
H-France Review Vol. 14 (September 2014), No. 139

Rosamond Hooper-Hammersley, *The Hunt after Jeanne-Antoinette de Pompadour: Patronage, Politics, Art, and the French Enlightenment*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011. xv + 397 pp. 2011. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978 0 7391 4963 8.

Review by Jennifer Germann, Ithaca College.

It may seem no small irony that Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour, one of the most well-known eighteenth century women (second, perhaps, only to Marie Antoinette) still needs to be “hunted after.” She was the woman whose memory Jacques-Louis David’s students rallied against (“Pompadour, Van Loo, Rococo”), who was dubbed the “godmother and the queen of the rococo” by the Goncourt brothers, and whose patronage was celebrated in exhibitions in Munich, Versailles, and London in 2002-2003.[1] Rosamond Hooper-Hammersley argues that Pompadour’s “place on the balance sheet has been overlooked”(p. 1), particularly by historians, and that “the historical timeline of France from 1745 to 1764 bears the unforgettable imprint and face of the marquise who weathered so much”(p. 2). Her first two chapters address Pompadour’s background, her preparation for court, and her earliest years at Versailles. The next three chapters deal with specific aspects of Pompadour’s activities and patronage. A subtheme throughout is that Pompadour embodies a “paradox” that historians have not adequately engaged, and which she addresses in chapter six. Here she argues that Pompadour crafted a remarkable career despite the striking levels of personal invective and courtly intrigue that she confronted at every juncture. Hooper-Hammersley demonstrates that there are still many areas of Pompadour’s biography and activity that need investigation, including the full extent of her art patronage and diplomatic activity.

In chapter one, Hooper-Hammersley charts Pompadour’s rise to prominence. She argues that Pompadour was no mere Venus (referring to Boucher’s 1751 *Toilette of Venus*), but rather “one who pressed art to the service of the state” (p. 27). An important contribution of this volume is Hooper-Hammersley’s convincing argument that Pompadour’s parentage was never doubted by herself or her family. Instead, she argues that it was politically useful for both pro- and anti-Pompadour factions to cultivate the confusion about her paternity among François Poisson, Charles Lenormant de Tournehem, and Joseph Pâris-Duverney. For courtiers, the question of the royal mistress’s parentage “was a way to sully her reputation without needing any evidence of wrong-doing on her (or anyone’s) part” (p. 55). In turn, the *fermiers généraux* “stood to strengthen their [position], to engineer claims of Pompadour as one of their own” (p. 55). Her analysis reveals that Pompadour’s position at court was actually assured by this position between the “money men” and the power of the throne. As the author argues, Pompadour “provided a conduit through which the rising influence of *les fermier généraux* on ministerial functions at Versailles in 1745 was funneled” (p. 31), which reveals how her questionable birth could be understood as an advantage for the king.

The second chapter deals with Pompadour’s first years at court, from her presentation in 1745 to the period between 1748 to 1752, during which the sexual relationship with the king ended and she made her first forays into politics. Hooper-Hammersley notes that Pompadour’s career as mistress was shaped at the outset by men, but the author concludes that what sustained her throughout the nineteen-year period as royal mistress was “her love and devotion which bound her to the king,” a devotion marked by

her “fidelity,” a characteristic that bound her also to family and friends (p. 104). What the author demonstrates is that aside from the king’s personal affection, Madame de Pompadour was useful to him in other ways. She brought money (from the financiers) and charm to a king who needed both, paving the way in the coming years for him to pursue his wars, to build alliances, and to conclude peace after the War of Austrian Succession.

Given the significant historical territory it covers, chapter three is surprisingly short. This includes Pompadour’s transition from royal lover to friend, her activity in relation to the *billets de confession* crisis, and her active engagement with military planning and international diplomacy from the War of the Austrian Succession through the Seven Years’ War. Hooper-Hammersley traces the transformation of Pompadour’s role at court from mistress to “de facto prime minister,” arguing that Pompadour could only have achieved that last after her sexual relationship with the king had ended. She does not develop or pursue this very suggestive claim, which is a shame because it offers an interesting parallel to Madame de Maintenon’s position in the court of Louis XIV and would have provided a potentially useful way to think about gender and sexuality in relation to power and authority. Instead, she pursues the close relations between the royal mistress, Count von Kaunitz, and Count von Starhemberg as they interceded for Louis XV and Maria Theresa, leading to the Diplomatic Revolution of 1756.

