The Unity of Fragments – the suicide of Marilyn Monroe and the execution of Marie-Antoinette

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Abstract: Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) and Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) were of hugely divergent social origin – Marilyn Monroe being born the poor, illegitimate child of a mentally unstable mother and an unknown father and Marie-Antoinette being born into ease and security as an Archduchess of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their ends were different too – Marilyn Monroe committed suicide alone and Marie-Antoinette was executed before a mob. Marilyn Monroe was an exceptional personality and Marie-Antoinette was quite ordinary. Nonetheless, there are resemblances and parallels in their lives – from them a) being required to follow established rituals of compliance to b), as a result of betrayal and exploitation, their early and tragic deaths. The purpose of such comparative analysis with its concentration on difference and resemblance is to illuminate the consequences of the features of social formations and how such features can affect agency and circumscribe the lives and selfhoods of individuals. It is in these terms that I explore aspects of the biographies of two seemingly widely differing women.

Marilyn Monroe: Hollywood is a place where they’ll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul

Marie-Antoinette: Monsieur, I beg your pardon (spoken to the executioner after she accidentally stepped on his foot)
Dissatisfaction with traditional biography was a reason for the inauguration of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group, where now brought to the fore, for the analysis of lives were the problematics of agency and structure, of discourse and narrative. It is in these terms that a concentration on fragments of lives has proved rewarding for insight into the character and operations of selfhood. In this article I want to talk about the connecting fragments of two lives – Marilyn Monroe and Marie-Antoinette. The main reason for this choice is to observe, firstly, the similarity of patriarchal relations in two seemingly very different settings, and, secondly, to give examples of persons in extremis, where choice is withheld and the self is an inseparable admixture of personal need shackled by social context. As such in these moral circumstances as Michael Sandel has observed, ‘the relevant description of the self may embrace more than a single, individual human being’ and in Taylor’s terms both have, ‘I-identity and We-identity’ (Sandel, 1982: 62; Taylor, 1989: 170). This is not a convergence of individuals but individuals having related participation in something beyond themselves. Further, the method of comparative investigation is important to all areas of sociology, the sociology of biography not least. It widens our perceptions by emphasising the great diversity of the manner in which people experience social relations. To use Barrington Moore’s phrase, ‘it is an exercise in deprovincialisation’ (Moore 1984: 267). Additionally, and conversely, it can emphasise not only distinction but broad similarities between remote cultural environments and remote cultural practices. As Durkheim said, ‘Only comparison affords explanation’ (1970: 41). Marilyn Monroe and Marie-Antoinette are not contingently related they are existentially related. This works itself out in specific ways and it is by these parameters (making no claim to an exhaustive understanding) that I venture to take some fragments of each of their lives that find reciprocal expression in the other. These are:

1. their arrival on the social stage;
2. their interest in dress;
3. their subjection to vilification and their untimely deaths.

**Arrival on the social stage from obscurity to the limelight – becoming Marie-Antoinette and Marilyn Monroe**

Both women’s arrival on the social stage translated them from obscurity to fame. In August 1946 Norma Jeane Dougherty changed her name to Marilyn Monroe and became a major film star. However, unlike Marie-Antoinette her start in life was highly inauspicious. Monroe came from a working class background. She was born on 1st June 1926 in a charity ward in Los Angeles County General Hospital to a mentally unstable single mother. Her mother, Gladys Monroe Baker, named her Norma Jeane and gave her a family name of Mortenson. Although, paternity is disputed the two men most likely to be her father refused to acknowledge Monroe as their daughter (Banner, 2012).
Rejected by her father(s) the three-month-old was given away to a foster family by a mother unable to cope with a young baby. By the time she was sixteen Norma Jeane had been resident in eleven different homes and also an orphanage which she considered to be the highpoint of her abandonment, describing herself whilst living there as an orphan. As a result she developed deep feelings of insecurity and a longing for a home and family of her own; something Monroe never achieved. During her childhood she was physically and sexually abused and left with feelings of guilt by the perpetrators. These episodes of exploitation are likely to have left Norma Jeane with a fragmented sense of self that may have resulted in her determination to create her sexually confident alter ego – Marilyn Monroe. Typical of her bravery in the face of adversity Monroe explores these events in her autobiography, *My Story* (Monroe, 2007). Exposing herself in this way was an exceptionally courageous thing to do in the 1950s/60s, in doing so she became unwittingly a pioneer of female sexual rights. 1946 also saw another turning point for Monroe when she divorced her first husband, Jim Dougherty.

