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The Power of the Queen of Fashion

Marie Antoinette was not supposed to have power. Nevertheless, Marie Antoinette still holds power in society. Even those who know little about history know her name. Movies tell her story. Only a few weeks ago, tiktoker Haley Baylee dressed as Marie Antoinette for the Met Gala and posted a video saying, “Let them eat cake” (Rittiner). The video went viral; the response was overwhelmingly negative. This provided us with a small glimpse of what it would have felt like to be a French commoner and to hear tales about Queen Marie Antoinette. Because of world events, this is an especially pertinent time to examine the history and impact of the infamous Queen Marie Antoinette. The fashion of Marie Antoinette shaped the fashion revolution in France and still impacts our lives to this day.

Alongside the French Revolution was a fashion revolution. Fashion historian, Aileen Ribeiro writes, “No other time in history has politics and dress been so closely entwined as the French Revolution” (23). Fashion is a tool for communicating identities, and since the French Revolution profoundly impacted the way that people understood their identities, it is only logical that fashion would transform. Before the Revolution, Europeans viewed society as ordered by God. They believed the king had divine authority to rule. The belief that people were placed at their rank in society by an omnipotent force was a convenient belief for men in power. It had the effect of preventing people from rebelling due to unfair conditions. It led women to believe God’s will was for them to suffer instead of fighting for equality. Furthermore, it kept people of higher classes from having too much sympathy for the lower classes and, therefore, prevented

them from disrupting the hierarchy from the top down. Because people's identities were rigidly ordered, so were their clothes. Sumptuary laws required that citizens dressed according to their class. Historian Daniel Roche argues that by the time of the French Revolution, sumptuary laws had been largely abandoned in favor of capitalism (Roche). Despite the relaxation of the sumptuary laws, some dress requirements were mandatory. In the royal courts, certain outfits were required. Outside of the royal courts, people of lower classes would not be able to afford the clothing of the upper classes, and clothing was not yet mass-produced. Therefore, fashion was still divided according to class.

When France revolted, it changed Western society permanently. If royalty were not divinely appointed, then neither was the social hierarchy. If God did not give people's life significance, then the individual was significant in and of themselves. Therefore, clothing represented an order that no longer existed. Society now needed new clothes to demonstrate their new ideals. How does one dress to demonstrate freedom? What does democracy look like in fashion terms? The question of what to wear was never more pressing than during the French Revolution.

Before we examine the way that the French people answered these questions, it is necessary to examine what they wore before the Revolution. We must know what Marie Antoinette wore so that we can see how her fashion impacted the fashion that followed. Before the French Revolution, class divided the ornateness of societies' dress, not gender. Fashion historian Lynn Hunt expands, "The elegance and finery of male dress at least equaled that of female dress during the classical period- and indeed, since the end of the Roman empire" (236). Prior to the Revolution, men wore heels, makeup, and wigs. On the abandonment of these accouterments, especially wigs, historian Quentin Bell writes, "This decline and fall is

portentous; ever since the days of Elisha men have been deeply sensitive to the crowning injustice of nature; the wig gave them a century and a half of immunity” (81). This large-scale abandonment of men’s efforts to beautify themselves has come to be known as the “great masculine renunciation,” a phrase coined by psychologist Johann Flügel in 1930. Instead of the elegance that had once characterized men’s fashion, simplicity and uniformity replaced it. Why would men sacrifice this opportunity to display grandeur or, at least, to cover their balding heads? The answer may have to do with one highly fashionable queen.

However, before we get there, and before we look at the Revolution’s impact on women’s fashion, which may also have contributed to the Great Masculine Renunciation, let us consider Marie Antoinette’s fashion. Her French fashion reign began before she even stepped on French soil.

When Marie Antoinette was only fourteen, she left her home, her country, her family, and everything else she’d ever known to marry Louis XVI. While on her way from Austria to France, the princess was made to stop and undress. “From her heavy train to her voluminous skirts, from her ruffled lace sleeves to her ribbon-bedecked bodice, from the jewels in her hair to the buckles on her shoes” (Weber 25) all of it was removed. This was known as an undressing ritual, and it was a Bourbon tradition. Now, along with everything else, even her specially chosen clothes were taken from her. European historian, Regina Schlute explains the reason. “Having shed both clothing and name, the princess stands literally and metaphorically naked, before being physically overcome in a genuine and symbolic act of fitting out with new garments. Never again will Austrian-Spanish thread or cloth touch the bride’s body” (4). The undressing ritual shows how significant clothing is.

