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Jordan D. Hallmark, Portland State University, graduate student, "Parody, Performance, and Conspiracy in Early Eighteenth-Century France: The Subversive Court of Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon, Daughter-in-Law of the Sun King (1700–1718)"

Abstract: This paper examines how the French princess Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon, duchesse du Maine (1676–1753), the wife of Louis XIV's illegitimate son, the duc du Maine, established an exclusive court at her château de Sceaux beginning in the year 1700 that challenged the centralized cultural system of the French monarchical state. Located twenty kilometers away from the rigid and controlling political center of Versailles, the court of the duchesse du Maine subverted social norms by inventing and performing parodies of court protocols, chivalric orders, emblems, and other forms of monarchical imagery. In a time and place where women were both legally and socially barred from holding positions of authority, the duchesse du Maine created a parallel world in which she was the sovereign, presiding over a court of important political, cultural, and intellectual figures, including the philosopher Voltaire. By considering the significance of this subversive court culture in the context of the factional divisions and dynastic crises emerging in the last years of Louis XIV's reign, this paper will show how the seemingly frivolous aristocratic divertissements of the duchesse du Maine and her circle were informed by political, social, and dynastic ambitions that would culminate in a conspiracy to overthrow the French regent, Philippe d'Orléans, in 1718.

"Parody, Performance, and Conspiracy in Early Eighteenth-Century France: The Subversive Court of Louise-Bénédicte de Bourbon, Daughter-In-Law of the Sun King (1700–1718)"

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Towards the end of December 1718, the regent of France, Philippe d'Orléans, deployed a team of musketeers and royal guardsmen to find and arrest a group of wanted conspirators. Not long before, the French police had intercepted correspondence that implicated these suspects in a plot to overthrow the regent and seize power for themselves.[1] The arrests took place on the morning of December 29 at a number of targeted locations. One of the principal targets of the police operation, Louise-Bénédicte, duchesse du Maine, was in her Parisian apartment when the commotion unfolded. Standing at less than five feet tall, this small, unimposing woman was arrested and securely transported over 300 kilometers south-east from Paris to Burgundy where she was imprisoned in the imposing fifteenth-century château de Dijon.[2] Louise-Bénédicte, duchesse du Maine, was no ordinary prisoner. Born on December 8, 1676, as Louise-Bénédicte de Bourbon, the duchesse du Maine was a princess of the house of Condé, a branch of the French royal house of Bourbon. As a Condé, Louise-Bénédicte was a *princesse du sang,* or princess of the royal blood, the highest noble rank outside of the royal family.[3] How did a *princesse du sang* get involved in a plot to depose her own cousin, the regent, and end up imprisoned for her role in the conspiracy? To answer this question, we must examine the events that led up to her dramatic arrest. For while Louise-Bénédicte had never been involved in a political conspiracy prior to the events of 1718, she had spent the past eighteen years of her life developing a subversive culture of royal opposition at the château de Sceaux, where the duchess held a rival court to that of Versailles. By examining her use of the visual languages of theater, ritual, and iconography to reappropriate the cultural foundations of Louis XIV's monarchical identity, this paper will situate the duchesse du Maine's subversive cultural patronage and performance within the context of a larger strategy of political opposition that would ultimately end with the duchess's arrest and imprisonment.