In chapter four, Hooper-Hammersley turns to Madame de Pompadour’s extensive art patronage, which was and is notable for its variety, high quality, and expense. Both visual and literary artists praised Pompadour’s unceasing engagement with the arts, and the chapter opens with a discussion of Carle Vanloo’s painting, *Les Arts suppliants* (1765), exhibited after her death. The author’s aim is to argue that Pompadour’s “patronage established her as an instrument through which some portion of the magisterial nature of Louis XV’s tarnished monarchy was restored” (p. 194), although Hooper-Hammersley does not account for the equal measure of criticism Pompadour’s spending incurred. She traces several examples of Pompadour’s patronage, linking the iconography to her personal interests, but she does not contextualize this activity in relation to other figures of the period. This is a missed opportunity, as it would be useful to address Pompadour’s efforts in relation to the few male and female patrons to whom she can be compared both within and outside of France.^[2] More problematically, the author asserts that Pompadour’s “dazzling ascent to power broke barriers in which she weakened the supremacy of a male world” (p. 194). This argument is not well supported, and, indeed, Pompadour’s own actions militated against such an interpretation. She did not actively promote women in the arts, did not attempt to found any institutions for girls or women (although she did support St. Cyr), and she did not create a path for other women to follow. Pompadour stood apart as the power of the many women at Louis XV’s court was fragmented. While her impact on French artists and taste is certainly demonstrated by her wide-ranging patronage, she appears quite singular as a lone female figure surrounded by the male artists and writers with whom she was most associated.

Chapter five details two key aspects of Pompadour’s activity in the political and cultural life of France during the 1750s. Hooper-Hammersley examines Pompadour’s anti-Jesuit stance and her relationship with Enlightenment authors in light of her “religious conversion” (p. 303). The author asserts that Pompadour’s religious devotion directly influenced her activity in the last decade of her life, despite the seeming contradictions between that and her apparently pro-Jansenist or philosophically-liberal actions. She states that the “breadth of Pompadour’s religious artistic commissions, her commitment to France’s political fate, and her abiding love of the king are tied to her ultimate shift toward faith, no matter what the cost” (p. 314). The various forms of support Pompadour offered included interventions with the king, possible collusion with Malesherbes in hiding volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, and references within Pompadour’s publicly-exhibited portrait by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. In addition, Hooper-Hammersley writes that “Pompadour’s support of the *Encyclopédie* was achieved through the gatherings she hosted at Versailles” (p. 306). Unfortunately, she does not relay anything about these gatherings except to note that Pompadour presided over Quesnay’s gatherings “as salonnière” (p. 321). She does, however, reject the notion that Pompadour’s conversion was “just politics,” instead viewing it as sincere,

particularly in the wake of the end of her sexual relationship with the king (around 1750) and the deaths of her father (1754) and daughter (1755). In light of her discussion, it seems that Pompadour may have been playing a double game. She lobbied to have herself placed in the devout queen's household (which Marie Leszczinska protested, despite what Hooper-Hammersley sees as their "fraternity" (p. 312), though surely she means sorority?) but she may also have seen this as a way to cultivate the trust of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria (p. 312), therefore becoming useful in French diplomacy. Hooper-Hammersley's account suggests that Pompadour's anti-Jesuit position was the linchpin between her newfound faith and her pro-Enlightenment position. It would have been helpful for her to pursue this line of inquiry directly, but instead she turns to an example of Pompadour's support of Francois Quesnay's Physiocracy in relation to her interest in *chinoiserie*.

Hooper-Hammersley's concluding thoughts are offered in two parts. In chapter six, she addresses what she calls the "Pompadour paradox," and in her Conclusion, which returns us to her larger argument, she argues that "previous assessments dismissive of Pompadour's achievements as either trifling or unwarranted are erroneous and misleading" (p. 353). The "paradox" is not something that her contemporaries seem to have perceived but rather something that historians should wrestle with as a part of Pompadour's historical legacy. Hooper-Hammersley offers an impassioned defense of Pompadour's importance, arguing that "she was not the lascivious mistress she has long been purported to be" but rather "a successful, if unofficial, 'first minister of the arts', as well as a figure of political skill" (p. 360).

