


THE QUEEN'S NEW CLOTHES

Imagine yourself a visitor to the Salon of 1783 gazing at the portrait of Marie-Antoinette painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (fig. 6.1). You see the queen sporting a straw hat and dressed fashionably in a simple gown of white muslin. How are you responding to the image? What story are you generating from the portrait? Ah, but you cannot have a response, you cannot generate a story until I tell you just what sort of visitor, even which particular visitor, you are; until you can measure your distance from the viewer generated by the portrait itself. Marie-Antoinette appears at the Salon, but for whom, and as whom, is she appearing?

Vigée-Lebrun's portrait particularly raises these questions because the public described it, even forced Vigée-Lebrun to remove it from the Salon. Why did this portrait disturb? What of queenship was or was not represented there? The immediate answer isolates the unsuitability of the costume en lèvite or en chemise for public appearance. Imported from England in the 1780s, and adapted by the famous dressmaker Rose Bertin, the robe en chemise was made from sheer white muslin, fastened down the back, and caught at the waist with a sash. The underskirt and corset, which ordinarily showed through the transparent muslin, were often of blue or pink silk. A soft fichu, usually of linen gauze, and a straw hat completed the ensemble. The style was immensely popular in England, where it made a fashion statement for the "natural woman," suggesting simplicity and honest sentiment. In France, however, the formalities of court made these simple styles less acceptable; for public appearances the robe en chemise was considered immodest, even though it revealed far less of the body than traditional court dresses with deeply scooped necklines. The Cabinet des Modes of 1786 included the robe en chemise under informal wear, and if worn outside the private chambers, such dress was reserved for walks in the park, for picnics, or for playing milkmaid with a few friends. Because this dress became closely associated with Marie-Antoinette, many called it the chemise à la reine.¹ As simple as these lingerie frocks might seem, in the early 1780s they were a luxury garment, made from very fine cotton fabric and purchased only at considerable expense.

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¹ This essay is adapted from chapter 5 in my book The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

Figure 6.1. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Marie-Antoinette en chemise, Salon of 1783. Oil on panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.)
THE PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s Marie-Antoinette en chemise

Mary D. Sheriff

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Figure 6.1. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Marie-Antoinette en chemise, Salon of 1783. Oil on panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.)
modesty of the queen appearing publicly in such attire: “Earlier one noticed among the portraits of this amiable artist that of the Queen en lévite, but because the public seemed to disapprove of a costume unworthy of Her Majesty, [Vigée-Lebrun] was pressed to substitute for it another with an attire more analogous to the dignity of the throne.”2 The Mémoires secrets, always quick to publish the latest gossip on Vigée-Lebrun, complained about showing an august person in garments reserved for the palace interior. The article went on, however, to shift the blame away from the artist, assuming that the painter was not authorized to take such a “liberty” without the consent of her sitter.3

Other pamphleteers were clever in their criticism. In La Morte de trois mille ans, for example, comments about the queen’s attire were indirect but nonetheless censorious. Simultaneously reporting and commenting on the reactions of the Greek maiden Dibutadis visiting the sculpture court, the narrator tells his reader that although it was an ancient practice, she found the fierce Achilles a bit too familiar for appearing nude before the ladies. He draws his sword undoubtedly to frighten those who would disapprove of his nudity. At least his attitude pleases. The ladies who appear in public en chemise cannot be overly critical of his nudity. Their own contrasts with the noble simplicity that was the adornment of the beautiful Greek maiden.4

Seen in public and in mixed company, a woman garbed en chemise is as inappropriate as a nude man—and much less pleasing. Her dress is no more modest than his nakedness, and it stands in pointed contrast to the Greek maiden’s “noble simplicity.” Armed with his sword, Achilles can fend off all critics, but the woman en chemise is defenseless; she cannot even point a finger at the warrior’s undress.

A second pamphlet, Monus au Salon, is even more subtle, including a character described as a “marquise en chemise.” The marquise plays the role of fashionable woman, at least at that role was described in moralizing tracts: she goes to the theater, sleeps until noon, and seduces the men around her. At one point while she is boasting about her ability to judge painting, the marquise declares herself “not modest,” a comment that has a resonance beyond claiming her expertise as a connoisseur. As to her preferences, the marquise loves the soft touch that is perceptible in works by Vigée-Lebrun. Her taste is thus far distanced from the “noble simplicity” favored by the Greek maiden.5

Years later Vigée-Lebrun described the controversy surrounding this portrait of Marie-Antoinette: “One [portrait] represented her donning a straw hat and garbed in a dress of white muslin with sleeves folded up, but quite orderly; when it was shown at the Salon, the malicious did not refrain from saying that the queen was represented in her underwear.”6 These reports of negative responses, however, contrast with other recorded ones, underlining the obvious point that reaction to the queen’s portrait depended on who was looking when and where. The queen herself apparently admired the work; she sent three versions of it to close women relatives and in 1786 judged it the most resembling of all her portraits.7 Vigée-Lebrun’s Souvenirs, in addition, include a report of another public’s response to the image:

This portrait in any case was not less of a great success. Toward the end of the exhibition there was a small piece at the Vaudeville which, I believe, was titled “The Union of the Arts.” Bruno-Gniart, the architect, and his wife, whom the author had taken into his confidence, had reserved a box in the front and came to find me on the opening day to take me to the spectacle. As nothing prepared me for the surprise that awaited me, you can imagine my emotion when Painting arrived, and I saw the actress who represented her imitate me in a surprising manner in painting the queen’s portrait. At that moment everyone in the parterre and in the boxes turned toward me and broke into applause. I do not believe that one could ever be so touched, so recognized, as I was that night.8

Although the divergence of these responses leads to the obvious question of what these audiences saw when they looked at the queen’s portrait, a more fun-
damental question might be: what did they expect to see in a publicly exhibited portrait of the queen? If a portrait of Caesar was Caesar, and a portrait of Louis was Louis, what then was a portrait of Marie-Antoinette, a particular queen of France? To ask this question is to call forth a narrative that aligns Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of the queen and Louis Marin’s Portrait of the King. I set these as companion pieces to explore the queen’s portrait as it relates to Marin’s chiasmus: representation of power and power of representation.

**THE REPRESENTATION OF POWER AND THE POWER OF REPRESENTATION**

In his now classic text, Louis Marin considered the face of absolute monarchy, Louis XIV, whose cultural ministers and painters deployed the power of representation to maintain a political imaginary suited to the pleasures/demands of the state. Sustaining this imaginary was an official aesthetics that Marin summarizes in three statements: the king’s motto “L’état, c’est moi,” the Catholic maxim “Ceci est mon corps,” and the Port Royalist’s utterance “Le portrait de César, c’est César.” Playing on Kantorowicz’s notion of the king’s two bodies as the essence of a medieval theological kingship, Marin proposes for classical absolutism: “The king has only one body left, but this sole body, in truth, unifies three, a physical historical body, a juridico-political body, and a semiotic sacramental body, the sacramental body, the ‘portrait,’ operating the exchange without remainder (or attempting to eliminate all remainder) between the historical and political bodies.”

