Scandal in the Royal Nursery: Marie-Antoinette and the "Gouvernantes des Enfants de France"
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Scandal in the Royal Nursery:

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Gouvernantes des Enfants de France

Thomas E. Kaiser

What was the role and status of the queen during the Old Regime? In her *La Reine de France: Symbole et pouvoir* and contribution to this forum, Fanny Cosandey has unraveled the many paradoxes that confronted all the foreign princesses who, upon marriage, became the subjects and spouses of their royal husbands. From her analysis, it emerges that there was no simple division of labor within the royal couple that attributed a purely “domestic” sphere to the queen. The queen’s “weaker nature” may have made her unsuited to exercise sovereignty, and yet the Salic Law—that fraudulent, but tenaciously observed “fundamental” law excluding female succession to the throne—effectively required the queen to play a public role, if for no other reason than that her maternity was necessary for the perpetuity of the dynasty. “If by virtue of the Salic Law,” Cosandey observes, “there is no queen without a king, the reverse must also be acknowledged: without a queen, no king.” As Cosandey makes

2. Ibid., p. 381. Translation mine, as are all those that follow.

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clear, queens were hardly free to define their public role, and they incurred serious risks when they usurped—or appeared to usurp—the complementary public role assigned to the king. Still, however much it ran contrary to their “nature,” queens were expected to perform “masculine” public duties during the frequent regencies of the Bourbon monarchy, when protection of the crown’s patrimonial inheritance not only allowed, but mandated transgression of “natural” gender boundaries. Conversely, although their all-important maternity appeared to confer upon them “natural” rights of tutelage over their offspring, those rights were not observed in French practice. As the jurist Cardin Le Bret explained when defining the maternal roles of queens, “the tutelage of their children does not belong to them . . . for all their being wife or mother of the king.”

This background helps to put into perspective the strikingly different public receptions of the last two queens of the Old Regime—Marie Leszczynska, wife of Louis XV, and Marie-Antoinette, wife of Louis XVI. Although a powerful dévot party stood behind Marie Leszczynska, her modest status as the daughter of a dethroned Polish king left her little choice but to abide strictly by French practice; she left the raising of her children to the royal governess, as tradition dictated, and she played no conspicuous, if any role in the making of public policy. Although the king’s sovereignty may have appeared vulnerable to feminine usurpation during Louis XV’s reign, it was the royal mistresses, most notably Mme. de Pompadour, not the queen who appeared to pose the far greater threat. Some courtiers grumbled at the outset of the marriage that her humble origins made Marie Leszczynska an unworthy candidate to share the bed of the greatest monarch in Europe, and, to be sure, at court she was often neglected and sometimes sneered at behind her back. Yet, as the mother of ten children, she met her maternal expectations, and most


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courtiers—including Pompadour—abided by Louis XV's injunctions to pay her outward respect. Never in the long reign of Louis XV was Marie Leszczynska subject to severe criticism, and she died well within the good graces of French public opinion.

The case of Marie-Antoinette could hardly have been more different. Born an archduchess of the imperial Habsburg dynasty—to which she remained proudly and conspicuously attached—and facing no competition from royal mistresses, Marie-Antoinette cast a much larger shadow at court than Marie Leszczynska ever did. Politically, she exercised enough clout over state appointments to make Louis XVI's ministers live in terror of a "nightmare scenario,"7 in which they would all be replaced by a Choiseul cabinet supported by the queen. Although this midnight massacre never materialized, Marie-Antoinette did eventually put three of her own candidates on the royal council. Moreover, she dutifully performed the unenviable task thrust upon her by the Austrian government to lobby the king in its interests, and although her efforts ultimately had little effect on state policy, they persuaded political observers that the queen had usurped royal sovereignty to promote the welfare of her native land at French expense.8

