



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

Elizabeth C. Goldsmith

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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.

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