Marie Antoinette's Sacrifice and the Fragmentation of French Femininity

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Introduction

From beautiful Austrian princess to tragic heroine to depraved whore, depictions of Marie Antoinette are almost as varied as depictions of the French Revolution itself. Historians have written at length about the persona(s) of this great royal but have yet to come to a consensus. Who was Marie Antoinette? What was her role in the Revolution? And did she deserve her sentence? Our perspective from within an equality-driven society makes it all too tempting to cheer along as the guillotine falls on a monarch; we want the Revolution to succeed because the values which it espouses so closely resemble those of our culture today. This bias in favor of the ideals of the early Revolution has led many historians to justify its later events in light of the Enlightened motivations behind them and, in doing so, to condone the death of Marie Antoinette as a necessary casualty on the road towards Enlightenment. However, due to the rapid reorganization of French society after the collapse of the monarchy, persistent food shortages, riots, violent political polarization, and frequent redistributions of power, the Republic of 1793 more closely resembled a civilization in crisis than a democratic society. Consequently, in order to fully appreciate the significance of the execution of Marie Antoinette and its impact on French national identity, we must take into account the violent elements which plagued the society that condemned her instead of simply writing her death off as collateral damage on the road to the modern Republic. Through the work of prominent philosopher René Girard, who has written extensively on the phenomenon of violence in societies in crisis as well as on the trial and execution of Marie Antoinette, we gain particularly valid insight into the execution of the queen. While Girard's work focused on the effects of the societal phenomenon of violence rather than individual sacrifice, his line of reasoning can help us create a valuable, nuanced understanding of Marie Antoinette when coupled with a feminist perspective—an understanding which clarifies both the fragmented nature of her modern identity as well as the evolution of French feminism and womanhood.

Girardian Mimetic Relations in Revolutionary France

To fully appreciate the complexities of Marie Antoinette's trial, we must first consider the tensions within France that later culminated in her sentencing and execution. Mimetic tensions had been building in France since the beginning of the Revolution, contributing to the violent atmosphere surrounding Antoinette in 1793. As Girard notes in his book, *Violence and the Sacred*, man's tendency to imitate the desires of his fellow man frequently leads to competition and conflict. Girard explains how these tensions multiply within the population, writing, "Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it*…The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being."[1] Girard argues that, due to man's insecurity over the validity of his own existence, he takes others' desires as more valid than his own and proceeds to mimic these desires in hopes of attaining the supposedly superior reality of his rival. In France, various factions (men with property, men without property, women, etc.) had all begun to mimic each other's desires and were each clamoring over the object of natural rights by the dawn of the Revolution. While there were certainly various factions involved in this competition, this paper will focus on the relationship between men and women, which had become particularly mimetic and contentious by 1791, as we can infer from the parallel writings of the National Assembly and Olympe de Gouges. Responding to women's exclusion from the supposed equality of the Revolution despite their

[1] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

equal participation in it, De Gouges penned her "Declaration of the Rights of Women" in hopes of attaining for women those rights which men had already seized for themselves. Commandeering the structure as well as the content of the original "Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen," de Gouges writes:

> Mothers, daughters, sisters, female representatives of the nation ask to be constituted as a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman.[2]

De Gouges's imitation of the male, Revolutionary "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" is a noteworthy example of the mimetic nature of political desire early in the Revolution. Although both desirous of the same object, men and women constituted two distinct factions that pursued their desires independently of one another, as the very existence of this document indicates. Due to the apt characterization of men and women as distinct entities that both desired the same object, Girard's idea of mimetic rivalry accurately depicts the relationship between the men and women of France at the time when De Gouges penned her "Declaration of the Rights of Women."