As regards Marie-Antoinette's "domestic" activities—which, of course, had major political implications and could never escape public scrutiny—historians have certainly taken note of her notorious personal coterie, her costly retreat at the Petit Trianon, her acquisition of Saint-Cloud as personal property, her extravagant fashions, and, of course, her fatal taste for expensive jewelry—all of which became targets of the enormous defamatory literature directed against her.9 What historians have in large


part overlooked—notwithstanding the perceptive observations of Lynn Hunt and other historians regarding Marie-Antoinette's image as a "bad mother"—were the political implications of her maternity, which, as I have argued elsewhere, conditioned her entire career. Although this maternity had many facets, one of the most damaging to the queen's reputation concerned Marie-Antoinette's relationships with the chief nominal administrators of her children's care, the two successive gouvernantes des enfants de France. This is the subject of the present article. An investigation of these relationships, I contend, merits attention for three major reasons: first, because during the reign of Louis XVI the royal nursery became a locus of financial and moral scandal that helped discredit the royal court in general; second, because allegations of gross misconduct by the royal governesses aroused fears that the welfare of the heirs to the throne—the living embodiments of the monarchy's future—was at risk; and finally, because Marie-Antoinette's unconventional and publicly scrutinized interventions in the affairs of the royal nursery insured that the scandal associated with it would tarnish her own reputation. In the end, a combination of circumstances and the institutional logic of the Old Regime paradoxically turned Marie-Antoinette's efforts to be and appear as a "good mother" against her, such that contemporaries had all the more reason to conclude that she was a threat to her family, the monarchy and her adopted country.

For all the importance attributed to their fertility, earlier French queens, as already noted, had been only incidentally involved in raising their progeny. Instead, the care of the royal children—including sons until the


age of seven—had been entrusted to the *gouvernante des enfants de France* and her subordinates.\(^\text{12}\) Usually transmitted from one family member to another by right of *survivance*, the office of governess was assumed upon swearing a solemn oath before the king, to whom the governess was directly responsible. In this oath the new office-holder pledged to promote and ensure all aspects of the physical and moral welfare of the royal children. Not the least of her duties, it should be noted, was that of instilling "a generous desire for virtue in their soul" and of protecting "their mind from the corruption of vice and bad habits."\(^\text{13}\) Possessed of this broad mandate, the governess was arguably the most powerful female officer at court; as the Austrian ambassador Mercy-Argenteau noted disapprovingly, the governess exercised "unheard of prerogatives" and, moreover, enjoyed virtual immunity from dismissal.\(^\text{14}\) Such was the extent of her mandate that when the dauphin was at court she even commanded the royal guards.\(^\text{15}\) Yet, most of her power derived from her control over all aspects of the royal nursery (the *maison des enfants de France*), from the hiring of dozens of personnel to the management of its budget, which by 1781 had risen to more than 500,000 *livres*.\(^\text{16}\) Open exclusively to noblewomen, the office of governess conferred upon its occupant in the company of her royal charges a *préséance* over all the ladies of the court, including the princesses of the blood. Among her other distinguishing honors, the governess personally received foreign ambassadors and other dignitaries and supervised the ceremonies in which they paid their compliments to the dauphin.\(^\text{17}\) As for compensation, the governess enjoyed a particularly splendid court apartment and received annual emoluments that totaled, depending on the number of

\[\begin{align*}
13 & \text{ AN KK 1452, p. 30.} \\
14 & \text{ Alfred d'Armeth and Auguste Geffroy, eds., *Correspondance secrète entre Marie-Thérèse et le comte de Mercy-Argenteau*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1874), 3:329.} \\
16 & \text{ AN O1 3799 - Enfants de France—État des ordonnances expédiés pour le service des enfants de France au nom de Mesdames les Gouvernantes depuis 1751" [October, 1782].} \\
17 & \text{ AN KK 1452, 34-38.}
\end{align*}\]
royal children, between 60,000 and more than 100,000 livres. No less important, because she enjoyed unmatched access to the royal family, the governess was better positioned than anyone else to line her pockets and those of her family with royal favors. To be sure, there was a price to be paid for such proximity: proper care of the royal offspring demanded constant vigilance, and thus on assuming the office, the governess was expected to sacrifice her freedom of movement, leave her charges only on rare occasions, and even sleep in their room.

