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Philip Mansel, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. xxxvi + 604 pp. Maps, illustrations, genealogies, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-69089-6; \$34.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-226-69092-6.

Review by Guy Rowlands, University of St Andrews.

Is Philip Mansel's book a biography, or something else? Is it as accurate and effective a consideration of a momentous period of French history as we should expect from a book published in America by a major university press? Does it justify its somewhat modish title, with an enormous courtly genuflection to global history? Readers certainly get to know Louis the man quite well, though not as well as they should from a book of such length. Nevertheless, anyone with prior knowledge of the reign who hopes this study will improve their understanding of the regime as a whole will come away still feeling very hungry. This is a book squarely aimed at the well-educated general public.

Problematic for an academic readership is that the author does not clearly situate his work in the flourishing world of *louisquatorzien* studies. It would certainly have been helpful at the start to have had at least a page or two on how Mansel sees the historiography of Louis XIV over the last 300 years. He does, though, reveal on page one the questions that have driven him to write this book, describing Louis XIV as "an argument" (or surely a series of arguments?): "How could such a civilized man, exceptionally considerate to women...order acts of barbarism against French Protestants and France's neighbors? Was Louis le Grand, as he was called from 1680, master or instrument of his court, his ministers, and his financiers? Did he leave France stronger or weaker?" These are good questions around which to hang a general biography, but not altogether those that have preoccupied leading scholars of the reign in recent decades. Healthy chunks of the book are devoted well to the Huguenots, and a substantial number of pages examine the king's youth in a very convincing manner, concluding as firmly as anyone can that Louis XIV was the son of Louis XIII. We are also presented with useful summaries of issues surrounding high culture and, with far greater brevity, kingship and religion. When it comes to the court, Mansel, a founder and leading-light of the UK, EU, and North American Society for Court Studies, dazzles. But any study of Louis XIV also needs to tackle war, international relations, the armed forces, and money in an effective and sure-footed manner. The king of France was a *roi de guerre* as well as a *roi de faste*, but he was also *le roi très chrétien* and administrator of his kingdom, both as *roi officier* and as *roi seigneur*. Any biographer has to tackle all these roles in depth.

There are many merits to this book, especially for someone who might not have read a study of Louis XIV before. It is probably the single best "life and times" study of the Sun King in English

(though bettered by several titles in French).^[1] Certainly, one cannot expect profound, searching, and complicated explanation in a book pitched at the general public, even from someone with Mansel's scholarly track record. But a review for H-France of a book that should not be ignored as a "trade" publication needs to advertise both its merits and its pitfalls for academic readers. So how well does this book stand up to close scrutiny? On the minus side, some general observations need advancing at this point. Too often, all kinds of matters are dangled before us, but we are then whisked away onto the next thing (warning: this book requires any reader to absorb multiple facts in every paragraph), or we are left with only a superficial appreciation of an issue. Sometimes there is evidence of misreading of detailed scholarship; some serious works published in the three years after the tercentenary of the king's death (giving Mansel enough time to have consulted them before turning in the manuscript) seem not to have been mined ^[2]; footnotes too often reveal material drawn from either old and outdated works or occasionally ones of doubtful intellectual authority (but impeccable social credentials) ^[3]; and there are too many factual errors for a book of such ostensible importance (see below). These are natural perils for a biographer who has not already spent decades mastering and writing monographs on the immediate field, nor ploughed through the archives for this subject for more than a handful of weeks.

More frustrating, the book seems to wander off-focus on many occasions, and it does not help that all too frequently topics are tackled in very short paragraphs, while whole sections of some chapters lose all sense of argument and order. Sometimes diversions do at least provide a useful sense of how significant a factor Louis XIV was in other places. Yet at other times information about some other issues or person leads us nowhere in particular. There are simply a large number of detailed digressions about this prince or that duchess, to the point at which even this *gourmand* for the constellation of the French aristocracy felt overfed. What Mansel does with this is stimulate a feel for the *Zeitgeist*, but there are other ways of achieving immersion, and some of the problems with this book arise from paths not taken.

Unfortunately, anyone writing a biography of Louis XIV is faced with a torrent of gossip and unverifiable assertions about individuals, abounding in the diaries and memoirs which became so much more prevalent in France at this time. It is a strong-willed scholar who is not tempted to use this juicy material. Happily, while Mansel is clearly trying to write a work of accessible history, his language does hedge whether such and such an anecdote should be believed: Every so often I felt I caught our story-teller winking at us with a hint of healthy scepticism. However, too much recitation of tittle-tattle can be the equivalent of daubing on face paint as thickly as an eighteenth-century courtier. The cumulative effect is that the colorful but toxic surface then becomes the reality. When entertaining tales and distracting digressions come at the expense of space that could have been devoted to deeper explorations of character, interpersonal relations, work practices, policies, and health, then our appreciation of the Sun King can be skewed to the unimportant, the superficial, and the tangential. There is little doubt, alas, that Mansel's *King of the World* privileges entertainment at the expense of profundity.

