CHAPTER 5

THE ENGLISH CIVIL WARS AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The collapse of monarchical authority during the English Civil Wars and French Revolution followed a sustained period of delegitimization of the respective royal families of England and France. During the reigns of Charles I and Louis XVI, the queen had been judged within the popular ideological climate concerning the place of women within their families without respect for her position. This process, which occurred before an ever-expanding public sphere, stripped away the royal mystique and reduced each consort to the position of any other vulnerable public figure, creating the potential for the seeming paradox of “royal treason.” The delegitimization of the queen also served as a framework for observers to critique the state of monarchical government without directly attacking the king because his consort was perceived to occupy the role of advisor. The accessibility of the positions of wife and mother to a broad audience made critiques of the queen possible for all social estates, which was facilitated by the increased proliferation of printed political tracts. Dismantling the queen’s legitimacy in her domestic role was a crucial part of the process wherein new governments asserted their rule. If the consort was not fulfilling her duties in roles that combined both domestic and political implications, the king appeared unable to act as the head of his household or his kingdom.

The perceived failure of both Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette to successfully occupy their roles within their families resulted in the formal removal of each queen by representatives of her husband’s subjects. The impeachment of Henrietta Maria by the English House of Commons in 1643 and the trial of Marie Antoinette before the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1793 were without direct precedents. The trials and executions of two of Henry VIII’s wives in 1536 and 1542 or the imprisonment of Philip IV of France’s daughters-in-law following the Tour de Nesle affair of 1314 were prompted by accusations of adultery, which was considered to be a crime against their husbands as well as a crime against the state because of its potential effect on the...
succession. Although both the English House of Commons and the French Revolutionary Tribunal attempted to frame their respective judgments of Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette within the history of subversive royal women both the charges and the prosecution differed from the accusations faced by previous consorts. The two queens were not charged with crimes against their husbands but accused of opposing their husbands' subjects.

The prosecution of each queen reflected changing interpretations of treason. At the outbreak of the English Civil Wars, medieval treason statutes were recognized as antiquated but had not yet been replaced by new formal statutes. In France, the Unigenitus controversy cemented the independence of French law from the will of any individual monarch. The impeachment of Henrietta Maria and the trial of Marie Antoinette provided new governments with the opportunity to use the perceived activities of the consort as evidence of illegitimate influence by foreigners and women over the discredited monarch. Formal proceedings against a queen also implied that the entire monarchical system was irrevocably corrupt rather than simply weakened by the failings of an individual sovereign. The delegitimization of both queens compromised the entire dynastic line, emphasizing the necessity of regime change.

The House of Commons and the Revolutionary Tribunal justified their charges against the queen through a combination of historical precedent and contemporary political expediency. Charging Henrietta Maria with high treason reflected seventeenth century anxieties concerning the intimate proximity of a Catholic, French woman to the king, but the House of Lords, which received the motion for impeachment from the House of Commons, still discussed the charges presented at Anne Boleyn's trial. Although the trial of Marie Antoinette focused on her suspected correspondence with the Habsburgs, influence over Louis, and moral character, the public prosecutor placed her within the context of past queens, including Catherine de Medici. While both the House of Commons and the Revolutionary Tribunal asserted themselves as representative bodies of new regimes, they also sought to reinforce the legality of their actions by referring to past queens deposed for crimes against their husbands and the state.

In these environments of political upheaval informed by the mythology surrounding previous queens consort, the queen herself often developed a symbolic significance beyond her actual activities, but the impeachment and the trial were the culmination of long-standing dialogues between each queen and her husband's subjects concerning her activities as a wife, mother, and head of a royal household. Both Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette viewed the formal accusations of treasonable activities as opportunities to defend themselves against