

MARIE-ANTOINETTE



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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Some of the following classifications are somewhat schematic. There were overlaps: for instance, Marie-Antoinette's social group, the Polignacs, were also the king's political supporters often in opposition to the queen. I have placed Robespierre among the republicans but as late as 1791 he thought the declaration of republic would be aristocratic. Lafayette and the Girondins were doctrinaire republicans but when it came to the crunch tried to save the monarchy – ineffectively, because their heart wasn't in it.

THE AUSTRIAN ROYAL FAMILY

Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor 1745–65.

Maria-Theresa, his wife, queen of Bohemia and Hungary in her own right, 1740–80.

Joseph I, their eldest son, Holy Roman Emperor 1765–90 and co-ruler with his mother.

Leopold II, their second son, grand duke of Tuscany then Holy Roman Emperor 1790–2.

Marie-Antoinette, their youngest daughter, b. 1755, archduchess of Austria, then dauphine of France 1770–4 and queen of France 1774–92.

THE FRENCH ROYAL FAMILY

Louis XV, king of France 1715–74.

Maria Leszczyńska, his wife, d. 1768.

Madame de Pompadour, his *maîtresse-en-titre*, d. 1764.

Madame du Barry, his *maîtresse-en-titre* 1768–74.

Louis-Ferdinand, his only son, the 'old dauphin', d. 1765.

Adélaïde and Victoire, his daughters, known as Mesdames Tantes under Louis XVI.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Louis-Auguste, eldest surviving son of Louis-Ferdinand: dauphin 1765–74, king of France 1774–92.

Louis Stanislas Xavier, his next brother, comte de Provence, known as ‘Monsieur’, then Louis XVIII 1813–24.

Charles-Philippe, the next brother, comte d’Artois then Charles X 1824–30.

Elizabeth of France, their sister, known as Madame Elizabeth, guillotined 1794.

THE CHILDREN OF LOUIS XVI AND MARIE-ANTOINETTE

Louis-Joseph, the ‘first dauphin’ 1781–9.

Louis-Charles, the ‘second dauphin’ 1785–95, sometimes called Louis XVII 1793–5.

Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte, Madame Royale 1778–1854, their eldest child.

Sophie, 1786–87.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE’S SOCIAL CIRCLE, THE POLIGNAC SET

Yolande de Polastron, comtesse then duchesse de Polignac, governess of the royal children 1782–9.

Armand, comte then duc de Polignac, Yolande’s husband, *Surintendant des postes*.

Diane de Polignac, Armand’s sister, the brains behind the group.

Vaudreuil, Joseph Hyacinthe, comte de, lover of Madame de Polignac.

Adhémar, Jean-Balthazar, comte d’, ambassador to the Court of Saint-James, 1783–7.

Calonne, Charles-Alexandre de, finance minister 1783–7.

Artois, Charles-Philippe, comte d’.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE’S POLITICAL CIRCLE

Breteuil, Louis Auguste, baron de, minister of the household 1783–8, head of the ‘ministry of the hundred hours’ 12–14 July 1789.

Castries, Charles-Eugène, marquis de, minister of the Marine, 1780–7.

Choiseul, Étienne-François, duc de, foreign minister 1757–61, dominant minister in the 1760s, arranged Marie-Antoinette’s marriage to the dauphin.

Guines, Adrien-Louis, comte then duc de, ambassador to London 1770–6.

Ségur, Philippe Henri, marquis de, minister for war 1780–7.

Loménie de Brienne, Étienne-Charles de, Archbishop of Toulouse, prime minister 1787–8.

Mercy-Argenteau, Florimond, comte de, Austrian ambassador, 1766–89.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Necker, Jacques, finance minister 1776–81, de facto prime minister 1788–9.
Vermond, Jacques-Mathieu, abbé de, Marie-Antoinette's tutor.

THE KING'S PARTY

Calonne, Charles-Alexandre de, finance minister 1783–7.
Maurepas, Frédéric comte de, minister for the household 1718–23, minister for the Marine 1723–49, de facto prime minister 1774–81.
Montmorin, Armand Marc, comte de, foreign secretary 1787–91.
Vergennes, Charles Gravier, comte de, foreign secretary 1774–87.
And the Polignac set in general, as above.