Une Poupée du Sang

Louise-Bénédicte de Bourbon was born on December 8, 1676, to parents Henri Jules de Bourbon, prince de Condé and Anne of Bavaria. As the daughter of the current prince de Condé, Louise-Bénédicte was born into one of the most powerful and illustrious families in France. In spite of the social and legal restraints and expectations imposed upon her on the basis of her gender and rank, Louise-Bénédicte grew up bearing grand ambitions for her future.[4] For a French princess like herself, the primary means of realizing her ambitions was by securing a socially advantageous marriage. In *ancien régime* France, however, the criteria for determining the quality and suitability of a potential husband were generally based, not on the desires of the unmarried princess, but on the priorities of her father.[5] Seeking to curry the favor of the king and benefit financially in the process, Louise-Bénédicte's father used his daughter to establish closer ties to the monarchy by offering her as a bride to Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, duc du Maine, one of the many children that Louis XIV had fathered illegitimately with his former mistress, the marquise de Montespan. Although the king had legally legitimized his son the duc du Maine in 1673, Louise-Bénédicte was nonetheless horrified by the prospect of marrying a *bâtard* born of the king's adulterous affair with his scandalous and now-disgraced mistress. In spite of her protests, the marriage took place on May 16, 1692, at the royal chapel of Versailles. For the extremely ambitious Louise-Bénédicte, henceforth known as the duchesse du Maine, the social demotion brought about by this marriage to the socially inferior duc du Maine constituted an affront to her sense of identity.[6] This public humiliation, which the duchess regarded as an arbitrary monarchical attack on her dynastic preeminence, would manifest itself in the oppositional culture that she would foster over the next three decades.

After their nuptials, the newly married duc and duchesse du Maine, like most princes

looking to benefit from the king's patronage, took up residence in their own apartment at the château de Versailles.[7] As a result of her gender and small size, the young duchesse du Maine's intelligence and ambition went long unnoticed by her fellow courtiers at Versailles, who condescendingly referred to her and her three sisters as the *poupées du sang* (dolls of the blood), a disparaging play on their titles as princesses of the blood.[8] Yet, in contrast to the frivolous character that her nickname served to project, the duchesse du Maine devoted much of her time at Versailles to exploring her intellectual curiosity, preferring to study astronomy and classical poetry with her husband's childhood tutor rather than participate in the endless ceremonies of the court.[9] By the end of the decade, the duchesse du Maine had resolved to escape the constraints that controlled her life at the château de Versailles, an edifice that had come to symbolize the submission of her Condé lineage and the humiliation of her unwanted marriage.

Finally, in October 1699, the fulfillment of the duchess's ambitions for greater independence was made possible after her husband acquired the vast estate of the château de Sceaux for her—an extravagant gift that, according to one of the ducal couple's most vociferous critics, the court memorialist Saint-Simon, the duke presented to his wife because "he was … scared to death" of provoking her anger.[10] Within just a few months of the acquisition, the duchesse du Maine had left Versailles and formally established herself at the château de Sceaux, situated nearly twenty kilometers beyond the gaze of the royal court.[11] Over the next fifteen years, the last years of the reign of Louis XIV, the duchesse du Maine would transform the château de Sceaux into her own rival court. Reappropriating the court ritual of Versailles, the duchesse du Maine would assert her own sense of social, cultural, and political superiority by appropriating and subverting the cultural symbols and institutions upon which the Sun King's absolutist identity was founded.

Subverting the Royal Image

In his important study of the cultural system of the Sun King, Peter Burke shows how Louis XIV, once a young, unintimidating boy whose kingship had been openly disrespected by rival princes during the regency of his mother, came to acquire and maintain a godlike identity within the first decade of his personal reign.[12] Employing a cultural strategy that Burke calls the "fabrication" of the king's image, Louis XIV's ministers enlisted a team of "image-makers," including artists, iconographers, writers, architects, and musicians, to develop a cultural language for representing the absolute power and heroic identity of the king.[13] One important early element of the king's cultural fabrication was the composition of his royal device. While royal iconographers occasionally included the inherited French royal emblem of the fleur-de-lys in their representations of the king, Louis XIV adopted his own personal device in the 1660s, which allowed the royal identity of the Sun King to be symbolically disseminated through prints, medals, and other forms of official imagery.[14] Indeed, while heraldic variations did exist, the most common version of Louis XIV's personal device shows the king in the form of the sun itself, his face, like the solar god Apollo, encircled by golden rays and soaring above the earth, his terrestrial kingdom. This cosmic imagery is reinforced by the device's inscription, Louis XIV's personal motto: *Nec pluribus impar* (Not unequal to many).[15]

