

Mistresses and Merveilleuses:
The Historiographical Record on Female Political
Players of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries¹
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IN A 1991 ESSAY, Linda Kerber quoted Mary Ritter Beard, who wrote of the “opinionative assurance” with which historians have approached and still approach issues related to women in history:

It would have been bad enough had male historians contented themselves with conveying that they thought women hadn't done very much of anything. But they concluded, from evidence which they laid before us, that women didn't have much skill in politics and they deduced that women were absent from intellectual histories because they hadn't thought many significant thoughts. These conclusions were, like any other conclusions, perched on limited evidence and open to re-examination. . . . But these opinions were rarely offered straight, up front, or in forms open to question and testing. Instead, opinion has often been offered with absolute assurance, as fact, and as though it did not need to be tested, evaluated, or investigated.²

Part of this assurance undoubtedly has to do with our recognition of the limits on women's ability to exercise power and influence throughout most of history. Women, for the most part, accessed power through

1. These comments were originally presented as part of “Prejudices, Misconceptions, and Blind Spots: A Round Table Discussion on the Historiography of Women from the Twelfth through Eighteenth Centuries,” Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 17-20, 2015.

2. Linda K. Kerber, “Opinionative Assurance’: The Challenge of Women’s History,” in “History Education Reform,” special issue, *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 30-34, 30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162796>.

men—as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and mistresses. Certainly this is true of the women in early modern France that I study, especially those active at court. While they often demonstrated keen intelligence, they also used resources such as physical beauty, theatrical presence, and erotic capital to work their will.³ Convinced that such machinations were properly outside the realm of the “political,” earlier historians wrote confidently that these women lacked any real political role or influence, while at the same time acknowledging the sway of men who operated in court society in an equally personal or “informal” manner.⁴ Modern historians, of course, draw on the works of both the contemporaries of these women and their historians—and it can be difficult to get beyond the amused and judgmental tone of their works.⁵ And yet, while we pride

3. Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret asserts that “L’arme la plus efficace dont dispose la femme, c’est d’abord sa beauté et l’on ne peut guère douter que toutes les favorites furent dans leur siècle dotées des perfections qui devaient presque obligatoirement attirer l’attention du roi.” *La Vie quotidienne des femmes du roi d’Agnès Sorel à Marie Antoinette* (Paris: Hachette, 1990), 169. On erotic capital, see Catherine Hakim, “Erotic Capital,” *European Sociological Review* 26, no. 5 (2010): 499–518, doi:10.1093/esr/jcq014, and *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

4. Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben offer a useful critique of this in the “Introduction” to *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 13: “One problem is that the use of the word ‘informal’ [to denote female political activity] is anachronistic; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it denoted an act ‘[n]ot done or made according to a recognized or prescribed form; not observing established procedures or rules; unofficial; irregular’, and had more often than not a negative connotation. The exercise of ‘informal’ power by women, and also men, created political leeway and opportunities, and as such must have taken place in recognisable patterns in order to be effective.” Contemporaries would have used the term “domestic” in place of “informal.”

5. To cite just one example, Louis Sonolet (a nineteenth-century historian) wrote of Thérésia Tallien: “Au point de vue religieux, son éducation semble avoir été assez superficielle et la foi ne dut guère embarrasser sa conscience au cours de ses chutes amoureuses. Sans doute se contenta-t-elle, toute sa vie, de quelques pratiques de dévotion espagnoles plus faites d’imitation et d’habitude que de véritable conviction. . . . Quoi d’étonnant, après cela, si Thérésia, bonne, généreuse, femme d’intelligence et de cœur, conserva néanmoins, durant tout le cours de sa carrière accidentée, le plus grand dédain ou plutôt la plus totale incompréhension d’un point de vue moral?” *Madame Tallien, d’après des témoignages contemporains et des documents inédits* (Paris: l’Edition, 1909), 9.

ourselves on “reading against the grain,” and judging primary sources with a healthy degree of skepticism, these easy assumptions about early modern women still permeate our work about them. As Kerber notes, “It is, after all, very difficult to disrupt the inherited narrative.”⁶

