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Flora Fraser, *Pauline Bonaparte: Venus of Empire*. New York: Anchor Books, 2010. vi + 287 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-307-27793-0.

Review by David Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

It is hard to have a genius in the family. When that genius is Napoleon Bonaparte and he is the family meal ticket the difficulties are multiplied.

The Bonaparte were a big boisterous, aggressive, acquisitive, and ambitious family whose natal Corsica was as far from European civilization as one could be yet still be a part of Europe. Charles Bonaparte, the patriarch, died young in 1785 leaving a widow and eight children ranging in age from one to seventeen. They had their way to make in the world. The older boys had been at best modestly educated. The girls were prepared only for marriage and they had no dowries. (Pauline, as her brother, dictated almost all her letters. Some said because her spelling and grammar were deplorable). Forced from Corsica and living miserably in Marseilles life looked and was bleak. It was the French Revolution that made the family because it made Napoleon, the second son. One can imagine Napoleon had there been no Revolution: living simply even precariously in provincial France, pensioned off as an artillery captain, his dreams of glory unrealized. But what of his siblings? Even such a constrained future was dubious.

By the end of the century Napoleon was the master of France and a military hero. His deep pockets were inexhaustible and his grasping, buccaneering family was rewarded beyond their wildest imagination: money, careers, and soon kingdoms. For the girls, it was only marriage. But in Pauline's case, after her first husband, General Victor-Emmanuel Leclerc died of Yellow Fever she married the scion of the Borgheses, one of the most distinguished Roman families. She was, literally and instantaneously, a princess. "Look at them, Laurette, do look", she told her friend Mme. d'Abrantès at a party. "They [her sisters] are dying of jealousy, for I am a princess, a real princess." [1]

Pauline, born in 1780, was the fifth of Charles and Letitza's living children. She was shakily literate in both French and Italian, inordinately concerned with her *toilette*, obsessed with clothes and jewelry, devoted to pleasure, and a beauty. Metternich, a connoisseur in these matters, declared her "as beautiful as it is possible to be". Antoine-Vincent Arnault, a socially well-connected writer of the day left a more nuanced portrait: "Although she was the most beautiful person one could imagine, she was also the most unreasonable," he wrote. Her conversation was inconsequential as she had "no more deportment than a schoolgirl", she laughed "at nothing and at everything ... contradicted the most serious people and put out her tongue at her sister-in-law when Josephine wasn't looking." Pauline "had no principles and was likely to do the right thing only by caprice." [2]

She did much "only by caprice", and it was not always the right thing. Her early life was precociously flamboyant and wilful but not yet scandalous. She had a passionate affair with Stanislas Fréron, a notorious terrorist, while still in her mid-teens, but until his financial

peculations were exposed the Bonapartes did not seem to object. Napoleon, who made these decisions, thought the proposed match (despite Fréron's mistress and two children) a good one. After the scandal broke Pauline was married off (1797) to the serious, competent, and loyal soldier Leclerc, with whom she appears to have been happy. Their son Dermide – the name was chosen by Napoleon from the forged *Ossian* poems he adored – was born in 1798. She and the baby followed General Leclerc to St. Domingue, his first important command, where she survived an attack of Yellow Fever which he did not; but her health was permanently undermined by the infection.

The trauma of Leclerc's death remained with Pauline for years, reinforced several years later by the premature death of their son. We have a good portrait of her at this time by Jacques de Norvins, an intelligent *émigré* who joined the expedition and was close to the Leclercs. There would be many more, but few as well-written or reliable. She returned to Paris from the pestilential island and threw herself into the social whirl, spending vast sums on her house, herself, and her entertaining. Her precarious health, compounded of the residual effects of Yellow Fever and a difficult and probably botched childbirth, was genuine but became woven into her extravagant selfishness. It was impossible to know whether she played the invalid or was actively distressed. She herself may not have known the precise place of pain in her personality.

