour's lack of shame with the "shame of the king," meaning her perceived faults were seen as indicative of the king's flaws, as well. The same song, but for slight differences in wording, was found in 1750 in an epigram in the possession of the chevalier de Resseguier and in the diary of Barbier Edmond-Jean-François, a member of the Parisian bourgeoisie.<sup>193</sup> Its appearance in two different written sources, and sources created by a member of the nobility and a member of the bourgeoisie respectively, suggests the wide reach of this song in particular and the greater potential for these slanderous songs to travel through social circles.



Figure 4. *Vérité surmonte l'autorité*. 1757.

<sup>193</sup> Colin Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*. (National Gallery, 2002), 59.

Pompadour's negative image also permeated her experience at court, leaving her dependent solely on the king's favor. Pompadour particularly suffered from largely negative relationships with the other women of court. Prince von Kaunitz-Rietberg claimed that "if she were well-born, all [the women of court] would have bent a knee before her, but they are too proud to humble themselves before a woman of finance."<sup>194</sup> As it was, Kaunitz-Rietberg reported that few respected women of court could be found each morning at Pompadour's dressing table, a location of pandering and relationship-building for previous official mistresses.<sup>195</sup> In this animosity, it is also important to recognize how Louis XV's choice of a member of the bourgeoisie for his official mistress constituted a snub to the women of court who would have been seen as more conventional choices for the position. Yet it is clear that Pompadour's social isolation was also a result of her personal disdain for many of the women at court, whose "vanity" and "fakeness" she described in 1754 to the chief of police in Paris as "unbearable."<sup>196</sup> In a letter to the Comtesse de Brancas in the same year, Pompadour did not hide her personal dislike of court ladies, and described those who could have proven to be important allies as "beautiful women, but ridiculous."<sup>197</sup> By her 1760 letter to Comtesse de Baschi, Pompadour stopped projecting any willingness to work with the court, when she said it was full of "nothing but baseness, filthy artifice, puerile intrigues, impertinent books, and an extreme misery."<sup>198</sup> While a natural reaction to her initial ostracization, resentment of those at court furthered critiques of her at court, turning her social isolation into a positive feedback loop. Pompadour's

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<sup>194</sup> "...Si elle était fille de condition toutes auraient fléchi le genou devant elle, mais elles ont trop de fierté pour d'humilier devant une financière" in Kaunitz-Rietberg. "'Mémoire sur la Cour de France' (1752). - I." *Revue de Paris*, vol. 11, no. 15, 1904, 449.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 452.

<sup>196</sup> "Leur vainté...et leur fausseté les rendent insupportables" in Pompadour, 13.

<sup>197</sup> "Il y avoit aussi de belles femmes, mais ridicules..." in Pompadour, 35.

<sup>198</sup> "Il n'y a que bassesse, laches artifices, intrigues puériles, livres impertinens, et une extreme misere" in Pompadour, 157.



isolation forced her to rely even more greatly on the favor of the king and made the king's dismissal of both court and public opinion all the more visible.

The popularity and rhetorical strength of the critiques against Pompadour, and by extension the king by her side, suggest a turning of public opinion against the monarch in the wake of an unpopular war and even more unpopular taxes. Yet Pompadour and Louis XV alike refused to acknowledge that this public opinion could pose threat to the legitimacy of the monarchy. In response to liberation efforts elsewhere in Europe, Pompadour asserted to the Comte d'Argenson in 1748 that "the French are in need of a master, and they are happy to have a good one."<sup>199</sup> Not only did Pompadour see the king as a master ("maître"), but she also asserted that the people are happy to have such a tyrannical power in place, projecting an ignorance of contemporary critiques of Louis XV's despotism. Kaunitz-Rietberg saw Louis XV, too, as "inaccessible to all his subjects," notably lacking the official audiences that had previously been held for citizens requesting the help of the king.<sup>200</sup> While historian Colin Jones sums up the critiques of Pompadour by claiming "popularity was not Pompadour's strong suit," in reality the critiques against her reflect a much broader pattern of change in France, stemming simultaneously from the increased power of public opinion and growing resentment of the authority of the king.<sup>201</sup>

### **Fighting Image with Image**

Madame de Pompadour was not simply the passive victim of these critiques. In the case of public opinion, Pompadour promoted her own images to counteract the derogatory cartoons

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<sup>199</sup> "Les François ont besoin d'un maître, et ils sont heureux d'en avoir un bon" in Pompadour, 55.