In my current research on the mistresses of famous men in early modern and Revolutionary France, I have tried to problematize this narrative, while acknowledging its persistence.⁷ Few women have drawn more criticism than the mistresses of famous men. Madame de Montespan, *maîtresse en titre* of Louis XIV in the 1660s and 1670s, and Madame Tallien, mistress, then wife, of *conventionnel* Jean-Lambert Tallien, and later mistress of politician Paul Barras, both exerted considerable political influence. Like other famous mistresses, they were lauded for their beauty, but also scorned as scheming, avaricious, unattractively intelligent, or stupidly vulgar.⁸ Both male and female historians dismiss them as either lacking in genuine political power or exercising too much influence illegitimately. Their behavior is contrasted with that of religious and domesticated women who fulfilled their legitimate role as wife and mother, or who, even when occupying the morally suspect role

6. Kerber, “Opinionative Assurance,” 31.

7. This research is part of a larger book project with Tracy Adams, University of Auckland. See also my “Venus of the Capitol: Madame Tallien and the Politics of Beauty Under the Directory,” *French Historical Studies* 37, no.4 (Fall 2014): 599–629, doi:10.1215/001610712717052; “‘Belle comme le jour’: Beauty, Power, and the King’s Mistress,” *French History* 29, no. 2 (2015): 161–81, doi:10.1093/fh/cru113; and “Performing for the Court and Public: Female Beauty Systems from the Old Regime through the French Revolution,” in *Female Beauty Systems: Beauty as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States, Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Christine Adams and Tracy Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 155–86.

8. Pierre Clément, relatively sympathetic toward Madame de Montespan, still highlights her avariciousness and willingness to flout public opinion. See Clément, *Madame de Montespan et Louis XIV: Étude historique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1868), 23. Charles de Constant, while blown away by the beauty of Madame Tallien, was shocked by some of her letters that she shared with him, which “ne renferment que des idées vulgairement exprimées . . . des exemples du plus mauvais goût comme du plus mauvais ton.” Quoted in Marie-Hélène Bourquin, *Monsieur et Madame Tallien* (Paris: Perrin, 1987), 305. Biographer R. McNair Wilson also paints a picture of Thérésia Tallien as coarse and duplicitous in *The Gipsy-Queen of Paris, being the Story of Madame Tallien by whom Robespierre fell* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1934).

of mistress, demonstrated a disinterested love for the king. For example, historians frequently contrast the self-effacing behavior of Louise de la Vallière, Louis's gentle first mistress, with Montespan's selfish will to dominate.⁹

Few historians today would accept such judgments as appropriate. And yet, too many continue to write about these women based on outdated interpretations. Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart, la marquise de Montespan was Louis XIV's most famous mistress and mother to seven of his children (several of whom he placed in the line of succession).¹⁰ While historians have traditionally acknowledged her social pre-eminence at the court, most uncritically accepted Charles Perrault's quote of young Louis, speaking to his council:

You are all my friends . . . for whom I have the greatest affection and in whom I have the greatest confidence. I am young, and women usually have great power over men my age. I order you all, if you notice that any woman, no matter whom, exercises the slightest control over me, you need to let me know, and I will only need twenty-four hours to get rid of her and to give you satisfaction on that matter.¹¹

H. Noel Williams is one of those historians who cites Perrault approvingly and argues that “one must, in justice to [Louis], remember that he never permitted his mistresses, whatever influence they may have

9. Just a few examples include Quentin Craufurd, *Notices sur Mesdames De La Vallière, De Montespan, De Fontanges, et De Maintenon extraites du catalogue raisonné de la Collection de portraits de M. Craufurd* (Paris: J. Gratiot, 1818), 47-49; Benedetta Craveri, *Reines et favorites: Le pouvoir des femmes*, trans. Éliane Deschamps-Pria (Paris: France Loisirs, 2005); Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La Vie quotidienne des femmes du roi*, 144; but many other histories, especially popular ones, follow the same narrative.

10. Although there are countless biographies of Montespan, especially focusing on the celebrated Affair of the Poisons, the most complete scholarly work is Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Madame de Montespan* (Paris: Perrin, 1988).

