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A HAPPY MARRIAGE OF INCONVENIENCE:
THE POWER OF ADRIENNE DE LA FAYETTE OVER HER DESTINY IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a testament to significant shifts in western civilization. The Industrial Revolution, the intellectual products of the Enlightenment, the decline in the Catholic Church, and the upheaval of established socio-political structures through public unrest coalesced together into a unique incubator that bred change. Women were being regarded as “complementary” to their male partners, which gave them heightened recognition although it did not constitute them as being equal counterparts.¹ Slowly women were surpassing the confines of the private home and were regarding themselves as more than just commodities in the business of marriage, but each struggled individually as there was no joint feminist movement. Marie Adrienne Françoise de Noailles, Marquise de La Fayette, grew up with a favorable name in pre-revolutionary French society, but she was restricted from the age of fifteen as being only the wife of the future “Hero of the Two Worlds.” She was then stripped of the notoriety of her maiden name when the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror attacked the aristocracy. Left with nothing, she successfully adapted to her restrictive circumstances that mirrored her marital constraint to a man who lost his political prestige under the same conditions. During a period of contention between the advantage of arranged marriages and marriages of love, Adrienne de Noailles experienced an amalgamation of the two through her union with the Marquis de La Fayette, which influenced her role as a female aristocrat in a tumultuous French society.

In a large but unassuming Hôtel de Noailles on the Rue Saint Honoré in Paris, Adrienne de Noailles grew up under the arranged marriage of her father Jean-Paul-François de Noailles, the Duc d’Ayen, an atheist socialite, and her mother Henriette Anne Louise d’Aguesseau, Duchesse d’Ayen, a pious introvert. Born on November 2, 1759, Adrienne was the second of

¹ June K. Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question: Discourses of the Other Sex in French Education, Medicine, and Medical Law 1799-1815* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), preface.

five daughters and she learned from her devoted mother that her words had power, which she could use in the art of arguing. Unlike many French aristocratic mothers of her era who bestowed the responsibility of rearing their children onto others, the Duchesse took it upon herself to cultivate her daughters into strong women so they would not experience unhappy marriages like her own. It would be her hope that Adrienne would be remembered as the woman who entertained intellectual celebrities and not just as an extension of her husband. The Duc had other expectations and arranged a marriage with the Comte de La Rivière between Adrienne and Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de La Fayette in 1772 that involved a dowry of 400,000 livres.² Aware that she could not break the arrangement, the Duchesse added multiple stipulations to the contract, including Gilbert's mandatory residence at the Noailles' home for a period of two years, Adrienne's ignorance of the marriage until six months before the wedding, and the mandatory residence of the newly-betrothed at the Hôtel.³

As Adrienne and Gilbert became familiar with each other during his stay, the Duchesse believed her daughter to be truly in love and approved the marriage that was carried out on April 11, 1774.⁴ Outwardly, it seemed to be the best outcome of the situation. Adrienne would share the rest of her life with someone she enjoyed and the marriage financially benefitted her family, which appeased the custom of marriages being a business venture. However, the love that Adrienne acquired for her new husband exceeded her mother's expectations. Adrienne cared so deeply for him that she deemed herself unworthy of Gilbert and undervalued her own personal qualities throughout their marriage. In a letter to her aunt she explained that, "The knowledge that I am very far from being as good and gracious as he is makes me sad, and then I hope that

² Jason Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), 8.

³ Ibid., 10.

⁴ Constance Wright, *Madame de Lafayette* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1959), 13.

my affection may make up for my shortcomings.”⁵ Her husband flourished under her constant attention because he could always rely upon it. Many of his early letters included variations of the question, “Is it not true that you will always love me?”⁶ The initial phase of their marriage sowed the seeds for many of the ordeals Adrienne had to confront later in life, including the constant and debase reassurances to her husband and his frequent, inconvenient absences. In an attempt to improve his son-in-law’s social standing, the Duc d’Ayen placed Gilbert in the Noailles Dragoons, a position that took him away to Metz each summer and initiated his disposition for ambition that would plague their marriage.⁷

Two years after their nuptials, America’s War for Independence began and Gilbert was enthralled by the ferocity of the people fighting for ideals that mirrored his own back in France. His enrapture was so complete that he participated in multiple schemes to ship himself to America without notifying the Noailles family. In 1777 on a presumed pleasure trip to London, he sent a letter to Adrienne with the statement, “Farewell, dear heart; in whatever country I go, I will always love you most tenderly.”⁸ His tongue-in-cheek remark had no meaning to Adrienne until he clandestinely crossed the Atlantic on April 20, 1777.⁹ There were many reasons for his departure: he wanted to gain self-confidence and fame, appease his ambitions, and support a cause he passionately wanted to succeed.¹⁰ However, according to Louis Philippe, Comte de Ségur in his *Mémoires*, the secrecy behind

His departure was a cause of much affliction to his family, the members of which suffered greatly, not only at the thought of those many dangers he was about to

⁵ Letter from March 2, 1779, in the unpublished Fabius Brothers’ collection, quoted in André Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961), 75.

⁶ Marquis de Lafayette to Madame de Lafayette, May 30, 1777, on board the *Victory*, in Marquis de Lafayette, *Memoirs, Correspondence and Manuscripts of General Lafayette*. Published by his family (Los Angeles: HardPress, 2017), 71.