<sup>200</sup> Kaunitz-Rietberg, 446.

<sup>201</sup> Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*, 98.

circulated about her. Pompadour, like official mistresses before her, used art and poetry to attempt to manipulate her image and her embodiment of the position. Just as Diane de Poitiers and Madame de Maintenon made conscious choices to fashion themselves into what that they deemed necessary – Goddess, Christian, woman of virtue – Pompadour too attempted to exert her own control over her projected identity. Historian Inge E. Boer claims that in Pompadour’s case, this cultural creation of image had added significance as it was “through the channel of culture that Madame de Pompadour created a place of her own at the French court.”<sup>202</sup> Boer argues that Pompadour’s artistic patronage was a means of justifying her place at court by asserting her elevated taste, if not her elevated title.<sup>203</sup> However, Pompadour was ultimately unable to control how she was perceived and spoken about, due both to the rising critique of the monarchy in Paris and her own lack of clarity about which traits in particular she wished to project: at times beauty, intelligence, or modesty. When this projection ultimately failed to functionally counteract public opinion, Pompadour turned her effort more fully towards the desires of the king alone, replicating both of their isolation from public opinion and providing further fodder for critique.

Pompadour employed artwork, particularly by the painter François Boucher (1703-1770), to control the visual creation of her own image and counteract the claims against her circulating Paris. As art historian Ewa Lajer-Burcharth points out, it is necessary “to bring the patroness into the picture and to examine how her own conception of herself materialized in it” to begin to understand the portraits of Pompadour.<sup>204</sup> The nature of Pompadour’s patronage with Boucher,

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<sup>202</sup> Tjitske Akkerman and Inge E. Boer, “Culture as a Gendered Battleground: The Patronage of Madame de Pompadour.” *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 104–121, 104

<sup>203</sup> Akkerman and Boer, 118

<sup>204</sup> Lajer-Burcharth, 58.

from whom she commissioned multiple works, was such that she was the curator of her own art production. During the earlier years of Pompadour's time as official mistress, her portraits were aimed at showing her as a beauty of her time. By showing herself in all of the riches of French fashion of the time, Pompadour literally fashioned herself into a continuation of the official mistress as the beauty standard of French court. One of Boucher's portraits commissioned in 1750, *Pompadour at Her Toilette*, depicts her in all of her finery while applying rouge.<sup>205</sup> The image of Louis XV attached as a bracelet to her wrist further anchors her beauty in her role as official mistress. Historian Colin Jones describes this depiction as the "make-up process by which Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson had made herself up as an individual of quasi-regal proportions."<sup>206</sup> In other words, it is a painting depicting her in the process of perfecting the beauty standards of the court and thereby transforming herself into a true member of the nobility. As a direct rebuke to the claims already circulating court and Paris regarding her low birth, this portrait of Pompadour embodying all of the norms of court consciously validates her right to exist at court. Boucher's *Pompadour at Her Toilette* transcribes Pompadour into a long line of mistresses holding the place of mythical beauties, justifying her place at the king's side despite her low birth.

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<sup>205</sup> François Boucher, "Pompadour at Her Toilette." *Harvard Art Museums*, 2013, Fogg Museum, [harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/303561](http://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/303561).

<sup>206</sup> Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*, 80.



Figure 5. *Pompadour at her Toilette*, 1750.

Where Boucher created Pompadour’s image visually, Voltaire (1694-1778) played an important part in crafting Pompadour’s image in words rather than artwork. Pompadour’s relationship with Voltaire began before she met the king, when she frequented the salons of Paris. Historian Steven Kale claims these salons “encouraged socializing between the sexes, brought nobles and bourgeois together, and afforded opportunities for intellectual speculation,” setting the stage for Pompadour and Voltaire to form a mutually beneficial relationship.<sup>207</sup> She could provide for him a pathway to the king’s ear while he could speak for her to a wider public through his published works and poems. Upon her reception of the title of Marquise de Pompadour in 1745, Voltaire began to praise both her character and her relationship with the king: “Sincere and tender Pompadour / For I can give you in advance / This name which rhymes