The marriage was arranged for entirely selfish reasons by her guardian, Grace Goddard, and took place on 19th June 1942, three weeks after her sixteenth birthday. Marilyn had no choice but to acquiesce; the alternative was to be sent to another orphanage until she was eighteen.

The powerful socialising constraints felt by Marilyn Monroe find a counterpart in those, perhaps even more enmeshing ones, experienced by Marie-Antoinette. In both cases rationality and freedom in social relations are precluded and the question of choice in relation to what Weber calls style of
life is either withheld or is unavailable (Weber, 1948: 1947). Like Marilyn Monroe, Marie-Antoinette is too well known to need extensive introduction and has been the subject of regarded biographies (e.g. Fraser, 2001; Zweig, 2010). She was born in Austria in 1755 as the ninth child of Maria Theresa, empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who betrothed her to Louis-Auguste, the French Dauphin for exclusively diplomatic reasons: to reduce the chances of war in Europe and to strike an alliance between Bourbon France and Habsburg Austria. Marie-Antoinette’s ritual transfer between the two states took place in a lavish pavilion on an uninhabited island in the Rhine between French Strasbourg and Austrian Kehl. In the scene there was a certain starkness in the calculus of the etiquette – when amid the immense imperial show the fourteen-year-old Archduchess was completely disrobed of her splendid and ornate Austrian dress, was required to be quite naked and then redressed in splendid and ornate French attire.

Marie-Antoinette aged sixteen (Joseph Krantzinger 1771)

Not an Austrian buckle or stocking was allowed to pass into France. Marie-Antoinette then processed to Versailles for a confirmatory marriage ceremony and was now set four years later, in 1774, to become Queen of France. Had it not been for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, this ‘insignificant Habsburg princess’ says Stefan Zweig, ‘who had married a King of France would have continued, in her cheerful and untroubled play-world … and be hardly remembered’ (Zweig 2010: 13). Although in an exalted sphere, Marie-Antoinette was an ordinary, unambitious woman and in this respect quite unlike the go-ahead and exceptional Marilyn Monroe. In a poignant reversal, however, while Marilyn Monroe toward her end loses her sense of self and
purpose, upon the arrival of the Revolution Marie-Antoinette achieves hers –
‘Tribulation first makes one realise what one is’ she says and Zweig
comments, ‘the life of Marie-Antoinette is perhaps the most signal example of
the way in which history will at times take a mediocre human being’ and give
her ‘a greatness consummate with her destiny’ (Mercy, 1874: 168; Zweig,
2010: 14,15,16)\(^1\)

Unlike the pomp surrounding the arrival of Marie-Antoinette in France and
the confidence in her position inured by high levels of social capital Monroe’s
entrance to the social stage was low key and extremely precarious. She started
her career as a photographic model after being ‘discovered’ by David Conover
in 1944. Her fortunes were to change briefly when Howard Hughes is reported
to have seen her photograph on the front of an issue of Laff magazine, in
August 1946, and wanted to know more about her. As a result she was signed
by Twentieth Century Fox. It was usual for new actors to have a screen name
that signified their rite of passage from ordinary existence into the sacred
world of Hollywood (van Gennep, 1960). As Bell states rituals are, ‘the means
by which individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated and
conditioned’, and the ritual name change resulted in the studio’s control over
their new initiate (1992: 20). The double M alliteration was considered lucky
but after only a year she was dismissed by Darryl Zannuck, who didn’t like
her and didn’t think she had any talent.

