Madame de Pompadour

By Tricia Tait:

Throughout history, the traditional roles that subordinated women passed from generation to generation. Although most women faced a life of limited opportunity, a few were capable of surpassing the traditional roles and gaining power and influence. One of these women was Jeanne-Antionette Poisson, who in the eighteenth century, rose beyond her class status and gained title of maitresse-en-titre to Louis XV, King of France. She was able to remain the King’s mistress between 1745 and 1750, and remained powerful as the King’s confidante until her death in 1764.

Madame de Pompadour was born Jeanne-Antionette Poisson on December 29, 1721 in the rue de Clery. Her father was Francois Poisson, a steward to the Paris brothers, and was forced to leave the country after a black market scandal in 1725. At this time, her mother, Louise Madeline de la Motte, was befriended by Charles le Normant de Tornehem, who then looked over the family. When Jeanne-Antionette was nine years old, her mother had taken her to a fortune teller and was told that one day she would become the mistress of a king. She was then given the nickname Reinette, meaning "little queen." Between the ages of eight and twelve, Reinette spent much time in and out of an Ursuline convent at Poissy where she received an education and first took interest in the arts. Once she returned home for good her mother insisted on giving her the best education because of her belief that she would marry a rich man. She was given voice lessons by Jeloitte, the star of the Paris opera, and taught elocution from a dramatist, Crebillon.

When Reinette reached the age of marriage, an arrangement was made by Normant de Tornehem for her to marry his nephew, Charles Guillaume le Normant d'Etoiles. In 1741 they were married and in 1744 she gave birth to a girl named Alexandrine. Shortly after she was married, she began to plan ways to gain access into the most elusive circles. Soon she was entertaining a great deal of men like Voltaire and Montesquieu in her chateau d'Etoiles. It did not take a long time for her name to be known all over Paris and even by the King himself.

After the death of the Duchess de Chateauroux in 1744, Reinette’s chance came to become the King’s mistress. Not long after her appearance at the masked Yew Ball she was put up in a room in King Louis XV's palace and given lessons on court etiquette. Finally, on September 15, 1745, she was legally separated from her husband and pronounced the Marquise de Pompadour, the King’s official mistress.

Once established in court, she was very modest and tried to win approval, despite the already implanted hatred of her by many because of her bourgeoisie background. She was very successful in finding ways to amuse and entertain the King. Through the Theatre des Petits Cabinets, she entertained the King with a total of one hundred twenty-two performances. She also planned many intimate parties and suppers for the King to keep him amused.

The Marquise de Pompadour has widely been known as a patron of the arts and literature. She had a huge library of thousands of books and had given her patronage to the writer Voltaire. She was also very successful in her artistic creations. She loved new buildings and decorative arts, and thus the fashion that she used is identified with the term "Pompadour style." Such interests allowed her to acquire many houses and mansions such as the Hotel d'Evreux. She also planned the building of the palace of Compeigne and the Petit Trianon.
The two most notable creations of the Marquise were the porcelain works of Sevres and the Ecole Militaire. Through her many works she became known as the patron of many artists like Boucher, sculptors, and architects like Lassurance.

Because she could no longer meet her lover's demands, after 1750, the relationship between the King and the Marquise was based strictly on friendship. At this time she looked to play a larger role in the politics and government of France. On October 12, 1752 the King made her a duchess, the greatest favor he could bestow on her. When France was on the verge of war with England, she played a major role in influencing the "Diplomatic Revolution," or the treaty that allied France with her former enemy Austria. The treaty was signed on May 1, 1756, and eventually led to the Seven Years' War. She also demonstrated her power and influence over the King in the way she was capable of removing her enemies from office and enabling her friends to come into government. All of these proved to be disastrous to France, and led to the unpopularity of the Marquise. She was blamed for all the misfortunes that fell upon France. The public hated her and began writing vicious letters, pamphlets, and verses against her, and also began threatening her with violent campaigns. Despite the public's view of her, the King continued to remain faithful to the Marquise de Pompadour.

The Marquise de Pompadour, who had put all of her energy towards the affairs of the state, was physically fatigued and became quite ill. She died on April 15, 1764. Through her influential twenty years at court, she truly became an example of rising above the traditions given to women.

By Susan Arnett:

Women have always had a profound effect on history throughout the ages. Madame de Pompadour is one female whose contributions and authority in France have distinguished her as a historical figure.

On December 30, 1721 Jean-Antoinette Poisson, the future Marquise de Pompadour was born to Louise Madeleine de la Motte and Francois Poisson of the bourgeois class. Francois was a steward to the Paris brothers who were responsible for running the economy of France. Jean-Antoinette's childhood was not always the easiest. Her father was exiled from France for charges of embezzlement when she was very young, leaving her mother to raise two children alone. She was also a very frail child who always had throat and nose problems. At age seven, Jean-Antoinette was sent to the Ursuline convent at Poissy where she was well educated and developed her love for the arts. Perhaps the most significant point in Jean-Antoinette Poisson's young life came from a prophecy by fortune teller Mme. Lebon. At age nine, this fortune teller told her that one day she would reign over a king's heart. Even when she married her husband Charles-Guillaume le Normant d'Etiolles, whom she loved deeply, she told him in fun that she would never leave him, except, of course, for the king.

Jean-Antoinette eventually began visiting the court of King Louis XV at Versailles. After their first meeting the king instantly admired her beauty and skill. He enjoyed watching her perform in plays at her own theater built in her Etiolles estate. She was installed at court as Louis the fifteenth's official favorite under the title of Marquis de Pompadour in 1744.

Madame de Pompadour had a profound effect over the private life of the court. Before she arrived at the court, life had been quite boring for King Louis XV. She organized suppers and brought many performances to the theater. She brought back the sense of intimacy and extravagance that the French court had lost. She also directed the artists of her time. She commissioned such artists as the writer Voltaire and the painter Francois Boucher. Madame de Pompadour also encouraged the manufacture of porcelain and decorated the palace of Versailles in the Rococo manner.

Madame de Pompadour did not stay mistress to the king for long, in fact she stayed the king's lover for only five years. Nevertheless, she stayed a true and close friend to Louis XV until her death. To maintain her status, the marquise took a part in the politics of France. She made and unmade generals during the Seven Year's War and helped to bring out the famous change of alliances. She wanted peace within France so it could be a strong
world power. Although she was very ambitious, her life was still filled with frustrations, bitterness, and unhappiness. Throughout her life in the court, Madame de Pompadour was many times looked down upon by the French people. Coming out of the bourgeois class, this mistress and friend of the king was taking a role usually reserved for the aristocrats. Others saw her as a woman trying to seize power.

In 1764, the always fragile Marquis de Pompadour came down with a violent headache. She was diagnosed as having congestion of the lungs. Two months after her diagnosis, the beloved friend of the king died at the age of 46. Madame Pompadour is proof that women had a role in history. Although she is not always portrayed in a pleasant light, Madame de Pompadour is a part of history because of her great qualities, talents, and influence.