After serving as a symbol of the Sun King's status as the absolute ruler of France and master of Europe for several decades, Louis XIV's device was reappropriated by the duchesse du Maine in one of her first attempts at fabricating her own regal image as queen of Sceaux. Whereas Louis XIV's impresa had identified the monarch with the cosmic and grandiose bodies of the sun and the god Apollo, the duchess would subvert the epic scale of the king's visual rhetoric by choosing as her emblem the small and outwardly trivial form of the honeybee. To

strip her emblem of any noble symbolism and further emphasize its derisive character, the duchesse du Maine referred to her heraldic lampoon not as an *abeille* (the French word for 'bee'), but by the more ignoble name of *mouche à miel* (literally, honey fly).[16] In 1703, the duchesse du Maine took her subversion of Louis XIV's image even further when she had her device immortalized on a gold medal, appropriating the traditional medium through which the king's device was glorified and disseminated.[17] During the reign of Louis XIV, medals bearing the king's likeness and device were cast to celebrate major events and military victories through the ceremonial glorification of the king's image, and subsequently circulated throughout the kingdom and beyond in printed reproductions.[18] In contrast to these official commemorative relics, the duchess's medal is at once a parody of the king's self-aggrandizing ceremonial paraphernalia and a celebration of her newly established queendom at Sceaux. For while the emblem of the *mouche à miel* served to ridicule solar, apollonian, and other forms of Louis XIV's vainglorious iconography, the duchesse du Maine, still belittled as a *poupée du sang,* also identified with her small but fierce insect surrogate. The reverse of the medal depicts a bee flying above a landscape with a beehive visible in the background and includes the duchesse du Maine's new motto: *Piccola si, ma fa pur gravi le ferite* (She is small, yes, but she inflicts severe wounds).[19] Adopted from the 1573 play *Aminta* by the Italian poet Torquato Tasso, the duchess's motto uses the bee as a symbol of her own hidden power.[20] With this motto, the duchess warns would-be opponents not to underestimate her ambition or the measures she would take to attain what she saw as her rightful position in the kingdom.

The duchesse du Maine's heraldic medals would play a central role in her efforts to establish Sceaux as a rival court to Versailles. As part of her strategy, the duchess appropriated one of the most ancient and potent symbols of the king's authority by establishing her own

chivalric order. In France, as in other European monarchies, the king stood as the grand master of the monarchy's prestigious chivalric orders, invested with the authority to confer knighthoods as part of a solemn ceremonial display of the monarch's divine status.[21] While Louis XIV had inherited the ceremonial rituals of the kingdom's most prestigious chivalric order, *l'ordre du Saint-Esprit,* the Sun King founded a new order in 1693, which he named after his namesake, *l'ordre royal et militaire de Saint Louis.* The duchesse du Maine's chivalric order, however, would be named for neither the holy spirit nor Saint Louis, but for the duchess's devious insect alter ego, *l'Orde de la Mouche à miel.* On June 11, 1703, at the château de Sceaux, the duchess held the inaugural investiture ceremony of her newly established order. The thirty-nine knights of the order of the honey fly included members of the nobility as well as important intellectuals, and, in contrast to the patriarchal conventions of the period, half of them—nineteen of the thirty-nine members, plus the duchess—were women.[22] Instead of the Croix de Saint Louis, the knights of Sceaux were decorated with their own gold medals displaying the duchess's emblem, which they received upon pronouncing the following oath: "Je jure par les abeilles du mont Hymette, fidélité et obéissance à la dictatrice perpétuelle de l'ordre" (I swear by the bees of Mount Hymettus that I will be loyal and obedient to the perpetual dictator of the order).[23] Although the chivalric ceremony and oath of obedience to the duchess, and her title of perpetual dictator, were conceived as theatrical parodies of the king's overbearing pageantry, this performance served as the opening act of what became a fifteen-year cultural and political spectacle featuring Louise-Bénédicte as its hero and the monarchy as its villain.

