

*H-France Review* Vol. 3 (April 2003), No. 36

**Colin Jones**, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*. London: Yale University Press, 2002. 176 pp. Bibliography, notes, index, and illustrations. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-85709-977-X.

Review by Katherine Crawford, Vanderbilt University.

If behind every great man there is a great woman, what does the fascination with Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour, suggest about what might be behind a not so great man? The enigmatic, shy, emotionally dependent Louis XV was a failure as kings go, in that his reign produced some of the problems and failed to stop others that historians now see as crucial to the collapse of the monarchy in the French Revolution. According to Colin Jones in *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*, Pompadour herself created some problems and contributed to a number of others during the reign. Despite her enormous influence, Pompadour could not entirely control her image. She was supposed to protect the king by functioning as a lightning rod for criticism, but instead, Pompadour made Louis XV look even worse. And yet Pompadour was in so many ways a remarkable success. The complexities of both her failures and her successes are captured elegantly in Jones's book, which doubles as the catalogue for a show exhibited at London's National Gallery. Jones offers little new information about Pompadour, but he does a masterful job situating Pompadour in her cultural locus.

When a royal mistress enters the picture, big things happen. Ministers are shuffled, patronage is redistributed, the king's old love interests fade from view—all seemingly without much agency on the part of the king. Royal mistresses had been a tradition in France for centuries. Compared to some of her more (in)famous predecessors (Agnes Sorel, Anne de Pisseleu, Diane de Poitiers, Gabrielle d'Estrées, Madame de Montespan, Madame de Maintenon), Madame de Pompadour seemed to contemporaries and historians alike to have more political and cultural influence. As Jones makes clear, from her emergence in 1745 until her death in 1764, Pompadour managed the king remarkably deftly despite hostility from the court, the queen, and the populace. A mistress being detested for sexual proximity to the king was nothing new, but Pompadour managed to retain her hold over Louis XV despite ceasing to be the king's sexual partner around 1750. The complaints against her—from altering French foreign policy to emasculating French culture through supporting rococo style—were vast oversimplifications. Pompadour was meddling and crass, Jones allows, but she was also misunderstood, in large part because of her own actions.

Central among those actions was positioning herself to become Louis XV's mistress. Jones covers familiar ground in his opening chapter, "The Making of a Royal Mistress," recounting Pompadour's background. Rumored to be the illegitimate daughter of one of the Pâris brothers for whom her father worked as a *financier*, Jeanne-Antoinette's early convent education was paid for by Charles-François Lenormant de Tournhem, a *fermier-général* with connections in the world of the salons. Jeanne-Antoinette became familiar with artists, such as Boucher and Drouais, and writers, including Fontenelle and Montesquieu. She also performed musically, playing harpsichord and singing well enough to secure

a favorable marriage to Lenormant de Tournehem's nephew, Charles-Guillaume Lenormant d'Étoilles, with whom she had a daughter in 1744. Jones deftly recounts episodes in Louis XV's love life in order to set the stage for Jeanne-Antoinette's entrance (pp. 29-31). Given that Pompadour was lowborn, lacking a discernible social identity, and regarded as somewhat foolish, she was given little chance by observers at court. Whatever her failures, Jeanne-Antoinette proved the nay-sayers quite wrong.

Pompadour managed to secure and retain her position against considerable resistance. In chapter two, "Discretion and Fidelity," Jones emphasizes that Pompadour, as a woman in patriarchal society, acquired vast amounts of power and influence by learning the skills to attract and retain the interest of an easily bored king. Compared to earlier, aristocratically-born mistresses, Pompadour's considerable achievement included learning the intricacies of court life virtually from scratch (p. 39). Once in place, her backers (Tournhem and the Pâris clan especially) and her family benefited almost immediately, while others, including the *contrôleur-général des finances*, Philibert Orry, lost their positions (p. 42). These changes facilitated the movement of financial elites into the aristocracy, but Jones's assertion that this broke the old ruling strategy of Louis XIV seems a bit misplaced (p. 44). At least since the polysynodie during the regency of Philippe, duc d'Orléans (1715-23), Louis XIV's system had been in abeyance.[1] Not surprisingly, Louis XV's wife, Marie Leszczyńska, detested Pompadour and doubly so because the queen was the titular head of the *dévo*t faction at court and noted for her personal piety (p. 45). Remarkably, Pompadour found ways to ingratiate herself with the queen (pp. 50-1). Pompadour focused primarily on the king, however, encouraging Louis to develop his artistic and scientific knowledge, easing his social interactions, and protecting his privacy. One of her favorite methods was staging theatrical productions with herself cast in leading roles in operas, ballets, and plays (pp. 52-4, 78). Jones argues quite convincingly that theater was more than just role-playing: Pompadour chose texts sympathetic to her relationship with the king (p. 54).

