

---

H-France Review Vol. 17 (July 2017), No. 105

Holly Tucker, *City of Light, City of Poison: Murder, Magic, and the First Police Chief of Paris*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. xxiii + 298 pp. Maps, figures, chronology, notes, and bibliography. \$26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-393-23978-2.

Review by Sarah Hanley, University of Iowa.

During the exceptionally long reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the young king was mentored by the queen regent and Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602-1661). Upon reaching majority age (1651), he aligned in governance with the formidable minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683). During an era that favored judicial and legislative reforms—of which the innovative Inaugural *Lit de Justice* assemblies (1610 and 1643) and the Ordinance of Justice (1670) are prize examples—the city of Paris underwent an extended civic makeover after the king appointed Nicolas de la Reynie (1625-1709) to a new government post, the Lieutenant General of Police. Seemingly modest, actually fiercely ambitious, the chief of police (in office 1667-1697) reorganized the Paris police force (formerly composed of four overlapping agencies) into a centralized bureau that exercised extended policing powers throughout the city's neighborhoods. Two sides of this policing endeavor converge in the book, *City of Light, City of Poison*.

On one side of policing practices, Holly Tucker, Professor of French and Italian at Vanderbilt University, focuses on Paris as the “City of Light,” treating the mostly positive events to come under the leadership of the first police chief, Nicolas de la Reynie. Heading a rapidly expanding police force whose agents reported on daily life in Paris quarters, he was vested with the authority to arrest suspects, interrogate them, conduct hearings, even take culprits to the old *Chambre Ardente* (a law court formerly used to try heretics), as well as to present written findings on policing deeds to Colbert and the king. An imposing figure, La Reynie stands at the center of Tucker's historical novel, a riveting narrative well framed by historical facts and liberally laced with fictional suppositions, actions, dialogue, and so on, the sorts of literary devices auspiciously rendered here that make her smartly plotted, swift paced, and suspenseful tale a compelling read that serves historical understanding while also allowing readers, historians among them, to consider alternative interpretations.[1]

From his appointment as the first police chief in 1667 the industrious La Reynie, trusted by the king and backed by Colbert, tackled a daunting task: the attempt to bring law and order to the dark, dirty, and dangerous city of Paris that reflected poorly on the monarchy. In addition to launching an impressive array of cleanup campaigns, the police chief installed the lanterns in the dark streets that would recast Paris as the “City of Light.” A wonder to behold, no doubt. He paved muddy streets, arranged water transport, required householders to rein in debris, and scheduled trash disposals. He dispensed aid to beggars and found refuges for abandoned babies. He cut down on assaults in streets better patrolled and lighted. He prosecuted seditious writings and speech, as well as suspected practitioners of magic and the dark arts. All the while fingering, fining, and jailing subjects who broke the rules. For some he was a beacon, for others a scourge.

La Reynie's impressive array of public works, along with his voluminous reports on the same, pleased Colbert and the king who issued a medal commemorating the advent of the lanterns that bathed Paris in the safety of night light. Securing royal favor by calling attention to his good deeds in reports, La Reynie's tenure in office was renewed for several decades. That the energetic police chief moved mountains in terms of public works chalked up to the public good is undeniable. That there was another side to those admirable efforts, just so. Tucker moves from La Reynie's formidable program of public works that earned Paris the nickname "City of Light" to the darker side of the effort that featured policing tentacles reaching into the habitats of the lower orders and through subjects there, once suspected of crimes, touching higher orders of the realm.

On the flip side of policing practices, Holly Tucker treats the other Paris, which is contrarily dubbed the "City of Poison," where the investigative tactics of Nicolas de la Reynie and his powerful police force reveal ways the zealous police chief, his agents, and spies created the sort of Parisian policing arena from which the later "Affair of the Poisons" (1677-1682) would emerge and fester. By invading domestic settings, the chief and his agents unveiled scores of moral infractions committed in daily life by interlinked neighbors and clients. They publicized secrets ordinarily kept private in families. They spotted and reported suspicious commerce between subjects in the lower orders and those in the nobility. By reviving an outmoded law court, the *Chambre Ardente*, moreover, the chief buttressed the police authority to arrest and interrogate with the judicial power to conduct pre-trials advancing indictments. Tucker lays out the social and legal context for understanding how the sensational "Affair of the Poisons" burst forth in a policing arena shaped by formulaic interrogations that doomed some and implicated scores of others, low and high on the social scale. The public was put on notice.