<sup>207</sup> Steven D. Kale, *French Salons : High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*. (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2; Philippe Hourcade. “Mme de Pompadour, Femme des Lumières ?” *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2004, pp. 361–375, <https://doi.org/10.3406/dhs.2004.2618>, 362.

with Amour.”<sup>208</sup> Voltaire took this opportunity to laud both Pompadour’s character and her relationship with Louis XV. Pompadour used Voltaire’s words to suggest that she was a woman of virtue who was in love with the king, rather than a woman of questionable birth trading sexual favors for power. Pompadour’s investment in Voltaire’s work is also clear in how often she herself cited him as her “good friend” in her letters – particularly after he retreated from life at court and was no longer present to circulate his words himself.<sup>209</sup> Pompadour’s friendship, or allyship, with Voltaire allowed her to control the output of her own form of positive propaganda.

Madame de Maintenon also used her friendship with Voltaire to justify her position by projecting herself as an intellectual. Her known involvement in the Parisian salons before coming to court lent itself to Pompadour’s image as a *femme savante*. Voltaire furthered this characterization in 1745 by claiming that Pompadour “read more at her age than any aged lady in the country where she reigns or where it is desirous that she reign.”<sup>210</sup> Pompadour herself created this image in her letters by referencing her knowledge of great minds to rhetorically link herself with them. In a single letter to the Marquise du Chatelet in 1747, Pompadour referenced both Newton, who “stunned Europe with his sublime discoveries,” and “ingenious Voltaire” as intellectual inspirations.<sup>211</sup> In a letter to the Comtesse de Baschi, she even went so far as to perform a literary analysis of Voltaire’s *Ecossaise*.<sup>212</sup> By referencing important thinkers, Pompadour represented herself as being well-read and keyed into the intellectual trends of the time. Her intentions in portraying herself as a member of the French intelligentsia were clearly spelled out in a letter to the Maréchal de Saxe in 1747 when she claimed that “love makes

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<sup>208</sup> Voltaire in Algrant, 42.

<sup>209</sup> Pompadour, 54;

<sup>210</sup> “Elle a plus lu à son âge qu’aucune vieille dame du pays où elle va régner et où il est bien à desirer qu’elle règne,” quoted in Hourcade, 366.

<sup>211</sup> “Lorsque Newton étonnoit l’Europe par ses découvertes sublimes.... Tandis que l’ingénieux Voltaire...” in Pompadour, 35.

<sup>212</sup> Pompadour, Vol. 1, 130-132.

heroes, and renders them wise.”<sup>213</sup> In this statement, Pompadour suggested that her position as lover to the king made him heroic, perhaps referencing the virility that mistresses were supposed to signal, and made him wiser through her own intelligence. In painting herself as having studied and understood the philosophical greats of her time, she fashioned herself into an important aide for the king, who could provide him lessons taken straight from the writings of great minds.

Where these images served Pompadour’s projection of her self-fashioning to the court and the public, they also served to project Pompadour’s virtues to the king. She geared her efforts in social pleasantries at the king as she recognized that, without her allies, he was her only means of securing her position at court. Pompadour herself admitted her single-mindedness in a 1755 letter to the Duc de Choiseul, where she acknowledged that “personal interest has led me only [to work for] the glory of the king.”<sup>214</sup> Similar to his dislike of diplomatic duty, the king also resented the courtly expectations set by his great-grandfather Louis XIV. To combat this, Pompadour created for Louis XV a scene of greater intimacy and entertainment through dinner parties and plays. Their smaller private dining room was used to host intimate and necessarily selective dinner parties where the king could feel comfortable in a more casual environment.<sup>215</sup> Pompadour recognized the importance of these dinner parties by reflecting on her role in a letter to the Comtesse de Noailles in 1747. In Pompadour’s words, “when melancholia dominates [the king], I resort to little airs that he very much likes.”<sup>216</sup> Pompadour saw both how the king’s mood “dominates” him, and the how redirection of these moods fit into her role as official mistress. These dinner parties succeeded in pleasing Louis XV, but they had the additional effect of ostracizing the members of court who were not invited – as Thomas Kaiser describes the affront

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<sup>213</sup> “L’amour fait les héros, et les rend sages” in Pompadour, 19.

