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John Hardman, *Marie-Antoinette: The Making of a French Queen*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019. xx + 363 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographic essay, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780300243086.

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From Sofia Coppola's 2006 pastel, postmodern romp of a film, *Marie Antoinette*, to the Petite Trianon-inspired tea towels sold at the gift shops at Versailles, Marie-Antoinette sells. The sharp contrast between Marie-Antoinette's glittering youth at Versailles and the gaunt and gray Widow Capet mounting the steps to the guillotine never fails to pique our historical imagination. Each generation of filmmakers and biographers, it seems, takes on the challenge of painting a new portrait of Marie-Antoinette. In the past twenty years, from Antonia Fraser's biography, *The Journey*, to Caroline Weber's, *Queen of Fashion*, Marie-Antoinette has been sympathetically repackaged for anglophone consumers, and even often imbued with the aesthetic of third-wave feminism: thrust onto the stage of history as a naïve foreign princess, Marie-Antoinette channeled her inner strength to carve out a realm of power and autonomy—with panniers and puffs if need be—in a court that stacked the cards against her. [1]

John Hardman's *Marie-Antoinette: The Making of a French Queen* (2019) is more likely to be found on the shelves in university libraries, alongside his companion biography, *The Life of Louis XIV*, than in the gift shops at Versailles. [2] Hardman does not write for a popular audience. [3] Nor does he have any truck with contemporary feminist debates or historiography. As a leading expert on Louis XVI and the political history of the late Old Regime, Hardman's sober and well-researched perspective on Marie-Antoinette draws upon his three biographical studies of Louis XVI, his monograph on the 1787 Assembly of Notables, and his edition of Louis XVI's correspondence with the comte de Vergennes, Louis's long-serving foreign secretary. [4] Those who are familiar with Hardman's previous works will find that he reprises many of his conclusions and even some of his narrative. Yet he also adds important new scholarly analysis. He departs from other biographers of Marie-Antoinette who rely heavily on the correspondence between Florimond Mercy-Argenteau (Austrian ambassador, 1766-1789), Maria-Theresa, and Joseph II. Relying on their correspondence, he argues, produces "chatty" biographies filled with details about Marie-Antoinette's and Louis XVI's sexual relations, gossip about court, and Austrian diplomatic maneuvers (p. xx). Instead Hardman shifts his focus to French source materials: the manuscript diary of the marquis de Castries, published and unpublished diaries of the abbé de Véri, and Marie-Antoinette's and Antoine Barnave's correspondence from 1791-1792. Although Hardman follows the progression of Marie-Antoinette's life from her childhood in Vienna to her trial and execution and offers his assessment of her personality and tidbits about

her private life (spoiler alert: Hardman believes she slept with Axel von Fersen, but he was not the father of her children), the central focus and achievement of Hardman's biography is his careful analysis of her involvement in politics in the years 1787-1791, when Marie-Antoinette came into her own as a political actor.

It is worth pausing to reflect on how subversive it is, in some schools of thought, to write a political history of Marie-Antoinette. While beloved by popular biographers for much of the twentieth century, Marie-Antoinette rarely made an appearance in scholarly histories of the French Revolution.^[5] A revolution with deep social and economic causes did not require analysis of the frothy actions of a flighty queen. Marie-Antoinette was consigned to the realm of historical anecdote. In the past thirty years, however, revisionist and post-revisionist approaches to the French Revolution have opened the door to fresh consideration of Marie-Antoinette's role in the revolution. The standard Jacobin line that Marie-Antoinette was a scheming traitor to France has been supplanted since the 1990s by a feminist and revisionist consensus that she was a victim of public opinion and deeply entrenched misogyny enflamed by the homosocial bonds of republicanism. The Diamond Necklace Affair, depictions of Marie-Antoinette in pornographic literature, and temporal links between Marie-Antoinette's trial in 1793 and the closure of women's clubs and execution of key female revolutionaries serve as the foci for what have become mainstream, but not uncontested, interpretations. Ironically, these interpretations, while potentially more sympathetic to Marie-Antoinette, often ignore her political agency as they subsume her story within the broader unfolding of a radically new political culture.

In the past two decades, however, historians have (re)turned to biography to foreground the role of the individual and contingency in history. Hardman makes a compelling case that Marie-Antoinette played a determinative role at key junctures in the unravelling of the Old Regime and the French Revolution. Although she was "from birth a pawn in others' strategies" (p. xv), "Nonetheless, Marie-Antoinette also intervened to a degree politically—and her interventions escalated so that, particularly in the six years preceding her death, she would play a significant part in determining the course of her own life, and that of her country" (p. xv). Hardman narrates Marie-Antoinette's attempt to rebalance the power of the established families at court and her role in ministerial appointments. He highlights her agency (and culpability) during the Diamond Necklace Affair, arguing that she served in effect as the prime minister for the conduct of the Affair, even visiting the Palais de Justice to lobby judges. She attended cabinet committee meetings and helped Louis write his speech for the opening of the Estates-General. She learned the practice of a radically new kind of politics on the fly in the crosswinds of Revolution, dealing with every major political leader except Robespierre. Along with her husband, she read David Hume's *History of England* for the lessons to be drawn from Charles I's execution. She even developed a political philosophy rooted in the ideals of the *séance royale* in June 1789 and her conversations with Mirabeau. She did more than any other leader, except perhaps Antoine Barnave, to attempt to make constitutional monarchy work in France. But for the radicalization produced by the Girondins' push for war in 1792, Hardman argues that her approach to building a stable constitutional monarchy in France might have worked. Hardman assesses that Marie-Antoinette was "markedly less 'reactionary' than is generally thought" (p. xvi).