⁷ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 15.

⁸ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 22.

⁹ Harlow Giles Unger, *Lafayette* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 28.

¹⁰ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 38, 75.

encounter, but because he was sacrificing a great part of his fortune in the interests of a country very far removed from France. Only his wife, who suffered more than anybody else, loved him too well not to share his feelings and approve his generous resolution.¹¹

It was obvious that he would keep his plans hidden from the Noailles family because King Louis XVI refused to give his consent for the expedition and they would be concerned about their political image, but his inability to trust his wife demonstrated his ignorance in regards to the temperament of the woman he married. Adrienne was not only aware and accepting that he was the type of man to put his career first, she was more apprehensive about how others reacted to his decision than about herself. In the memoir *Vie de Madame de Lafayette*, her daughter is quoted stating that Adrienne once remarked about the Duchesse's response, that "[the Duchesse] realized that she could not fear for my happiness without fearing for her own. The depth of her feelings for him made it the more possible for her to soften the pain of mine."¹² Throughout the future emotional strains that her husband placed on her, Adrienne would always turn to the women in her life for support.

Her selflessness was a stark contrast to Gilbert's own biting egoism, demonstrated in a letter to Adrienne dated from about March 1777, when he was traveling in England: "I have been much put about, dear heart, at having received no news of you for two posts. Fortunately, I know you are not sick but only lazy, because I have heard from the Vicomtesse and other friends, who say nothing of you."¹³ Although he sent his letter at the time of the perceived snub and her reflection occurred many years after the American incident, her immediate reaction of silence was a testament to her understanding of her position. If she outwardly approved his expedition to America, she would face the backlash of her fellow Frenchmen and the French royalty, but if she

¹¹ Quoted in Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 49.

¹² Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

condemned him alongside the entire Noailles family - excluding her mother - she would be considered a bad wife. Instead, she did what her husband asked of her: "Please do not condemn me before you hear me."¹⁴

While her husband was abroad, Adrienne faced the challenges of maintaining her roles at home and keeping up appearances within the French Court. Sentiments were negative towards her husband due to his disobedience of the royal family, until he was deemed valiantly wounded on September 11, 1777 at the Battle of Brandywine. Upon his first return home, he was formally put under house arrest for a week before being warmly welcomed by his fellow Frenchmen. As a result, Adrienne adapted to his newfound popularity, which consequently brought her added notoriety with not only the general public, but also political individuals, both domestic and international. Queen Marie Antoinette curtailed her accustomed post-dinner procession to La Muette in order to escort Adrienne home upon her husband's return.¹⁵ Adrienne also became well acquainted with Americans at her designated Monday American dinner nights, where she entertained celebrities such as Thomas Jefferson, the Adams family, and Benjamin Franklin. To maintain her husband's acclaim with these highly regarded individuals, she eclipsed the habitual conventions of hospitality and gained admittance for the Adams into a selective Notre Dame service. She was even complimented alongside the Comte du Nord, the son of Catherine the Great, by the Court of Peers.¹⁶ However, her prestige was not limited to the vicinity of France; Adrienne began a correspondence with George Washington, her husband's mentor, which reached its apex when he pleaded with her in a letter to visit America because "the charms of

¹⁴ "Selected Documents from the Collection: Letter to Adrienne Lafayette from Valley Forge, January 6, 1778," *The Marquis de Lafayette Collection*, Cleveland State University Library Special Collections <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/lafayette/documents/doc9.shtml> (accessed 1 August 2017).

¹⁵ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 72.

¹⁶ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 105.

your person, and the beauties of your mind, have a more powerful operation – These Madam, have endeared you to me, and every thing [*sic*] which partakes of your nature will have a claim to my affections.”¹⁷ His generous proposal and compelling argument were ultimately rejected graciously due to Adrienne’s prioritization of her children’s welfare.

Keeping with the social norms of the time, Adrienne began rearing children at an early age. Her first child, Henriette, was born in 1775 when Adrienne was sixteen but she lost the baby two years later, months after the birth of her second child, Anastasie Louise Pauline.¹⁸ Adrienne had to experience the dismal reality of infant mortality without the comforting presence of her husband, who had left for America in April of 1777. In a letter of consolation, Gilbert referenced the cruelty of being so far away but admitted that he was determined to help the colonists and so his return home would not be imminent during that crucial time.¹⁹ Another letter emphasized his own emotional turmoil because “this sad news followed immediately that of the treaty; and whilst my heart was torn by grief, I was obliged to receive and take part in expressions of public joy” and he pleaded with her to “consider, my love, how dreadful it must be to weep for what I have lost.”²⁰ He would not visit France until 1779 when George Washington deemed it necessary to gain French aid, and the trip resulted in Adrienne’s third pregnancy of Georges Washington Louis Gilbert. At the age of twenty-three, Adrienne bore her last child, Marie Antoinette Virginie, soon after Gilbert’s second triumphant return from America. These early years that transitioned her into motherhood set a precedent for the future roles she and her husband would play as parents. Gilbert would generally be an absent father due to his ambition. Adrienne faced

¹⁷ George Washington to Adrienne, Marquise de Lafayette, April 4, 1784, *Founders Online: Papers of George Washington* <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-01-02-0192> (accessed August 5, 2017).

