

VAMPYRIA

THE  
COURT  
OF  
SHADOWS

VICTOR DIXEN

Translated by Françoise Bui

# ***THE COURT OF SHADOWS***

(VAMPYRIA SAGA, BOOK 1)



**A fiery heroine seeks vengeance against a royal court of deadly vampires  
in this epic alternate history set in lavish Versailles.**

Louis XIV transformed from the Sun King into the King of Shadows when he embraced immortality and became the world's first vampire. For the last three centuries, he has been ruling the kingdom from the decadent Court of Shadows in Versailles, demanding the blood of his subjects to sate his nobles' thirst and maintain their loyalty.

In the heart of rural France, commoner Jeanne Froidelac witnesses the king's soldiers murder her family and learns of her parents' role in a brewing rebellion involving the forbidden secrets of alchemy. To seek her revenge, Jeanne disguises herself as an aristocrat and enrolls in a prestigious school for aspiring courtiers. She soon finds herself at the doors of the palace of Versailles.

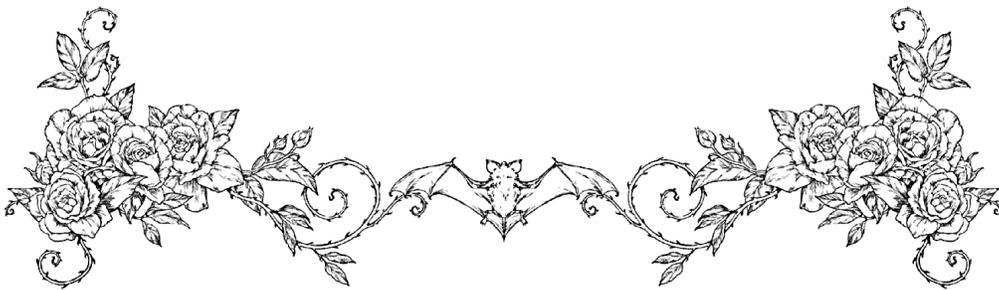
But Jeanne, of course, is no aristocrat.  
She dreams not of court but of blood.  
The blood of a king.



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Genre: Historical, Fantasy, Horror



**ATTENTION**  
**THIS DOCUMENT INCLUDES SPECIFICS YOU MIGHT WANT TO AVOID  
UNTIL YOU HAVE FINISHED READING THE BOOK.**



CHARACTER LIST

WHO WILL GAIN ENTRY TO  
THE COURT OF SHADOWS?



Jeanne Froidelac,  
born in Auvergne, France



Proserpina Castlecliff,  
born in England



Tristan de La Roncière,  
born in Ardennes, France



Hélénaïs de Plumigny,  
born in Beauce, France



Naoko Takagari,  
born in Japan



Rafael de Montesueño,  
born in Spain

AWAITING YOU AT COURT



Alexandre de Mortange,  
Viscount of Clermont



Edmée de Vauvalon,  
Marquise de Vauvalon



Suraj de Jaipur,  
Squire to the King



Lucrèce du Crèvecoeur,  
Squire to the King



Raymond de  
Montfaucon, Director of  
the Grande Écurie



Madame Thérèse,  
Governess at the Grande  
Écurie

*(Art by Loles Romero)*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY CHAPTER

### Prologue – The Mortal Code

- Historically, France under the Ancien Régime (before the French Revolution) divided society into three estates: the First Estate (clergy); the Second Estate (nobility); and the Third Estate (commoners). Comment on how the Magna Vampyria’s social structure builds on the Ancien Régime’s structure, adding a fourth estate.

### Chapter 1 – Visit

- What are your first impressions of Jeanne?

### Chapter 2 – Secret

- In your opinion, why did Jeanne’s parents not tell her about their involvement in the Fronde?
- At this stage of the story, what do you think of Bastien?

### Chapter 3 – Refuge

- Imagine this is the trial of the baronette Diane de Gastefriche, and you are the judge. What is your verdict? Was she responsible in the death of Jeanne’s family? What should her sentence be?
- Was Jeanne acting in legitimate self-defense when she killed the baronette?