By the eighteenth century the office had entered into the patrimony of the eminent, but much resented house of Rohan, one of whose members, the cardinal, would help destroy Marie-Antoinette’s reputation in the Diamond Necklace Affair; another member of that family, the comtesse de Brionne, would also cause her much political damage. In 1775—one year into Louis XVI’s reign—the post passed from Mme. de Marsan, the governess who had raised the king, to her niece Mme. de Guéménée, born in 1743 and married to the prince de Rohan-Guéménée in 1761. In every respect except birth Guéménée was an unlikely candidate for a position that called for considerable dedication and exemplary moral behavior. To start with, she was the daughter of the disreputable prince de Soubise. A general whose military career owed less to his ability as a commander than to his sycophantic service to the clique of Mme. de Pompadour, Soubise had earned lasting notoriety—echoed in popular derisive songs known as the “Soubisades”—for his role in the battle of Rossbach of 1757, the worst French military defeat of the eighteenth century. Notwithstanding this humiliation and other notorious feats of incompetence, Soubise had acquired during the Seven Years’ War the prestigious titles of maréchal and ministre d’état, which he used to feather his own nest. As one contemporary acidly put it, “great enough lord to steal through his own powers, he remained content to obtain from the king, his friend—if one can use such a term—contributions to the maintenance of his

18. AN AP 278 doss. 2—Letter of Amelot to the princesse de Guéménée reports a total 67,200; according to Poignant, Les Filles, p. 84, the duchesse de Ventadour was receiving 96,000 at her death in 1743, while her successor, the duchesse de Tallard, received about 115,000.

19. AN KK 1452, 34.


household.”22 Soubise’s leverage on Louis XV seems to have derived in part from his promotion of the king’s promiscuity.23 Having enjoyed highly publicized, illicit liaisons with numerous filles de l’Opéra over his lifetime, Soubise reportedly abandoned his palace in his last years so that he might “surrender himself completely to debauchery and dissolution.”24 His voluminous correspondence with his daughter indicates that he and Mme. de Guéménée remained on close terms.

Mme. de Guéménée—plucked by an undiscriminating fate to become the moral guardian of princes—put her own twist on this dubious heritage. She was raised by her aunt and predecessor as governess, Mme. de Marsan, who, as a leading member of the dévot party, had a reputation as an imperious prude. But Guéménée developed a moral character quite different from that of her aunt, and she soon passed into the rival Choiseuliste faction.25 Her marriage to her cousin, the prince de Rohan-Guéménée, was of the modern variety—that is, the couple lived apart and found other romantic partners: the prince passionately courted the comtesse Dillon, while Madame maintained a liaison with the duc de Coigny.26 What the couple continued to share was a high lifestyle involving the purchase of lavish estates and the staging of theatricals and dinners known less for their good taste than their extravagant cost.27 Adding further éclat to this conspicuous consumption was Mme. de Guéménée’s addiction to gambling. At Versailles she ran a salon featuring games of chance for high stakes that attracted a fast crowd prone to malicious gossip and murky court intrigues.28 Her personal archives indicate that she placed bets not only at home, but also abroad—for example, in the English lottery—until the very moment of her disgrace.29


27. Ibid., pp. 291-92.


29. AN AN T 286 (3) Letter from a Mr. de Kendall to the princesse de Guéménée 14 sept 1782.
To a young queen looking for diversion, the amusements provided by Mme. de Guéménée proved irresistible. Marie-Antoinette socialized night after night chez Guéménée during her early reign, despite persistent warnings of her “handler,” the Austrian ambassador Mercy, that frequenting this dubious society would endanger her reputation. It was there the queen learned to lose large sums at the gambling table and join in vicious gossip, some of which came back to haunt her. In return for such diversion she granted major favors to the governess—among them, she brokered the prince de Guéménée’s purchase of the office of grand chambellan.\(^{30}\) Indeed, Mme. de Guéménée enjoyed so much royal credit that she did not hesitate to compose an insolent letter implicitly blackmailing the king when he balked at bestowing the office of grand aumônier upon her cousin, the imminently notorious cardinal de Rohan, to whom Louis XV had allegedly promised the post.\(^{31}\)

Gambling did not provide the only source of Mme. de Guéménée’s political leverage. The governess maintained close ties to other royal family members, among them, her first charges, the kings’ two sisters.\(^{32}\) In addition, she and the queen shared an aversion to the dévot party and strong ties to the Choiseulistes. Finally, Mme. de Guéménée proved a willing silent partner in Marie-Antoinette’s plan to take charge of child-rearing. The queen often lamented that her mother, the Austrian Empress-Queen Maria-Theresa, had been a remote figure, and for reasons that remain unclear, she resolved to be a very different kind of parent.\(^{33}\) When in 1778 Marie-Antoinette gave birth to her first child, who turned out to be a girl instead of the long-awaited dauphin, she consoled herself with the thought that, unlike a boy, the newborn Marie-Thérèse would “belong” to her rather than the state. “You will have all my care,” she whispered to Marie-Thérèse, “you will share all my happiness and lessen all my sorrows.”\(^{34}\) Contrary to custom, Marie-Antoinette kept her child by her side nearly the entire day in order to supervise Marie-Thérèse’s education.\(^{35}\)

