



Athenais: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress, the Real Queen of France

Lisa Hilton

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In her superb new biography, Hilton chronicles the life of this extraordinary woman, known as "the real Queen of France," who reigned as official mistress to Louis XIV during the most glorious period of "the splendid century."

Athenais: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress, the Real Queen of France Details

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From Reader Review Athenais: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress, the Real Queen of France for online ebook

Meg says

Well, this is one of most disappointing and horribly written pieces of pop history I've read yet. The cover is pretty, the inside is ugly. Do not read this. Do not waste your time. Seek anyone or anything BUT this book.

While this author has something approaching a thesis, she doesn't tend to stick with it. Indeed there are times when she's so set on describing the material and cultural minutiae that she loses the plot entirely. More to the point, what organizational prowess she does have doesn't serve to illuminate or tell a story that hasn't been told 50000 times already by all the other people writing about this king and his various ladies.

For reasons passing understanding, she quotes poems and sayings in French with no translation throughout because apparently you either better read very fluent French or take her word for it. It's annoying and there's no reason for it in an English language edition. Or any non-French edition, really.

There are also terribly rank moments of obvious prejudice on the author's part. First being that she uses the word "shibboleth" when she means "kibbutz" because apparently it's not worth taking five seconds to google that mess and make sure she's using the right word. It's just words that relate to the culture of people who have been demonized and persecuted in European and American history. No big, right?

Not to mention that awkward moment when the author says (summed up): "Sure, Athenais's husband BEAT her, terrified her, threatened her, took all her money and left her in crushing debt, deprived her of her children, was beyond cruel to her, and caused her no end of deep humiliation, but she could've been nicer to him in the divorce settlement because she was banging the king and had money now."

REALLY, AUTHOR? REALLY? You're seriously analyzing this part of a woman's life and saying "okay, so he PHYSICALLY ABUSED HER, but..." as if she's just being petty by not being "generous" when she's finally in a position of power and not actively being beaten? This author literally wagged her finger at a woman for not being nicer to her abuser.

That is probably one of the most disgusting things I have ever read. Anyone who can write this in all seriousness is not fit to be a historian or an author.

I also found it really offensive the way the author posits that Scarron being disabled is what caused Madame de Maintenon to become celibate and unwilling to have sex later on in life, because having to be with a disabled man must have been SO disgusting. The ableism and prejudice against disabled people in that is so rank that I almost stopped the book there. There's no evidence that Madame de Maintenon had all that much sexual contact with her husband and there's no evidence that her reasons for not having sex were anything but tactical or just a personal preference. God, the author has no business being a historian.

The writing over all is nothing to get excited about. It's facile at it's best, and does not serve the meandering, lackluster narrative. It's adequately researched up to a point, but honestly I've seen much better when it comes to really getting into those sources, examining them and weighing them. This author writes as if the court of Louis XIV was some kind of soap opera, and that might be interesting in the hands of someone willing to really do the work. But not this author.

Whether you're a historian or just a person who likes history and casually reads about favorite personalities throughout time, you're better off finding anything from anyone else than wasting a minute on this book.

Kara says

This is an excellent biography of Athenais de Montespan, considered to be the most successful of Louis XIV's mistresses.

The biography starts not with her birth, but a few years before that, covering the background of Louis's early reign when he was minor and his mother had her hands full keeping a not exactly unified France in one piece as various factions tried to gain power. This is the background that lead to Louis's agenda of an extremely centralized government that would have a huge impact on the country and those in his immediate circle.

Athenais was, as much as any courtier, affected by Louis's policies, but, more importantly, as she rose in power to become his primary mistress, she helped him create his policies. Louis was always very firm about not letting women influence his political decisions (mommy issues) – and Athenais wisely did not try and do otherwise – but he was open to cultural and artistic suggestions, and Athenais was in large part the one responsible for much of the culture of refinement that would come to define Louis' reign.

Athenais had her share of failures, but she lived an extraordinary life on no one's terms but her own.

A balanced portrait that neither condemns or praises her but strives to show her as she was, digging into the primary sources, highlighting biases, and making educated guesses surrounding the missing pieces while still acknowledging what is fact and what is speculation.