Rejection was a recurrent event throughout her life but Monroe was strong and
determined; returning to the Actor’s Lab in Los Angeles to hone her acting
skills. She reflected later:
I knew how third-rate I was. I could actually feel my lack of talent as if it were cheap clothes I was wearing inside. But my God how I wanted to learn, to change to improve. I didn’t want anything else. Not men, not money, not love but the ability to act (Summers, 1985: 28).

For several years she lived in the shadows of Hollywood stars making her living as a pin-up model and Hollywood starlet. Although, Monroe was extremely ambitious, as a starlet she was at the beck and call of the powerful people, mainly men. This included conforming to the rituals of the casting couch and working as a ‘party girl’. Being part of the contract pool was an ambiguous position for an ambitious actress. The double standards in Hollywood meant that anyone known to be ‘sleeping around’ or regarded as a ‘slut’ would not be employed. Reputation was everything. Unsurprisingly, according to David Brown a Fox producer, party girls experienced a loss of self-esteem and feelings of being victimized in their constant desire to please in order to advance their career (Banner, 2012). She was advised by Hollywood producers not to get pregnant as this would ruin her body. It is likely that during the period 1946-50 she had up to 12 abortions. Monroe felt abused by Hollywood, the men and the industry, but she was determined to become famous. In order to achieve this ambition she set about creating the synthetic artifice of the Marilyn Monroe persona. Once created this star image became the property of the film industry and out of Monroe’s control. However, as Dyer remarks, ‘the commodity she produced was fashioned in and out of her own body and psychology’ (2004:7). In becoming Marilyn

![Marilyn at the opening of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof in 1955](www.autobiographyjournal.com)
Monroe, she would pay a heavy price in terms of broken relationships, three divorces, several suicide attempts, multiple abortions and miscarriages, exploitation, loneliness, and a tragically early death.

Whatever differences are to be found in the circumstances of the two women’s lives what is clear is that in their positions, as Queen of France or would-be Queen of Hollywood, they were expected to conform to the norms and values of a male dominated society in order to maintain and retain their position.

Self-image and interest in dress

Monroe’s and Marie-Antoinette’s need to conform meant that their appearance and dress were heavily prescribed by social conventions and expectations and became a major feature in shaping who they were. Although distant in time and circumstance the centrality of the question, ‘what to wear?’ is common to both Marilyn Monroe and Marie-Antoinette. In fact it is a link that attaches them to many women – an interest and concern about appearance and dress, where it can offer opportunities for pleasure and enjoyment along with worry, frustration and annoyance. As Guy et al. note, women will have a ‘wardrobe moment’ at least once a day (Guy et al., 2001:1). They consider decisions about what to wear are voluntary, conscious acts depending on where a woman is going, what she will be doing and who she will be with that can raise her self-esteem and sense of personhood. However, the reasons for dressing and adorning ourselves are anthropologically and socially complex but are always related to notions of identity (Davis, 1992; Guy, Green & Banim, 2001). What a woman looks like and what she chooses to wear might, therefore, be regarded as her prerogative in order to express her selfhood but it is also an act of social constraint even for ‘ordinary’ women (Gilman, 2002 [1915]). For Marie-Antoinette and Monroe their social location removed much of the ‘free will’ aspects of their appearance.

