



# **The Kings' Mistresses: The Liberated Lives of Marie Mancini, Princess Colonna, and Her Sister Hortense, Duchess Mazarin**

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The Mancini Sisters, Marie and Hortense, were born in Rome, brought to the court of Louis XIV of France, and strategically married off by their uncle, Cardinal Mazarin, to secure his political power base. Such was the life of many young women of the age: they had no independent status under the law and were entirely a part of their husband's property once married.

Marie and Hortense, however, had other ambitions in mind altogether. Miserable in their marriages and determined to live independently, they abandoned their husbands in secret and began lives of extraordinary daring on the run and in the public eye. The beguiling sisters quickly won the affections of noblemen and kings alike. Their flight became popular fodder for salon conversation and tabloids, and was closely followed by seventeenth-century European society. The Countess of Grignan remarked that they were traveling "like two heroines out of a novel." Others gossiped that they "were roaming the countryside in pursuit of wandering lovers." Their scandalous behavior—disguising themselves as men, gambling, and publicly disputing with their husbands—served as more than just entertainment. It sparked discussions across Europe concerning the legal rights of husbands over their wives. Elizabeth Goldsmith's vibrant biography of the Mancini sisters—drawn from personal papers of the players involved and the tabloids of the time—illuminates the lives of two pioneering free spirits who were feminists long before the word existed.

## **The Kings' Mistresses: The Liberated Lives of Marie Mancini, Princess Colonna, and Her Sister Hortense, Duchess Mazarin Details**

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# **From Reader Review *The Kings' Mistresses: The Liberated Lives of Marie Mancini, Princess Colonna, and Her Sister Hortense, Duchess Mazarin* for online ebook**

## **Jo Walton says**

This was fascinating, the material well handled and the parallel lives well drawn. If you're at all interested in the way it was and was not possible for women to manage their own lives in Italy, France and England in the period, you should read this.

At its best, biography gives you a window into time and place that formal histories can't give, because they tend to focus on period (and on period as divided up in the nineteenth century, reigns and eras) and even more so on place -- on one country. People's lives are messier and cut across these artificial divisions. The lives of the Mancini sisters are a perfect example of how this can work to cast illumination across otherwise neglected spaces.

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## **Dorothy says**

This was a very well done and unembellished biography of two fascinating sisters in Louis XIV's court and milieu. Their story is a stark reminder of how far the civil rights of women have come (at least in Western civilization) since those days when they were nothing more than property belonging to fathers and husbands. The extent to which their husbands forced their estranged wives into penury and confinement with the approval of the courts and society at large is utterly chilling. The price, literally, to be paid by being a noble and wealthy female was freedom. Compared to other true tales of women who fled their marriages in the 17th and 18th centuries the absence of outside, romantic dalliances is noteworthy. Given that there were no rumors cited and only Hortense's one affair, one must assume that these women were truly driven for freedom from stifling and disturbing marriages rather than misguided notions of romance. Two plucky women who had the gall to want to experience their lives unscripted and unrestricted by male conventions and double standards. Social creatures who resisted the strictures of Catholic misogyny amid a rigid society which feasted on ridicule and scandal.

There is not a vast amount that informs the emotional essence of Marie and Hortense. That said, I find this preferable to excitable biographers who attribute all variety of sensibilities to their subjects without any basis for them. It is also rather fun to see Louis as a supporting character and a bit of a prig. All said and done, the travails and travels of these sisters in the turbulent 17th century when women were chattel were remarkable.

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## **Melissa says**

I knew nothing of the Mancini sisters going into this book, but right from the start I knew their story was unique. *The Kings' Mistresses* is well written and engaging, which is not always something that can be said for non-fiction. The two sisters caused sensations throughout Europe after fleeing from their husbands and while reading you really get a sense of just how much media coverage there was even in the 17th century. It seemed the sisters could hardly travel anywhere without being known. After the sisters go different ways the

story could have gotten jumbled by trying to follow each but the author does a good job of going between each and not feeling like you are going backwards or rehashing anything. I was also nervous about the length of the book being somewhat of a hindrance to telling a full story but after I was done I felt like their story had been told fully and completely.

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## **Rimma says**

I won the book, so looking forward to it.

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Read.

