Following the Path to Success: The Marquise de Pompadour's Interest in and Emulation of the Marquise de Maintenon

It is widely accepted that Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, the Marquise de Pompadour and maîtresse en titre to Louis XIV from 1745 until her death in 1764, had a great influence upon the arts. Numerous studies have established that Pompadour, arguably the most famous royal mistress in history, had direct agency in the construction of her public identity through prolific and extensive patronage of the arts. Within these studies, Pompadour is revealed to have had an interest in a predecessor to her position of maîtresse en titre, Françoise d'Aubigné, the Marquise de Maintenon, who was the last royal mistress and morganatic wife to Louis XIV. What proof exists for an association between these two mistresses? Why would Pompadour have looked to Maintenon for inspiration? How can this correlation be seen in Pompadour's construction of her public identity? This study will analyze the basis for such a comparison and investigate the implications of this unexpected relationship between two royal mistresses from different eras, revealing that Pompadour had numerous reasons for looking to Maintenon for inspiration.

Within the prolific scholarly literature concerning Pompadour, Maintenon is occasionally mentioned as having an influence on Pompadour. Elise Goodman, in her book about the portraits of Pompadour, includes a chapter entitled “The New Montespan / The New Maintenon.” She argues that after her physical relations with Louis XV are believed to have ceased, Pompadour emulated Maintenon.1 Strangely, Pierre Mignard's painted portrait of Maintenon is not mentioned, despite numerous copies existing and also having widely circulated prints made after it that would have been available to Pompadour. In Maintenon as Sainte Françoise Romaine,

1 Although there have been more recent publications on Pompadour, Goodman's feminist approach to the portraits of Pompadour was highly influential upon subsequent discussions of the royal mistress. The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savante (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 50-80.
pious and charitable qualities are emphasized over Maintenon's beauty and physical appeal (see Fig. 1). Because Goodman's main focus is Pompadour's potential emulation of Maintenon as a *femme savante*, or educated and cultured woman, these portraits are not central to her thesis. Colin Jones makes a similar comparison, again not alluding to either painted portrait of Maintenon, but instead using an unrelated print.²

More recently, Melissa Hyde briefly compares François-Hubert Drouais' *Pompadour as a Vestal* to Pierre Mignard's *Maintenon as Sainte Françoise Romaine* (see Fig. 2). However, Hyde's comparison consists of only a paragraph and focuses on Pompadour's use of rouge. She does significantly suggest "perhaps there were also deliberate affinities, both formal and thematic, between the image of Maintenon's virtue in [this comparison]."³ Kathleen Nicholson, who has also written on Drouais’ portrait of Pompadour, states:

The subject of the vestal virgin had appeared only rarely in French portraiture prior to the eighteenth century, and without the heroic overtones and didacticism of an exemplary, identifiable ancient vestal such as Tuccia, the lesson of whose steadfast virginity was so effectively appropriated in sixteenth-century England for state portraits of Elizabeth I. Rather, in France, in the age of libertinage and royal mistresses, the topic of vestal virgins would seem to have been loaded and ironising – its erotic undertones heightened

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² Overall, Jones' interpretation of Pompadour is very sound and well researched. Unfortunately, he maintains the belief that "even though many parts of her collections were unrivalled in quality, Pompadour was less a collector – a term that denotes choice, selection and discrimination – than a cultural accumulator." For the origin of Pompadour characterization as 'cultural accumulator,' see Donald Posner, "Madame de Pompadour as Patron of the Visual Arts," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 1 (March 1990): 74-105. For a well argued response to the use of this phrase, see Eunice Lipton, “A Tarnished Reputation: Madame de Pompadour Still Gets No Respect,” *The Women’s Review of Books* 20, no. 6 (March 2003): 12-13. In general, I was left with the view that, despite having explained numerous examples of ingenious inclusions of double-meanings, significant iconography, and other complexities of art associated with Pompadour, Jones still gives her no direct cultural agency and, indeed, blames her for France's decline in the eighteenth century. Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress* (London: National Gallery, 2002), exhibition catalogue, 36-39.

³ Hyde is most concerned with Pompadour as a prominent patron of Boucher, and so does not elucidate this interesting comparison. *Making up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute Publications Program, 2006), 130.
precisely through the notion of virginity to be despoiled.4

Nicholson does not mention Mignard’s portrait, yet her assessment of what it would mean for a portrait of a royal mistress to represent eternal virginity seems applicable to this portrait. In relation to Drouais’ portrait, she states that it “strikes a note of parody in the seemingly odd fit of the king’s former mistress in the guise of a vestal.”5 Mignard's depiction of Maintenon as a saint might seem similarly absurd and this theme of representing royal mistresses as virginal and chaste is an issue that I will explore in this study.