In attempting “an exchange without remainder,” the portrait, the king’s sacramental body, is the site where the physical body of a man-king and the theoretical body of a nation-state are married. Indeed, the man-king is only “absolument monarch” in images. Marin concludes that a belief in the effectiveness of these iconic signs is obligatory, or the monarch is emptied of substance. The portrait is thus both semiotic—that is, constituted of signs—and sacramental, a political Eucharist in which the king is truly present.

Three terms—representation, power, and imagination—emerge as central to Marin’s thesis. In his definition, the representational framework has both the “effect and power of presence instead of absence and death and the effect of subject, the power of institution, authorization, and legitimization.” Representation does not simply signify a preexisting subject who is elsewhere—it constitutes its own legitimate and authorized subject by exhibiting qualifications, justifications, and titles of the present. Power is the ability to exert an action on someone or something, and as Marin defines it, power stands in a constant and shifting relation with its own potentiality, force, and representability. Power valorizes potential as obligatory constraint, and “in this sense power means to institute potential as law.” More important to Marin’s argument, force represented is potential and power, because representation, which has the power of presence and the power of institution, puts force in signs. In other words, the representation of force is doubly forceful; force is both the signified of representation and an attribute intrinsic to it.

Marin considers representation as a “delegate of force” because it institutes an imaginary order of relations between the king’s subjects and the state. What gives power to power’s discourse is the imagination’s potential power; through imagination subjects internalize the master’s discourse as a representation of obligatory belief. The portrait of the king, then, represents (constitutes and authorizes) the relations that different subjects imagine themselves to have with the king-state.

At first glance, Marin’s text, dealing as it does with Louis XIV and classic absolutism, may seem remote from the portrait of a reputedly frivolous queen made when the French monarchy, greatly desacralized, had lost much of its mystical power. Yet the framing of this particular queenly portrait mediates between the Sun King and the ill-fated queen. The portrait appeared in the Salon of 1783, a salon the Comte d’Angiviller, Surintendant des Bâtiments, conceived as a move in his plans to revive the gloire of French art during the reign of Louis XIV. Fashioning himself as the new Colbert, d’Angiviller wanted to restore power to representa-
tion, a power he perceived it had lost during the reign of Louis XV, and to make art once again an important instrument of state. In this Salon, however, a portrait of the queen exhibited by a woman both stole the show and embarrassed the monarchy. Not only the power of the artist but also the power of the queen was implicated when the Mémoires secrets pronounced that at the Salon, the scepter of Apollo had fallen to the distaff side. Take away the qualification “of Apollo,” and the phrase is identical to that used to describe female rule. Thus there is an implicit parallel between the reputed triumph of her woman painter and the imagined ascendency of the female monarch.

Marin’s text provokes significant questions when read in tandem with Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Marie-Antoinette. How does a portrait of the queen serve the aims of state? What relations of representation, power, and imagination are at work in the queen’s portrait? What does it mean to represent the queen? In his Portrait of the King, Marin explicated a system of power and representation in which each portrait of Louis XIV meant the same thing, and seemed to mean it absolutely—that is, for every viewer at every moment. The central chiasmus (representation of power and power of representation) figures a closed system, for it places the two terms as mirror images of one another. Figuring the relation between the king and his image as a chiasmus, Marin uses the figure to explicate how belief is structured by representation and to elucidate the repressive structure of absolute monarchy in colonizing the subject’s imagination. In Marin’s text, the chiasmus defines absolutism played out in/on the represented body—the portrait—of the king. Marin demonstrates how through representation the king is authorized as subject, as absolute transcendent Subject. In Marin’s analysis, there is an implicit filiation between “absolute monarch” and signifieds like Law, God, and Phallus.

**SALIC/PHALLIC LAW**

It should surprise no one that the French monarchy depended on the suppression of women’s claims to the scepter. Indeed, one could suggest three sentences that characterize this gendered side of absolutist aesthetics. The first of these comes from Antoine Loisel’s maxims and condenses the Salic law (1607): “The kingdom cannot fall to the distaff side.” The second, drawn from Bignon’s De l’excellence des Rois et du Royaume de France (1610), justifies that law: “This is not a written law but one that was born with us that we have not invented but drawn from nature itself.” And the third, from Guy Coquille, Institution du droit de Français (1588), separates the queen—the king’s wife—from the body of the king and hence from state power: “The king is monarch and has no companion in his royal majesty. External honors can be communicated to the wives of kings, but that which is of his majesty, representing his power and dignity, resides inextricably in his person alone.”

Salic law determined kingship by the right of succession and excluded from succession females and males descended in the female line. Whereas there were queens of France, there were no French queens. The queen of France signified the wife of the king, and queen had no meaning except in relation to king. Salic law was considered first among the fundamental laws of France, which were laws perceived as anterior to all other laws and hence constitutional of the nation. Although the sacredness of monarchy and its mystical character were widely challenged in the Enlightenment—at least in philosophical circles—part of the Salic law and its seventeenth-century justifications fit well with thinking on women that crossed political boundaries during the ancien régime and Revolution. Jurists such as Le Bret in his Traité de la Souveraineté du roi justified the exclusion of women on the basis of natural law. Salic law, he argued, conformed to the law of nature which, having decreed woman imperfect, weak, and debilitated, as much in body as in mind, has submitted her to the power of man, whom she (nature) has . . . enriched with a stronger judgment, more assured courage, and a stronger physical force. Also we see that divine law wants a wife to recognize and render obedience to her husband as to her master and to her King.
The fundamental law of France, Salic law, is thus justified along the same lines as those laws that prescribed a wife’s état as one of subservience to her husband. State portraits, moreover, represented this relation, and they remained fairly constant in type from Louis XIV to Louis XVI. A queen is a wife, and an official portrait of the queen shows the wife of the king; it is always a (possible) companion piece to the king’s portrait.

