

Remembering Marie-Antoinette: The Martyr, the Whore, and the Icon

Mylynka Kilgore

University of Texas at Arlington

Marie-Antoinette and her image have been placed into three categories: positive, negative, and an amalgam of the two. In this paper I will present her placement in each group through the use of imagery, both contemporary and modern. But, we cannot talk about our memory of Marie Antoinette without talking about her image, how that image was constructed, and how it forms today's usage.

Marie-Antoinette, an Austrian archduchess, was promised in marriage in 1768 to the French Dauphin Louis-Auguste as a form of political alliance between Austro-Hungarian Empress Maria Theresa and France's King Louis XV (Weber 12). It rested on the shoulders of a fourteen year old girl to cement the treaty, preferably by quickly producing an heir.

The shaping of her image began long before her arrival at Versailles. A few years prior to her marriage, she was already in the process of becoming Gallicized. Her mother brought in a slew of experts to educate the girl in the ways of life at the French court. Marie-Antoinette was taught to walk, speak and act like a lady of Versailles (Zweig 5, Weber 13). She was remade into the ideal image of French beauty. Her appearance, mannerisms, movements, dress, and style of dance were all molded in the French form (Weber 16).

The appearance of the young bride-to-be was vital to the nuptial negotiations and to her reception at Versailles. As Dennis Hosford puts forth, this was a "critical symbolic matter. France was governed by Salic Law," the law referring to the prohibition of inheritance by or

through women (184). This becomes very important for queens of France, who were always foreign. Hosford makes this clear with his translation of Guy Coquille's *Institution au droit des François* (1588):

The King is Monarch, & has no companion in his Royal Majesty. Exterior honors may be communicated by Kings to their wives, but that which is of his Majesty, representing his power and dignity, resides in his person alone (184).

Hosford argues that,

Before the queen's body assumed its performative role as the vessel through which the Bourbon dynastic power would pass during the generation of the king's sacred body, it must first be inscribed with the appropriate "exterior honors." (184).

This came to mean that Marie-Antoinette needed to "look French". Louis XV would not fully agree to the marriage until he saw what the young bride-to-be looked like. The altered constructions of Marie-Antoinette, which included a new Parisian hairstyle and three months of orthodontic work (without anesthesia), culminated in a commissioned portrait painted by portraitist Joseph Ducreux (Weber 16). This portrait was important because it would display the corporeal modifications which had been undertaken. The Ducreux portrait was crucial to the nuptial negotiations, as Hosford explains, "since a portrait could only present the exterior signs of [her] character, and those signs, if they were to signal that the [A]rchduchess had been thoroughly Gallicized, all needed to be French" (184-185). A portrait was finally approved and submitted to Louis XV May 1769 (Fraser 37). The King was pleased with the appearance of the future Dauphine and found her suitable to bear heirs to the Bourbon throne. A wedding date of May 16, 1770 was set to take place at the Chapel of Louis XIV at Versailles (Zweig 17).

Prior to the wedding in Versailles, the official handover of Marie-Antoinette, the *remise*, was to take place on the Île des Épis, a small island in the middle of the Rhine River, neutral territory between France and Austria. The *remise* would mark the young Archduchess's

abandonment of her Austrian culture and her embracing of her new country of France. She would be shedding all that was Austrian, be transformed and reborn on the other side of the Île des Épis a French Dauphine. Four days prior to the *remise*, on April 17, 1770, the Archduchess had officially “renounced her hereditary succession rights as an archduchess of the [Austrian] empire” (Weber 28). This metamorphosis on the Île des Épis would be Marie-Antoinette’s first indoctrination to the French court and its strict etiquette.

The *remise* was literally a delivery, or legal transfer. Inside the specially constructed *pavillon de remise*, which resembles a small French château, Marie-Antoinette was stripped in a traditional undressing ritual. As later explained by her lady-in-waiting at Versailles, Madam Campan, “the dauphiness had been entirely undressed, even to her body-linen and stockings; in order that she might retain nothing belonging to a foreign court (an etiquette always observed on such an occasion)” (45).