While Pompadour's entire understanding and knowledge of previous *maîtresses en titre* can never be fully grasped, certain facts and suppositions lead to the idea that during her reign as royal mistress, Pompadour was thinking of Maintenon. First, it is logical that Pompadour would want to learn of previous women who held her position. It is also likely that she would have been interested in why they failed in order to avoid losing her title. Maintenon can arguably be viewed as Pompadour's most successful predecessor.6 Maintenon became invulnerable to potential rivals at court because she eventually became Louis XIV's morganatic wife in 1684, after the death of the Queen Marie-Thérèse. Because she was no longer simply a *maîtresse*, Maintenon attained an even higher position and was installed as a permanent and unassailable companion and confidante to the king. She remained secure in this position until Louis' death in 1715. If

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5 Ibid., 65.

6 There are few objective and well-researched biographies of Maintenon. The best is perhaps a dissertation written by Mark Bryant. Now a professor, Bryant has plans to publish a biography of Maintenon, but the book was not yet available when writing this paper. "Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon: Religion, Power and Politics - A study in Circles of Influence during the Later Reign of Louis XIV, 1684-1715," Ph.D. dissertation (University of London, 2001).
Pompadour had any knowledge of this history, emulation of Maintenon seems not only plausible but also probable.

Unsurprisingly, Pompadour studied not only the memoirs of Saint-Simon and Dangeau from the court of Louis XIV, but also owned many books specifically about Maintenon. Elise Goodman has established the following:

In 1752, when she rose to the rank of duchess, she acquired the two-volume edition of the *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon*, published the same year, and in 1756, when she was given the title and privileges of supernumerary lady-in-waiting to Queen Marie Leczinska, she purchased the fifteen-volume edition of the *Lettres de Mme de Maintenon, & Mémoires*, published in 1755 and 1756. In 1755, in the midst of her political ascendancy, she subscribed to the six-volume edition of the *Mémoires de Madame de Maintenon*.

Thomas E. Kaiser observed that Pompadour was probably influenced by Maintenon, and points out that these actions “persuaded more than one observer that Pompadour, as a ‘second volume of . . . Maintenon,’ had taken up ‘bigot-devotion.’”

Therefore, contemporaries of Pompadour understood a connection between the two royal mistresses, and Pompadour apparently did little to discourage such comparisons.

In fact, when planning the foundation of the École militaire in 1750, Pompadour is known to have travelled to the school for girls at Saint-Cyr, founded by Maintenon, as she planned to use it as a model for her institution for boys. In a letter, Pompadour wrote: "We were at Saint-Cyr the day before yesterday. I can not tell you how touched I was by this establishment, and all that was there." It is very likely that she saw at least one of the many replicas in

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7 Goodman, 58.

8 Kaiser makes this point briefly and does not elaborate on the interesting idea of Pompadour's emulation of Maintenon's 'bigot-devotion.' “Madame de Pompadour and the Theaters of Power,” *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 4 (Autumn, 1996): 1038.

existence of Mignard's *Maintenon as Sainte Françoise Romaine* during this trip. Significantly, the strongest direct visual comparison of depictions of these two mistresses is between this portrait of Maintenon by Mignard and Drouais' *Pompadour as a Vestal*, the comparison of which was briefly discussed by Hyde. *Pompadour as a Vestal* is an oval three-quarter-length portrait depicting Pompadour in the guise of a vestal virgin. Vestals, from ancient Rome, were virgin priestesses dedicated to Vesta who tended the sacred fire at her temple. The represented location in this portrait is complex, as it seems to include elements from an imagined antique temple setting, such as the pilaster, niche, antique statue, and fire, but the table, book, and Pompadour's costume, while perhaps classically inspired, are clearly contemporary to eighteenth-century France. The statue in the back seems to be loosely based on *Statue of a Vestal Virgin* at the Uffizi Gallery, but the Drouais' depicted statue's costume is far less antique in style (see Fig. 3). While formal similarities to Mignard's portrait might be unintentional, this seems unlikely as Drouais' portrait was painted well after Pompadour's visit to Saint-Cyr, where she would have viewed Mignard's portrait of Maintenon.