<sup>214</sup> Pompadour in Adams and Adams, 145.

<sup>215</sup> Algrant, 55.

<sup>216</sup> “Quand la mélancholie le domine, j’ai recours à de petits airs qu’ils aime beaucoup” in Pompadour, 33.

inherent in invites chosen by an “*anoblie* marquise in the position of arbitrating court honors among the high nobility.”<sup>217</sup>

Pompadour began to produce plays in her quarters whose subjects were nearly always thinly veiled depictions of her and the king as a story of the triumph of love, such as *Le Mariage fait et rompu* by Charles Dufresne and *Le Préjugé à la mode* by Pierre-Claude la Chaussée.<sup>218</sup> Through this theater, Pompadour actively molded herself into a figure of the king’s affection by playing one on stage for his attention. In theater, Pompadour could exercise even greater control over her image than through art, as in theater Pompadour could create the media of her self-fashioning herself, allowing her near complete representational autonomy. While theater was the form of fashioning that Pompadour had greatest control over, it also provided particularly visible material for critique. Pompadour’s starring role in Lully’s *Armide* drew significant commentary, as in singing one of its arias, Pompadour sang “at last, he is in my power.”<sup>219</sup> Such an outward projection of her relationship with the king as one of her own domination, performed for the consumption of others, engendered commentary from the court. This was reflected in Pompadour’s letter to the Duc de Richelieu in which she acknowledged the “quarrels about our theater.”<sup>220</sup> The performance of Pompadour’s relationship with the king also functioned as an insult to the queen, contributing to the critiques of the *parti dévot*.<sup>221</sup>

Pompadour’s experience in the theater likely helped her maintain the poise and emotional concealment required both for international negotiations and diplomatic presentations to the king. As Paul Friedland pointed out, Pompadour recognized to some extent what broader French

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<sup>217</sup> Kaiser, 1032.

<sup>218</sup> Danielle Gallet, *Madame de Pompadour; Ou, Le Pouvoir Féminin*. (Fayard, 2011); Lever, 90.

<sup>219</sup> Pompadour in Algrant, 85.

<sup>220</sup> Pompadour in Algrant, 84.

<sup>221</sup> Kaiser, 1033.

society would not until the French Revolution forty years later: “the representations of theatrical and political actors had always been conceptually identical.”<sup>222</sup> Her own participation as the main actress in these productions gave fodder to detractors who pointed to the Catholic Church’s historic assertion that actors are “indecent and sinful” as a religious condemnation of Pompadour’s actions.<sup>223</sup> Similar to her dinner parties, Madame de Pompadour worked tirelessly on theatrical productions to entertain the king, even to the detriment of her already weak physical health.<sup>224</sup> While they were said to greatly please Louis XV, they increased the divisions between those loyal to Pompadour and those who already resented her, with attendance expected from her allies. In a 1747 letter to the Comtesse de Brézé, Pompadour referred to Brézé as a “true friend” or ally, then reinforced the expectations of her friendship: “I count on seeing you in my apartments next Saturday at my comedy.”<sup>225</sup> Pompadour’s supporters were therefore confined to those who attended her private affairs, with her plays perceived as an obvious snub to all those without invite, furthering the visibility of her alliances at court.

As she got older, Pompadour shifted her artistic self-fashioning to more closely follow the image of a *femme savante* rather than a young beauty. Said to have been plagued by gynecological issues, Pompadour and Louis XV’s sexual relationship ended as early as 1750, only five years into her nineteen years as official mistress.<sup>226</sup> Rather than keep up appearances of a sexual relationship with the king, Pompadour fashioned herself into a figure of piety by depicting her relationship with the king as one of virtuous friendship, remarkably similar to Diane de Poitiers’ self-depiction as a maternal friend to the king and Madame de Maintenon’s as

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<sup>222</sup> Paul Friedland. *Political Actors : Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution*. (Cornell University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Algrant, 65.

<sup>225</sup> “Des vrais amis” and “Je compte vous voir dans ma loge Samedi prochain à la comédie” in Pompadour, 39.