Carle Van Loo’s portrait of Queen Marie Leszcynska (fig. 6.2), commissioned for the royal collection and shown in the Salon of 1747, represents the type for the queen’s public portrait. The painting is large-scale and shows the full-length standing figure. The pose, although formal, is not stiff, and the attitude suggests regal bearing in its straight lines and stability. Indeed, the portraitist establishes a virtual line that runs the length of the body through the boned bodice, which comes to a point at the center of the queen’s waist, and the highlighted crease at the front of her dress. The downturned folded fan she clutches in her left hand emphasizes this line, which can also be imagined as extending upward from the point of her bodice, through the middle of her jeweled pendant and face. Thus centered, the queen becomes one of three strong verticals that define the picture; she is as
solid as the columns to her right and left. In what is something of a tour de force, Van Loo manages to associate the queen, standing before us in her elaborately frilled court dress, with these strong verticals, rather than with the ornately carved rococo table leg curving prominently in the left foreground. We imagine her as serpentine and seductive, but as standing straight and erect underneath the mounds of costume. The overall shape of her dressed body, moreover, tends toward a stable triangle, with the curve of her waist more or less straightened out by the fall of her cape. Comparing this type of queen’s portrait to state portraits of the king, say Van Loo’s *Louis XV* (Musée du Château, Versailles), shows a gendered contrast also at work. Kings look active and queens immobile. Kings partake of the energy encoded in the agitated drapery that swirls around them, and their visibly protruding, taut leg muscles suggest the force attributed to the male body.

As is typical in official portraits, the queen, Marie Leszczyńska, is displayed in elaborate court costume, and the room is as ornamented as the queen. Marin suggested that to be elegant is to show that a great number of people have worked to produce the effect. Hair, embroidery, ribbons, and the like are in the people’s eyes effects of force—signs of work at work to show how one can make others work. The queen’s portrait, however, points not to her own force and power, but to that of the king. The markers of high status are clarified by the attributes of queenship—Marie’s crown resting on a nearby table and her ermine-trimmed cape with fleur-de-lys lining. The defining quality of queenship—her relation to the king—is signified twice, first because the image appeared as a companion piece to Van Loo’s portrait of Louis XV, and second because Louis appears within the painting as a portrait bust on the table. The king seems to be gazing down at his queen as she looks out at the audience. Although viewers cannot share the king’s gaze, they can imagine themselves exchanging glances with the queen. At the same time, they see him looking at her, and can envision him as re-presenting, or authorizing, or even authoring her. Through the king’s gaze, the whole top half of the composition—the queen’s face and upper body—is framed in a space defined by his triangle of vision.

The problem in making a state portrait of the queen is how to eulogize the absolute monarch through a portrait of his wife, how to show the king’s force in the queen’s portrait. Marin has argued that in representation, to be elegant is to show and to be one’s appearance, and also to present oneself to others and by that to represent oneself through one’s image in the gaze of others. The queen here is represented through her image as the regal and elegant consort not only in the gaze of her subjects (those who are the real viewers of the painting), but also in the gaze of her husband, the king— who is the real Subject in and of the painting. Although Marin argues that to be elegant is to show and be shown, to assume both the subject and the object position, here the queen is the object of the king’s showing. Marie Leszczyńska is represented to us as queen, but the authority that allows her representation is vested elsewhere; her image always refers to that authority.

The portrait of the queen, then, creates a subject “queen of France” that refers to a position a woman holds because she is wife to the king of France. Not an accident of birth but a legal contract changes the historical woman into a queen. The title queen held no authority or right to govern. And the queen held no relation to the kingdom independent of her relation to the king. The wife of the king, a queen was expected to be the mother of a king, and her function was to produce sons. As Marie-Thérèse wrote to Marie-Antoinette: “To bear children, that is why you have been summoned; it is by bearing children that your happiness will be secured.” The queen’s fertility was a major concern, but as only the father could confer royalty, she was the medium through which power was exchanged between father and son. Power passed through the queen’s body but was not part of her.

This point returns me to the third and final proposition of the aesthetics of queenship: “The king is monarch and has no companion in his royal majesty. External honors can be communicated to the wives of kings, but that which is of his majesty, represent-
ing his power and dignity, resides inextricably in his person alone.” In terms of the relation between king and queen, the third proposition is very significant. In some respects they did not have the same relation as other married couples, especially when marriage was conceptualized as a unifying of two individuals into one “body,” with the husband as the head. This view of marriage could not obtain for the king and queen, because only in his person, thought by tradition to be united to the state, resided majesty, power, and dignity.

The queen, moreover, did not share community property with the king. Another of the fundamental laws of France conceptualized the king’s domain as an attribute of sovereignty, and sovereignty could not be subdivided or alienated, that is, shared with the queen or anyone else. What the king acquired went to the profit of his kingdom, which came to be thought of as the king’s “most privileged spouse.” Thus the king had two spouses—the privileged one, or the kingdom, which shared his sovereignty, and the alienated one, or the queen, who was separated from it. Indeed, since the sixteenth century, various marriage metaphors described the king’s relation to the kingdom: “The king is the husband and political spouse of the chose publique (the kingdom) which brings to him at his sacre and Coronation the said domain as the dowry of this Crown. And kings swear solemnly at their sacre and Coronation never to alienate that dowry.”

Not only did the marriage metaphor persist through the eighteenth century, but also from the union between the king and the kingdom came the tradition of calling the king’s children the children of France.

When the king is married to the nation and his children are the children of France, the queen is—at least metaphorically—displaced as mother of the (future) king. There could be no coordination between the queen’s body and that of the other wife—the royaume, or France. Queens are theoretically and symbolically foreign to the kingdom, so the portrait of the queen operates no exchange between the real historical woman and the political body/state. Unless the presence of the king is indicated, nothing closes the representational play of the queen’s portrait. This is perhaps why all queens, as Hunt and Revel respectively have said of Marie-Antoinette, have “many bodies” or are “paper queens.” Indeed, their queenship exists only on paper—on marriage documents.

Although the queen had no relation of her own to the kingdom, she was fated to live in the gaze of court and populace. As the king’s consort, she was the object of elaborate court rituals and spectacles of viewing, and she had little or no private life, in the sense of a life apart from her position as queen. At court the queen did not own her own body. She was dressed and undressed in elaborate ceremony; her giving birth was a major public spectacle. Yet she was not as completely a public person, or as completely the public’s person, as was the king, for her theoretical relation to court and nation was that of outsider alien to the chose publique.

As an outsider, the queen could raise fears of overstepping her boundaries, of having too much power over the king her husband, or the king her son. In the first case, her power could come from the place where women were perceived to exercise their authority—the bedroom. Historically, however, this sort of female power was fragmented because the king took various official and unofficial mistresses. Louis XVI, however, was not a womanizer, and he had no official mistresses. Thus his queen, Marie-Antoinette, seemed to be the only influential woman in his life, and her influence was undiluted, a situation complicated by the perception that Louis was a weak ruler and man. Marie-Antoinette was an archduchess and daughter of an empress; she presented the real and imagined threat of allegiance to her mother’s house.

**MARIE-ANTOINETTE PORTRAYED**

In the French imaginary, royalty was incestuous. The dauphin, the child of France, fulfilled the Oedipal fantasy of marrying his mother, France, at his coronation, when she became his privileged spouse. In practice, the historical woman who became queen of France, at least in the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-
turies, represented a principle of exogamy. Because the importation of a (foreign) woman was necessary to the proper running of the monarchy, the queen of France can be construed as a sign of political alliance between two families or houses. The portrait of the queen can underscore and/or mask this meaning of queenship.

