

H-France Review Vol. 14 (July 2014), No. 115

Annie Duprat, *Marie-Antoinette, 1755-1793. Images et Visages d'une Reine*. Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2013. 260 pp. Figures, Filmographie, Bibliographie, Chronologie, Notes, Index, Table des matières, Bibliographie de l'auteur. € 19.95, \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 2746733773.

Review by Sarah Hanley, University of Iowa.

Annie Duprat is a professor at the Universités Cergy-Pontoise who studies iconography and aims to place “polemical images and texts” in their “technical, economic, and social context” so as to “understand their sense and impact on the society which produced them.”[1] Despite the title, she does not focus in this book on the life of the queen of France, Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) as seen in images. Rather, she looks at the propaganda campaigns against the queen—the visual images (paintings and engravings, films and television) and the writings (pamphlets and books)—that have been created by the mass media in two stages across time (1750s-1790s and 1800s-2000s). Crucial for the study, Duprat reproduces thirty-one striking images that cross this extended time period. Readers who saw the images posted in the “Marie-Antoinette” exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2008 visited a wide spectrum in the life of the queen—daughter, wife, and mother, courtier and political adviser, equitation expert, patron of painters and the decorative arts—all of them ingested before entering the “twilight zone” of venomous propaganda that was only mounted in this show, as befits the chronology, at the very end. That exhibition was balanced so that viewers were not constantly reminded of the queen’s brutal end, allowing her to emerge as a whole woman living a complicated life along a trajectory of time (1755-1793).[2]

Annie Duprat’s book is not balanced in this way. Readers are repeatedly reminded from start to finish of the ghastly end. As a result, her fate, which appears to have been predictable, overshadows all else. The queen is therefore splintered into overwhelmingly negative personas delivered by propagandists before and even long after her death (1755-2000s). That said, if I have read Duprat correctly, she has intentionally chosen this type of expository path. She appears determined, and for good reason, to force readers of the texts and images to comprehend fully the inhuman wages wrought by modern defamers, as well as to recognize that disturbed minds are often at work in calumny campaigns. Writing in a compellingly lively and challenging style, she concentrates on propagandists whose fierce negation of the queen marks them as deranged producers of the early campaigns turning her into an evil woman who could not be seen in human terms. Their successors in modern mass media have reproduced the effects of those campaigns under the guise of artistic license. The book is a valuable study of the ways propaganda campaigns serviced by mass communications and media have erased a real woman from the human fold. As Duprat writes, “The image of Marie-Antoinette has been broken up into as many fragments of a puzzle as there are sensibilities in France” (p. 9), and she could have said, “in the world.” There is a mighty message here.

In the title of the first section, *Marie-Antoinette en rose?*, readers may notice the question mark. Daughter of the empress Marie-Thérèse, Maria-Antonia is contracted to marry the dauphin of France, Louis-Auguste, grandson of Louis XV, in order to seal the alliance between Austria and France. Maria-Antonia displays a “strong character” as shown in the Liotard painting of 1762 on the cover. Duprat adds, however, that this attribute will later be used against her to signal lack of constraint in a queen

responsible for the “decadence” of the monarchy. For his part, Louis-Auguste is “timid” and willing to observe the “constraints” involved in the “education of a future king” (pp. 8-9). Problematic straightaway (for a historian) is the way Duprat constantly recounts an event in the life of the queen and immediately connects that event to her death, thus throwing the reader off kilter by superimposing the end of her life on all else.

Right away Duprat brings up “the poison of the Austrian alliance,” the treaties of 1756 and 1757 that were designed to establish an “equilibrium of powers in Europe” (p. 16), but culling French outrage as “the first step towards the national humiliation and the loss of the international position of France” (p. 19).^[3] Even early on the theme of “Austrian despotism” spurred libels. As the author notes, however, this early theme becomes an “arm of the propaganda that will haunt Marie-Antoinette to the end” (p. 19). The happy wedding in 1770 is also presented as a prelude to her execution. Duprat names the members of the wedding party at Versailles, their “youth and spontaneity a marvel” to behold (p. 28), but she also notes that nearly all of them will be dead by 1794 (p. 28-29). In addition, when the carriages of the wedding party, halted by the large crowds in Paris for the celebratory fireworks, have to return to Versailles, 132 people are killed and 700 injured in the press of the crowd. Again, for Duprat, this is an early omen of her ever-present fate: “Thus death itself was invited to the marriage of Marie-Antoinette” (p. 32).