In the years following the creation of the *Ordre de la Mouche à miel,* the duchesse du Maine arranged numerous festivities for her circle of courtiers, from intimate concerts and literary games to elaborate theatrical and operatic performances.[24] With the château de Sceaux's

growing reputation as an important cultural venue, however, it soon attracted the attention of the king, whose natural son, the duc du Maine, officially owned the property. On a few occasions, Louis XIV personally attended the duchesse du Maine's famous *divertissements*, most notably in October 1704, which required the duchess to temper the subversive elements of her public cultural program.[25] In the meantime, however, the duchesse du Maine, having already undermined the absolutist symbolism of several iconic forms of monarchical media and ritual, including the king's device, royal medals, and the chivalric orders, embarked on a project to reappropriate Louis XIV's art and architectural language of kingship, one of the most important elements of the king's public image. At her châteaux de Sceaux, a residence constructed by Louis XIV's late minister, Colbert, and decorated in a manner designed to flatter its occupant's royal patron, the duchesse du Maine hired the painter Claude III Audran to redecorate the interior's Louis XIV-style iconography. While only known to us through descriptions and sketches as the entire château was demolished in the nineteenth century, the most subversive of Audran's decorative schemes for the duchess was in the *cabinet des arts et sciences*.[26] The cabinet's painted ceiling centers around the figure of Apollo, one of the most extensively reproduced symbols of Louis XIV's royal identity.[27] Audran's decorative scheme reappropriated Louis XIV's grand Apollonian iconography, as seen in Charles Le Brun's heroic mythological decorations for the *galerie d'Apollon* at the Louvre or the *salon d'Apollon* at Versailles. In contrast to this heroic royal mythology, the Apollo of the duchesse de Maine is small, playful, and decorative, incorporated into a floral ornamental scheme with allegories of different poetic genres, including, of course, an allegory of satire.[28] Just like the playful yet subversive rituals of the *ordre de la Mouche à miel,* the duchess's cabinet at Sceaux takes a symbol of the king's godlike status and undermines its power through the subversive language of parody.

The most explicit, and public, cultural assault on the royal image of the Sun King was not staged at the château de Sceaux until the end of July 1714, when the duchesse du Maine put on the first in a series of elaborate festivities that would continue until the Spring of 1715, concluding only a few months before Louis XIV's death on September 1. This sequence of festivities, sixteen in all, was named the *Grandes Nuits de Sceaux* (the great nights of Sceaux), a reference, not only to the late hour at which they were staged, but also to their nocturnal theme.[29] For the crowd of aristocrats and literary figures who flocked to the *Grandes Nuits*—the young Voltaire was a frequent guest—the highlight of each evening was the suite of theatrical performances known as the *divertissement*.[30] These performances consisted of short theatrical pieces called *intermèdes,* usually three or four of which were performed over the course of each *divertissement,* and combined elements of different theatrical genres with instrumental music, dancing, and singing.[31] As Catherine Cessac has observed, the *grandes nuits* were neither conceptually nor stylistically very modern.[32] In fact, these grand spectacles resembled the sumptuous *divertissements* hosted by Louis XIV at Versailles in the 1660s and 1670s much more closely than any of the more fashionable Parisian theatrical genres of the early eighteenth century. Boldly reappropriating this outmoded theatrical medium used to glorify the king at the height of his political, cultural, and imperial prestige, the *grandes nuits* center around the theme of the night and tell the story of the triumph of the night queen, played by the duchesse du Maine, over the setting sun, symbolizing the end of the reign of the Sun King and rise of the queen of Sceaux. Whereas the symbolic power of the sun had stood as a cornerstone of Louis XIV's absolutist monarchical identity for most of his reign, famously incarnated by the young sovereign himself in the *Ballet royal de la Nuit* in 1653, its triumphal meaning was inverted by the duchesse du Maine and the literary figures in her service. In one of the most explicitly

subversive and anti-monarchical performances of the *Grandes Nuits,* presented during the festivities of the fourth *nuit,* a diplomatic delegation from the distant nation of Greenland, played by a group of young men dressed in heavy furs, swore their allegiance to the duchesse du Maine and rejected the sovereignty of the "sun that she despises," a rather explicit reference to the Sun King.[33]