Mansel works within the modern historiographical framework, set over three decades ago by Ragnhild Hatton, who cajoled the French and foreigners alike to think of Louis as no more of a monster than some of his fellow monarchs like Emperor Leopold I; and William Beik, who stressed how much Louis XIV's regime was characterized by compromise and cooperation between elites and the crown.^[4] Mansel is equally alert to a range of more recent important developments such as the rise of public opinion. As he communicates with verve, this was a

society that wanted a well-organized and well-advised monarch at its head, but it also contained strong streaks of libertinism and libertarianism and was not receptive to taking too many orders, especially on morality, nor easily censored. It was one of Louis XIV's more impressive characteristics that he knew both how to overawe his subjects and where to draw the line at asserting his sovereignty. Mansel makes clear that his was as much the case when Louis was handling his brother's turbulent household as managing the *parlements* and outlying *pays d'états*. At the same time Mansel does not buy Beik's conflation of a king's party in the localities with the class interest of the nobility, wisely observing that in some places *robins* and *bourgeois* were the tools of the crown, while elsewhere provincial landed nobles or even some of *les grands* (e.g., the Condé princes) did the king's work. Absolute monarchy did not mean uniformity, even if at times it could be exceptionally intrusive and forceful. When the king's government did become more authoritarian and active in the second half of the reign it was fortunate that insurrection and revolution were highly unlikely, because, as Mansel argues, too many people had bought into the regime, many others were cowed by it, and the symbiotic relationship of state, church, privileged elites, and secondary institutions had not yet curdled.

None of this gets much more than a handful of paragraphs, however, and while the thoughts are sound and have some freshness to them, they reveal little new. When Mansel turns to the king himself, then we do gain insights that are energizing. This is certainly the case with the discussions of some of the king's relationships: his closeness to his mother, his decency to his queen (by the standards of most male princes), his respect for his godfather and chief minister Mazarin, and his alternating tenderness and callousness towards his lovers. All are examined with care, sympathy, and flair. The occasional anecdotes about the king's interactions with those outside his immediate circle provide if anything the best glimpses in the book into the king's character. Yet, little attention is given to his fifty-year relationship with Louis the Grand Dauphin. Admittedly this is not easy to get at, as most of their correspondence has disappeared, but especially from the mid-1680s he was one of the key props of his father. So too was the duc du Maine, illegitimate son of Louis XIV by Madame de Montespan, not only a significant military administrator but someone who, judging by his voluminous extant papers, had a shrewder understanding of how to handle his father than any other official. His brother the comte de Toulouse even led a French fleet in a major sea battle. Alas, we learn only a few outline facts from Mansel about the royal bastards, possibly the king's greatest clients.

So, who was this man who ruled for so long? On the one hand, Louis XIV could chat with anyone. He was exceptionally warm and had a remarkable ability to put people at their ease, eliciting surprising frankness from them. On the other hand, Mansel suggests not unfairly that he had a blind spot for the misery that his orders and wars could inflict on hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, especially those whose religion he disdained, the Huguenots, and those he regarded as intrinsically a threat to the harmony of the realm, the lower orders. Mansel makes fairly clear that, as with nearly all princes of the time, there was some kind of psychological barrier that prevented Louis comprehending the magnitude of the problems facing those "*vingt millions de Français*" whom Pierre Goubert focussed upon in a previous study of the king's regime.^[5] It would have been good to see further exploration of the king's social attitudes, however, because he also seems to have failed to sympathize with the legitimate interests of the bourgeois.