If the striking contrast between Versailles and the guillotine provides the frisson that propels readers to open a new biography of Marie-Antoinette, then surely, Hardman suggests, the most important question to ask is, why did Marie-Antoinette become so unpopular? This is a question that Marie-Antoinette herself famously asked Mme. de Campan when she was not applauded at

the opera in 1782, despite having just produced a dauphin: “What have I done to them then?” (p. 159). In some sense Hardman’s entire biography is driven by an attempt to answer this question. Hardman argues that fears that Marie-Antoinette was a traitorous Austrian puppet were uncalled for: Marie-Antoinette was a first and foremost a French queen and thought it was wrong for Vienna to nominate ministers for Versailles. The public’s taunt in 1787 that “Madame Déficit” was in cahoots with Charles-Alexandre de Calonne to bankrupt France was also, Hardman suggests, grossly unfair, especially since Marie-Antoinette loathed Calonne (p. 142). Accusations that she was a bad mother were particularly off the mark: Marie-Antoinette was a loving and hands-on mother. Moreover, she “exhibited none of the qualities connoted by the cake/brioche trope: heartlessness and being out of touch with her people” (p. 314). Hardman credits her with inspiring “loyalty in strangers who were ready to risk their lives for her even when the chances of success were slight—Mirabeau and particularly Barnave” (p. 313). Hardman concludes with dry reserve, “There are ins and outs in every court. But there was no reason for people to detest Marie-Antoinette so much” (p. 313).

Why then, was Marie-Antoinette so disliked both at court and by the public? Hardman turns to Marie-Antoinette’s own assessment: she believed that her rumored and actual meddling in political affairs was the real reason she was so detested. Hardman explains that her involvement in politics was harmed by two dangerous inclinations: vengeance against enemies and overindulgence to friends. Marie-Antoinette’s taste for vengeance “was satisfied early on with the disgrace of Madame du Barry, d’Aiguillon, and Turgot” (p. 313). And it blinded her, tragically, to the need to work with adversaries during the Revolution, especially with men like Lafayette who might have helped save the monarch. If Marie-Antoinette’s vindictiveness toward her enemies was politically counterproductive, her over-indulgence of friends cost her—and the monarchy—even more dearly. Hardman argues that Marie-Antoinette’s friendship with Yolande Polignac “sucked” the Queen into the realm of politics and destroyed the traditional etiquette that had created a buffer dividing the court as a social space from affairs of state (p. 308). In order to preserve their position at court, the Polignacs needed ministers, like Calonne, who would support their interests. This created an impossible situation in which Marie-Antoinette was pitted politically against her dearest friend. Marie-Antoinette’s elevation of the Polignac family, Hardman concludes, was seen as “capricious favoritism and deepened her unpopularity” (p. 309).

After charting Marie-Antoinette’s attempts to rebalance the court, interventions in ministerial politics, and growing unpopularity in the first five chapters, Hardman devotes two finely textured chapters to her involvement in the Diamond Necklace Affair and the Assembly of Notables. Hardman describes this period as “the ascendancy of Marie-Antoinette” (p. 122). This ascendancy came crashing to a halt with the October 6, 1789, a day which figured much more prominently in Marie-Antoinette’s imagination than July 14. Hardman suggests in chapter eight, which roughly covers the next year and a half of the Revolution, that Marie-Antoinette’s chief emotion was fear and “her principal concern was to make herself forgotten in the hope that Frenchmen could come to their senses about her in particular and the role of the monarchy in general” (p. 199). Hardman concludes sympathetically that if Marie-Antoinette pursued a tortuous path in this period “it was because the Revolution itself was a maze” (p. 193). By mid-1790, as it became clear to Marie-Antoinette that Louis’s and Necker’s policy of appeasement and passive acceptance of the Revolution was not working, escape became the queen’s central goal. In chapter nine, “The Flight to Varennes,” Hardman advances a theory he developed in his earlier books that Louis did not attempt to flee France in order to join counter-revolutionary forces but rather to find a safe place from which to negotiate with the revolutionaries. Most important for this biography, on

the ride back to Paris from Varennes, Marie-Antoinette forged a relationship with Antoine Barnave, who is in some sense the real hero of Hardman's story.