Although she recognized the governess’s right to select the personnel of the nursery, the queen insisted upon approving these appointments and in

31. AP AN 273 AP8, doss. 2, undated letter from her to Marie-Antoinette.
32. See her correspondence with Clothilde and Elisabeth in AN 273 AP8, doss. 2.
33. Campan, Mémoires, p. 141.
34. Ibid., p. 138.
1778 extracted from the king a promise to delay the choice of a governess for any future dauphin, presumably to keep her options open. 36

Where did all this untoward maternal activism leave the governess Guéménéée? The evidence suggests that she hardly minded sharing her duties with the queen. To be sure, she probably resented and feared the rising influence of Marie-Antoinette's confidante, the duchesse de Polignac, to whom rumor attributed an influence on the raising of Marie-Thérèse following the birth of the dauphin in 1781. 37 But from the start Mme. de Guéménéée left the strong impression that she was "in no way worthy of the job entrusted to her," a judgment shared not only by the queen and the wary Mercy, but also by others who observed that Mme. de Guéménéée "had always been regarded as inferior to the position she occupied, to which birth alone had called her." 38 Her lackadaisical management was confirmed when the royal nursery accounts were audited in 1782. Although cleared of suspicions she had speculated state funds, the auditor determined that the costs of the nursery had skyrocketed since the days of her predecessor, in part because Guéménéée had mindlessly splurged when ordering the furnishings of the dauphin's layette; indeed, she had spent five time more on the layette than had been spent during the previous reign. All told, in the auditor's blunt words, 234,795 livres "had been thrown out the window for nothing." 39

Until the fall of 1782 the public seems to have found Mme. de Guéménéée's laxness and dubious morality tolerable. Nor does Marie-Antoinette seem to have protested: she, after all, was herself a member of Guéménéée's gambling circle, and inactivity on the part of the governess facilitated her personal intervention in the affairs of the nursery. But two events would quickly alter this situation.

First, a servant responsible to the governess accidentally left a piece of glass in the food of the infant dauphin. Rather than report the incident, Mme. de Guéménéée tried to cover it up, which made her inattention seem all the worse once the story of the dauphin's seeming brush with death became known. Court observers were incensed, for despite the monarchy's generally declining fortunes, public affection for the dauphin remained strong, as evidenced by the wearing of medallions that bore his

39. AN OI 3799 doss. 2 - "Dépense des Enfants de France."
image in place of the cross.\textsuperscript{40} When one courtier indignantly remarked upon how “the hope of the nation, a prince surrounded by fifty people highly paid and supposedly chosen with care and discernment, had [had] his life [endangered],” it was clear he meant to blame the governess.\textsuperscript{41}

Second, in 1782 the Guéménéés suffered what was probably the greatest personal bankruptcy of the Old Regime. Years of high living and overspending by the governess and her profligate husband had generated an astronomical family debt of about 33 million \textit{livres}, nearly four million of which, according to archival records, had been accumulated the previous year.\textsuperscript{42} Far from constituting a private affair, this bankruptcy had major public repercussions. For one thing, an estimated three thousand petty lenders had lent the Guéménéés considerable sums of money, and these hapless people now risked losing their modest assets. For another, the public immediately suspected that the bankruptcy had been fraudulent—that is, the couple had borrowed huge sums knowing full well they would be unable to repay them—a crime potentially punishable by death. As the marquis de Bombelles bitterly pointed out, a fraudulent debtor had recently been hanged for defaulting on a sum that was only the tiniest fraction of what the Guéménéés had borrowed—a relatively paltry two thousand \textit{écus} (six thousand \textit{livres}).\textsuperscript{43} Little wonder that the entire Rohan family now risked assault in the streets by legions of their unhappy, desperate creditors.\textsuperscript{44} Finally, it became known that the king himself had approved the loans, thereby implicating the monarchy in a swindle so large it was baptized a “bankruptcy of sovereigns.”\textsuperscript{45}