I love really history books. And this one is not a romance type novel, but more of a well written history. It is fascinating to learn about real people and their unusual lives. Hortense and Marie aristocrat by birth, were raised by all mean in in rich house and were Cardinal Mazarin's nieces. It is not only shows the life style on 16 th century, but how out of ordinary the characters in the book were for their time. They appear as some people would say were born in a wrong time. As they would not get satisfied with the limitation considered normed of beaver and manners for their time.

The book give us a review of England, France, Italy, and Spain during the mid to late 1600's.

The sisters travel around the Europe, dressed up as a men, and do many adventures things for their time. For some people for our time too.

Excellent read from category of independent and creative inspiring women in a way. As to go against a lot of in society also take courage and character.

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## **Marita says**

Initially I was reluctant to read this non-fiction book as I found the title The Kings' Mistresses a bit off putting. However, I had it already downloaded, and as I am currently reading 17th century English and French history it seemed appropriate. What has happened though is that I have spent two days glued to the pages of this book. There is nothing fluffy here; it is an absolutely fascinating account of these women's lives.

The title is a bit misleading as the mistresses to kings bit is a very small part of the story. The history concerns the sisters Marie and Hortense Mancini, nieces of the powerful Cardinal Mazarin. Mazarin was initially an Italian diplomat and later the chief minister of France. Marie and Hortense also had three other sisters, but these have minor roles in the story. The five sisters were the daughters of an Italian aristocrat.

### **Cardinal Mazarin (portrait below by Pierre Mignard - Wikipedia)**

Born in the Kingdom of Naples and raised in Rome, he was originally known as Giulio Mazzarino, but later acquired acquired the French version of the name, i.e. Jules Mazarin. Once ensconced in the position of Chief Minister of France, he arranged for various family members to come to France, including the Mancini girls Anna Maria and Ortensia, later known as Marie and Hortense.

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**Marie Mancini (portrait by Jacob Ferdinand Voet - <http://wga.hu>)**

She was regarded as a bit of a handful, but she soon captured the eye of Louis XIV who was madly in love with her and she with him. Not regarded as being a suitable partner for him, she was soon banished from the court and he was married to Maria Theresa of Spain.

Marie was subsequently married to Prince Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna, a Roman nobleman. This marriage started off well, and the prince went to great lengths to impress her. However, he eventually tired of her, acquired various mistresses and Marie felt that her life was threatened.

### **Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna (portrait by Jacob Ferdinand Voet - Wikipedia)**

Prince Colonna was from a very prominent noble family whose credentials went way back to the year 1000. Lorenzo and Marie had a fabulous home with a spectacular art collection. When Marie was pregnant, Paul Schor and Gian Lorenzo Bernini created a bed for her that was to become a famous tourist attraction:

“It was a vision out of a fairy tale, in the shape of a giant gilded seashell floating on waves and drawn by four seahorses mounted by mermaids. The bed was framed by a giant canopy of gold brocade held up at the ceiling by an array of cherubs carved of wood and gilded. Marie lay as resplendent as Venus on this marvelous creation.”

The couple also collaborated in theatrical productions such as this one:

”Seated on top of a huge rolling cage filled with animals, Marie presided, dressed as the sorceress Circe from Homer’s Odyssey, who had famously transformed Ulysses’s men into beasts. Lorenzo, masked as Ulysses, was among the gentlemen seated at her feet, holding dogs on leashes to represent the lovers Circe had transformed into animals.”

The odd dalliance with the lower classes could easily be forgiven, but Lorenzo having a very visible affair with someone of equal standing was humiliating to Marie, particularly as the affair produced offspring.

### **Hortense Mancini**

Hortense was Mazarin’s favourite niece, and he was determined to marry her off well. On his deathbed he decided that the most suitable candidate would be Armand-Charles de la Porte de la Meilleraye, a nobleman with impeccable family credentials. Armand-Charles had in fact admired her from the time that she had arrived at court. Mazarin also bestowed the title of Duke and Duchess Mazarin on them.

Unfortunately Armand-Charles was a religious fanatic as well as being obsessively jealous. He made Hortense’s life absolute hell. She stated that her uncle had made her ‘the richest heiress and the unhappiest woman in Christendom.” A-C went to excessive lengths to stop her from seeing people she liked or doing anything that interested her. She was spied on night and day.