Only in the aftermath of the flight to Varennes did Marie-Antoinette truly come into her own as a political player, and chapter ten, subtitled "Government by Letter," serves as the climax of Hardman's biography. With Louis consumed by depression, Marie-Antoinette and Barnave functioned as an "unnoticed duumvirate" for four months until January 1792, governing France through a secret correspondence comprising forty-four letters from each to the other (p. 242). Other biographers, including Evelyne Lever, argue that Marie-Antoinette manipulated Barnave.^[6] But in Hardman's analysis, Marie-Antoinette respected and trusted Barnave. Younger, smarter, and more handsome than Marie-Antoinette's lover, Axel von Fersen, Barnave provoked Fersen's intense jealousy. Hardman comes close to suggesting that Barnave, less reactionary and more virtuous than Fersen, would have been a more worthy lover for Marie-Antoinette and would have been more successful at saving her—and France—than the counter-revolutionary Fersen. More importantly, Hardman's stimulating assessment of Marie-Antoinette and Barnave's working relationship enriches our understanding of the understudied last gasp of constitutional monarchy.

Hardman takes on an enormous and complex task encompassing the narration and analysis of an exceptional life, a revolution that transformed nearly every aspect of Old Regime politics and society, and the connection between the two. Any history on this scale faces considerable challenges. Sometimes Marie-Antoinette gets lost in this story, disappearing for paragraphs, if not pages, as Hardman discusses court politics and ministerial machinations. Occasionally Hardman relies upon primary sources written by Marie-Antoinette's enemies (notably, Calonne and Véri) without probing their biases. Historians engaged with the flourishing scholarship on gender, representation, and the French Revolution may feel frustrated by Hardman's implicit dismissal of the stimulating scholarship on Marie-Antoinette conducted in the past thirty years.^[7] Hardman brushes this scholarship aside with the comment: "It is considered chic in some academic circles to intellectualize the scurrilous or the horrendous, the juxtaposition of incongruities being the hallmark of the intellectual. Such treatment of the scurrilous pamphlet literature concerning Marie-Antoinette and later her gruesome trial and death are cases in point. This literature did the queen some damage, though it is hard to quantify and at her trial, as Maximilien Robespierre realized, such accusations were counterproductive if not actually counter-revolutionary. We don't venture far down this road..." (pp. 160-161). Hardman's refusal to engage with the historiography on scandalous and pornographic *libelles* and to acknowledge that public opinion is a force to contend with in history creates a false dichotomy between the "real Marie-Antoinette" and her public image. It also renders Hardman's final assessment about why Marie-Antoinette was so detested somewhat unsatisfying. Hardman's conclusion feels as though he has thrown in the towel: "She was the scapegoat of an irrational age suffering a nervous collapse, the so-called rationality of the Enlightenment shot through with the charlatanism of Mesmer, a Cagliostro and, for that matter, a Necker" (p. 312).

Yet Hardman's erudite and elegantly written biography deserves to take its place as the definitive academic biography of Marie-Antoinette, a worthy companion to his biographies of Louis XVI. Hardman brings Marie-Antoinette to life as political player who carved out a sphere of real authority in a political culture that denied the queen legitimate influence in matters of state. From the 1780s, when Marie-Antoinette's Petit Trianon, a site for tea parties and romantic trysts, became "an alternative seat of government" (p. 154) to her imprisonment and trial when Marie-

Antoinette and the royal family “ran rings round their jailors” (p. 291) and she “argued her case with some verve and ingenuity” (p. 295), Hardman brings to life Marie-Antoinette’s independence and agency. Many scholars will conclude that Hardman has written, even if unintentionally, the most “feminist” biography of Marie-Antoinette to date.

NOTES

[1] Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, “Marie Antoinette: Fashion, Third-Wave Feminism, and Chick Culture,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38 (2010): 98-116.

[2] John Hardman, *The Life of Louis XVI* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

[3] Hardman refers to his book as an “academic biography” and asserts that his is the first academic biography of Marie-Antoinette since the publication of Jeanne Arnaud-Bouteloup, *Le rôle politique de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Éditions Champion, 1924).

[4] John Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); John Hardman, *Louis XVI: The Silent King* (London: Arnold, 2000); John Hardman, *The Life of Louis XVI* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France’s Old Regime* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Hardman and Munro Price, eds., *Louis XVI and the compte de Vergennes: Correspondence 1774-1787* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

[5] Hardman praises biographies of Marie-Antoinette by Madame de Staël, *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine par une femme* (1793); Stefan Zweig, *Marie-Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933); Pierre de Ségur, *Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1925); and Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor, 2001).

[6] Evelyne Lever, *Marie Antoinette: The Last Queen of France* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000).

[7] The essays in Dena Goodman’s edited collection provide an excellent introduction to this literature: Dena Goodman, ed. *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York and London: Routledge 2003).

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