In the 1770s and 1780s, life at the French court is difficult for Marie-Antoinette, a “young star within the aged French monarchy” who is “joyful” but “impetuous” (p. 32). She misses warning signals. To be sure, as queen, she was innocent in the sordid “affair of the necklace” (1785). As the author adds, however, the affair is one of the “heavy links of the chain which, day after day...steers her to the tribunal of public opinion” (p. 33). Marie-Antoinette behaves imprudently: card games, breakneck horseback riding, passion for equitation at which she excelled (No. 1, p. 49), the company of the flirtatious brother-in-law Artois. All this Duprat regards as “imprudent” behavior, because calumny, assisted by pamphlets, newspapers, and libels cranked out by the popular press, had a life of its own. And the mass media of these times lie straight out, as in attributing to the queen a supposed saying about the poor: “If they have no bread, they can eat cake” (p. 39), a lie constantly repeated to this day.^[4]

To be sure, in the 1770s Marie-Antoinette is shown dispensing charity and supporting the arts (No. 2, p. 50, and No. 4, p. 52), but compare that, Duprat notes, to her vilification in 1791 as “a new Médicis,” a “debauched Austrian bitch who has caused the degeneration of the royal blood of France” (p. 42) (No. 3, p. 51). The mother of a daughter and two sons by 1785, the queen enjoys only a brief respite from defamation (No. 5, p. 53). The problem: lack of prudence. A “woman of the eighteenth century,” she looked “to live freely, whether in Versailles at her paradise of the Trianon and Hamlet, or in Paris, at the Opera and the Palais-Royal.” Indeed, “Had she forgotten she was the queen of a country” with “contradictory” views of “liberty”? The result: “The image of Marie-Antoinette” was destroyed by “calumny” (p. 45). Oddly, it appears here that the queen, for lack of prudence, was responsible for calumny. At the end of the queen “*in rose*,” it is quite clear why the author placed a question mark after the title. There is little, if any, rosy hue to reflect upon. Duprat concludes: Marie-Antoinette was “the target of all sorts of malicious gossip that is expanded, multiplied, and transformed in wake of her imprudences” (p. 46).

In the second section, *Marie-Antoinette in black*, the title does not end with a question mark. No need: the negative view holds. Defamed in the 1770s, the queen in the 1780s is the object of images that are now “licentious,” even “obscene.” Those images, the author adds, “date the beginning of the descent into hell of Marie-Antoinette” (p. 60). The engravings depict bodies of monsters and animals with the face of the queen (No. 6, 7, 8, pp. 54-55). These and like caricatures, she notes, will be staples of the Revolution: the queen as “the Austrian,” or “Madame Deficit,” destroying the French monarchy (No. 10, p. 105). Truly shocking among Duprat's figures, though not for those who entered the “twilight zone” at the Grand Palais exhibition, is a 1791 engraving (one of many) showing the queen of France lost to sexual passion,

skirts hoisted, vaginal area nakedly exposed, offering herself to a courtier (No. 11, p. 106). The theme of the libertine is a staple (No. 12, p. 107; No. 13, pp. 108-109) that also informs that of “the lovers and the husband” (p. 76) (No. 14, 15, and 16, pp. 110-112). “The repetition *ad nauseum* of smutty stories that attract the public,” Duprat writes, is a powerful piece in the machine of “calumny” (p. 75). Marie-Antoinette, who was “executed by judgment of the revolutionary Tribunal” at the end was murdered “beforehand by rumor” from the start. (p. 76).

In the third section, *Marie-Antoinette in Revolution*, the violent propaganda campaign against the queen encompasses her care of the royal children (p. 84). In 1782 the governess is said to be “greedy, lazy, negligent....” (p. 86). By 1786 the public complains that negligence puts the health of the dauphin at risk. And Duprat appears to echo the critics. “The queen has not measured the importance of the dauphin in the eyes of the entire French nation in his condition of successor to the crown and continuator of the monarchy” (p. 86). When the dauphin dies in 1789, she is attacked in pamphlets for dereliction of maternal duty: “frivolous, a lecherous wife and bad mother” (p. 87). After the royal family is caught in flight at Varennes (1791), Louis is suspended from rule pending an inquiry. The population is stupefied. They say the king is a “child, an impotent cuckold, an incapable drunk, crazy, prisoner of the queen, a perverse and evil woman” (p. 95). And by 1792, the actions of counter-revolutionary forces put the royal couple in greater jeopardy.

