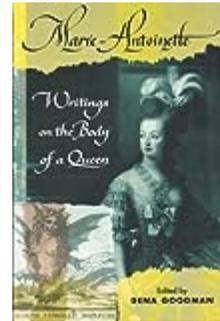




**Dena Goodman.** *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen.* New York: Routledge, 2003. x + 307 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-93394-0; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-93395-7.



**Reviewed by** Christopher Corley (Department of History, Minnesota State University, Mankato)

**Published on** H-Women (July, 2005)

## Marie-Antoinette for the Seminar Room

Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793), youngest daughter of the Habsburg Empress Maria-Theresa (1717-1780; r. 1740-1780) and wife of the French King Louis XVI (1754-1793; r. 1774-1792), has been a source of fascination for the general public ever since the late-eighteenth century.[1] Symbol of an alliance between traditional enemies France and Austria, the talk of France during the first eight years of childless marriage, an object of increasingly contemptuous rumors and pornographic pamphlets, Marie-Antoinette was finally condemned as “the scourge and bloodsucker of the French” and executed on October 16, 1793 (p. 118).

It was not too long ago that historians of women and gender eschewed biographical studies of famous elites.[2] But the insights we have gained from examining culture and the construction of gender identities have reinvigorated analyses of wealthy, influential, and famous people in ways that are far superior to the traditional biographical narratives of years past.[3] Indeed, Dena Goodman explains that this collection of eleven essays is “not another biography of Marie-Antoinette. The authors of the essays presented here do not claim

to tell her life story, nor do they aim to pass judgment on her. Unlike biographers, they have not tried to make sense of her life by making a narrative out of it” (p. 1). Renewed historical interest and analysis of Marie-Antoinette, Goodman argues, reveals that the French queen, particularly her body, was an important “site of controversy and power struggles” (p. 3). As an Austrian princess at the French court, she was caught up in international and domestic strife. Her arrival at Versailles highlighted friction among royal courtiers, and opposing factions used her as a symbol to criticize women’s influence in politics. The failure to have a child until 1778 helped fuel “doubts about the king’s virility and queen’s sexuality” (p. 3). These controversies developed within the context of eighteenth-century debates about women’s nature and roles, and within the emerging power and influence of public opinion. These struggles, centered on the body and reputation of the queen, shed much light on gender, politics, and power, both in the eighteenth century and in our own.

All but two of the eleven contributions have been previously published. The first selections examine the

correspondence and portraits of Marie-Antoinette. Larry Wolff considers the letters between Marie-Antoinette and her mother between 1770 and 1780 and shows that the future queen did not have to wait for the French public to scrutinize her body—her mother already was doing so from afar. Wolff emphasizes Maria-Theresa’s first letter to her daughter on April 21, 1770, the so-called “Regulation to read every month” (p. 27). The letter is ostensibly about spiritual devotion, but when placed in the eighteenth-century cultural context of surveillance and self-discipline, Wolff shows that Maria-Theresa attempted to collapse space and time by regulating her daughter’s soul and body. The empress was not only interested in her daughter’s regular devotions, but as other letters make clear, in her menstrual cycle, too. Marie-Antoinette’s body quite literally was a tool of international diplomacy. In the second essay, Mary D. Sheriff helps us understand why the so-called robe en chemise portrait of Marie-Antoinette caused such a stir in 1783. The portrait represented Marie-Antoinette in a simple, informal English-style dress that courtiers deemed unsuitable for the queen. The artist, Elisabeth Vig e-Lebrun, eventually removed the portrait from public view. Sheriff outlines the larger contexts of political philosophy, official state portraits, and court etiquette, and explains that, traditionally, the queen’s portrait was “always a (possible) companion piece to the king’s portrait” (p. 48). French queens had no theoretical power on their own, but only as partners to their husbands, and royal portraits traditionally reflected this political philosophy. The problem in 1783 was that an effectively masculine companion piece could not be imagined for the robe en chemise portrait. Its display upset court etiquette because it revealed “the queen in a private role that did not suit the proper image of the king’s wife ... [and] show[ed] her as a woman with the will to reconfigure associations within the elite” (p. 68).

