

“LET THEM EAT CAKE”: THE MYTHICAL MARIE ANTOINETTE AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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ONE OF THE MOST universally believed “facts” about the French Revolution is the famous line attributed to Marie Antoinette: “If the people have no bread, then let them eat cake.” No reputable biographer has traced the remark to her, nor has any historian identified anyone who heard her say it. It seems to have been something of an old chestnut among Bourbons, who attributed it to several queens and princesses, most often to the queen of Louis XIV, Maria Theresa, in the seventeenth century.¹

Why, then, has this “fact” endured? Wherein lies its power? Why is it conventional knowledge among those whose acquaintance with the French Revolution is otherwise slight to nonexistent that the queen mocked the people when they were suffering, caused them to rise in righteous revolt, and brought down on herself their justifiable wrath? Joséphe Jeanne Marie Antoinette of the house of Habsburg-Lorraine was a somewhat ordinary, though attractive, woman with no egregious qualities. She would have lived out her days in obscurity—like the countless Marie Adelaides, Catherine Annes, and Anne Maries known only to genealogists—had not her mother, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, married her to the future king of France at a critical juncture in French history.

These questions are not new. Recent research in Revolutionary studies, however, provides historians with new ways to approach these issues. With the disintegration of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution as a class conflict reflecting changes in the modes of production, historians have become more keenly aware of the importance of individuals as historical forces and of the significance of ideas that motivated or perhaps victimized them. A biographical approach has often replaced class

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¹ Popular biographies of Marie Antoinette often refer to this mythical line and explain its apocryphal nature. See, for example, Joan Haslip, *Marie Antoinette* (New York, 1987), 75; Vincent Cronin, *Louis and Antoinette* (London, 1974), 13; Lady Helen Augusta Magniac Younghusband, *Marie Antoinette: Her Early Youth, 1770–1774* (London, 1912).

analysis. At the same time, the media, both verbal (books, newspapers, pamphlets, and posters) and non-verbal (caricatures, paintings, and festivals) have been subjected to close scrutiny. Research has demonstrated that words were power and that ideas and images, however expressed, packed potent messages.²

In addition, women's studies, probing the role of women in the late *ancien régime* and the French Revolution, have provided a better understanding of gender politics. It has become clearer why the Jacobins were hostile to women in the public sphere and why the republic excluded women from the citizenship and the civil liberties claimed by men. This new evidence helps explain the vulnerability of Marie Antoinette in the political culture of her day.³

This essay traces the images Marie Antoinette projected to the public, officially and unofficially, from the time of her arrival in France until her death. Only then can the psychodynamics of the black legend of the queen be understood, as well as why it, instead of official adulation, won public acceptance and defined her image for posterity. A review of the radical press coverage of events in which she figured prominently during the French Revolution can also help ascertain to what degree the virulent images of the queen pervaded the political culture of these crises and were present in the minds of the people and their leaders.⁴

When fourteen-year-old Marie Antoinette first arrived in France in May 1770 as the bride of the dauphin, she was presented to the public as a youthful goddess of beauty and virtue. In a burst of pageantry orchestrated by the government and reported in the official press she was, if only briefly, the object of a kind of cult in which she was worshipped as a deity.

² For the biographical trend, see Jonathan Dewald, "Politics and Personality in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 893–908. Although the article focuses on the seventeenth century it notes the broader trends in French studies. For the power of the media, see Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class, and Political Culture* (New Haven, 1989), 29; Jeremy Popkin, *The Press in France, 1789–1799* (London, 1990), 3. Popkin regards the newspaper press as indispensable in creating a democratic culture and making the French Revolution what it was.

³ For a recent historiographical survey, see Karen Offen, "The New Sexual Politics of French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 909–922. For a broader survey of French women's history, see Cécile Dauphin, et al., "Women's Culture and Women's Power: Issues in French Women's History," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Offen, et al. (Bloomington, 1991), 107–134.

⁴ The following newspapers have been analyzed: *Mercure de France*, *Gazette de France*, *L'Ami du peuple*, *Journal de la Montagne* (appeared only briefly in 1793), *Révolutions de Paris*, *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, *Journal des hommes libres de tous les pays, ou le Républicain*, *Orateur du peuple*, *Journal d'Etat et du citoyen*, *Keralio* (which became *Journal universel*), and *Journal universel: Annales patriotiques et littéraires de la France*.

