



IT SEEMS THE past is sexy again. What with a shirtless Poldark scything his way into the audience's hearts, incest in *War and Peace*, not to mention the infamous brothels of the quasi-medieval *Game of Thrones*... The TV past has rarely been so universally imagined as lusty. And now here comes Canal Plus's new ten-part costume romp *Versailles* to demonstrate a Gallic flair for French kissing in sumptuous settings. It feels like *The Borgias* crossed with *The Three Musketeers*, but for some conservatives it is simply "porn dressed up in a cravat and tights".

"The year is 1667 and King Louis XIV is a 28-year-old monarch on the cusp of greatness," gushes the BBC2 publicity material. "A 17th-century rock star and an utterly ruthless leader, he will stop at nothing to seize control of France and his enemies."

The history on which the series draws is bloody and dramatic, for sure. Louis XIV inherited the throne of France aged just four in 1643. Protected by his mother Anne of Austria as Queen Regent, Louis survived a bout of smallpox, the revolt of discontented nobles, plots and civil war to rule singlehandedly until 1715, the longest reign of any major European monarch to date. He presided over what was seen as France's Grand Siècle (the Great Century), and transformed the nation as military victory brought economic, social and political pre-eminence in Europe and global power.


**L**ouis XIV was unquestionably the greatest European monarch of his generation. But his golden age was hard won. As we see in nightmare flashbacks in *Versailles*, Louis never forgot the violence and jeopardy of his childhood. As king, he strove to strip his rebellious nobles of any independent muscle and to consolidate all authority in his own person. Louis sacked his over-mighty first minister Fouquet (builder of

## 'Louis's promiscuity outstripped that of Henry VIII'

the rival palace Vaux-le-Vicomte), and from 1682 forced the nobility to live most of the year in his new complex at Versailles, 12 miles out of Paris, cutting their ties with the countryside from which they drew private armies.

Versailles was the scene, engine and symbol of Louis's victorious achievement of absolute power, and the most dazzling palace in European memory. Louis's chamber lay at its heart – even the avenues in the gardens radiated out from him. Every minute of the court day was dictated by his movements. Louis headed court, government and judiciary. While he may not have actually said "*L'état, c'est moi*" (I am the state), he certainly believed it. ▷

Was life under Louis XIV as racy as new French drama *Versailles* suggests? Yes, says historian Amanda Vickery

 Ajouter une légende



# Sex & the





**ROYAL AFFAIR**  
The stars of Versailles, from far left: Elisa Lasowski is Queen Maria Theresa, George Blagden is Louis XIV and Anna Brewster is Louis's mistress, Madame de Montespan

# Sunking

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LUCY WORSLEY ON THE REAL VERSAILLES ►



◁ Louis could not be said to lack the sparkle or dynamism to match his swaggering self-assurance. He was considered a beautiful, athletic youth, with famously shapely legs that he displayed in white silk tights as much as possible, even starring in his own court ballets.

A painting of 1653 records his dance debut aged 14, long legs on show, wearing a radiant headdress of diamonds and pink feathers. The teenager materialised in the court spectacular with the dawn as the sun god Apollo. The stage management of greatness was his genius. Perhaps BBC2's "17th-century rock star" epithet is not so wide of the mark then?

**V**ERSAILLES WAS LITTERED with depictions of the king – as Apollo, Jupiter, Mars and Caesar Augustus. During his reign alone, Louis's image was reproduced in at least 300 portraits or statues, 300 medals and 600 engravings. An equestrian statue of Louis was planned for every town in France. He even had a recognisable logo – the sun. For the writers of *Versailles*, he was less rock star and more media magnate. They have claimed that Louis reminded them of Steve Jobs building the Apple brand.

The Sun King was the ruler to emulate. As Frederick the Great of Prussia later observed of European royalty, "There is not one of them,

## 'Louis set new standards for royalty – and mistresses'

down to the youngest son... who does not preen himself on some resemblance to Louis XIV: he builds his Versailles; he has his mistresses; he maintains his standing armies."

Frederick was not big on mistresses, but Louis set new standards in a royalty known for them. We know of as many as 20.

Canal Plus has been accused of sexing up history, yet Louis's promiscuity outstripped that of Henry VIII and matched any *Game of Thrones* potentate. He suffered gonorrhoea as a youth, but this proved no impediment. His Queen, Maria Theresa of Spain, bore him five children, but he did not reward her with fidelity. Instead he entertained a bevy of mistresses both official and unofficial, and sired scores of bastard children including six with Louise de La Vallière, and seven with Madame de Montespan. In fact, he fell in love with Madame de Maintenon, his second wife, when she was governess of his illegitimate children with Montespan.

