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Recommended Citation

De Angelis, Lauren () "Marie Antoinette: Misunderstood Monarch?," *The Histories*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol9/iss1/3

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I
**Marie Antoinette:
Misunderstood Monarch?**
By Lauren DeAngelis '11



As a foreign bride to Louis Auguste, the Dauphin of France, Marie Antoinette was to be both an Austrian liaison and, more importantly, a breeder whose “sole function was continuing the dynasty.”¹ Throughout her years at Versailles, Marie Antoinette found it difficult to fulfill both functions because her marriage to Louis Auguste was characterized by mistrust and impotency. The unhappiness she felt during her early years at Versailles was reflected in her thoughtless pursuits of fashion, affairs, and frivolity. Although Marie Antoinette’s actions helped her to forget her failures, they also created a poor image among the French people who read the libels and believed that Marie Antoinette was a malicious queen. However, Marie Antoinette was not the monster her enemies made her out to be. Instead she was a compassionate woman who stood strong when faced with the destruction of the monarchy. During the years of revolution, Marie Antoinette took further control of her destiny by having an active role in state affairs. The libels declared that Marie Antoinette was incapable of performing her duties as a queen because she was selfish and frivolous; however, after closely analyzing Marie Antoinette’s life, it is apparent that she could not do her job because she was mistrusted by King Louis XVI as a foreigner and hated by her people because of the many rumors that had spread, which prevented her from having any influence in France.

Maria Antonia was born on November 2, 1755, to the powerful and influential Empress of Austria, Maria Teresa. Maria Teresa ruled Austria without a man by her side, and did so successfully. Believing in alliances, Maria Teresa signed the Treaty of Versailles that allied Austria and France against Prussia. In *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, Antonia Fraser asserts, “No single event in Marie Antoinette’s childhood was to have a more profound influence on the course of her life than this alliance.”² This alliance began the relationship between Maria Teresa and Louis XV that would eventually cause

¹ Chantal Thomas. *The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie Antoinette*. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 30.

² Antonia Fraser. *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. New York: Doubleday, 2001, 10.

the marriage between Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette. The problem that existed at the time of the alliance, which persisted throughout Marie Antoinette's marriage, was the anti-Austrian feelings that Louis XV's family held toward the Austrian Empire.

In April 1770, fourteen-year-old Maria Antonia began her life as a Dauphine of France. On April 17th, she renounced her heredity to the Austrian Empire in front of her family and the Austrian government. Finally, on April 21, Marie Antonia left her country and would never return. Her mother hugged her daughter and stated, "Farewell, my dearest child, a great distance will separate us...Do so much good to the French people that they can say that I have sent them an angel!"³ This would be the last time Marie Antonia laid eyes on her beloved mother. However, when she encountered problems within her marriage and at court, Marie Antoinette wrote to her mother for advice on how to salvage her dignity in this foreign court. Although she had tried to prepare her daughter by educating her and providing advice, Maria Teresa was not able to stop the bad habits that caused Marie Antoinette to be viewed with hatred by her people.

One of the most interesting ceremonies performed during Marie Antonia's journey to Versailles was the literal stripping of her Austrian identity, which allowed her to embrace her new identity as Marie Antoinette, Dauphine of France. This arduous ceremony was the first of many she would endure; however, "in France her dignity depended much upon customs that were by no means necessary at Vienna."⁴ In this foreign court, Marie Antoinette had to adopt many rituals that seemed arbitrary or else face continual criticism. It was an overwhelming moment for Marie Antoinette because she began to realize that this new life was one where those around her sought favoritism and privileges.⁵ Privileges for the nobility at the time of Marie Antoinette's arrival seemed crucial to keep the people happy; however, these privileges eventually helped fuel the common man's contempt for the French monarchy.

Marie Antoinette finally met the King and the Dauphin on May 14th in the forest near Compiègne. When met by the Duc de Choiseul, the man responsible for the match, Marie Antoinette said, "I will never forget that you are responsible for my happiness!" Choiseul replied, "And that of France."⁶ There appeared to be much hope for not only a successful marriage, but also a successful reign. In this air of anticipation, Marie Antoinette met her new husband, who was then only sixteen-years-old. His unease and formality caused even Marie Antoinette to feel less optimistic about this match. Little did she know that this formality only foreshadowed problems that Louis would have regarding intimacy, problems which would only cause her humiliation and sadness because she was viewed as a failure.⁷

When the Dauphin and Dauphine finally married at Versailles, many concerns arose after nights past without the consummation of the marriage. Although many in

³ Frasier, 53.

