

The New Statesman

Mistresses: A History of the Other Woman

Elizabeth Abbott

Christmas brings out the best and worst in publishers. The virtuous and the venal, the meritorious and the meretricious, are heaped together – often inside the same dust jacket – and then hurled with desperate force at an increasingly indifferent public. Frankly, in these sad times of short money and high stupidity, who can blame publishers for resorting to every trick in the book, as it were, to shift sales.

So what was Duckworth's game plan behind Elizabeth Abbott's 'Mistresses: A History of the Other Woman'? When Marketing met with Editorial, did anyone actually ask the question who was the target audience for this particular Christmas book. It seems an unlikely gift for a husband to give to his wife, unless there is something he wishes to get off his chest. Would a wife give it to her husband unless she was either making a suggestion or, more likely – enclosing the book with a copy of her PI's report.

Mistresses is the perfect cross between an encyclopedia and CliffsNotes. There are over eighty potted histories of adulterous women, starting with Hagar in the Old Testament, zipping through Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, glancing at Lara, and ending with someone called Michaela (a friend of the author's?) who lives in Toronto. But, presumably, a husband would be taking an awful risk by giving this book to his own mistress. She might get ideas. Abbott's list includes the Russian-born Roxelana (c. 1500-1558), principal concubine of Suleiman the Magnificent, who parlayed a dud hand – kidnap, slavery, imprisonment in a harem – into the ultimate success for a mistress – marriage, wealth, political power, and the death of all rivals, including her step-sons. Worse, still, not only did Suleiman give Roxelana everything she could possibly desire, he also wrote her some of the most beautiful love poetry in the Turkish language, calling his wife:

"my wealth, my love, my moonlight... My springtime, my merry faced love, my daytime, my sweetheart, laughing leaf... My woman of the beautiful hair, my love of the slanted brow, my love of eyes full of mischief...
I'll sing your praises always,
I, lover of the tormented heart, Muhibbi of the eyes full of tears, I am happy."

This is surely a bad example to show to one's mistress, and likely only to produce much discontent and carping in the months to follow.

On the other hand, *Mistresses* is hardly the sort of book that a real-life mistress with a brain in addition to other attributes would seriously consider giving to her secret consort. The long catalogue of selfish, cruel behaviour meted out to women by their lovers gives the impression 'twas ever thus. Virginia Hill comes to mind in particular. Virginia was immortalized in the film *Bugsy* as the vain gangster's moll who seals the doom of Bugsy Siegel, the mobster who invented Las Vegas, by stealing \$2 million from the construction budget. In real life, she was simply a greedy, self-destructive plaything of the Mob. More than once Virginia was beaten unconscious by Bugsy and then raped by him. Her role in Bugsy's downfall was not stealing the money but in keeping notes of what he himself stole from the budget.

After Bugsy's murder, Virginia passed from man to man, growing ever more drug-addled and pathetic. The IRS pursued her for unpaid taxes from her 'job' as a mistress. She eventually ended up in Naples in 1966, in the hope of pressuring one of her former lovers into giving her money or else she would go to the authorities and spill the beans. Not surprisingly, Virginia was later found dead by walkers following a trail through the woods near Salzburg. Austrian police assumed that she had chosen to take her own life by swallowing a deadly cocktail of pills and then lying down in the snow. Far more likely, Virginia was frogmarched to the remote location, had the pills forced down her throat, and then left to freeze to death.

I would not recommend giving this book to mistresses-in-training, either. A man seeking to groom a woman for the role would almost certainly put her off it instead. Like writers, it seems, mistresses are born, not made. The successful ones know from the start how to get their man, how to please him, what the score is, where it's all going to lead. Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman, who died in 1997, was, literally, to the manor born. The daughter of the 11th Baron Digby, her upbringing was one of privilege and wealth. Why she ended up, in the words of *The Times*, 'one of the greatest courtesans of her age', remains somewhat mysterious since she lived in an era when class, looks, and intelligence were means enough for a woman to get ahead. Perhaps she was molested as a child. Perhaps her father was cold and distant and she was left with abandonment issues. Perhaps she had a personality disorder which in another woman would have been expressed as a shoe fetish, but in her became a

powerful man fetish. Who knows. Certainly there was something abnormal in the way Pamela committed herself to the man du jour. 'She just unconsciously assumed his identity, as if she were putting on a glove,' reminisced a friend.

Indeed, she was so good at the job, that quite a few men thought that she was far too valuable to be wasted as a wife. With Gianni Agnelli, the Fiat heir, Pamela became so attuned to his world that she adopted an Italian accent, wore floaty scarves and dark glasses, and converted to Catholicism. With Baron Elie de Rothschild, she abruptly switched to Hermes and said things like "Ici Pam" on the telephone. Fortunately, for Pam, American men proved to be a little more demanding than their European counterparts in their expectations of their wives. After almost a quarter century of out-geishering the geishas, Pam settled down to ordinary wife-hood marrying first, the Broadway and Hollywood producer Leland Hayward; and second, the Democratic Party grandee and diplomat Averell Harriman. Since she allegedly didn't care about sex anyway, it was apparently no hardship servicing the octogenarian Harriman who died a happy man in 1986. Pam was made the US ambassador to France and died in situ after suffering a seizure in the pool at the Hotel Ritz. Pamela Harriman's example is so daunting that it is likely to either put off any would-be mistresses for good or give them unrealistic expectations.

So, in the end, who is this book aimed at? Who knows. Abbott's writing is a cross between the Daily Mail and Mills and Boon. Nell Gwynne, for example, had "an uptilted nose, lustrous chestnut hair, hazel eyes that regarded you with all the directness and honesty she was famous for, and firm and full breasts.' Abbott's musings at the end of each example are homely and sympathetic and would not offend anybody unless he or she had religious morals about that sort thing. Actually, that does sound like the average Daily Mail reader.

Anyway, this reader found *Mistresses* a harmless pleasure – rather like a deep-fried mars bar on a snowy night. The book will go next to Schott's *Miscellany* in the guest loo rather than under the tree, and no doubt be enjoyed for years to come.