Some mistresses used their proximity to the king and his officials to enrich themselves, gain positions for their families and influence royal opinion. Louis liked to raise his favourite lovers one at a time to a recognised position of "maîtresse-en-titre". He often ennobled his illegitimate children. Yet offering one's body to a powerful man was a high-risk strategy. ▷

# In the court of the Bling King

Lucy Worsley reveals the glamour of Versailles



As a British historian, I like to think that Henry VIII can beat the world at royal magnificence. But I have to admit that even his splendid palaces and parties pale besides those of Louis XIV.

If you know anything at all about Louis XIV, you'll know him as the Sun King. *Le Roi Soleil* used the sun as his personal symbol to demonstrate his absolute power. And, at his extraordinary new palace of Versailles, he could have given Henry VIII a lesson or two in how to live it large...

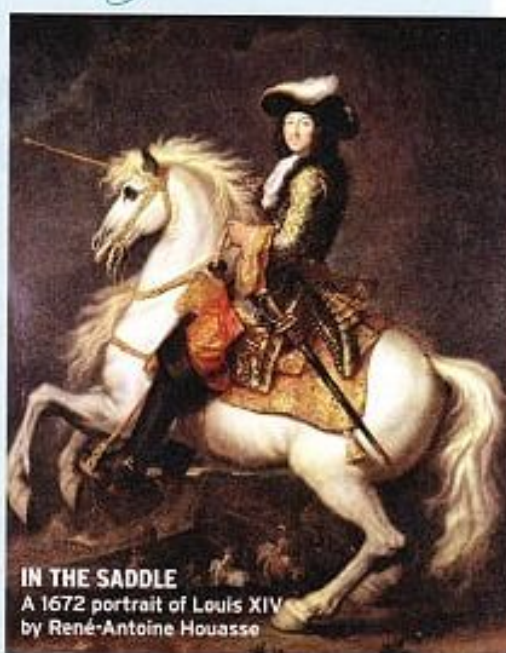
## Keeping the peace

As a boy, Louis XIV had been horribly scared when a rebellious mob broke into the room where he was sleeping. The country he inherited at four was wildly unruly and deeply divided into provinces with different customs, laws, even languages. But Louis would impose his rule upon this mess with a will of iron.

He'd been told from birth that he was special: after all, his parents had been trying for an heir for 23 years, and named him Louis Dieudonné, or "Given by God". Louis took this to heart, turning self-glorification into an art form. However, the secret of his success wasn't to wage war against his rebellious nobles. Instead, he used culture, refinement and hospitality to distract and disarm them.

## The ultimate crib

At the start of Louis XIV's reign, Versailles was just a humble hunting lodge 12 miles from Paris along a bumpy track. Louis transformed it into Europe's most magnificent palace as a deliberate ploy to draw his courtiers out of their comfortable homes and plotting places in Paris, and bring them to dance constant attendance upon him in this drafty, uncomfortable, but extremely grand stage set. Magnificent Versailles, then, was something of a gilded cage. It was also built at immense human cost. Louis was too impatient



**IN THE SADDLE**  
A 1672 portrait of Louis XIV by René-Antoine Houasse

for work to proceed at a safe pace, and three hospitals were built to tend to those injured on the building site.

In 1668 heavy machinery crushed a man to death, but when his mother complained, Louis had her thrown in prison. It's an example of the ruthlessness with which he pursued his goals.

## Louis's women

It was long accepted in France that a king needed two women: a foreign-born princess, like Louis's wife Maria Theresa of Spain, to bear his children, and a mistress for pleasure. Unlike Henry VIII, Louis had no problem in fathering children. And the list of his official mistresses is bewilderingly long. Louise de La Vallière was Louis's lover at the time when Versailles was built, but her rivals included Louis's sister-in-law, Henrietta of England, and then Athénais de Montespan. Louis is said to have made love to the witty Athénais three times a day. It was also said that "her powder lit very easily". ▷



**FIT FOR A KING**  
Left: George Blagden as Louis XIV  
Inset: the palace's "Abundance Salon"



# The heart of France

## The entourage

Louis's life at Versailles was an enormous piece of performance art. He turned even the simplest of actions – going to bed or going to chapel – into ceremonies, demanding his courtiers' presence and attention. The fever, the getting out of bed in the morning, was typical. Wherever he may have spent the night, Louis made sure he was back in his own bed by 8am. The curtains opened, and he was greeted by his valet and physician. His old childhood nurse came in to give him his good morning kiss. Then the highest-ranked nobles came in to help the king with his shirt – it sounds menial, but it was a huge honour. Lesser courtiers only entered once the king was fully dressed.