Mansel also takes aim at the king's susceptibility to flattery, and his apparently insatiable appetite not only for food but for adulation. It's certainly true that in the first half of his life Louis had

some kind of deep craving for fame, enhanced reputation, and praise, no doubt a product of the awesome insecurity caused by living and reigning through the Frondes, but also surely from fear of Spain resurging? Nevertheless, Mansel is perhaps too ready to cite the king's detractors, even while providing evidence that the king knew full well that some of the sycophancy and adoration was completely ludicrous. Yes, Louis was a showman who might have wanted to hear his courtiers' applause, but too often Mansel decries this as a character defect, rather than seeing it, as Louis definitely did, as a tool of statecraft. Had Mansel made more allowance for and given more attention to the changing personality of the king over a very long personal rule of fifty-four years, the book would have made it much more evident that the Louis XIV of 1700 was not in fact the same man who invaded the Netherlands in 1672. Just as Mansel thinks the youthful Louis was a modest, civilized gentleman who became increasingly hubristic and narcissistic in his thirties, he should have crystallized the notion that this same Louis mellowed considerably and became more inwardly reflective from his mid-fifties, not coincidentally after the 1691 demise of the true evil genius of the reign, the marquis de Louvois, and the onset a year later of a concatenation of natural disasters and strategic setbacks that would stretch to 1696. In fairness, *King of the World* does present some evidence for the king's changing character, but the most important message Mansel sends about the aging king is that he was very far from being the killjoy religious bigot he is still too often depicted as. Certainly, by looking at the king's excursions to the château of Marly, and his adoration of the duchesse de Bourgogne, we get a striking sense of Louis the bountiful and engaging host who encouraged his guests to have some fun and lighten up (within bounds).

This kingly gregariousness is in spite of the onset of health problems that make any modern reader with sensibility wince. Alas, in an area that should be central to any biographer, Mansel ducks serious and sustained engagement. The youthful genito-urinary problems and health scare of 1658 get a mention, as, obligatory for any biography, does the anal fistula crisis of the mid-1680s. But the mounting health strains, mental and physical, in the final twenty years of the reign get scant acknowledgement. This matters for a biography of a monarch who ruled as well as reigned. Louis XIV seems to have had major bouts of depression and insomnia from as early as 1695, and more consistently from 1704, as military setbacks accumulated. How these problems might have affected key decisions is not properly considered.

It is his treatment of the court—at ideal length, spread across one main chapter and several others—that makes Mansel's book worth the read for any historians interested in Louis as a man and a Maecenas. Not only does he capture court culture with aplomb and emphasize just how much court development was stimulated by the aspirations of the aristocracy and Louis's desire to make court life enjoyable, he also has a refrain worth taking very seriously: the Bourbon court was always more open than most of its rivals, but it went from being relatively informal and socially inclusive early in the reign to being more rigid and stratified, especially from the 1680s. This was ominous for the ties that bound the monarchy to its subjects. It would have been helpful had Mansel dwelt more on why the court grew in numbers, footprint, and intensity of activity, for one of his sources, the Savoyard ambassador, the marquis de Saint-Maurice, seems to me to suggest elsewhere that Louis was developing the court in the late 1660s precisely to prevent domination of his person by his ministers. Mansel is less convincing, however, when he occasionally suggests a dichotomy between the court and the state. There was a separation of offices and of activities to a considerable extent, and individuals had to choose whether to be ministers or “professional” courtiers, but the Secretary of State for the Maison du Roi had oversight of the court (along with plenty of leading *grandes familles*) and ministerial families

excelled at placing some of their children into court offices. To suggest Colbert's resistance in 1665 to the king's expenditure on Versailles was a reflection of some teleological tension between court and state is to conflate the state with an austere minister known as "le Nord," a cynic in Oscar Wilde's definition of the word, a utilitarian city-dweller who associated country living with down-time. His master, however, knew it was a powerful lever for building the state and nourishing loyalty to it.

When it comes to the ministers, it is therefore unfortunate that Colbert gets more attention than the rest of them put together, relegating arguably the most influential adviser of them all, Michel Le Tellier, almost to a footnote. The departmental arms of the state, plus foreign and strategic policy and the institutions of the army and navy for which ministers had responsibility, are where the book is at its weakest. Although we learn about the king's working habits with his ministers and councils, this crucial element of Louis XIV's life is given far too little treatment. Deep immersion in the ministerial archives brings out a vast array of information on how Louis managed problems of patronage, resource-allocation, turning down supplicants, handling ministers, constructing policies and strategy, but Mansel has done so little manuscript work that he has to rely on the *corvées* of other historians and even then makes some egregious errors on international politics, state finances, and the armed forces. A few examples will suffice. The galleys are twice dismissed as redundant "obsolete" relics at least a quarter-century before they became so (from the 1730s); command disputes among the generals are misunderstood, and we thereby get erroneous impressions of how hierarchies adapted; the military household corps are misleadingly used as a microcosm for wider patterns of army developments; the essential need for venality in regiments is condemned without the slightest understanding of how officers needed their investments protected to achieve a more sustainable army; hussars emerged in the French army in 1695, not after 1713; milice and regular force recruitment patterns are conflated; Mansel confuses heavy artillery batteries and infantry firing platoons; and on two occasions he has Louis replacing pikes and muskets with "guns and pistols" or "guns with bayonets," as if muskets were not guns and pistols hadn't been used since the 1530s (p. 345, p. 383). Given the huge store Louis placed on the armed forces, even keeping up relentless and detailed running commentaries to women of the court when on manoeuvres, given his close interest in weaponry, his own and those of his forces (I have handled one of his personal flintlock hunting *rifles*, far in advance of its time), Mansel's airy, brief forays into the military world can only be described as a depressing failure to get to grips with substantial issues that mattered to the king.