As Rory Browne has shown, the crown did take pains to put distance between itself and the now radioactive Guéménéés.\textsuperscript{46} Louis XVI quickly accepted the resignation of the governess, who tendered it and left the court once it was suspected that the Guéménéés had confounded their malfeasance by trying to perpetrate a fraud on the government. Desperate to repay their creditors and thereby rescue their good name, they had offered to sell to the crown rights in the port of L’Orient, but for a time it

\textsuperscript{40} Bachaumont, \textit{Mémoires secrets}, 19:119.
\textsuperscript{41} Bombelles, \textit{Journal}, 1:160.
\textsuperscript{42} AN T 286 (3) - “Résumé.”
\textsuperscript{43} Bombelles, \textit{Journal}, 1:156.
\textsuperscript{44} Lescure, \textit{Correspondance secrète}, 1:513-14; S.-P. Hardy, “Mes Loisirs ou journal d’événements tels qu’ils parviennent à ma connaissance,” Bibliothèque Nationale (henceforth, BN) Ms. Fr. 6684, 237.
\textsuperscript{45} Hardy, BN Ms. Fr. 6684, 228; Bachaumont, \textit{Mémoires secrets} 21:176.
\textsuperscript{46} Browne, “Court and Crown,” chap. 5.
appeared they had proposed to sell to the crown a property to which they lacked clear title.  

No doubt genuinely shocked by the bankruptcy and its aftermath, the king took other measures to publicize his displeasure; for example, it was widely reported that he had angrily thrown a letter he had received from the Guéménéées into the fire before reading it.  

Likewise, Marie-Antoinette, pressured by Mercy and his creature the abbé Vermond to cut her ties immediately to the disgraced family, hastened to replace Mme. de Guéménéée with the duchesse de Polignac. Notwithstanding these measures, the royal couple were unable to prevent the scandal from sullying them.

Much as the public assailed the Guéménéées for their reckless spending, one reason the stain of scandal reached so high was that some court observers pointed a finger at the court in general and the queen in particular for abetting the extravagance that had led to the bankruptcy. As the baron de Besenval observed, the couple’s financial collapse was in part due to the heavy expenses necessarily incurred by a person in Mme. de Guéménéée’s position.  

In the view of the comte de Tilly, Marie-Antoinette had seduced the couple into overspending by her very presence at their soirées. “Did she not,” he alleged, “take part in their entertainments, and thereby occasion new ones?”  

Not only did the queen face blame as an accomplice in the scandal, she also came into much criticism for the brutal, unseemly way in which Mme. de Guéménéée had been dismissed. The comtesse de Boigne charged that in her haste to replace the incumbent governess with her own candidate, Marie-Antoinette had been “much more severe than she would have been in other circumstances”; “the resignation of Mme. de Guéménéée,” she wrote disapprovingly, “was accepted with a joy and her exile expedited with a sort of callousness.”  

Likewise, the comte de Tilly would accept no excuse for the “absolute lack of concern that the queen ought to have shown” for a person who

47. As Mme. de Guéménéée wrote to the king in her letter of resignation, “I dare beg Your Majesty to take possession of the L’Orient . . . certain that this grace without being onerous to the king would be the only means to bring honor to our affairs.” AN 273 AP 170-71.

48. For slightly different versions of the story see Hardy, BN Ms. Fr. 6684, 228; Bachaumont, Mémoires secrets, 21:159.

49. Besenval, Mémoires, p. 292; see also the statement in Bombelles, Journal, 1:173: “Her wrongdoing was [a product of] errors of the mind, and her heart had never sinned.”


deserved her confidence. Seeing through the strategy used by the crown to shield itself from popular fury, he correctly speculated that Marie-Antoinette had acted out of fear of exhibiting “too much concern for the two defaulters against whom the public had clamored, such that the cry of so many families in despair echoed in the interior of the palace and even against the throne.” Near instant dismissal had proved a two-edged sword.