As Girard notes, however, a mimetic relationship such as that between the men and women of the early Revolution, can never be peaceful. He elaborates on the nature of the mimetic relationship, writing, "The model, even when he has openly encouraged imitation, is surprised to find himself engaged in competition. He concludes that the disciple has betrayed his confidence by following in his footsteps. As for the disciple, he feels both rejected and humiliated, judged unworthy by his model of participating in the superior existence the model himself enjoys."[3] Taking men to be the model in this scenario (simply because they expanded their rights earlier than women) and women to be the disciples, we begin to understand, firstly, why tensions existed between these two factions that supposedly desired the same ends and, secondly, why the first faction blocked the second from attaining its object. Initially, the debate over women's rights seemed to be making headway and even gained purchase on the floor of the National Assembly.[4] Scarcely a year later, however, the tide had turned against women's rights, prompting Olympe De Gouges to write her "Declaration of the Rights of Women" and English author and observer of the Revolution Edmund Burke to conclude, "On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order."[5] Girard's idea of the model's resentment of their rival(s) accounts for the tentative consideration and then violent rejection of women's rights. Due to the threat the male faction perceived in women's desire of the coveted object of rights, they could not allow women to achieve those same rights because any other faction's achievement would diminish the value of their own. As a result, the relationship between women and men was fraught with resentment which, as the Revolution progressed, moved closer and closer to violence.

Sacrificing Marie Antoinette

While in developed societies today, Girard explains, venerable judicial systems serve as bulwarks against mimetic violence, the judicial system of France in 1793 was not yet so established as to be able to fulfill this role and, as a result, had to employ a more primitive method to restore harmony

[2] Olympe de Gouges, "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman, September 1791," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, trans. and ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1966), 124-129.

[3] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[4] Marquise de Condorcet, "On Giving Women the Right of Citizenship," in *Condorcet, Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory*, trans. and eds. Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt (Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1994), http://www.historywiz.com/primarysources/condorcet.html

[5] Edmund Burke, *Reflections On the Revolution In France, And On the Proceedings In Certain Societies In London Relative to That Event: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman In Paris*, Second ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), PDF, https://archive.org/details/reflectionsonre04burkgoog

within the population: sacrifice. According to Girard, when tensions within a society threaten to erupt into violence, that violence cannot be denied. It can either be redirected through the state's judicial system—provided that the judicial system possesses enough recognition to command this authority—or redirected towards a surrogate victim. In 1793, violence was redirected through the latter course.[6] As one Revolutionary author noted in her work "Defense of the Queen by a Woman," Louis XVI was the first surrogate victim to fall to the internal dissentions within France. Germaine Necker (née de Stael), the most famous woman of her day, writes of Louis' execution:

> The principal men of a popular party seek to bind the people indissolubly to their own cause; they know that in all revolutions glory or failure belongs only to the leaders; and, fearing that the people do not trust them, these leaders want to identify the people in all manners [with the Revolution]; they try to persuade the people that they are the true authors of these irreversible acts. Initially, the execution of the king joins together these cruel advantages. The Convention, in multiplying the judges of Louis XVI, was applauded by many spectators; it made several addresses from various departments to the kingdom; it ordered that a hundred thousand men-at-arms, the day of the death of the king, agreed, by their silence, with this terrible catastrophe.[7]

Necker, a contemporary of Louis XVI, reveals exactly what his death was: a ploy by the state to bind the conflicted French people to the Revolution. In other words, if the people were convinced that Louis XVI's death was the embodiment of their will, not only would their violence fix upon an object and cease to threaten the society as a whole, but they would pledge allegiance to the government that satiated their appetite through the controversial execution of a king.

Although she is writing almost two hundred years before the birth of Girard, Necker's insights in this passage closely resemble Girard's explanation of the scapegoat effect. Specifically, Necker's analysis of the execution of the king touches upon Girard's claim that "A single victim can be substituted for all the potential victims… All the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure, the *surrogate victim*."[8] However, as Necker also notes, the sacrifice of this particular surrogate victim was insufficient to quell the disparate antagonisms within the French populace. Necker argued that the failure of Louis XVI's sacrifice should have marked the end of the scapegoating cycle, writing, "nothing could equal the terrible show of the execution of the king. The judgement of the queen would be thus a useless crime, and by that even more degrading…Would one imagine to redouble the courage of the people by making them drunk on the blood of a new victim?"[9] Despite Necker's incredulity, this is exactly what the Convention imagined, and her entreaty fell on deaf ears. Since the execution of the king was not odious enough to quench the people's thirst for vengeance, the Convention was forced to cast about for another, even more dramatic victim during the tense months that separated these trials. They found one in the queen.