REVOLUTIONARY LEADERS

Constitutional Monarchists

Barnave, Antoine, deputy in the Constituent Assembly.
Duport, Adrien, *parlementaire* then deputy in the Constituent Assembly.
Lameth, Alexandre comte de, courtier then deputy in the Constituent Assembly.
The above three known as 'the triumvirs'.
Duport de Tertre, Marguerite-Louis-François, minister of justice, 1790–2. The conduit for the implementation of Marie-Antoinette and Barnave's policy in 1791.
Lafayette, Gilles, marquis de, commander of the Parisian National Guard, determined enemy of Marie-Antoinette whom he blamed for stiffening the king's resistance to the Revolution.
Mirabeau, Honoré Gabriel, comte de, journalist, deputy in the Constituent Assembly, secret adviser to Marie-Antoinette.
Mounier, Jean Joseph, deputy in the Constituent Assembly. Supported a strong constitutional monarchy and seceded from the National Assembly in protest at the October Days.
Malouet, Pierre Victoire, deputy in the Constituent Assembly. Supported a strong constitutional monarchy.
Narbonne, Louis comte de, minister of war 1791–2. Lover of Madame de Staël, advocated war.

Republicans

Pétion, Jérôme, deputy, mayor of Paris.
Robespierre, Maximilien, deputy, member of the Committee of Public Safety. It was his influence which sent Marie-Antoinette before the Revolutionary Tribunal.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

David, Jacques-Louis, painter, deputy, member of the Committee of General Security.

Hébert, René, editor of *Le Père Duchesne*, official in the Commune of Paris.

Danton, Georges, deputy, member of the 'first' Committee of Public Safety.

Brissot, Jean-Pierre, deputy, the leader of the war party 1791–2.

Vergniaud, Pierre, deputy, Girondin associate of Brissot.

Fouquier-Tinville, Antoine Quentin, public prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal which tried Marie-Antoinette.

Herman, Armand-Joseph, president of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

OTHER CHARACTERS

D'Aiguillon, Emmanuel, duc, foreign secretary under Louis XV, and Marie-Antoinette's first 'scalp' on becoming queen.

Fersen, Axel von, Swedish nobleman in the service of France, reputed lover of Marie-Antoinette.

Guéméné, Victoire-Armande, princesse de, governess of the royal children 1778–82. Marie-Antoinette once told her, 'I will love you to my dying day', but had her dismissed after the spectacular bankruptcy of her husband.

Kaunitz, Wenzel Anton, prince von, Austrian chancellor 1753–92. Kaunitz discounted Marie-Antoinette's utility to Austria, calling her a 'bad payer'.

Lamballe, Marie Thérèse Louise of Savoy, princesse de, *surintendant* of the queen's household. An early favourite, she returned to France at Marie-Antoinette's request in 1791 and was killed in the September Massacres the next year.

Lamoignon, Chrétien-François de, president in the Parlement, justice minister 1787–8. Lamoignon organized the acquittal of Cardinal Rohan by the Parlement but Marie-Antoinette had to work closely with him a year later.

La Motte-Valois, Jeanne, mastermind of the heist known as the Diamond Necklace Affair.

Noailles, Anne comtesse de, *dame d'honneur* (no. 2) in the queen's household. Dubbed 'Madame Etiquette' by Marie-Antoinette, who also thought the power of the Noailles had become too entrenched.

Ossun, Geneviève de Gramont, comtesse de. Marie-Antoinette attended her salon when relations with Madame de Polignac became strained in 1787. Guillotined in 1794.

Rohan, Louis, cardinal de, ambassador to Vienna 1772–4, Grand Almoner 1777–86, hated by Marie-Antoinette and the dupe in the Diamond Necklace Affair.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Staël, Germaine, Madame de, daughter of Necker, lover of Narbonne, she published an anonymous defence of Marie-Antoinette when she learned she was to be tried.

Turgot, Anne-Robert-Jacques, distinguished economist and finance minister 1774–6. Marie-Antoinette threatened to have him thrown in the Bastille but her role in his downfall has been exaggerated.