Pompadour and Maintenon are both represented in three-quarter length portraits, seated with one arm resting on a table. The hand of the leaning arm is, in both cases, holding a book. Maintenon's is a prayer book, which she holds open to the viewer. Pompadour's is a history book about vestal virgins, and she extends the spine towards the viewer for us to read it. Both wear veils and rather historically inaccurate, costume-like clothing, which is richly decorated in jewels and pearls. Both also have one object on the accompanying table to provide some indication of narrative. In Maintenon's case, the hourglass refers to a specific story associated with Sainte Françoise Romaine that illustrates her swift obedience both to her husband and God. The fire on the table by Pompadour obviously refers to her imagined duties as a vestal, in which she would
be responsible for tending a fire in honor of Vesta, shown in the form of a statue behind the fire.

Both mistresses are represented as historical women with strong spiritual beliefs and great loyalty to their respective causes. Like Maintenon, Pompadour is represented in the guise of another person, in this case a vestal from ancient Rome. Maintenon is represented as Sainte Françoise Romaine, a fifteenth-century Roman oblate nun who, although married, took vows and led a life of chastity. She is also known to have devoted herself to charity and was an obedient wife. Despite the fact that Maintenon is represented as a Christian saint, whereas Pompadour is shown as a pagan Roman vestal from antiquity, both characters are associated with chastity, virtue, loyalty, and complete devotion.

Both women would have wanted to emphasize these traits, especially in portraits painted following tumultuous times in the mistresses' lives. Mignard's portrait of Maintenon was commissioned around 1694, which was a time of great controversy relating to the religious philosophy of Quietism.10 Even though she was firmly established as the morganatic wife of Louis XIV, Maintenon feared a great backlash if she was linked in people's minds to the heretical Madame Guyon. In addition, this portrait was also made after Louis XIV's controversial Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), greatly reducing religious toleration within France. Drouais' portrait of Pompadour was commissioned around 1760, following her controversial involvement in negotiating the first Treaty of Versailles (1756), which resulted in a Franco-Austrian alliance and preceded the exceedingly taxing Seven Years War (1756-73). Considering the extensive study that Pompadour seems to have made of Maintenon, it is possible that she

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10 For information concerning the Quietist controversy, refer to: Catherine Randall, “Loosening the Stays: Madame Guyon’s Quietist Opposition to Absolutism,” Mystics Quarterly 26, no. 1 (March 2000): 8-30; Bryant, "Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon: Religion, Power and Politics - A study in Circles of Influence during the Later Reign of Louis XIV, 1684-1715."
could have realized parallels between their situations prior to her commissioning of Drouais' 

*Pompadour as a Vestal.* As Goodman has shown, Pompadour obtained all of her books concerning Maintenon after 1752. She obtained many in 1755-1756, the period in which she was both becoming lady-in-waiting to the queen, but also entangled in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles. Perhaps by the early 1760s, Pompadour had realized the similarities between herself and Maintenon. Pompadour would certainly know that Maintenon was popularly blamed for Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the subsequent violence and discrimination associated with it. Perhaps Pompadour even saw an association between Maintenon's legacy and the one she would eventually possess, as the supposed political mastermind behind the terribly unsuccessful Treaty of Versailles. It is even possible that Pompadour looked to Maintenon as a model for how to handle such a situation. While Maintenon's legacy was certainly problematic by the 1760s, the publication and popularity of her letters and memoirs reveal that Maintenon was at least somewhat respected within eighteenth-century French society.

However, in addition to emulating Maintenon's response to controversy, and perhaps attempting to bolster her legacy, Pompadour also had other reasons for feeling that her relationship with Louis XV was threatened during the 1760s. Pompadour became mistress to Louis XV in 1745 but in about 1750, a pivotal shift occurred in Pompadour's relationship to the king when they ceased having sexual relations. Instead, Louis began having new *petites maîtresses*, unofficial mistresses who lived in the Parc-aux-Cerfs, a private house at Versailles. Pompadour's position became extremely vulnerable for a time, but the king kept these dalliances secret from the court and eventually his relationship with Pompadour became stronger than ever. During this period, Pompadour's cultural patronage began to change. Pompadour started commission religious works from artists such as François Boucher and Joseph-Marie Vien,
including Boucher's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, painted around 1750 for the chapel at Bellevue, and Vien's *Visitation* (1752-3), which was commissioned for a hospital founded by Pompadour at the village of Crécy (see Figs. 4-5).\(^{11}\) This latter act of charity should not go unnoticed as it represents, along with the foundation of the École militaire in 1751, a trend of Pompadour engaging in charitable works. It is possible that Pompadour found it politically expedient to display her religiosité at this time, as has been suggested in most accounts of her life.\(^{12}\) A number of events occurred during this period in her life that could have made her consider the fate of her soul: advancing age, the death of Louis' daughter Henriette in 1752, the serious illness of the dauphin, the death of Alexandrine and her father in 1754, the rise of the dévot faction at court, or the increasing polarization concerning Jansenism.