Another dilemma posed by the bankruptcy for the crown stemmed from the insistence of the public, most especially the creditors, upon repayment of the defaulted loans. It was immediately evident that since the bankruptcy was so massive, even partial compensation would require the government to play a major role in salvaging the fortunes of the Guéménéées, which in turn meant that the crown could not bury the scandal simply by cutting them off. Thus, despite giving them the cold shoulder publicly, the king granted the Guéménéées favors from the outset of the scandal and even after the Diamond Necklace Affair had destroyed what remained of the Rohans' credit in royal eyes. Such charity led the monarchy into fresh difficulties. First, rather than ordering the Parlement to investigate the affair, as the creditors persistently demanded, the king dealt with it en conseil, a decision that allowed the naval minister, the marquis de Castries, a close Guéménéée ally, to lobby and leak information on their behalf as a leading member of the commission of inquiry. As Soubise wrote to his daughter, whom he coached throughout the scandal, Castries was “a friend on whom you can rely; you could not have chosen anyone better.” Second, the Guéménéées were granted short-term legal protection from their creditors, which was taken as a sign of the crown’s enduring gratitude. Third, although she and her husband were obliged to resign their court positions, the ex-governess was soon awarded a handsome pension of 60,000 livres in addition to the pension of 36,000 livres she retained, a concession that even the sympathetic marquis de Bombelles conceded was a large grace under the circumstances. In addition, after intensive lobbying on the Guéménéées' behalf by the cardinal

52. Tilly, Mémoires, p. 150.
53. AN 273 AP8, doss. 1: 516, 592.
54. AN 273 AP8, doss. 1:278. The marquis de Bombelles noted that Castries was chosen “to calm the public as much as possible by showing that the government is sufficiently interested in moderating [the effects of] the bankruptcy to assign this task to a secrétaire d’État.” Even so, the appointment certainly assisted the Rohan-Guéménéées in dealing with the family crisis.
de Rohan and his family, the king agreed to pay them 690,000 *livres* for having resigned their offices, while to provide the family with further liquidity, the king's sister, Mme. Elisabeth, bought Mme. de Guéménée's _hôtel_ in Versailles, and the duc de Penthèvre, a prince of the blood, purchased the Guéménée estate of Châteauneuf-sur-Loire.\(^\text{57}\) In later years the Guéménées acquired an exemption from the withholding of these pensions, a special royal bequest of 12,000 *livres*, and the command of a regiment for their son.\(^\text{58}\) Finally, and most explosive politically, the crown agreed to purchase the contested rights of the Guéménées in the port of L'Orient once those rights were validated by the Parlement of Paris. Although the king had little choice but to consent to the purchase if the Guéménées' creditors were to be repaid, the sale was not without negative consequences for the government, since far from settling the affair, it stirred up further controversy.

To begin with, it reportedly caused dissension in the ministry, for when the controller-general d'Ormesson opposed the purchase for reasons of economy in 1783, he was not only overruled by Marie-Antoinette's court syndicate, but was also dismissed and replaced by the queen's protégé, Calonne, who favored the sale.\(^\text{59}\) Once the deal was closed in 1785 and its terms became public, many outraged observers concluded that the state had been robbed, since the Guéménées were offered 11 million *livres* plus a 1.5 million *livre* supplement for a property thought to be worth only 4-5 million.\(^\text{60}\) Little wonder that Soubise could triumphantly crow "we have completely won with full military honors!," while the family's creditors were forced to accept only partial and/or delayed repayment on their loans.\(^\text{61}\) In the end, the crown was a loser, too, for during the Assembly of Notables of 1787 the sale of the L'Orient was repeatedly held up as a prime example of profligate spending by the monarchy, which had to endure a tongue-lashing by Lafayette for having squandered on the sale “so many

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58. AN 273 AP8 doss. 1:214; AN T 286 (3) - Letter of Calonne to the prince de Guéménée, 11 April 1786; AN T 286 (3) - Letter from Ségur to the princesse de Guéménée, 28 January 1787.
60. Ibid., 30:71-72.
The Guéménéé episode is significant, because it planted in the mind of the public a politically dangerous notion that would metastasize in the last years of the Old Regime—namely, that the queen's frivolity was not only adding to the state's financial burden, but also putting dynastic continuity at risk by endangering the moral and physical well-being of the royal children, especially the dauphin. Of course, Marie-Antoinette had not herself appointed Mme. de Guéménéé; and the queen's idiosyncratic maternal activism might have provided some reassurance against the governess's generally acknowledged unsuitability for her position. But failing to heed Mercy's warnings, Marie-Antoinette had promoted the Guéménéées at court, participated in the governess's high-stake gambling parties of ill-repute, and tolerated her mismanagement of the royal nursery. Despite efforts to distance itself from this disgraced family, the monarchy—by now widely assumed to be heavily influenced by the queen—had protected them, if only to repay their creditors. How much reassurance could her subjects draw from this record that Marie-Antoinette was providing better care for the heir to the throne than had Mme. de Guéménéé?