Eighteenth century Paris was the centre of fashion and Marie-Antoinette was its high representative – a combination that was problematic. The ritualistic change of attire as, the uncertain fourteen-year-old, Antoinette was transferred from Austrian to French soil has been mentioned. That difficult moment of dress and undress presaged what was to follow: the etiquette of French Royalty was that every day Marie-Antoinette would be dressed from nakedness to full apparel by the senior females of the Versailles court. After a period of confusion she settled to the regimen and her couturier, Rose Bertin, visited her twice a week to ensure a steady supply of new dresses. As the dresses accumulated so did the debts. Ironically the King was not much interested in great display and strange enough, not infrequently, Marie-Antoinette shared her husband’s view. She was keen to spend when she wanted to spend but had no choice (as female embodiment of France) but to
do so even when she didn’t. Unable to move and easy to observe – she was pinned like an entomological exhibit. Marie-Antoinette as Dauphine and then Queen had to personify the best of Paris – a city where, workers, artisans and the commercial and professional classes found employment in the manufacture, sale and servicing of luxury and semi-luxury goods. The Royal debt continued to mount and Marie-Antoinette was praised for wearing elaborate dresses (Fig. 7) and subsequently criticised for buying them.

In fact her preferred attire, which she wore in private at the Trianon, her own Versailles chateau, was quite simple. For dressing in this uncomplicated muslin or calico dress known as a Chemise de la reinne she was criticized on three levels, i) for simplicity, ii) for lewdness, iii) for being an enemy of France. It was said that such a simple dress was an insult to the dress-makers and silk merchants of France that the looseness of the dress encouraged her nymphomania, and finally that the material from which it was made favoured the weavers of the enemies of France. The portrait below, by Vigée Le Brun, was so reviled it had to be withdrawn from public exhibition. To her execution
Marie Antoinette wore a white shift. She asked for a black one to show mourning for her husband, but that was refused. Of all the hundreds of dresses that were made for Marie Antoinette not one has survived – they were stolen, destroyed or even defiled.

In comparison when it came to the question of dress Monroe had more freedom in her private life than Marie-Antoinette. Whilst being a trend setter she also liked to dress casually, or wear just her favorite white toweling dressing gown when at home (Nickens and Zeno, 2012).

But as a star she had to represent the glamour of Hollywood. This image was thoroughly developed by her costume designer and personal dresser, William Travilla, for eight films from 1952 to 1956 (Hansford, 2011). The memorable
dresses he designed made her into a Hollywood Goddess, both on stage and off, included the gold lamé dress that she was wore to accept her Photoplay Award for the fastest rising star of 1952 (Fig. 10). These clothes and how she wore them came to symbolise her glamour, star quality and sexuality. Unfortunately the sex symbol ‘blonde bombshell’ image became her nemesis as Hollywood moguls and the media escalated their levels of exploitation and she found it impossible to shake off the Marilyn Monroe persona when she tried to be taken as a serious actor.

She had, for example, to perform many unnecessary takes of the well known scene with her skirt flying up, over the subway grating, in The Seven Year Itch. She was constantly required to pose as a sex object, as Dyer notes:

Monroe may have been a wit, a subtle and profound actress, an intelligent and serious woman ….and it is important to recognise and recover these qualities against the grain of her image ………….but the grain itself … is overwhelmingly and relentlessly constructed in terms of sexuality (2004:18).

Hollywood companies and their executives existed to make money by creating dreams for the people who went to the cinema; they were not interested in developing artistic talent or taking risks. Monroe was therefore constantly ascribed the role of the sexy but dumb blonde even though as early as 1950 she was critically acclaimed for her acting, dramatic roles were to evade her
throughout her career. Eventually she became a parody of herself both as the
dumb blonde and sex goddess (Shevey, 1987). As Dyer (2004) says she had
no biography beyond the sexy image but this was not the person she wanted
to be. She constantly walked a tightrope between trying to please the film
industry and her ambition to become a serious actress. She was also passionate
to learn; an autodidact she read voraciously, went to classes about art and
became knowledgeable about psychoanalysis and politics (Summers, 1985).
She was regarded as witty and clever by those who knew her well. But
Monroe never entirely shook off Norma Jeane resulting in a fragmented
persona:

> When I wrote, this is the end of Norma Jeane [in my diary], I blushed as if I had been
cought out in a lie. Because this sad, bitter child who grew up too fast is hardly ever out
of my heart. With success all around me, I can still feel her frightened eyes looking out
of mine. She keeps saying ‘I never lived, I was never loved’, and often I get confused
and think it’s I who am saying it.’ (Monroe, 2007: 32).