PREFACE

Throughout her life Marie-Antoinette was haunted by the spectre of death, and her days were riddled by destructive ennui. Her beloved father Francis I, duke of Lorraine and Holy Roman Emperor, had died in 1765 when she was ten; in adult life she would go on to lose two of her four children; and as queen, half expecting to be killed, she would pore over David Hume's recently published account of the English Civil War along with her husband the king, who hoped thereby to dodge the fate of Charles I.¹ In the grounds of her Versailles pleasure villa, the Petit Trianon, there stood a tomb inscribed with a French translation of *Et in arcadia ego*, 'I, death, am present even in Arcadia.' The tomb was fake, as was the rustic simplicity Marie-Antoinette affected, but the shudder it must have evoked was genuine.

During her early years as queen Marie-Antoinette moved between listlessness and hedonistic activity, seeking out pleasure in the form of balls and gambling for high stakes with her court favourite, Madame de Polignac, by her side. Her periods of unpredictable and rash activity following her arrival at the French court in 1770 oscillated with periods of inertia – she was, from birth, a pawn in others' strategies. Nonetheless, Marie-Antoinette also intervened to a degree politically – and her interventions escalated so that, particularly in the six years preceding her death, she would play a significant part in determining the course of her own life, and that of her country. In 1788, before the Revolution was properly under way, she wrote, 'My fate is to bring misfortune.' The contrast first highlighted by Madame de Staël between her glittering beginning and tragic fall was really present throughout.

Six months after the birth of Marie-Antoinette, her Austrian mother Maria-Theresa, wife of Francis I but de facto ruler, worked to ensure that she be pledged as wife to the dauphin, thereby sealing the Austrian-French alliance. Initially a passive player exploited by her mother and brother, Joseph II, Marie-Antoinette would in her later years come to assert her independence. As queen of France

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she would play a decisive role in the unfolding of events, try to make the constitutional monarchy succeed and strive to turn the tide of revolutionary fervour, albeit with limited success.

The scene of the French court into which Marie-Antoinette arrived as the young dauphine was marked by an atmosphere of ossified tradition, severe formality reinforced by the entrenched power and influence of certain long-established noble families, rivalry between different groups with vested interests, and distrust and hatred of the mistresses of Louis XV who had sown seeds of division, past (Madame de Pompadour) and present (Madame du Barry). It was also a court presiding over a country in dire financial straits, and badly in need of reform. France had recently emerged from the Seven Years War in which she had been trounced on land and sea, losing Canada and her influence in India to England, accumulated debt, and become involved in internecine disputes with the political judges sitting in the Parlement whom Louis XV considered to be 'republicans'. Many in France attributed France's defeats to a one-sided commitment to her new ally, Austria. Marie-Antoinette would have to be careful, particularly in resisting her family's attempts to enlist her in their striving for territorial expansion.

This life of Marie-Antoinette looks at the extent of her power and influence, and the political role she played, prior to and during the French Revolution. This influence only became marked when the king's morale collapsed after the Assembly of Notables rejected his comprehensive reform programme in 1787 – the first in an unbroken chain of events which led to revolution. Then the king turned to her in his distress, but she came to the task largely unprepared as he had hitherto excluded her from matters of state. She had, as she told Antoine Barnave in 1791, some 'experience derived from following politics silently [*sic*] for 17 years'. But would it be enough?

This biography will demonstrate how before the Revolution Marie-Antoinette's favouritism, notably for the Polignac circle, was not just driven by a desire for constant amusement but was also an ambitious attempt to rebalance the Court and diminish the power of established families. In this, she sought to emulate her mother. Maria-Theresa had slackened the rigid, gloomy and austere Spanish etiquette that her father the emperor Charles VI had introduced to the Austrian court, and had managed to achieve the difficult balance between informality and familiarity. But where the mother had succeeded, the daughter's rebalancing was seen as capricious favouritism and only served to deepen her unpopularity.