The controversy over the portrait erupted in 1783, and most historians point to the mid-1780s as the period in which public criticism of Marie-Antoinette emerged. What caused this situation? While the explanations by Sarah Maza, Chantal Thomas, and Lynn Hunt will be well-known to specialists, students new to the field will be fascinated by the analyses of gender and late-eighteenth-century political culture. The contributors point not to the queen herself as the source of the problem, but rather to cultural changes of the late-eighteenth century. The queen became not merely a symbol of the abuses of the monarchy, but also of aristocratic society and its household governance model in which females

were increasingly perceived as having too much political influence and control. Maza focuses on the 1785-86 Diamond Necklace Affair as an important moment when attacks on mistresses and despotic ministers from the previous reign were associated with Marie Antoinette, although the queen was clearly innocent of any personal wrongdoing in the affair. Chantal Thomas and Lynn Hunt show how pornographic pamphlets portrayed the queen as secretly evil and malicious, a classic dissimulator who feminized the court and undermined the link between private and public virtue through her purported sexual crimes and escapades. It is no coincidence, Hunt argues, that women’s political clubs were banned only two weeks after Marie-Antoinette’s execution.

Of the contributions that address the deteriorating situation in the 1780s, only Thomas Kaiser suggests that Marie-Antoinette herself might have exacerbated the situation. “The extravagant vilification of Marie-Antoinette,” Kaiser states, “was a product not only of her crossing gender boundaries, but also of the specific ends for which her supposed usurpation of power was allegedly used, in particular the subversion of France by the Habsburgs” (p. 173). During her trial, Marie-Antoinette was accused of trying to unite Lorraine with the Habsburg territories. Kaiser believes that this accusation has not been sufficiently examined, and he shows how the queen’s connections to the House of Lorraine and the pro-Austrian lobby at court also fueled criticism that helped lead to her death. Warranted or not, the queen’s association with perceived enemies of France, and the xenophobia it generated, might have been just as important as her gender.

The last set of contributions show that Marie-Antoinette remained a powerful symbol long after her death. Terry Castle’s contribution, “Marie-Antoinette Obsession,” examines a series of early-twentieth-century writings about women who believed that they had mystical encounters with the queen. Castle interprets the stories as “lesbian legitimation fantas[ies],” that emerged in a period where public discussion of female homoerotic love was impossible (p. 212). Rumors that Marie-Antoinette had lesbian relationships in the 1770s did not fade in the nineteenth century, and attempts to defuse them only made them more interesting for the reading public. Castle concludes that the queen “gave those who idolized her a way of thinking about themselves. And out of such reflection—peculiar as its manifestations may often look to us now—something of a modern lesbian identity was born” (p. 230). Laura Mason’s analysis of the 1938 film *Marie-Antoinette* shows that

the film's contemporary concerns about gender confusion during the Depression influenced the film's narrative structure. The film casts aside most of the historical context for the revolution in favor of the personalities around Marie-Antoinette. According to Mason, the filmmakers "painted a picture of Old Regime society that suffered bitterly from the absence of bourgeois marriages and households headed by men" (p. 250). In another contribution, Pierre Saint-Amand makes explicit the connections between eighteenth-century concerns about gender and power and our own. He compares attacks on Marie-Antoinette to those of Hillary Rodham Clinton (readers could add Teresa Heinz Kerry as well), arguing that both powerful women were vilified for having undue political influence over their husbands. Like Louis XVI, critics of President Clinton attacked his spouse in an attempt to criticize his own masculinity and ultimately his legitimacy.

Students who read and discuss the text undoubtedly will learn much about the late eighteenth century. Instructors offering courses on the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, or on European women's history, for instance, might introduce the theories of Joan Landes, Carol Pateman, or Joan Wallach Scott on the gendered construction of eighteenth-century liberalism, and then use the essays to examine how these ideas played out during Marie-Antoinette's lifetime.[4] But the text should not be limited to history courses. Courses emphasizing methodology and cultural theory might similarly profit

from the text, as the contributors use a wide array of techniques to get at the problem of Marie-Antoinette.[5] Women's Studies instructors, for example, might use the text as a case study in a broader examination of gender, sexuality, and politics, since many of the contributions shed light on the demonization of women in political culture.

#### Notes

[1]. See, most recently, Antonia Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

[2]. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Womens History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): pp. 83-103.

[3]. See, for example, Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[4]. Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[5]. For another recent and interesting approach, see Desmond Hosford, "The Queens Hair: Marie-Antoinette, Politics, and DNA," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38 (2004): pp. 183-200.

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**Citation:** Christopher Corley. Review of Goodman, Dena, *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10751>

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