This duality, her failed marriages, the desire to be a mother coupled with
gynaecological problems that resulted in at least three miscarriages added to
her insecurity and caused her immense anxiety and stress3. As Taraborrelli
observes:

> ever since she’d posed for photographs as a petty teenager , she had learned to become
‘Marilyn Monroe’ and had lived in a strange dislocation , as two women. One was the
ordinary girl who wanted a stable domestic life, with friends, marriage and children; the
other was the movie idol and sex goddess, with the hour glass figure, glistening lips and
crown of blonde hair (Taraborrelli 2009:263).

In order to ameliorate her emotions and physical pain Marilyn resorted to
alcohol and drugs.

**Vilification and death**

Marilyn Monroe and Marie-Antoinette were subjected to vilification, slander
and, an immiseration of their cultural prestige that culminated in their deaths.
However the circumstances were not the same. Marie-Antoinette’s experience
of being caught up in major political upheaval is in stark contrast to Marilyn’s
with it is petty politics, jealousies and trite events. She was affected by what
occurred to such an extent that the extraordinary persona of the young and
determined woman was sequentially and systematically eroded. By the time
she died Marilyn had become mentally fragile and uncertain about her
selfhood.

During her career Monroe made millions of dollars for Fox but she
continued to be held in contempt by its executives. When she made Gentlemen
Prefer Blondes in 1953 she was still being treated as a starlet. She was
undervalued and underpaid4. The film was a huge success and shot Monroe
further into the limelight. She was now a star and the public loved her. She always considered that it was her fans that made her a star not the Hollywood moguls (Monroe, 2007).

Singing to the troops, South Korea 1954

However, in both her public and private life she was often insulted and belittled. Neither of her husbands, Joe di Maggio or Arthur Miller liked Monroe’s star status. On honeymoon in Japan, Joe, a famous baseball player was to hold coaching sessions but the reality was that the crowds came to see Monroe and this enraged him. The final straw came when she sang to the troops in South Korea and received massive adulation. Di Maggio thought of Monroe as his property and couldn’t stand her public sex appeal (Leaming, 1998; Banner, 2012). Their physically violent marriage was short lived and the press hounded her after the announcements of their divorce. As she was bombarded with questions she had an envelope pressed into her hand, inside was a piece of toilet paper with the word ‘Whore’ written on it in faecal matter (Shevey, 1987).

Monroe married the left-wing play write Arthur Miller in late June 1956 at the height of her fame. Only a few weeks after they were married they came to England for the filming of The Prince and the Showgirl. On set, and off, she endured criticism from Lawrence Olivier about her lack of acting skills. Whilst sources vary (e.g. Leaming, 1998; Clark, 1995; Victor, 1999; Bigsby, 2008) about the extent to which Miller colluded with Olivier he does not seem to have been wholeheartedly supportive. He undermined Monroe further by writing derogatory remarks about her that she subsequently found. Soon after this episode Miller left her alone for ten days while he visited his children in
New York. These actions added to Monroe’s already fragile mental state and she went to London to see Anna Freud for therapy. Miller was cruel and unkind towards her even though she had supported and protected him from theHUAC committee. This vilification of her continued posthumously when Miller staged After the Fall, that some consider a diatribe against Monroe.

Despite her celebrity status Monroe had gained a reputation for being lazy and selfish. She was often late for work, some of this being due to ill health, although most people were suspicious and thought she was being disingenuous. She had chronic endometriosis and took drugs to manage the pain. With those she took for insomnia this made for a heady cocktail that undoubtedly caused problems in arriving at work on time (Clark, 1995). But unlike other stars, such as Elizabeth Taylor, Shirley Temple and Marlena Dietrich her misbehaviour wasn’t tolerated. She was treated without respect by producers and directors, frequently having to make public apologies on set. Monroe reacted to this treatment by having tantrums, being deliberately late, or flouncing off the set thus exacerbating the situation in her attempt to revolt against the anomie corporation (Dyer, 2004).