With the camps radicalized, no quarter is given. The moving painting of 1793 that shows the loving husband Louis being separated from his weeping wife, Marie-Antoinette, and clutching children (No. 17, p. 161) is reissued with damning caprices listed. Newspapers declare “Louis the traitor” and his “whore, Marie-Antoinette, the new Médicis,” the “Austrian bitch.” Deposed, he is executed in 1793. Imprisoned in the Conciergerie, she awaits trial (No. 18, p.162). At the sham trial conducted by the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1793, Marie-Antoinette is charged not just with treason but also with a surprise accusation: incest debasing her son Louis-Charles, then ten years old. In a remarkably courageous stand taken while facing a crowd of furious men, she responds to the incest charge: “If I have not responded [the first time], it is because nature refuses to answer such a charge brought against a mother. I appeal to all the mothers who are here” (p. 123). And those mothers, onlookers in the courtroom, erupted in a show of support for her maternal stand that embarrassed the men, who dropped that charge. Convicted of treason, the widow Capet is sentenced to death and goes to the guillotine (No. 19, p. 163; No. 22, p. 167). For Duprat, however, the death appears to have been foretold: “The Austrian, then, always Austrian, this queen is the victim of diplomatic games organized before her birth” (p. 138).

The execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette threw European monarchies into disarray. The “French people,” it appeared, “founded the Republic on the blood of the monarchy” (p. 131). Counter-revolutionary propaganda ensues. In an engraving from London (No. 20, p. 164-165), Marie-Antoinette, queen of France, is “the victim of a barbarous act committed by republican France” (p. 132). Despite her death, “the authors of libels and scandalous engravings are not disarmed” (p. 132-133). Whereas relative silence followed the king's demise, that of the queen did not calm the caustic critics of “Madame Veto” (No. 21, p. 166). In one chilling piece, the guillotine itself speaks of awaiting the “pretty head” to be “the ornament of [my] mechanism” (p. 133). David's sketch depicts the queen, debased and defeated, on her way to the scaffold, and that sketch is reproduced in other pictures, albeit more dignified, made after her death (No. 22, p. 167; No. 23, p. 168). The perverse attention that survived the death moved right into the 21st century.

In the fourth section, *Marie-Antoinette in bits [and pieces]*, the dead woman, who is evoked in sound bites and visual bits in modern mass media, is turned into an “icon known worldwide” (p. 138). The result: various “Marie-Antoinettes” represented in dolls, films, television, caricatures, and articles in magazines. First, the dead Marie-Antoinette is seen as a “heroine” in films: *The Rose of Versailles* (1972), popularized in a television series, *Lady Oscar* (1979), adapted for a film (1980). Second, she is seen as both the heroine and the victim of a tragic history by novelists such as Dumas, *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* (1845), or *Le*

Collier de la Reine (1849) as well as novelists who lean on imagination, such as d'Arvor, *J'ai aimé une reine* (2003). Others invent an intimate journal: Lever's *Marie-Antoinette, journal d'une reine* (2002). Third, the dead woman inspires historical novels, such as those of Benzoni, *Les Larmes de Marie-Antoinette* (2006), Bellaïche-Daninos, *Les Soixante-seize Jours de Marie-Antoinette à la Conciergerie* (2006), and those aimed at youths by Lasky (2005) and Sylvestre (2006). Fourth, among biographies (scientific, popular, or entertaining), Duprat argues that the best are by Stefan Zweig (1932) and Joël Félix (2006).