The young girl may well have thought she was entering an enchanted world. She, so recently berated by her stern mother and her censorious older brother, Joseph, for her feckless conduct and shameful scholarship, found herself hailed as a model of perfection. Arrayed in finery, surrounded by guards of honor, she was greeted by cheering crowds, artillery salvos, church bells, and fireworks. Her every step seemed a triumphal progress, her every glance a much-sought favor. Dignitaries of the towns and villages through which she passed bowed and scraped at her feet, vowing that she would be “the ornament, the glory . . . the admiration . . . the hope . . . and happiness of all of France.” The official press treated her as a celestial being sent from above to grace the French people. An ode in the *Mercure de France* commemorating her marriage to the dauphin addressed her as Hebe, goddess of youth, who entered the heavens as the bride of Hercules: “Born high above all ordinary thrones, to her belongs all the radiance of Divinity.”⁵

The reasons for these effusions require little explanation. As the pawn of the Austrian and French governments, Marie Antoinette had been married for reasons of state—the Austro-French alliance. To celebrate the wisdom of its own judgment and to flatter its Austrian ally, the government of France in its official press and through its representatives on the dauphine’s route to Versailles hailed her as a larger-than-life personification of female virtue and beauty. Reality, of course, was different and not long in asserting itself. The religious marriage having been duly celebrated, the official press ceased its encomium and left the make-believe princess to live happily ever after with her prince as best she could.

Dropped by the official media, Marie Antoinette was soon the object of the unofficial media of the faction-riven and hostile court: the grapevine of scandalmongers. The early attacks on Marie Antoinette originated within the court and spread to the masses. This is not surprising, as Marie Antoinette lived within the confines of the château of Versailles or other royal palaces, which afforded the public few opportunities to form an opinion about her. A host of ready-made enemies were within the château, including the ascendant anti-Austrian cabal, which included “Mesdames,” Louis XV’s elderly, unmarried daughters, important ministers, and the party of the *dévots*; the king’s mistress, Madame Du Barry, jealous of the rivalry of a youthful, pretty dauphine; and Monsieur, Count of Provence, younger

⁵The compliment was addressed to Marie Antoinette by R. P. Husson, dignitary of Nancy, on 10 May 1770. See Baron Max de Sedlitz, *Marie-Antoinette à Nancy* (Paris, 1906), 16; “Portrait de la Mme. Dauphine,” *Mercure de France*, July 1770, 39. In May both *Mercure de France* and *Gazette de France*, royally privileged newspapers with access to news of the court, published long accounts of Marie Antoinette’s entry into France at Strasbourg and followed her progress through eastern France to Compiègne, where she was greeted by the king and the royal family.

brother of the dauphin and next in line to the throne as long as the dauphin remained without a male heir. These members of the royal family and of the court had access to the dauphine and possessed intimate knowledge of her daily routine and court politics, which was evident in the early libels. When, for example, Marie Antoinette took a notion to see the sun rise and arranged a party of young people for the purpose, one of the first of the later flood of hostile pamphlets, *Le lever de l'aurore*, immediately appeared. When she became queen in 1774 she was thought to have mocked some of the venerable ladies at court and neglected proper etiquette. Soon after, insulting and threatening couplets appeared, such as: "Little queen of twenty years/You who greet the court with jeers/You'll go back from whence you came." The author of this particular piece, a skillful example of its genre, was privy to information of the most intimate nature. In a play on the word *puce*, known to the court to be the favorite color of Marie Antoinette, he alluded to the *prépuce* (foreskin) of Louis, quoting precisely the words of a recent medical examination of the king to ascertain the physiological reason for his childlessness, a matter of general and vivacious speculation.⁶

The marriage that for some seven years was no marriage cannot be exaggerated as an essential cause of the defamation of the queen's character. Louis' long delay in consummating the marriage not only became a subject of grave concern for those interested in the continuity of the dynasty but forever fixed the image of the king and his wife in the public mind. Spied on incessantly within the château, the couple became the butt of all manner of ribald humor within and later without the court. The incomplete marriage was ready-made grist for the mill of the illegal pamphlet industry already flourishing despite the efforts of government censors. The *esprit gaulois* was insatiable and irrepressible on the themes of the king's alleged impotence and the queen's consequent frustration. Naturally, it followed that if the king were a *mauvais fouteur*, the queen, young and lively, must be promiscuous. The pamphleteers outdid each other in describing her alleged lovers. Nor was the situation much improved when the queen became pregnant by Louis in 1778. The damage to their reputations proved irreparable. In the pamphlets the queen's children were anyone's but the king's. (Artois, Louis' youngest brother, was frequently cited as a

⁶ For a study of the pamphlets, see Hector Fleischmann, *Marie-Antoinette: Bibliographie critique et analytique des pamphlets politiques, galants et obscènes contre la reine* (Paris, 1911). Quotation from the medical report may be found in the correspondence of Count d'Aranda in the summer of 1774. See Jules Flammermont, ed., *Correspondance des agents diplomatiques*, report of Aranda, 5 August 1774, 476–477, n. 2. *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France*, a gossipy newsletter edited out of London, described these *exécrables couplets* but did not provide exact quotations. See *Mémoires secrets* 9 (21 February 1776): 48–49. The poem is reproduced in its entirety by Gerard Walter, *Marie-Antoinette* (Paris, 1948), 224–226.

putative father.) Recent research has demonstrated that within a decade, these pamphlets had successfully destroyed the reputation of the queen and made the king an object of derision.⁷

