

Flavie Leroux, *La Marquise de Verneuil. Maîtresse d'Henri IV, Paris (Fayard) 2023, 320 p. (Lieux et expressions du pouvoir), ISBN 978-2-213-72096-8, EUR 23,00.*

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An expert on French royal mistresses and the resulting blended families, Flavie Leroux set out to write an objective biography of Henriette de Balsac d'Entragues (c. 1579–1638), one of the many mothers of Henri IV's illegitimate children. Like other scholars seeking to fairly appraise the lives of women whose reputations have rested largely on narratives intended to demonize them, Leroux has combed the archives for contemporary reports and financial and legal documents that reveal Henriette's own agency, especially after Henri IV's assassination. The book comprises nine chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, an index of persons, and a short essay on sources followed by a bibliography of archival, primary, and secondary materials.

With no male heir in the offing, the Valois line was doomed. In 1572, Henri of Bourbon, heir presumptive, wed Valois princess, Marguerite, to tie the new line to the old. King Henri III, moreover, named Navarre as his heir, but Henri IV nonetheless had to establish himself in power, first dealing with the religious issue, then by assuring dynastic continuity. At his 1589 accession, his marriage bore no fruit. Henri had children with mistresses, and Gabrielle d'Estrées, with whom he was deeply in love, produced a son, César, in 1594. The king hoped to divorce Marguerite and marry her. But her unexpected death ended that dream, while creating space for Henriette. Anne Boleyn extracted a promise of marriage from Henry VIII and Henriette's father received a written pledge to that effect, on the condition that she bear a healthy son within six months. Her pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth, but clearly, as Leroux points out, Henri never intended to keep his word, as negotiations progressed for his marriage to Marie de' Medici, which took place in 1600.

Henriette continued as mistress and learned to survive in the shifting sands of the court. There were tensions between mistress and queen, but Leroux properly contextualizes them more broadly than merely binary, for Henri found it useful to play women, and their adherents, off against one another. Mistresses had powerful connections through kinship or court position. Marie Touchet, before marrying Henriette's father, François de Balsac, bore a son to Charles IX and Leroux explores the difficulties caused by her royal half-brother, Charles, duc d'Angoulême.

Henri gave Henriette lands and titles, but he asserted control when he wished. She was implicated in a conspiracy based upon that marriage promise. After producing a healthy son, Gaston-



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Henri, in 1601, the same year the queen birthed the future Louis XIII, her father and half-brother proclaimed that Gaston-Henri be made the dauphin and Louis declared illegitimate. Extensive court records indicate the parts each played, the possible involvement of foreign agents, and Henriette's being called to testify. She escaped severe punishment but her male relatives did not, her father retreating to his estates and her half-brother sent to the Bastille. Henriette remained in the king's sights, no longer his main mistress, her status being, as Leroux puts it, mother to royal offspring, a daughter having been born in 1603. The children were raised with the king's other progeny, legitimate and not; some, but not all, legitimized. Here too Henri held all the cards, occasionally refusing Henriette permission to visit them.

After Henri's assassination in 1610, Henriette did not experience retribution from the queen. What came instead was the bombshell insinuation that she was involved in the murder plot. Again, she was in the public eye and interrogations followed, but Leroux concludes that available documentation does not permit a reliable conclusion about who was involved in the scheme. From Henriette's later behavior it seems unlikely she would want to cut off her means of support.

The book's final chapters treating Henriette's later life are in certain respects the most interesting. While not providing revelations on matters of state or life at court, documentation shows how this unmarried former royal mistress conducted her life over the next 25 years, dealing expertly with her agents in managing her Parisian residence and her estates and planning her legacy. Leroux notes her almost total absence from reports about court life in these years, indicating a conscious decision to stay away, as it certainly saved money and intrigue. Inventories reveal possessions and interior décor, from which Leroux concludes that Henriette kept up appearances. She contemplated her children's futures: Gaston-Henri, legitimated in 1603, had an ecclesiastical career before a childless late-in-life marriage. Securing a suitable marriage for her daughter Gabrielle Angélique preoccupied her practically from infancy. Two initial projects didn't pan out, but she remained at court as Louis XIII's queen Anne of Austria befriended her. When, in 1622, the queen again miscarried, imputed to her companions' rambunctious behavior, Gabrielle Angélique was sent away. Shortly thereafter she married Bernard de Nogaret, duc d'Épernon and Henriette re-emerged for the ceremonies, occupying a prominent place at court. The couple had two children, Anne Louise and Louis, but Gabrielle Angélique died shortly after the latter's birth, aged 24. After some marriage projects, Anne Louise became a Carmelite nun and Louis died unmarried at age 30. Henriette had considered the possibility that she might lack descendants, and thought about her sister's son, who was a Bishop and childless, as well as the children of her father's first wife. But concerned for her own salvation, she acted like many of the era's women of means by directing her resources to found a convent, contributing to other religious institutions, and providing for her own burial.



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Royal mistresses provide a rich subject for study because their presence is acknowledged, since a king effectively conducts his intimate life largely in public. Some relations were fleeting while others endured and constituted perhaps a sovereign's love interest as emotional attachments in arranged marriages were hit or miss. As this case makes clear, the lovers were not the only ones with an interest in the affair and that could create difficulties. Illegitimate royal children generally attained important ecclesiastical positions or married well and within a generation or two there is little difference in status with their legitimate relatives. Leroux's book demonstrates how persistence in finding and interpreting sources to flesh out the life of someone largely ignored produces an exemplary picture of how the *marquise* managed when on her own.



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