

**Johanna Hellmann, Marie Antoinette in Versailles.  
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One of the mysteries of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French historiography is why the royal court, which had riveted the attention of contemporaries, was so astonishingly neglected by most French political historians during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This neglect extended to the court's most conspicuous royal women, such as Madame de Pompadour and Marie-Antoinette, whose personal lives were the subject of numerous biographies, but whose politics remained obscure. Only at the turn of the last century did historians begin to acknowledge that such prominent royal women exercised power in their own right, which in turn called for charting its extent and determining its means.

This book, devoted to the first ten years of Marie-Antoinette's reign as Dauphine and Queen, is a valuable contribution to this effort. Rather than expounding upon some unknown or underappreciated aspect of her life or personality, it focuses upon Marie-Antoinette's position within the political system of Versailles by posing and seeking answers to the question of how much power Marie-Antoinette had at her disposal and of what kinds.

Following a brief sketch of Marie-Antoinette's career, the author examines the juridical status of the Queen, taking as her point of departure the magisterial work of Fanny Cosandey, who brought to light and elaborated upon the paradox that while the Queen symbolically and otherwise shared in the King's sovereignty, she also remained his subject. This dual status had always been fraught with tensions. But under Marie-Antoinette, the author argues, it became increasingly so for multiple reasons: her pursuit of a private life ran against the grain of court etiquette; the infertility of her first eight years of marriage prevented her from fulfilling her foremost duty to perpetuate the dynasty and raised serious doubts about the viability of her marriage; and her exclusion from the coronation ceremony, while common to all French queens since 1610, was particularly marked, since Marie-Antoinette, unlike all her immediate predecessors, was already married at the moment of her husband's coronation.

Whatever remained of sacral kingship in 1775, therefore, seemed to apply less to her. In sum, although Marie-Antoinette was not obliged to compete with a royal mistress after Madame Du Barry was exiled from the court at Louis XVI's accession, her power derived not only from the King's forbearance, but also from non-formalized relationships with members of her entourage and other courtiers. More than ever, Versailles was a battleground of



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cliques, some of them, such as the *choiseulistes*, anchored by exiled, disgraced ministers.

The author breaks down Marie-Antoinette's relationship with her retainers into three categories: friendship, patronage, and brokerage (the last being the procuring of favors not bestowed by the Queen herself). As the author acknowledges, these categories were not rigid, and some relationships fell into more than one. Moreover, they could change in nature and significance over time, in part because the status of Marie-Antoinette herself changed, most notably when she escaped the severe constraints that had limited her discretionary power as Dauphine.

Once she became Queen, she acquired a much deeper trough of patronage and widened her freedom to allocate it among her favorites. To be sure, in theory the King's sovereign will prevailed in the distribution of all court patronage. But in practice, not only did the King share some of the Queen's friends, such as the duchesse de Polignac, to whom he was enormously generous; he also granted the Queen considerable leeway in constructing her own patronage networks as compensation for limiting her role in decision-making over policy, including foreign policy.

A major turning point occurred in 1775, when, with the King's permission, Marie-Antoinette installed the princesse de Lamballe as her *surintendante*. In addition to forcing the resignation of the comtesse de Noailles as her *dame d'honneur*, this nomination enabled the Queen to strengthen her power-base at court by extending her authority over appointments to her *maison*. Whether and how much it enabled Marie-Antoinette to do battle with the King's ministers, especially Maurepas, is, however, open to question. Despite persistent efforts on her part, she could never persuade the King to recall Choiseul to the ministry; nor – appearances to the contrary – was she the major force behind d'Aiguillon's forced resignation as foreign minister or Turgot's dismissal as controller-general. It was only in the wake of her long-awaited maternity in 1778 that this situation began to change, as evidenced by the appointment during the next three years of three royal ministers who owed their positions largely to her intervention.

As the author recognizes and Marie-Antoinette herself acknowledged, influence and power at the royal court were very much matters of image and perception, which is why the Queen self-consciously exaggerated hers. The second half of this book is therefore devoted to the impressions Marie-Antoinette made on her contemporaries, especially foreign ambassadors, which provide a useful barometer of her rising and falling political credit. In this regard, the author is to be congratulated for exploiting diplomatic archival sources that have been underutilized by historians of the Queen.

These include the reports of Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian ambassador to France, that were not published by Alfred von



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Arnoeth in his editions of Austrian diplomatic correspondence, which have long been the principal source of information for her reign. Not surprisingly, Mercy's perceptions of the Queen differed in some respects from those of other ambassadors in their glosses of specific events. As her designated »handler«, Mercy had far greater access to the Queen and enjoyed far more of her confidence than they did – a difference in perspective that the author might have taken more fully into account.

Nevertheless, all of them to a greater or lesser extent acknowledged the limitations of Marie-Antoinette's power in these early years, partly because the King was so jealous of his own and so determined to preserve his freedom of maneuver. To be sure, the ambassadors understood that this state of affairs was not necessarily stable. With the coming of the War of the Bavarian Succession and the onset of her maternity, all of them began to notice the Queen's flexing of diplomatic muscle on behalf of her native Austria, which would become more pronounced – and to some powers like Prussia more worrisome – as her reign continued.

Unfortunately, the author does not extract from these reports as much value as she might have because she does not go very far in mapping out the diplomatic context in which they were written and read. The Prussian emissaries Goltz and Sandoz Rollin who composed their reports for Frederick II were hardly innocent observers of the Queen's behavior, but rather spies responding to the demands of their master for certain kinds of information, much of it relating to her efforts to maintain and strengthen the 1756 Franco-Austrian alliance. Even less innocent were the dispatches of Mercy, which were written not only to satisfy the curiosity of Maria Theresa and Kaunitz, but also to persuade them that with more concentrated energy on the Queen's part, she might overcome the King's resistance to her meddling in French foreign affairs on Austria's behalf.

In short, the Queen exerted – and was seen to exert – power not so much as an independent force of nature than as one player in a great diplomatic game that at different moments created and closed opportunities to determine outcomes. This study could also have benefited from more attention to the court's other major players, such as Maurepas and Vergennes, with whom Marie-Antoinette was more or less constantly at odds. Aply tracked by such scholars as John Hardman, Munro Price, and Julian Swann – whose work is not even cited in this book – the schemes and strategies of these ministers were the critical complement to Marie-Antoinette's efforts to seize and apply power in a court of vipers, and for this reason need to be fully factored into any full account of her politics.

These limitations aside, this book is a solid, formidable study that will be of considerable benefit to all who study and seek to understand Marie-Antoinette's early reign. All serious scholars will need to pay it close attention.



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