Mistresses and Merveilleuses: 
The Historiographical Record on Female Political 
Players of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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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 histo-
ries 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, evalu-
ated, or investigated. 

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, 
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of Women from the Twelfth through Eighteenth Centuries,” Annual Meeting of the 

History,” in “History Education Reform,” special issue, OAH Magazine of History 6, 
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


\(^{4}\) 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.”

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. 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. 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


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.  

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). 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.

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 extraits 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).

acquired over his heart, to have any over his government.”

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.

Williams was the author of equally breathless books about actresses and mistresses and published this particular work in 1903. 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.”

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

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.
protégés into advantageous positions, to soliciting occasionally on behalf of religious establishments, and to procuring material goods for herself.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{17} While historians are beginning to reassess their understanding of the influence of court women over political affairs,\textsuperscript{18} the “inherited narrative,” as Kerber calls is, 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


\textsuperscript{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,” \textit{The Court Historian} 8, no. 2 (December 2003): 136-37.

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. 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.

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. 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. But her cultural role created unease about the influence she also exercised in the political realm, an unease

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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).


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 *Incroyables* 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


\(^{26}\) For an example of this approach, see McNair Wilson, *The Gipsy-Queen of Paris*, esp. chaps. 10 and 11.

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,
moved 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 histori-
cal 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 his-
torical figures as we eradicate that moralistic tone that too often influ-
ences our assessment of their significance.

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28. Maïté Bouyssy makes a similar argument, suggesting that Thérésia’s biogra-
phers have, in fact, refused to acknowledge her power and independence. “Thérésia
Cabarrus, de l’instruction des filles.” Annales historiques de la Révolution française 344
2006.