She was then dressed completely in garments made exclusively *en France*. Once *bien habillée à la Française*, in a gleaming cloth-of-gold, formal *grand habit*, and high shoes, she moved to the central chamber for the signing of the formal *actes de remise* and “was transformed into a *Française*” (Weber 28). She was now, in all ways, property of the French Crown, and therefore, by extension, the French people.

Now *Dauphine*, Marie-Antoinette would be the very center of court ritual at Versailles. In the spectacular court, regulations governing when, how, and in whose company she dressed would serve as reminders that she was no longer in control of her own person. She had given up this control when she renounced her hereditary succession rights prior to her marriage.

There was not one aspect of her life that she was in control of, including her body and most intimate of functions (Campan 89-90). Her marriage was suspect as she had not produced

an heir in her years as Dauphine. She was holding a very tenuous position in the highly cut-throat and competitive court of Versailles. She had yet to assume her role as a mother to future Kings of France. Marie-Antoinette's prestige and assurance of her place in court, all came down to one thing – her fertility.

Her role in the monarchy could only be cemented by the birth of an heir, preferably a male. Her husband was not an amorous sort due to his medical condition – *phimosis*; a condition in which the foreskin of the penis is deformed, making sexual intercourse painful (Schuman). Due to this physical ailment, Louis could not (or would not) consummate the marriage right away. This lack of intimacy between the monarch and his consort, as well as the lack of the subsequent heirs the marital relations *should* produce, left the young Queen open to further scrutiny.

This intrusion of her most personal domain was coupled with the “humiliation of having her bedsheets checked daily for blood or “emissions,” and her monthly periods reported on by ambassadors to every court in Europe” (Thurman 137-138). Her prolonged virginity kept her in a kind of limbo. As long as no heirs were produced her position at court was not secure. The Queen had to cultivate an “appearance of credit” at Versailles. She began to fashion herself in the style of a royal mistress (Thurman 137). Royal mistresses had traditionally held the role of being the outward sign of the King's sexual prowess, of his virility. They wore lavish clothing in sumptuous colors and expensive cuts of cloth. Official mistresses were provided with jewels, a royal purse and apartments at Versailles. They were the highest ranking female in court social settings (Lever 34). In contrast, the royal consorts were to be pious, discreet, bearers and rearers of royal broods. Queens were the polar opposites of mistresses.

As the Dauphine, Marie-Antoinette adopted the appropriate “external honors” to mark her as property of the Crown, but she would not remain an innocent bystander once she became Queen. Beginning with the coronation of Louis Auguste on June 11, 1775, the young Queen’s fashion became the subject of much discussion and emulation (Schama 51). The gown Marie-Antoinette chose for the ceremony was not of the traditional coronation style, but rather, as the Duc du Croÿ noted, “In the contemporary, gallant style.” The regent’s dress was covered in sapphires, other gemstones, and ornate but fanciful embroidery (Weber 95).

Of all the opulence of the coronation in Gothic Reims Cathedral, the biggest surprise was the new Queen’s hairstyle. Caroline Weber notes that it was “teased high above her forehead, heavily powdered, and topped with a cluster of nodding white feathers... So towering was the overall effect of this coiffure that the face appeared to be the midpoint between the top of her hair and the hem of her gown” (95).

Soon all of French society clamored to imitate their new queen’s coif, the *pouf*. The *pouf* became the rage of Europe and soon the downfall of Marie-Antoinette’s good image as ladies sacrificed what they could to be *à la mode de la reine*. Judith Thurman points out, the *pouf*:

like most of the Queen’s fashion fantasias, proved ruinous to her plebian imitators, who it was said, sacrificed their dowries on the alter of the Austrian’s frivolity, and thus their chances of marriage, then turned to rich protectors to take up the slack, so in the end – the omega of such arguments – the French birth rate suffered.” (142).