Despite these factors, most of Pompadour's contemporaries at court considered her increasing religiosity to be a ruse in order to ingratiate herself towards Queen Marie-Leczinska and also present a respectable façade to the French public. After being asked by her husband, the queen made Pompadour an official lady-in-waiting in 1756, finally providing her a stable position at court and publically revealing the king's intention to maintain a close companionship with Pompadour. Although it is now difficult to assess the role Pompadour actually played in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, Louis XV was widely criticized by contemporaries for


\(^{12}\) Since her death, authors writing about Pompadour have used the fact that none of her remaining writings concern her religious beliefs to argue that she was not actually very spiritual. However, this type of assumptive argument based on a lack of evidence is extremely weak. The writings of her virulent detractors characterize Pompadour as an impious dissimulating power-hungry manipulator. I have attempted to base my findings upon actual evidence and relatively impartial theories instead of relying upon potentially biased contemporary accounts and later biographies, which also tend to focus heavily upon this sensationalistic and biased information. For an example of the typical description of Pompadour's assumed dissimulation, see Evelyne Lever, *Madame de Pompadour: A Life*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 200-203.
giving her too much power and Pompadour was popularly believed to be a bad influence on the
king. Although historians have revealed that Louis showed signs of wanting an alliance with
Austria before 1755, when she is believed to have gotten involved, Pompadour is nonetheless
popularly blamed for the Treaty of Versailles and the disastrous ramifications, including the
subsequent economic and militaristic decline of France that eventually led to the French
Revolution. Obviously, however, the king did not hold her responsible, as they maintained a
close relationship until Pompadour's death in 1764.

Representing Pompadour as a chaste virgin from classical antiquity has struck many
scholars as odd.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, the portrait of Maintenon in the guise of a saint might be considered
unusual and even ironic by casual observers. Despite the dissimilarity in subject matter, one
representing a Christian saint and the other a believer of the Roman religion, both implicitly
concern the characteristics of chastity, piety, devotion, and loyalty. In this study, a case has been
made that Pompadour saw and was influenced by Mignard's portrait of Maintenon in her
commissioning of a portrait from Drouais. It has been shown that Pompadour showed an interest
in Maintenon, purchasing numerous editions of her predecessor's letters and memoirs, and that
she had reason to look to Maintenon for inspiration, as both experienced criticism for excessive
involvement in their respective consorts' political decisions and also the perceived impious and
dissimulating construction of a religious façade. In addition, subtle layering of meanings unites
these portraits, which both emphasize the positive attributes of Pompadour and Maintenon,

\textsuperscript{13} "Virginity was not something that one readily associated with a royal mistress, but in
the context of Pompadour's changed relationship with Louis over the 1750s, it seems to signify a
chaste fidelity and a superiority over other women grounded in more than mere beauty." Jones,
78. For other accounts of \textit{Pompadour as a Vestal}, see Nicholson, 57-71. Unfortunately,
Nicholson's main point seems to be that Drouais' portrait "strikes a note of parody in the
seemingly odd fit of the king's former mistress in the guise of a vestal (65)." Yet, she does not
fully unravel the complexities of this portrait.
respectively, but also recognize and honor the power of their respective consorts. In addition, *Pompadour as a Vestal and Maintenon as Sainte Françoise Romaine*, which respectively represent Pompadour and Maintenon in the guise of characters, left open the door for later accusations of dissimulation and falsity. Pompadour and Maintenon both have problematic legacies complicated by biased contemporary accounts, undeserved blame for political failings of the state, and accusations of deceitfulness. In both cases, the commissioning of portraits in which they are represented as implied actors in constructed realities did little to combat these allegations and, instead, seem absurd and even humorous to modern viewers.
Bibliography


Illustrations

Figure 1 Pierre Mignard, *Maintenon as Sainte Françoise Romaine*, c. 1694, Musée du Louvre.

Figure 2 François-Hubert Drouais, *Pompadour as a Vestal*, c. 1760-63, Stewart Museum at the Fort Île Sainte-Hélène, Montreal, Quebec.
Figure 3 *Statue of Vestal Virgin*, date unknown, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Figure 4 François Boucher, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1750, Musée des Beaux Arts de Lyon.

Figure 5 Joseph-Marie Vien, *Visitation*, 1752-3, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.