11. Paul Bonnefon, ed., *Mémoires de ma vie, par Charles Perrault/Voyage à Bordeaux (1669) par Claude Perrault* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1909), 40. Through <https://gallica.bnf.fr>, accessed 18 March 2014.

acquired over his heart, to have any over his government.”¹² Williams goes on to pontificate of Montespan that

this woman dominated the whole Court of France, denied political influence by her royal lover, it is true, but denied nothing else, glorying in her dishonour, contemptuously defying the *dévots* and the envious men and women who surrounded her to wrest the sceptre from her grasp. Once indeed, when, for a brief moment, the eloquent pleading of Bossuet prevailed, she received orders to leave Versailles, only to return, a few weeks later, more haughty and more powerful than ever.¹³

Williams was the author of equally breathless books about actresses and mistresses and published this particular work in 1903.¹⁴ However, we continue to see similar judgments on Montespan in the works of modern historians, who simultaneously criticize her imperious control at court while denying her any real political power. Most historians make note of Saint Simon’s famous quote that Montespan’s apartments were “the center of the court, the pleasures, the fortune, the hope and the terror of ministers and army generals, and the humiliation of all France.”¹⁵ Wendy Gibson writes of Louise de la Vallière and Madame de Montespan that

in actual fact neither showed any inclination to meddle in state affairs. Mlle de La Vallière was universally celebrated for her disinterestedness, though this did not prevent her from accepting, amongst other trifles, the duchy of Vaujours and the sumptuously furnished Palais Brion for herself, the abbey of Chelles for her sister, a rich heiress for her brother and the elevation of her surviving bastard daughter to the rank of Princesse de Conti. Mme de Montespan restricted the ‘ambition sans bornes’ with which she was credited to manoeuvring, likewise, numerous relatives and

12. H. Noel Williams, *Madame de Montespan* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1903), 2.

13. *Ibid.*, vi.

14. These include books about Marguerite of Angoulême, Madame DuBarry, Juliette Récamier, the mother and sisters of Napoleon Bonaparte, and “the queens of the French stage,” among others.

15. Craveri, *Reines et favorites*, 197.

protégés into advantageous positions, to soliciting occasionally on behalf of religious establishments, and to procuring material goods for herself.¹⁶

To dismiss these activities as having no connection to state affairs suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of politics under the Ancien Régime—an intensely personal polity centered on the court.¹⁷ While historians are beginning to reassess their understanding of the influence of court women over political affairs,¹⁸ the “inherited narrative,” as Kerber calls it, has indeed been difficult to disrupt.

The situation in which Thérésia Tallien maneuvered was quite different from that of Madame de Montespan. By 1795, the political context in France had changed dramatically in the wake of the Revolution of 1789 and subsequent Reign of Terror. However, the end of the Terror and the creation of the Directory created an environment in which it was once again possible for women to play a political role, despite the

16. Wendy Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 145. Kathryn Norberg also asserts that Louis kept a tight lid on the political role of his mistresses. “Women of Versailles, 1682–1789,” in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 205; and François Bluche states bluntly that Louis's mistresses “did not become involved in politics.” *Louis XIV*, trans. Mark Greengrass (New York: Franklin Watts, 1990), 271.

17. Leonhard Horowski argues that the court nobility's “relative lack of formal participation in the decision-making of ‘high politics’ or bureaucratic administration” was of relatively little importance to them. “What mattered much more to them than abstract issues and policies was the distribution of those positions, goods and honours which it took to establish and to maintain the greatness of their families. It was a world of clan politics, where the perennial political question was rarely ‘what?’ and almost always ‘who?’” “‘Such a Great Advantage for my Son’: Office-Holding and Career Mechanisms at the Court of France, 1661 to 1789,” *The Court Historian* 8, no. 2 (December 2003): 136–37.

18. Just to cite a few: Olwen Hufton, “Reflections on the Role of Women in the Early Modern French Court,” *The Court Historian* 5, no. 1 (2000): 1–13; Jeroen Duidam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550–1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 239–40; and Kathleen Wellman's recent study, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

establishment of a Republican regime that explicitly excluded women from the vote and from the formal political roles newly available to men. The *Merveilleuses*—the fashionable women who shaped Parisian social intercourse while influencing political discourse under the Directory—were particularly conspicuous, and of these, the beautiful Thérésia Tallien was among the most prominent.¹⁹ The political role attributed to Madame Tallien's salon, with its aristocratic tone and aspirations and links to the members of the Directory, as well as to the newly powerful military men, caused enormous consternation about France's political future among many republicans, a consternation reflected in the works of subsequent historians.²⁰

This ambivalence about Madame Tallien reflects the social disorder that more generally defined the Directory and allowed women to act as political brokers, as had aristocratic women under the Old Regime.²¹ Clearly, politicians worried about the influence that these women exercised, for, in their eyes, it threatened both economic and moral disorder. It was during this period of social and cultural uncertainty, underlined by shifting gender roles, that a woman like Thérésia could become both a fashion icon and a power broker.²² But her cultural role created unease about the influence she also exercised in the political realm, an unease

19. As with Madame de Montespan, there are many breathless accounts of Thérésia Tallien's life; the most useful is Françoise Kermina, *Madame Tallien, 1773-1835* (Paris: Perrin, 2006).