Highly recommend for those who wish to learn about both the “first lady of France” as well as the reign of the Sun King.

kingsheart says

Although the premise sounded intriguing, and Athénaïs sounded like a fascinating person, frankly, I found this book kind of dull, and it was a bit of a slog to get through. I think, if I had to characterize the problem, it's that it read more like slightly single-focused history rather than like a biography. I get that it's hard to write a really personal, in-depth biography of someone who's been long dead if that person has not left any significant personal record (like extensive correspondence), so it's perhaps not Lisa Hilton's fault.

Nonetheless, it just seemed like everything in here was basically common knowledge. It's like if you were to write a biography of a current celebrity based only on whatever appeared about them in the news, but didn't talk to them, only maybe talked directly to one or two people who sort of knew them but weren't close, etc. What you end up with is not very intimate, and frankly, not as interesting as their life probably is. Likewise, this biography was not that intimate, and not as interesting as Athénaïs' life probably was. Hilton tries to get into her head, but it's all speculation. You end up with things like, "She did this, which seemed kind of conniving, but she probably did it because of this less objectionable motive." Just... not that interesting, I'm afraid.

Lisa says

Another fascinating look at the life of Louis XIV and his women. I appreciated the genealogical information included. It even had a chart explaining who of what ranks was allowed to sit on what in whomever else's presence. That was fascinating! The author's footnotes were very well-done and informative.

This is one of those non-fiction books that reads like fiction.

Jenks says

A good account of Athenais with Louis .

However , this is the most glamorous love affair of history , and the book just felt so slow, there were a lot of times when you didn't read athenais name for pages! I felt that this could of been such a fast paced intriguing version and it let itself down.

Belinda says

This is the first book review I have done in awhile due to a long and sad few months during which I lost my beloved uncle and I just have not felt like doing much but grieving. He was a book lover and always inspired me to read and continue to learn my whole life so I know he would want me to get back on the proverbial book horse.

I have always found Madame de Montespan an interesting subject, but this is the first book I have come across that was specifically about her. When I started the book I found it a bit chatty for a serious biography--it had a kind of odd modernity about it's descriptions that put me off at first. That dissipated pretty quickly. The book was well written and informative and fairly well balanced. It loses some points for a bit too much opinion for my liking (a problem I have with most biographies lately--I don't really like to feel the author is judging the subject) and for not enough illustrations for such a lush subject.

Athenais de Montespan is probably best known for being the greatest of the Sun King's mistresses and also being caught up in what is known as "The Affair of the Poisons" which involved witchcraft, poison and loads and loads of innuendo. Historians have gone between believing Montespan guilty of the darkest crimes to believing she was the victim of a witch hunt. The author does a decent job of clearing up what was clearly a smear job against Madame de Montespan but she falters at the end of the book, falling into fancy when describing King Louis final thoughts--describing what sounds like a scene from a Jean Rollin movie (for those not in the know, Rollin is famous for his soft core horror films with nubile lady vampires, witches and the like). Other than that and a few other missteps, the book was fantastic. I always wish for a larger photo section in these types of books (my gawd, there are paintings out the wazoo for all of the people involved here) and because I like to have art in my books..(totally a personal preference which I will admit). I have to say I fell madly in love with the fair de Montespan. One of the great beauties of her time, and the most famous maîtresse en titre in French history, Athenais was much more than that. She was complicated, intelligent, creative, and imperious. She was as royal as the Sun King who loved her and much more constant. Her influence in the beautification of Versailles and the French court in general is immeasurable. Even once she was no longer his lover, Louis continued to consult her on matters of design and architecture. Her life is amazing to observe and full of love, intrigue, sorrow and repentance. At her height, she was

known as "The Real Queen of France" and held great personal influence over King Louis and his tastes. Despite the glory and excess that she was deeply entrenched in, when all was said and done her story is deeply sad in parts. She enjoyed every material luxury that could be heaped upon her lovely head but was unable to raise her own children due to the rules and regulations of the time and was betrayed by one of her own children cruelly once she could no longer achieve more glory for him. She was deposed by the strange and for me, quite despicable Madame de Maintenon who became Louis's morganatic wife in his old age. The fact that Maintenon was also the governess for Athenais children by Louis only makes her betrayal even uglier and more despicable. Despite what might appear on the surface, Athenais is a very sympathetic person. She truly loved Louis and never aspired to be more than his lover and companion, did not try to influence politics (except to help her friends and relatives and then mainly socially) and to protect the children she had by Louis and be sure they received what she felt was their due as both royal children and descendants of her own proud family. To be totally honest, I fell in love with her deeply. It's not hard to see what caused Louis to adore her so extravagantly that he built beautiful gardens and homes for her and proclaimed his love for her through art and amazing entertainments. The descriptions of the exquisite little charms Louis built for her--private Roman style baths carved from enormous chunks of marble with PERFUMED hot water flowing from their decorative taps, a tiny hideaway in Versailles made of Delft porcelain tiles and surrounded by scented flowers where they could make love and enjoy the beauty of Versailles, rows and rows of her beloved orange trees--these are so enchanting to read about that you almost feel as if you can smell the jasmine and tuberoses. The author does a good job of capturing the beauty and vitality of Versailles and France in general during Athenais reign. Her downfall and the way her life unraveled is very hard to read--you would not think she would be a sympathetic character but she truly is--you want her to win, despite knowing she would lose to the woman she trusted to raise her children and keep her secrets.