Marie Antoinette would have experienced this acutely. There is evidence that Marie Antoinette felt an unusual fondness for clothes from an early age. When Marie Antoinette was only seven years old, her older sister, Archduchess



Marie Christine, painted a portrait of the family at breakfast on Christmas morning. While the rest of the family wears more casual and comfortable attire, Marie Antoinette does not. She is dressed in an elegant *robe à la française*. Fashion historian, Caroline Weber explains that this dress was “a slightly less cumbersome variation on the ceremonial *grand habit*, identifiable by its tight, low-cut bodice and by the pleated train hanging from her tiny shoulders” (14). Because the rest of the family is dressed casually, the portrait implies that Marie Antoinette willfully chose not to present herself this way. The painting suggests that she enjoyed dressing up and beautifying herself. So, when Marie Antoinette was stripped of her clothes, she cried (Weber). Despite her years of training preparing her for what she would face as a Queen, the removal and confiscation of her clothing caused her to lose her composure. Marie Antoinette was uniquely positioned to connect the significance of clothes to identity.

Though the purpose of the undressing ritual may have been to symbolically remove her national identity and reclaim her as French, it also proved that Marie Antoinette now had nothing that completely belonged to her. Even the way that she presented her body was under the authority of others. Her duty was now to the king, to bear him sons, and to the nation to be a

symbol of the order which God ordained. Because human bodies are clothed bodies, the removal and control of Marie Antoinette's clothing symbolized a loss of control of her body and identity. However, perhaps it also emphasized in her mind the extraordinary power of clothes. Perhaps that was a lesson she never forgot and one that she passed on to the French citizens who revolted. Hence, when Marie Antoinette finally gained some freedom to choose how she presented herself, she reclaimed herself. And since she was meant to belong to the King and the country, this was a revolutionary act.

For centuries the ruling class displayed their status through their grand appearance; it was the law. However, Marie Antoinette's dress was different. Her dress, along with widely circulated gossip and rumors about her, caused Marie Antoinette to gain more attention than her husband, the King. This overshadowing had a cyclical effect. The attention caused outrage, which led to more attention and then more outrage. For example, the public deemed the dress Marie Antoinette wore in a portrait by Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun inappropriate. Indeed, it was so offensive to the French public that it had to be removed. They compared it to Marie Antoinette being nude (Sheriff). Because the French people were focusing more on Marie Antoinette's fashion than the king, the Queen faced accusations of feminizing the French royalty (Sheriff 62). Therefore, her feminine dresses, some of which would not have otherwise inspired wrath, added to charges of feminization and caused further offense. Additionally, Marie Antoinette's private gardens were the subject of suspicion and intrigue. It led the French people to speculate about her sex life. The real insult to the public did not come from the validity of the rumors, but from the Queen's sexuality overshadowing the King's (Sheriff). Again, the royalty was feminized.

Unlike the portrait her sister painted of their family when Marie Antoinette was a child, in the Vigée-Lebrun portrait Marie Antoinette's dress is more casual than was common. The style is known as *en chemise*, or a chemise dress. It is not structured like the *robe à la française* she wore for fun as a little girl. Conversely, she chooses to dress herself in something flowing and whimsical. As a princess, she might have been dressing up as a queen, but as a queen, she seems to be reminiscing about childhood. The portrait is casual. Her dress and her activity speak of ease. They also represent pleasure. The Queen is comfortable and performing an activity that brings her joy. So, by her dress and activity, the queen references herself, not the King, not the nation. The portrait is additionally feminized by the many curves: her dress with its frills, her floppy hat with its fluffy feathers, the spiraling petals of the flowers. There are very few masculine, hard, straight lines. There is no reference to the King. And Marie Antoinette dares to stare at the viewer. She observes those who observe her. She asserts that she is more than a vessel for the country; she has her own free will. Women were allowed to be in positions of power, yet they were not allowed to have power. A woman in a position of power, not sacrificing all of her power, well, that was like a French peasant deciding to demand their rights instead of playing the role God had assigned to them.

While the French people were abundantly clear about what they thought of Marie Antoinette's fashion, the fact that



French women still copied her style indicates that their feelings were more nuanced. One contemporary writer reflected in 1797, “By one of these contradictions that are more common in France than anywhere else, even as the people were criticizing the Queen for her outfits, they continued to imitate her. Every woman wanted to have the same *déshabillé*, the same bonnet, that they had seen her wear” (Montjoie 101). Her chemise dress was no different. One pamphlet compared the dress to nude sculptures of ancient Greek men. The only difference, it said, is the sight of a nude man would be much more pleasing (Sheriff 46). Though the chemise dress fully covered women, a naked man was preferable in the opinion of many. Therefore, imitators not only mirrored a despised painting and an increasingly despised Queen, but they also broke codes of convention.