¹⁸ Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question*, 181.

¹⁹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 43.

²⁰ Marquis de Lafayette to Madame de Lafayette, June 16, 1778, at Valley Forge Camp, in Marquis de Lafayette, *Memoirs, Correspondence and Manuscripts of General Lafayette*, 134.

a miscarriage, a dead first-born, a physically difficult pregnancy, and Virginie's two month premature delivery with very little paternal support. However, she was not alone in enduring these misfortunes and received comfort from other women in her family. At times, she would visit her husband's Aunt Chavaniac, an old-fashioned woman set in her ways, but her heaviest reliance was on her sister Anne Jeanne Baptiste Louise, vicomtesse d'Ayen, who experienced similar hardships when her husband journeyed to America with Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau.²¹ She also did not criticize her husband's absence but had so much admiration for him that she actually praised her children's genetic relation to him because "the number of those who resemble you is so small that any addition to their ranks is a public service."²²

Adrienne's role as the sole progenitor in her children's rearing was eccentric but not inconceivable for her time. It was within her power to insist upon Georges Washington's private tutoring with Félix Frestel on the Rue St. Jacques so as to keep him from developing a grandiose sense of self due to his family's notoriety.²³ However, it was less traditional for her to manage the family's finances and charities. When Gilbert left for America, his expedition was not only deemed social suicide, it also put an immense strain on his finances. As time passed and he gained prestige in the war, French society deemed him less controversial but his monetary allocations did not diminish. Out of necessity, Adrienne was forced to continuously seek ways to balance the family budget with Monsieur Morizot, the comptroller of Gilbert's estate until he came of age at twenty-five.²⁴

²¹ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 56-57.

²² Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 81. French original referenced from the Henry E Huntington Library.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 82.

Not only was it unusual for her to be the principle supervisor of financial compromises, including selling property and choosing a less assuming Parisian home, she also adopted the role of executor over charitable works. Some of her achievements were common for aristocratic Catholic women to undertake, including assisting peasant farmers in the Auvergne region in 1782 when the area was wrought with famine, but the extent and sincerity with which she carried out her duty was nonpareil.²⁵ Within that region, a similar harvest collapse occurred at her husband's estate at Chavaniac and she established an alternative way of self-sufficiency for women with the opening of a weaving school at St. Georges d'Aurac.²⁶ Her charitable works were partially a byproduct of her Catholic faith's value of compassion but also due to Gilbert's talent of formulating modern concepts without the capacity of bringing them into fruition. In 1786, Gilbert resolved to buy a plantation in Cayenne, French Guiana as an experiment for gradual emancipation. Adrienne expanded upon his idea to include a second plantation and Saint-Régis and La Belle Gabrielle were purchased that year.²⁷ His idea was admirable but Gilbert was not gifted at managing his time and overseeing logistics. If Adrienne did not take over the administration of the project, 125,000 livres would have been wasted on purchasing the land and forty-eight slaves would not experience freedom. She completely overhauled the undertaking and added missionary work with the transfer of priests from the Seminaire du Saint Esprit.²⁸ The plantations were later appropriated during the political upheaval of the French Revolution.

When her husband's desires coincided with her religion, Adrienne was elated to offer her

²⁵ Unlike most aristocrats who used their money as the main tool of relief, Adrienne utilized her influence on the area's bailiff to restore order. She had never set foot on the land so she did not have a personal connection but it was the right thing to do. Simultaneously, her husband went into isolation over his separation from one of his mistresses.

²⁶ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 80-81.

²⁷ René de Chambrun, "Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 29, no. 2 (April 1972): 82.

²⁸ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 128.

assistance, which was demonstrated by her ardent fixation on the welfare of the plantations. Nevertheless, Gilbert was not pious and her acceptance of his secular lifestyle tended to create moral dissonance. It was common for male French nobles to have relations outside of wedlock and Gilbert became very popular with women due to his heroism in America. He famously had affairs with Aglaé d'Hunolstein and Diane-Adélaïde de Damas d'Antigny, Comtesse de Simiane and a speculated affair with Adélaïde-Félicité-Etienne de Guignot de Monteconseil, Princess d'Hénin.²⁹ Religiously, Adrienne deemed her marriage a contract under God but socially she respected his decision, as it was expected of her. She never condemned his behavior publicly nor in writing and she frequently took on the responsibility of being his intermediary correspondent when his political career encroached upon his personal time. But she was resolute in fighting for her devout ideals when his assistance in instigating the French Revolution led to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790. Even though it could have damaged his political career if it became known, she supported and aided “non-jurors” at Saint Sulpice, and refused to host influential refractory priests in her home.³⁰ Adrienne internalized the customs of her culture in regard to infidelity but she could not tolerate the condemnation of the people she deemed to be truly holy.

Initially—before the attack on her religion—she supported the French Revolution of 1789 because her husband was at the forefront of the movement and she believed in the cause of equality.³¹ Gilbert was a living legend, prancing through the streets on his horse Jean Le Blanc, and he desired his wife's complete support, which she gave wholeheartedly. She presented

²⁹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 80-81.

