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**Dena Goodman, Ed.** *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. x + 307 pp. Illustrations and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-41593-394-3; \$23.95 (pb). ISBN 0-41593-395-1.

Review by Jeffrey Merrick, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

The Munchkins wanted to know if Dorothy was a good witch or a bad witch. Our students want to know if Marie-Antoinette was a good queen or a bad queen. She got mixed reviews from contemporaries, who not only flattered her in public but also criticized her in private. They made negative comments about her performance as wife, mother, and queen that circulated through gossip and materialized in print. The abbé de Veri lamented that she did not show her spouse “the consideration usually seen in couples between wife and husband.”[1] The marquis de Bombelles reported that her daughter confessed that she did not love her mother “because she annoys me and pays no attention to me. For example, when she takes me to [visit] her aunts, she walks ahead of me at full tilt and does not even look to see if I am following her, whereas my father leads me by the hand and looks after me.”[2] Bombelles concluded that Marie-Antoinette would not have so many problems if, “content with the fine role of queen of France, she did not want to be its king” as well.[3] Such comments have something to do with historical events that can be documented and everything to do with gendered assumptions, perceptions, and projections that must be investigated. As scholars know and students should learn, there is much more to Marie-Antoinette than the apocryphal comment about cake.[4] Her life and death provide a window into French political culture and sexual politics before and during the Revolution.

This splendid collection includes nine essays published between 1988 and 2001 and one (by Thomas Kaiser) not published before, along with a perceptive Introduction by Dena Goodman (“Not Another Biography of Marie-Antoinette!”) and a provocative Afterword by Susan Lanser (“Eating Cake: The (Ab)uses of Marie Antoinette”) that discuss the unifying themes. The volume showcases work by *dix-huitièmistes* in history, art history, and literary studies. The contributors, using a variety of sources and methods, analyze the figure of the dauphine/queen from many angles and, in so doing, exemplify creative scholarship in contemporary cultural history. Collectively, the authors transcend traditional *petite histoire* by examining texts, pictures, and incidents in detail and byspeculating about the larger meanings of it all. They address questions about fact and fiction, identity and agency, past and present. As Goodman and Lanser explain, these essays explore the ways in which Marie-Antoinette’s words and deeds, and her body itself, have been imagined, appropriated, and represented, during her life and since her death, in conflicting ways for conflicting purposes. If her multiple incarnations, at court, in pamphlets, in royalist/republican history, appeared together on the television show *What’s My Line*, which one would stand up and stand out as the “real” Marie-Antoinette?

**A Tale of Two Cities:** In the course of her voyage to Versailles, Marie-Antoinette abandoned Austrian attire and adopted French attire, but she did not forget, she was not allowed to forget, her mother back in Vienna. Larry Wolff (“Hapsburg Letters: The Disciplinary Dynamics of Epistolary Narrative in the

Correspondence of Maria Theresa and Marie-Antoinette”) shows how the empress exercised long-distance surveillance over the dauphine/queen. She gave instructions about daily devotions, asked questions about monthly periods, and did her best to inculcate lasting habits of self-discipline in her daughter. The connection with Austria did not make Marie-Antoinette popular in France, and neither did the connection with Lorraine, through her father Francis Stephen, duke of that territory before he became Holy Roman Emperor. Thomas Kaiser (“Ambiguous Identities: Marie-Antoinette and the House of Lorraine from the Affair of the Minuet to Lambesc’s Charge”) traces French hostility to the duchy’s rulers and their relatives back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Marie-Antoinette supported the requests of Madame de Brionne, who married into the house of Lorraine, for favors and appointments and thereby made herself even more vulnerable to charges that she was more foreign than French.