⁴ Madame Campan. *The Private Life of Marie Antoinette*. New York: Tudor Publishing, 1930, 46.

⁵ Joan Haslip. *Marie Antoinette*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987, 10.

⁶ Frasier, 64.

⁷ Haslip, 13.

court were concerned about this problem, "This absence of marital prowess did not alarm Louis XV."⁸ Maria Teresa, on the other hand, was quite concerned and saw her daughter as a disappointment. However, these critiques were made because a marriage could be annulled by the Catholic Church if left unconsummated. This law, created by the Church, left Marie Antoinette's place at Versailles quite vulnerable.⁹ She thus had to ensure her place at Versailles through other means, such as talking to the King's mistress, Madame Du Barry, even though those at court universally hated her. Marie Antoinette suffered much shame because of her husband's lack of sex drive and was forced to find other ways to maintain her status at court.

In spite of the many criticisms that attacked her capabilities to perform the functions of a Dauphine, Marie Antoinette showed that she was capable of acting compassionately when her people suffered. Madame Campan saw that "The dauphiness continually gave proofs of both sense and feeling. Sometimes even she suffered herself to be carried away by those transports of compassionate kindness, which are not to be controlled."¹⁰ An example of this compassion is seen when tragedy struck during the spring festival in 1770, which left many dead because careless workers had left trenches uncovered.¹¹ Upon hearing of this disaster, both the Dauphin and Dauphine sent their yearly income to those families who had lost someone. Many observed that "the grief Marie Antoinette was genuine, and lasted for several days; nothing could console her for the loss of so many innocent victims."¹² These acts and observations of compassion stand in great contrast to later images of Marie Antoinette as a self-centered queen incapable of feeling concern for her people. Although enemies may have created this image of Marie Antoinette, they did so because her actions of ostentatious spending and frivolity became more frequent as her married life seemed to crumble around her.

By May 1771, Maria Teresa was criticizing Marie Antoinette more harshly and frequently. Not only was she concerned about her daughter's status as a wife, but also concerned about the friends Marie Antoinette kept. She "denounced her daughter for laughing with her younger ladies and making fun of others at the court; she was certainly drawing attention to unwise behavior"¹³ It is worth noting that Marie Antoinette was only sixteen-years-old at this time and acted as such. She most likely felt more comfortable with these girls than with the older generation who constantly judged her. Maria Teresa expected more from Marie Antoinette because she had been trained to be a ruler, and understood that her image was important to maintain popularity with the French people.

In June 1773, Marie Antoinette finally visited Paris. This event is important because she became aware of Paris' attitude towards her. She wrote to her mother stating,

⁸ Castelot, André. *Queen of France: A Biography of Marie Antoinette*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, 38.

⁹ Fraser, 97.

¹⁰ Campan, 50.

¹¹ Haslip, 23.

¹² Campan, 51.

¹³ Frasier, 94.

“We received every imaginable honor...the tenderness and the eagerness of the poor people who, in spite of the taxes which oppress them, were transported with joy on seeing us.”¹⁴ The French people had much hope that this young couple would help their country and showed it through their loyal praise and loud cheers. The reaction of the French people surprised Marie Antoinette and endeared her to them. It is unfortunate that these sentiments would soon be replaced by outcries of rage when the people no longer could withstand the injustices they believed the monarchy had caused.

The following year, in April 1774, Marie Antoinette’s life changed forever when the King went out hunting and began to feel weak. It became apparent that that he was suffering from small pox and would not recover. When King Louis XV expired on May 10, 1774, Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette were informed that they were to reign. It was at this moment the new royal couple declared, “Oh God protect us, we are too young to reign”¹⁵ Louis XVI was only twenty-one-years-old and Marie Antoinette nineteen when they came to the throne. Their youth and inexperience would play a major role when making decisions as monarchs. These decisions were many times wrong. At other times, they simply failed and, as a result, caused their people to lose respect for the power the monarchy represented.