The Trial, Distortion, and Legacy of Marie Antoinette

Examining Marie Antoinette through her role as a sacrificial victim—instead of simply an unpopular monarch or a symbol of the bourgeoisie—we can finally begin to grasp the logic of the grossly unjust and, oftentimes, ridiculously heinous trial which sentenced her to death. Girard notes that as a sacrificial victim, one must both represent the tensions which one's sacrifice is to resolve as well as remain distant enough from these tensions and from the society in general so as not to inspire vengeance. Marie Antoinette was distant from this society as a foreigner, as an essentially classless "monarch," and, as the Convention would argue during her trial, as the antithesis to the ideal Revolutionary woman. The

[6] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[7] Germaine Necker, *Réflexions Sur Le Procés De La Reine*, trans. Eithne Leahy (Paris: Édicions du Boucher, 2002), PDF, http://www.leboucher.com/pdf/stael/b_nec_rp.pdf

[8] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[9] Germaine Necker, *Réflexions Sur Le Procés De La Reine*, trans. Eithne Leahy (Paris: Édicions du Boucher, 2002), PDF, http://www.leboucher.com/pdf/stael/b_nec_rp.pdf

only tension she herself embodied was that between the Ancien Régime and the Revolutionaries; however, due to the long history of pornography and slander which surrounded her reign,[10] she was already a symbolic figure of any and all crimes (real or imaginary) that the people perceived against themselves. Therefore, as a politically malleable public figure, she was the perfect candidate to assume and suffer for all public antagonisms. Indeed, her trial opens with the broadest of accusations that "Marie Antoinette, widow of Louis Capet, has, since her abode in France, been the scourge and blood-sucker of the French people."[11] While Louis XVI's indictment limited itself to his political crimes against the Revolution, Marie Antoinette stood trial for a laundry list of grievances, including but not limited to intentionally distributing her own pornography in order to "make it be believed by foreign powers that she was extremely ill-treated by Frenchmen, to instigate them to go to war with France;" intentionally causing a famine to stop the Revolution; brainwashing and feminizing the king and controlling matters of state; and even raping her own son. It does not matter that these accusations were ridiculous fabrications as often as they were legitimate grievances because her trail was not a judicial determination of guilt or innocence but, rather, a ritualistic airing of grievances before sacrifice. If Marie Antoinette assumed blame for the War with Austria, continued food shortages, and the "base" character of women, then her death appealed to every tension within the French population, and she became the ideal victim to quench the vengeful spirit of each faction within the new Republic. Consequently, the true identity of Marie Antoinette ceased to matter during her trial as Marie Antoinette the woman slowly gave way to the symbol whose extinguishment was to restore internal harmony to a restlessly divided nation.

Additionally, the idea of Marie Antoinette as a sacrifice accounts for the dichotomy of her memory both in Revolutionary as well as current thought. As mentioned above, Marie Antoinette's purpose as a surrogate victim overshadowed her personal identity leading up to and during her trial. The heinous accusations that dominated her trial amplified unsubstantiated charges (e.g., the queen's dissemination of pornography) and cemented two distinct images of Marie Antoinette into the annals of history. Binhammer recognizes these two distinct images, writing, "While Mary Robinson reveres Marie Antoinette as a symbol of victimized womanhood, Mary Wollstonecraft, even as late as 1794, was decrying the queen as a sexual and political abomination who was the corrupt head of an oppressive political state."[12] Even within the context of French Revolutionary feminism, there existed two caricatures of Marie Antoinette, one the dignified martyr and one the recalcitrant whore. Marie Antoinette lives on as both Beauty and the Beast; the cruel truth, however, is that neither of these images does justice to the individual. If, like Edmund Burke, one chooses to paint Marie Antoinette as a beautiful victim, she loses all depth of character and sense of agency. Burke described the early misfortunes which befell the queen in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

> surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision… she just began to move in, glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy…little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men…I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone.[13]

10 Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, Second ed., ed. Gary Kates (New York: Routledge, 1998).