20. For example, socialists Albert Mathiez, *After Robespierre: The Thermidorian Reaction*, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), and Georges Lefebvre, *The Directory*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1964), found the period of the Directory and Madame Tallien herself extremely problematic; Alfred R. Allinson, *Days of the Directoire* (London: John Lane, 1910), is also critical of both.

21. Pierre Serna analyzes the sources of this political disorder and the intense infighting that characterized post-Thermidorian France. *La république des girouettes (1789-1815 . . . et au delà): Une anomalie politique; La France de l'extrême centre* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2005), 393-413. Many historical works draw on the Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, who wrote the colorful *Histoire de la société française pendant le Directoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1929) in the nineteenth century.

22. For more on this see Adams, "Venus of the Capitol."

that we see reflected in historical works of the nineteenth, and even the twentieth, centuries.

This unease reflected itself in a number of ways, both among contemporaries and historians. In his memoirs, the former member of the Directory La Révellière-Lépeaux constructed a salacious narrative in which Barras “handed over” Thérésia to Ouvrard in a business deal because he could no longer afford her expenses.²³ Republican commentators accused her of collaborating with royalists and undermining the Republican regime.²⁴ The Goncourt brothers (who in general appreciated the sense of style and fashion that the *Merveilleuses* and *Incredibles* brought back to France) accused Thérésia and her friends of political corruption and interference in the financial markets.²⁵ Some of her more scathing biographers suggest that her every move was dictated by her desire for financial gain and that she plotted to place France under the control of financiers like her father to the benefit of her family and socio-economic class.²⁶

But even more damning and demeaning are the accounts that simply dismiss her influence and focus on her looks, reputation, and fashion contributions. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographers of Madame Tallien were so focused on her beauty, her reputation for promiscuity, and so fascinated with the “corrupt” role of the *Merveilleuses* under the Directory that it is difficult for the modern researcher to understand the real influence of women like her. It is significant that contemporaries believed that she wielded a genuine influence that many considered benevolent.²⁷ But while her beauty provided her with important erotic capital, in some ways, it obscures the intelligence that

23. The biographers of both Ouvrard and Barras discount this as malicious gossip, but still emphasize her frivolity. Otto Wolff, *Ouvrard, Speculator of Genius, 1770-1846*, (New York: David McKay, 1962), 50; Jacques Vivent, *Barras, le “roi” de la république, 1755-1829* (Paris: Hachette, 1938), 173-74.

24. François Gendron, *The Gilded Youth of Thermidor*, trans. James Cookson (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 33.

25. Goncourt and Goncourt, *Histoire de la société française pendant le Directoire*, 297.

26. For an example of this approach, see McNair Wilson, *The Gipsy-Queen of Paris*, esp. chaps. 10 and 11.

27. For example, Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, future prefect under Napoleon. See *Mémoires sur la Convention et la Directoire*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Paris: Ponthieu, 1827), 1:130-32.

allowed her to make use of that asset, as well as the political role that she played. Both contemporaries and later biographers were so fixated on her physical appearance and sordid reputation (she was divorced twice, married three times, public mistress of two famous men, and mother of ten children, five fathered by her lovers) that her role as political actor sometimes appears as an afterthought.²⁸

This comment, while brief, extends the analysis of my medievalist colleagues in this special issue, whose essays examine similar issues that both shape and deform the historiography of medieval and early modern women. And despite the presuppositions that continue to shape too much historical scholarship on women, I want to close on an optimistic note. I do believe that our historical understanding of the “political” is becoming more capacious as our treatment of politics in various historical contexts becomes more sophisticated. This will, I think, gradually allow for our assessment of these women to shift. However, it will also require that we employ these earlier history texts much more judiciously and interrogate sloppy judgments about the past actions of female historical figures as we eradicate that moralistic tone that too often influences our assessment of their significance.

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28. Maïté Bouyssi makes a similar argument, suggesting that Thérésia's biographers have, in fact, refused to acknowledge her power and independence. “Thérésia Cabarrus, de l'instruction des filles.” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 344 (April-June 2006): 4-5, accessed at <http://ahrf.revues.org/6153>, placed on line 1 June 2006.