Chapter three, "The Many Faces of Jeanne-Antoinette," emphasizes that Pompadour had much more to say about her image than did Marie-Antoinette, to whom Jones obliquely refers in his chapter title.[2] Scurrilous commentary, which Jones cautiously attributes to court circles, savaged the king and his mistress. Yet neither the criticism nor the shift to a non-sexual relationship with Louis damaged Pompadour's position. When the sex stopped, Jones argues that Pompadour became more aware of and attentive to her image and her artistic patronage, directing positive images of herself primarily to the king (p. 61). Among her efforts were images such as the portraits of her by La Tour and Boucher that cast her as a patron of the Enlightenment. On the face of it a dubious strategy given her direct dependence on the king (who was not sympathetic to the disruptive aspects of Enlightenment thinking), Jones argues Pompadour's was a strategic response to criticism from the republic of letters. Jones implies that Pompadour's direct role in staging her image was considerable. In some cases, this seems more likely than others. Statues of Pompadour as *Friendship* by Pigalle and Falconnet fit with the shift toward a non-sexual relationship with the king, but why Pompadour would support the imagery of female power apparent in Vanloo's *Madame de Pompadour as a Sultana* (c. 1752) is not self-evident (p. 74). On the other hand, Jones makes a compelling case that a number of images emphasized chastity and fidelity instead of the carnal desire usually associated with royal mistresses.

Chapter four, "Rococo Self-Fashioning," argues that Pompadour's acquisitiveness was "her own quest for an identity" (p. 85). Pompadour accumulated rather than collected, Jones points out, and she bought objects in such vast quantities that it took two years after her death for all of her possessions to be inventoried and sold. Despite Pompadour's association with rococo style, Jones emphasizes that she adopted that which was already popular. The shift from the monumental classicism of Charles Le Brun under Louis XIV to the more personal scale of the rococo was paralleled by the declining emphasis on moral content in favor of ornamental beauty (pp. 85-6). François Boucher's versatility and popularity made him an obvious choice for Pompadour, who was rich and had control over much royal patronage through her relationship with Lenormant de Tournehem (appointed *directeur des Bâtiments du Roi* at her behest).

Jones elegantly presents the range of Pompadour's uses of art, particularly during the 1750s. He situates Boucher's work in terms of Pompadour's role in Louis XV's life (pp. 90-3). Pompadour used her lavishly appointed estate at Bellevue as a refuge for the king but also to present an idealized Pompadour to the king. In an effort to cement personal ties with potential or actual supporters, Pompadour exported her image in various forms, sending copies of Falconet's *Amitié* (with Pompadour as the model) to a number of intimates and less extravagant reminders, such as engravings, to more peripheral acquaintances. Pompadour speculated on real estate, stocking properties such as the Hôtel d'Évreux (the present Élysée Palace) with important commissions. Jones sees Pompadour as a particularly prominent consumer in the growing market for luxury goods (pp. 94-5). Her vast and varied purchases attest to her wide-ranging acquisitiveness. Rococo self-fashioning, in Pompadour's case, would seem to mean that she was all the myriad goods she chose to buy.

In chapter five, "Patriotism and Piety," Jones argues that criticism about her extravagance prompted Pompadour to attempt to appear more circumspect. Jones terms her efforts to revitalize history painting through royal patronage "neo-Colbertian." But whether Pompadour had such a sophisticated agenda is not certain. While Tournhem was clearly deeply involved in efforts to encourage public interest in the arts, Pompadour's role is less apparent. Here, Jones suggests a number of links to the discussions and debates about the public sphere in eighteenth-century France and has a rather interesting example of government intervention in and even creation of classic elements of the Habermasian public sphere, but he leaves them muted.<sup>[3]</sup> Jones seems to have had in mind the more generalist audience, for whom the niceties of debate over the bourgeois public sphere would seem inappropriate in an exhibition catalogue.

Pompadour's efforts to claim a central role in the establishment of the École Militaire were more obviously neo-Colbertian in intent. Jones points out that Pompadour, who exaggerated her role, was emulating Madame de Maintenon's foundation of St. Cyr. Both institutions were designed to facilitate elite education for impoverished aristocrats (p. 102). Also Colbertian in spirit was Pompadour's encouragement of luxury trades through association with herself as a fashion leader (pp. 104-8). Despite the lack of certainty about her agency, taken together, Jones's examples suggest new ways to understand Pompadour's importance in French culture.

