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# ***The Mistress of Paris: The 19th-Century Courtesan Who Built an Empire on a Secret.* By CATHERINE HEWITT**

***The Mistress of Paris: The 19th-Century Courtesan Who Built an Empire on a  
Secret.*** By Catherine Hewitt. London: Icon Books, 2015. 358 pp., ill.

Sara Phenix ✉

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In 1881, Valtresse de La Bigne, one of Paris's pre-eminent courtesans, attended a performance of the stage adaptation of Zola's *Nana* despite her profound objections: as the supposed inspiration for the eponymous character, the sophisticated Valtresse felt as though Zola had betrayed her — she sensed little kinship with his vulgar creation. However, like Anna Wintour at the 2006 premiere of *The Devil Wears Prada*, Valtresse — a fashion icon in her own right — attended the play in order to reassert control of her own image and claim superiority over her literary double. Zola's unmitigated failure that night proved to be her absolute triumph. These questions of identity and aesthetic production are at the heart of Catherine Hewitt's captivating new biography, a portrait...

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