

# Empress Eugénie: France's First Lady

*by Murielle Gaudé-Ferragu*

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**Despite the black legend that surrounds her name, the Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III's wife, was the embodiment of maternity and Christian virtues, even as she played a political and diplomatic role.**

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Reviewed: Maxime Michelet, *L'Impératrice Eugénie. Une vie politique* [Empress Eugénie: A Political Life]. Paris, Cerf, 2020. 408 p., 24 €.

This book, which paints a political portrait of Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III's wife, belongs to gender history's effort to renew historical writing. In this book, which is his first, Maxime Michelet breaks with convention and misogyny of all kinds to reevaluate the role played by this first lady as a "woman in power."

## **Alien to reason**

The book opens with an excellent first chapter devoted to the black myth surrounding the empress, who, like every woman who has exercised power, was the target of many character aspersions. Criticized for being frivolous and shallow, like Marie-Antoinette--and a foreigner to boot--Eugénie de Montijo is remembered as an accursed empress, who, by transgressing gender boundaries, contributed to the regime's ruin.

Michelet calls attention to the role played by misogyny in making contemporaries take a dim view of this woman who would be the last female sovereign in French monarchical history. The regime's collapse in the 1870 debacle and the smear campaign that followed the empire's demise revived criticism against Eugénie for being a woman, Spanish, and Catholic.

In his 1907 biography of the empress, Frédéric Loliée wrote the following, particularly hostile words: "But--and this will be repeated after us--she was a woman; she felt and she did not reason; she acted and did not see where her actions--or, rather, her impulses--would take her and the French emperor" (p. 36). These lines manage to reference every possible gender stereotype: emotive and impulsive, women are alien to reason.

## **A dynasty maker**

Yet the countess of Teba was very much a woman of power, as Michelet brilliantly demonstrates by drawing on a vast array of source material, particularly the Fonds Napoleon at the French National Archives, as well as numerous contemporary testimonials. With her marriage to Napoleon III in January 1853, she became a part of French history. Far from being a bit of romantic buffoonery--as the historiography implies--this union was a political and diplomatic event of the first order, which brought closure to a multifaceted crisis triggered by the decision to restore the monarchical form of Napoleonic power (p. 56). It was necessary to highlight the distinctive traits of a regime that was the offspring both of traditional monarchy and the French Revolution's enduring features.

Like all female sovereigns before her, Eugénie de Montijo was expected to give France an heir. On March 16, 1856, she gave birth to a son, who was baptized three months later in Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral. The cleverly orchestrated ceremony put the limelight on imperial power, embodied by Napoleon III and Eugénie, as well as on dynastic continuity.

The "consecration of the Empress' maternity" promptly assumed a legal form: the Senatus-consultum of July 17, 1856 defined how imperial government would function during the prince-heir's minority. A year and a half later, on February 1, 1858, Eugénie was chosen by the emperor as a possible regent. Her legitimacy rested on two

pillars: maternity (a mother's love for her son minimizes the risk of usurpation) and matrimony (she was "associated" with her husband's reign).

Eugénie was able to test the reality of these responsibilities in 1859, when Napoleon III decided to support Italian independence by going off to Austria to fight. Yet her two-month regency was strictly regimented: her actions, discussed in the imperial council, had to be countersigned by competent ministers. She also wielded temporary power during Napoleon III's second trip to Algeria in 1865 and when, in 1870, he led his troops during the Franco-Prussian War. She proved herself to be a "stateswoman" by virtue of her political actions and the measures she took.

The regency, however, was exceptional. Her power was also exercised--in more lasting ways--in realms related to representation: during specific ceremonies, for instance, or by presiding over one of Europe's most dazzling courts. The empress was endowed with a unique aura, which made her a primary attraction for state visits. For example, in the fall of 1869, she led one of the most triumphant missions of her reign, travelling to Egypt to officiate at the celebrations inaugurating the Suez Canal.

Eugénie also embodied charity--in a Christian as well as a "royal" sense, playing the mediator "between those who suffered and those who can help them," between the disadvantaged and the powerful (p. 182). She exercised her "ministry of good works" through various foundations and charitable organizations supporting hospitals and prisons, as well as by helping children (through Societies of Maternal Charity). These roles were consistent with the longstanding role of French first ladies--these "women with golden hearts" who, by redistributing wealth, played the role of "mothers to their people."

As a woman and an imperial sovereign, Eugénie also embodied the Empire's monarchical dimension, in contrast to Napoleon III, who was both a hereditary monarch and a popularly elected leader:

Due to her goal of *creating a dynasty* by giving an heir to the monarch and, even more generally, by creating a dynasty to ensure that the monarchy might continue, Empress Eugénie played an essential if not primary role in the great failure that was the attempt to build a monarchical France in post-revolutionary France (p. 52).

Her power was more informal--an influence she wielded in various domains, notably diplomacy. Michelet considers the role she played in the Mexican expedition. He shows that she was a major force behind the genesis of "the regime's great idea, which turned into a diplomatic and military disaster" (p. 218). Eugénie was a capable

member of a school of diplomatic thought that, between 1860 and 1862, favored an intervention in Central America. Through her relationships with Mexican exiles in Paris and Napoleon III, she was a particularly effective interface.

## A gallery of "women in power"

Enamored of his subject, Michelet sets out to show that Eugénie was an exceptional figure. It is perhaps necessary to refer, more than he does, to earlier models of "women in power", to better situate the empress's actions in continuity--or lack thereof--with ruling women who preceded her.

For while the empress did have a political role, one must recognize that it was limited to functions imposed by her gender: in France, a woman could not hold *auctoritas*, except during the narrowly defined periods of regency. Eugénie did not seek to exceed the responsibilities she had been assigned (regency, representation, and charitable work), unlike other female rulers (such as Blanche de Castille and Catherine de Médicis), who were reputed to have "a man's heart" in a woman's body (meaning that such circumstantial variations did not challenge the basic framework of masculine superiority).

Michelet acknowledges this point in his conclusion: "Her role in the *polis* pertained primarily to representation, and whatever active roles she undertook related not to her political views, but to her charitable work." The historical literature has attributed her power that is largely "fantasized" (p. 301) and which was used by some (notably pamphleteers) in political struggles. Because she supported the Mexican expedition, she was seen as its instigator. Because she did not support the Empire's liberalization, she was seen as a major authoritarian Bonapartist.

Herein lies the book's originality: Michelet seeks to untangle the historiographical threads relating to Eugénie, removing the misogynistic and xenophobic clichés to trace the trajectory of an exception woman who, due to an unusually long life that spanned most of the nineteenth century, from her birth in 1826 to her death in 1920, feels quite close to us. "Having listened to Stendhal's tales in the early years of her life, she had tea with Jean Cocteau in advanced old age" (p. 16). Only a century separates us from the death of the empress, the survivor of a dying century,

"the fading glimmer of a Europe to which the first global conflict would deal a final blow."

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