Despite her demonstration of Pompadour's historical importance, the author's selection and use of primary and secondary source materials troubled this reviewer. In a work with such a broad scope, the author necessarily relies on secondary material. She demonstrates a marked preference for significantly older sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it is surprising not to find Michael Antoine's 1989 biography of Louis XV, André Picciola's admittedly sympathetic biography of the Comte de Maurepas (1999), Darrin M. McMahon's *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*, or Margaret Hunt's 2009 *Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe*.^[3] While she does cite some of the very rich and more recent literature in art history, she relies heavily on Danielle Rice's 1984 essay, "Women in the Visual Arts," which she uses to assert inaccurately that there has been a lack of art historical scholarly interest.^[4] Her practice of using memoirs that are generally regarded as later inventions undermines her argument as she weaves quotations from these sources into her text with quotations from accepted primary sources.^[5] Particularly disturbing is her habit of quoting extensive (and presumably fabricated) dialogue, such as when she quotes a passage from the Du Hausset memoirs that claims Louis XV commented that the Dauphin was "of Polish disposition" (p. 101). In addition, I would note that this monograph could have used more editorial attention. There are multiple spelling errors, transposed digits that lead to wholly inaccurate dates, some strange word choices, and at least two instances of the repetition of the same quotation from two different sources on adjacent pages (see pp. 158-159 and 159-160). In other cases, the confusion is wrought by the author's presentation of the material, as for example in her discussion of Pompadour's letters to the Archbishop Christophe de Beaumont regarding the enforcement of the *billets de confession* (see p. 168). It is not clear what Pompadour is advocating for, charity or firmness.

There is a lot going on in this book which makes sense given the argument, but at times the material gets away from the author, who might have been able to do more with a narrower focus. Hooper-Hammersley has offered an impassioned defense of Madame de Pompadour, and she enriches our understanding of Pompadour's early life in particular. I would recommend this book to advanced graduate students and specialists in the field as it does add to our knowledge of this important figure but requires significant grounding in the personalities and events in question.

NOTES

[1] E. and J. Goncourt, *Madame de Pompadour* (Paris: Oliver Orban Eds., 1982 [1878]), p. 309. The exhibition traveled under different names. In Munich it was called “Madame de Pompadour—l’art et l’amour,” and at Versailles it was “Madame de Pompadour et les arts.” In London, it was titled “Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress.”

[2] See for example, Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam, eds., *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), Colin Bailey’s *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002) and Michael Yonan’s *Empress Maria Theresa and the Politics of Habsburg Imperial Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

[3] Michael Antoine, *Louis XV* (Paris: Fayard, 1989); André Picciola, *Le comte de Maurepas: Versailles et l’Europe à la fin de l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Perrin, 1999); Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Margaret Hunt, *Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: Longman, 2009). Also missing is Kathryn Norberg, “Women of Versailles, 1682-1789,” in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[4] Danielle Rice, “Women in the Visual Arts,” *Women and the Enlightenment*, ed. Samia Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 360. She notes Ewa Lajer-Burcharth’s review of the 2002 exhibition, “A Woman’s Worth—Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV’s influential mistress, excelled as a patron of the arts,” in *Art in America* 91: 4 (2003), but not her more substantial essay “Pompadour’s Touch: Difference in Representation,” in *Representations* 73 (2001). She also does not cite Katie Scott’s or Mary Sheriff’s essays from the journal *Art History* (2005).

[5] The texts in question are Madame du Hausset, *Lettres de Madame de Pompadour, depuis 1746 jusqu’à 1752* (New York City: Brentano’s, 1928) and the *Lettres de Madame de Pompadour* (which may be *Lettres de Madame de Pompadour à Choiseul, ambassadeur à Rome*, published by Général Piépape, (Revue de Versailles, 19ème année, 1917) in the bibliography or *Lettres de Mme la Marquise de Pompadour, depuis 1746 jusqu’à 1752, inclusivement* (London: G. Owen, 1985, vols. I and II) in footnote 41, p. 18, from her introduction but not included in the bibliography), the reliability of which she discusses on pp. 8-10. The lack of clarity regarding the second collection compounds the problem of accepting them as useful historical sources. She defends her use of these sources in her introduction, arguing that “While these are not particularly reliable primary documents, they are potentially valuable provided we acknowledge the questionable authorship” (p. 9). However, she does not revisit the issue clearly later in the monograph, instead weaving quotations from them throughout her text without question.

Jennifer Germann
Ithaca College
jgermann@ithaca.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print

form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172