<sup>226</sup> Lever, 131.



caretaker and religious guide. In doing so, Pompadour outwardly acknowledged her waning sexual role, which was already clear to the court in the king's frequent visits to other young mistresses. Yet even as she revealed her inability to fulfill all of the king's needs, she did so as a means of counteracting criticism of her debauched or sexual role and of legitimizing her continued place at the king's side as a companion and a confidante.

This shift in image came with the commissioning of two statues representing friendship as the strongest of social links. Both the 1755 statue *Madame de Pompadour as Friendship* by Étienne-Maurice Falconet and the 1758 statue *Love Embracing Friendship* by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle depict Maintenon's changing relationship with the king, into one of friendship rather than sexual love, as one of only increased virtue and strength. Originally intended to be positioned across from a statue of Louis XV, *Madame de Pompadour as Friendship* portrays Pompadour as the physical embodiment of Friendship, recognizable to its contemporaries for the baring of her left breast and the garlanded tree beside her.<sup>227</sup> Similar to Diane de Poitiers' self-fashioning as the goddess Diana, Pompadour's self-fashioning as the sentiment of Friendship, following the classical iconography of Cesare Ripa, an influential artist of the Italian Renaissance, calls on historical concepts of virtue to then inscribe them upon her sculptural body.<sup>228</sup> This analogy is furthered in *Love Embracing Friendship*, where Friendship is shown as a force even stronger than Love, acting as a mother to the cherubic Love figure.<sup>229</sup> As an allegory for Pompadour's relationship with the king, these statues stood as a clear statement that the shift from a sexual relationship to one of friendship alone had not weakened Pompadour's standing, but rather further anchored her at the king's side.

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<sup>227</sup> Katherine K. Gordon, "Madame de Pompadour, Pigalle, and the Iconography of Friendship." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 50, no. 3, 1968, pp. 249–62. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3048548>, 256.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*, 73.



Figure 5. *Madame de Pompadour at her Tambour Frame*. 1764.

Her following portraits alluded to her continued position at the king's side, yet set her as a wise and virtuous woman as opposed to a sexual icon. For instance, the location of Pompadour's portraits shifted from in front of her toilette, the site of her process of beautification, to a site of embroidery and creation that alluded to a lack of pretension and a focus on peaceful and pious acts. In *Madame de Pompadour at Her Tambour Frame*, Pompadour is surrounded by signs of her cultural merit, as opposed to her beauty. The fiber work in front of her and the instruments by her feet display a rooting in cultural capital and creation. The placement of a bookshelf behind her again reinforces her identity as a *femme savante*, projecting her worth at once as a creator and as an intellectual at court – two roles considered acceptable and even desirable in women at court. As she could no longer serve the king in a sexual capacity, Jones argues “image-management became her key technique for maintaining ascendancy over

the affections of her difficult master [Louis XV].”<sup>230</sup> In the context of the church’s smear campaigns portraying her as a national shame, her projection of respectable activities for a woman, as cultural protector, allowed her to combat accusations of her hyper-sexuality and intrusion into masculine roles at court.

Between Voltaire touting her virtues and her own commissioned artwork, Pompadour attempted to project the legitimacy of her position at court and in wider French circles. Both by portraying her relationship as one of love, and later on as one worthy of respectable female friendship, Pompadour attempted to play to public opinion on virtue and religion and thus avoid backlash against her position. However, her efforts to control the narratives surrounding her role were not entirely successful. Holding the position of official mistress in the mid-eighteenth century, Pompadour had to contend with a degree of public opinion and press that previous mistresses did not experience because of a greater divide between the court and the public. Faced with the nearly impossible challenge of combatting critiques coming from the court and the public at the same time, Pompadour produced her own image in paintings, sculptures, and writings to refute these critiques for herself and for the king.