Monroe was often the victim of bad press and Colin Clark’s prescient diary entry, in November 1956, became all too true:

…”the great engine of publicity that surrounds her is unstoppable. Like some awful curse of the gods, it stalks her every moment, and one day it will crush her” (Clark, 1995: 208).

The press had a field day when the announcement of her divorce to Miller was made public in 1961. They wrote outrageous articles about her divorce, her sex life; claiming that she had bisexual and lesbian tendencies, something that was regarded as scandalous at the time. She was even blamed for Clark Gable’s death (Morgan, 2012). Hedda Hopper was particularly vicious suggesting that Marilyn may have killed the child she miscarried in 1958 because of her drug and drink habit. She even attacked her for weight gain, stating, ‘as a star you must keep yourself thin’ (Banner, 2012:360).

The attacks didn’t stop. When Monroe was fired from Something’s Got to Give, her last and unfinished film, the executives escalated their publicity campaign against her claiming that she was responsible for the loss of over one hundred jobs when the picture folded. In all probability it was cancelled because of the need to retrieve money to avoid bankruptcy as a result of the inordinate and rising cost of Cleopatra, ironically due to delays as a result of Elizabeth Taylor’s bad behaviour (Banner, 2012).

What would Marie-Antoinette have said noticing this experience of Marilyn Monroe: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. That there was political dissatisfaction in France with an over-spending Royal household was clearly the case – exhibitions of unchecked luxury and conspicuous consumption at Versailles and its satellites became increasingly unappealing to those who witnessed it and felt excluded. And, beyond Versailles the
grievances and discontents common to the dying period of an absolutist state began the transformation from disquiet and suffering into armed insurrection and political overthrow.

Without surprise in such a context political satire flourished. A conspicuous feature of such satires were attacks upon the manner, characteristics and activities of Marie-Antoinette. These began as political but became prolific pornographic representations. These works were known as *libelles*, their authors libellists. While the eighteenth century was the age of sensibility and taste it was also one of public execution and pornography. The degree of interchange between genuine revolutionists and straight forward scandal peddlers is much debated but, it is clear, that there was some crossover between the two groups making for an unpleasant congregation of degenerate hacks, aristocratic pretenders, career criminals, defrocked priests and embittered activists (e.g. Darnton, 1995; Burrows, 2009). In fact Antoinette had been a victim of personal attack from her arrival in France, she was known in aggrieved circles as *L’Autrichienne* which, of course, while literally meaning Austrian woman also means Austrian bitch, this was later amended, for unneeded emphasis, to *louve autrichienne* – she wolf Austrian bitch.

After her imprisonment the *libelles* continued – the depictions even cruder. The *libellists* in the heat of pre-Terror anticipation moved closer to becoming formal instruments of the state. Marie-Antoinette’s son Louis, eight years of age and also imprisoned, was induced by threats and promises to say he had incestuous relations with his mother. Marie-Antoinette had nowhere to go.
Jacques Hébert, *libellist extraordinaire* and the person set to oversee Antoinette’s imprisonment chose to confirm the accuracy of Louis' confession. Even the Revolutionary Tribunal itself reacted with some embarrassed silence at this obvious calumny. When it was reported to Robespierre he replied, ‘What a fool Hébert is’ (Zweig, 2010: 552). Marie Antoinette was executed on 16th October 1793. She showed fortitude, ‘The bitch was bold and impudent to very end,’ wrote Hébert (Schama, 1989: 675). Robespierre had him guillotined.