Pompadour depended throughout on retaining the king's favor, and Jones argues that the real threat was not other women, but Louis XV's conscience. Indeed, Pompadour almost fell from favor when the *dévo*t faction went to work on the king after the assassination attempt in 1757 by Robert François Damiens (pp. 127-9). While Jones allows that Pompadour's shift toward piety in the 1750s may have been genuine, he leaves plenty of room to suggest it may not have been. Pompadour certainly reshaped her patronage toward religious imagery and had herself depicted in more devout settings and practices. On the one hand, Jones contends that Pompadour was attracted to the *dévo*t position (even as she was uncomfortable with *dévo*t religious intransigence), and she continued to work on her relationship with the *dévo*t queen (p. 119). On the other hand, Pompadour's alliances with Parlemtaires, who were strongly Gallican in sentiment, indicate a high degree of instrumentality with respect to religious belief on Pompadour's part (p. 129). Jones sees Pompadour once again as modeling herself on Madame de Maintenon, perhaps even aspiring to a morganatic marriage with Louis should the queen die.

The most difficult period of Pompadour's career followed the "Reversal of Alliances," which produced closer ties with Austria at the expense of the French relationship with England. Pompadour supported the shift, and when France entered the Seven Years' War (1756-63) on Austria's side, she was roundly criticized. In chapter six, "A Mistress Goes to War," Jones argues that Pompadour occupied the position Cardinal Fleury had held as ministerial coordinator for the king, except that Pompadour could not carry it off. Her control over and understanding of foreign policy was limited, while her heightened visibility increased criticism of her role in public affairs. She was the first one blamed when the war went badly. Jones attributes her blunders in large part to her lack of experience of warfare, but the king, who did know something of the horrors, did nothing, and as Jones points out, the king's mode of dealing with his

ministers individually meant that none of them had a sense of the true scale of the crisis (p. 135). Only Louis might have had the necessary perspective, at least until Pompadour's friend, the duc de Choiseul, was brought in as foreign minister. He imposed some measure of coordination, and his efforts dampened slightly the terms of the 1763 peace. Choiseul gradually managed to gather a wide range of responsibilities to himself, while Pompadour continued to attract most of the blame (p. 138). The king's popularity was shattered as well, while the pressures of war had broken Pompadour's health. She died on 15 April 1764. She was 42 years old.

Jones closes with a final chapter, "Scheherazade Pompadour?," comparing Pompadour's hold over the king with the skillful story-telling of Scheherazade. Instead of fabulous tales, Pompadour invented and reinvented herself to enthrall the king. She projected unerring fidelity and managed, despite the disasters of war and her attenuated sexual relationship with the king, to keep his favor even after her political and cultural influence waned. Jones analyzes the posthumous portrait of Pompadour by François-Hubert Drouais in terms of the consolidation of her image as a patron sympathetic to the Enlightenment without the ornate fussiness that had previously accompanied her image (p. 148).

Pompadour has been credited with originating the "Pompadour style" that was already vanishing in the somber calm of Drouais's unadorned background. Jones rightly points out that Pompadour was more a patron and collector than one who articulated matters of style. Pompadour may have followed fashion more than she determined it, but as the entire volume suggests, she remains almost indelibly attached to the dominant trends of her day. This is true despite both the criticism in her lifetime and the backlash immediately after her death that Jones deftly documents (p. 153). Public opinion and the influence of Paris, Jones notes, were changing the cultural playing field, and Pompadour's career reflected and exacerbated these changes.

Criticism of the court and of Versailles certainly increased because of her figural centrality there. In the end, this was Pompadour's failure. Jones reminds us that the mistress was supposed to protect the king by diverting criticism away from him, and this Pompadour did not do. But is it not rather reductive to say that a woman who catered to the needs of a man in a myriad of ways over nearly two decades "failed" because Louis XV had a (richly deserved) poor reputation as a king? Of course she was out of touch, but as Jones allows, "It was her friend and lover who was in command, not she" (p. 156). She was no saint, and the ways that her career allowed for the denigration of the king and the monarchy were important political issues. But to blame Pompadour seems to let Louis XV rather off the hook, which means that perhaps Pompadour did not fail so entirely after all.

## NOTES

[1] Peter R. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720-1745* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[2] The title refers to Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 108-30.

[3] See especially James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Katherine Crawford  
Vanderbilt University  
katherine.b.Crawford@vanderbilt.edu

Copyright © 2003 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 redistribution/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