



L'Envers du grand siècle.
Madame Palatine, le défi au Roi-Soleil
By Thierry Sarmant
Flammarion, 2024
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L'Envers du Grand Siècle. Madame Palatine, le défi au Roi-Soleil. By Thierry Sarmant. Flammarion, 2024. ISBN 978-2-0802-7004-7. 345 pp. €23.90.

Louis XIV and his court have been the subject of countless studies since the end of his reign, the longest in French history (1643–1715). In the eyes of the public, particularly in France, the Sun King stands out as the embodiment of monarchy, the king *par excellence* who expressed his majesty in a setting that entirely reflected his conception of power—the palace of Versailles. Adding an original work to the monumental bibliography on the topic is an ambitious enterprise. However, Sarmant skilfully addressed this challenge by authoring a book that analyses Louis XIV's reign through an overlooked lens, that of “Madame,” the second wife of his younger brother Philippe d'Orléans, Elisabeth-Charlotte (1652–1722). The daughter of the Palatine prince-elect, she married Philippe in 1671 and was a major figure of the French royal family until her death, outliving both Louis XIV and her husband and witnessing the regency of her son in the early years of Louis XV's reign.

This compelling volume written in French, despite some minor flaws, successfully presents a succinct and incisive insight into early-modern court society and its political, cultural, and societal dimensions during the reign of the Sun King, backed with relevant and effectively embedded source material. The style is engaging, enlivened by Madame's often racy comments on court life, quoted from her correspondence addressed to her relatives in Germany, which forms the bulk of primary sources Sarmant relies on. Although the book does not feature footnotes, the author relies on a rigorous analysis of a variety of primary sources that are well embedded in the flow of writing, which will satisfy both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

The book starts with a chapter setting the scene, describing Madame's marriage in 1671, and ends with one that summarises historiographical and cultural developments around the figures of Louis XIV and Madame following their deaths. Apart from these sections, the analysis is organised thematically, covering a wide range of topics in chapters of an optimal length—long enough to be developed with generally convincing analyses, but without expanding into lengthy developments that could disorientate the reader. The studied topics are cleverly connected to each other and the reader smoothly moves on from one section to the next, although it would have been helpful to talk about epistolary exchanges in the early chapters—rather than halfway through the volume—since it explains how most of the primary sources analysed in the book were written.

After the introductory chapters, Sarmant first effectively synthesises *Ancien Régime* social mechanisms. He outlines the complex system of ranks and hierarchies that structured interactions between members of the court, as well as the royal family's willingness to impose its pre-eminence within this cosmos. He then moves on to discuss the relations between members of the royal family, with a particular emphasis on the position of the king's illegitimate children—one of whom, Mademoiselle de Blois, became Madame's daughter-in-law by marrying her son, the future Regent—and his morganatic wife, Madame de Maintenon. The following set of chapters delve into the culture of the Sun King's court, including a brilliant section about the culinary history of the *Grand Siècle*. The author later sketches out geopolitical evolutions in Europe during Madame's life in France and political and cultural connections between the French and German spheres. He concludes his book with a study of religion, noting that neither the king nor his sister-in-law accurately reflected the religiosity of their time, coupled to a chapter about the two figures' approach to their own death. Both their respective wills are also provided as appendices.

Globally, it is worth noting that Sarmant places the French court in a transnational dimension, which helps steer the volume away from the French-centric approach inherent to most francophone studies of the Sun King. The lens of Madame, a member of the Palatine branch of the house of Wittelsbach, enables him to make frequent comparisons with the imperial sphere. Other relevant comparisons include hunting at the French and Chinese courts (159) or the French *Lumières*, whose initial stages coincide with Madame's death, with other Enlightenment movements in other parts of Europe (239). The author could have relied more on non-French literature in this regard, but this can be explained by the fact that the book is addressed mostly at a Francophone audience.

However, some aspects of Sarmant's work are perfectible. Although the reader is properly introduced to all members of the royal family in text and imagery, a family tree would have been helpful to grasp blood relations between them at a glance, which would have spared the author from lengthy paragraphs enumerating children and dates of births (87–88). In addition, the author misses the mark in some of his terminological choices. First, the use of the term Counter-Reform ("*Contre-Réforme*") does not reflect the latest developments in religious history (242). Likewise, Louis XIV's depiction as the "absolute sovereign of an ancient monarchy" (36) and France's description as an "absolute monarchy" (292) evades all historiographic debates about the nature of absolutism. Although it is difficult to comment directly on historiography in a book designed for a

general audience, the author could have avoided the use of these contested terms or explained how their use can no longer be taken for granted.

A few sections could also have been developed further. For example, after stressing the importance of protocol rules at Louis XIV's court, Sarmant touches upon a breach in protocol by Philippe d'Orléans at the reception of the king's future granddaughter-in-law, Marie Adélaïde of Savoy, in 1696. He simply indicates that the monarch quickly excused his brother without hinting at the fact that breaking protocol could, perhaps, have served a political purpose (56). The author also writes that Elisabeth-Charlotte interacted with the "people of Paris," which "tend[ed] to represent the French people as a whole," without giving any justification for this supposed representativeness (77). Finally, although the book is usually successful in highlighting continuities between a seemingly remote "société des princes"—to take Lucien Bély's phrase—and the twenty-first century, some comparisons are clumsy and unnecessary (133, 154), and the rather acrid and simplistic judgement on gender history in the conclusion could have been avoided (290).

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