The cost of the upkeep of her hair, plus the extravagant sums of money she spent on her dresses, decorating Versailles and Petit Trianon, and her gambling habit, fed into the image of official mistress. Which Pierre Saint-Amand says the queen had to take on to “compensate for a long Bourbon line of mistresses who had usurped the Queen of France’s position.” For “If”, as Saint-

Amand states, “there is a style we could call *style Marie-Antoinette* it is to be seen in this excess of ornament and decoration” (Saint-Amand 389). Humanities professor and author, Camille Paglia, sums up the Queens dilemma thusly:

Forced to jockey for position, French courtiers were slaves of fashion, while queens tended to be more modest and reserved. Fashion flash was practiced instead by the kings’ semiofficial mistresses – a role...borrowed by Marie-Antoinette (whose husband had no mistress). [This] eventually compromised her reputation and made it easier for scurrilous pamphleteers to caricature her as a whore (Paglia).

This would be the inception of her fall from grace with the French people.

As the French Revolution began, as the events of 1789 unfolded, and the Reign of Terror took a hold of France, one’s attitude towards Marie-Antoinette depended upon which side of the Terror one was on. If one sympathized with the Queen, one was against Robespierre and vice versa. The good Queen was portrayed as a martyr of the Revolution, the scapegoat of the blood thirsty Jacobins. Images portraying her as a mother and grieving widow evoked sympathy for a woman who had lost everything.

In the end of her days, during her trial and subsequent execution, Marie-Antoinette seemingly had, at long last, control over her own body. She was, perhaps for the first time, actually fully in control of her own corporeal manifestation. Stefan Zweig captures her preparation for her trial with the following:

She was determined to face the Revolutionary Tribunal and those members of the public that were admitted with the dignity becoming to her station. The people must be made to realize that the woman who appeared in the dock was a scion of the House of Habsburg and, notwithstanding the decree of deposition, a queen. More carefully than of late in the Conciergerie she arranged her white locks. Then she donned a freshly starched cap of white linen, from either side of which her mourning veil fell. It was the widow of Louis XVI, the last King of France that she was to present herself before the republican judges (434).

Upon being found guilty of treason and a host of other crimes, the *Veuve Capet* (as she was know called) was sentenced to be guillotined on October 16, 1793. Zweig notes:

Marie-Antoinette had been forbidden to go to the scaffold in the mourning [dress] she had worn when on trial, since the authorities were afraid this widow's dress might be regarded by the people as provocative. She made no objection, and decided to don a simple white gown (448-449).

On the morning of October 16, after a rough haircut by the executioner, Marie-Antoinette was led through the streets of Paris on the back of a wooden cart, like a common criminal, to the scaffold and guillotine. At 12:15 p.m. she was executed (Fraser 440).

In contrast to the martyr image, Marie-Antoinette was seen as the symbol of the corrupt nature of the monarchy. She was a lightning rod for competing ideologies during the Revolution and the twin forces of misogyny and xenophobia kept her at the forefront of the firestorm.

Francois Furet plays up the Austrophobia of the time and sets up the distrust the public has with its foreign queen, by conveying her as, “[Louis’] rash Austrian queen” who “elbowed aside” the Bourbon court tradition and “revealed the rack and ruin behind the walls”. Furet pins the discrediting of the monarchy, or at least the discrediting of the image of the monarchy, onto Marie-Antoinette. By her obtaining her own private apartments and creating “a little court within the court, where she amused herself and friends”, Furet credits her with “destroying the nature of the monarchy’s public image offered at Versailles, and exposing only the aristocratic coteries”. According to Furet, “public opinion deeply resented such derelictions of the duties and trappings of the reign: Marie-Antoinette represented a trebly vulnerable target – queen, foreigner, and woman” (Furet 31-32).

