Bernard-Henri Lévy is a Left Bank intellectual with a personal fortune and a perfectly coiffed mane, whose affair with the avant-garde aristocrat Daphne Guinness has shocked le tout Paris. Christopher Silvester on an intriguing tale of couture, philosophy, scorned wives and amour fou.
The name is Lévy,
Bernard-Henri Lévy,
clockwise from above:
BHL in Paris in 1979;
BHL on a diplomatic
mission to Afghanistan
in 2002; his future wife
Arielle Dombasle, in
1981; BHL and Arielle
at a Vanity Fair party
during the Cannes
Film Festival 2007;
on their wedding day
on the Côte d’Azur
in 1993.

Homme d’affaires,
clockwise from above:
Les derniers jours de
Charles Baudelaire
manuscript by
Bernard-Henri Levy;
the wedding of
Daphne Guinness
and Spyros Niarchos
in Paris, 1987;
BHL and Daphne
Guinness in Nice, 2010;
BHL meets President
Jacques Chirac to
discuss Afghanistan at
the Elysée Palace, 2002.
ethics. His scholarship is sometimes dubious. Years ago he was derided for suggesting that Himmler had stood trial at Nuremberg six months after his suicide and earlier this year he was mocked for citing the 20th-century philosopher Jean-Baptiste Botul in a book about the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant – the trouble was that Botul and Botulism were a satirical invention of literary journalist Frédéric Pagès. A proposed indictment against him for tax evasion was quashed by Nicolas Sarkozy back when he was Minister of Finance. Although BHL refused to endorse Sarkozy for the presidency in 2007 – claiming that he still considers the Left to be his famille – he has always been careful to avoid directly criticising him.

It is BHL’s private life that has burnedished his allure. By the late 1980s he was married to his first wife but leading the life of a libertine, sleeping with as many as three women in a single night according to a friend quoted in a magazine interview in 2003. He only requires four hours of actual sleep. When his current wife, Arielle Dombasle, first saw a picture of him, by her own account she thought he was Jesus Christ; and when he first met her, at a book signing, he was, to use his own words, ‘thunderstruck’ by her beauty.

A strawberry blonde actress who was born in America, Arielle’s father was a silk manufacturing heir from Lyon, who indulged his interest in archaeology. After the premature death of her mother, Arielle was raised by her maternal grandparents in Mexico, where her grandfather served as de Gaulle’s ambassador. Her grandmother was a poet who lived to the age of 101 and it is from her that Arielle took her professional surname. By the age of ten, she could drive a car, water-ski, parachute and scuba dive. Fluent in four languages, she trained as a hat-maker with Philip Treacy, while also recording several albums of songs in different styles.

Two years after their first meeting, during which time BHL had divorced his first and married his second wife, Arielle met him again in Milan and they spent a passionate night together. She, too, was married – to a society dentist some 30 years her senior. After a month’s separation, and after he had hired a private investigator to check her out, BHL began a surreptitious affair with Arielle – “Elevators and barmen were our only friends,” each has said. It lasted seven years, until they eventually married in 1993. A few years later, she starred in a film Lévy had directed called Le Jour et La Nuit, with Alain Delon co-starring as a character based partly on BHL, partly on Arielle’s father and partly on Ernest Hemingway. It was a horror as far as the French critics were concerned. The distinguished magazine Cahiers du Cinema called it the worst French film for decades and BHL provoked laughter when he tried to explain what the film was about to an audience at the Berlin Film Festival.

‘Bernard and Arielle are where fact and fiction meet,’ declared the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg. Today, the Paris-based American fashion commentator Mary Deschamps sees them as ‘the intellectual Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie of France.’ ‘He’s part of what is referred to as la gauche caviar,’ she explains. ‘Meaning Left idealism but spending on bling-bling. He’s greatly admired as a champion of many causes. He’s kind of a ditzy blonde, totally redone cosmetically. They’ve been together for years and they were in all the magazines, but every-one sort of makes fun of them – the intellectual and the blonde bombshell.’