Consider, for example, the image of Marie de' Medici in *The Presentation of the Portrait* from Rubens's famous series (Louvre, Paris; fig. 5.1, p. 100). In that panel, Juno and Jupiter watch as putti present to Henri IV the portrait of Marie. Although in reality she was chosen as a wife because of political needs and in exchange for debt relief, the king seems immediately smitten with her image, gazing at it like a lovesick suitor. Marie’s position in a dynasty is not visible in the bust portrait, and her personal attributes are left to attract the king. The portrait presents itself as a representation of Marie’s charms, and it seems to elicit from Henri the effects of love. Rubens hides the exchange value of the queen and attributes power to her representation not as dynastic symbol but as desirable woman. Bear in mind, however, that Marie de’ Medici’s portrait was presented in a work designed for her; as regent, her interest was to underplay her outsider status and position as an object of diplomatic exchange. The image of a close and trusting relationship between herself and the deceased king could only help secure her position.

In relation to queenship as diplomatic exchange, the making and viewing of Marie-Antoinette’s portrait has an important history. Before Louis XV would close the deal with Marie-Thérèse, he wanted to see a portrait of the young archduchess. We cannot really know why Louis insisted on having this portrait. Perhaps he understood it as his prerogative, since it was traditional to be supplied with such an image. Perhaps he, sly old fox, was also drawing out the negotiations, extending the courtship. For her part, Marie-Thérèse seems never to have been satisfied with any portrait, and she repeatedly delayed sending a definitive one, as if no artist could really capture the beauty of her daughter—always implying that there was more, something that could not be represented. Al-

ways leaving something to the old king’s imagination. Perhaps she knew the value of prolonging the anticipation. The impatient Louis wanted to send France’s most distinguished portrait painter, the academician François-Hubert Drouais. But Drouais overestimated the king’s desire and asked too high a price. In the end, in late January of 1769, Louis sent Joseph Ducreux to do the job. A hairdresser went with him because Marie-Thérèse wanted her daughter to look as French as possible.29

The portrait that sealed the deal is now lost, but Jacques Gautier-Dagoty represented it in an engraving that shows the duc de Choiseul, who brokered the marriage, holding the long-sought likeness (*Louis XV Presenting the Portrait of Marie-Antoinette to the Dauphin*; fig. 6.3). The success of frenchieification is evident here, as the woman seen in the portrait (Marie-Antoinette) is nearly the mirror image of the court lady (the king’s sister?) standing nearby. Although this similarity can be attributed to the artist’s mediocre skills, the effect of sameness is appreciable whether or not it was intended. Not only does the young woman resemble the image of Marie-Antoinette, but her hands and fan are held to frame her upper body in an oval shape mimicking the portrait’s format. Glancing back toward the dauphin, she assesses the effect of her portrait double. But all this builds from the periphery inward. Louis XV holds the center with his grandson alongside him. They are holding hands—a sign of dynastic continuity—and behind them hangs a portrait of the deceased queen surmounted by a double portrait of king and queen. Busts of Henri IV and Louis XIV are also evident in the background. Gautier-Dagoty’s work is a portrait of dynastic succession and diplomatic mission. The work focuses on Louis XV, who appears not only as the leading character, but also as the principal spectator of the event. If one speculates that not only Marie-Thérèse but both aging monarchs pinned their hopes of peace on the alliance between their houses, this painting represents the last great diplomatic initiative of Louis XV’s reign.

If the history of making Marie-Antoinette’s portrait is bound on one side by the French king, it is determined on the other by the Hapsburg empress. The
Figure 6.3. Jacques Gautier-Dagoty, *Louis XV Presenting the Portrait of Marie-Antoinette to the Dauphin, 1769.* Oil on canvas. (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)

The approval of Marie-Thérèse seems to have secured Vigée-Lebrun her position as favored portraitist. The correspondence of Marie-Thérèse, her agent Count Mercy, and Marie-Antoinette shows the empress anxious to have appropriate images of her daughter. As a mother, she wanted private portraits to remind her of the child sent away; as empress, she wanted public statements of her daughter’s position first as dauphine, then as queen. It was in conjunction with the latter that Vigée-Lebrun was first successful. Why and how Vigée-Lebrun was called to paint the queen from life is not clear, but it is evident that the official images made by other painters exasperated both queen and empress.

Marie-Thérèse spent nearly a decade trying to obtain an official portrait of her daughter (as dauphine or queen) that pleased her. After commissioning a work from the painter Jean-Etienne Liotard, she wrote to Marie-Antoinette in December of 1770: “I await the painting of Liotard with great expectations, but in your finery not in casual dress nor in a man’s outfit. I want to see you in your proper place.” The work has been lost, but we know from correspondence that Liotard did not satisfy the empress’s expectations. Her comment, however, also points to another aspect of the story. Smaller, private images of Marie-Antoinette did satisfy the mother who, making a distinction between them and official portraits, allowed them more leeway in terms of costume. Her remark about not wanting to see her daughter in a man’s outfit recalls Joseph Krantzinger’s famous 1771 portrait of Marie-Antoinette *en amazone*, that is, in a costume resembling a man’s riding coat. Marie-Thérèse expressed her pleasure even at this portrait since it represented her daughter as she was, enjoying her activities. Thus even as she warned Marie-
Antoinette against the dangers of horse riding—especially of riding *en homme*, which she found hazardous for future fertility—she relished these images and used them in her private spaces. In August 1771, she wrote to her daughter, “I have received your portrait in pastel, it is quite resembling and it pleases me and the whole family. It is in the cabinet where I work, and the [second] framed image is in my bedroom, where I work in the evenings, so I have you with me before my eyes and you are always profoundly in my heart.”

The search for a suitable official portrait went on for years, however, much to both women’s exasperation. In 1774, Marie-Antoinette wrote to Marie-Thérèse: “It quite saddens me not to have been able to find a painter who catches my resemblance; if I found one I would give him all the time he wanted, and although he would be able to make only a bad copy, I would have a great pleasure in dedicking it to my dear mama.” The letter responds to the unrealized desire of the mother, and three years later the daughter wrote to her in a similar vein: “I put myself at the discretion of the painter, for as long as he wanted and in the attitude that he wished. I would give everything for him to be able to succeed and to satisfy my dear mama.” Several days later, Marie-

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Figure 6.4. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Portrait of Marie-Antoinette, 1778–79. Oil on canvas. Collection Hesse. (Photo: Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.)
Thérèse wrote to Marie-Antoinette about two official portraits—one as wife of the king, the other as daughter of the empress—that she had requested:

Excuse my impatience for your large portrait. Mercy received today the measurements for it. The [other one] will be for my cabinet, so that you can be there with the king. But this large one will be for a room where all the family is in large portraits. Must not this charming queen also be there? Must her mother alone be deprived of this dear daughter? I would like to have your face and court dress; even if the expression is not too resembling. So as not to inconvenience you too much, it satisfies me to have your face and demeanor, which I do not know and with which everyone is pleased. Having lost my dear daughter when she was such a small child, this desire to know how she is formed must excuse my impatience, coming from a most lively fund of maternal tenderness.  