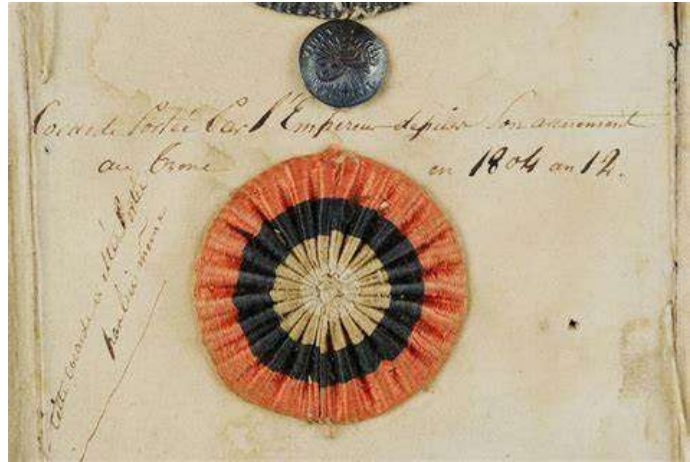
Marie Antoinette’s clothes implied power, not for the King or the nation, but personal power. Writing in *Queen of Fashion*, Weber elucidates:

Propelled to notoriety by the ingenuity of designers to whom the public came to refer as her ‘ministry of fashion,’ Marie Antoinette established herself as a force to be reckoned with- as a Queen who commanded as much attention as the most dazzling King or mistress, and whose imposing stature had nothing to do with her maternal prospects (6).

Marie Antoinette’s power was directly related to and indeed caused by her fashion. Therefore, despite what women may have thought about the Queen herself, they observed clothing was a way to grasp personal power and they followed suit.

Thus, when the Queen and King were overthrown, women experimented with fashion. With the Queen no longer there to lead the stylistic way, they groped for the best way to make fashion work for them. One Parisian magazine published in the winter of 1799 said of women,

“The fashion now is to follow none. In a circle of thirty women, you will not see two hairstyles, two dresses, two get-ups that resemble each other” (*Journal des modes ed nouveautés* 10). Not only did variety characterize women’s fashion, but so did rapid change. One writer in 1800 observed, “In the past, [a fashion] lasted three or four months, and sometimes a whole semester; now it changes every fifteen days, and there is never one pronounced enough to enjoy preference over the others” (Henrion 125). This fashion instability suggests that for a time



after Marie Antoinette, women were uncertain about what to say with their fashion or how to say it. Marie Antoinette's clothing eloquently announced her personal power, and many copied to identify with the message of personal power for women. Now that she was gone, they were uncertain what their next outfit should be.

Other women knew exactly what they wanted to say with their clothes and the men did not like it. After the royal family was removed from Versailles, both men and women began wearing the tricolor cockade to represent their support for the revolution. Historian Philip Mansel explains, “The tricolor cockade became an indispensable outward symbol of support of the revolution and the new social order... Not to wear the tricolor cockade in a public place after July 1789 led to insults from ‘the populace’ and, after July 1792, to the possibility of arrest or execution. All other cockades were banned” (68). The tricolor cockade was like a flag; each color symbolizes something meaningful. Red stands for courage and the blood sacrificed by French patriots, blue represents France and justice, and white means royalty (Mansel). Like a flag, laws

were made to ensure the respectful use of this revered symbol. For example, if the white part were extended, one could receive up to six years in prison (Mansel). While all were expected to wear them, and eventually they were also legally required to, some women's clubs took things a step further. They began to monitor the cockades that people wore, and they ripped cockades that they disagreed with from people's shirts. They also added to the clothing requirements. They believed everyone should wear red liberty caps to show their support for the revolution. Some of these women also wore pantaloons. This aggressive behavior by certain women's organizations led to a law stating, "No person of either sex may constrain any citizen or citizens to dress in a particular manner, each individual being free to wear whatever clothing or attire of its sex that pleases him" (Hunt 227). While this law appeared to give everyone freedom of dress (according to their sex), in practice, it decreased freedom for women. The law had the effect of depoliticizing these women's groups. Hunt explains the motivation, "Dress had become too political an issue for women, and it signaled their intrusion into a public sphere seen as masculine (thus requiring masculine dress)" (228). These women, like Marie Antoinette, were too visible and political with their dress, so they, too, were silenced.

The cockade wars demonstrate an effort to use outward adornment to affect inward change. Though the sumptuary laws were gone and there was now "freedom of dress," the belief persisted that by adjusting fashion certain outcomes could be obtained. This logic resembles their previous belief system of an outside force ordering society. Though they no longer understood society that way, they still tried to create a republican society by ordering the wearing of cockades and then, for men, uniforms.