Her detractors called her the Austrian Whore, saw her as a catalyst of the Revolution, and blamed her for the downfall of France. The contemporary imagery portrays the Queen as a nymphomaniac, lesbian, adulteress, guilty of corruption and uttering the infamous, “Let them eat

cake!” Work on the scandalous and pornographic writings of the 1770s and 1780s give insight into the public’s opinion of Marie-Antoinette and the discrediting of her image, and by consequence the discrediting of the monarchy. Caricature found Marie-Antoinette to be its most perfect subject. Vivian R. Gruder, in her essay on political perspectives in the *ancien regime*, notes that during the revolutionary period, “there was political pornography exuding vitriol against Marie-Antoinette.” She illustrates how the crude images of the queen, “vividly represented in word and illustration as a nymphomaniac and lesbian...had a corrosive, indeed subversive effect, fatally undermining allegiance to the person of the king and to the institution of monarchy” (Gruder 255).

Saint-Amand puts forth that the Queen was contaminated by her tastes:

She offered herself up for frequent rituals (such as balls, games, and parties) that exposed her as an object to be looked at, an object of desire. Marie-Antoinette was progressively perceived as usurping the spectacular role of the king. What Marie-Antoinette did was to efface the king, to render him invisible, by orienting all circuits of desire toward her body (390).

This “rendering of the king invisible” made the queen more visible for all the wrong reasons. She was soon represented as a whore (among other things), a representation I do not believe she ever intended when trying to cultivate an “appearance of credit” for herself at Versailles.

In postmodernist popular culture Marie-Antoinette is viewed in a favorable light because she defied stereotype. Today she tends to be seen as a thoroughly (post)modern woman who was punished on all sides because of it. The image of Marie-Antoinette today epitomizes strength, sexuality, and the allure of the female. Evoking Marie-Antoinette as a symbol of empowerment is to move her from one category to another, portraying her as positive because she exhibited the same traits that she was condemned for. Women use her and her imagery today to convey their power and strength. The images of pop-icon Madonna are not ones of opulence for its own sake,

but ones of female sexuality, control and power. Fashioning oneself as Marie-Antoinette the wearer is both sexy and powerful at the same time. The memory of her sexuality (misconstrued or otherwise) is a powerful one. Director Sophia Coppola, I think, knew this and used it to her advantage when promoting her 2006 feature film *Marie Antoinette*.

Nonetheless, her image is still used and misused alternately to garner sympathy or to tarnish anyone seen as excessive or lacking empathy for the poor. When, after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2004 rendered New Orleans a disaster site and many of the poor and minority residents were forced to relocate to a Houston, Texas sporting arena, former First Lady Barbara Bush was deemed to have had a “Marie-Antoinette” moment when she uttered the infamous, “So many of the people in the arena here, you know were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.” (The New York Times). Her son, President George Bush, as well as the former House Majority Leader, Tom Delay, have both been lampooned in the media as “Marie-Antoinettes” for their various perceived mistreatments of the poor or lower class Americans (Mediaresearch.com).

The reported extravagances of Marie-Antoinette are so “well known” that her image is recognized often as symbol of excess and used in advertising campaigns for companies such as Juicy Couture, and as an extravagant display in a New York City shop window. The display maker, Linda Fargo, Vice President of Visual Merchandising at Bergdorf Goodman noted that “Enough is never enough for Marie Antoinette, it has to be more, it has to be more!” (Fargo).

Following the theme of excess and popular culture manifestations of the *ci-devant reine*, Holly Madison, one of Hugh Hefner’s three girlfriends, recently held a lavish Marie Antoinette themed birthday party for herself. When asked why she chose the Queen as a model for her

special day, Holly replied, “Because we are both blond and like little dogs.” Holly thus showing her skills as a historian – Marie Antoinette was a red-head ([The Girls Next Door](#))!

The myriad of uses to which Marie-Antoinette is now put in popular culture illustrates the enduring power of her memory, from the strong to the sexy, the excessive to the down right fun; Marie Antoinette will remain a powerful icon in our collective memory.

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Marie Antoinette Members and Watchers Thanks everyone who are watching and are members of the Marie Antoinette Art group, I'm thinking of starting a contest. If anyone has any ideas of one or any ideas you can tell me! I'm also hoping to get more member and watchers! And I might even pick an administrator. thanks! Â©2020 DeviantArt. All rights reserved. About.