



*Picturing Marie Lezczinska (1703-1768): Representing Queenship in Eighteenth-Century France*

**Jennifer Germann**

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In *Picturing Marie Leszczyńska (1703-1768): Representing Queenship in Eighteenth-Century France*, Jennifer Germann considers the visual legacy of the wife of Louis XV (r. 1715-1774) through the lenses of social art history, patronage, and gender studies. During her time as the longest reigning queen of France (1725-1768), Leszczyńska gave birth to ten children. She never enjoyed a great deal of power at the French court, however, for she arrived there as the daughter of the exiled Polish king and was eventually eclipsed by the royal mistresses, particularly Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry. Germann's account is a template for the historical consideration of a weak consort. During Leszczyńska's tenure, the power of French queenship continued to erode, a process that began with her predecessor, Marie-Thérèse (wife of Louis XIV), and came to a fateful end with her successor, Marie-Antoinette. Germann's analysis of gender, power, and representation provides a necessary description of the change in French queenship from the strong Médici consorts of the early modern period to the weak ones of the eighteenth century.

Germann focuses primarily on four portraits made at three distinct historical moments in Marie Leszczyńska's life, arguing that although she did not wield political power, her portraits reveal a degree of historical agency. Some of these images, although intended to testify to the king's absolute power, ultimately undermined it. Royal advisors commissioned early portraits of the queen by Francois Steimart (1725-26), Alexis-Simon Belle (1730), and Louis Tocqué (c. 1737-1740); these images amounted to feminized state portraits. The portrait by Steimart was based on Jean-Baptiste Sancerre's earlier portrait of Louis XV's mother, Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie; this borrowing helped to visually integrate the Polish princess into the French regal line, a high priority for the royal courtiers who ordered these images. Instead of dismissing this portrait solely as a replica of an earlier painting, Germann identifies some key nuances in Steimart's hybrid image, which help it to execute a "double move", portraying her as both French and not-French (78). Its Turkish elements refer to Leszczyńska's faraway birthplace, whilst simultaneously connecting her to the use of turquerie by her father, who used it to craft a different political persona that masked his status as a deposed Polish king.

On 4 September 1729, Leszczyńska gave birth to the long awaited dauphin, whose birth temporarily elevated her status. Belle's 1730 portrait of the infant prince was expanded into a very successful double portrait of Marie

and her son, which reads like a secular Madonna and child. Germann offers a novel and compelling argument for the queen's patronage of this painting. In 1738, Tocqué painted the dauphin's portrait; the nine-year old prince then requested a portrait of his mother, which intriguingly emphasized Leszczinska's regal rather than maternal qualities. Germann proves that this powerful image influenced Tocqué's later images of royal and imperial women. Although the queen did not commission the Belle or Tocqué portraits, these images indicate her heightened status at the French court and offer rare images of royal motherhood.

The 1740s were a kind of golden decade for Leszczinska, for her childbearing years were over. Because Louis XV was publically criticized for his infidelity, the queen garnered sympathy and a temporary increase in power. Following the king's recovery in August 1744 from a serious illness, he repudiated his mistress and temporarily dedicated himself to his wife. In the wake of this, royal advisors made the rare decision to commission queenly images from Maurice-Quentin de la Tour and Carle van Loo in order to restore the king's reputation and provide a message of royal reform.

In 1745, de la Tour produced several pastel portraits for the royal couple; these images emphasized the gendered identity of their sitters. The queen's portrait replicated the format and pose of the king's image, but in contrast, provided a proximate and relatively informal view of the queen. He and Carle van Loo exhibited the images that ultimately served as propaganda of the royal couple in the public environment of the Salon. By examining van Loo's image of the queen in the context of the king's missteps, Germann underlines its hybridity and instability; it seems to both celebrate and undermine the king's power, for his fragmentary depiction as a portrait bust is dependent on and countered by Leszczinska's presence as both first subject and the good wife. Germann's interpretation is bolstered by the fact that van Loo's portrait of Leszczinska was removed from Versailles in 1788, the same tumultuous year in which Louis XVI commissioned a milk bowl in the shape of a breast from the Sèvres porcelain factory for his wife Marie Antoinette. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast between the modest Leszczinska and her successor who used this china service while playing milkmaid at the Château de Rambouillet's royal dairy.

In the final chapter, Germann considers the only portrait commissioned by Leszczinska, Jean-Marc Nattier's image of the queen reading the Bible. This portrait offered a new type of noble femininity that was in stark contrast to Madame de Pompadour, who was often depicted as Diana, the tempting huntress who had ensnared the monarch. These distinctions would have been blatantly obvious in the Salon of 1748, where the artist exhibited his portraits of both women. In Nattier's portrait, the

queen fashioned an identity that highlighted her intelligent, devout, and sensitive qualities. Instead of wearing a court dress, she is in a habit de ville with subtle allusions to her Polish ethnicity; few overt references to the king are included. In its modesty, frankness, and informality, the portrait is similar to Jacques-André-Joseph Aved's Portrait of Madame Crozat (1741) and the Portrait of the Marquise du Châtelet by Marianne Loir, an artist who deserves future scholarly study. The Nattier portrait of Leszczinska represents a rare example of the queen's historical agency in which she was able to subtly fashion herself in clear opposition to the king's favourite; the image was completed at the same time that the king and his mistress were criticized both within and outside court.

Salic law limited the power of French queens. As Germann indicates, the interwoven nature of the simultaneously private and public procreative qualities of Leszczinska's body made her dangerous and in need of control, particularly when she came from a remote country like Poland. Upon her arrival at Versailles, she had few political and cultural tools at her disposal. This changed somewhat during her lifetime, as she bore the king a stable of children. Even while Pompadour enjoyed the king's company, the Nattier portrait and Leszczinska's will and testament indicate that the queen had gained some power, for both items de-emphasize her connection to the king. Germann's reading of the will and its multiple references to Poland and Lorraine (her parents' burial site) suggest that the queen was fashioning herself as "the other within", who literally distanced herself from her royal spouse.

Germann provides an innovative view of Marie Leszczinska, who has been traditionally viewed as a weak consort. Her account is uniquely diachronic, providing a multi-century analysis that has missing from many accounts of European queenship. Depictions of French queens as mothers were rare and mostly without precedent. Germann's monograph clarifies why Nattier's informal portrait of Leszczinska was successful, while Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's casual depictions of her successor Marie Antoinette failed so spectacularly. Germann's account leaves the reader wishing that Leszczinska had lived a few years longer in order to help the doomed Austrian archduchess navigate the treacherous court at Versailles.

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