³⁰ Chambrun, “Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange,” 82.

³¹ He was the unpaid commander of the Paris National Guard, the president of the Fête de la Fédération, a member of the Estates General, the vice-president of the National Assembly, and created the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

money to the national mint, ate the bread of the poor as a symbol of solidarity, and fed approximately three hundred representatives of the National Guard in her Parisian home, the Hôtel de Lafayette, at various times.³² While the people cheered for her spouse and she expressed adoration for his work, Adrienne once again experienced personal suffering that sprouted from his good intentions. Many of her aristocratic ties were severed because Gilbert's campaign for the rights of the average person lowered the status of the upper class. An invitation to see her sister Anne Paule Dominique was rescinded because her sister's father-in-law, Monsieur de Beaune, condemned Gilbert's behavior.³³ It was deemed an insult that in 1791 he changed his title from La Fayette to Lafayette to minimize his affiliation with the aristocracy.³⁴ Just as the nobility condemned Gilbert for being the "King's Jailer" after the Women's March on Versailles in 1789, soon even the general public turned on the "Queen's lover" due to his termination of a riot and his growing discord with the radicalizing Paris Commune. The disbandment of a riot occurring in June of 1791 led to an attempted mob attack on the Hôtel de Lafayette while Adrienne was in residence. It was her first encounter with a personal threat on her life.³⁵ In 1792, Gilbert saw an opportunity to protect his wife from Parisian hostility by transferring her to Metz after his deployment there for the French Revolutionary War with Austria. However, she rejected his attempt to save her because it would weaken his already precarious military and political position and instead she insisted upon staying in Paris. As her husband's prestige began to deteriorate, Adrienne stood firm and according to her daughter Virginie,

Every misfortune, every occasion of disorder she watched with a clear and disillusioned eye. All through that time she was sustained by my father's principles, and was so wholly

³² Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

³⁴ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 238.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36, 41-42.

convinced of his power to do good and to prevent evil that she endured with unbelievable strength of character the constant dangers to which she was exposed.³⁶

At this point in her life, Adrienne experienced almost a complete discontinuation of any personal political power and instead she advocated for Gilbert by providing him with moral aid and balancing his expenditures by selling land, which ultimately led to a decrease in income from 128,000 livres in 1788 to 57,000 livres in 1791.³⁷ She also supported him when he once again helped people outside of his native borders, including the Dutch patriot movement of 1783-1787 and the Brabant Revolution of 1789-1790 in Belgium.³⁸

A dissention with her fellow Frenchmen began to foster as the French Revolution developed into a more radical movement that condemned her for her maiden and family names. Her circle of allies diminished to her immediate friends and family who were mainly located at Chavaniac. The change in location was an attempt to disassociate her loved ones from the growing hostilities in Paris and to refocus attention on managing the family estates. Soon, the Reign of Terror gained momentum under the Jacobins and a warrant for Gilbert's arrest was fashioned because of his failure in the Austrian campaign and his denouncement of Jacobin ideas. With his decision to flee the country, Gilbert was deemed a traitor and an émigré, which implied that he was conspiring to overthrow the government and granted a legal basis for the confiscation of his property. To protect her children, Adrienne reluctantly sent her daughters to the château of Langeac and her son to Conangles.³⁹ Gilbert's aunt, Madame de Chavaniac, had to be constantly consoled due to her poor memory and inability to understand the situation that was causing her nephew's absence. Additionally, Adrienne contacted the president of the tribunal of

³⁶ Ibid., 163-164.

³⁷ Ibid., 199.

³⁸ Paul S. Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010), preface.

³⁹ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 214.

Brioude in August of 1792 to acquire a governmental seal on her Chavaniac home as a safeguard against looting.⁴⁰ Her trip to Brioude launched her back into the political sphere after a delay of worrying and supportive behavior that was more in accordance with the women's role of her time.

On September 10, 1792, Alphonse Aulagnier, the commissioner of Le Puy ordered Adrienne's incarceration. In response, she traveled to Le Puy, addressed herself as "La Femme Lafayette" to the Department Council, persuaded the officials that she was not a flight risk, and was granted house arrest.⁴¹ Twisting the situation to her advantage and increase her leverage, Adrienne made the valid point that her detention was a good incentive for her husband's return but there was no logical need for her to wait in a prison. In her address to the council she stated, "you must allow me to have confidence in my own integrity, and realize that I have no bayonets with which to support my word."⁴² Her diplomacy granted her a reprieve from jail and she stayed resolute despite her newfound knowledge on August 24, 1792 that upon her husband's flight from France earlier that month, Gilbert was detained in Belgium and arrested by Frederick Wilhelm II of Prussia. Pressure was placed on Adrienne to file for a civil divorce, which would allow her to keep her own property and dowry. Partially because of her devotion to traditional Catholic doctrine and partially due to her loyalty to her husband, Adrienne refused this opportunity and instead sought assistance from Gouverneur Morris. Morris was the United States Minister Plenipotentiary to France from 1792 to 1794 and he was previously well-acquainted with Gilbert.⁴³ Using this personal connection and the knowledge that the Americans felt a debt

⁴⁰ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 56-57.

⁴¹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 189-190.

⁴² Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 224.