During the revolutionary period, Marie-Antoinette's stance was markedly less 'reactionary' than is generally thought. Nor at first was she wholly opposed

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to the growing demands of the Third Estate in 1788–9. In the aftermath of the royal family's flight to Varennes and their forced return to Paris, it will be argued that Marie-Antoinette made sincere and concerted efforts to make the constitutional monarchy work during the last year of its life, between July 1791 and January 1792. The full significance of the exchange of letters between the queen and Barnave during this period will be brought out. An early leader of the Revolution, by autumn 1790 Barnave had come to the conclusion that a strong constitutional monarchy was necessary in order to 'stop the Revolution' before it descended into barbarism and an attack on property. In the closing months of 1791 Marie-Antoinette and Barnave governed France by secret correspondence. Their letters (forty-four apiece) show how policy was hammered out in detail between them. Their correspondence was published in 1913 but has never been fully exploited. At first many considered it a forgery because it presented Barnave as a 'traitor' but when in 1934 handwriting expertise showed it was undoubtedly genuine, another obstacle arose: the correspondence was worthless because Marie-Antoinette was palpably insincere, stringing Barnave along until her Austrian relatives saved her. I argue that the queen was sincere as long as there was a chance of success, but in order to bring their policy alive one needs to know how it was implemented. This can be done via the correspondence between two insiders,² which shows how the policy agreed by Marie-Antoinette and Barnave was given via the justice minister Duport du Tertre to a cabinet committee sitting in a specially designated room in the Tuileries. It was then rubber stamped by the Conseil d'Etat for executive action. This, Marie-Antoinette's most serious essay in government, necessarily sheds light on one of the most obscure and under-investigated aspects of the Revolution: the ministerial politics of the constitutional monarchy.

But the queen's intervention in politics came at a price. There wasn't supposed to be any politicking in a theoretically absolute monarchy like France; and even if, in practice, the king was obliged to spend some of his time on it, the queen certainly wasn't. In 1788, Marie-Antoinette 'sighed, and said there has been no more happiness for me since they turned me into an intriguer', claiming that in entering the political arena she was 'yielding to necessity [the king's depression] and my unfortunate fate'. But who had 'turned Marie-Antoinette into an intriguer'? Or was she merely being self-indulgent, something of which she was capable? It was not her Austrian relatives: Maria-Theresa and Joseph both urged her to stay clear of internal politics given its precarious nature and keep her powder dry to aid their foreign policy. The Austrian ambassador, however, Florimond Mercy-Argenteau, off his own bat plugged the candidacy of Loménie de Brienne, the archbishop of Toulouse, to be prime minister and,

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after he had played the role of leader of the opposition in the Notables, Marie-Antoinette was indeed instrumental in making him prime minister and then supporting him heart and soul during his disastrous eighteen months in office. I have called the chapter devoted to this period, 'The Ascendancy of Marie-Antoinette'. Her association with the hated premier completed her dangerous unpopularity, which had already deepened as a result of the Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785–6.

Who else dragged a not always unwilling queen into politics? Yolande, comtesse then duchesse de Polignac, was one of the seminal friends of Marie-Antoinette, the other two being Axel von Fersen and the revolutionary leader he was madly jealous of, Barnave. Marie-Antoinette was accused, in the scurrilous pamphlets that abounded, of sleeping with all three, especially Madame de Polignac.³ But a well-informed observer considered that by 1785 the king was fonder of Yolande than the queen was.⁴ She was prettier than the queen, though it was said that contemporary portraits did justice to neither. But that was not the main reason for the king's interest.

Madame de Polignac was 'planted' at court by her relative, the king's chief minister, the comte de Maurepas, to neutralize what he considered the queen's dangerous influence, particularly on foreign policy, and to keep a watchful eye over the Austrian fifth columnist. Maurepas was the young king's Mentor, but Louis needed no encouragement to keep his wife out of foreign policy: as she was Austrian, he considered excluding her from affairs of state essential to prevent the alliance from becoming unbalanced. On two recorded occasions he shouted at her at the top of his voice and on one of them the row could be heard through the bedroom doors. Louis used Madame de Polignac to calm his wife after such episodes.

Naturally Louis raised no objections when Marie-Antoinette asked him to shower the favourite and the Polignac circle with more offices, pensions and lands than any of Louis XV's mistresses acquired. The Polignacs, to preserve their position, then sought to influence ministerial appointments. And here, as with foreign policy, they served the king rather than the queen, so that although they were the queen's social set they formed an important part of the king's political society. This inevitably led to tensions culminating in the ministry of Charles Alexandre de Calonne, whom Madame de Polignac supported, and 'for whom . . . [Marie-Antoinette] had a violent aversion'. Calonne's measures sparked off the Revolution. His fall led to an estrangement between the queen and her best friend, who was exiled to Bath ostensibly to take the waters. Returned to favour, in June 1789 Madame de Polignac disastrously turned Marie-Antoinette from her policy of supporting the pretensions of the Third

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Estate against the nobility – for once uniting the king's and queen's policies, which only magnified the catastrophe.