**Hussies and Harpies:** Maria Theresa admired a formal portrait of her daughter by Vigée-Lebrun, but Parisians disliked an informal one, exhibited in 1783, that represented the queen in an English outfit that looked immodest to French eyes. According to Mary Sheriff (“The Portrait of the Queen”), this painting also offended because it included none of the customary visual references to the king and thereby implied the independence of the queen. Neglecting responsibilities and ignoring expectations, she transformed the Petit Trianon into foreign, female space. Sarah Maza (“The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785-1786): The Case of the Missing Queen”) suggests that hostility to the mistresses who allegedly dominated Louis XV spilled over into the reign of Louis XVI and onto the person of Marie-Antoinette. She was not involved in the plot to swindle the cardinal de Rohan, but the resulting scandal and his eventual acquittal damaged her reputation. She was innocent, in this and other cases, but she could be made to look guilty, as a woman out of place and out of control. Chantal Thomas (“The Heroine of the Crime: Marie-Antoinette in Pamphlets”) outlines the accumulation of criticism in the 1770s and 1780s. Much of it originated at court, and some of it surfaced in print. The voyeuristic and moralistic publications simplified, ridiculed, and standardized the representation of the foreign, extravagant, meddling, duplicitous, sexualized dauphine/queen. According to Lynn Hunt (“The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution”), the texts published before 1789 provided models for the more numerous and scurrilous texts published after 1788. Pamphleteers attacked the queen more aggressively than the king because she embodied sexual/gender as well as political disorder. By executing her and suppressing the women’s movement, the Jacobins differentiated male and female roles in the republic of virtue. Elizabeth Colwill (“Pass as a Woman, Act Like a Man: Marie-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution”) argues that the pamphleteers vilified Marie-Antoinette not only for exemplifying female vices but also for usurping male privileges. They made her look like an insatiable woman and act like a predatory man. In staging her sexual exploits with women as well as men, they exploited and developed the figure of the masculinized tribade.

**Long Live the Queen:** The much maligned Marie-Antoinette has had a busy afterlife since 1793. Terry Castle (“Marie-Antoinette Obsession”) analyzes dreams, apparitions, histories, biographies, and novels that deny and/or imply that she was sexually attracted to, and involved with, women. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the queen was sometimes represented as a Sapphic figure. Laura Mason (“We’re Just Little People, Louis’: Marie-Antoinette on Film”) regards the Hollywood epic starring Norma Shearer as a version of the past influenced by the concerns of present. The film contrasts good Marie-Antoinette with bad Madame du Barry, and masculine Fersen with impotent Louis XVI and effeminate Orléans. It suggests that French society in 1789, like American society in 1938, needed stronger male leaders. Pierre Saint-Amand (“Terrorizing Marie-Antoinette”) compares the attacks on Marie-Antoinette with the backlash against Hillary Clinton. Both violated conventional expectations about royal/presidential wives in their private/public lives. Both were demonized for doing so, but only one survived long enough to produce her own version of the story.

Many of us have read some of these essays before, but all of us will learn something from reading the twelve of them together. They are sufficiently different to engage, and sufficiently similar to cohere. In the background, we have a culture of publicity shaped by decades of conflict involving the crown, the clergy, and the parlements, as well as the ideological battles of the Enlightenment and changes in the production and consumption of printed material. Relatively new patterns of sociability, the cult of sentimental family values, and questions about gender also became essential rather than peripheral dimensions of both political and domestic relations. In the foreground, we find Marie-Antoinette on stage not only in the theater in the Petit Trianon, but throughout her career from the day she crossed the Rhine to the day she mounted the scaffold, empowered and limited by her position, recognized as a person and identified with a regime, differentiated from the majority of the female sex by rank, but stigmatized as a woman in the end.