### **The Beginning of an Era or the End of a Tradition?**

Madame de Pompadour’s time at court represents the breaking and expansion of the conventions that had been set through hundreds of years of official royal mistresses. As a member of the bourgeoisie, Pompadour did not have the aristocratic claims or privileges that former mistresses held. In taking over official political tasks from the king, Pompadour willingly inhabited a space of high visibility that surpassed that of former mistresses. In this manner, her

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<sup>230</sup> Jones, 40.

efforts as diplomat and stand-in for the king broke the norms of the mistress's power being an "open secret" engendering critiques stemming from her outward performance of historically masculine roles at court.<sup>231</sup>

Madame de Pompadour gained through her position as official mistress an aristocratic title, a place at court, and a source of significant political power. However, what came with this position was a life with few allies where she constantly pushed herself to provide the entertainment and support that ensured that the king retained her as his official mistress even as their sexual relationship ceased. In taking on the king's diplomatic responsibilities, Pompadour made visible the political power that previous mistresses strove to conceal, thereby becoming a scapegoat for all of the mistakes of the monarchy during her time as mistress. The critiques against her suggest growing unrest over the state of court more broadly at the same time as a growing space for public opinion, culminating in more outward forms of criticism than had faced previous mistresses. Even so, Pompadour was not a passive subject of such defamation. Instead, she endeavored through art, writing, and theater to create her own image for the court, the king, and ultimately herself.

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<sup>231</sup> Adams and Adams, 141.

### **Conclusion: In the Absence of the Mistress**

Diane de Poitiers (1500-1566), Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), and Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764) represent three complex historical figures whose impacts on the French monarchy should not be underestimated. The methods employed by each of these women in the role of official mistress had lasting impacts on both the nature of female power in France and the state of the monarchy's projected image. These women skillfully inhabited and shaped the position according to their desired image creation and their context, whether it be a cultural or religious revival or mounting criticism of an increasingly isolated king. The official mistress came to be a symbol of the king, as the woman that he chose out of all women to be his companion. As a third member of the monarchical triangle, the official mistress was impacted by the realities of court, and adapted the position to fit their identity and the needs of the king and the court.

Recalling the frameworks provided by Greenblatt regarding self-fashioning and Bourdieu regarding tactics of power, the position of the official mistress can be understood through the complex social maneuvering used to create identity and culture in order to enact symbolic forms of power. Without a lifelong position beside the king, and legally barred from formal means of political power, official mistresses nonetheless employed a variety of social and cultural activities to make themselves into figures of near-absolute authority at court. The individual nature of the position of the official mistress meant that while each of these women built their role off of the legacy of those before them, they had to entirely reproduce, or even create anew, their personal identity as official mistress in order to both keep the respect of the court and the interest of the king. If it was assumed that a given mistress would not inhabit the role for long, then there was no incentive for parties at court to respect her authority or voice. On the contrary,

if she was able to fashion herself into a lasting figure beside the king – a third member of the monarchy – then she would be considered a legitimate and influential ally at court.

While deploying the tactics required to enact these informal modes of power, official mistresses also had to contend with gendered structure of power within the French political imaginary. Where French Salic law stands as a testament to the French insistence on a strictly masculine political realm, women as early as Christine de Pizan in the fourteenth century understood that they were capable of immense intelligence and therefore significant cultural contributions. Official mistresses worked within the confines of these inherently contradictory conceptions – of women as worthy and as limited. Understanding that it was this social and cultural realm in which women were traditionally accepted as deserving of power in France, official mistresses couched their political involvement, in diplomacy and advice to the monarchy and in forms of involvement that were accepted for women, such as art and the caring of children. Using these forms of “feminine” influence, official mistresses were able to enact a form of power that could be considered as positive particularly because of their identity as women, rather than in spite of it, while advancing in their responsibilities at court that were conceptualized as strictly masculine. The stakes of this performance of femininity come to true light in the study of Madame de Pompadour, who was vilified in many ways because she allowed her involvement in masculine forms of power to be visible in a world of increasingly loud forms of public opinion.

Diane de Poitiers, as one of the earliest official mistresses, reflects the individuality of the position, in that it was based so deeply in the characteristics of the individual holding it, even while it existed in a complex relationship with the monarch and the court. Diane de Poitiers stood as official mistress for the entirety of Henri II’s rule, and was so visibly intertwined with the

monarchy that even his royal emblem is believed to include a D for her. Determined to distance her place in the role from that of Anne de Pisseleu before her, Diane de Poitiers extended her power past the king to his children and the court, even as she cloaked the true nature of her relationship with the king in shadow. Her support of the arts in France both helped contribute to this concealment by painting her as the virginal goddess Diana, and encouraged the progression of the French Renaissance. As her image was so closely linked with that of the king, her own association with the virtuous goddess and her support of the arts painted Henri II as a forward-thinking supporter of culture. For a king who entered the role as the second son, considered ill-prepared for the culture of court, Diane de Poitiers' capacity to align herself with the most respected and modern artistic trends of her time allowed the king to gain respect as a supporter of the arts and a man of culture.