It is over 50 years since Marilyn Monroe was found dead in her bungalow in Brentwood, Los Angeles on 4/5th August 1962. She had attempted suicide several times during her lifetime. The coroner’s report states that, ‘the same pattern was repeated – except for the rescue’, and a, ‘probable suicide’, due to an overdose of drugs. Marilyn had become addicted to many drugs including chloral hydrate to help her sleep. There are parallels with Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*. Lily came from modest origins and yet she rose to be a highly sought after young woman in 19th century New York high society. Without family connections to protect her many men wanted to take advantage of her, inevitably rumours abounded. Lily was excommunicated from polite society resulting in isolation and degradation. Whilst sexual freedom was more acceptable in 1950s and 60s Marilyn too suffered from the double standards of the day (Dyer; 2004; Banner, 2012). Lily is found alone and dead in her room after taking an overdose of chloral hydrate. Of Durkheim’s (1952) types of suicide Lily’s is certainly egoistic, reflecting her alienation from the society in which she was embedded. Marilyn’s is a little less transparent.

Whatever happened that night Marilyn’s death was a private affair. The fragments of information that are left surrounding her end are inconclusive. Conspiracy theories abound not least that the Kennedys, John and Bobby, were involved in a cover up (Mailer, 1973). Many consider that the long affair between John Kennedy and Marilyn was ended brutally the weekend she died. The level of Marilyn’s involvement with both Kennedys is disputed, although the rumours about her affair with John were quashed at his command (Dallek, 2003). This and other events that year – her public humiliation in being fired by Fox on June 9th, a disastrous weekend in late July at Cal Neva when she hoped to meet Bobby Kennedy but he failed to arrive – are likely to have increased an already deteriorating mental state.

The loneliness and privacy of Marilyn’s death was however soon overturned by the media frenzy. Although it was too late to include a report in the *Los Angeles Times* on Sunday 5th her death was soon front page news in all the papers in the USA and most in Europe. The private death became public property. Reports provided prurient details, emphasising her nakedness and the drug overdose. As in life, Marilyn in death was exploited to titillate the public’s imagination.
If Marilyn Monroe did commit suicide its categorisation, as is frequent, is complex and moves across intersecting planes of the anomic and egoist tendencies; or on the other hand it may have been a matter of bad luck, a mistaken overdose. But even if accidental it remains suicidogenic in nature. The sad ending of Marilyn Monroe conforms in character with similar ambiguous forms of self-extinction. The death of Marie-Antoinette, however, is entirely unambiguous – she was guillotined before a raucous mob, hungry for her decapitation. As was mentioned earlier, following Zweig, Marie-Antoinette was an ordinary, average person – not given to deep thought, not in possession of a striking personality, easily distracted, unkeen to be bored and holding a caring disposition and loving her children. Her royal career was not her own doing – it was decided for her by the ruling interests of Vienna and Paris. She did what was required, she secured an alliance and bore a son, and her enthusiasms – for dress, for theatricals, for music were just as one would expect. She was always surprised to find herself a subject of ridicule because the reasons were opaque to her. Further, she was a person who had no reason to speculate on the nature of great fortitude. But that is exactly the quality that at the end she displayed quite remarkably. ‘Some have greatness thrust upon them’ – she was one such.

What was the unexpected source of her final intrepidity? A double origin may be suggested – firstly, her intense sense of personal dignity, a lesson learned deeply from her mother’s training, and secondly, also from childhood a complete, certain and fixed belief in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Faith. These early imprintings were to coalesce, as her execution approached, into a steadfast resolve. Her last letter, written at 4.30 on 16th October 1793,
the morning of her execution was addressed to her sister-in-law, also
imprisoned. In it she asks God to forgive her her sins and bids farewell to her
children and to her dear friends – they will she says, at the moment of her
execution, be in her mind. Just a week before the head of her best friend the
Princess de Lamballe had been severed, stuck on a pike and disported before
her window.