Finally, two years later, a portrait arrived that suited Marie-Thérèse, a portrait painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (fig. 6.4). Here is how the empress responded after receiving the work in April 1779: “Your large portrait pleases me! Ligne has found it resembling, but it is enough for me that it represents your face, with which I am quite happy.” Given that Vigée-Lebrun’s image succeeded where so many others had failed, is it any surprise that Marie-Antoinette became attached to the painter who finally pleased her dear mama?  

The work sent by Vigée-Lebrun is well within the tradition of the queen’s official portrait. The symbolic accessories duplicate many of those seen in Van Loo’s portrait of Marie Leszczyńska. The queen is standing near a table on which rests a crown placed on a pillow decorated with fleur-de-lys. The curving figure that signaled a woman’s body is presented within a more stable triangular form. On one side the queen’s extended arm masks the round of her hip, and on the other a virtual diagonal runs from her headdress down the slope of her shoulders and through her skirt. That diagonal is emphasized by the direction of her gaze. As in Van Loo’s portrait, the vertical accents—the straight arm and the hanging tassels adorning her dress—reinforce the stabilizing effect of the massive columns. Moreover, the artist uses to positive effect the long Hapsburg face. The right side is rendered in a sharp, straight profile; on the left, her hair is pulled well back, and the vertical shadow cast along temple and neck stands out against the rounded and lightly rouged cheeks and chin. The hair, underplayed and kept in shadow, acts as a frame for the face. Despite her plumed headdress and wavy hair, Marie-Antoinette’s highlighted face rises from her neck with a verticality nearly as regular and definite as that of the column beside her. Moreover, she holds the center of the composition easily. Her face is isolated against a rectangular space articulated by the door frame in the background, and light reflected from her white neck and chest, which are bare of necklace, pendant, or other jewels, ensures her maximum visibility.

Marie-Antoinette’s image in this work is simplified in comparison to that of Louis XV’s queen, although it is still opulent enough to bespeak royal status. Similarly, the artist maintains certain traditional elements, such as the swag of drapery that both adds complexity to the composition and theatricalizes the sitter. However, even the drapery swag is made to seem less self-consciously dramatic by reducing the complexity of its folds and tracing a more or less vertical fall rather than a diagonal sweep. It is not enough to attribute this difference to a change in taste, since in other images Marie-Antoinette was even more decorated than Marie Leszczyńska. Overly embellished images of her daughter drew criticism from Marie-Thérèse, who felt they made Marie-Antoinette look like an actress. In March 1776, she found the dress and hairstyle of her daughter represented in a work by Drouais (now lost) outré and “too inferior for the rank of a great princess.” I prefer to believe that Vigée-Lebrun’s simplifications represent the artist’s appeal to the recipient of the portrait, Marie-Thérèse, who had repeatedly complained about overly decorated images. Given the numbers of painters called to represent the queen, the quest for the proper image...
of Marie-Antoinette could hardly have been news to the artistic community.

In her portrait of the queen, Vigée-Lebrun reduces the ornamentation by restricting the number of different elements in the painting (elements are repeated rather than varied) and by making these less decorative. She uses one dominant color for the costume, which makes this dress seem more austere, and she restricts the color range of the entire composition, relying primarily on an overall white with strong red accents and more muted ones of gold and blue. Even the headdress is simplified, and because the hat’s plume harmonizes in overall shape with the flowers on the nearby table, it seems integrated with the overall composition and not singled out as an attention-grabbing flourish. Vigée-Lebrun, moreover, has made the queen look serious and august. Marie-Antoinette does not engage the viewer; rather than acknowledge anyone’s gaze, she stares out of the painting. Her expression resembles that usually reserved for important male sitters—for example, the king. Focused as it is on some thing—or some history—we cannot see, her look recapitulates that which Vigée-Lebrun gives to a bust of Louis XVI positioned on a plinth in the painting’s upper right corner.

“MALICIOUS PEOPLE SAID THE QUEEN APPEARED IN HER UNDERWEAR”

The portrait of Marie-Antoinette en chemise is obviously not a state portrait, although a successful state portrait was probably Vigée-Lebrun’s license to make this one. As we have seen, there was a tradition of depicting the queen more informally, but such portraits did not often appear “in public” at the Salon, as did the image of Marie-Antoinette en chemise. In this portrait, Vigée-Lebrun shows the queen standing at a table, but set against a blank background so it is not clear if the sitter is positioned in an interior or exterior space. Marie-Antoinette poses as she wraps a blue satin ribbon around a small nosegay, which includes her signature flower—the rose. A few flowers lie on the table and a larger bouquet stands in a blue Sevrès vase decorated with a gilded satyr’s head. For whom, one wonders, does the queen wind the ribbon as she looks out of the composition with a lopsided glance? Her person, moreover, is pushed up to the picture plane so that the viewer can fancy herself in intimate conversation with the monarch. The entire image is coded for informality and refers to the artful naturalness of the picturesque. Marie-Antoinette’s face is skillfully framed in a C-curve formed by arms, ribbon, and hat plume, and her straw hat breaks the contours of the long Hapsburg face in a pleasing way. Her soft, unpowdered hair, lack of jewelry, and seemingly simple costume also betoken a studied naturalness associated with the look en chemise.

The image that reworked the portrait en chemise, Vigée-Lebrun’s Marie-Antoinette with a Rose (fig. 6.5), lacks the intimacy of close contact with the sitter as well as the naturalness implied by composition and dress. Although the portrait is set in the informal space of a garden, the sitter is distanced from her audience, set back from the picture plane. Her eyes are bright and blue, but not as large or as inviting as those in the earlier version, and now it is decidedly more difficult to imagine exchanging glances with the figure. Her satin court costume; formal, powdered coiffure; and elaborate headdress change the tone of the piece, since the queen no longer wears the dress characteristic of private spaces shared with friends.

Why make the portrait en chemise? The letters between Marie-Antoinette and Marie-Thérèse suggest that even early on Marie-Antoinette wanted to see herself painted in her favorite costumes, undertaking her favorite activities. What does Marie-Antoinette want to be in the portrait en chemise? What desire is Vigée-Lebrun representing to her? What trap for her desire, as Louis Marin would say, is she presenting the queen? In showing the queen as a fashionable lady, Vigée-Lebrun has imaged, perhaps without realizing it, Marie-Antoinette’s desire not to be queen of France. I am not suggesting anything like a wish for abdication, but rather a desire to separate herself, if only temporarily, from the demands of the office. I would like to distinguish this desire—if it is possible.
to do so—from the vision of Marie-Antoinette’s escapist tendencies well represented in all kinds of writing, from serious historical studies to Hollywood movie scripts, and reworked every day for the visitors tromping through her private apartments at Versailles.