Filling in the legal context for the police operations, Tucker puts forth exemplary legal cases publicized in the 1670s which helped set the police stage for hosting the scandalous *Affair of the Poisons* (1677-1682). To give one example, the arrest and trial of Marie Madeleine Marguerite d'Aubray, marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676), who was accused of murdering family members by poison (1670-1676), stirred considerable public interest: talk, gossip, rumors, even a comment by the intrepid letter-writer Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696). When the death of Madame de Brinvillier's father (a man of law) in 1666 was followed by the deaths of her two brothers (also lawyers) in 1670, suspicion of poisoning fell upon the sister to whom the family estate passed. The murder charges rested upon allegations of poison administered by a family servant, La Chaussée, supposedly at the direction of the marquise, whose lover, an army captain, Godin de Sainte Croix (who died suddenly in 1672), was said to have been complicit in the deed. Faced with allegedly incriminating documents at hand (albeit never put forth), she fled from France in 1672. Once the servant La Chaussée, tortured to death's door, implicated Brinvilliers in the poison scheme, La Reynie's police agents hunted her down, caught her in Liège, brutally assaulted the suspect, and returned her, near-dead from injuries, to Paris. Put on trial in the *Tournelle* court, she was found guilty, attended by a cunning priest (a police informer), and executed in 1674. Throughout the whole ordeal, she denied the poison and murder charges. That is, until faced with torture just before her scheduled execution by beheading (with nothing left to lose by confessing to that priest).<sup>[2]</sup>

In another example, in 1677 Madeleine de La Grange staged a false marriage to her elderly benefactor who was impersonated by a dissolute priest, Launay. When the benefactor-husband died soon after the supposed marriage, La Grange claimed the estate (as wife). The false marriage undone by the man's family, suspicions arose regarding his death. La Grange was investigated, interrogated, tried at the *Châtelet* court, and convicted of poisoning the benefactor. Attempting to stave off her sentence from prison, she claimed to have crucial information passed by a spy in the jail, Nicolas Poncet, an operative in the Low Countries (at war with France). Whereupon the police chief La Reynie interrogated Poncet, who insisted La Grange was the spy, thus leading in turn to her interrogation. At first the La Grange spy caper waned, then it was revived amid more dangerous circumstances enabling further police action, hence additional suspects on tap, and so on moving to the same punishing tune. As seen by these cases, the police confines in which the *Affair of the Poisons* would take root were most assuredly prepared by

---

La Reynie's aggressive investigative tactics featuring the sort of interrogations that discovered new criminal actions, tainted additional suspects, and fired up a good deal of public attention.

As for the main attraction--the relentless police investigations over a five-year-period that came to be called the "Affair of the Poisons" (1677-1682)--Tucker does an admirable job of wading through the difficult sources that document this long case.<sup>[3]</sup> Wielding authority in Paris as Lieutenant General of Police, La Reynie arrested, interrogated, and indicted subjects whose public crimes ranged from thievery, assault, and murder to secret crimes deemed morally corrupt, such as engaging in magic, sacrilege, and black masses, as well as the brisk sale of home-made powders, aphrodisiacs, and poisons to customers low born and high. The case of the indicted midwife, Catherine Deshayes Monvoison (called La Voisin), arrested in 1679, who was implicated by Marie Bosse, a near neighbor likewise questioned, shows how police tactics worked to implicate scores of suspects, innocents along with traffickers in the dark arts, who were charged with dispensing potions to influence persons and poisons with intent to murder. Dragging scores of suspects down with her, including her own daughter, La Voison was declared guilty of numerous charges, some touching members of the nobility, and executed by burning in 1680. Not satisfied with snaring La Voisin and cohorts, the police chief upped the ante amid the social turmoil engendered by these policing actions.