⁴³ "Morris, Gouverneur (1752-1816)," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000976>, (accessed October 11, 2017).

to her husband, Adrienne established a correspondence with Morris that would continue for many years and would prove to be lucrative, starting with a loan of 100,000 livres.⁴⁴

However, even her powerful friend could not stop her second order of arrest from Commissioner Granchier under the Law of Suspects on November 12, 1793. Be that as it may, her own character granted an extra night in her home because her loyal relationship with Anastasie instilled sympathy.⁴⁵ She was then transferred to Brioude, where she identified with her socio-economically diverse cellmates. On May 27, 1794, she was transferred to La Petite Force prison in Paris, which was initially a prison for prostitutes but became associated with an inevitable death sentence for aristocratic women during the Terror. With the knowledge that her transfer would lead to a trial, she sent a petition to Representative Guyardin back in Brioude asking him “to collect honest testimonies in my favor, so that even though it is no longer possible for you to decide my fate, you may at least be able to enlighten those into whose hands I am to be committed on the facts. It is my children who ask justice of you.”⁴⁶ Knowing that the representative took pride in his semblance of justice, Adrienne attempted to charm her way into a more favorable position. Ultimately she never went to trial, partially due to Morris’s unofficial suggestion that her death would strain French relations with America and the timeline of her arrest. The infamous mass killings ended in July of 1794 so there was little time for the Committee of Public Safety to find an opportunity to condemn her, although the circumstances were different for her relations. July 22, 1794 marked the day she lost her closest female allies to the guillotine: her grandmother Catherine de Cossé-Brissac duchesse de Noailles, her mother Henriette-Anne-Louise d'Aguesseau, duchesse d'Ayen, and her sister Louise.⁴⁷ Their murders

⁴⁴ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 107.

⁴⁵ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 241.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁷ Chambrun, “Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange,” 82.

marked one of the only traumatic experiences not connected to her husband that produced extreme emotional distress for Adrienne. Her persevering attitude was severely shaken as she was transferred to the Plessis prison, the Mais on Delmas detention house, and then the Desnos house prison infirmary, up until her release on January 21, 1795.⁴⁸

Her discharge did not produce a conclusion to the necessity of action. Gilbert was still incarcerated and was being transferred all over Prussia and Austria. Under the order of Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, Gilbert's final destination was Olmütz. Before his arrest, Gilbert sent a letter to Adrienne on August 21, 1792 stating, "I am making no apology at all, either to my children or to you, for having ruined my family. Not a single one of you would have wanted to benefit from my having acted against my conscience."⁴⁹ With the change of circumstance upon his captivity, Gilbert assumed that Adrienne would seek asylum outside of France and, like many others, underestimated her ability to stand her ground. Due to her unusual actions that succeeded her husband's turn of fate, it is understandable that Gilbert would misjudge her decision.

Adrienne, a woman, attempted a serious feat of diplomacy. She never abandoned her post in France during the Reign of Terror and was constantly contacting people in the political sphere that could help her husband regain his rights. Letters were written to Jean-Marie Roland, an influential Girondin; George Washington; Gouverneur Morris; the commander of armies Duke of Brunswick; Frederick Wilhelm II of Prussia; the Princess of Orange; Thomas Pickney, the Minister of England; and the Prussian ambassador Girolamo Lucchesini soon after his capture.⁵⁰

As time passed, she received few responses and witnessed even fewer actions. A letter written to Frederick Wilhelm II stating, "I have always hoped, Sire, that Your Majesty would

⁴⁸ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 147-149.

⁴⁹ Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State*, 12.

⁵⁰ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 191-200; Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 88, 96, 100.

feel respect for virtue, irrespective of opinions and would in this set a glorious example of all Europe... But it seems to me that both [Gilbert's] enemies and I speak eloquently in his favor: they by their crimes, I by the excess of my grief" fell on deaf ears.⁵¹ Her cordial letter to Washington on October 8, 1792 was followed with a curt accusation on March 13, 1793 when he failed to reply. For Adrienne, her political and private interests were congruent and she was resolute on getting assistance regardless of governmental policy. Albeit, Washington was not completely parsimonious because he did send private funds to help Adrienne in her quest and unofficial letters were issued to Gilbert's captors. However, Adrienne expected more and with the aid of her uncle, the Vicomte de Ségur, she secured a passport for her son under Gilbert's humble name of "Motier" through Boissy d'Anglas, a new member of the Committee of Public Safety, and Georges Washington was sent to the man who inspired his name.⁵² Speculations arose regarding her motives for sending her son to America. Secretary of War James McHenry believed her to be trying to gain sympathy from Washington to entice more immediate action out of him than just private loans.⁵³ However, she was acting upon more than self-interest; Georges Washington needed a safe and stable environment to be raised in and it was Adrienne's duty to send him away if she could not provide it herself.

With the failure of the political sphere, Adrienne turned to the private and women's realms. A growing group of Fayettees consisting of a wide variety of individuals attempted to assist the captured hero. Women were especially prevalent members because the sexist stigma against them actually gave them more freedom to work covertly without rising suspicion.

Princess Adélaïde d'Hénin, Germaine de Staël, Georgiana Cavendish the Duchess of

⁵¹ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 229.

⁵² Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 161-162.

⁵³ Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State*, 176.