### **Armand-Charles de la Porte de la Meilleraye**

Not only did A-C curb his wife as to who, what and where, but he was also destructive in his jealous rages. There are accounts of unbelievable destruction of priceless artworks inherited from Cardinal Mazarin. I leave the details for you to read. Hortense was fond of staging plays, and he duly destroyed her theatre. A-C also

managed to spend much of her fortune, reinvesting much of the income from the sale of her jewels in property.

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What followed was that both sisters left their husbands, children and homes. Both husbands were furious and expended a great deal of time, effort and money to chase after them. Colonna pursued Marie not out of love, but rather to restore his dented prestige. Armand-Charles hunted Hortense out of sheer obsessive jealousy and vindictiveness. And so we follow these sisters on their extensive travels around Europe and through their legal tangles to obtain some of their funds and a measure of independence. The sisters had to go to extraordinary lengths to evade their pursuers and at times had lengthy negotiations with their husbands' agents. It is a tale of convents, incarcerations, escapes, disguises, hasty trips in carriages or on horseback and frantic appeals to kings and other important people. But there were also times when they could actually enjoy themselves. Marie eventually ended up in Spain and Hortense in England where she had an affair with Charles II.

In England

“Her salon became a focal point for popular discussions of science and art, and for pre-publication readings of French writers newly translated into English, and English into French.”

Already being in the public eye and much gossiped about, Hortense decided to write and publish her memoirs with the help of her author friend César Vichard de Saint-Réal. Not long after that, a memoir appeared which had purportedly been written by Marie, but it was in fact fraudulent. Marie responded by immediately writing her memoirs and publishing them. In this way the sisters were able to state their case and to manage the media, so to speak. Celebrities of their time they might have been, but they were definitely not empty-headed fluff-heads. They were erudite and had a keen interest in art, literature and theatre.

Lorenzo died before Marie, but when Hortense died there followed another very bizarre incident involving Armand-Charles.

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The story of Marie and Hortense led to legal discussions of issues such as:

“What were the limits of a woman's obligation to a deranged husband? When should a feuding couple be encouraged to divorce? Did a woman not have an absolute right to control her own dowry?”

It also generated various treatises on the legal rights of women in marriage.

The sisters printed their memoirs under their own names, Hortense being the first noble French woman to do so. There were many firsts that they could lay claim to, and I leave that for you to read.

###

The author doesn't indulge in speculation, but lets the facts and the sisters speak for themselves in frequently quoted primary sources. The text is peppered with extracts of letters and other writings of the protagonists. There is much detail, but I never felt swamped by it.

Recommended!

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## Tom Williams says

I got a pre-publication review copy of the UK edition. It was an interesting read. Elizabeth Goldsmith has done good service in drawing attention to these women. She argues that their influence on the arts (they were great patrons of the theatre), on social mores and even on the legal position of women, makes them important, as well as fascinating, figures. Not being an expert on the late 17th century, I am not qualified to say if she is right, but she makes a convincing case. The 17th century marks the beginning of modern history and these two women were, if not the first modern women (as Goldsmith claims), certainly important early examples of their type.

The book is thoroughly researched, with frequent references to their correspondence. Both women were (as was normal at the time) prolific writers and Goldsmith has read and translated many of their letters, and mined them for material in this book.

The scholarship seems of a good quality, but, like many scholars, Goldsmith does not do a good job in making her material immediately accessible to a lay audience. Background information on the period is not well integrated with the story. Fascinating and exciting incidents that lack documentation are passed over in a couple of paragraphs. For example, at least two significant figures in the tale die suddenly and both are described as probably poisoned. But no other details are given. There are fascinating stories of family feuds, intrigues and dastardly plots, but they are just skipped over in the blink of an eye. And there are other interesting things that are just mentioned and passed over without being pursued. For example, around 1674, Hortense acquires a new servant, Mustapha. He was, we're told, captured by pirates, and he stays at her side, obviously an important figure in her life, until her death. But that's pretty well all we are told about Mustapha. How did this Arab end up in France as a servant – or was he more of a slave? Were they lovers? If not, what was the relationship? They were painted together and, toward the end of her life, friends urged Hortense to let Mustapha cheer her up. There's another story here I'd like to know more about.