Although she was concerned about producing an heir, the Queen also became increasingly concerned with frivolous things, such as fashion, which filled the emptiness in her life. Fashion was a passion of Marie Antoinette, and she not only followed trends, but also set them. Madame Campan makes this observation that “Up to this time the Queen had shown but a very plain taste in dress; she now began to make it an occupation of moment; and she was of course imitated by other women.”¹⁶ For example, Marie Antoinette created extravagant hairstyles, even though many at court disapproved because she looked like an actress or a mistress.¹⁷ This comparison to impious and lowly women caused a great scandal throughout France. Her extravagant ways thus ignited the first attacks against her as Queen. Although some French citizens saw her fashion sense as scandalous, Marie Antoinette used her fashion sense to influence the French people because she was denied any influence in the French court by her husband.

In 1775, the year of the coronation of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette told her mother that the Comtesse d’Artois, her sister-in-law, was pregnant and would produce the first heir of the next generation. On August 6, 1775, news came that she delivered a healthy boy. Although Marie Antoinette was elated for her sister-in-law, she faced an inner crisis because she was still incapable of conceiving. When the Queen left the birthing room, women cried out, “When will you give us an heir?”¹⁸ This question caused Marie Antoinette to run into her inner room and collapse in sheer agony. This humiliation

¹⁴ Castelot, 62.

¹⁵ Castelot, 73.

¹⁶ Campan, 87.

¹⁷ Thomas, 89.

¹⁸ Frasier, 137.

caused her to act more irrationally as time progressed, which only intensified the hatred presented in pamphlets.

In the same year the Queen experienced the aforementioned crisis (1775), libels became a predominant issue for not only her, but all those in power. Marie Antoinette reported to her mother, "No one was spared...not even the King," which shows that attacks were quite common because authors wanted to display their dissatisfaction with the French monarchy.¹⁹ It is important to understand the influence that the libels had in France during this time because they had the power to sway public opinion for and against those in power. Robert Darnton states, "Since the old regime was a political as well as a social and economic system, a socioeconomic interpretation of its publishing ought to take account of political factors."²⁰ For example, libelers used the impotence of Louis XVI to represent the slow death of the monarchy. They wrote:

It is well known that the poor Sire...
For complete impotence,
Cannot satisfy Antoinette.
Quite convinced of this misfortune,
Considering that his match-stick
Is no bigger than a straw,
Always limp and always curved,
He has no p...except in his pocket;
Instead of f..., he is f...
Like the prelate of Antioch.²¹

This quote offers a glimpse into the types of crude libels written against the monarchy and shows the growing lack of respect for this regime. Not only did libels (such as the one above) attack the king's impotence, which was a difficult subject for this royal couple, but also attacked the Queen for having affairs with both men and women, including her brother-in-law, the Comte d' Artois. Although Madame Campan asserts that there were no inappropriate relationships occurring, the public thought otherwise and believed that these exaggerations were pure fact.²²

It is evident that these libels were threatening to all nobility, not just the royal family. However, Marie Antoinette did bear the brunt of the libels' criticisms. Using such accusations as those previously mentioned, they were able to create a mythology. Marie Antoinette, "the Foreign Woman, Messalina, Proserpine, was evil, a fiend from hell."²³ Although these libels made a complete mockery of the monarchy, Marie Antoinette did

¹⁹ Frasier, 138.

²⁰ Robert Darnton. *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*. London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982, 199.

²¹ *Ibid*, 201.

²² Campan, 154.

²³ Thomas, 17.

not seem concerned with these publications.²⁴ She thought that these libels represented the voices of only a few individuals, not the majority of French people. However, these pamphlets converted more and more people into believing Marie Antoinette was the enemy of France. In order to combat their reactions, Maria Teresa encouraged her daughter to thwart her excessive gambling, ostentatious dressing, and incriminating friendships that soiled her reputation as time progressed.²⁵ Marie Antoinette found breaking these habits extremely difficult, but she was forced to minimize her gallivanting when she became pregnant.

Although there was still much to criticize about Marie Antoinette's character, one area of her life ceased to be a problem: her ability to produce an heir. By the end of 1777, Marie Antoinette became pregnant and "really was the Queen of France."²⁶ This statement was quite significant because bearing a Dauphin would give her great power over her husband. Marie Antoinette gave birth to a healthy baby girl named Marie T r se, known later as Madame Royale. Although the French court had hoped for a Dauphin, they were simply relieved that the King and Queen could have children.²⁷ Even though some were disappointed, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were elated, and Marie Antoinette declared, "Poor little one...you are not what was wished for, but you are not... less dear to me. A son would have been rather the property of the State. You shall be mine; you shall have my undivided care...and console me in all my troubles"²⁸ This statement shows not only the love Marie Antoinette had for her child, but also illustrates the less important role women had in the French court. It is also worth mentioning that Marie Antoinette herself still lacked influence because a male heir had not yet been produced.