The Borghese marriage was arranged by Napoleon who provided a generous dowry. Pauline became the first Bonaparte to make a brilliant match, which would not be equaled until her brother married a Hapsburg princess. The first few years of marriage appear happy, but Pauline soon became bored with Camillo. The couple ceased to live together and fought regularly, theatrically, and publicly. Napoleon thought Camillo Borghese a handsome peacock and a foolish man. "He's an imbecile," he shouted at his sister during one of their many passionate confrontations. "True, but so what," answered Pauline.[3] Imbecile or no Napoleon took Camillo onto his staff and gave him a succession of commands. A share of glory was the coin of the imperial realm. Pauline got access to the Borghese jewels, lavish apartments in the Borghese palace in Rome, access to the highest Italian society – she was even on familiar terms with the Pope when he was not imprisoned by her brother – and began a life of sexual adventure punctuated by the collapse of her health and long visits to various spas. Ms. Fraser suggests that the painful and recurrent inflammation of Pauline's fallopian tubes could only have been successfully cured with a hysterectomy: in that age a death warrant. She apparently also contracted gonorrhoea whose treatment with leeches, enemas, douches, purgatives, decoctions of herbs, and extracts of minerals only added to her pain. Sexual abstinence, regularly prescribed, was beyond Pauline's powers.

Paul Barras, hardly a witness who spoke with any moral authority, had his own diagnosis: "Excessive sexual activity, in consequence of *furor uterinus*" – Latin for nymphomania – "had given her an incurable ill. Too weak to walk [he had encountered her at the spa Géoux], she was in such a state she had to be carried everywhere." [4] Her behavior became increasingly bizarre and willful. Fraser quotes the Duchess d'Escars who visited Pauline in Nice. She was received by the princess who had her feet on the neck of Mme. de Chambaudoine, one of her ladies-in-waiting, who was prone on the floor. When Mme. de Chambaudoine answered questions Pauline would wiggle her feet to distort the poor woman's voice in a comic way. [5] She often insisted on being carried, even from place to place at home. The demands she made on her hosts were notoriously extravagant, she often dressed in diaphanous clothes and her perfect figure was much remarked upon, and her numberless love affairs were publicly flaunted. Her nude figure, elegantly poised, with her loins carefully draped, carved in marble by Antonio Canova, was on public display at the Borghese Palace in Rome. Such behavior begs editing Lord Acton's aphorism: "Power corrupts. Absolute power depraves."

She loathed Josephine and urged her brother to divorce. “We ought to detest her,” she told Joseph Bonaparte, “for the Emperor would betray us all for his dear Josephine.” She threw a tantrum at being compelled to carry Josephine’s train at her coronation: “Do I have to be there to swell his wife’s court? ... Oh, honorable indeed, Bonapartes in the suite of Beauharnais. Truly, my sisters make me sick with their submission.”[6] Pauline’s haughty dismissal of the Beauharnais, who became prominent in the time of Joan of Arc, is the absurd snobbery of the parvenu. Napoleon may have, as Stendhal said, made the mistake of “estimating too highly the class into which he had risen” but he had no illusions about his pedigree.[7] It derived from his sword and 18 Brumaire.

All these anecdotes are amusing and they have been worn smooth with repetition. The more interesting questions, to my mind, are not addressed in Ms. Fraser’s biography. It is not merely that she has written a ‘popular’ biography, addressing herself to a general audience and hence emphasizing as scandalous the salacious behavior. Popular history can be quite good providing the author does her homework. Ms. Fraser, the daughter of another popular biographer, Antonia, has done her homework, but very selectively. She deprives the reader of any discussion of the sources for Pauline’s life. Ms. Fraser tells us that she diligently examined Frédéric Masson’s papers at the *Fondation Thiers*. That industrious and distinguished historian did not include any notes in his twelve volumes on Napoleon and his family. But the author has not been similarly diligent about all the memoirs she quotes, all the anecdotes she relates. A number of the stories about Pauline are at best gossip and rumor, retailed by authors (including a few who are anonymous) who had no contact with the princess and seem to have operated with the scruples of *The National Inquirer*.

