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Mark Bryant, *Queen of Versailles: Madame de Maintenon, First Lady of Louis XIV's France*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. vii + 557 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 CAD (cl). ISBN 9780228003397.

Review by Christine Adams, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Historians of Louis XIV's France have long been awaiting Mark Bryant's *chef d'oeuvre* on the Marquise de Maintenon, Louis's second--and morganatic--wife. We are fortunate that Bryant was willing to put in the time to research and write such a comprehensive tome and lucky that McGill-Queen was willing to publish a book much longer than the usual 100,000-word monograph presses prefer. In the book, he sets out to paint an accurate picture of Maintenon's political influence as Louis's wife, while acknowledging that she "remains an obscure figure" for many reasons (p. 16), including the fact that many of her letters were destroyed in a fire at the Louvre in 1890 (p. 396n26). Bryant approaches his task in two ways: first, by seeming to have read every piece of correspondence that the marquise wrote and received (and that still exist), along with every other relevant contemporary document; and second, by engaging vigorously with the existing historiography, parts of which he accepts, and parts of which he challenges.

This is a political biography focused on Maintenon's life as Louis's consort, and eventually, his most trusted adviser. Bryant relates the first forty-five years of her life, from 1635 to 1680, in a chapter of twenty pages, briefly covering her impoverished background as the daughter of a felon, her unsettled and complicated upbringing among often unwilling relatives, her early life as a Protestant eventually badgered into converting to Catholicism, her marriage at a young age to the famous burlesque writer Paul Scarron, and her dependence on the kindness of friends as a young widow. He emphasizes the beauty and appealing personality that found her friends and protectors and brought her into the salon orbit of the king's mistress, Madame de Montespan. From there, Bryant traces how she became Louis's "Favourite Courtier and Secret Consort, 1680-1683" (chapter two), moving from her role as governess to Louis's natural children with Montespan to the king's romantic interest and confidante. Bryant rejects as unlikely the conclusion of some historians that Louis and Maintenon had been sexually involved since the 1670s. In fact, he suggests that it was "improbable, with the queen still alive, and considering that Maintenon was renowned for her probity" (p. 62), that Maintenon and the king began a sexual relationship prior to their secret marriage, which, based on the tone of her correspondence and other evidence, he convincingly dates to October of 1683, as do a number of other historians. The marriage was widely known, but never publicly acknowledged.

Chapter three, “‘Becoming Visible,’ 1684-1689,” examines Maintenon’s growing prominence at court. The constraints of a secret marriage meant that she had to develop her own networks and interests; of these, her most important and enduring interest was the school for young noblewomen at Saint-Cyr, whose location was moved closer to Versailles in 1685. Bryant argues that “managing Saint-Cyr significantly bolstered Maintenon’s confidence as well as her standing at court, for it was an unbridled display of the king’s favour” (p. 75). She gradually became an influential member of Louis’s inner circle and was tacitly accepted as consort by the late 1680s, which paved the way for her to become one of his most trusted political advisers, despite Louis’s vocal aversion to allowing a woman that role. Bryant does not see her path to the position as a linear one, but rather “erratic and complex,” since “Maintenon would constantly be hampered by humility, inexperience, competition, criticism, and a king who wanted advice but not direction” (p. 95). “The Evolution of the Marquise’s *Métier*, 1690-1695” is the subject of chapter four. While Bryant claims that Maintenon’s influence was restricted to religious affairs in the 1690s—early in their relationship, Maintenon had focused on the moral reform of the king and his court, and religion remained a powerful basis of their relationship—the fact that religious and state affairs were inseparable drew her into politics more generally. Louis began working with his ministers and advisers in the marquise’s apartments, and, over time, she became an integral member of his government.