To be sure, if Mme. de Guéménéé had been succeeded by a notably better candidate, none of the above would likely have had much long-term impact. But the bankruptcy scandal and the disgrace of the Guéménéées in 1782 only opened the door to yet further scandal in the royal nursery. As noted above, the hasty resignation of the royal governess was followed by the immediate appointment of the duchesse de Polignac to this highly visible position. Several critical points are worth noting about her unfortunate tenure as governess.

First, it is clear that Polignac's appointment was due to Marie-Antoinette's heavy lobbying of the king, and furthermore, that it was publicly recognized as such.63 Considered to be the queen's closest friends, Polignac and her clique had been promoted by Marie-Antoinette from


63. On the politics of the appointment see Browne, "Court and Crown," chap. 5. On public perceptions of the hand of the queen, see Hardy, BN Ms. Fr. 6684 229-30, in which Hardy writes on 31 October 1782, "Today we learn that the Queen, who had used a thousand means to succeed in this project and accomplish her goals, had arranged with the king that the post of gouvernante des enfants de France occupied by the Princesse de Rohan-Guéménéée be given to the duchesse de Polignac."
nearly the outset of the reign. Rumors affirming that the queen had allowed the duchesse to exercise influence in the royal nursery circulated before 1782, and thus her announcement as governess occasioned no surprise. The main point to be noted is that the duchesse de Polignac’s appointment was not, like Mme. de Guéménée’s, the product of patrimonial aristocratic office-holding, but of the queen’s increasing intrusion into the affairs of the nursery and her leverage on the king. She had pushed for the Polignac appointment partly out of friendship, but also undoubtedly because she knew that the duchesse, like Mme. de Guéménée, would not obstruct her maternal activism.

Second, by the time the duchesse de Polignac became governess, she and her clique had earned a well-deserved reputation for rapacity at public expense. One notorious example: the duchesse’s daughter, thanks to the queen, received a state-funded dowry of 800,000 livres, an extraordinary amount by any standard, which became known to an increasingly incensed public.⁶⁴ The duchesse de Polignac’s appointment as governess could only have aroused fears of still greater favors to come, many of which were indeed conferred when Calonne, their crony, became controller-general. There is good reason to think that indignation was not limited to the common taxpayer, for as more graces were bestowed upon the Polignacs and other insiders, most other court nobles were being cut out.⁶⁵

Third, there was every reason to question the duchesse de Polignac’s qualifications as governess. For one thing, her family occupied a relatively low rung of the nobility—far lower than that of the prestigious Rohan-Guéménée. Her appointment as governess could only have aroused resentment among court nobles of higher rank, especially those who found their share of Versailles’ graces shrinking to the benefit of cutthroat upstarts like the Polignacs. Furthermore, the duchesse struck most observers as unhealthy, listless and lazy. As the number of royal children increased to four, it was widely expected that she would look with “invincible repugnance upon a charge whose chain is so heavy.”⁶⁶ Once in office, Polignac fully lived down to her reputation. She delayed acquainting


⁶⁶. Besenval, Mémoires, p. 293.
herself with the affairs of her department; refused to sleep in the same room as the dauphin; spent barely an hour a day with him; rarely took him outside for exercise; abandoned him on jaunts to Paris with the queen; left most of her work to her staff; and petitioned the king for relief from her ceremonial duties.\textsuperscript{67} Not surprisingly, there were recurring rumors that she would resign, although most observers predicted that she would not do so in the belief that her greed exceeded her lethargy.\textsuperscript{68}