What I have in mind is a bit more sympathetic toward this admittedly spoiled woman; for while Marie-Antoinette likely wanted sometimes to escape her position, she certainly had no desire to be less than a queen, even for a day. She wanted to be what she—willful woman that she was—wanted to be, not what French etiquette would make her. It was a revolt, of sorts, but hardly a profound political one. Jacques Revel has well articulated the dilemma of Marie-Antoinette in writing of her pretension to conduct her life as she wished. Marie-Antoinette “forgot the maxim that royalty has no right to private life.”

Revel goes on, analyzing her wish to create a private space symbolized by Trianon: “In this case, the staging of the private sphere is at the origin of a degradation of the representation that it renders trivial, even ridiculous.” It is a joke, maybe even an outrage, a queen playing milkmaid with her Sévres buckets and golden implements. We see class anger and anticipate the final dramatization of the distinction between the queen playing at being a peasant and the real state of the French people. It is easy to imagine the queen, dressed as a milkmaid, uttering that apocryphal line: “Let them eat cake!”

Yet we forget today what other messages other audiences might have constructed from this portrait and the remaking of the space at Versailles. What if one looks at this portrait from a perspective other than that of the Revolution? How might a “public” of 1783 still attached to the monarchy, patrimoine, and gloire...
have read the desire encoded in the queen’s portrait and at Trianon? How they read these could, for a segment of the public, have been directed by the queen’s enemies at court, for libels issuing from the court forged the first of the caricatures that were to haunt the queen through the Revolution.41

If Trianon was an escape from anything, it was an escape from the court with all its formality and, one imagines, tedium. In the portrait Marie-Antoinette represents herself not in terms of a position at court, but in terms of a position in a larger society—as a fashionable woman. The portrait confuses boundaries; the queen *en chemise* is a queen in masquerade. In this work the queen appropriates the right to pose publicly as a private individual, a fashionable woman. Taking the authority not to occupy her position as queen, Marie-Antoinette defies the sacrosanct laws of French court etiquette.

**A WOMAN JUDGED**

Although it is clear that Marie-Antoinette enjoyed close friendships with women at court and supported women artists, the queen showed no solidarity with women of different classes. This, however, does not mean that French women did not have some stake—no matter how remote—in the queen’s status. At least some commentators argued that the Salic law had a negative impact on all women. In his *Histoire des Amazones anciennes et modernes* of 1740, the abbé Guyon wrote that the Salic law “which has excluded them [women] from the throne of France, in our minds has made them lose a part of the esteem that several among them rightfully merit.”42

Feminist historians and critics writing today increasingly draw attention to the relation between Marie-Antoinette’s fate and that of all French women. Lynn Hunt, for example, writes: “The question of Marie-Antoinette and the issue of the status of women more generally were closely connected, even though Marie-Antoinette herself probably had no interest in women’s rights and early French feminists had little concern for the queen.”43 Madelyn Gutwirth uses her analysis of Germaine de Staël’s *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* (1793) to demonstrate that Staël understood much of what was at stake for women in the queen’s trial and execution: “Whereas the courtly code had maintained a semblance of social integration for the women of the privileged class, the new republican code promises women honor as mothers. Staël clearly perceived that in killing the queen, a people ‘neither just nor generous’ was expressing both the death of the old and the feebleness of the new dispensation.”44

Indeed, Staël addressed her defense of Marie-Antoinette to women and stressed their common cause with her: “Oh! you, women of all countries, of all classes of society, listen to me with the emotion I experience. The fate of Marie-Antoinette contains everything that can touch your heart: if you are happy, so was she.”45 In her *Réflexions*, Staël enumerates the queen of the many crimes—and especially that of bad mother—charged against her, and concludes by suggesting to women not their collectivity in difference, but their similarity in sharing a single fate: “I return to you, women whose lives are all sacrificed with [that of] so tender a mother, whose lives are all sacrificed in the outrage that would be perpetrated against weakness by the annihilation of pity. It is the end of your dominion if ferocity reigns, it is the end of your destiny if your tears flow in vain.”46 Staël here panders to some of the most conservative clichés about woman’s nature, but at the same time warns women of their vulnerable position in the social order. Marie-Antoinette’s impending fate symbolizes that position, and earlier in the pamphlet Staël had reminded her readers that the slander used to damn Marie-Antoinette was the sort that could be used to ruin any woman.47

A decade before Marie-Antoinette’s trial constructed her as the quintessential bad mother, Vigée-Lebrun unwittingly showed her as an immodest woman, providing enemies with yet more evidence against her.48 Showing the work was perhaps a tactical error. Maybe the artist was captivated by a certain image of the queen or by her desire to please a patron
captivated by a certain image of herself. So captivated that she “forgot” what everyone knew by 1783: the Salon was becoming a school for virtue and morality increasingly intolerant of immodest depictions. Or maybe the artist just counted on art critics devoted to the monarchy to ensure the proper reception for her work. Aside from these possibilities, Vigée-Lebrun likely considered a Salon entry as a portrayal of her talent. This was, after all, the response to the portrait en chemise of the circles she frequented, the response she represented in the Souvenirs.

In 1783, however, paintings were also judged according to the moral effect of their subject matter, according to how they could influence future action. In a Salon where critics found the most up-to-date history paintings to be those dedicated to great men, to heroic action, to women sacrificed for their virtue—how would this portrait of the queen of France signify? What future did the queen en chemise suggest? Not the future of the past—the gloire of the French monarchy—but a future symbolized by the world of Trianon. The emblem of Trianon was the dress en chemise, as commentators, including the Royalist Rose Campan, have noted. It was as the queen of Trianon that Marie-Antoinette was displayed, judged, and condemned at the Salon of 1783. Although her condemnation then was not as consequential as it would be in 1793, there is an underlying similarity in the charges against her. At her trial Marie-Antoinette was accused of damaging her son’s sexual potency. As the queen en chemise, she was castigated for feminizing a sacred space of the virile French monarchy with her society of women at Trianon. This violation—like that of her son—was all the more egregious because engineered by a foreign woman, by the Autrichienne.