Probably no degree of saintliness on the part of Marie Antoinette could have successfully rebutted the libels. Ignoring the warnings of her mother, she either paid them no heed or treated them with derision. In addition, the frivolity of her behavior was easily misinterpreted and/or exaggerated and turned against her. On the few occasions Parisians saw her, more often than not she was riding horseback in the Bois de Boulogne, dashing through icy streets on elegant sleighs, or attending opera balls of dubious reputation. Her husband, who retired early, was conspicuously absent. This gilded youth helped create the fantastic image of the profligate, arrogant queen who danced while the people starved.⁸

The public's readiness to swallow even the grossest tales about the queen may also be attributed to the increasing secularization of the monarchy. The climate of opinion of *les lumières* was hostile to the divine right of kings. To the elite, the transition of the king from the viceroy of God to the first servant of the state had already been made. At the time of Louis XVI's coronation there were rumblings against what was seen as the unnecessary expense entailed in an outmoded and superstitious ceremony. On the popular level, the enormous sales of the salacious so-called memoirs of La Du Barry were evidence that many French men and women were willing to perceive their late king, Louis XV, as little more than a dirty old man and to scorn him as such. The implication was that he, like other men, should be held to a common standard of morality. The chaste reputation of Louis XVI might have cleansed the stains from the crown of Louis XV and continued the process of its *embourgeoisement*. Instead the new king became a public joke.⁹

⁷ See Lynn M. Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn M. Hunt (Baltimore, 1990), 109–130; Vivian Cameron, "Political Exposures: Sexuality and Caricature in the French Revolution," *ibid.*, 90–107. For extensive coverage of Marie Antoinette in the pamphlets, see Chantal Thomas, *La reine scélérate: Marie Antoinette dans les pamphlets* (Paris, 1989).

⁸ *Mémoires secrets* 15 (20 September 1780): 303; *Ibid.*, 16 (28 September 1780): 7. In March 1784 the queen reportedly had one of her ladies compose a parody of the libels in which all the calumnies were cleverly turned to compliments. Marie Antoinette sang it herself at court, but its effect was not recorded. *Ibid.*, 25 (29 March 1784): 201.

⁹ Robert Darnton, "The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France," unpublished lecture delivered at the University of Texas at Austin, October 1990. For a thoughtful discussion of the new morality evident in the late eighteenth century, see F. W. J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France, 1789–1848* (Leicester, 1987), 7–8.

Moreover, the very faithfulness, indeed the uxoriousness, of Louis XVI, which made him a cuckold and dolt in the public mind, placed Marie Antoinette in an even more vulnerable position. Lacking in virility, he was seen as unable to dominate his consort. Subject to her sway, his rule was corrupted by feminine power. As Sarah Maza, among others, has recently shown, the female, allegedly "characterized by deceit, seduction, and the selfish pursuit of private interest," was the antithesis of reasonable and lawful government. Femininity was thought incompatible with the public sphere and embodied the worst of monarchical power. In the past, when kings such as Louis XV and many before him had taken mistresses, they were criticized by factions at court for submitting to female influence. Their supposed weakness, however, had not been fatal to their rule and, indeed, was seen as evidence of their humanity. Royal favorites could be banished and the king could bring his court together again and impose his authority. The mistress, as Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret has shown, could serve as scapegoat as well as seductress, drawing the blame for the errors of the Crown. The queen, mother of the heir to the throne, was spared. Relegated to the private sphere, tending only to their families, the Marie Thérèses and Marie Lecszinskas of French history were nonentities, but nonetheless queens whose reputation for virtue remained intact. Hence, the legitimacy of the heir to the throne and the continuity of the dynasty were not in peril. In the case of Louis XVI, however, his irreproachable family life made his wife the victim. All the opprobrium otherwise reserved for the mistress, not the wife, fell on the queen instead. In failing to be dominated and impregnated by her husband, Marie Antoinette was the recipient of the flood of malevolence that had previously been the lot of the "royal whore." The queen, unlike a mistress, could not be banished. Thus the very principle of hereditary monarchy was undermined.¹⁰

Another reason for the victimization of Marie Antoinette not often recognized by recent historians focusing on gender is the fact that she was a foreigner. In late eighteenth-century France, Marie Antoinette was always *l'Autrichienne*. Hostage in a land where the Imperials were the traditional enemy, she could from the outset be suspected of the worst. A symbol of the Austrian alliance, she revived in French memories the disasters of the Seven Years War and its humiliating peace. The libels naturally exploited the Austrian identity of the queen to the fullest. A 1774 pamphlet emphasized the queen's Austrian origin in showing her decision to take her mother's advice and choose a lover (or lovers) so that she could get pregnant since the

¹⁰ Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785–1786): The Case of the Missing Queen," *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn M. Hunt (Baltimore, 1990), 82. See also Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988). For the role of the royal mistress, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Femmes du roi d'Agnes Sorel à Marie-Antoinette* (Paris, 1990), 236–237, 240–241.

king proved inadequate. The anonymous author wrote: "Remember that she is Austrian, and so is ambitious. Remember of what mother she is born and . . . [who] will be her able confederate in such schemes." The queen's Viennese birth was her original and irremediable sin.¹¹

By the beginning of the 1780s, the basic repertoire of the pamphlets attacking the queen was already established. She was foreign; she hated and disdained the French; she was extravagant and luxury loving, depleting the royal treasury by her expenditures and her lavish rewards to her favorites; she intrigued to manipulate the king; and she was profligate, capable of sexual excesses without limit. Her lovers sullied the nuptial couch of kings.