An enormous number of the hundreds and hundreds of memoirs of the Napoleonic period are unreliable for one reason or another. An inordinate number have been tampered with, some have been invented. Many are suspect because of the conventional editorial practices of the day which we now deplore. Others are dubious for less legitimate reasons. The most reliable are those that survived forgotten in family archives and so escaped the contemporary demand for colorful and scandalous recollections prepared by the *teintureries*, as the hacks who did this work were called. Ms. Fraser should have informed her readers that these tempting and easily accessible sources need to be used with caution. Pauline Bonaparte was a notorious character in her day, the most embarrassing of the clan, but there was more to her than the gossips reported.

A corollary of Ms. Fraser’s heavy reliance on the memoir literature for the bulk of her book is that the historical context in which Pauline lived and acted is sketchy at best. This in turn suggests another dimension of Pauline’s life that is left in shadow or darkness. Ms. Fraser has written biographies of controversial and unconventional women of the early nineteenth century: Emma, Lady Hamilton, Queen Caroline, and George III’s six daughters. She is not required to provide any feminist analysis of her subjects, but it is odd that she is drawn to women who violated social conventions so dramatically yet does not analyze what she finds so fascinating in her subjects. She has nothing to say about Napoleon’s misogyny, about how he pressured his sisters to make marriages that would benefit the family and his dynastic politics. She has nothing to say about his public hounding of Mme. de Staël, for example, who violated his prejudices, or his contempt for bluestockings generally, or the Civil Code that fixed some of his opinions about women in law.

These are significant historical circumstances that shaped Pauline’s life, secured the gilded cage in which she lived. Her frivolity, her sexual adventures, her capricious and often childish behavior, her huge expenditure on adorning herself and her surroundings – twenty packing cases of mirrors, candelabra, and clocks, were sent to Elbe, not including her jewelry which was

separately shipped – were excessive to the point of bizarre self-indulgence. Such behavior was, at least in part, dictated by the life her brother thought acceptable for the women of his family (and perhaps all women), and imposed upon them. Pauline exaggerated and challenged but she did not violate the limits of her prescribed role. She stayed out of politics, even though she hobnobbed with the international political elite of the day. She had few choices if she wanted to receive her brother's largess. Eccentricity and perversion were her modes of rebellion.

Things were easier for the boys. Power as well as wealth were theirs so long as they did Napoleon's bidding and made marriages he thought appropriate. They too bridled under his demands. Joseph and Jérôme stayed the course and managed to deflect or tolerate much of the insult and abuse he poured on them. Lucien, who might have had a political career of his own had it not been for his brother, refused to yield. He retired to Rome a rich man and lived a life of his own choosing. Louis, the most neurotic of the brothers, broke under Napoleonic hectoring, abdicated the Dutch throne and left public life.

But if Pauline was scandalous she was deeply loyal. None of Napoleon's siblings was so devoted to him. Pauline followed her brother to Elbe and tried to visit him on Saint Helena. When Francesco Antommarchi, the incompetent doctor Napoleon's mother and uncle chose for him, arrived on Saint Helena and reported that Pauline was ready to join him, "Let her remain where she is," said Napoleon. "I would not have her see me insulted like this."<sup>[8]</sup> She was even loyal to her husband, despite years of quarreling and bitterness. Her last act before she died was to hand her keys securing the jewels and coffers and apartments which she and Camillo had fought over for so long to the prince. She died on June 9, 1825, with her affairs in order.

#### NOTES

[1] Fraser, p. 99.

[2] Quoted in Fraser, pp. 24–5.

[3] Quoted in Fraser, p. 137.

[4] Fraser, p. 142.

[5] Fraser, p. 160.

[6] Fraser, p. 122.

[7] Quoted in Fraser, p. 146.

[8] The standard authority is Jean Tulard, *Nouvelle bibliographie critique des memoires sur l'époque Napoléonienne, écrits ou traduits en Français* (Geneva: Droz, 1991).

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