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HIST 635/French Revolution

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### Private Lives and Public Affairs

If an historian is reading up on the French Revolution, Sarah Maza's *Private Lives and Public Affairs* is a good place to start. It does not explore the Revolution itself, but rather ~~the phase~~ of the waning of the Republic of Letters and the onset of the Revolution itself. *Private Lives* provides a contextual set-up for the Revolution by way of certain literary devices, namely legal briefs, memoirs, and theatrical pieces. *I'm not sure it's the intended*  
*in re*  
*Republic.*

This book does especially well combined with *The Republic of Letters* written by Dena Goodman (1994, Cornell University Press); combined these books make a thorough introduction to the Revolution. *was word choice*

In arguing her theme in the context of the legal briefs written for sensational court cases, Maza lets the cases and their resulting literary devices speak for themselves; the briefs, their authors, and their subjects practically write the book for her. Except for one chapter devoted entirely to *l'affaire du cardinal* (the Diamond Necklace Affair), each chapter deals with a variety of cases and their symbolism in the context of the declining Old Regime.

The central argument of *Private Lives* is that the numerous court briefs prepared and published largely as memoirs were critical to developing public

opinion into a viable power before the French Revolution. Instead of a public passive at the feet of the autocracy, Maza's public of the 1770s and 1780s transformed itself into a public capable of affecting the outcome of controversial court cases. (2-3, 313)

Maza purposefully shies away from the pre-revisionist Marxian theories of the French Revolution, using the particulars of the Véron-Morangiès case to shoot down the simplified class-struggle version of the Revolution. (21-3) Instead, the Véron-Morangiès and Kornmann cases combine to provide the bulk of Maza's symbols of the pre-Revolutionary culture. These symbols represented aristocratic values, the various roles of women, morally accepted behaviors, the existing political system, and, to a smaller extent, class-related pressures and prejudices.

There are two arguments of lesser <sup>crucial</sup> intensity than the primary theme. Both are feminist in nature. Trying not to trivialize the secondary arguments is difficult, especially in light of the prevailing trend toward more culturally-oriented history; however, the themes come across as slightly contrived to further a feminist view.

The more prominent of these themes is that the marginalization of women was a symptom of an important turning point in the political culture of France. (172)

The other, lesser secondary theme is that great sociopolitical significance should

a need  
to see  
specificity  
what this  
means.

be attached to the connection of a woman's infidelity or disobedience to the chaos of the French political system.

You need to show how she expresses here<sup>3</sup>

These secondary themes, though they are more seamlessly combined with the primary theme than Cynthia Bouton does in *The Flour War* (1993, The Pennsylvania State University Press), detract in a small way from the main theme by adding the element of feminism to pre-Revolutionary France. Feminism was not enough of a concern to realistically affect politics at that time. By extrapolating Maza's secondary themes forward to our times, we are able to understand the contemporary press treatments of Hillary Clinton. According to Maza's line of reasoning, Clinton is just another in a line of mistreated public women, following Henrietta Stuart, Marie-Antoinette, Alexandra Romanov, and Imelda Marcos.

Through the course of *Private Lives*, several men emerge as primarily significant to the literary-based development of the public's power through reference under opinion. Voltaire and Rousseau, of course, are the prime movers, followed by Beaumarchais, several prominent lawyers in the 1770s and 1780s, and, indirectly, Maupeou. Voltaire achieved his prominence through conspicuous attendance at highly prominent court cases and his subsequent writings based on those cases. Beaumarchais came to his glory more by his dramatic treatments of memoirs than

as an author of legal briefs. Maupeou can practically be singled out as the reason the new crop of sensation-seeking, fame-hungry young lawyers came to the foreground of the French judicial system. Maupeou was so eager to pull the French judicial system into line that, in ousting much of the old guard, he provided the means to his own end by enabling many young, talented, and politically charged lawyers to rise to prominence. Several of the more prominent young-Turk lawyers later opposed his oppressive tactics.