“The Eruption of the Quietist Controversy, 1695-1697,” which Bryant treats in chapter five, presents Maintenon in a less than flattering light, as she abandoned erstwhile friends such as Madame Guyon and Fénelon to preserve her own position vis-à-vis the king. While critical of her callous behavior, Bryant asks, “Could she have possibly preserved her position and reputation and the king’s esteem while openly throwing her considerable weight behind such a sensitive issue that had already engendered impassioned and schismatic debate?” (p. 167). And certainly, she comes off no worse than Bossuet, Fénelon, or indeed Louis himself. In his continued analysis of the controversy in chapter six, “Quietism Vanquished, but Heresy Endures, 1697-1699,” Bryant demonstrates that Maintenon came close to losing the confidence of her royal husband because of her sometimes maladroit “meddling” in the Quietist affair (p. 181). However, by 1699, she had regained her favored position; to the horror of the king’s sister-in-law Liselotte, Duchess of Orléans, who detested Maintenon, Louis showed his wife unheard-of deference.

The final four chapters of the book turn to the marquise’s “quasi-ministerial influence and power between 1700 and 1715 and . . . her efforts to alleviate the virtually insupportable monarchical burdens shouldered by Louis XIV, whose self-confidence was repeatedly challenged and at times undermined” (p. 214). Chapter seven, “1700-1709, Part One: ‘Mother of the State’ and ‘Protectress of the Realm,’” draws its title from soldiers who addressed her in this fashion when they wrote to request help during the War of the Spanish Succession and focuses on her role as wartime adviser. During these years, which pitted France and Spain against much of Europe, Louis came to rely even more heavily on Maintenon, and “she was expected to carry out an even broader range of matriarchal functions, monarchical duties, and ministerial tasks” (p. 269). The following chapter, “1700-1709, Part Two: Queen of the Court and ‘Mother of the Church,’” looks at her personal life within the royal family and her life at court more generally. The marquise devoted herself to the king and his needs despite her frustrations at his enormous appetite that threatened his health and his tendency to valorize his own needs and comforts over hers. But she sought to alleviate the burden that government business imposed on him to the extent she could. Maintenon was also recognized as the most influential conduit to the king’s favor, and was, as a

result, constantly subject to the importuning of relatives, friends, and courtiers desirous of the pensions and positions she might solicit on their behalf.

Chapter nine, “1709-1715, Part One: ‘La Toute Puissante,’ or Waning Influence?,” considers the conflicting historiography for these years, as some historians claim that Maintenon’s influence expanded after 1709, while others see it contracting. Bryant finds evidence for both interpretations, but argues that Louis’s increasing volatility in his later years “made Maintenon’s involvement even more important because she provided a degree of independence and balance” (p. 344). The final chapter “1709-1715, Part Two: The ‘Universal Abbess’: Mortal Challenges and the Jansenist Crises,” looks at Maintenon’s maneuvering in the two greatest crises of Louis’s final years: the “year of sorrows,” 1709, plagued by cold weather and famine, as well as the revival of the Jansenist controversy. Maintenon had become the focus of popular hatred by this point: “Her adverse influence was held responsible for the army’s poor performance,” since, according to public opinion, she exercised undue influence over the king. The public also blamed Maintenon for the weather and ensuing subsistence crises, claiming that “she had brought about the widespread misery by offending God” (p. 350). Still, she worked hard to alleviate the food scarcity in the country, distributing alms and trying to encourage the king to be more frugal. Her intervention in the Jansenist affair was less helpful; the disputes caused by the papal bull *Unigenitus*, which Louis had requested, would continue to fester over the course of the eighteenth century.

A clear goal of this book is to evaluate the many myths about Maintenon and to reassess the nature of her role. Bryant’s analysis is deeply embedded in contemporary understandings of Maintenon’s influence, positive and negative, as well as the abundant historiography about her. More nuanced views on women and power at the early modern court that have emerged in the scholarship in recent decades also shape his work. Bryant challenges the popular notion that Maintenon brought about the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, arguing that she was neither a “miserable crusading bigot set on converting the court into a puritanical priory” nor a “malicious Machiavellian aiming to dominate Louis XIV’s spiritual and political affairs” (p. 47). Bryant contends that while she “welcomed the prospect of the reunification of the French Catholic Church” that triggered the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685, “she could not be held directly accountable for the Revocation itself” (p. 57).