When it comes to state finances, which Louis regarded as so crucial he carried pocketbooks to keep on top of things, the *capitation* from 1695 was not an income tax but a graduated poll tax; stamped paper, an essential lever for screwing money out of propertied society through its use in legal transactions, is mistaken for paper money; Desmaretz's achievement in merely preventing total collapse is unjustifiably crowned with praise for restoring French finances; and where the figure of 756 million *livres* of expenditure in 1708" comes from is baffling when in reality it was, even taking into account inflationary paper-shuffling by speculators, perhaps one-third of that at most (p. 398).

This is all very frustrating in a study which claims on its cover to be "exceptionally researched, drawing on worldwide archives." It does not come close to deserving this commendation. Nor does the book justify the claim of its title, *King of the World*, or the cover's absurd assertion that Louis came "tantalizingly close" to ruling the world. A chapter on "The Global King" compellingly portrays a marked uptick in interest at the French court in other parts of the world

and myriad exotic cultures. Expeditions were encouraged, not least in the Mississippi Valley; contacts with China were boosted; and Mansel, on very strong ground, argues well for the importance of the Ottomans to Louis XIV. It is also true that efforts to dominate Siam were tantamount to turning it into a French protectorate at around the same time Louis and Louvois were trying to place Savoy under French tutelage. But the aspiration to be a global player, and to be the central focus of world interaction, is not the same as ruling the world. An opportunity to justify the book's title has probably been missed here. For six brief years, 1701-1706, the double-headed Bourbon empire came close to dominating Europe and the Americas, but instead of a deep exploration of how this dynastic conglomerate was guided, we get some discussion of Spanish royal household politics, and precious little on the rest of the empire. But to call Louis "king of the world," even on that basis, would be a level of hyperbole unworthy of a serious study. This is, then, not a study of a ruler aiming at world domination, as the book title implies. Mansel himself recognizes explicitly that the king was not even aiming at total domination within Europe. This is because Louis was fundamentally a pragmatist at heart, and one who changed his priorities, not a few of his attitudes, and his working patterns over the course of a long reign. When Mansel has burrowed deep into Bourbon France, and striven for accuracy and depth, we see at work an outstanding historian, gifted with a feel for the period. Alas, we do not see this scholar often enough in this book.

NOTE

[1] Most notably, Thierry Sarmant, *Louis XIV: Homme et roi* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012) and on the regime, Olivier Chaline, *Le règne de Louis XIV* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).

[2] It is unfortunate that three volumes of essays, in each case commissioned by their editors from the world's current leading experts on aspects of the reign and the king, have not been consulted: (eds) Charles-Édouard Levillain and Sven Externbrink, *Penser l'après Louis XIV. Histoire, mémoires, représentations* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018); (eds) Julia Prest and Guy Rowlands, *The Third Reign of Louis XIV, c.1682-1715* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2017) (though Mark Bryant's essay does seem to have been read); and (ed.) Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (Perrin: Paris, 2015/17). Note also the absence, inter alia, of Isaure Boitel, *L'image noire de Louis XIV: Provinces-Unies, Angleterre, 1668-1715* (Champ Vallon: Ceyzérieu, 2016); and (eds) Hervé Drevillon, Bertrand Fonck and Jean-Philippe Cénat, *Les dernières guerres de Louis XIV: 1688-1715* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes: Rennes, 2017).

[3] For example, it is a wonder, when he plunders rich works of scholarship to discuss other episodes, why Mansel should try to explain the formation of the Grand Alliance in 1701-02 through the derivative, ancestor-worshipping, and at times misleading trade book of Charles (Earl) Spencer: *Blenheim: Battle for Europe. How two men stopped the French conquest of Europe* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson: London, 2005).

[4] See Ragnhild Hatton, *Louis XIV and His World* (New York: Putnam, 1972) and William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[5] Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen* (New York: Pantheon, 1966).

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