Devonshire, and Julienne de Bureau-Pusy were some of the women who used their social skills and relationships to apply pressure to the situation.⁵⁴ However, the slow nature of this strategy did not prompt an immediate resolution to Adrienne's goal of being reunited with her husband so she decided that instead of fighting for Gilbert's release, she would join him at Olmütz. In an undelivered letter to her husband, she explained, "my argument, beloved, is this: that one who is condemned to ostracism can best endure that trial in the company of his wife and children."⁵⁵ After a failed attempt to get a passport from the American Minister James Monroe, she acquired one from the American consul John Parish as the American citizen "Mrs. Motier."⁵⁶ With this added protection, she travelled to her aunt Adrienne Catherine de Noailles, comtesse de Tessé in Austria. Through her aunt's friend the Countess von Rombeck, she acquired an audience with the Prince von Rosenberg, the Grand Chamberlain, which led her to an introduction with Francis II.⁵⁷

Adrienne invested so much of herself into her objective because it was a means of coping and she needed an upbeat purpose. The loss of her female familial heroes was very detrimental and she suffered from the trauma of her own experiences in prison, proven in a letter to her husband on September 8, 1795 stating

So great is my joy that I can describe it only by saying that I feel guilty at still being capable of entertaining so lively a sentiment after all our miseries. They will poison all that still remains to me in life, but all I can think of now is the only thing which might extinguish the meaning of them: namely, that I am on my way to you. That hope alone gave me a renewed sense of life when I was almost at the foot of the scaffold.⁵⁸

For almost a year she believed each day would be her last; trials and executions were frequently

⁵⁴ Ibid., 155-156.

⁵⁵ Chambrun, "Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange," 85.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 176. Adrienne was able to be an American citizen because her husband was dedicated an honorary citizen in many U.S. cities during a national tour in 1784.

⁵⁷ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 282.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 275-276.

carried out within hours at the height of the terror. As a result, she unhesitatingly used the weight of her family name to gain admittance to a meeting with Francis II on October 10, 1795, who granted her the privilege of staying with her husband in prison as long as she funded her needs.⁵⁹ However, in accordance with her history of transgressive behavior, Adrienne decided to allow her daughters to accompany her. She viewed it as their duty in regard to the support of the family. Even with the warning about the conditions of Olmütz from the war minister infantry general, Count Joseph von Ferraris, their presence was ultimately deemed appropriate to their mother after they relentlessly pleaded to be together.⁶⁰

Upon their arrival, Adrienne was shocked to see the regressed state of her husband and the conditions that he was forced to endure. Well-acquainted with French prisons, Adrienne believed herself to be prepared for a life at Olmütz but she had underestimated her self-inflicted plight. The family was forced to eat with their hands after their utensils were confiscated; her daughters could only leave their separate cell during specific hours and had to share a small bed; they could not attend the on-site mass; the food was generally cold and unsanitary; and they had to sew any necessary clothing from the items that they brought.⁶¹ Adrienne had been promised the ability to write to the emperor with any complaints but he never answered her letters. Not even the commandant of Olmütz, General von Shröder, paid any attention to her concerns.⁶² Instead, the La Fayette family had to suffer the stench of an open sewer next to their cell window and frequent diseases. Gilbert was emaciated after years in prison, Virginie developed a stoop at a pivotal point of her physical development, and Anastasie suffered from frequent illnesses. However, it was Adrienne who endured the most afflictions: she had stomach cramps, migraines,

⁵⁹ Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State*, 144-145.

⁶⁰ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 226-227.

⁶¹ Chambrun, "Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange," 85.

⁶² Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State*, 147-153.

arthritis, fevers, abscesses, enlarged appendages, flaking skin, and a popular diagnose of blood poisoning.⁶³ The prison doctor Kreutschke attempted to heal her but his most efficient assistance came from his empathetic smuggling of letters with hidden messages.

At Olmütz, letters were either censored or completely rejected so the La Fayettees were frequently isolated and repressed. As a result, their main form of communication had to come through secret transfers. Even when her inflamed limbs stiffened so that writing was painful, Adrienne always scribed for Gilbert because his handwriting was too distinct and she was not meticulously watched. She never gave up sending notes that sought relief in their conditions to her husband's captors and she took offense when she never received the courtesy of a response. In a recalled conversation with an assistant commandant she brazenly stated, "Perhaps they are angry at my being here at all, because the necessity of having my signature before our expenses can be paid forces them to let me write at least a few lines."⁶⁴ She refused to be silenced despite her humbling situation. Even when her health deteriorated considerably and the emperor gave her the ultimatum of leaving the prison to seek crucial medical assistance without the capacity to return, she maintained her resolution. On March 4, 1796 she responded, "I can never forget that, while we were both on the point of perishing... I was not permitted to receive any news of him, nor he to learn that his children and I still existed. I will not expose myself to the horror of a new situation" along with a heartfelt rejection of his proposal.⁶⁵ Additionally, her writing was not restricted to diplomatic discourse concerning Olmütz. In the margins of books she wrote a memoir about her mother's life, which gave her an occupation to fill her time and relieved her ongoing guilt and mourning.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 153-155.

⁶⁴ Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 290.

⁶⁵ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 230.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 189.