So!

The most interesting aspect of *Private Lives* is Maza's largely uncritical treatment of Marie-Antoinette and her possible complicity in the Diamond Necklace Affair. Maza puts the blame for Marie's later execution squarely on the misogynistic shoulders of Rousseau. Even to a modern-day sexist, Rousseau seems excessive in his hatred of women. Maza presents his views objectively, thereby giving him enough rope to hang himself in the context of her feminist themes. Though Maza paints Marie as nearly universally unliked, the recipient of nicknames such as "l'Autrichienne"<sup>1</sup> and "Madame Déficit;" she is sympathetic toward Marie's unknowing participation in the scandal which in all likelihood led directly to her beheading. (172-3) The briefs surrounding the prosecution of the perpetrators of the Diamond Necklace Affair, also known as *l'affaire du cardinal* after Cardinal Rohan's involvement, were incredibly popular; their print runs were

in the tens of thousands and reached people numbering in the hundred-thousand-plus range. Maza posits, and it is difficult to disagree with her on this point, that the wide availability of these kinds of documents to the general public can not help but mobilize public opinion on certain issues. It would have been interesting if Maza had included some discussion of sensational cases in which great publicity did little, if anything, to change the outcome. All Maza's examples end with the wronged party receiving justice; surely every case brought to the public purview did not have a happy ending.

Central to Maza's primary theme, though not as sensationally interesting as her treatment of Marie-Antoinette and the Diamond Necklace Affair, is the comparison of memoirs to theatrical productions, both original and those fictionalized from court cases. These two literary mediums were intimately connected during the two decades before the Revolution; indeed, the authors in each genre borrowed freely from the techniques of the other.

Memoirs were of the utmost importance to rallying public opinion; Maza supports this point especially well by having Ambroise Falconnet, a barrister at the time, say it for her: "A memoir establishes the rights of a citizen by explaining them...to the public...A good memoir brings one back to the law...[and] underscores [its] necessity." (116) In the 1780s, memoir authors incorporated the

techniques of fiction writers – especially style and language – to spice up their writing. However, in the 1770s, fiction writers had used the same techniques employed by memoir and legal brief writers to lend credibility to their novels. In addition, memoirs in the 1770s resembled theatrical productions, staged simply so just about everyone could understand the allegories and criticisms contained in them. The Diamond Necklace Affair, Maza proves, is a prominent example of art imitating life – a real-life scandal that in many ways mimics the stage comedies of the 1770s, complete with plotting, maneuvering, confusion, and a stunt double for Marie-Antoinette. (203, 221, 323)

*Private Lives and Public Affairs* is a very good introduction to the decades immediately preceding the French Revolution. Maza writes for an audience already interested in the topic and time period, which makes the book suitable for graduate-level students and professionals in the field. It may be beyond the average undergraduate student, especially at an overview or survey level. Anyone writing on legal briefs, memoirs, or theatrical productions in the years before the Revolution would do well to use Maza as a source. Besides being a good book, *Private Lives* is also a good example of proper research. Maza uses a variety of primary and secondary sources, in English and French, and documents these sources well.

Maza's primary theme, that of the importance of the above-mentioned literary genres, is clear and well argued. In pursuing secondary themes pertaining to feminism, she falls short of clear and well argued; these themes, while entertaining and interesting, are not exceptionally convincing. In the context of the current trend of cultural history, though, they are definitely appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> I have to wonder if the appearance of the French word for dog (*chien*) as part of the word for Austrian (which, when applied to Marie, was a slur), is significant of how the French viewed Austrians or only how they viewed Marie.

This paper  
 really never gets to  
 Maza's specific claim  
 of what the memoir  
 rhetoric might convey.  
 This is an extremely  
 serious omission.  
 Plus the lack of  
 contextualization with  
 current historiography  
 is a problem. You can do a  
 B = for better than this -  
 discussing how you have to hear down  
 A -