A fringe member of the Polignac set was Axel von Fersen. He was a favourite of Gustavus III of Sweden. Sweden was France's oldest ally and Gustavus was a frequent visitor to Versailles. It has been suggested recently that Madame de Polignac, who certainly knew about Marie-Antoinette's liaison with Fersen, was blackmailing her and that this accounted for much of their wealth.⁵ But this cannot be proved and depends on the assumption that Fersen and the queen slept together. This cannot be proved either though it is likely that they did from 1786 onwards, after Marie-Antoinette had provided the king with an heir and, since he was sickly, one to spare.

Until the Revolution Fersen's friendship with the queen was purely disinterested – he received little financial reward and did not involve himself in politics, though he gave some advice on the dispute between France's two allies Austria and the Dutch Republic in 1785. But he became a violent supporter of Counter-Revolution, organising the Paris end of the royal family's attempted escape, which culminated in recapture at Varennes in 1791. This event was a turning point in that it greatly enhanced popular hostility towards the institution of the monarchy as well as towards the king and queen themselves. Fersen did not help matters when, after the catastrophe, he engaged in futile attempts to secure a second escape or foreign intervention. In part his hardliner stance was motivated by sexual jealousy of another of Marie-Antoinette's friendships, that with Barnave with whom, as said, she experimented in a form of epistolary government. In fact, because of Barnave's security concerns, he and Marie-Antoinette seldom met in person, to her expressed regret and despite a side door to the Tuileries manned in readiness.

Marie-Antoinette's origins also made it easy for her to be cast in the role of 'intriguer', and her precarious position in France was not just down to her intervention in politics, and the distrust with which she was viewed as a result, but also owed something to the fact that she was seen and reviled as 'l'Autrichienne', as her enemies referred to her. However, Marie-Antoinette was as much French as anything and her father was duke of Lorraine. In this book she will be presented as French rather than Austrian. She left Austria when she was fourteen and by 1778 needed German lessons, which she abandoned. This point shouldn't need labouring. However, since its publication in the mid-nineteenth century the correspondence between Versailles (Marie-Antoinette and the Austrian ambassador Mercy-Argenteau) and Vienna (Maria-Theresa, Joseph II, Leopold II and the chancellor, Count von Kaunitz) has formed the bedrock of all the numerous biographies of Marie-Antoinette, and one can see why. The mate-

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rial is detailed – Maria-Theresa loved gossip – and both she and Joseph took an interest prurient as well as dynastic in the sexual relations between Marie-Antoinette and the dauphin, later Louis XVI. They were chatty people and provide material for chatty biographies. But the Austrians' correspondence is skewed by the *idée fixe* that Marie-Antoinette should promote their aggressive foreign policy, something which the queen herself did not prioritize. It is further distorted by distance. There is moreover plenty of French source material available, including from before the Revolution: the manuscript diary of Marie-Antoinette's protégé the marquis de Castries (naval minister 1780–7), and the published and unpublished diary of the abbé de Véri, best friend and chronicler of Maurepas, who was Louis XVI's Mentor but Marie-Antoinette's adversary. I have adopted a similar approach to the queen in the Revolution. It was, after all, the *French Revolution*. Her attempts to secure foreign intervention were nebulous, confused, sterile and unrewarding, partly because of her 'profound ignorance' (her phrase) of what exactly her brother the emperor wanted. So the key source for this period is the aforementioned correspondence between Marie-Antoinette and Barnave. Marie-Antoinette only knew Barnave for the last six months of 1791 and, as with Fersen, their letters were crucial. Given Barnave's place in Marie-Antoinette's story, I have placed extracts from his brilliant *Introduction à la Révolution française* at the appropriate places in the narrative, starting with his verdict on Louis XV. This makes it possible to trace a measure of convergence in the thinking of these two unlikely partners in government.



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