I write historical novels and there are always arguments about whether historical novels are essentially dishonest because we wicked authors write things that might not be true. (Say it soft, but I write the occasional thing that very definitely isn't true.) This book, though, shows the limitations of historical non-fiction. Goldsmith (quite properly) avoids speculation. No one seems to have written about these mysterious poisonings or exactly why Hortense was so close to Mustapha, so these areas of her life are passed over.

I loved finding out about these fascinating women, but I grew frustrated by the careful detailing of the chronology of their lives. There is an amazing story (actually, several amazing stories) to be told here but Goldsmith doesn't let herself tell a story. She gives us details of journeys taken, inventories of jewels, the names of famous artists, courtiers and writers they associate with, paintings they feature in but she doesn't make it come alive. The result is a solid scholarly study but a book that won't get these two women the attention they deserve.

We can never truly understand or know the past as it was. All history is about story telling. One day a historical novelist with a lively imagination and a relaxed approach to the exact truth will write a novel that will do the Kings' mistresses justice. But they'll almost certainly be reading Goldsmith's book when they do their research.

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## **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

3.5 stars

Hortense and Maria Mancini were women ahead of their time. They were courageous trailblazers who stood up for their independence from forced marriage and seemed to never age throughout their stories. Carefree in the worst of times, they never let circumstances get the best of them and refused to let men make all of the decisions. I think I may admire them after reading this book.

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## **Louise says**

"... but one cannot always choose the life one would like to lead" (p. 125) This quote is from the memoirs of Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin. At the time it was written, even the King of France, Louis XIV, could not choose his marriage partner. A life determined by others fell most heavily on women. This book tells the story Hortense and her sister Marie who had the course of their lives determined by their influential uncle. By advising the young King Louis XIV and his mother, Cardinal Mancini, who came from modest beginnings, became one of the wealthiest men in Europe.

Marie and Hortense (from a family of 10 siblings) were extraordinarily beautiful. Marie caught the eye of Louis XIV and they became so smitten with each other that the young (perhaps) lovers could jeopardize the Cardinal's position through a royal-commoner wedding. Removing Marie to Italy was the good solution for the Cardinal who had the power over her to make it happen. It was not a good solution for Marie who had no power to stop it.

Armand Charles, Duke of Mazarin followed the curtsies and dances of Hortense since she was 11 years old, and a marriage followed that would elevate the Cardinal's status through her marriage to a noble. The terms most likely were those that eventually gave, through the Cardinal's will, control of Hortense's vast inheritance to her husband. The Duke proceeded to give away her inheritance to religious causes and kept her as a virtual prisoner. His actions clearly demonstrate that religious fundamentalism has been going hand in hand with restricting women across centuries and cultures. After bearing four children in succession Hortense fled to her sister Marie in Italy. Only after the Duke's destruction of the Cardinal's art collection did the male nobles who controlled Hortense's future take note; but still, their response was tepid.

Eventually Marie fled her situation as well. Author Elizabeth Goldsmith does not build strong case against her philandering (highly tolerated at the time) husband, Lorenzo Orfrio Colonna. Marie did not want to bear more children, but did he really try to poison her? How bad a husband he was for his time is not clear; neither is how heavily Marie is influenced by her sister. What is significant about Marie's flight is the power Lorenzo had to make her suffer and her resolve to be free.

Goldsmith does show how the legal and political systems were stacked against women and the resolve of these two noble women to escape the abusive husbands that the system protected. As judges decreed that these women return to their husbands, they did not go back. Through their charm and connections, they were able to push the envelope, but only so far.

The book's title refers to the young Marie's relationship with the young Louis XIV and Hortense's later



relationship with Charles II of England. While these relationships are important, they are not the thrust of the story.

The style bridges that of a history or a report (it could have been presented as a female picaresque or have a feminist spin), but in either case, it seems to be unnecessarily incomplete. Presumably there are records of the 7 children of these two women. How were they raised and what became of them? How the sisters supported themselves through all this is spottily reported. Did they sell their jewels? What of the 8 siblings of Marie and Hortense? How did they manage, assist, undermine and/or view the two traveling sisters? One brother initially tries to assist, but why he essentially "dumps" them is not clear. Both women wrote memoirs, there were court records and letters. These women were celebrities, there is clearly more to know about them than is presented here.