After a political shift swaying towards the La Fayette's cause and with much deliberation between France and Austria, the family was released on September 19, 1797. They had the opportunity to leave months prior but Adrienne and Gilbert jointly refused the emperor's first bargain upon ideological grounds.⁶⁷ However, the terms of their discharge were finally agreed upon and the La Fayette's traveled around central Europe. They had few set destinations because Gilbert was still marked as an émigré so he could not legally enter France. Nor could they find refuge in the United States because Adrienne's poor health was too debilitating to travel that far. Instead of these preferable locations, they visited Lehmkuhlen in Schleswig-Holstein, their Aunt and Uncle Tesse, and Hamburg.⁶⁸ Gilbert continued to stay with family but Adrienne took it upon herself to regain her lost estates and decrease the family's growing debt. Some historians have interpreted her actions as a gender role reversal with her husband because he had to wait in obscurity while she engaged in political and business endeavors.⁶⁹

She undertook multiple trips to her home country with some attempts more fruitful than others. During her first crusade, she lodged with her former servant Philippe-Nicolas Beauchet and his family. He had maintained his loyalty to her by preserving some of her belongings even though it was life-threatening and it would have been more lucrative for him to sell the expensive goods.⁷⁰ However, the rest of her possessions were less straightforward in their reclamation and she spent laborious months fighting government officials. Her goal was to gain compensation for the Cayenne plantations; ownership of properties in Brittany and her mother's estates including land in the Pas-de-Calais, Fontenay, and La Grange-Bléneau; the return of Chavaniac to her

⁶⁷ The negotiation would have forced Gilbert to give his word that he would never return to Austria. His conscience hindered his acceptance because it may have infringed upon his future ability to serve France. Spalding, *Lafayette: Prisoner of State*, 207-220.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 244.

⁶⁹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 243.

⁷⁰ Chambrun, "Adrienne and Lafayette at La Grange."

extended family; and the nullification of the interdiction of Gilbert.⁷¹ In many instances she was successful and her greatest reward was La Grange. The estate was dilapidated but it was to become her family's new residence. Therefore, she invested money she lacked into architect Antoine Vaudoyer's renovation. In order to pay him and his workers, Adrienne travelled to Brittany and extracted rent from peasants. A letter to Beauchet explained that "if you only knew what it means to squeeze the 61,200 livres which I have already passed on to you from a lot of peasants, not one of whom has a coat to his back that is not patched, you would realize what good reason I have for being discouraged" about the cost of making La Grange habitable.⁷² Taking from the poor was compromising her integrity as a person and a charitable Christian; she had grown up learning that her privileged status came with the responsibility of protection and fairness towards those who supported her. Additionally, in a meeting with Gilbert's mistress Adélaïde de Simiane, she agreed to find funds for a secret loan of 10,000 livres since her culture deemed it her duty to provide for the downtrodden lover.⁷³ As a result, she was becoming extremely discouraged by personal strife and the state of her beloved country. She explained to Gilbert in a letter "... if you could see into the depth of the abyss we are in and the little hope we have of ever seeing liberty reborn in the midst of so much filth."⁷⁴

While she witnessed many distressing circumstances, Adrienne also experienced a shift in her marriage after Olmütz. Gilbert recognized the full extent of Adrienne's worth during her willing imprisonment and he became extremely dependent upon her. Before the societal chaos of the French Revolution, she had balanced the management of *his* estate but now she was the

⁷¹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 251; Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 166.

⁷² Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 400.

⁷³ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 254-255.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

breadwinner who sent him an allowance of forty-eight francs per month.⁷⁵ Adrienne assumed the role of the head of the household because circumstances necessitated her talents. She met with Directory members including President Louis Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux and Abbé Sieyès with the intention of restoring her husband's citizenship by appealing to their need for a talented commander in the French Revolutionary Wars. Their refusals did not deter her and during the confusion of power shifts with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte to the position of First Consul, she used the opportunity to smuggle her husband into the country with a false passport. Diplomatically astute, she knew it would be easier to ask for forgiveness than to get permission. In a private interview with Napoleon, her hunch proved to be well-founded because she tactfully exploited his low expectations of women through the creation of a subservient persona that ironically enabled her to charm her way to her objectives. She cleverly balanced the acute senses of pride between the two men so that they both perceived they were receiving the better end of the deal. As a result, Gilbert's presence was condoned as long as he abstained from Paris.⁷⁶ However, as time went on Gilbert became unmoved by her accomplishments because they kept her from his side at his new home of La Grange. In a letter from December 2, 1800 he wrote "...up till now you have been placed in a false position... and it is unbecoming that his wife should appear to be intriguing in Paris while he plays the philosopher at La Grange."⁷⁷ Any praise that he expressed towards her accomplishments were offset by critiques, such as her failure to whitewash rooms for visitors at La Grange.⁷⁸

Prison and the stress to reclaim her family's old lifestyle left Adrienne physically

⁷⁵ Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question*, 180.

⁷⁶ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 247-248.