To make a point about the new Republic, Duprat repeats the mistaken notion that a “salic law” excluded women from rule in France. As has been shown, however, this exclusionary text supposedly found in the ancient Salic Law Code, was actually the product of rank forgery carried out from the early to mid-1400s, which was discovered in the early 1500s by embarrassed jurists who replaced the fraudulent Salic Law text with a biogenetically construed theory of Male Right safely rooted in nature. [5] “In a country which cannot be ruled by a woman by reason of the salic law,” she holds, “the Revolution has imposed a symbolic feminine figure, that of the Republic,” so “Marianne” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries replaces the tainted queen of the eighteenth century (p. 140-141). Marie-Antoinette commissioned paintings, the famous work of Élisabeth Vigée-LeBrun one of many. Yet for Duprat, “This obsession with figuration and resemblance appears excessive, even by the standards of an 18th century,” she says, “a bit hedonist,” an obsession “to spread her portrait across Europe” (p. 146). Anyway, she adds, portraits capturing the last days before her death (later made in the 1800s) tended to portray her as younger and more innocent than the sketch done at the time by David (compare No. 22, p. 167, with No. 23, p. 168). What “more innocent” means in this context is not clear. All the while, caricatures telescope political events through the dead body of Marie-Antoinette (No. 25, p. 217, and No. 16, p. 112). By way of death, she becomes a “ghost queen” and a “queen of fantasies” (p. 148), as in a modern comic strip, where the amiable ghost queen befriends a modern young woman artist (No. 24, p. 217). Duprat confirms the media blitz: books, comic strips, photos, films, and television—the pillars of communication in the culture of the masses since the second half of the 19th century—have “cited or exploited Marie-Antoinette” (p. 151).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Marie-Antoinette is both “queen of the cinema” and “queen in the cinema” (p. 156). In the “American Marie-Antoinette” from Hollywood (1938), Norma Shearer (the queen) is twenty-six years old, a great beauty, and Tyrone Power (as Fersen) is twenty-five years old and handsome, while Robert Morley (the king) is fat and uncomely (No. 27, p. 220). The American film depicts a supposed torrid and fatal liaison of the two lovers (the queen and Fersen) and places events outside of history: no poor people, no Estates General, a Revolution barely present. Compare this with the film supplied by “French culture” (p. 157), *Marie Antoinette, queen of France* (1956) in which experienced actors play balanced characters, a historian, Philippe Erlanger consults, the supposed love affair is only surreptitiously suggested, and events fit the times (p. 157-158). Annie Duprat raises a question: What image of Marie-Antoinette should prevail? Certainly not that of Sofia Coppola's film (2006), which is not related in any way “to the history of a queen of France” (p. 171). Certainly not that of Benoit Jacquot's film, *Adieux à la reine* (2012), based on a novel by Chantal Thomas, which portrays the queen's “lesbian” relations and thus turns the “gutter” talk of the eighteenth century into an “established truth” in the 21st century (p. 172). Through “artistic preoccupations,” these films have created a “new person,” not one who actually existed, an exercise that repeats calumnies from the propaganda campaign carried out in the eighteenth century (p. 173). Will the only acceptable modern image of the queen be that of “an enticing and frivolous Lady Di?” (p. 173). Clearly, the persecutors of a dead woman continue their propaganda rampage in modern times: she consorted with the devil, she is an example of the worst “dangerous women,” the “criminals” among whom “Antoinette of Austria holds first rank,” outweighing Agrippina and Catherine de Médicis (p. 182). The images of Marie-Antoinette are so contradictory that “she almost disappears under the trappings of the communications [industry] and the media” (p. 183).

Annie Duprat's last section is *The Human condition of a queen*. In her view (maintained throughout the book) Marie-Antoinette was the only queen subjected to such vicious opprobrium from subjects while she was acting queen and “until her death” and even “for decades beyond.” No other queen qualifies. Catherine de Médicis, she says, does not even come close (p. 184). While this opinion justifies a theme in the book—treating Marie-Antoinette as an iconic figure undone by media orchestration—it is not historically tenable. From the 1560s through the 1580s, Catherine de Médicis was thoroughly vilified within the context of those times dominated by the religious wars and prey to a printing press capable of launching propaganda campaigns. And after her death (1589), the tarnished image projected (in picture, word, and speech) rolled right through the 1600s, when the figure of Catherine was used to slam Marie de Médicis and Anne of Austria, into the later 1700s, when Catherine was used against Marie-Antoinette, and even into the last two centuries.^[6] Yet Duprat misses this historical connection—the prototype of wicked queens—even though she notes that Catherine was used against “Antoinette of Austria,” both of them in “hell,” from the later 1790s and into the 1800s (p. 210). In historical terms, Catherine might be viewed as a forerunner to the wicked queen prototype that ran through the 1700s and even into 1848, but she cannot be dismissed from the format.^[7]

Annie Duprat's book is not simply a study of Marie-Antoinette seen through various images created across a lifetime as the title indicates. She has much more to say about the work of propaganda campaigns and covers a longer time period (1750s into the 2000s) using the queen as a case study. Duprat opens up an important discussion about the place of mass communications in modern life by addressing the way in which propaganda campaigns in the eighteenth century gave way to refuelled multi-media projects in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries and robbed a real woman, Marie-Antoinette, during her lifetime and after her death, of the essential element of humanity required to keep human communities intact. For this reason, the book will take strong hold in multi-media bastions, the world of modern mass communications—communication studies, media management, film studies, journalism and photography, film and television programming—where the provocative questions posited by Annie Duprat will tap professional interests.

NOTES

[1] The quotations are from the “Bibliographie de l'auteur” (no pagination). Annie Duprat is the author of *Marie Antonette. Une reine brisée* (Paris: Perrin, 2006) and *Histoire de France par la caricature* (Paris: Larousse, 1999), as well as other books on the role of iconography and propaganda related to the monarchy beset by revolution in France.