Proof that these libels were hitting their mark and arousing the hatred of the people for the queen is provided by the Diamond Necklace Affair. In this well-known scandal, although Marie Antoinette was totally innocent, it was she who emerged as the villain. All of the other primary players—the gullible Cardinal de Rohan who had pledged his credit to buy the notorious necklace, the adventuress Madame de La Motte who was the brains behind the scheme, and the alchemist and generic charlatan Cagliostro and his wife, Serafina—became popular heroes. Rohan and Cagliostro were acquitted and liberated to the wild acclaim of the people. La Motte, after escaping from prison with the help of the queen's enemies, played the role of the virtuous victim. In pamphlet after pamphlet she assailed the wicked queen who had lured her to the the Petit Trianon, entrapped her, and then introduced her to sapphic pleasures. "Women! Women!" she exclaimed, "Especially princesses, and worst of all queens."¹²

After the Diamond Necklace Affair the pamphlets became not only more numerous but more vile. The queen began to take the form of the female monster of the Revolutionary years—depraved, alcoholic, bestial, and sadistic. The theme of lesbianism present in the La Motte pamphlets, not entirely new, took increasingly degrading tones. By 1789 in the pamphlets

¹¹ *Dissertation extraite d'un plus grand ouvrage, ou Avis important à la branch espagnole sur ses droits à la couronne de France, et qui peut-être mesme très utile à toute la famille de Bourbon, surtout au roi Louis seize.* Although the pamphlet was not obscene, it was insulting to Austria and had an obvious political purpose. When Marie-Thérèse read it she thought it "the most atrocious thing" she had ever seen. Marie-Thérèse to Mercy-Argenteau, 28 August 1774, *Correspondance secrète entre Marie-Thérèse et le comte de Mercy-Argenteau avec les lettres de Marie-Thérèse et de Marie-Antoinette*, ed. Arneth and Geffroy (Paris, 1874), 2:224.

¹² Thomas, *Reine scélèrate*, 137; *Mémoires justificatifs de la comtesse Valois de La Motte, écrit par elle-même* (London, 1788), 94. See also Maza, "Diamond Necklace Affair," 81–82; Franz Funck-Brentano, *L'Affaire du collier* (Paris, 1901), 37–38.

the queen was a nymphomaniac, insatiable in her desires. The coquette became a whore, her beauty ravaged by her degrading pleasures.¹³

Marie Antoinette's unpopularity was so great after the Diamond Necklace Affair that it could no longer be ignored by either the queen or the government. Her appearances in public all but ceased. Offended by the hostile reception she had received by the Parisians in the spring of 1785 (just before the Diamond Necklace Affair), she omitted the customary ceremonial visit to Notre Dame to render thanks to God for the birth of her fourth child in May 1786. The police in Paris feared it would be unable to protect the queen from an angry populace.¹⁴

The official press remained virtually silent and never countered the attacks on the queen. From the very beginning of Louis' reign it had largely ignored her. At the time of Louis' coronation in 1775 the *Gazette de France* acknowledged her presence (incognito) in the cathedral at Rheims in a single sentence. When she delivered her first child, a daughter, in December 1778, the paper noted merely that "after a rather long but normal labor, she gave birth . . . to a Princess, who is in good health." The appearance of the long-awaited dauphin in 1781 naturally received more attention, but it was directed not to the mother but to the infant son, to the joy of the king and of the nation. The official *Gazette de France* and the *Mercure de France* chose to ignore the Diamond Necklace Affair entirely, even though it was a journalistic sensation. The queen was mentioned only in passing and in connection with routine news of the court: vaccination of the dauphin, peregrinations of the court from Versailles to Saint Cloud and Fontainebleau, attendance at baptisms and marriages, and so forth.¹⁵

The monarchy, however, realized that some attempt had to be made to reply to the defamatory pamphlets and to rehabilitate the queen in the public mind. The method they chose was a traditional one: the commissioning of a portrait to be exhibited in the Grand Salon of the Louvre. A sure indication of the high political importance of the decision, the order

¹³ As early as 1776 an obscene song about Marie Antoinette's alleged lesbianism circulated at court. See Fleischmann, *Pamphlets libertins*, 241. The friendships of the queen with the Princesse de Lambelle and Mme. de Polignac were the usual basis of these allegations.

¹⁴ For a contemporary summary of the reasons for the queen's unpopularity, see Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris* (Paris, 1799), 3:10–11. For hostile reception in Paris, see *Mémoires secrets*, 29 (25 May 1785): 45–47; *Ibid.*, 35 (12 August 1787): 401–402. Insulting caricatures were then circulating in Paris. One presented Marie Antoinette astride a Trojan horse filled with her favorites. Another showed the queen eating at a well-filled table while the king drank and the people cried. *Ibid.*, 27 August 1787, 452–453.