During the Affair of the Poisons, where the list of suspects kept growing, with no end in sight, the police chief La Reynie, who was passionately convinced of his mission, took an inordinately bold step that would throw his investigation out of bounds. A police dossier in the making on the matter, he suggested the king's mistress, Madame de Montespan, was in touch with the murderous midwife La Voison. Yet even though this Affair directed by the police chief would produce a social disaster that left Paris encumbered with the label "City of Poison," Tucker firmly holds in her final assessment of events that Nicolas de la Reynie was a "hero:" "Both principled hero and cruel enforcer,.... Far from perfect, he was a singular man of his time (241)." Some skeptical readers will find Tucker's heroic model of the zealous chief of police misleading. In retrospect the social turmoil that resulted from the chief's supposedly heroic police tactics wielded over a five-year period, 1677 to 1682, include the following: 442 suspects, 218 arrests, thirty-six executed, scores of others sent to the galleys, exiled, or imprisoned, never seen again.

For these reasons, a multi-faceted interpretation, rather than one narrowly fixed on the heroic aspects of Nicolas de la Reynie's tenure as police chief, may be preferred. In treating this other Paris, the "City of Poison," La Reynie's heroic image may be chastened in three ways: first, by calling attention to his excessive moral zeal in rooting out suspected poisoners and connecting those presumably murderous street folk to nobility deemed complicit in magic and the dark arts (no matter the lack of proofs in hand); second, by pointing to his self-serving zeal in writing reports seeking the attention of his patrons, Louis and Colbert (charged with renewing his office); and, third, by showing the kind of policing bubble he created around him that led to rash, even outlandish, suppositions that would not pass muster at the gates of the royal court. These overzealous aspects of the police chief's prosecutorial mindset, it may be suggested, created the intemperate social climate in Paris that allowed the Affair of the Poisons to run amok. The more so as lists of suspects came to include Louis XIV's mistress, Madame de Montespan. Surely a bridge too far.

Tucker presents a formidable account of Louis XIV's domestic arrangements at the royal court where two tracks to chosen bedrooms ran apace for three decades, church complaints shunted aside, intrigue endemic. Wonderful portraits are included. One track was trod by the queen, Marie Thérèse of Spain (1638-1683, married 1660), mother of six royal children, only one, a son, to survive childhood. The other track belonged to the mistresses, several of them mothers of royal bastards, including the long-time favorite, Madame de Montespan. Tucker also rightly points out the enormously high rank the favorite held in this royal court constellation. Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart, Marquise de Montespan (1641-1707, mistress from 1667 to around 1678, over a decade), born of the most prestigious

royal house in France, was strikingly beautiful, culturally refined, gifted at conversation, and politically informed. Also, she was snippy, witty, and economically astute. While Louis bestowed valuable properties and goods upon Montespan, she conferred pensions, positions, and the like on clients. She had friends at court, also enemies. Attuned to repute, the king in 1674 legally secured her release from a problematic marriage, thus shielding her (as mistress) from epithets of adultery. She was a formidable woman to whom the king remained loyal across a long span of time—as a lover, as a friend, and as a benefactor—from 1667 through the decades she lived at Versailles before leaving of her own accord in 1691, after nearly twenty-four years. [4] As lovers for over a decade, they had seven children, four surviving childhood, all of whom, it may be added, Louis legitimated by legal decrees (the name “de Bourbon” bestowed) registered in Parlement. Still, attempts to track royal attitudes that measure the king's confidence, or lack thereof, in his mistress during the Affair of the Poisons go jaggedly awry.