TRIANON

Both Trianons, the grand and the petit, were conceived as resting places for the king to shelter him during the summer’s heat, but each took on other functions, both practical and symbolic. The Grand Trianon became a stage setting for Louis XIV. There the Sun King entertained his court and offered himself to the court as spectacle. The Petit Trianon has a different history, but it too participated in the French monarchy’s symbolics. Its domain was carved out in 1750 with the establishment of a botanical garden, which Louis XV entrusted to Claude Richard. The cultivation of different species of plants extended the symbolism of the seventeenth-century gardens in which Versailles contained the entire cosmos. Jacques-Ange Gabriel designed the garden pavilion built in 1750, which again was the king’s resting place on his garden walks. The Château du Petit Trianon (1763–68), built by the same architect, allowed Louis more extended visits and became the place where he met Mme de Pompadour and where they entertained. His next mistress, Mme du Barry, later occupied the Trianon palace. Although the domain of the Petit Trianon was generally associated with the symbols of Versailles, its palace was associated with the king’s pleasure.

In 1774 Louis XVI gave the Petit Trianon to Marie-Antoinette, who transformed the grounds into an English garden, which we can take as a symbol of the freedom and liberty she hoped to obtain there. With its aesthetics mimicking the look of natural growth through planned disorder, the English garden has long symbolized these values. More important, perhaps, is that the English garden (like the English dress en chemise) was a foreign import into the heart of the French symbolic space. Replanting these gardens coincided with a general replanting of the estate after the trees had been cut down and sold for timber. As head of the Bâtiments, d’Angiviller was in charge of this project. Susan Taylor Leduc has argued that the practical reason for the replanting was hidden under royal propaganda designed to influence public opinion. D’Angiviller wanted the replantation to be perceived as “a restoration of a symbolic space that would signal a return to a golden age of Bourbon rule under the young monarchs, Louis XVI and the queen, Marie-Antoinette.”

D’Angiviller’s fantasy of the replanting was hardly supported by the queen’s jardin anglais at Trianon, with its serpentine paths, sur-
prising views, and architectural follies. As Taylor-Leduc has argued, Trianon negated d’Angiviller’s hope for restoring the park as a sign of royal and national power.\textsuperscript{54} The English garden represented what was fashionable and modern, not the French tradition and Bourbon rule.\textsuperscript{55} The court’s malice took aim at these gardens and accused Marie-Antoinette of changing the name of her domain to “little Vienna.” Mme Campan recalls these rumors in her memoirs, and although the particulars of the story may be unreliable, the tale jibes well with the other charges emanating from the court:

From the moment she was in possession of the Petit Trianon, it was spread about in some societies that she had changed the name of the pleasure pavilion that the king had just given her and had substituted that of little Vienna or little Schönbrun. A man of the court, simple enough to believe the rumor and desiring to enter into her society at the Petit Trianon, wrote to M. Campan to ask permission of the queen. He had in his letter called Trianon little Vienna.\textsuperscript{56}

The image of Trianon as “little Schönbrun” may have been highlighted by copies of paintings that Marie-Antoinette had sent from Vienna and whose subjects recalled her childhood there. In particular, a copy by Wuchart represented the opera and ballet performed by the young archdukes and archduchesses at the marriage of Joseph II. It pictured Marie-Antoinette as a young girl dancing a minuet with her brothers. The French accused her of still dancing to their tune.

In its association with Trianon, the portrait \textit{en chemise} could be, and indeed was, read as indicating the queen’s desire to escape being French, to bring what was alien into the heart of the French realm. Two other comments about the dress make this point. One appeared in a court libel, the \textit{Correspondance secrète inédites sur Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette et La Cour et La Ville de 1777-1792}, which reported that the queen’s fashion angered the silk makers at Lyon, who charged her with ruining a national industry for the profit of her brother Joseph, the Hapsburg ruler.\textsuperscript{57} A second remark directed to the portrait retitled it “France as Austria reduced to covering herself with straw.”\textsuperscript{58}

It is difficult to exaggerate how much clothing mattered in the symbolic economy; its importance for Marie-Antoinette was established with the elaborate etiquette designed to ensure that neither the Hapsburg empress nor the Bourbon king would be sighted when the guardianship of an adolescent girl—the future queen of France—was transferred from Vienna to Paris. The transfer took place in 1770 on neutral territory, on an island in the Rhine under the domain of neither empire, where the French erected tents and other portable shelters. In one of those shelters the young Marie-Antoinette performed the ceremony of the toilette (or rather had it performed on her). She was divested of all her Austrian garb, stripped of all of her clothing, and redressed in garments fabricated entirely in France. She emerged from the tent as if reborn, or at least converted.\textsuperscript{59}

The portrait \textit{en chemise} flaunted the conventions of French etiquette and French dress and opened Marie-Antoinette to the charge that her conversion was not sincere. Even if she had fully assimilated French culture, however, Marie-Antoinette would always be foreign to it. The portrait \textit{en chemise}—or the libels it provoked—brought to light what was fundamental about the queen of France: she was alien to the kingdom. Marie-Antoinette the \textit{Austrienne} was not invented by the revolutionaries or even by her enemies at court. She was conceived with the fundamental laws of France.

But more was encoded in Marie-Antoinette’s portrait than the \textit{Austrienne}, and indeed, the portrait came to stand for some of the most common themes of the libels emanating from the court: the queen’s foreign character, her extravagant spending, and her uncontrolled sexuality. The association with her spending was evident in 1783, for the queen was reputed to have dispensed outrageous sums for the decoration of Trianon. As to the queen’s sexuality, the dress signaled the costume worn by Marie-Antoinette’s friends,
whom libelists characterized as the "tribades of Trianon." This last association was damning not so much because people necessarily believed that lovemaking between women was rampant in the queen's circle, but because the queen had made a location associated with the king and the French domain not only foreign but also feminine. Intimacy among women replaced male desire at Trianon.

Although men were among the invited guests, women and children dominated Trianon, and they stayed there without the ceremony or etiquette normally associated with the court. The king regularly visited the queen at Trianon, but he never slept there. By representing Marie-Antoinette as the queen of Trianon, Vigée-Lebrun made a portrait of the queen for which one can imagine no companion portrait of the king, who was alien to that realm. In fact, a counterpart to the portrait of the queen en gaulle could be found among Vigée-Lebrun's Salon entries in her portrait of the marquise de la Guiche, a member of the queen's intimate circle, as a milkmaid.