In 1779, Marie Antoinette wrote to her mother for the first time regarding public discontent. War with England had caused major financial problems without producing any major gains. She wrote, "We have given up our visit to Fontainebleau on account of the expense caused by the war and also so as to be in closer touch with the army"²⁹ During this war, the French ministers warned Louis XVI about going to war because of financial consequences. As time progressed, the government would not be able to pay its debts and could not find a way to solve this problem.³⁰ Not only did finances cause tension among the French people, but so did the problems created by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (these problems can be attributed to their youth and inexperience).

Those problems caused by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were pointed out when Joseph II, Marie Antoinette's brother, visited Versailles. He saw that the King and Queen alienated themselves from their people because Louis XVI was not involved with his military and Marie Antoinette continued to be frivolous in her personal life. In order

²⁴ Darnton, 205.

²⁵ Fraser, 150.

²⁶ Campan, 166.

²⁷ Castelot, 134.

²⁸ Campan, 185.

²⁹ Haslip, 124.

³⁰ Peter Campbell. *The Origins of the French Revolution*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan. 2006. 58

to achieve greater popularity, Marie Antoinette needed to do her part to remedy the negative opinions her behavior had engendered. Therefore, she needed to take a break from her excessive gambling and late night trips to Paris.³¹ Also, she needed to ensure that her affairs remained secretive; the most prominent being with a Swedish officer named Count Axel Fersen.³² It is evident that both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were inexperienced and unqualified to rule France because they were still young and did not fully understand what the French people needed. Although this couple was inept in many areas, they were able to win favor with the French when the Dauphin of France was born in 1781.

In October 1781, Marie Antoinette gave birth to a male heir. Louis XVI stated, 'Madame, you have fulfilled my wishes and those of France; you are a mother of a dauphin.'³³ This was a momentous day for Marie Antoinette because she had satisfied her obligation as a foreign queen. Although all of France was joyous over this birth, the slander against Marie Antoinette's character intensified as libelers accused both Fersen and the Comte d'Artois to be the father of this child. In one pamphlet, Marie Antoinette is quoted stating to the Comte d'Artois, 'Now I am stuck for nine months, thanks to your gaff.'³⁴ It is quite apparent that her affairs sparked many rumors regarding the paternity of this child; however, "even the most evil-minded gossips had to admit that the dates of the Queen's conceptions 'fitted only too well with the King's conjugal visits.'³⁵ Regardless of these attacks against her, Marie Antoinette was more respected because she was capable of producing a male who would one day assume the throne.

The birth of Marie Antoinette's son finally allowed her the opportunity to influence the King. Joseph II, now emperor of the Austrian Empire, used Marie Antoinette's possible influence to aid in Austria's campaigns in Europe. For example, Joseph wanted to reopen the Sceldt River, which had been blocked after the signing of the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648. Opening the river would in turn help the city of Antwerp's commercial economy. In 1782, Marie Antoinette was bullied by her advisor to appeal to the King to advance this matter. However, Louis remained hostile to Marie Antoinette's entreaties. It was well known that he did not confide in her about affairs of state. Marie Antoinette told her brother, 'He responds when I speak to him, but he hardly can be said to keep me informed, and when I learn about some portion of a business, I have to be cunning in getting the ministers to tell me the rest of it.'³⁶ It is evident that Louis XVI still held his childhood fears that Austrian women seek to dominate their men. Marie Antoinette tried to become more active as Queen of France, but was still thwarted by the prejudices held against her because she was a foreigner.

When the Queen gave birth to her second son on July 12, 1785, the Sceldt Affair was still unsettled and vicious rumors were still spreading about the fidelity of the Queen.

³¹ Fraser, 179.

³² *Ibid*, 182.

³³ Campan, 192.

³⁴ Thomas, 65.

³⁵ Fraser, 217.

³⁶ Fraser, 197.

