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French Studies, Volume 71, Issue 1, 1 January 2017, Pages 124–125, https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knw311

Published: 13 January 2017
In 1881, Valtesse 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 Valtesse 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*, Valtesse — 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...

**Issue Section:**
Reviews

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