¹⁵ *Gazette de France*, no. 6 (August 1787): 307; *Ibid.*, no. 48 (16 June 1775); *Ibid.*, no. 102 (22 December 1778); Supplement to *Gazette de France*, 26 October 1781, 399–400.

came from the Surintendant des Bâtiments instead of the more usual channel of the Maison de la Reine. Marie Antoinette's de facto official painter, Madame Vigée Le Brun, was chosen to paint the queen surrounded by her children. The idea was to convey a more wholesome and positive image of the queen and of the sacredness of the dynastic succession. In the painting a mature queen, richly but soberly dressed, sits holding her younger son on her lap while the older boy, the dauphin, points to the cradle of the youngest (recently deceased) daughter. The oldest child, the future duchess of Angouleme, clings to her mother's arm and looks up at her adoringly. All are in radiant health, despite the fact that the dauphin was in fact a sickly, near invalid child. Symbolic messages, both classical and Christian, abound. Bathed in a golden light like a celestial crown or aureole, the queen appears to reify the divine right of kings. By her position in the painting she is enthroned as a Virgin in Majesty of the high renaissance. The fullness of her bust suggests fecundity, a holy *procréatrice* of the dynasty. At the same time the painting presents a classical theme of the *mater familias*, very popular in the eighteenth century: a magnificent jewel box surmounted by a crown in the background reminds the viewer of Cornelia of antiquity, whose sons were her precious jewels.¹⁶

Spectacular though the portrait was, from the point of view of public relations it was a fiasco. The painting had taken nearly two years to complete, and so great was the hostility to the queen that Vigée Le Brun at first dared not submit her work. Consequently, the huge empty frame, displayed in the place of honor on the wall of the Salon, called forth Parisian witticisms about "Madame Déficit." When at length the portrait made its appearance, the reaction of the public was unfavorable. Perhaps authoritarian, divine-right monarchy and bourgeois maternal tenderness were incompatible. More likely, the image of the queen was by then far beyond redemption. Eventually the painting was retired out of sight to a remote corner in the château of Versailles.¹⁷

After 1789 and the fall of the Bastille, the pamphlet industry expanded tremendously. These later pamphlets, peddled openly in Paris and the provinces with the breakdown of censorship, entered the realm of dark fantasy. The queen of the *ancien régime* pamphleteers had been wicked enough, but usually she had been recognizable as a human being. The

¹⁶ The use of portraits for didactic purposes had been used sporadically since the stunning portrait of Louis XIV by Rigaud in 1701. Angeviller, Surintendant des Bâtiments, to Vigée Le Brun, 12 September 1785, Archives Nationales, 01 1918, folio 330. The analysis of the portrait is credited to Joseph Baillo, "Marie-Antoinette et ses enfants par Mme. Vigée Le Brun," *L'Oeil*, pt. 1, no. 308 (March 1981): 34-41, and pt. 2, no. 310 (May 1981): 53-60, 90-91.

¹⁷ Louis-Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun, *Souvenirs* (Paris, 1835), 1:72; *Mémoires secrets* 36 (25 August 1787): 347-351.

Marie Antoinette in the Revolutionary press, if she retained her human form at all, possessed supernatural powers of evil. Frequently listed as her forerunners and mentors were the legendary queens of crime: Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius, notorious for her sexual appetites and ascendancy over her husband; Agrippina, mother of Nero, would-be usurper and skillful poisoner; Catherine de Medici of Saint Bartholomew massacre fame; Brunhilda, murderess of her husband, a Visigothic king, among others; and Fredegund, Frankish queen and multiple murderess who decapitated a rival with the lid of her trunk. Marie Antoinette surpassed them all. More often than not the queen appeared as a wild beast of rapacious appetites—a panther, hyena, or tigress who fed on the French people. At other times classical mythology was invoked to represent her as a harpy, a winged creature with the upper body of a woman, savage talons, and foul appetites. By 1793 she had become the daughter of Satan to whom no form of depravity was foreign. Always she was in the grip of a preternatural eroticism of the most loathsome kind, which was often explicitly described. Incest was not excluded. An Austrian, she had learned this vice physically and early on from her father, who “had introduced *le priape impérial* into the *canal autrichien*.” To him and to her mother, who had borne her specifically to take revenge on France, she owed also her loathing of the French people. Small wonder, then, that she poisoned them, massacred them, and drank their blood and bathed in it. Satan was her godfather, who presided over her birth, guided her actions, and with whom she communed. In the pamphlets published under the monarchy she had endangered the throne; in those published under the republic she defiled the nation. The anti-Austrian royalist faction would have sent her back to Vienna; the republicans would send her to the guillotine.¹⁸