The biggest villain of this piece is King Louis himself. Despite his long and mostly successful reign, he seemed to have little to recommend him as a human beyond his royal lineage and love of the arts. He picked up and tossed away people (women especially) as if they were one of the flowers in his garden and less valuable to him. He seems to have lacked loyalty to much of anyone and honestly shows little to no depth in terms of his feelings. He took good care of his bastard progeny, legitimizing them and arranging good marriages for them, but he seemed to care nothing for the women who gave them to him and expected his mistresses to retire to a convent after he finished with them, whether they wanted to or not. He comes off as a shallow, vain and sometimes callous person who spent most of his life pleasing himself without concern for those around him. It is very hard to like him in any way. Unlike King Charles II (whose beloved sister Henriette d'Angleterre was an early love of Louis and his sister in law) he does not seem to have had any care for the women in his life (least of all his poor wife) and saw everyone around him as a tool to make him happy. He had little of the kindness and sentiment that made King Charles II (as profligate as he was) a very sympathetic person.

Overall, I really enjoyed the book and felt that Athenais was done as much justice as she could be in this time so long after her reign. The best part for me is that I have a new obsession to pursue and that is always a good thing.

Rebecca Huston says

I found this to be a lot of fun to read, and well-constructed. I hadn't known a great deal about this mistress of Louis XIV before I read this, and it helped me to understand why Louis XIV went through such a change after the Affair of the Poisons.

For the complete review, please go [here](#):

Barker says

An intense read and an absolute necessity to understand the politics of the court of the Sun King. A fantastic journey in the dealing of the court, the habits and the thinking process of the king is captivating. You can't help but admire the woman, and secretly wish to be her confidant.

Emily says

oddly biased for a non-fiction historical book that was clearly researched

M A says

I've read "Athenais" a few times, hoping to have a better sense of how to best evaluate it. I'm fascinated by the life and times of Louis XIV France. The Sun King's long-term mistress, notorious for her adulterous affair with the married king and for her alleged involvement in the Affairs of the Poisons, is a fascinating and mysterious figure. She is probably the most important of Louis's mistresses and she had the nerve, style, and influence to see her children advance to the highest possible echelons in court life where status and position were everything.

Unfortunately, this book suffers from two serious defects:

1) Information concerning Athenais is much too generalised. I read nothing new in this book. Although the information was well-written, an easy read, and accurate to the best of my knowledge, I'd heard/read all of it before. This isn't exactly Hilton's fault. There simply may not be much "new to know" about Athenais. Most of the book focuses upon Athenais's years as royal mistress with a few chapters concerning her fall from grace and later years as a private gentlewoman and philanthropist. Parts of the book appeared to veer off into details concerning other key players in Louis's court to fill in word count and book length. I was hoping to get a better sense of who Athenais was in her more private life, not merely her position as Louis's mistress. Evidently, details are too scant and this book simply presents many known facts about her life and career along with numerous speculations about Athenais's motives and attitudes governing her behavior.

2) Hilton displayed no objectivity for her subject. I ended up with the impression Hilton was either descended from Athenais or believed herself to be the reincarnation of Athenais. Her apologist attitude concerning some of Athenais's less admirable qualities and actions surpassed level ridiculous. Meanwhile, Athenais's own rivals are presented as avaricious, cunning, deceitful, and ungrateful to Athenais for her friendship.