The golden couple at each other for a full five minutes before exchanging a word.

The new bombshell in BHL’s life, Daphne Guinness, 42, is sometimes described as a brewery heiress, although her family have been more involved in ownership of land and other assets for many years. She is a peroxide blonde who has worn two dark peroxide blondes who has worn two dark badger stripes in her hair ever since her 1999 divorce from the Greek shipping heir Spyros Niarchos, to whom she was married for 12 years and with whom she has three children. She is said to have received £20 million in her divorce settlement in addition to her own family money. Her mother was French and counted the artists Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp among her friends, while Daphne prefers the world of haute couture fashion. With her slim figure, much-feted pose and penchant for avant-garde creations, she was a muse to the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen and recently bought the entire clothing collection of her fellow muse, the late Isabella Blow, rather than let it be auctioned by Christie’s. She has given her name to a Comme des Garçons fragrance and has inspired a make-up line. Her use of such words as ‘crickey’ and ‘gosh’ in interviews betrays her upper-class origins, but one interviewer, Jim Reginao of American fashion magazine W, testified to her innate style and intelligence, saying that ‘she does diamonds and particle physics.’

In October 2008, the New York Post reported that BHL and Daphne had been ‘making out’ poolside at the Beverly Hills Hotel – not exactly where one goes if one intends to be discreet. Several more sightings followed, in Toronto, London and New York, though significantly not in Paris. At the beginning of this year, David Patrick Columbia, who edits the New York Social Diary website, noticed Daphne and BHL lunching at the Grill Room of the Four Seasons Hotel in Manhattan. According to a witness seated at the neighbouring table, the golden couple had stared at each other through sunglasses for a full five minutes before exchanging a word. Columbia had already seen them a few months earlier at Michael’s, a Midtown restaurant favoured by media big-shots. On each occasion they were a source of fascination to the other patrons. ‘People as clearly defined intellectually and fashion-wise as this couple,’ Columbia wrote, ‘are rarely unaware of their surroundings.’ Only a couple of weeks ago they both attended the Another Magazine dinner at the Istanbook Festival, which was held in the grounds of Istanbul’s Topkapi Palace. BHL looked on admiringly as the ‘concept’ that is Daphne went on stage to discuss the art of hat-making with Philip Treacy.

‘Hopefully for her, he’s in love,’ says Deschamps. ‘In any case, it looks like yet another display of trophy lovers. People are going to be pretty cynical. It’s the classic story. He’s dumped Arielle for a younger, prettier, richer girl. It goes back to the King of France. If the King could do it, others could, too. But I think this might mar his reputation as an intellectual. What will the French think? I don’t think the French are going to think much.’

Some commentators I spoke to declined to offer an opinion about the change in BHL’s domestic arrangements, possibly because they feared upsetting him or Arielle or Daphne, or out of the traditional Gallic respect for the privacy of the bedroom. One French commentator would only say there was unlikely to be much of a reaction in Paris because ‘the French still don’t care about public figures’ private lives’. BHL is unlikely to be bothered either way. ‘I took the measure of the absurdity of the judgement of Paris a long time ago,’ he once said. ‘Whether it’s good or bad, it’s the same either way.’

In his 2003 book about the murder in Pakistan of the American journalist Daniel Pearl, BHL wrote a novelistic passage in which he speculated about Pearl’s last thoughts about his wife. ‘He thinks of Mariane, that last night, so desirable, so beautiful – what do women want, deep down? Passion? Eternity?’ BHL and Daphne will no doubt have many years of passionate interchange ahead, but perhaps she should avoid adopting widely status. The late Sir James Goldsmith, who for many years had a wife in London and a mistress in Paris, once averred that a man who marries his mistress creates a job vacancy. Arielle should understand. After all, she was once the mistress.