NIGHTFALL

While the duchesse du Maine did not record her motivations for challenging the king so forcefully and publicly in the *grandes nuits* of 1714 and 1715, one possible impetus could have come from the intensifying conflict over the king's last will and testament. In the first decade of the duchesse du Maine's court at Sceaux, the subversive nature of her cultural program had been inspired by her desire to assert her autonomy and prestige as a *princesse du sang* through monarchical parody. Yet, in spite of whatever ambitions she may have harbored between 1700 and 1710, she assuredly recognized that there was no realistic path to a position of political authority. Between 1711 and 1712, however, the political and dynastic landscape of the French monarchy was dramatically altered through a rapid succession of tragedies. First, on April 14, 1711, Louis XIV's only son and the heir apparent, Louis, le Grand Dauphin, died of smallpox. Then, during the months of February and March 1712, the next two princes in the line of succession, Louis XIV's grandson and eldest great-grandson, both perished during a measles outbreak. This left the two-year-old duc d'Anjou, the future Louis XV, as the heir to the French throne.

Over the remaining three years of the aging Sun King's life and reign, the attention of the royal court, the Parlements, and all other interested parties, the duchesse du Maine foremost among them, was fixed on the issue of the king's final will and testament.[34] As the *dauphin* or

heir apparent, the duc d'Anjou, could not govern as king of France until he had reached the age of thirteen, the septuagenarian Louis XIV needed to determine the composition of the regency that would assume power in the likely event that he should perish before his heir's thirteenth birthday in 1723. In 1714, around the time of the first *Grandes Nuits de Sceaux,* the king's decision was made known. His nephew Philippe d'Orléans was named president of a regency council responsible for governing during the future Louis XV's minority, while the duc du Maine, as an important member of the regency council, would be responsible for "looking after the safety, preservation, and education of the minor king" and for commanding the royal guard.[35] While the role assigned to the duc du Maine in the king's will was certainly one of considerable influence and importance, the duchesse du Maine's personal ambition almost certainly left her feeling unsatisfied and, once again, resentful towards the Sun King's continued control over her destiny.

Following the king's death on September 1, 1715, Philippe d'Orléans, himself dissatisfied with his ceremonial title of president of the regency council, successfully executed a scheme to secure complete control over the regency and strip the duc and duchesse du Maine of any political authority.[36] When an encounter with the Spanish diplomat, Antonio del Giudice, prince of Cellamare, in 1718 offered the duchess the opportunity to seize control of the regency through the intervention of the king of Spain, the ambitious duchess jumped at the chance. This poorly executed plot to overthrow the regent, Philippe d'Orléans, was quickly exposed by the regent's agents, who, on the morning of December 29, 1718, arrested and transported the duchesse du Maine to prison.[37] Although her time in prison at the château de Dijon lasted less than a year, the reign of the queen of Sceaux had come to an end.

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[1] Edmond Jean François Barbier, *Chronique de la Régence et du règne de Louis XV (1718–1763) ou Journal de Barbier, avocat au Parlement* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1885), 1:24.