The book has no photos or drawings. There is plenty for the reader to want to see. There is Marie's lying in bed, the paintings that the sisters sold throughout Europe, the Mancini Palace and other residences be they convents or a prison. Renderings of their routes and means of their travels are also of interest.

What is presented is very good, worth 5 stars, but I can't help but think there is more content to be unearthed. I got this book at the public library, but had I paid \$27 (+ tax and shipping) I would not have been happy.

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## **Joy says**

I won this book through goodreads.

I enjoyed this non-fiction book. However, I feel it could have been done better. The research that went into the book appears to be excellent, the author seems to have a complete understanding of the times and events. But, I would have liked to see it put together a little more like a novel. Sometimes the time-line jumps forward and backwards a few years. Some events or back story is just thrown in for justification. I feel that the sisters liberal efforts could have been a little more punctuated, a little less matter-of-fact, especially since that was the author's intent, to show how these two sisters struggled, failed, and triumphed over women's rights. If you love history and strong women, this book is a must.

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## **Meghan says**

I won this book through GoodReads!

I'm halfway through. Since this is a history book rather than a historical novel, it can stray to being a recitation of events rather than a narrative at times. The excerpts of the sister's letters and journals keep it from getting too dry though. I have only one minor complaint about the writing. The author could have called out their ages a little more often as the story progresses. The sisters had such tumultuous lives it was hard to keep track of how old they were. The author does indicate what year it was but just working in that Hortense was 15 when her son was born would be a more dramatic way of marking the passage of time.

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## jules says

I honestly knew absolutely nothing about the Mancini sisters until I picked up this book. The only reason I checked it out from the library to begin with is because I'm currently going through a King Louis XIV phase and reading up all the information I get. While King Louis isn't a huge part of this book, I ate it up.

I love women in history who have somehow figured out how to thrive independently. Sadly, historically speaking, there's not a lot of these stories because women didn't have many rights -- or any, in some circumstances -- to live the way they wanted to.

The Mancini sisters changed all that. In the mid 1600's -- it still blows my mind that they did all this in the 1600's -- they both left their husbands, traveled around Europe alone, attempted to legally separate their assets from these husbands, and just overall tried to live their life independently from anyone else.

They're iconic.

They also were the first women to publish their own memoirs and could even be considered the first media darlings at a time when journalism was just getting off the ground (in terms of society pages and info). They were the first women to do a lot, and reading about their history and their stories was so fun.

A main reason this book was so interesting to read is, hands down, because of Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Goldsmith was able to make a historical book interesting and captivating. I had just put down a King Louis XIV biography that I absolutely hated because I couldn't get with the writing style, so discovering this book was heaven.

Overall, if you like to read about intriguing women and crazy moments in history that were way before their time, pick up this book. It's so interesting.

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## Sarah says

Dry, Dry, Dry

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## Christy B says

**The Kings' Mistresses** is a fabulous account of Marie and Hortense Mancini, two of the most scandalous and free-thinking women of their time.

Marie and Hortense were the nieces of Cardinal Mazarin. The two, along with their siblings were born in Rome and brought to Paris: Marie was 13 and Hortense, 9. Their uncle arranged marriages for both of them -- Marie first, because she was a little too cozy with King Louis XIV.

However, both Marie and Hortense's marriages didn't go well. After producing several children, both of them ditched their husbands. Hortense left her mad and scheming husband in 1668, and Marie left her husband four years later, with fear that he would kill her otherwise.

Both sought refuge in different places, but not the same. Marie went from convent to convent, finally ending up in Madrid, and didn't have the freedom that Hortense ended up having in London after she became the mistress of Charles II.

However, both accomplished what they set out to do: never to return to their husbands. Whatever roadblocks were hurled their way, whatever lawsuits were produced, and whoever tried to intervene, the sisters somehow managed their goal. The sisters ended up having major influence on the women of their time. Their escapades were reported all through Europe and it got people talking. Whether people were on the sides of the sisters or their 'poor, deserted' husbands, people talked. And when people start talking about an issue, things start happening.

The result, eventually, of the sisters flights ended up having was the discussion of just how much power a husband should have over his wife. Unhappy wives soon started following the Mancini sisters' examples by standing up and saying that they shouldn't have to stay in a disastrous marriage and should have the right to live separately from their husbands.