### Chapter 4 – Departure

- What are your impressions of Alexandre? Could he be an ally for Jeanne?

### Chapter 5 – “Friend”

- The Fronde’s motto, “Liberty or Death,” was used historically during the French Revolution (1789-1799), but also during the American Revolution (1775-1783). Do you agree with this statement? Do you think it is worth fighting to the death for liberty?
- At the end of this chapter, Jeanne’s perception of Alexandre shifts entirely. Did you suspect that he was ultimately responsible for Jeanne’s mother death?

### Chapter 6 – Hate

- As Jeanne comes closer to Versailles, she discovers the world beyond Butte-aux-Rats. The whole Magna Vampyria society is organized around the collection, conservation and distribution of blood. To what extent is the economy of blood similar to or different than the economy of gold?
- Jeanne comments on the hypocrisy of the *pax vampyrica*: “*The lords of the night are supposed to be protecting banlieue inhabitants from the abominations inflicted by the Shadows, but in truth the lords are*

*the worst among them.*” Can you give other examples in history, where fear was used to control and oppress populations “willingly?”

### **Chapter 7 – Newcomer**

- Jeanne is a total outsider at the Grande Écurie. Have you ever experienced a similar situation of being an outsider in a group? How did you cope – by trying to integrate at all costs or by marking your differences?
- The pre-Revolution aristocratic society was obsessed by Antiquity. A lot of names were inspired by Roman gods and goddesses, mythical heroes and heroines. This is the case of Hélénaïs, whose name is inspired by Helen of Troy. Do you know her story?

### **Chapter 8 – Competition**

- Because vampires, by definition, are creatures stuck in time, a world ruled by vampires would also stop evolving. Even if the *Vampyria* story happens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it looks and feels like the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century: there has been no social progress, no scientific breakthroughs. But some touches of anachronic modernity sometimes appear, like the “denim” fabric worn by Prosperpina. Have you noticed other modern hints at this stage of the novel?
- “*As for the proper grace that ladies are supposed to exhibit, that’s an invention of men so that they can subdue us,*” claims Adrienne, Knight of Saint-Loup. Do you agree? Can grace also be a weapon for emancipation and empowerment?

### **Chapter 9 – Boys**

- Verbal jousting is all the rage at Versailles, and Jeanne gets a foretaste of it during the battle around the word “*place*.” If you had been in her shoes during dinner, what other expressions could you have used to win this battle?
- At the end of the chapter, Jeanne appears discouraged and defeated. What do you think should be her next move to achieve her goal?

### **Chapter 10 – Escape**

- In this chapter, Jeanne makes a mysterious and chilling encounter. Who do you think is the recluse of the Grande Écurie?

### **Chapter 11 – Vagabond**

- In the gardens of Versailles, Jeanne eavesdrops on a conversation between two powerful vampires: Princess des Ursins, the minister of foreign affairs, and Ézéchiél de Mélac, the minister of the armies. She gains a new political vision of the tensions in the Magna Vampyria, both on the West (England) and the East (the stryges). Do you think that the Fronde could benefit from such tensions? How?

### **Chapter 12 – Prey**

- This chapter sees the King’s first appearance. What impression did he make on you?

- The King seems fascinated by “the infinity of space and time.” Why do you think he is so absorbed by watching the night sky in his observatory?

### **Chapter 13 – Return**

- The scene of the heads on pikes is a shock to Jeanne. Did it shock you, too? Naoko says that “The Immutable takes pleasure in humiliating those who dare revolt against him.” Do you have other historical examples in mind where tyrants used horror to assert their power and morally destroy opposition?
- At the end of this chapter, Jeanne seems trapped: the aristocratic papers of the real baronette will unveil her usurpation! What would you do if you were Jeanne?

### **Chapter 14 – Papers**

- Since the beginning of the novel, Tristan de la Roncière seems to be apart from the other students at the Grande Écurie. In what ways is he similar to Jeanne, and in what ways is he different?

### **Chapter 15 – Truth**

- In this chapter, for the first time since she arrived in Versailles, Jeanne reveals her true identity to someone. How do you think she felt when talking to Naoko?
- Do you have predictions as to why Montfaucon lies to Jeanne, saying that he ordered the removal of the heads?