The great masculine renunciation began with the belief that men could achieve equality through donning simple, military-style uniforms. The new republican government considered

uniforms for men appropriate to show republican citizenship. Robespierre supported the introduction of uniforms so much so that he is recorded saying children should wear uniforms beginning at the age of five to accustom themselves to the idea of equality (Mansel 75). An additional motivation for the belief that a dress code could transform character comes from Marie Antoinette. The French people witnessed the power that fashion gave the Queen. Men, especially, would have been hesitant to believe the power came from within and that fashion was a tool for expressing what she knew. Instead, the message they likely received was that clothing creates the individual.

The fashion revolution caused men to revolt against the Queen of Fashion and the fashion of the ruling class. Whereas the Queen's clothes were known for luxury, men's clothing went the opposite direction and became known for simplicity. They also felt the need to distinguish themselves from women. They gave up anything that would make them resemble a woman, including wigs, heels, and makeup. Now men's fashion announced gender distinctions very clearly. This reasserted male dominance. In a time when identities were in flux, they used clothing to announce that one thing would not change: they were men, and they were keeping their positions at the top of the hierarchy. The need to emphasize this might not have been so great if not for Marie Antoinette.

The effort to create equality through fashion failed in comparison to the use of fashion to exclude women from power. This is because one was a wish that people had for society and the other was using fashion to confirm something that was already believed by society. As renowned fashion scholar Anne Hollander writes, "The language of clothes is essentially wordless- that is what it was created to be, so that it can operate freely below the level of conscious thought and utterance" (7). Therefore, equality was not achieved through uniforms. However, through

uniforms and suits which are its legacy, men made it difficult for women's fashion to ever overshadow them again. They no longer compete with women. Their lack of competition has led to the spectacle of women's fashion being perceived as a flaw of womanly frivolity. However, the fact that men historically matched women's "frivolity" shows that the flaw is not with women, but rather the underlying beliefs about women.

Trends in fashion, which began in the fashion revolution, persist to this day. Men's fashion is still simpler and more uniform than women's. However, today we see more nudity in women's fashion than ever before. In the nudity are echoes of Marie Antoinette's chemise dress. One can read a reclamation of power in these sheer ensembles. By exposing their bodies, they expose society to what it fears: women. The centuries-old belief that women are evil, deceptive, seductive, and unintelligent lingers with us. Along with it is the belief that women's bodies are wrong; men's are correct. By exposing nipples and showing almost bare bodies, women demonstrate that there is nothing to fear; there is nothing wrong. No tricks are being played. They embody themselves. Instead of being mentally undressed and, therefore, the object of sexualization, they take the initiative. They have the power. Marie Antoinette, whether intentionally or not, sexualized herself as a way of reclaiming her sexuality. She hinted at her body so that the world could see it was hers.

Today, female celebrities are blamed in a similar fashion as Marie Antoinette. Society resembles the circumstances leading to the French Revolution, such as an extreme wealth disparity. The rage that Haley Baylee's recitation of "let them eat cake" inspired proves this. Another celebrity who faced criticism related to her Met Gala fashion was singer Camila Cabello, who carried a \$22,500 purse made of ice. Frozen in the ice was a copper rose. Critics drew attention to atrocities occurring across the globe as the singer's ice block melted on the red

carpet. Like the French aristocracy, Met Gala attendees are expected to wear rich and elaborate costumes. Because of outrage at female stars' conspicuous display of wealth, an initiative has spread online to block celebrities on social media (Paton). It is worth noting that men have not faced the fraction of criticism for their fashion that women have. However, neither Marie Antoinette nor today's celebrities have the power of ruling men, yet they are facing blame.

How does one create a successful revolution? Maybe it is time for another paradigm shift. Those who are able to win should not be able to take all. The world's richest people are not the world's rightful rulers. The Kings of centuries past did not divinely rule. They simply ruled until society decided this was not the way. As the planet nears destruction and wars and genocides persist, many realize that the rulers of capitalism are not the right ones. However, society remains largely un-united. The ability for people to unite is crucial for a revolution.

Unfortunately, little unites a society like hating a woman. Marie Antoinette was the sacrificial lamb. The one who had to be hated in order for France to unite and successfully revolt. She held the sins of society for the revolution. Therein was her greatest power, though not her only power. Marie Antoinette taught women how to use fashion to claim their power, themselves, and she gave men something to fear so deeply that they would renounce any ties to womanly fashion in an effort to avoid it ever happening again: a woman who by being herself can inspire revolution.

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