

## La Duchesse: The Life of Marie de Vignerot—Cardinal Richelieu's Forgotten Heiress Who Shaped the Fate of France

**Bronwen McShea**

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Filled with dramatic, often violent, seventeenth-century court and clergy intrigues, Bronwen McShea's *La Duchesse* is meticulous—the “first fully researched modern biography of Vignerot.”

Vignerot would have been a minor rural aristocrat had she not been the widowed protégé and heir of her powerful uncle, Cardinal Richelieu. His ascension into France's highest royal and ecclesiastical echelons swept her into influential roles. She was the confidante of the Queen Regent (for the future Louis XIV); a literary patron and salon hostess; a Peer of France; a philanthropist and planner for Catholic charities; and a foreign policy and military strategist as Governor of Le Havre.

Nonetheless, the story of this “force of nature” has been cast to the shadows by previous historians and biographers, which McShea attributes to various biases and motives. McShea analyzed scores of documents from several centuries and in several languages to unearth a fuller, entertaining profile of Vignerot and her legacy. Inviting details about court customs, fashion, royal entertainments, and transportation embellish this chronicle with a huge cast of historical figures and shifting alliances during France's civil war and the Thirty Years' War.

While Vignerot planned and financed religious missions before Richelieu's death in 1642, the enormous largesse of her inheritance enabled her to expand these activities manyfold for the next three decades. She sponsored hospitals, seminaries, missions in Africa, New France, and Asia, and charitable work by various Catholic orders throughout France. She had a particular interest in women's charities and education, as well as in the work of the future Saint Vincent de Paul, known for his devotions to the poor, but not often characterized as being so cautious as he is here.

*La Duchesse* adds much to church history and restores its intriguing and formidable subject to seventeenth-century France's center stage.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2023)

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