It was in this tense atmosphere that two events occurred “which seem scarcely worthy of a place in history, which nevertheless are important in that of the French Revolution.”³⁷ They caused the people to hold further contempt for the highest ranks of French society by portraying the many flaws and extravagances among the French monarchy.³⁸ These two events are the comedic performance of “The Marriage of Figaro” and the jewel heist known as the Diamond Necklace Affair. Both Louis XVI’s and Marie Antoinette’s reputation would be destroyed because of these scandals, and nothing they could do for the public would help repair the damage that already had been done.

Beaumarchais was the author of “The Marriage of Figaro” and was one of the most popular playwrights in France. He had the ability to use his plays to display the flaws of the French monarchy and ignite public indignation, which is why the King refused to allow the play to be performed. Those in Paris, and also those in court, were infuriated by the king’s infringement on their liberties. Madame Campan states, “that the words ‘oppression’ and ‘tyranny’ were uttered with no less passion and bitterness at that time than during the time which immediately preceded the revolution.”³⁹ Hearing of this discontent, Louis XVI allowed this play to be performed, after further censorship, in April 1783. Despite this censorship, there were still many instances of satire that persuaded audiences of the upper classes ineptitude.⁴⁰ Although “The Marriage of Figaro” shed further light on problems regarding the French ruling classes, Louis XVI’s censorship was far more incriminating because it appeared as if he was trying to infringe on his people’s civil liberties and protect his position.

The other incriminating incident called the “Diamond Necklace Affair” directly affected Marie Antoinette’s reputation more so than the play, “The Marriage of Figaro.” This affair began when two famous jewelers, Boehmer and Bassenge, created a 2800 carat necklace for the French Queen; however, Marie Antoinette felt that this setting was far too extravagant. Marie Antoinette understood that buying such an expensive piece of jewelry would only incite the people’s contempt towards her. Despite this restraint, her reputation was still destroyed because the Comtesse Jeanne de La Motte, a power hungry member of the French court, hatched a plot whereby she manipulated not only the jewelers, but also Cardinal Rohan, a French bishop who belonged to the political party that opposed Austria and Marie Antoinette.⁴¹ Seeking favor with the Queen, Rohan fronted the money and completed the transaction; however, the necklace was stolen by accomplices of the comtesse. Although the Comtesse de La Motte was brought to trial and punished, Rohan was acquitted. Marie Antoinette had done nothing wrong throughout this incident, and yet “The Diamond Necklace Affair and the ensuing trial were symptoms of the unanimous hatred for the Queen.”⁴² The people remembered her frivolous spending as a young Queen, and believed that she was selfish enough to

³⁷ Campan, 9.

³⁸ Ibid 10.

³⁹ Campan, 13

⁴⁰ Haslip, 145

⁴¹ Fraser, 227.

⁴² Thomas, 129.

purchase such an extravagant piece. Regardless of her innocence, Marie Antoinette was now seen as the unanimous enemy of the French people.

Between 1786 and 1788, there were continual problems facing this royal couple politically, which only further alienated them from the French people. For example, the financial problems caused by the American war drained the French treasury. Marie Antoinette never favored the war and disliked many of the king's advisors throughout it. Nevertheless, she understood that it was her job to support Louis XVI during this crucial time. In order to solve the problem of the national deficit, Louis XVI convened The Assembly of Notables on February 22, 1787. However, when this body proved to be incompetent, the French people became angry and demanded that the Estates General be called. It is obvious that the King was beginning to lose control and power.⁴³

When problems occurred because of the Assembly of Notables' failure, Louis XVI began to rely on Marie Antoinette's opinion more. It had taken years for Marie Antoinette to be included in discussions regarding state affairs; however, the present circumstances reveal that there were few people at court Louis XVI could trust. Madame Campan notes that "she frequently regretted her new situation, and looked upon it as a misfortune which she could not avoid." Not only did she have to give opinions on affairs she did not fully understand, but she also had to console her husband who had sunk into a deep depression. As a result of this depressive state, there were "occasional lapses of reason and a kind of brusque thoughtlessness," which caused Louis XVI to be incapable of maintaining his power over the newly formed Estates General.⁴⁴ Although she tried to aid the King during this time, Marie Antoinette's new role proved to be a great burden because she was universally hated by her people because she represented the waste and decadence they wanted to destroy.