Even more seriously, by 1786 the public was becoming progressively agitated over the declining health of the dauphin, the reasons for which it could easily imagine. \textquotedblleft The state of monseigneur the dauphin is beginning to be known in Paris,	extquotedblright observed Bombelles, \textquotedblleft and to excite murmurs about the lack of attention given to him.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{69} As he perceptively noted, a governess of solid, if old-fashioned virtues like Mme. de Marsan could afford slight lapses of duty; but the duchesse de Polignac, known for her laxness and loose morals, was held by the public to a stricter standard and would have far more trouble explaining why the dauphin, who reportedly could not tolerate her, had not passed a single night in two months without fevers waking him up before dawn.\textsuperscript{70} Marie-Antoinette was inevitably implicated in the neglect that seemed to account for the dauphin’s pathetic decline into near paralysis and ultimate death in June 1789. Having acquired \textquotedblleft an authority over the physical as well as moral education of her children that no queen of France ever exercised,\textquotedblright Marie-Antoinette could hardly avoid sharing the opprobrium that fell on her confidant Polignac, who was burned in effigy by group of youths in 1787.\textsuperscript{71} Nor were other custodians of the prince much more credible than Polignac. Although some people defended the choice of the duc d’Harcourt as governor of the dauphin—appointed upon the latter’s seventh birthday when he passed out of the governess’s care—there were nonetheless café conversationalists who accused Harcourt of further damaging the dauphin’s delicate health by imposing too severe a regimen on the moribund prince.\textsuperscript{72} Ultimately, even a sympathetic observer like Bombelles

\textsuperscript{69} See Bombelles, \textit{Journal}, 2:129.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 2:129-30; Campan, \textit{Mémoires}, p. 206. Already in 1784 Polignac had been “sometimes reproached for not having sufficiently concerned herself with the important functions of her job.” Bombelles, \textit{Journal}, 1:323.
\textsuperscript{71} Bombelles, \textit{Journal}, 2:128; Hardy, BN. Ms. Fr. 6686, 255.
could not help noticing how Marie-Antoinette had allowed the dauphin to be neglected. "The queen," he wrote, "does not yet realize how much this child, so precious to the State and to her, has been in danger. She has a very good heart [and] loves her son and daughter very much, but great dissipation necessarily dulls one's sensibility, and one often becomes distracted from what should affect us the most."

In conclusion, it can be said there were many reasons to hate and fear Marie-Antoinette, but at the core of most of them lay the notion that she had fundamentally abused her exalted position and turned it into an instrument of vice and treason. Her alleged promiscuity, greed and power-lust were all symptomatic of this betrayal, and many were her alleged means. Whatever credit she may have earned for being an active mother, she also wound up hardening belief in her nefarious designs by intervening so clumsily in the affairs of the nursery. Insufficiently aware that it was partly the royal governess upon whom, as one observer put it, "depends the happiness or unhappiness of twenty million people," Marie-Antoinette allowed herself to be exploited by the clientele she promoted, with the result that her subjects suspected she was undermining the principle of dynastic succession at the core of the French "constitution" through the reckless endangerment of her children. Traces of this belief could be found even after that constitution collapsed in 1789. Revolutionaries accused her of exploiting her second son to establish a regency under her control; they constitutionally proscribed female regencies, and they accused her of sexually abusing the former heir to the throne. Indeed, they even accused her of deliberately killing her first son. Motherhood has never been a risk-free vocation.

Could "better management" on Marie-Antoinette's part have enabled her to become the active mother she wanted to be without further damaging a reputation already dubious for other reasons? Conceivably, but the failed attempt of Queen Marie-Amélie to project herself as a "bourgeois" mother under the July Monarchy—analyzed in the following

74. Lescure, Correspondance secrète, 2:107.
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contribution by Jo Burr Margadant suggests that there were institutional limits to the redefinition of the queen's role, limits that even "better management" or a more robust "bourgeois" consciousness than existed under the Old Regime could not have overcome. Much as "nature" seemed to grant the rights of tutelage over their children to all mothers, French practice ran contrary to that mandate in the high nobility and certainly in the monarchy, where virtually nothing was purely "domestic," least of all the raising of royal heirs—the very embodiment of the Old Regime's future. It is not, therefore, surprising that such a critical function was performed by a governess, who, even if she inherited her position, was still bound by an oath sworn to the king rather than to a foreign-born queen.

Here, we return to the critical factor of Marie-Antoinette's origins. Had she come from an obscure dynasty of no threat to France, as had Marie Leszczyńska, her interventions in the nursery would probably have appeared to her contemporaries as somewhat curious and perhaps unfortunate, yet still relatively benign. But because she descended from the house of Austria—France's ancient and ever-present nemesis—and because she took few pains to obscure this fact, Marie-Antoinette lived in a web of suspicion that made any heterodox extension of her authority appear threatening, even the raising of her own children. Although she constantly appeared in public with them as part of a calculated campaign to project an image as a "good mother," maternity in the end provided Marie-Antoinette with no shield. On the contrary, it was construed by many of her subjects as yet another instrument of her imputed treason.