11 Marie Antoinette, *Authentic Trial at Large of Marie Antoinette, Late Queen of France, before the Revolutionary Tribunal at Paris, on Tuesday, October 15, 1793 ... To Which Are Prefixed, Her Life, and a Verbal Copy of Her Private Examination ...*, Third ed. (London: Printed for Chapman and Co., 1793).

12 Katherine Binhammer, "Marie Antoinette Was 'One of Us': British Accounts of the Martyred Wicked Queen," *The Eighteenth Century* 44, no. 2/3 (2003): 233-55, PDF, http://www.jstor.org.cuhsl.creighton.edu/stable/41467927.

13 Edmund Burke, *Reflections On the Revolution In France, And On the Proceedings In Certain Societies In London Relative to That Event: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman In Paris*, Second ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), PDF, https://archive.org/details/reflectionsonre04burkgoog

While he does sympathize with the queen, Burke's treatment of her is that of a precious yet defenseless object. Characterizing her as a divinely surreal vision, Burke supplants the real Marie Antoinette with his stylized illustration of womanly purity, destroying her identity as well as her existence as a flesh and blood woman. Therefore, those who sympathize with Marie Antoinette as a fallen, defenseless object of beauty, as Burke does, actually further the oppression of women through their glorification of unrealistic feminine delicacy and innocence, which provides an impractical, powerless mold for women to attempt to fit themselves into. Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft's venomous critique of the queen produces another type of misogyny. By identifying the queen as the embodiment of femininity and then railing against her vulgar existence, Wollstonecraft first harangues traditional womanhood by suggesting that women should aspire to be male and then demands that all women fashion themselves as the antithesis of Marie Antoinette.[14] Just like Burke, Wollstonecraft attempts to fit women into an ideal mold; the only exception is that her mold is the exact opposite of Marie Antoinette, while Burke holds the queen up as his model. Thus, whichever characterization of Marie Antoinette we choose, we are still embracing one version of the "ideal woman." With this perspective, we are no closer to delving beneath the stereotypes or discovering the individual behind the caricature. The scapegoating of Marie Antoinette has robbed her, like so many women, not only of her life, but her identity as well. For now, instead of remembering the brave woman, mother, and daughter who ruled France and eventually ascended the scaffold, we must choose between one of two reductionist, androcentric narratives: the sacrificial virgin or the dangerous whore. Indeed, the sacrifice of Marie Antoinette did not conclude with her death. We are still feeling the effects of it today through our limited, simplistic narratives of a complex and very real woman.

Finally, the sacrifice of Marie Antoinette constituted not only the death of the ideal of "class" in the French Republic, but the death of positive femininity throughout Europe as well, which tragically shaped French feminism and female identity for years to come. While the sacrifice of Marie Antoinette did succeed in fending off internal violence in France for a time (many more sacrifices were to come in the months of the Terror), hers was not the only casualty which resulted from her death. Elizabeth Colwill explains the dual nature of her execution, writing, "On the one hand, it undermined the legitimacy of the monarchy and provided a rallying cry for the new republic; on the other it provided a negative model against which non-elite women were to define their own identity. Marie-Antoinette's trial and execution thus represent events of real political significance in French political history, as well as a watershed in the ideology of womanhood."[15] As Colwill indicates, the sacrifices of Marie Antoinette signified the death of both the Ancien Régime and of Revolutionary feminism. Her re-branding as the anti-woman at the hands of the National Convention as well as English feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft paved the way for a new era of misogyny which began the very weeks after her trial. Two weeks after Marie Antoinette's execution, the Convention banned women's political clubs. Soon after, Olympe de Gouges was guillotined, as was the Girondin Revolutionary leader Madame de Roland. The Convention solidified their victory over their rivals with an epitaph in *Le Moniteur*. Colwill quotes the epitaph as follows:

> The revolutionary tribunal has given women a great example which must not, no doubt, have been lost upon them . . . Marie-Antoinette, raised in a perfidious and ambitious court, brought the vices of her family to France. She sacrificed her spouse, her children, and the country that adopted her to the ambitions of the house in Austria . . . She was a bad mother, a debauched spouse . . . and her name will be forever abhorred by posterity.[16]

[14] Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effict it Has Produced in Europe* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), PDF, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/wollstonecraft-an-historical-and-moral-view-of-the-origin-and-progress-of-the-french-revolution

[15] Elizabeth Colwill, "Just Another 'Citoyenne?' Marie-Antoinette on Trial, 1790-1793." *History Workshop* 28 (1989): 63-87, PDF, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288925.