### **Chapter 16 – Progress**

In this chapter, Naoko and Jeanne discuss the humors. Historically, the kind of medicine that was practiced at Versailles was very close to magical thinking and to alchemy. Based on beliefs dating back to antiquity, the doctors of the time thought that the human body was made of four humors based on the four elements:

- 1) Earth was represented by black bile.  
It was associated with a melancholy nature (daydreamer, spiritual, nostalgic).
  - 2) Fire was represented by yellow bile.  
It was associated with a choleric nature (ambitious, decisive, aggressive, and short-tempered).
  - 3) Water was represented by phlegm.  
It was associated with a phlegmatic nature (reserved, calm).
  - 4) Air was represented by blood.  
It was associated with a sanguine nature (enthusiastic, active, and social).
- Jeanne was diagnosed by her father as “half-melancholic and half-sanguine.” What would you say would be your dominant humor(s)?

### **Chapter 17 – Hunt**

- In this chapter there are clues that Poppy may be hiding a secret of her own. Have you guessed which secret?
- The chapter ends with a dramatic event: Tristan discovers that Jeanne is a commoner! Is there a way out for her? How?

### **Chapter 18 – Unmasked**

- What do you think happened to Tristan after he disappeared?
- What do you think of Madame Thérèse’s cruel behavior towards Toinette? What are Madame Thérèse’s motivations?

### **Chapter 19 – Naoko**

- Naoko’s secret, the evilmouth, is a *yokai*: a kind of monster from Japanese folklore. Do you know other yokais, that you may have seen in Japanese novels, legends, mangas or animes?

### **Chapter 20 – Remorse**

- In this chapter, Tristan reveals that he belongs to the Fronde. Did you see it coming? Retrospectively, what were the hints that he was a rebel?
- Do you understand why Jeanne allows herself to live this first and last love story, when her situation is so precarious and the future so uncertain? Do you approve?

### **Chapter 21 – Jig**

- This chapter starts with Jeanne saying, “*I belong to the Fronde, a joyous voice sings in my head when I open my eyes.*” How does the awareness of being part of part of a group can uplift us in times of stress and despair?
- How do you imagine that never-ending jig sounds? Can you describe it? Can you pick a melody or a song (old or modern) that could make you dance perpetually?

### **Chapter 22 – The Art of Courtly Manners**

- The competition starts in this chapter! Do you approve of Jeanne’s strategy to win this first test?
- What were your reactions and thoughts when reading the very special vampyric menu?

### **Chapter 23 – The Art of Equestrianism**

- Jeanne tries to justify Madame Thérèse’s death to Naoko. What do you think? Was it self-defense? An accident? A murder?
- Naoko tells Jeanne: “You talk about human life like a vampyre. Careful that you don’t become like everything you hate. It would be too high a price to pay for revenge, Jeanne.” In your opinion, what is the highest price one can pay for revenge?

### **Chapter 24 – The Art of Conversation**

- Compose your own octosyllabic verses to defeat Hélénaïs!

- How do you feel about Jeanne using Poppy’s secret disease to win the verbal jousting? At this stage of the novel, what do you think of Jeanne? Is she a heroine, an anti-heroine or a villain?

### Chapter 25 – Torture

- In this chapter, we see Orfeo for the first time. The author was inspired by two characters from gothic literature to create Orfeo: Frankenstein’s creature and The Hunchback of Notre-Dame. Do you see how the traits of the two combine in Orfeo?
- Montfaucon reveals that he is part of the Fronde. Did you suspect it? How does this explain his actions since the beginning of the novel?

### Chapter 26 – Orfeo

- How do you feel about Orfeo?
- After Jeanne escapes the Grande Écurie, everything accelerates. Her race to get to the Hall of Mirrors is paced by the strokes of the clock, as she makes her way from room to room. Have you ever visited the palace of Versailles? Or seen it in movies? Do the descriptions fit what you had in mind?