Given the quality and variety of the essays, this collection should work well in the classroom. Instructors who use it might also want to assign Vivian Gruder's recent critique of "the pornographic interpretation of the French Revolution." [5] Gruder reminds us to identify the sources and objectives of hostile talk and texts, to locate them in historical circumstances with chronological specificity, and to recognize that different audiences could understand them in different ways. Her objections to the homogenization of the evidence about Marie-Antoinette's reputation are well taken, but there seems to be some tension between the effort to minimize the amount and effect of criticism by nailing it down (this gossip did not circulate beyond the court, and that pamphlet was suppressed by the authorities) and the effort to downplay the damage caused by criticism by opening it up (maybe contemporaries distinguished fact from fiction, or enjoyed the pornography but rejected the politics). *Nouvellistes* commonly framed news about slanderous conversations and libelous publications with expressions of doubt or dismay, but that doubt or dismay obviously did not stop them from spreading the news and probably did not make their readers discount it. On the one hand, readers might refuse to believe that Marie-Antoinette really had sex with the comte d'Artois and princesse de Lamballe. On the other hand, they might allow themselves to be persuaded that she resembled Madame du Barry and satisfied the cardinal de Rohan, although she actually disliked both of them.

We cannot quantify the results, but we can assume that criticism of Marie-Antoinette influenced some French subjects who heard and read it, whether or not they accepted it lock, stock, and barrel, and that its forms, contents, and tropes reveal something about collective mentalities in the late eighteenth century. Gruder does not want us to think that sexual slander caused the Revolution, but the scholars included in Goodman's collection do not claim that it did. They explore not only sexuality but also sex and gender (not the same as sexuality) as well as other themes, and they do not suggest that gossip and pamphlets alone could have triggered the events of 1789. Gruder argues that criticism of Marie-Antoinette expanded and exploded in response to events largely beyond her control and that accusations against the queen were not just about the queen but also about contemporary debates about the use and abuse of royal authority, changes in the ministry, fiscal policies, diplomatic conflicts, and so forth. Our twelve authors in search of a character make much of the fact that concerns about such matters, in this place and at this time, could be expressed through personalized and sexualized attacks on Marie-Antoinette. They also demonstrate that the polemical representations cannot be reduced to reflections of biographical realities and vehicles for political agendas, because those who produced and consumed them could not imagine or comprehend them without recourse to a large repertoire of cultural baggage with rhythms and resonances of its own.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

- Dena Goodman, "Introduction: Not Another Biography of Marie-Antoinette!"
  - "A Select Chronology of Marie-Antoinette's Life".
  - "Biographical Sketches of Principal Figures in the Life of Marie-Antoinette".

- Larry Wolff, "Hapsburg Letters: The Disciplinary Dynamics of Epistolary Narrative in the Correspondence of Maria Theresa and Marie-Antoinette".
- Mary Sheriff, "The Portrait of the Queen".
- Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785-1786): The Case of the Missing Queen".
- Chantal Thomas, "The Heroine of the Crime: Marie-Antoinette in Pamphlets".
- Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution".
- Elizabeth Colwill, "Pass as a Woman, Act Like a Man: Marie-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution".
- Thomas Kaiser, "Ambiguous Identities: Marie-Antoinette and the House of Lorraine from the Affair of the Minuet to Lambesc's Charge".
- Terry Castle, "Marie-Antoinette Obsession".
- Laura Mason, "'We're Just Little People, Louis': Marie-Antoinette on Film".
- Pierre Saint-Amand, "Terrorizing Marie-Antoinette".
- Susan Lanser, "Eating Cake: The (Ab)uses of Marie Antoinette".

## NOTES

[1] Joseph-Alphonse de Veri, *Journal*, ed. Jehan de Witte, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Tallandier, 1928-30), 1:401.

[2] Marc-Marie de Bombelles, *Journal*, ed. Jean Grassion and Frans Durif, 5 vols. thusfar (Geneva: Droz, 1977- ), 1: 208.

[3] Bombelles, *Journal*, 2:214.

[4] The cartoonist Gary Larson has represented Marie-Antoinette climbing the steps to the guillotine and making a "last-ditch effort to save her head" by shouting, "And ice cream! I said, 'Let them eat cake and ice cream!'" The punch line inside the card (copyrighted by FarWorks, 1994) reads, "Another birthday beheaded your way!" How about a line of French history cards to raise money for SFHS and WSFH?

[5] Vivian Gruder, "The Question of Marie-Antoinette: The Queen and Public Opinion before the Revolution," *French History* 16 (2002): 269-98.

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