[2] Ibid., 26–27.
[3] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jean-François Fitou, *Saint-Simon and the Court of Louis XIV*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 121.
[4] Catherine Cessac and Manuel Couvreur, "Introduction," in *La Duchesse du Maine (1676–1753): Une mécène à la croisée des arts et des siècles*, ed. Catherine Cessac and Manuel Couvreur (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2003), 7.
[5] Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam, "Introduction: Art, Cultural Politics and the Woman Questions," in *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.
[6] Katia Béguin, "Les enjeux et les manifestations du mécénat aristocratique à l'aube du XVIIIe siècle," in Cessac and Couvreur, 24.
[7] Philippe de Courcillon, marquis de Dangeau, *Journal du marquis de Dangeau avec les additions inédites du duc de Saint-Simon*, ed. Eudox Soulié, L. Dussieux, Philippe de Chennevières, Paul Mantz, Anatole de Montaiglon, and F. Feuillet de Conches (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1854–1860), 4:26.
[8] Léonce de Piépape, *A Princess of Strategy: The Life of Anne Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon-Condé Duchesse du Maine*, trans. James Lewis (London: John Lane, 1911), 10–11.
[9] Ibid., 36–37.
[10] Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires complets et authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon sur le siècle de Louis XIV et la Régence* (Paris: Delloye, 1840–1844): 6:109.
[11] Nina Lewallen, "Architecture and Performance at the Hôtel du Maine in Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 17, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 2009–2010): 8.
[12] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 10–11.
[13] Ibid., 10–11, 109.
[14] Ibid., 16.
[15] Hendrik Ziegler, *Louis XIV et ses ennemis: Image, propagande et contestation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2013), 29–35.
[16] Catherine Cessac, "La Duchesse du Maine ou la Reine Didon: La mythologie mise à l'épreuve," *Dix-Septième Siècle* 3, no. 272 (2016): 491.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 16.
[19] Cessac, "La Duchesse du Maine ou la Reine Didon," 491.
[20] Torquato Tasso, *Aminta*, act 2, scene 1, lines 1–2.
[21] Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest 1661–1701* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 224.
[22] Marianne de Meyenbourg, "L'almanach de 1721 et l'emblème de la Mouche à miel," in Cessac and Couvreur, 163.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Cessac, "La Duchesse du Maine et la musique," in Cessac and Couvreur, 100.
[25] Maurice Barthélémy, "Chaulieu à Châtenay et à Sceaux," in Cessac and Couvreur, 199.
[26] Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decorated and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 134.
[27] Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 39–47.
[28] While the château du Sceaux was demolished in 1798, Audran's decorative scheme for the duchesse du Maine's *cabinet* is described in a poem, likely composed by a member of her court. The poem, entitled "Dessein de l'apartement de SAS Mme la duchesse du Maine à Sceaux," is in the collection of the musée Condé at the château de Chantilly. For a transcription of the poem, see Auguste Panthier, "L'appartement de la duchesse du Maine à Sceaux," *Bulletin des amis de Sceaux* (1930): 70–85.
[29] Cessac, "La Duchesse du Maine ou la Reine Didon," 495.
[30] Ibid. On the relationship between Voltaire and the duchesse du Maine, see Couvreur, "Voltaire chez la duchesse ou Le goût à l'épreuve," in Cessac and Couvreur, 231–248.
[31] Ibid., 494–496.

[32] Ibid.
[33] Adolphe Jullien, *Les Grandes Nuits de Sceaux: Le théâtre de la duchesse du Maine, d'après des documents inédits* (Paris: J. Baur, 1876), 9. "La Renommée, qui n'annonce chez nous que les nouvelles les plus rares, nous a instruits des vertus, des charmes et des inclinations de Votre Altesse Sérénissime. Nous avons su qu'elle abhorre le soleil. On en rapporte diversement la cause. Plusieurs veulent (et c'est ce qui nous a parus le plus vraisemblable), que votre mésintelligence soit d'abord venue d'avoir disputé ensemble de la noblesse, de l'origine, de l'éclat, de la beauté et de l'excellence de vos lumières. Quoi qu'il en soit nous nous estimerons heureux si la haine que vous lui portez vous dipose à vous retirer sur nos terres, éloignées de son aspect … Je viens donc vous supplier, au nom de toute ma nation, d'ajouter nos pays à vos heureux Etats."
[34] Saint-Simon, *Mémoires complets et authentiques*, 23:225–226.
[35] Testament de Louis XIV, August 2, 1714, AE I/25, Archives Nationales, Paris, quoted in Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 144.
[36] Crawford, *Perilous Performances*, 145–147.
[37] Barbier, *Chronique de la Régence et du règne de Louis XV*, 26–28.

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