Evidence of public hatred of Marie Antoinette as a motivating factor in the radicalization of the Revolution is clear as early as 1789 in the march of the women on Versailles in the October Days. It was the first of the Revolutionary events that closely involved the queen and that, by bringing the king and government to Paris, all but doomed the monarchy. On that occasion the people were hungry and in search of bread, which was in short supply and high in price in Paris. Also, as the testimony of witnesses in the official inquiry into the October Days of the National Assembly and the contemporary radical press show, the French people intended to lay violent hands on the queen. Yet recent scholarship analyzing crowd action, dominated by the orthodox interpretation, has turned a blind eye to the

¹⁸ *Vie privée, libertine et scandaleuse de Marie-Antoinette d'Autriche, ci-devant reine des Français, depuis son arrivée en France jusqu'à sa détention au Temple*. This anonymous pamphlet first appeared in 1791 and went through slightly different versions in 1792 and 1793. For the most recent complete review of the pamphlets attacking the queen, see Thomas, *Reine scélérate*.

fury of the crowd against the queen and has seen the bourgeois National Assembly as the instigator of the action.¹⁹

During the troubled summer following the attack on the Bastille agitation against the queen became frenzied. Rumors ran that she was sending millions to her brother Joseph to bring an Austrian army to France to use against the people. By September radical journalist Camille Desmoulin was heard in gardens of the Palais Royal urging the Parisians to seize Marie Antoinette and bring the king to Paris lest the Austrians make war on France. Aware of the growing peril, Saint Priest, the minister of war, ordered the Flanders regiment to Versailles. As it turned out, the summons precipitated the very event it was designed to prevent.²⁰

The idea that the king should return to the capital and reside among his subjects was not new. The precipitating event, however, was the celebrated banquet in honor of the Flanders regiment at the château of Versailles on 1 October in which the queen made the round of the tables with the dauphin while the officers sported the black emblem, the colors of the queen and Austria, and allegedly trampled underfoot the *cocard* of the Revolution. Reported in *Révolutions de Paris* the following day, the stories spread across Paris. Combined with the scarcity of bread, the news sufficed to incite the *menu peuple*, principally women, to action.²¹

During the subsequent investigation of the event, witnesses testified that they had heard the people threaten the queen. Some of the women wanted to seize her and shut her up in a convent. Most wished to murder her outright and parade parts of her body as trophies. "Kill! Kill! We want to cut off her head, cut out her heart, and fry her liver," they cried. "There

¹⁹ George Rudé's widely read and influential book, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959), has never been surpassed in analyzing the components of the crowds of the Revolution. Nevertheless, in maintaining that the crowds marching on Versailles were motivated by the bourgeois members of the National Assembly, he failed to mention the queen. For Rudé, the scarcity and high price of bread were short-term economic causes that served the purpose of the middle-class instigators. Rudé dismissed the Châtelet official inquiry as a smokescreen intended to divert attention from the true authors of the march to the duke of Orléans or to Mirabeau. Rudé also ignored the repeated threats of the crowd to the queen. The Châtelet inquiry was undoubtedly biased, but it remains the best existing eyewitness account, in which the animosity of the people toward the queen has the ring of truth. As is well known, Alfred Cobban challenged Rudé's thesis and other aspects of the Marxist interpretation of a bourgeois revolution in his *Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964), 126–127. A whole generation of scholars since Cobban has continued to dismantle the Marxist thesis, while Marie Antoinette has been left in the background.

²⁰ Testimony of Sieur Edme-Thomas Garnier Dwall, secretary of His Royal Highness Prince Edward, *Procédure criminelle, instruite au Chatelet de Paris, sur la dénonciation des faits arrivés à Versailles dans la journée du 6 octobre 1789* 2, no. 317 (Paris, 1790): 187.

²¹ *Révolutions de Paris*, 2 October, no. 13 1789, folio 5.

she is, the filthy whore!" exclaimed one woman. "We don't want her body, what we want is to carry her head to Paris." Attempting to make good their words, the crowd broke into the palace early on the morning of 6 October and mounted the stairs leading to the apartment of the queen, who was rushed by a hidden passageway to safety. Frustrated by her flight, they vented their anger on the furnishings, especially the queen's bed, which was a symbol of her alleged sexual depravity. A member of the National Assembly and member of the household of Monsieur, arriving on the scene shortly after the departure of the invaders, was sickened by the disorder: the queen's room had "become a chamber of horrors."²²

In the days that followed, Parisian Revolutionary press stories featured the queen and her alleged iniquities. Marat's *Ami du peuple* described the "orgy" at Versailles in which "a great Princess" paraded the heir to the throne in the midst of a "conspiracy" that threw the capital into alarm. The *Annales patriotiques littéraires* asserted that the queen had plotted to bear the king away and that the action of the people had aborted "a diabolical scheme."²³

By the spring of 1791 rumors circulated that the king intended to go over to the counter-revolution and return to massacre the French people. The Revolutionary press began raising the alarm, blaming the queen for the "Austrian flight" and urging the people to take preventive action. When the attempt at flight materialized in June the radical newspapers continued to attack the queen, the Austrian committee, and the Austrian government and began to call for the overthrow of the monarchy: "So he has fled, this coward [Louis] . . . and gone to join his *Autrichienne*." The alliance with Austria had been the fatal mistake: "Great God! Can not it be understood that this deadly treaty and the even more deadly influence of *Marie Antoinette* . . . has a hundred times brought France to the abyss!"²⁴