Just work out a timeline of the two affairs and the optics blur. In 1673 Louis XIV took the legal steps to legitimate his three children born earlier of Madame de Montespan (1670, 1672, and 1673): royal acts of confidence. This was four years before the Affair of the Poisons erupted in 1677.[5] In 1677 and 1678, two years in which the Poisons Affair was ratcheting up, Madame was pregnant, attesting to the domestic affair in high gear at the same time: royal acts of confidence revisited. Moreover, in 1681, when the unbridled Poisons Affair was lurching out of bounds, the king legitimized those two children: royal confidence confirmed, the name “de Bourbon” bestowed.[6] And as the Poisons Affair boiled over by 1682, Louis turned his back on Paris and moved the seat of government, as well as his mistress Montespan, to Versailles.

Given the steady peregrinations of the domestic affair observed at the royal court, including babes born in 1670, 1672, 1673, 1676, 1677, and 1678, then legitimated in 1673 and 1681, while the Affair of the Poisons was flying off base from 1677 into 1682, it is reasonable to draw two conclusions. One, Madame did not need La Voisin's sex potions to stir up the king's passions in the 1670s. Two, the king was not impressed by La Reynie's judicially weak attempts to link the mistress Montespan to the midwife La Voisin. Yet Tucker does not suggest this alternative reading, perhaps because it does not fit the heroic model she assigns to the police chief La Reynie. A pertinent query in tow, skeptics may seek another interpretation of these events.

Should modern scholars perpetuate the completely unproven notion that Louis XIV, supposedly realizing his mistress, Madame de Montespan, might have been involved in transactions with criminals during the Affair of the Poisons, put a halt to the proceedings for that reason? Tucker would do so. Assuming Montespan was compromised by the Affair of the Poisons, she says: “I feel confident that the king's decision to end the affair [of the poisons] for good following Colbert's refutation of the evidence against Montespan offers us...an explanation...: The king simply chose to believe she was not guilty (p. 242).” But wait a minute. “The king *simply chose* to believe...” is not sufficient. In fact, La Reynie's demonstrable, even embarrassing, inability to produce hard evidence that linked Montespan to La Voisin spoke most loudly to her innocence. The police chief's uncorroborated suppositions of guilt were left tottering on gossip. Colbert said as much when he destroyed the flawed police dossier supposedly implicating her. Why not position the king's credulity in tune with the minister?

To be sure, the police chief expressed great disappointment at being thwarted in this prosecution which supposedly, in his self-serving view, was undone by aristocratic privilege (not by flawed police work). Yet no real proofs implicating Montespan ever appeared at this time, or in modern times for that matter.

Summing up: is it possible to imagine that Louis XIV, demonstrably loyal to his high-born mistress Montespan and their children (six babes born in eight years, all named “de Bourbon” and legitimated by law) actually suspected she was involved in the Affair of the Poisons with the intent to master him with potions, or even kill him with poison? Or is it more likely that the king, along with Colbert who shot down the scanty police allegations recognized the threat that La Reynie's unbridled police tactics posed to social order in Paris? Whatever the case, Louis XIV moved to curb the police investigation by 1678,

abolished the *Chambre Ardente* in 1682, and abandoned Paris that same year for Versailles. A reader may wonder if the irony wrought by the unseating of Paris as the hub of government by the fallout from the Affair of the Poisons run amok was lost on the first police chief of Paris.

All things considered, Holly Tucker's historical novel is a stunning recreation of events framed by historical facts. And if the singular heroic model she assigns to Nicolas de la Reynie holds, her interpretation of events is plausible. Though at odds with a multi-faceted interpretation that factors in the social wages of the police chief's overzealous policing that produced the bridge too far and left Paris behind. Finally, the negative aspects of the book are related to the format adopted by the publishers. W. W. Norton has not provided an index, which historians will find perplexing, even vexing. As a result, the book may be off limits for students in history classes who depend on an index to use the study as a research tool for writing footnoted history research papers. Nor has Norton matched the numbered endnotes with their related page numbers (left unmarked) in the advance copies sent to reviewers. This creates difficulties for reviewers, especially historians, who wish in some instances to align the sources cited in the endnotes with the text as well as to include more relevant page numbers in the review.