This is not to say that Bryant’s view of Maintenon is in any way hagiographical. He acknowledges her ruthlessness with regard to religious conversions, especially her intense pressure on members of her family to convert in order to spare her the embarrassment of having Huguenot relatives. She was also, like most early modern courtiers, quite assiduous, even greedy, in seeking financial security for herself as soon as she was ensconced at court (in part, Bryant suggests, a reflection of her impoverished past), as well as requesting patronage for family members and friends, including her worthless brother Charles. Bryant is also honest in assessing her political maneuvering and the value of her political advice. Her machinations in the religious realm, both during the Quietist and Jansenist controversies, were neither skilled nor helpful, and, in the former case, served primarily to preserve her own position at the expense of others. And while she sought to serve the king, she was also capable of acting independently and hiding information from him, especially as his depressive tendencies and indecisiveness became more pronounced later in his reign. More generally, Bryant finds that “in spite of her benign aspirations, her exertions sometimes reaped unfavourable results” (p. 269).

Bryant refutes scholars such as François Bluche, who underplay the marquise's influence, or who, like Jean Cordelier, argue that "Louis XIV did not want Mme de Maintenon in his government, he wanted her in his bed" (p. 13). He carefully parses Maintenon's own efforts to hide her influence behind the language of gender, accepting "her subordinate status as a woman," which "she often manipulated . . . to her advantage" (p. 220). This undoubtedly reflected her internalization of social mores about the appropriate role of women, but also her fear both of Louis's dislike of women "meddling" in state affairs and of inciting more intense public hatred. Bryant suggests, however, that "Maintenon found elements of the imbalance between the genders irksome"; she acknowledged at one point that "men are not perfect" (p. 221). The grueling and complicated schedule she maintained as Louis's consort clearly pushed her to her limits.

This is an important book, but it is not an easily accessible one. Bryant assumes that the reader comes to the text with background knowledge of the history of Louis XIV's court and of its main players. Names come thick and fast, and more contextualization and sign posting would have been useful at times. While Bryant is a clear and lucid writer, the finer points of the Quietist affair, the ins-and-outs of the War of the Spanish Succession, and the minutiae of the Jansenist controversy can leave the reader flipping back and forth between pages to identify individuals and trace arguments. While the abundant information is a service to researchers, it can be difficult to follow the narrative thread, and Maintenon herself sometimes disappears into the details.

Bryant's book is based on evidence that many other scholars have considered over the years rather than newly unearthed materials. His argument that "Maintenon's influence did rival that of ministers during this period because she was able to modify religious, financial, domestic, military, and foreign policies, intervene directly in events and necessarily in certain crises, and affect the appointment of secretaries of state, chancellors, marshals, ambassadors, bishops, cardinals, royal advisers, governors, and tutors" is not necessarily an original one (p. 21). But his assertion of the importance of contingency in history is compelling and useful to reiterate: that "Maintenon almost accidentally became an integral, then central, and finally pivotal part of the world of the French court, the private life of Louis XIV, and the state system over which he presided" is a point well taken (p. 21). He goes on to specify that "The king unwittingly allowed this to happen because [Maintenon] was a shrewd, discreet, and altruistic adjutant in whom he could place his trust and with whom he could converse frankly on equal intellectual terms, impelling him increasingly to seek her views on his personal and official affairs" (p. 21). Bryant effectively puts to rest the idea that Maintenon came to her position with a grand scheme to manipulate Louis and to govern the country through him, while acknowledging her essential political role in the final thirty years of his reign. This deeply researched and extremely valuable book should stand as the definitive work for years to come on Maintenon's role as Louis XIV's consort.

Christine Adams
St. Mary's College of Maryland
cmadams@smcm.edu

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