## The parties

The upside of attending the court of Louis XIV was that you got to take part in history's most magnificent parties. Perhaps the best of all was a week-long entertainment called *The Pleasures of the Enchanted Island*, starring Louis himself as a knight named Roger. The music was by Lully and the drama scripted by Molière. In British terms, that's rather like hiring Shakespeare and Purcell. But the star of the show was the palace itself, illuminated with thousands of candles.

Louis, ever the master of propaganda, had books of engravings (right) produced of this party, and sent them to the other kings of Europe to show them how things were done in France.

## The security

Louis XIV survived assassination attempts and plots, so was constantly paranoid and suspicious. The postal service to Versailles ran through Paris, and there Louis's spies opened and read the letters of all the chief courtiers. Substances such

as mercury were used to open and replace wax seals in a manner impossible to detect. It was a shock when those who had written something disrespectful about the king found themselves out of favour without quite knowing why. The courtiers used code, but Louis countered that by employing the great cryptographer Antoine Rossignol to decipher their secrets.



## The legacy

England's most notorious dynasty, the Tudors, puttered to a halt with the death of Henry VIII's children. Louis, on the other hand, not only reigned for 72 years himself, but also established a line that lasted for a hundred years. The spell of Versailles was broken only when Louis's great-great-grandson, Louis XVI, had his head chopped off in the French Revolution. The French had finally had enough of absolute monarchs. But they couldn't bring themselves to destroy the emblem of their power, Versailles, which is still seen as the symbolic heart of France.

*The Real Versailles* is on Monday BBC2

Some lovers achieved wealth and near respectability, but they were vulnerable to blistering attack from court factions, and the public. The fall from grace was steep – Montespan was accused of using witchcraft and love potions to hold the king's affections and even of poisoning her rivals, charges for which she could have been executed had Louis not intervened.

Paradoxically, throughout all his sexy sinning, Louis XIV remained a pious Roman Catholic. In 1658, he ordered the imprisonment of all women found guilty of prostitution, fornication or adultery. Parisiennes could be incarcerated for sexual crimes in the women's prison of Salpêtrière.

Versailles was hazardous to female virtue, but it was also the centre of the aristocratic marriage market. To attract the most distinguished proposals, a young lady had to have an unsullied reputation for chastity. Hence the great families hid their virgins in the country, a convent or exclusive boarding school, only bringing maid-

## 'One mistress was accused of using witchcraft to hold the king's affections'

ens to court when the deal was done. Women were the means of uniting fortunes and factions, but were rarely power brokers in their own right.

An all-male bureaucracy weakened women's roles as political players, and many of the female intellectuals and *salonnières* of the previous generation had been discredited by their links to the noble rebels of Louis's childhood.

CONSERVATIVE MP ANDREW Bridgen has protested at the screening of *Versailles* on British TV, asking, "Is this an example of the BBC dumbing down and seeking more sensationalised programming?" Not shy of double entendre himself, Bridgen continued, "That's an arms race to the bottom – quite literally in this case."

But for all the courtly cavorting, *Versailles* is far more fascinated by the glamour of power than the sensual allure of women, and men. In fact, the most striking thing about the series isn't the sex, but that such an archetypal French story is performed by English actors in English. But this is not Canal Plus giving up on the superiority of the French language and culture. *Au contraire*. In our era of HBO and Showtime sex-power dramas, this is the Sun King as export brand. Louis would expect nothing less.

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**RT Books** To pre-order *Versailles* by Elizabeth Massie for £8.70 (including p&g) call 0344 245 8092 and quote ref RTE22 or visit [radiotimes.com/versailles22](http://radiotimes.com/versailles22)



### POLE POSITION

Louis XIV's one-time mistress-in-title, Madame de Montespan (Anna Brewster)

## MORE FRENCH FANCIES

### THE MUSKETEERS BBC1

The third and final series starts on Saturday. Set in politically turbulent 17th-century Paris, it features Rupert Everett as Philippe Achille, the corrupt Governor of Paris and illegitimate brother to Louis XIII.

### THE DISAPPEARANCE BBC4

This Lyon-set drama, which starts on Saturday, traces the trauma of the Morel family when their 17-year-old daughter fails to return home from a night out.

### THE COLLECTION AMAZON PRIME

Due to launch in the autumn, this postwar drama is centred on a Parisian fashion house and the two brothers who run the family business. Frances de la Tour, Richard Coyle and Tom Riley star.

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