
H-France Review Vol. 7 (December 2007), No. 144

Lynn Wood Mollenauer, *Strange Revelations: Magic, Poison and Sacrilege in Louis XIV's France*. Magic in History Series. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. 224 pp. Illustrations. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0271029153; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0271029160.

Review by Orest Ranum, The Johns Hopkins University.

The latest in the distinguished Magic in History series of the Pennsylvania State University Press, Lynn Wood Mollenauer's *Strange Revelations: Magic, Poison and Sacrilege in Louis XIV's France* (2007) is a well-researched and convincing introduction to and nearly definitive book on the subject. This paradoxical fact results from the lack of further sources for research: thus Mollenauer has done just about all that can be done on poisoning and black magic in late seventeenth-century Paris.

After introducing the well-known cast of characters — the poisoners and spellbinders on one side, and the lieutenant of police on the other — Mollenauer turns to the spiral of accusations, arrests and executions that went on before a very curious king, his entourage and the gossip-consuming public. Between 1679 and 1682, 319 arrest warrants and 442 indictments were issued. The melange of aristocrat and commoner, well-off and poor, women and men, and young and old in the various networks (not a “shadow hierarchy,” since there were few socially visible links between high and low practitioners), soon made it apparent that serious crimes such as murder had been committed, and that individuals in high places — most notably the king's mistress, Madame de Montespan — were involved.

It was Alfred Soman who first stressed the important point that the king had a moral duty to enforce his laws and to remove, prosecute, and judge in an established court those who threatened the religious, political, and moral order. What to make of the fact that more women than men seemed to be involved, and that wayward priests were carrying out rituals that had knock-off religious elements?

The chapter on the ways in which elites perceived poisoning (intentional) through the Medea myth offers a major cultural frame for their understanding all these goings-on; but would it not also be correct to remark that an underworld of poisoners and sorcerers existed in Paris across the centuries, and that it was linked to apothecaries, physicians, quacks, and street vendors as part of the urban scene? The difficult question is: were there more of these in the 1670s than, say, in the 1650s, or did they become more apparent as their clients become increasingly loose-tongued and notorious? Or did the police under La Reynie finally become effective enough to carry out such a major “roundup of the usual suspects”? The efforts to “hospitalize” beggars, pickpockets, and prostitutes was hitting its stride in the 1670s, as state supervision of the social order grew stronger.

Put another way, were the poisoners and sorcerers of the 1670s on the cusp of a more permissive social order, or were they survivors of a marginal social component of the large city? L.W. Mollenauer recognizes the importance of Roman Catholic reform and its social programs, but it may have been the new state administration that made it possible to make so many arrests. La Reynie's police power was in no way dismantled as a result of the end of the investigations in 1682.

While the *chambre ardente* established by the king to investigate and prosecute criminal behavior had some quite special features, such as meeting in a torch-lit cellar, other features made it just like any special commission. Consisting of judges carefully picked from other courts, the *chambre ardente* served at “the king's pleasure” (a legal phrase). Commissions usually worked for a few months—or in some cases

for a few years--and were ended by royal order after a few cases of exemplary justice in the form of executions or heavy fines. No one was naive enough to believe that all the tax farmers who had profited from Mazarin's and Fouquet's fiscal shenanigans had been prosecuted and found guilty by the time that particular chambre de justice was terminated. Was the *chambre de justice* ("ardente") created for the Poison Affair stopped by royal order because the king feared that the evidence about Montespan et al. might become public, or did he conclude that the commission had essentially done its work?

L. W. Mollenauer's general framework belongs to the limits-of-absolutism genre which, though convincing, might lead the non-specialist reader to conflate absolutist government with tyranny. In addition to the divine and natural laws limiting the king's powers that were refracted in various institutions, other delegated powers — notably in inheritable venal offices, local estates and the great autonomy of the Gallican Church — bridled royal powers. Did anyone in 1682 remark that the Sun King terminated the *chambre ardente* out of some fear of a loss of authority or a challenge to that authority? The parlements were referred to as sovereign courts because this supported their members' claims to sovereign power; but in fact all their decisions could be appealed and, if the king so ordered, be brought to the Council of State. Litigants with clout at court such as Montespan could be virtually certain to win an appeal of a decision by a parlement.

L. W. Mollenauer reads like the lurid prose of the *Historiae Augustae* or Sallust, when referring to royal power in the king's person. Louis' remark about not permitting favorites to influence decisions of state is quoted (p. 22), but the evidence provided about Montespan's influence over these decisions is very largely about pensions and appointments. Power to influence these was certainly a major element in power tout court; but if Louis' own hierarchy of decisions is kept in mind, affairs of state were peace and war, alliances, justice, and finances, and there would seem to be little evidence of Montespan's influence on these. The Rochecouart-Mortemart family and its allies certainly benefited enormously from having one of its own in the royal bed, but as a favorite her influence cannot be compared with that of Gabrielle d'Estrées, Concini, Puylaurens, and Cinq Mars. While it is difficult to estimate *crédit*, Montespan cannot be considered as influential as Maintenon or Pompadour.

The office of *surintendante* of the Queen's household was probably like the *surintendance des finances*, that is, venal and highly revocable, but it certainly gave Montespan a lot of patronage. The recurring phrase in Mollenauer, *maîtresse en titre*, seems to be just that, a phrase used at court but not an office. Louis placed Montespan among the seated females at court, but did he use that expression or sign any letters-patent calling her his *maîtresse en titre*?

The ordering of crimes from those committed against God, king, and a third party in the Edict of 1682 seems consistent with the jurisprudence for the *cas royaux*. Poisoning as an art remained framed in a language about magic and sorcery, though restrictions on access to such products as arsenic increased. Interestingly, La Voisin and company seemed not to have been called on by women seeking to become pregnant nor by men who wanted to be cured of impotency. Why not?

Finally, having so many women involved in black magic and poisoning could mean only one thing: the failure of education for young women. The church had for centuries battled black magic and would long continue to do so. Enlightenment philosophers took up the task. If we take apart the word "indoctrination," it becomes obvious that lack of doctrine or church teaching had become all too apparent in the Affair of the Poisons. Madame de Maintenon's foundation to educate aristocratic but impecunious girls might be interpreted as a response to women's education in the Grand Siècle.

P.S. Specialists in forensic science have now determined beyond a doubt that Agnès Sorel, Charles VII's famous mistress, was poisoned. But by whom? Or was it an overdose of a remedy?

Orest Ranum The Johns Hopkins University Orestranum@cs.com

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (December 2007), No. 144

ISSN 1553-9172