When the Estates General was formally called on August 8, 1788, the royal family was suffering greatly because their eldest son died of tuberculosis. Marie Antoinette's grief was great, but she and her family were forced to focus on politics when the Estates General was ousted in favor of the National Assembly. It is important to understand that in this instance Marie Antoinette had to be a strong Queen, and therefore try to put aside the inner turmoil she felt. Marie Antoinette had finally learned the lesson that she had to put the well-being of France before that of her own family – a lesson that, if learned earlier, could have helped save her reputation and possibly, the French monarchy.

With the backdrop of the formation of the National Assembly, the pamphlets and libels produced about Marie Antoinette became more scandalous and absurd. Nevertheless, the people believed them. Stories ranged from Marie Antoinette pillaging millions for her brother Joseph II to her being a promiscuous lesbian who hosted many orgies. Although these stories were not true, they played a decisive role among the French people because they had been reprinted hundreds of times. Marie Antoinette felt nothing but disgust because not only was her reputation gradually taken from her, but

⁴³ Castelot, 225

⁴⁴ Fraser, 251.

also her crown. For instance, the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, illustrated that the monarchy was losing power quickly. This event occurred because Louis XVI used troops to protect Paris from upheavals; however, this only incited the people's fury. Louis XVI could not stand strong against the people, and therefore capitulated and removed the troops. The Queen heard cheers outside her window, but "knew that the cheers were neither for her nor for her children, but to celebrate the King's capitulation."⁴⁵ It is thus evident that the monarchy was no longer respected and steadily becoming a menace to the French people.

The King now realized the extent to which this revolution would go and began to send some of the Queen's favorites away from Versailles. Although Marie Antoinette was the most hated member of the royal court, she stayed at Versailles, despite her husband's beseeching her to go. She refused to leave because "she was determined to preserve her position as the King's wife and the Dauphin's mother."⁴⁶ Marie Antoinette knew her place was at her husband's side because she had a new understanding of how to act as a Queen because she had matured and become more active. When Versailles was invaded on October 5, 1789, Marie Antoinette remained calm as her entire world fell apart around her.

When the Bread Riot occurred, there was a standoff between the royal family and the women who had come to Versailles for bread. This standoff ended with Louis XVI consenting to the Declaration of the Rights of Men in order to appease the crowd and save his family.⁴⁷ Although Louis XVI conceded to the women, they were not satisfied, and demanded that Louis XVI go to Paris. He stated to the women, 'I shall go to Paris with my wife and children. I entrust what is most precious to me to the love of my good and faithful subjects.'⁴⁸ It would be the last time both Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI would see Versailles. Although the King was becoming visibly weaker as a monarch, Marie Antoinette's strength and resolve to stay the course is an example of the changes in her disposition. No longer was she the immature teenager that had arrived at Versailles, but rather an adult prepared to die for her right to rule.

Throughout this entire ordeal, Marie Antoinette was prepared to sacrifice everything for her family. Tuileries became their new home, which was the palace used by Louis XV when visiting Paris. Marie Antoinette knew their situation was precarious because they remained unsure if they were free or actually prisoners. Although they remained in a palace, they had many restrictions on their freedom. Marie Antoinette worried about their future as the royal family and even foreshadowed her husband's fate when telling Madame Campan that "Kings who become prisoners are not far from death."⁴⁹ It is only logical that they tried to escape this situation and leave Paris; however, most plots were discovered before they could even be initiated.

⁴⁵ Haslip, 195.

⁴⁶ Fraser, 287.

⁴⁷ Castelot, 249

⁴⁸ Castelot, 252

⁴⁹ Fraser, 303

Finally, an escape plan was created in late 1790 because “Too much delay risked losing everything.”⁵⁰ On April 18, 1791, the royal family would leave Tuileries on a 180 mile journey to Montmédy. They would not make this journey alone, but with the help of loyal friends, such as Count Axel Fersen. This plan was risky, especially since the party encompassed “three adult royals who had spent most of their lives in a magnificent cocoon where ritual took the place of decision.”⁵¹ Those who helped with the escape feared that the King and Queen would not be able to remain inconspicuous among the masses and thus risk being recognized. Although there were problems the night of the escape, they were able to pass through many towns unrecognized. However, upon reaching Varennes, Louis XVI was identified and the National Assembly’s guards were called. This moment proved to be the downfall of both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette because the people would use this attempt at escape as a means to bring them to trial in 1793.