### Chapter 27 – The Art of Weaponry

- Jeanne manages to flatter the King in order to compete in spite of being late: *“You are the immortal lord of the Magna Vampyria, the all-powerful master of space and time. Your limitless power bends over the course of time itself, as your reign brought an end to history. What are a few minutes for a sovereign who holds eternity in his hands? No doubt, with one word, one word alone, you could erase my tardiness.”* If you were in front of the Immutable, how would you flatter him to get in his good grace?
- Jeanne uses what she learnt in the letters from Hélénaïs’s father to defeat her. Now that we had a glimpse into Hélénaïs’s past and the reason why she was sent to Versailles, has your opinion changed about her?

### Chapter 28 – Sip

- This chapter starts with Jeanne saying, *“I’ve made it. I’ve had to lie, betray, cheat, kill . . . but I’ve made it.”* Does the end justify the means? Always? Never? It depends on the circumstances (which ones?).
- In this chapter, to Jeanne’s horror, Tristan unveils his true intentions. She realizes that she entirely misread him. What about you? Are you as surprised as Jeanne is?
- If you were in Jeanne’s shoes, what would you have done in the mortuary chamber, with the sword in your hands. Would you have killed Tristan? Killed the King? Killed or spared both? Why, and how do you think that the situation would have unfolded from there?

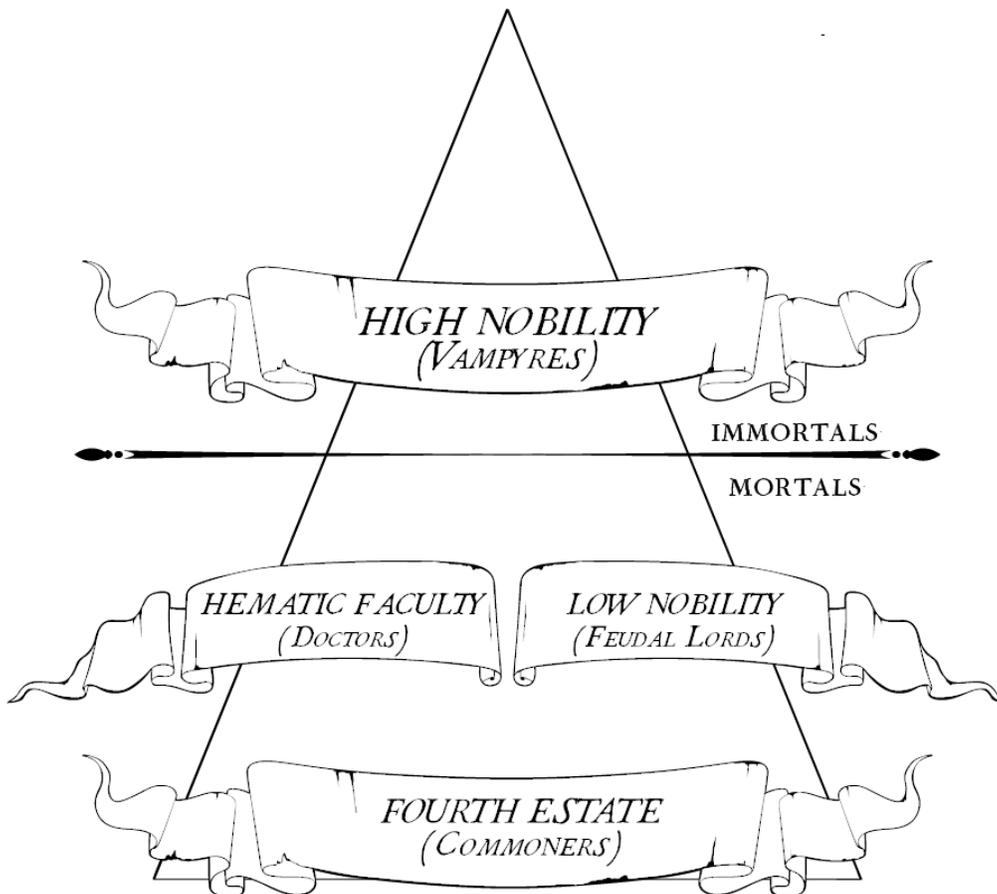
### 29 – Vision

- What do you think is the meaning of Jeanne’s vision? Is it a prophecy? A parallel universe? A future that could have happened if the Age of Shadows did not rise, but that will never be? Or do you have other theories?