Louis received his share of abuse but it was tinged with ridicule, not hatred. He was the passive partner manipulated by the diabolical wife. Either he was too imbecilic or too alcoholic to know what was afoot. (He was thought to be drunk when the queen bundled him into the carriage for the flight.) The press emphasized his vast appetites for food and drink and

²² At least 42 witnesses cited threats made by the people specifically against the queen. See *Procédure criminelle* 1, no. 12, 131; *Ibid.*, no. 18, 39; *Ibid.*, 2, no. 272, 141. For the bed of the queen, see testimony of M. Claude-Louis, comte de la Chatre, first gentleman of the chamber of Monsieur, deputy to the National Assembly, *ibid.*, 1, no. 139, 213.

²³ *Ami du peuple*, 5 October 1789; *Annales patriotiques littéraires*, no. 13 (10 October 1789), folio 27.

²⁴ *Orateur de peuple*, 5, nos. 26, 44 (April 1791); *Annales patriotiques littéraires*, no. 563 (18 April 1791), folio 1310; *Ibid.*, 7, no. 628 (28 June 1791), no. 636 (30 June 1791); *Journal Universel* 11, no. 513 (19 April 1791), folio 5003; *Mercure de France*, April 1791, folios 304–308.

invoked animal imagery: Louis was the "pig," while Marie Antoinette was the "tigress" or "hyena" who plotted the deaths of the French people.²⁵

With the abortive flight to Varennes the press became not only abusive but menacing. During the absence of the royal family the papers gleefully reported acts of symbolic violence against the queen. When a bust of Marie Antoinette had been dragged through the mud of the streets and broken into bits the editor regretted that it was the image, not the queen herself, who was the object of abuse. The *Ami du peuple* advised shaving her head and throwing her into prison, while the *Orateur du peuple*, not to be outdone, recommended dragging her, like Fredegund, at the tail of a horse through the streets.²⁶

By featuring the queen and hounding her in the press, radical journalists seemed to have sensed the power of the people's rage and exploited it for their own purposes. The sans-culottes now turned openly toward a republic. The fiction that the king favored the Revolution could no longer be maintained after he had been caught in the act of fleeing the capital. The king, as the passive partner manipulated by a diabolical wife, was no longer a fit ruler.

Thus, in the political culture created by the Revolutionary press, the attack on the Tuileries and overthrow of the monarchy became virtually inevitable. The uprising of the Champs de Mars in July 1791 saw the crowds calling openly for the overthrow of the monarchy while the press continued to defile the Crown. René Hébert, in *Père Duchesne*, began his systematic hounding of "Mme. Veto," the "Austrian hag." Louis, labeled "the tyrant," was more often "the drunken Capet" or a disgusting animal who guzzled and defecated at the public trough. As always it was the queen, conspiring with the Austrian emperor, who planned the massacre of the French people. When the people invaded the Tuileries in August 1792, the bed of Marie Antoinette once again became the scene of obscene debauchery.²⁷

²⁵ *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 83, 4 July 1791. Lynn Hunt has suggested that the reason the king was never denigrated to the extent as the queen was because of the alleged sacredness of his person. Lynn M. Hunt, "The Political Psychology of Revolutionary Caricatures," in *French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Los Angeles, 1988), 37.

²⁶ *Orateur du peuple* 6 (25 June 1791), folio 6; *Ibid.*, no. 50 (late June-early July). The journalist got his history wrong. It was Brunhilda, not Fredegund, who was dragged to her death at the tail of a horse. His readers probably did not know the difference.

²⁷ *Père Duchesne*, December 1791, no. 119; Mercier, *Nouveau Paris*, 1:196. The thesis of Popkin's *Revolutionary News* is that "the press as much as any other revolutionary institution . . . transformed the French population into a political nation." The press caused the events of the decade of revolution to occur as and when they did. That the role of the printing was an "active force" in the Revolution is the thesis underlying the

With the advantage of hindsight, historians are able to perceive how strongly the psychodynamics behind the imagery of the queen ran against her. Although the French government was inept and ineffective in its rare attempts to present Marie Antoinette in a favorable light to the public, it probably mattered little what it did or did not do. In the social and political culture of late eighteenth-century France the queen was beyond rehabilitation. Even so astute an observer as Thomas Jefferson, American minister to France and thus caught up in its moral climate, was convinced that "had there been no queen there would have been no Revolution," a view to which few if any historians would subscribe.²⁸