The image of Trianon, with its aura of female intimacy, lingered long after the Revolution, and as Terry Castle has shown, women in the nineteenth century called up this myth to manufacture a lesbian identity. Castle writes:

And yet one cannot help but feel in the end, perhaps, that there is also something bizarrely liberating, if not revolutionary, about the transmogrification of Marie-Antoinette into a lesbian heroine. It is true that there is a nostalgic element in her cult: women who thought they "saw" her, like Hélène Smith, the "Dream Romances" writer, and Moberly and Jourdain, were in one sense flagrantly retreating into the past, into a kind of psychic old regime. But in the act of conjuring up her ghost, they were also, I think, conjuring something new into being—a poetics of possibility. It is perhaps not too much to say that in her role as idealized martyr, Marie-Antoinette functioned as a kind of lesbian Oscar Wilde: a rallying point for sentiment and collective emotional intransigence. She 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 the modern lesbian identity was born.60

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Castle's notion of the poetics of possibility leads me to wonder if other women besides Smith, Moberly, and Jourdain saw other sorts of possibilities in the figure of Marie-Antoinette. I am thinking here of women like Olympe de Gouges, who dedicated to the queen her Declaration of the Rights of Woman. This is not to argue that the queen in any way supported or sympathized with the political goals of the French Revolution or generally supported women's rights, but with Olympe de Gouges, advocates for women could imagine the queen as a potential ally. Moreover, Marie-Antoinette provided for some women during the old regime the image of an exceptional woman, a powerful woman descended from an even more powerful woman, who proved herself a supporter of women's endeavors. Under Marie-Antoinette's protection, for example, the Journal des Dames reappeared in 1774, five years after its suspension. Mme de Montaclos (then, baronne de Prinzen) dedicated the new publication to Marie-Antoinette, who lent her support in late 1773, when she was still dauphine. Although Marie-Antoinette may not have advocated the political and moral stances taken by much of what appeared in the Journal des Dames, she maintained her patronage of the publication. Nina Gelbart speculates that the queen was grateful to Mme de Montaclos, who seemed eager to uphold her as "an intelligent and virtuous model for the whole female sex."61

In the visual arts, not only did the queen advance Vigée-Lebrun's career, but she was also a strong supporter of the artist Anne Vallayer-Coster. On September 15, 1779, Mercy reports to Marie-Thérèse that Marie-Antoinette left Versailles only to go to Paris to see the Salon. In that Salon was Vallayer-Coster's image of a vestal crowned with roses, which belonged
David’s work, finding the real queen in neither the portrait she found most resembling nor the one her mother found most pleasing. These authors were perhaps led by the immediacy of the rapid sketch suggested; or maybe the reputation of the great male artist seduced them; or it could be that the tendency to view Marie-Antoinette from the perspective of the Revolution motivated them. On the other hand, David’s drawing may have seemed the most “resembling” because it so well fits the stereotype of a royal person as one who acts with great dignity in the face of imminent annihilation. Finally following the proper etiquette, in David’s image Marie-Antoinette is resigned to her fate. Here is how Henri Bouchot characterized the work:

David had the last sitting with the queen, he saw her for a few seconds before him more majestic and more sovereign than Madame Le Brun or the others had known her. No rouge on her cheeks, no powder in her hair. A linen bonnet has replaced the toque of velvet, a little white robe garbs her miserably; it is again a portrait “en gaulle,” the last one this time.  

Finding David’s portrait the most majestic seems to me a misogynistic and perversely Royalist gesture. In this image, the woman-queen can be safely majestic and sovereign precisely because she has no power. Her hands tied behind her back, Marie-Antoinette is not threatening to the French republic as the daughter of the Hapsburg empress, nor to her viewers as an unruly woman. She is here resigned to the role that, perhaps even more than the part of mother, patriarchy has reserved for woman—that of victim. I am not suggesting that she was the Revolution’s victim, as Royalist sympathizers would portray her, but rather that she occupies the position of victim, the “feminine” place of the one destined to be attacked.  

From the standpoint of many French citizens in 1793, Marie-Antoinette certainly represented the indecent privileges of aristocracy and the bankrupt principles of monarchy. It would be folly to deny that
she is entitled to represent a share of that meaning. But such a reading of the queen’s image can no longer be cited, at least not after the work of Hunt, Mazza, Gutwirth, Colwill, and others, without also noting that she more than other likely candidates came to embody “the possible profanation of everything the nation held sacred.” In this context, David’s sketch can be viewed as one more example of the interest focused on the queen’s body and, more specifically, as part of the attention that accompanied her on the road to the scaffold.

Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Marie-Antoinette and David’s sketch of her must be read according to the different political circumstances in which they were produced. Marie-Antoinette in 1783 posed a threat not to the new French republic, but to certain interests at court and within the governing elite. What ties the two images together, however, is that in different ways each presents Marie-Antoinette not simply as the king’s wife, but as the most notorious, dangerous, and powerful public woman in France. And a woman who acted in public—both in 1783 and 1793—only raised fears of sexual differentiation, but also bore the blame for society’s moral decline.

David’s portrait pictures not so much an absolute monarch—for the queen could never be that in France—but a public woman vanquished, paying equally for her real and imagined political sins and gender-bendings. In contrast is Vigée-Lebrun’s 1783 portrait, which transgresses, first by showing the queen in a private role, and second by showing her as a woman with the will to reconfigure associations within the elite, to ignore the rules of court life and etiquette, to reconfigure part of the king’s domain. Of the two images, I prefer the one made in 1783; it lends Marie-Antoinette not the political power of a monarch’s wife anxious to quell a popular revolution, and not the authority of the austere queen-mother who sits with her children in the official portrait Vigée-Lebrun made in 1787 (Musée du Château, Versailles). I prefer the portrait that allows Marie-Thérèse’s daughter the power to define herself against established norms of seemly, modest, womanly behavior. I prefer Vigée-Lebrun’s unofficial portrait, the one the sitter chose as her image, the one that shows Marie-Antoinette as the tribade of Trianon.

NOTES
4. La Morte de trois milles ans au Salon de 1783, Collection Deloynes, 286: 6.
10. Ibid., 11–12.
11. Ibid., 14.
13. Ibid., 3. Representation in Marin’s text is both a substitution and an official showing, as when the term means to represent or to show one’s documents.
15. Ibid.
16. Whether or not this actually happens in the imagination of an individual subject is a different question.
19. Ibid., 2: 88.
22. Ibid., 26.
26. Ibid., 97–98; and Mousnier, Institutions, 2: 89–90.
28. Even after Louis received Dureux’s portrait, Marie-Thérèse’s agent in Paris let it be understood that Marie-Antoinette’s beauty was superior to that represented. J. Flammermont, “Les Portraits de Marie-Antoinette,” Gazette des Beaux-Arts 18 (1897): 5–21.
32. On Marie-Thérèse’s warnings about riding “en homme,” see Correspondance secrète, 1: 104.
33. Letter dated 17 August 1771. Ibid., 1: 196.
34. Letter of 18 October 1774. Ibid., 2: 248.
37. Letter of 1 April 1779. Ibid., 3: 303.
38. Letter from Marie-Thérèse to the Count de Mercy, 18 March 1775. Ibid., 2: 310.
40. Ibid., 123.
46. Ibid., xxx.
47. Ibid., xvi; and Gutwirth, Twilight, 301.
51. As quoted by Marin, Portrait of the King, 205.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 87.
55. I owe this observation to Nicholas Mirzoeff.
56. Campan, Mémoires, 84.