- In Jeanne's vision, the quote on Bastien's shirt is the title of a David Bowie song: WE CAN BE HEROES JUST FOR ONE DAY. How does that sentence resonate with the story you just read? Was Jeanne a heroine just for one day?

### Epilogue

- Eventually, Jeanne saved the King she had pledged to destroy. Comment on the irony.
- What do you think the future will hold for Jeanne? What are your expectations for book 2?



## GENERAL QUESTIONS

- What were some of the overarching themes of the story?
- Who were your favorite characters?
- What did you predict would happen?
- What were the most pivotal points in the story in your opinion?
- Did you anticipate the role Raymond de Montfaucon would play in the book?
- What were some of your favorite quotes from the book?
- What were your favorite scenes or moments?
- Did you learn anything new about the historical time period of reference (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century)?
- What did you think about Jeanne's evolution throughout the story?
- What are your impressions about the King of Shadows?



## QUOTES

### Discuss the following quotes:

*“Our lives aren’t as ephemeral as yours.  
It takes so little, really, so very little, for you to go from emotional peaks to valleys.  
You lose one person you love, and your entire world crumbles.  
You find comfort in a single friend, and you’re revived.”*  
Page 42

*“As for the proper grace that ladies are supposed to exhibit, that’s an invention of men so that they can subdue us.”*  
Page 83

*“Beneath their bewitching beauty, the lords of the night are dried-up cadavers  
who forgot what it means to be mortal and who’ve lost every ounce of humanity.”*  
Page 140

*“Liberty or death...  
I choose death.  
Because liberty has no meaning in a world without my loved ones.”*  
Page 174

*“Wounded animals are the most cunning.”*  
Page 232

*“Flee or fight. Kill or be killed. In nature, the choice is reduced to simple,  
pure alternatives unencumbered by remorse or regrets.”*  
Page 275

*“You can hurl killer digs all through the night as long as you do so with a smile.”*  
Page 291

*“You talk about human life like a vampyre. Careful that you don’t become like everything you hate. It would be too  
high a price to pay for revenge, Jeanne.”*  
Page 274

*“Justice is the most dangerous word in the world, for everyone has their own definition!  
What slaughter has been perpetrated in its name!”*  
Page 307

*“Big changes don’t come from vengeance, my dear girl, but from vision.  
Vengeance binds us to what no longer is, like a chain to the past.  
But vision propels us toward what is yet to come, like the breath of the future.”*  
Page 348

## STRUCTURE, WRITING & GENERAL DISCUSSION

- What did you think of the overall structure of the novel?
- Were you engaged immediately?
- Did you race to the end, or was this a slow-burn story for you?
- What did you think about Jeanne’s voice? Could you relate to her?
- How did you feel reading the story? Which emotions were conveyed in the story?
- Were you surprised by the plot? Or did you find it predictable?
- Did certain parts of the novel make you uncomfortable?
- Were there any scenes that made you laugh?
- Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?
- Did you think the ending was appropriate?
- Have any of your views or thoughts changed after reading this book?
- What do you think about the cover of this book? Would you change it? How?
- If you were making a movie of this book, who would you cast?
- Though this story is set in an alternate history world, how do the issues the characters face relate to today?



MAP OF THE MAGNA VAMPYRIA



(Art by Misty Bee)

**A TOUR OF VERSAILLES BY VICTOR DIXEN**

*Pictures provided by the author*



*Figure 1: the famous golden Apollo mask that adorns all the gates in Versailles, emblem of the Sun King.*



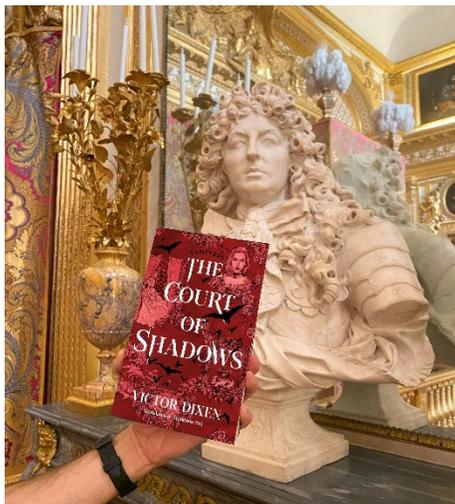
*Figure 2: the maze in the gardens of Versailles, reminiscent of the one where Jeanne gets lost during the gallant hunt.*