The two sisters ended up writing memoirs, which were quoted in the book. I so happen to have said memoirs, and can not wait to get to them now.

**The Kings' Mistresses** was a great biography on two women who stood up for their rights during a time when women didn't have any. At times, reading the book, I was infuriated by just how little power the women had, how much Marie's husband toyed with her: locking her up in convents (and at one point, a prison!). Through the decades, both husbands would demand their wives return to them, not because they cared for them, but because of their own wounded prides. Neither husband won, and to that, I say: Hooray!

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## **Xole says**

Wow. I'm adding this to my list of 'books to re-read'. I really liked this book. It covers the lives of two women at a point in time where the concepts of feminism are starting to get traction. The author covers feminists, both male and female, in the book, and it's fascinating to read about the different options to open to women of the time. I recommend this very highly.

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## **Orsolya says**

Admittedly, I didn't know much about the Mancini sisters aside from Hortense having been a perspective wife to Charles II and later being his mistress. This is because of my love for Nell Gwynne and therefore, Hortense was "competition". What better way to infuse my knowledge about this "forward" lady and her sister Marie than with Elizabeth C. Goldsmith's, "The Kings' Mistresses"?

Although dual biographies can pose problems (bias towards one of the figures, not enough information, or a lack of cohesiveness to name a few); Goldsmith's "The Kings' Mistresses" is a rare gem. Initially introducing the Mancini sisters with a background view of their family and both the courts of France and Rome (don't be shy to consult the genealogical table!); Goldsmith then alternates chapters focusing on each sister. Although this could cause sequencing confusion, Goldsmith seamlessly fuses their stories and manages to produce two separate stories woven into one. Furthermore, unlike other dual biographies, both

Marie and Hortense receive equal time and detail within in their respective chapters.

The reader feels the drama of the sisters so vividly and can't help but be wrapped up in wonder and inspiration (for instance, Hortense was the first non-royal female to pen her memoirs published under her own name and her attempt at divorce "became the first of its kind to be aired in international media" while generating "published treatises and arguments about the legal right of women in marriage" (189).

Speaking of detail, the amount of information and knowledge which Goldsmith presents is awe-inspiring, compelling, and entertaining, along with drama and a rich pace. Yet, the text is not overwhelming as Goldsmith knows the precise equation regarding which topics to dive deeper into and which to allow more air. Goldsmith also has the ability to bring the text to life. The events and settings are described in such a manner that the reader feels like he/she is seeing everything first-hand. Even those readers with little interest and/or knowledge of the courts of France and Rome will find the text easy-to-read but beautiful.

Goldsmith augments the work with a lofty amount of primary resources with the majority being letters and family papers/documents which creates a feeling of the sisters themselves addressing the reader and thus, the reader in turn being able to learn their private thoughts (very much like reading a memoir, which makes sense because there are memoir excerpts). Sometimes, Goldsmith offers facts which are more on a social history level (meaning: a glimpse into how events are either viewed or effected current times); which would normally be an elementary tactic in a biography but works rather well in "The Kings' Mistresses". These are not over-done nor employed often enough to annoy the reader not interested in this method.

Goldsmith also skips the habit of other writers who present too much speculation. Again, the amount of knowledge is staggering and amazing so she perhaps doesn't need to speculate. Also intriguing is the full view created of the sisters as not only letters and primary sources from other people in their lives are quoted; but also sister regarding sister! Although time periods overlap between the chapters, the reader does not have difficulties remembering what the other sister was experiencing at the same time, due to Goldsmith's ability to present information in a solid way.

One minor setback is that unlike other history works, Goldsmith declined to include a color plate insert. This is disappointing as she mentions a vast amount of artworks and portraits which would have supplemented the text well to be added.

The ending was the weakest portion of "The Kings' Mistresses" with overly- epitaph writing. Further, although Marie's death and legacy was described in a somewhat lengthy manner, Hortense's death was somewhat skimmed and the impact on Marie was completely absent and ignored which leaves the reader with questions. Overall, however, "The Kings' Mistresses" is delightful, informative, and very well written. One thing is for sure: I now have a huge interest and respect for the Mancini sisters.

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