Madame de Maintenon practiced many of the same tactics of concealment as Diane de Poitiers. Yet rather than hearken back to the virtues of the gods of antiquities, Maintenon constructed her virtuous image by tying herself closely to the Catholic Church. In a time of Catholic revival at French court, Madame de Maintenon projected humility and piety in her actions caring for the king's children, and in her morganatic marriage to the king. While not officially acknowledged, the open secret of the marriage shifted the position of the official mistress from one of courtly acceptance to one of religious respectability. Unlike Diane de Poitiers, Madame de Maintenon did not consciously construct her image through art; instead, her efforts to project herself as a virtuous supporter of France came through the creation of her school at Saint-Cyr. While Maintenon did not project her power in the same manner as her piety, her school created a system of female empowerment that strengthened the poorer nobility and tied this mission to the king. In doing so, Louis XIV's legacy was shifted from one defined by

military conquest and glamour to one equally defined by religious conviction, embodying his divine right to the throne and strengthening his authority in the eyes of a religious court.

Madame de Pompadour contrasts in many ways with Madame de Maintenon. Where Maintenon spent much of her effort on hiding the extent of her power at court, Pompadour inhabited the position with a high degree of visibility, going so far as to hold official meetings with diplomats in the king's stead. This degree of visibility challenged traditional notions of French masculine power, and therefore fueled public defamation of Pompadour through *Poissonades*, a series of derogatory songs and comics referring to Pompadour's maiden (bourgeois or ignoble) name, Poisson. These songs reflect a difficult time for the monarchy, when increasing claims of despotism coincided with a growing public press to create an environment in Paris hostile to both Pompadour and the king. Pompadour attempted to combat these claims through her own self-fashioning as glamorous and beautiful, and later in life as a respectable *femme savante*. While Pompadour attained a greater breadth of power than had previous mistresses, her focus on the king over all others helped reflect the construction of his absolute power, but also ultimately his inability to control public opinion in Paris.

While each of the women discussed in this study inhabited the role of official mistress in different ways, they each made significant contributions to the image and the legacy of the monarchy. Through the complex mechanisms of court and public opinion, mistresses at once drew criticism away from the king and queen and onto themselves, and reflected their own positive traits of virtue and culture back onto the monarchy. Embodying a role so closely intertwined with the monarchy, operating closer to the monarch than arguably anyone else, official mistresses were indelibly linked to the shifts in the monarchy as it progressed to an absolute monarchy and finally was upset by revolution. The history of official mistresses in



France is in many ways the history of the French monarchy itself, while also recounting a story of the peak of possibility for women at the time.

As discussed throughout this study, the roles of the queen and the official mistress were in many instances considered complementary, supporting each other to fulfill the many roles expected of women at court. Where the queen became inscribed as mother, the mistress became inscribed as lover, and in doing so represented many of the artistic expectations of women. This complementary relationship, representing two thirds of a monarchical pyramid, designates the combination of the two roles in one person as a fascinating historical study. Multiple historians have emphasized the importance of the official mistress by analyzing what takes place in the absence of a woman holding this role, specifically in the case of Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793). Louis XVI (1754-1793) chose not to appoint a royal mistress, nor was he known to have any mistress at his side. It was perhaps precisely this lack of official mistress, rather than any one trait of Marie Antoinette, that led to a depth of critique that ultimately contributed to the downfall of the French monarchy in the French Revolution. Historian Christine Dousset argues that before Marie Antoinette, the queens most outwardly attacked were those who became widows, because “the disappearance of their husbands had placed them in positions to exercise power.”<sup>232</sup> Marie Antoinette was similarly attacked because she combined the official power of the queen and the unofficial power of the official mistress, surpassing the level of overall influence that was deemed acceptable for a woman to hold and therefore challenging the legitimacy of the framework of monarchy in the eyes of the public.