*Figure 3: the castle seen from the gardens.*



*Figure 4: the gate of the Grande Écurie, that still exists today.*



*Figure 5: a bust of Louis XIV in the palace of Versailles.*



*Figure 6: Victor Dixen in the Hall of Mirrors.*

**What inspired you to write *The Court of Shadows*?**

I was raised in Versailles, France, and I have always been fascinated by the castle. As a teenager, I used to spend a lot of time reading classic gothic vampire novels in the castle's gardens. Therefore, the inspiration to write *The Court of Shadows* stemmed from two deeply anchored desires: to write about Versailles on one hand, and to write about vampires on the other hand. These two desires combined in one question: *what if Louis XIV, the Sun King and longest reigning monarch in French history, discovered the secret of immortality in order to remain on the throne forever?*

**What exactly is it about and who is it written for?**

*The Court of Shadows* and the whole *Vampyria* series belong to the historical fantasy genre, and more precisely to fantasy alternate history. After Louis XIV turned into a vampire, most of the European kings and queens pledged allegiance to him in order to become immortals, too. Because vampires, by definition, are creatures stuck in time, I imagined that a world ruled by vampires would also stop evolving. Even if the *Vampyria* story happens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it looks and feels like the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century: there has been no social progress, no scientific breakthroughs – and, of course, no French nor American revolution. Originally written in French, the series has already been translated into 9 languages. When I tour internationally, I can see that it appeals both to fantasy readers and history buffs.

**What do you hope readers will get out of reading your book?**

First of all, entertainment! 17<sup>th</sup> century history by itself is such an exciting subject, full of anecdotes and conflicts. The added fantasy elements allow me to take the drama one step further. But I would also like readers to get a new critical view at this pivotal time in modern history.

You see, I've long been interested in the "Grand Siècle," which, for many historians, goes all the way up to the death of Louis XIV in 1715. It's a pivotal moment in our history, one that brims with paradoxes. It's the time of Descartes, of Pascal, and of the advent of reason, which prefigured the Age of Enlightenment. But paradoxically, it's also an age of darkness, with an incredible resurgence of superstitions and of the occult. Witchcraft was never more practiced in France than under Louis XIV (the lurid Affair of the Poisons bears witness), while in Spain, the Inquisition reached its sinister apogee, and in America, suspected witches were burned in Salem. It's as if humanity's dark dreams made a tremendous comeback in this period. It's a subject matter that appeals to me—especially through the prism of our own period, which between conspiracy theories and fake news, is itself under threat from a rise in irrationality.

Beyond these mystical manifestations, on a cultural, political and social level, the Grand Siècle shaped France into what it is today: centralization of power, development of architecture and the arts, the rise of gastronomy, and the art of living. But here again, there's a paradox: the unsavory side of Louis XIV's luminous reign—its religious intolerance (revocation of the Edict of Nantes), and abject inequality (enactment of the Code Noir in the colonies).

So by way of an alternate history, I wanted to question the Grand Siècle, this monument of history books, honoring its splendors and holding it accountable for its crimes.

**What challenges did you overcome in the writing of this book?**

All writers can testify that their characters acquire a form of autonomy in the writing process, making their own decisions. I've experienced that in my previous novels, before *The Court of Shadows*. But of all the books I've written, of all the characters I've created, Jeanne, the heroine of *Vampyria*, is the one who got the most out of my control. She's so impulsive and unpredictable! She really gave me cold sweats. But looking back, I know that I precisely needed this type of main character for this story. You see, the world of *Vampyria* has been stuck in time for

three centuries. Everything is ossified. I needed a character like a cannonball, very dynamic, destroying everything on her way... including my sanity.