⁷⁷ Gilbert had a tendency to switch from first person to third person in his correspondence. Maurois, *Adrienne: The Life of the Marquise de La Fayette*, 406-407.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 398.

fatigued and extremely susceptible to illness. Throughout her life she tended to suffer from weakness that made her sensitive to the cold and frequently experience fainting spells but the severity of her symptoms became more prevalent with harsher surroundings.⁷⁹ Olmütz inflicted a possible hematological disease on her and because of the nature of the malady, she was never truly healthy again. As a result, she relied on her mental perseverance throughout the rest of her incarceration and her political battle in France while her body was ultimately failing. The unfair high standards that her husband required became even more potently recognized when analyzed alongside her challenging health. Adrienne was entirely devoted to her husband so she pursued his wishes no matter the strain it put on her body but the cost became more serious with time. Without adequate funds she was unable to utilize carriages, resulting in the necessity of walking to her destinations. Normally an easy task, Adrienne suffered considerably because of flare-ups of swollen limbs and stiff joints. She aged markedly from her efforts according to Fanny Burney d'Arblay, an influential friend, who recorded her graying hair and downtrodden facial countenance.⁸⁰ However, Adrienne was not spiritually dejected from the repercussions of her actions but instead expressed pride in finally accomplishing a deserved praise from her husband.

Once she achieved her estate objectives in France, Adrienne experienced a reprieve of her symptoms due to her ability to rest. She enjoyed watching her children grow up healthy since their youth allowed them to rebound wholly from the harsh conditions at Olmütz. They reached the age where marriage was wanted but Adrienne mimicked her mother's philosophy and encouraged them to marry for love over pedigree. While others resented Anastasie's choice in Charles Maubourg for their joint lack of monetary prospects, Adrienne exhibited her blessing of

⁷⁹ June K. Burton, *Adrienne Noailles Lafayette (1759-1807) as Medical Patient: Lafayette's "Better-half" in the Worst of Times*, (Easton, PA: American Friends of Lafayette, 1999), 3.

⁸⁰ Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question*, 181.

their nuptials by insisting upon being carried into their ceremony despite a debilitating purulence on her leg.⁸¹

On August 22, 1807 Adrienne's lifelong sacrifices put their final strain on her body. She suffered from stomach cramps, fevers, and blistering legs. Dr. Lobinhes treated her symptoms with a diet of bouillon, cream of rice, potato flour, chicken and veal pot-au-feu, and quinquina wine.⁸² When she did not improve, Adrienne was transported to her Aunt Tessé's home in Aulnay-sous-Bois outside Paris on October 11.⁸³ According to medical bills, a more abrasive treatment was implemented that included nine types of lead that were either ingested or plastered on open leg wounds to purify her blood. Adrienne began experiencing severe hallucinations that were attributed to her high fevers but more recent medical understanding has added the theory of lead poisoning.⁸⁴ Initially, her family did not suspect the enormity of her illness because of her constant life-long struggle with health issues and Gilbert and their son, Georges-Washington, went on a trip to visit family at Chauvaniac during a momentary improvement. No one expected that her ailment would be lethal. After a final downward spiral, Adrienne died on her son's birthday, December 24, 1807, with her enlarged family surrounding her. Throughout her painful final days she expressed jubilant happiness because she was leaving her family in a blessed state. She had witnessed the marriages of her children and the births of her grandchildren, all of whom had more joyful prospects than her own destiny. The last ten years of her marriage were spent largely uninterrupted by her husband's side. Her final words were directed at Gilbert sitting by her bed, finally close at hand, "je suis tout à vous"—I am yours alone.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 241-242.

⁸² Burton, *Adrienne Noailles Lafayette (1759-1807) as Medical Patient*, 4-5.

⁸³ Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question*, 184.

⁸⁴ Burton, *Adrienne Noailles Lafayette (1759-1807) as Medical Patient*, 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

Adrienne de La Fayette's life embodied the foundations of a shift in privileged women's roles that was gaining momentum by the nineteenth century. She inherited and amassed influence by exploiting her pedigree and utilizing inherent strengths as a means to assist Gilbert. Her realm of perception revolved around him but she never viewed her position as stifling because she recognized that she was one of the few fortuitous women who married for adoration. Instead, Adrienne used her boundless love for her husband as an empowering incentive to push her into taboo environments for women in order to prove herself worthy of his affection. Although her driving factor was a man, Adrienne's accomplishments were not dampened. Working with her sister Anne Paule Dominique, the Marquise de Montagu, Adrienne discovered the mass grave at Picpus where 1,306 victims of the late Terror were disposed, including the three maternal figures she loved dearly. She toiled tirelessly to establish a subscription to purchase the land and organized the Order of Perpetual Adoration to commemorate the loss of the innocent lives.⁸⁶ The preserved but unassuming cemetery and church still emit a sorrowful ambience that sobers visitors. She also attained meaningful friendships that were initially founded on her husband's introduction but were solidified by her own merit. Gouverneur Morris's ample assistance throughout her tumultuous hardships was influenced by a deeper foundation than just an obligation towards Gilbert. Adrienne's personality was praised by an extensive range of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including Frances "Fanny" Burney, a Gothic novelist. She connected with Fanny through their mutual financial support of their families in a time when their independence was generally denounced by the way of social and political impediments. Adrienne was born a woman of her time but she matured into a herald of female empowerment that was slowly recognized over the next two centuries.

⁸⁶ Wright, *Madame de Lafayette*, 247-248.

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