The executioner came to her cell and cut off her hair, tied her arms behind
her back and took her to the open cart that would transport her to the
guillotine. Among the well-placed spectators was the great artist (and even
great boot licker) Jacques Louis David who produced an instant sketch as the
tumbrel passed. There is nothing regal in it, only a prematurely aged figure,
with close-lipped determination. On reaching the scaffold Antoinette walked
quickly up its steps. In her haste she stepped on the toe of the executioner
(apologised for her carelessness) and went determinedly to her death. The
state priest stepped forward pressing his enfeebled, spiritual services. She
glanced at him with reserved contempt and replied, ‘The moment when my ills
are going to end is not the moment when courage is going to fail me’
(Campardon, 1864: 232).

drawing of Marie-Antoinette on her way to the guillotine (J L David)

The least typical of Durkheim’s categorisations of suicide is fatalistic suicide.
It is suicide that results from a clearly observed (by the victim) excess of
regulation, it is committed he says by those, whose ‘future is pitilessly blocked
and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline’ (1952: 276n). This is
not a matter of confusion over norms or a loss of (or over-abundance of) self-
identification – it is a clear-eyed choice for self-extinction in the face of an
intolerable lack of reasonableness. As such it is suggested that while Antoinette died most certainly not by her own actions she nevertheless did so with equal certainty, on her own terms.

Conclusion

To say that both these women suffered because they were women is correct but too partial. Perhaps it is worth recalling (with apposite amendment) Kluckhohn’s maxim (1949), every woman is

a) like all other women
b) like some other women
c) like no other woman

Marilyn Monroe and Marie-Antoinette were itemized as particular kind of women – good looking, influential and prominent. These crucial similarities are the background for much difference – in personality, in temper and in social position. Marilyn Monroe was well-read, intellectual, and ambitious and an accomplished actress but she was also continuously searching for an anchor in her life but never quite achieving it, thus her selfhood became fragmented between her desires and aspirations and the reality of her experience. An early feminist, a pioneer of equal rights, an independent career woman she was supportive and had a clear sense of right and wrong and of fairness over discrimination but in the same moment she was irrationally dependent on others. Marie-Antoinette was unintellectual, ill-read and her ambition was only to fulfill her rôle – have children, be Queen, and represent the position and dignity of France. She showed a caring nature but had formed no views on general questions of social justice.

So far as their physical attractions and studied public appearance are concerned both subjects enjoyed a degree of objectification. It is the case that objectification is not a uniformly dispiriting experience. Martha Nussbaum and other feminists have argued that in certain contexts objectification can have unharmful forms: ‘ …the difference between an objectionable and benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship’ (Nussbaum, 1995: 271).

What neither woman liked was when appreciation of their looks and erotic appeal was employed to torment them. The extraordinary woman Marilyn Monroe became caught up in a complex of trite events and dysfunctional interactions and she died, as others have done, when these things became over-determining and too much to bear. Marie-Antoinette the most ordinary of women had at her exit, unlike Monroe, extraordinary clarity of mind. For both, their dazzling appearance upon the public stage was double-sided. In public and in private their erotic identity was used against them. This sort of scurrility works much more painfully against women than men. This activity however
was not the thing that killed either of them but what it did do was hasten Marilyn’s death and give sick relish to Marie-Antoinette’s accusers.

Notes

3 It might seem strange (given what it is) not to talk of the primary, supra-individual social truth of the French Revolution but perhaps to talk of an individual so intensively inscribed by the politics swirling about her is also a form of primary social truth.

2 It is worth noting that Austrian Royalty, outside official situations, were far more informal than the French and it was an informality that Marie-Antoinette much missed.

3 Marilyn suffered from chronic endometriosis and had several minor operations in attempts to rectify the problem but to no avail. She also has at least three miscarriages; these were during her marriage to Arthur Miller.

4 Jane Russell was paid $200,000 for the film but Marilyn, still on contract, only received $1,7000 per week.

5 Marilyn was heavily dependent upon her psychiatrists throughout her life, these included Marianna Kris, Ralph Greenson and Anna Freud.

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