**Precisely, how did you create your character, Jeanne?**

I tend to do a lot of research, worldbuilding, and plotting before I start to write a novel. But for me, characters are the most instinctive elements of a story. I don't rationalize them too much: they come to me progressively, as if they were walking towards me. First, they are mere silhouettes, and then their features and psychology become more and more apparent. That's how Jeanne took shape: an aloof girl with this striking gray hair. At the beginning, I didn't know why she had this particularity. But during a book signing in France, a reader came to me with a theory that I like. This reader told me: "Jeanne has gray hair because she is a morally gray character!"

**How did you decide on your book's cover design?**

Visual aspects of a book are very important to me as a reader, and as a writer I always like to work with artists in order to materialize the fictional world that I have in my head. The European covers were made by a Spanish artist, Nekro, who reproduced the famous golden Apollo mask that adorns all the grids in Versailles. For the US edition, my publisher and I wanted to have a cover very evocative of classic French culture. With the American artist, Colin Verdi, we came up with the idea of the "Toile de Jouy". This kind of luxurious printed fabric was all the rage in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Colin gave his own interpretation of the Toile de Jouy, decorating it with scenes from the novel and vampiric patterns.

**Are there particular films that have influenced your writing?**

I belong to a generation of writers who have been very influenced by visual media, movies as well as TV and even video games. Specifically, when writing *Vampyria*, I had two period films in mind: *Barry Lyndon* by Stanley Kubrick, and *Dangerous Liaisons* by Stephen Frears. Both are exquisite recreations of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, down to every costume detail. Stephen Frears's movie is based on the novel of the same name by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, a literary masterpiece, both cruel and delicate, that captures the spirit of the decadent aristocratic world just before the French Revolution. Translating this very French matter to the English language and to the screen seemed to be an impossible feat. But Stephen Frears, Glenn Close, John Malkovich and the rest of the cast managed perfectly. This was an inspiration for me during the process of translating *The Court of Shadows* to English.

**Indeed, *The Court of Shadows* is translated from French: did you participate in the translation?**

French is my native language. I write all my novels in French, before they are translated to other languages. Being a fluent English speaker, I can then work with the French-to-English translator in order to find the best way to translate images, metaphors and other expressions. It was a pleasure to recreate *The Court of Shadows* story for the American audience, with the excellent translator, Françoise Bui.



## PRAISE FOR THE COURT OF SHADOWS

“Supernatural alternate histories don’t come much more suspenseful or fully realized than this impressive series debut from Dixen (the Phobos Trilogy). Dixen excels at concocting unexpected detours and jaw-dropping cliffhangers. Anne Rice fans will be especially enthralled.”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“I loved it! The tension, the intrigue, the undercurrents of revolution, and above all else, a warrior girl who still wants to love and be loved. This will be an immediate classic. Bravo!”

—Amy Harmon, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *New York Times* bestselling author

“Seductive, thrilling, and deliciously dark, **THE COURT OF SHADOWS** brings the glamour and danger of eighteenth-century Versailles to life. This is historical fantasy at its finest!”

—Kass Morgan, bestselling author of *The 100*

“Victor Dixen has crafted a decadent literary feast that makes vampire lore fresh again. **THE COURT OF SHADOWS** deserves a place on your bookshelf with all the bloodsucking classics.”

—Megan Shepherd, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Grim Lovelies*

“**THE COURT OF SHADOWS** has intriguing world-building and a protagonist with true, merciless grit. You’re rooted in the familiar, yet there are enough twists to break your expectations. Jeanne is vicious in her determination, and the king is utterly fascinating. I NEED TO SEE HIM WITHOUT THAT MASK!”

—Charlie N. Holmberg, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *The Paper Magician*

“A brilliant and brave young heroine who is still realistically vulnerable, in a world of vampires who really do want to kill people—and yet retain their creepy fascination. Read this to find out why Victor Dixen’s thrilling series is a huge bestseller in France. I can’t wait to read the next one!”

— Ellen Kushner, World Fantasy Award and Locus Award winner, author of *Swordspoint*

“Gory, twisty, heart-stopping fun of the best kind—I couldn’t stop reading!”

— Shelley Parker-Chan, #1 bestselling author of *She Who Became the Sun*