When they were escorted back to Paris, the public looked on the royal family with both anger and pity. Marie Antoinette was regarded as being “proud and noble” as she met the people in Paris. This only further sparked a negative public opinion because they believed she, as a fugitive, still saw herself as better than the honest citizens of Paris.⁵² The press attacked Marie Antoinette relentlessly because of her apparent lack of guilt. When Marie Antoinette, along with the rest of her family went back to Tuileries, she asked how she could try to win favor with the people. Antoine Barnave, a politician who felt sympathy for the royal family, stated, “Popularity, madame.” Marie Antoinette replied, “And how could I use that...of which I had been deprived.”⁵³ Her question and response not only reveal that Marie Antoinette wanted to please her people, but also shows that she felt she was incapable to do so.

As days passed, the growth of republican feelings spread throughout France. Marie Antoinette wanted to help, but was told that she was seen as “too shallow and frivolous to be taken seriously.”⁵⁴ Even though the people saw Marie Antoinette as such, she was still asked by the National Assembly to use her influence with the king to disband the *émigré* on the frontier. Those in power also tried to use Marie Antoinette to convince her brother, the emperor of Austria, to accept the constitution as the legitimate law of France. One can see that Marie Antoinette was taking control of her own destiny and doing what was necessary in order to restore some semblance of order in her life. Although she tried her best, the *émigré* remained obstinate and Leopold II remained obstinate. Their situation seemed bleak and only further deteriorated when war was declared on Marie Antoinette’s homeland on April 20, 1792

Believing that Austria and Prussia were going to wage war on France in order to help the monarchy, the government pushed for a declaration of war. When Louis XVI declared war on Austria, Marie Antoinette felt completely torn because she did not want

⁵⁰ Fraser, 321.

⁵¹ Ibid, 329.

⁵² Ibid, 345.

⁵³ Campan, 151.

⁵⁴ Haslip, 247.

to see her home country tear apart France. Marie Antoinette felt compelled to aid both sides with information she could gather. However, "when the French offensive began-- the offensive whose plans Marie Antoinette had sent to Austria and Prussia-- there was a rout. Naturally, Marie Antoinette and 'the Austrian committee' were accused."⁵⁵ Marie Antoinette was seen as a traitor to her country for writing to Austria; however, it is worth noting that the French people saw her as treacherous on grounds of her birth.⁵⁶

As the war progressed and the French continually lost battles, the King's use of the veto ignited much public discontent. Marie Antoinette was now popularly known as "Madame Veto" because the people believed that her husband would use this power to regain his position as the sole ruler of France. The French people were enraged at this prospect and decided to storm Tuileries on June 20, 1792. As the mob entered, "they were found to be also bearing some grisly symbols such as a gibet from which a stained doll dangled, labelled 'Marie Antoinette'"⁵⁷ Throughout this entire ordeal, Marie Antoinette remained calm and understood that this situation needed to be handled diplomatically or else ignite the people's rage.

Her composure in spite of the public's scorn illustrates the strong, intelligent woman Marie Antoinette truly was. She had grown to understand how to react to the events that her unpopularity brought, which was truly remarkable in the face of such adversity. After the royal family fled Tuileries for the National Assembly, Marie Antoinette was noticeably more coherent than her husband. She "was an inspiration to everyone, handing out food and drinks to the defenders, urging her husband to go out among them and make a stirring speech pledging himself to fight to the end."⁵⁸ Even though her husband was defeated, Marie Antoinette refused to allow the Parisians to destroy her. This resolute figure who was encouraging and compassionate was completely different from the evil figure portrayed in the libels.

The next day a National Convention was held that would decide the fate of the monarchy. Marie Antoinette was distraught when she heard that the royal family would be held in the Tower of a seventeenth century palace, known as the Temple. Marie Antoinette knew that being put into the Tower meant that they were now in a real prison, and understood that they would most likely not escape alive.⁵⁹ Her existence at this time was quite depressing because Marie Antoinette had little privacy and was continually subjected to hateful comments on a daily basis. As time progressed, the royal family's position became more precarious because Paris was in uproar and murders of members of the nobility were a daily occurrence. Finally, on September 21, 1792, the monarchy was officially abolished, and King Louis XVI was now to be known as Louis Capet. It was only a matter of time before this royal couple would be put on trial for treason against France. Marie Antoinette would remain strong throughout this time, which is

⁵⁵ Castelot, 297.

⁵⁶ Fraser, 368.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁸ Haslip, 262.

⁵⁹ Fraser, 382.

unimaginable because she would suffer the loss of her husband and children before she herself would be executed by the guillotine.

On December 11, 1792, the trial of Louis Capet began, which would last six weeks. During this time, he would not be allowed to communicate with his wife or children. This strictness occurred not because the King was hated, but rather the Queen. The French wanted to see her suffer under the strain of uncertainty.⁶⁰ Louis Capet knew that he would be executed by his people and wanted to declare that it was he who was at fault for the problems that existed in France, not Marie Antoinette. Stating to the court, "I beg my wife to forgive me all the evil she is suffering for my sake and the grief I may have caused her during the course of our marriage, *as she may be sure that I hold nothing against her, if she should think she has anything with which to reproach herself,*"⁶¹ Louis Capet tried to show that it was indeed mistakes he had made that had caused his wife to be universally hated throughout France. Regardless of his sincerity and love for both his wife and his people, Louis Capet was found guilty of treason and put to death on January 21, 1793. Although she may have never truly loved her husband, Marie Antoinette was touched by his compassion and love for her. Her entire life had been destroyed by the French people who hated her; therefore she no longer cared if she lived or died.

Marie Antoinette was now known as "The Widow Capet." This title was changed to "the woman Capet" in newly printed libels to emphasize the complete lack of sympathy and respect the French had for the former Queen.⁶² During this time, her daughter, who was now a teenager, saw that "she no longer had any hope left in her heart or distinguished between life and death"⁶³ Living became more difficult for Marie Antoinette because the more sympathetic Girondins were overthrown by a far more strict power. The newly formed Commune sent troops to the Tower on July 1, 1793, to inform the Queen she would lose custody of her son. In that instant, Marie Antoinette knew that "neither prayers nor protests could prevail against the pathological hatred of" those who were in power.⁶⁴ One month later, on August 2nd, Marie Antoinette was brought to the Conciergerie where she would await the trial that would end in her death.

Marie Antoinette was convicted not for overt crimes she had committed, but rather convicted to appease those in Paris. The leader in charge of her fate, Hébert, sought to use Marie Antoinette as a way to win over the *san-culottes*. He stated, "I have promised the head of Antoinette...I will go and cut it off myself if there is any delay in giving it to me. I have promised it on our behalf to the *san-culottes* who are asking for it."⁶⁵ Hébert's statement illustrates the complete disregard for a fair trial for this former Queen. The common man had spoken, and so Marie Antoinette was charged for instigating Louis XVI's treason when they fled in 1791. Not only was she charged with this crime, but also accused of having an incestuous relationship with her son, Louis

⁶⁰ Haslip, 274.

⁶¹ Castelot, 323.

⁶² Fraser, 403.

⁶³ Fraser, 404.

⁶⁴ Haslip, 281.

⁶⁵ Fraser, 425.

Charles. Even those who had little sympathy for Marie Antoinette called for these accusations to stop.⁶⁶ It is quite apparent that the tribunal wanted Marie Antoinette executed because the trial did not appear to be just. She was accused of crimes that were outlandish and lacked evidence. However, that did not matter, and she was proven guilty for crimes committed against France. According to the penal code of France, this warranted her death.

Marie Antoinette could not have avoided her fate that awaited her at the guillotine. Since the time of her arrival in France in 1770, Marie Antoinette was constantly criticized and humiliated for her supposed failures as both a wife and a royal. However, one cannot blame Marie Antoinette for her downfall. Although she was frivolous and partook in the enjoyments that her station offered, she did so to cope with the constant pressure to not only perform her duties as a Dauphine and Queen, but also to perform her duties as a liaison to Austria. When these duties could not be met, the libels began to circulate that Marie Antoinette cared only for herself, and not for her people. Even though Marie Antoinette wanted nothing more than to please her people, her name was destroyed by the rumors created by her enemies. Although she did mature and showed an unimaginable strength during the monarchy's downfall, Marie Antoinette could not redeem herself among the French people. Those who did not know her personally saw her as a vicious libertine who caused the downfall of the French monarchy. However, those who knew Marie Antoinette understood that "if the Queen had been, from the moment of her arrival in France, the object of the care and affection... she would have contributed greatly" to France. It thus appears Marie Antoinette is not a vicious character, but instead a sympathetic one who was never given the chance to display her true capabilities as a ruler of France.

⁶⁶ Fraser, 431.

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