[16] Excerpt from *Le Moniteur,* as cited in Paule-Marie Duhet, *Les Femmes et la Révolution française* (Paris, 1971), pp. 205-206, quoted in Elizabeth Colwill, "Just Another 'Citoyenne?' Marie-Antoinette on Trial, 1790-1793." *History Workshop* 28 (1989): 63-87, PDF, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288925.

With the sacrifice of Marie Antoinette, the Convention gained both a scapegoat for public tensions as well as a distinct victory over their rival faction. The message in this excerpt is clear: French womanhood is the opposite of Marie Antoinette in every way. Women are to be loyal to their spouse and children and forego their own ambition. Certainly, they are not to desire the same objects as men or to enter into competition with them. These ideals of French womanhood would persist for years and severely crippled the French feminist movement. Indeed, this rigid perspective of French womanhood endured well into the twentieth century. France was one of the last Westernized countries to grant women the vote (they did in 1944), and feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir have continued to critique women's secondary status. Even today, historians cannot make up their minds about Marie Antoinette. Was she a neutral, passive victim, a tragic heroine, or a frivolous symbol of excess? While the real Marie Antoinette may be lost to us forever, the ramifications of her sacrifice live on, for women are still caught in the same dichotomy between innocent motherhood or dangerous seductress which shaped her trial. However, understanding how Marie Antoinette's role as a sacrifice shaped this dichotomy leads us one step closer to deconstructing and, ideally, reversing it. For once we divorce the caricatures of Antoinette which persist in our memory from the woman herself, we can begin the historical task of resurrecting Marie Antoinette the individual and, hopefully, dismantling the misogynistic paradigms which her sacrifice perpetuated.

Conclusions

Applying Girard's theories of mimetic violence and ritual sacrifice to the trial and execution of Marie Antoinette elucidates both the contradictory versions of Antoinette that have muddled her character for the past two centuries as well as the drastic impact her death had on French female identity. Firstly, Girard's theory of mimetic violence aptly describes the tensions between men and women over the object of natural rights, which created a contentious backdrop to the queen's trial and contributed heavily to the degradation of French womanhood. Secondly, understanding the nature of sacrifice as an abject symbol of all public grievance explains how Marie Antoinette's identity ceased to reflect her character and instead became a catch-all of vice and antagonism during the Revolution, a disassociation which gave rise to the many disparate versions of Antoinette which exist today. Finally, as the culmination of the brief struggle for women's rights during the Revolution, the queen's execution and the Convention's swift removal of women from the political sphere sounded the death knell of the French Revolutionary feminist movement, a setback which crippled the ideal of French womanhood for centuries to come.

While the litany of rumors and accusations which trailed Marie Antoinette during her life and ingratiated itself into her trial has persisted for so long as to become de facto truth, it is our duty as historians to delve into this body of myth, separate the true from the false, and analyze the factors which contributed to her defilement in the first place. The task of any historian is to recover pieces of the past and incorporate them into a meaningful, rounded history that comments on modern society. Subsequently, if we succumb to the false perspectives of Marie Antoinette that solidified during her trial and have persisted in some form or other ever since, we are presenting only one version of history—a version which, as Madame Necker indicates, the general populace recognized as false even as it was created. If we perpetuate the debate of Burke and Wollstonecraft over the Beauty or Beast nature of Antoinette, we fail to provide any sort of well-rounded or even accurate history. Thus, it is imperative that we at least attempt, as much as we are able, to separate the woman from the sacrifice. Once we achieve this task, only then can we begin to recover the true identity of Marie Antoinette and finally reclaim the notions of French femininity which perished with the scapegoated queen.

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