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<sup>232</sup> “Sous l’Ancien Régime, les reines cibles d’attaques virulentes étaient jusqu’alors des veuves, tels Marie de Médicis et plus encore Catherine de Médicis, parce que la disparition de leur époux les avait placées en position d’exercer le pouvoir...” in Christine Dousset, “Marie-Antoinette : la reine refusée.” *Cahiers De Framespa*, no. 7, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.4000/framespa.696>, 4.

Without the presence of this unofficial third member of the monarchy, Marie Antoinette was left to perform the reproduction linked to queenhood as well as all of the roles of the official mistress: trendsetter, artistic supporter, political advisor. These combined expectations for Marie Antionette effectively prevented her from fully embodying any of the positive projections of either official mistress or queen. Where the mistress represented French interests through her heritage, and therefore could acceptably stand beside the king, Marie Antoinette held close ties to Austria; where the official mistress stood as a testament to the king's virility, the seven years it took for Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI to consummate their marriage enacted precisely the opposite, portraying him as impotent, physically and politically.<sup>233</sup> Historian Nancy Barker claims that where the official mistress could be at once a "scapegoat as well as a seductress," and a queen could have a "reputation for virtue [that] ensured the legitimacy of an heir," the combination of these roles instead made Marie Antoinette a symbol of the king's weakness and a source of doubt for the legitimate continuation of the royal lineage.<sup>234</sup>

In attempting to fulfill both the role of the mistress and the queen, due to the king's choices rather than her own, Marie Antoinette opened herself up to harsher critique than official mistresses of the past received, as she was seen as crossing boundaries between roles.<sup>235</sup> Nancy Barker clarifies that it was specifically the "Marie Antoinette of the media" who was so despised, as opposed to Marie Antoinette as a real person. Just as the image of official mistresses was a consciously crafted projection of what they wanted others to see, Marie Antoinette's image was a construction, yet one largely controlled by those outside of her power.<sup>236</sup> In some ways, the

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Nancy N. Barker, "'Let Them Eat Cake': The Mythical Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution." *The Historian (Kingston)*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1993, pp. 709–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1993.tb00920.x>, 714.

<sup>235</sup> Adams and Adams, 164.

<sup>236</sup> Barker, 722.

vilification of Marie Antoinette is the terminal end of the critiques leveled against Madame de Pompadour, when her own self-fashioning was ultimately undermined by the narratives created by the church and her opponents at court and taken up by the public. But where an official mistress could be used as a scapegoat, hated, and then removed from her position and from court, the queen could not, meaning that hatred for her was translated into hatred for the monarchy as well. The combination of the roles of the queen and the official mistress was ultimately unsustainable due to the contradictory nature of the expectations for each role. At once unassuming and ostentatious, sexual and maternal, Marie Antoinette struggled to cohesively embody the two positions, leading others to accuse her of impropriety and over-spending even as she attempted to follow in the footsteps of official mistresses, while also performing her role as queen.

Examination of the repercussions of a lack of official mistress makes the importance of the position clear, as it provided a specific framework in which female political power could be exercised without significant reproach. The official mistress embodied a form of unofficial power that existed within the realm of acceptability. By outwardly presenting themselves as a means of bolstering the king's virility and therefore his masculine power, the official mistresses ultimately held one of the most powerful positions in the kingdom as the advisor to the king. In this role, the mistress had access to the king's ear, his knowledge, and his resources, and with these tools each individual mistress furthered her own goals. Whether this resulted in the support of artistic movements, educational philosophy, or theater, the lasting legacy of each of these women reflects their capacity to consciously shape the conditions surrounding them to leave their own legacy behind, independent of yet intertwined with that of the king.

While it is easy to discount a role such as the official mistress as one based in female beauty and sexuality alone, a closer look reveals that the position of the French *maîtresse-en-titre* shows the ability of these historical actors to overcome a system that actively worked to limit their access to power by thinly veiling what was inherently a cultural and political role behind an accepted female sexual role. The projection of policies like Salic law paint the French monarchy as staunchly patriarchal at first glance; however, the study of the official mistress effectively disproves this image by demonstrating the significant role that women had in supporting and producing the authority of the monarchy. The women who came to inhabit the space of official mistress – acting as cultural icons, political advisors, artistic and intellectual leaders – wielded complex tactics of power to secure their position as the third member of the monarchical triangle, interweaving their power with that of the queen and the king for the over three centuries that the position of official mistress existed in France.

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