



ANTONIA  
FRASER



LOVE AND  
LOUIS XIV

*The Women in the Life of the Sun King*

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'I believe that the histories which will be written about this court after we are all gone will be better and more entertaining than any novel, and I am afraid that those who come after us will not be able to believe them and will think they are just fairy tales': thus wrote Louis XIV's sister-in-law. Antonia Fraser does indeed entertain us by bringing to life these very 'fairy tales', vividly portraying the vast edifice of Louis XIV's court between the years 1643 and 1715 – the magnificence, artistic splendour, intrigues, elaborate ritual and in some cases, absurdity and misery.

Antonia Fraser brilliantly explores the rich dynamic that existed between Louis XIV and the many fascinating women who ornamented his personal life. This includes not only Louis's mistresses, principally Louise de La Vallière and Athénaïs de Montespan as well as the puritanical Madame de Maintenon, but also the wider story of his relationships with women in general: his mother Anne of Austria, his two sisters-in-law who were Duchesses d'Orléans in succession, Henriette-Anne and Liselotte, his wayward illegitimate daughters, and lastly Adelaide, the beloved child-wife of his grandson.

Antonia Fraser portrays the gallantry of these relationships, from friendship shading to love, the subtle art of courtship, the more frivolous and even dangerous pursuit of flirtation, down to sensual libertinage ending in sex. But if gallantry – or sex – is one theme of this book, then religion is another and it is in the connection between the two that the fascination of Louis XIV's relationships with his mistresses properly lies. Great religious figures of the age such as Bossuet spoke out on the subject of royal adultery and even Louis could not stop them. As for the women's spiritual life, it was significant that Penitent Magdalen was the favourite saint of seventeenth-century France.

Drawing attention to the political significance of female figures of the period, this book also inevitably reflects something of the condition of women of a certain status in seventeenth-century France. Antonia Fraser considers their choices and to what extent they – mistresses and wives, mothers and daughters – were in control of their own destinies.

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