#### NOTES

[1] Holly Tucker categorizes her study as a “work of nonfiction” (p. xv). Which it is in part; albeit it is not a history. Tucker slights historical methodology in a number of ways: relying on endnotes, rather than fuller explanatory footnotes; recasting original quotations to fit contexts; developing a plot that fixes the direction of the story; writing a linear narrative, not a multi-faceted argument; offering a long bibliography of historical sources, many of which do not appear to be connected to information given in the text; and failing to provide an index. As a result, the book fits better into the category of historical novel where authors are given freer rein to mix fact and fiction while nonetheless imparting important historical knowledge of the time and place. This is the essence of history-based films as well, and in that vein, as in this one, I have long promoted toleration for some license in order to facilitate the production of valuable history-based novels and films (Sarah Hanley, “European History in Text and Film: Community and Identity in France, 1550-1945,” *French Historical Studies* 25:1 (2002):3-19). However, because this review is for H-France (the “H” for History), I must point out the mix of facts and fictions here, especially if the book is to be assigned in history classes where the historical method is of import as is the distinction between a historical novel and a history study. This said, the Tucker book is a read that will not disappoint, as well as one that will encourage other interpretive forays. Attesting to current interest in the History-Fiction writing corner, the Huntington Library sponsored a conference, 12-13 May 2017, which explored “Fictive Histories, Historical Fictions” and closed with remarks by Hilary Mantel (author of three historical novels featuring Henry VIII's minister Cromwell) and Mary Robertson (curator of relevant manuscript materials at the Huntington Library shared with Robertson).

[2] Tucker mistakenly presumes that the judges in this court showed disdain for Brinvilliers by ordering her to be executed by beheading (rather than by hanging). However, it was beheading (not hanging) that was reserved for nobles, so the judicial order actually recognized her elevated social condition.

[3] Truth in the telling, I have read many of the documents underlying the legal cases, hence can testify to the difficulties faced by Tucker in sorting out the complicated stories.

[4] Tucker inserts the portraits of Louis XIV's mistresses (between pp. 149 and 150) as follows. Louise de La Vallière (1644-1670 sic [d. 1710]), mistress 1661-1667. Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart, marquise de Montespan (1640-1707), mistress from 1667 [to around 1678, more than a decade]. Claude de Vin des Oeillets (1637-1687), interim mistress when Madame de Montespan was indisposed [seven pregnancies]. Marie Angelique d'Escorailles de Rousille, duchesse de Fontanges (1661-1681), mistress from 1678 to her death in 1681.

---

[5] Children born of Montespan and Louis. Louis-Auguste de Bourbon (1670-1736), who would become the duc de Maine. Louis-César de Bourbon (1672-1683), later the comte de Vexin. Louise-Françoise de Bourbon (1673-1743), soon mademoiselle de Nantes. All legitimated in 1673.

[6] Children of Montespan and Louis. Louise-Marie (1676-1681), who died in childhood. Françoise-Marie (1677-1749) de Bourbon, would become mademoiselle de Bloix, and Louis-Alexandre (1678-1737) de Bourbon, would become the comte de Toulouse. Both legitimated in 1681.

[7] An aside: as it would turn out, Louis' effort to sustain dynastic succession in the male line was challenged by 1715 with the deaths of his only son, two grandsons, and a great grandson, leaving in wait only the last great grandson, a sickly boy (later Louis XV). Faced with extinction of the Bourbon line, the king took an inordinately bold political step in 1715 by registering in the Parlement of Paris his testament declaring his legitimated son with Montespan, Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, duc de Maine, a prince of the blood capable of succession to the throne of France (should the sickly great grandson in wait expire). Under duress in 1715, the angry judges in the Parlement who argued against this move registered the declaration, but at the king's death in 1716, the same judges quickly reversed it.

Sarah Hanley  
University of Iowa  
sarah-hanley@uiowa.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/ republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172