[2] The “Marie-Antoinette” exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris (15 March to 30 June 2008) was produced by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (Xavier Salmon), and L'Etablissement Public du Musée et du Domaine de Versailles (Pierre Arizzoli-Clémentel); see the book, *Marie Antoinette*, by Arizzoli-Clémentel and Salmon.

[3] For the complicated Austrian connection, the works of Thomas E. Kaiser are essential: “La Fin du Renversement des Alliances: la France, l'Autriche et la déclaration de guerre du 20 avril 1792,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 351(2008): 77-98; “Maternité et nationalité: Marie-Antoinette,” 201-214, in *Femmes et pouvoir politique. Les Princesses d'Europe XVe-XVIIIe siècle*, Isabelle Poutrin and Marie-Karine Schaub, dir. (Rosny-sous-Bois: Éditions Bréal, 2007); and Kaiser's forthcoming book, *Devious Ally: Marie-Antoinette and the Austrian Plot*.

[4] Duprat notes that this anecdotal saying actually written in 1782 by Rousseau, *Confessions*, to exemplify the great distance between kings and subjects, rich and poor, does not mention Marie-Antoinette (p. 39).

[5] On the "invention of the Salic Law" supposedly forbidding rule to women but actually the product of a textual forgery first rendered by Jean de Montreuil (1406-1413) upon losing the dispute with Christine de Pizan over *The Romance of the Rose* (1399-1404) and in wake of Pizan's follow-up challenge, *City of Ladies* (1405), approving rule by women, see Sarah Hanley, "La Loi Salique," 11-20, the opening chapter of *Encyclopédie historique et politique des femmes*, Christine Fauré, dir. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, March 1997 and September 1997; English ed. (London: Routledge, 2003). Also Fauré (dir.), *Nouvelle encyclopédie historique et politique des femmes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010); Spanish ed. (Madrid: Akal ediciones, 2010). Note that the information in the Hanley chapter (1997), including the phrase "invention of the Salic Law," is repeated in Eliane Viennot, *La France, les femmes et le pouvoir: L'invention de la loi salique (Ve-XVIe siècles)* (Paris: Perrin, 2006).

[6] On Catherine de Médicis, just a few examples give the taste of a prototype in the making either directly, by vilifying Catherine, or indirectly, by placing her in the company of dangerous women of yore (the usual suspects, Frédogonde and Brunhilde); or by foisting the so-called criminal women of recent vintage, such as Marie-Antoinette, into Catherine's dead company. See (1) Henri Estienne's piece printed in 1575 (English and French), *A mervaylous discourse upon the lyfe, deedes, and behaviors of Katherine de Medicis, Queene mother...the meanes...practised to atteyne unto the usurping of the Kingedome of France, and to the bringing of the estate...unto utter ruine and destruction* (London and Paris, 1575), and many editions brought out to take a slap at Marie de Médicis, or Anne of Austria (1578, 1649, 1660, 1663, and 1847). (2) Claude Du Bosc de Montandré, *L'Apocalypse de l'Estat faisant voir, I. le paralelle de l'attachement que la Reyne [Anne of Austria] a pour le Mazarin, avec l'attachement que Brunehaut avoit pour Proclaide, et Catherine de Medicis pour a certain Gondy...* (s.l. 1652), issued to taint Anne of Austria. The theme rolls on. (3) J.-F. Destigny (de Caen), *Histoire mystérieuse de Catherine de Médicis, ses intrigues, ses crimes...* (s.l. 1847 [almost 300 pages of this]). (4) The many dramas in the 1800s deemed "tragedies," F. Combes, *Catherine de Médicis: tragédie en 3 actes* (Theatre of Bourdeaux) 1874. No stopping. (5) The songs of Charles Trenet, *Catherine de Médicis* (words and music) (1991). Finally, (6) Jean Orioux, *Catherine de Médicis; ou la Reine noire* (1986, 1987, 1988, 1998).

[7] See Kaiser, "Scandal in the Royal Nursery: Marie-Antoinette and the Gouvernantes des Enfants de France," 412-416; Jo Burr Margadant, "Representing Queen Marie-Amélie in a 'Bourgeois' Monarchy," 421-451; and the commentary, Hanley, "Configuring the Political Authority of Queens in France, 1600s-1840s," 453-464, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 32:2 (2006).

Sarah Hanley
University of Iowa
sarah-hanley@uiowa.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.