The Marie Antoinette of the media was the ideal target on whom the people could project their anger and frustration. A kind of eighteenth-century Imelda Marcos, she symbolized, among other things, the lavishness and corruption of a dying regime. Students of psychology are well aware that the ties binding members of a group (the *sans-culottes*, for example) are strengthened if it has outsiders it can hate and destroy. It does not matter if the individual in question has had slight if any contact with the supposed enemy. The Bolsheviks had the bourgeoisie; the Puritans had the papists; Hitler had the Jews. The Jacobins had the aristocrats, personified by the queen, who was also a foreigner. In a much-reported incident in 1791 at Varennes, where the royal family was apprehended during the attempted flight, a poor working man of the town jeered brutally at the queen: "So, our lady, you have been leading us a pretty dance. Now you bet I'll call the tune." Although he had never before laid eyes on Marie Antoinette, he held her responsible for all the miseries of his daily existence.²⁹

As the French Revolution deepened, passions escalated. The declaration of war against the Austrians highlighted the image of the queen as a foreigner and increased the xenophobic rage of the masses against the queen and their desire to destroy her. A *sans-culotte* in the region of Paris wrote of the "fierce Austrian," the "tigress," who spared no effort "to shed the blood of the French people." Another from the distant Pyrenées labeled the Austrian queen the "ferocious panther from whose pores spewed the pure blood of the *sans-culottes*."³⁰

collection of essays edited by Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800* (Berkeley, 1989), xii.

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington (Washington, D.C., 1853–1864), 1:101.

²⁹ *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 82 (27 June 1791), folio 189.

³⁰ *Revue rétrospective, recueil de pièces intéressantes et de citations curieuses* (Paris, 1887), 6:47; M. de Lescure, *Les autographes en France et à l'étranger: Portraits, caractères, anecdotes, curiosités* (Paris, 1865), 178.

Finally, the quintessential femininity of Marie Antoinette completed her undoing. With her youthful blond beauty, grace, and coquettish vivacity, she was the perfect example of woman. Seemingly the eternal Eve, she possessed the power to tap the visceral emotions of the masses and to bring to the surface the misogyny prominent in the French Revolution. With her intrusion into the public sphere she upset the patriarchal order in which the consort is obedient and submissive to the sovereign. Her sexual powers, on which the pamphlets and Revolutionary press insisted, corrupted and endangered the honest and virile republic. The pornographic fantasies of the last pamphlets, appearing shortly before and after the queen's death, gave expression to usually repressed sexual and aggressive impulses. In one, Marie Antoinette as prisoner with a coterie of lesbian friends greatly shocks the virtuous republican jailers by their depraved acts. In another, Marie Antoinette desires ever more magnificent studs to rape her repeatedly. Characteristic of hard pornography, the female becomes the object of degradation, the male organ the symbol of mastery. Thus it is not surprising that when the queen appeared before the Revolutionary Criminal Tribunal in October 1793 on trial for her life, her prosecutor, Antoine-Quentin Fouquier-Tinville, dared to accuse her of mother-son incest, the ultimate crime of womankind.³¹

Consequently, when the queen went to her death following her trial, it was above all as a woman that she was reviled. "Marie Antoinette, the Bitch, had as fine a death as the pig in the slaughter house," gloated a village terrorist from Normandy who was in Paris and present in the crowd on the day of her execution. "The greatest of all possible happiness," editorialized Hébert in *Père Duchesne*, "after having seen with his own eyes the head of the female Veto separated from her . . . whore's neck." The following day the *Journal des hommes libres*, organ of Robespierre, ran a long homily on her alleged crimes and concluded: "More bloodthirsty than Jezabel, more conniving than Agrippina . . . her life was a calamity for France . . . her fall a triumph for liberty. . . . The widow Capet . . . died under the guillotine. The globe is purified! Long live the Republic!"³²

The monster whose death these revolutionaries were celebrating was the creature of the Revolutionary press and bore no resemblance to Marie Antoinette. It was this monster, not the queen, who had captured the

³¹ *La vie de Marie-Antoinette, reine de France*, 102: *Le Godmiché royal*. This pamphlet is reproduced in its entirety in Thomas, *Reine scélérate*, 175–183. For analyses of pornography, see Richard S. Randall, *Freedom and Taboo: Pornography and the Politics of a Self Divided* (Berkeley, 1989), 19–27; Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, vol. 1, *Education of the Senses* (New York, 1984), 375–376.

³² Citizen La Pierre of Carentan, October 1793, excerpts of his letter, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Français, 12759, vol. 4, folio 201; *Père Duchesne*, no. 299 (October 1793); *Journal des hommes libres* 1, no. 350 (16 October 1793).

imagination of the masses, aroused their fury, and united them in a frenzy to act. The journalists obliterated the real woman and put in her place an imaginary queen of crime. Marie Antoinette was the perfect target of radical media, the perfect scapegoat of the morality play that the Revolution in part became. Although the political culture of the late eighteenth century was becoming more democratic and egalitarian, it was also increasingly xenophobic and misogynistic. Aristocrat, foreigner, and female, Marie Antoinette stood to lose on all accounts. Some of the most lurid and indelible images of the French Revolution are associated with her. Thomas Jefferson was probably wrong to believe that without the queen there would have been no revolution; but with the mythical Marie Antoinette of the media as queen, could revolution longer have been avoided?