Example: When Athenais deliberately flirted, enticed, and seduced Louis's attentions away from Louise de la Valliere (Athenais's "best friend") Athenais is excused and justified of every betrayal, cruelty, and abuse visited upon her predecessor. Athenais and Louis even insisted on keeping Louise (who sincerely loved Louis) in their household to retain the appearance that Louise was still Louis's mistress/favorite in order to

protect Athenais's (a married woman) reputation. To Hilton, Louise is a sentimental ninny unworthy of the public role of maitresse en titre to royalty, Athenais was more worthy and therefor Louise "deserved" to be pushed aside and taken advantage of. When the king's interest drifted from Athenais to Madame de Maintenon (governess to Athenais's children), however, Hilton portrays Mme. de Maintenon as a religious hypocrite, backstabber, phony friend to Athenais, etc..

This lack of objectivity gave the book a tabloid, unprofessional quality despite its lively narrative.

Overall, this is a readable book about an interesting historical figure, but if you've already read up on Louis XIV, you probably already know everything there is to know in this book.

Vivian says

I'm giving Lisa Hilton two stars for the actual information in this book, but was not at all impressed with her talent as a historian. I understand it's close to impossible to be completely neutral and unbiased when writing about events and people of the past, but the opinions of Hilton came through loud and clear, and to her, Athenais de Montespan practically walked on water. No other woman besides Athenais was worthy of the King, and when other women of the court were able to attract the attention of Louis XIV, they were "manipulative, cunning, hypocritical, and ungrateful."

Read how Hilton explains away Athenais's own cruelty - for cruel she definitely was - by blaming the receiving parties, in this case, the former favorite mistress: "A great deal has been made of Athenais's cruelty to the fallen favorite; of how she turned all her capacity for bitchy wit on to poor Louise and forced her to act as a ladies' maid...If Athenais really was so unkind...then surely Louise's infuriating lack of dignity provides some excuse?" Really? You, the historian, blaming a victim for the actions of your subject?

The ironic twist to this author's obvious subjectivity is that she herself warns against OTHER authors' agendas in her notes: In reading any of the primary sources, "The reader must therefore be alert not only to factual discrepancies in the work of the writers of letters or memoirs, but also to the peculiar subjectivity of the authors, their personal motivations and characters...". I read the whole book just to see how far Hilton would carry her vendetta against Athenais's rivals, but it was clear from the beginning that this would not be a fair and balanced portrait of this certainly very fascinating, but flawed, woman. Not recommended.

Louise Pennington says

This book is one of the most misogynistic things I've ever read. It is spiteful and snide about women who are deemed 'ugly' and therefore deserving anything negative which happens to them. The book is simply cruel.

Siria says

Engagingly written, but shallow popular biography, which doesn't even attempt neutrality or scholarly distance—Hilton makes no bones about the fact that she's firmly on the side of Madame de Montespan. This makes for an unbalanced book, and while the reader might be able to enjoy the book, one can never shake the scepticism which such partisanship creates in the reader.

Tracey Sinclair says

Engaging and fluidly written bio of someone I knew v little about.

Lena Tumasyan says

Heads up: this is NOT a porn or an erotic novel. This is a well documented, academically thorough research novel of the famous, Marquise de Montespan, aka Athenais the Real Queen of France.

The author, Lisa Hilton, does a really GREAT job of presenting us with information about Athenais. It's easy to follow and not at ALL boring to read. We really get to see the EVERYDAY life of Athenais as she grew up, competed to get into court, won Louis XIV's affection and became his official mistress. Hilton shows us Athenais' impact on culture, theatre, Moliere, fashion, hairstyle, clothing, architecture from Versailles to Clagny to many other buildings that she commissioned or had THE BIGGEST role in creating/decorating. We see her POWER (something that many women at the time didn't have) by her word, her control of the king, and her many children. What I love about Hilton's account of Athenais, is that it's neither an all positive nor all negative one - meaning we see the WHOLE truth.

We also see her demise, and it's such a profoundly sad one. We see the impact that society has on the love between the king and Athenais. We see the ridiculousness that is the FRENCH court, the stupid, excessive, ridiculous "etiquette" of all the players in the court, from where their apartments are located to what chair they sit on. We see the overindulgence of the court, the impact of court lifestyle on Athenais' children, and their children.

Hilton shows us the impact left behind by Athenais, not just during the time that France was prosperous but also the poverty that slowly followed, and how Athenais really did have a good heart. She built many schools and convents for girls and really tried to give back to society all she had taken.

I think Hilton did a FANTASTIC job of showing Athenais life, and we REALLY get to see it come alive. The photos, charts and diagrams were also INTENSELY helpful in following along. My only gripe? the book was a little long. But overall, a VERY good book.
