

What the butler saw: sex secrets of French presidents' palace revealed

For 300 hundred years staff at the Elysée witnessed men flaunting their power over women, but no longer, says author of a new book

5 The Guardian, Kim Willsher, Sun 19 Apr 2020

From the time of kings and emperors to modern day presidents, the Elysée Palace has stood as a symbol of male dominance in society and politics. Behind the wrought iron gates its gilded salons have witnessed conquests of many kinds – including, frequently, the sexual.

10 Now a prominent historian has argued that, just as French society is changing with the #MeToo movement and greater scrutiny of predatory behaviour, so too must the country's presidents.

15 “In the past, it was almost a mark of prestige that a man of power like the president had a mistress, almost as a kind of gauge that he was a true leader, even if these dominant males were almost a kind of predator,” said Jean Garrigues, author of a new book on the Elysée's scandalous past. “The behaviour of French presidents was like that of a monarch. Today, this type of behaviour that treats women as objects and trophies is no longer accepted in society.

“We have the #MeToo movement. We don't tolerate the subjugating of women or that they are some kind of hunting trophy. The erotic story of the Elysée shows us the evolution of our society.”

20 His interpretation tallies with a new report published earlier this year which painted a far more sober picture of the palace under Emmanuel Macron.

25 “It's the first time we've seen advisers working this hard,” an unnamed butler, who was described as having worked at the presidential palace for 40 years, told *Le Figaro* magazine. “We're bored stiff at the Elysée. No one bonks any more. Before you had to knock two or three times at doors to be certain not to interrupt someone in a compromising position.” Another anonymous witness told the magazine: “With this administration, all the libido of power is going into drawing up technical notes.”

30 In *Une histoire érotique de l'Elysée*, Garrigues details how the palace has been at the centre of some of the country's most notorious sex scandals for three hundred years. “There has always been a sort of erotic perfume in the atmosphere of the palace that comes from it being a place of strength and power,” Garrigues said.

“It is complicated to say whether it's the power of the place that makes its occupants great seducers or whether it is those men who have shown a strong desire to conquer women and power, who become occupants.”

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40 The Elysée was commissioned as a grand *hôtel particulier* [private mansion] by the Count of
Évreux, who used the dowry of his 12-year-old wife, Marie-Anne Crozat, daughter of Paris's
richest man. No sooner was it completed than Évreux bundled Marie-Anne into a carriage
during the inauguration ball, ordered the driver to take her to their country home and installed
his mistress in the property.

45 Shortly afterwards, Louis XV acquired the property for his mistress, the Marquise de
Pompadour, who held lavish parties where she would pick young women to have sex with the
king, according to Garrigues. Later, banker Nicolas Beaujon lived in the palace with his six
mistresses.

50 Since 1848, the Elysée has been the official home of French presidents, and while at least
two, Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou, were faithful, others were decidedly not. This
arguably reached a peak during the 1981-1995 rule of François Mitterrand, who was most
notorious for keeping a secret second family installed in an annexe of the Elysée, with the
knowledge of his long-suffering wife Danielle.

55 But Mitterrand had many other affairs, and according to the journalist Catherine Nay, quoted
in Garrigues's book: "During Mitterrand's time in the Elysée it was incredibly libertine.
Everyone was jumping on everyone else." The president's behaviour, said Garrigues,
bordered on harassment.

60 His book ends with the Elysée's current occupants: Macron and his wife, Brigitte, about
whom he has nothing scandalous to reveal. "Not only have mores and mentalities changed,
we have seen with recent scandals that the increased media scrutiny and the paparazzi makes
it difficult for politicians to pass under the radar as they once could," Garrigues said.
Macron's predecessor, François Hollande, dumped his long-term girlfriend Valérie
Trierweiler after being caught by photographers visiting actress Julie Gayet on his scooter.

"There was a tradition of keeping quiet in France that protected presidents' private lives,
which is how Mitterrand was able to lead a double life, but that is not possible today. This
type of behaviour by presidents is no longer admired," said Garrigues.

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