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1

Prologue



FIGURE 1. Maria Theresa monument on the Ringstrasse in Vienna. Sculptures by Caspar Zumbusch based on a design by Alfred von Arneth, 1888

Monumental History

The story of Maria Theresa, as it is usually told, reads like a fairy tale. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess and young mother who inherited an enormous, rundown old empire and was immediately set upon by her many foes. She convinced a band of rough but valiant

warriors to take up arms for her cause. With their help, she defended her ancestral throne, “fighting with dauntless spirit against the ravening horde of enemies that surrounded her, and emerging from the contest not always unscathed, . . . but happily in the end.”¹ Three times she faced her most ruthless adversary and was forced to cede him her richest province. But fate turned these defeats to her advantage. For it was only thanks to this serious ordeal that she was able to dismiss the hidebound old men who had advised her father and so, with the help of the wise counsellors she appointed in their place, transform her ramshackle empire into a modern state. “Having been all but given up for lost, the state ultimately emerged victorious from the struggle that had threatened it with utter ruin.”² This fairy-tale narrative filtered down to the last dregs of popular historical knowledge, the collectors’ albums mass-produced by the advertising industry in the twentieth century: “From the very first day of her reign, the twenty-three-year-old showed that she was a born ruler. From the motley collection of lands she inherited, a true state grew under her hands.”³

The suggestive power of this heroic narrative is difficult to resist. Over the course of the nineteenth century, it transformed Maria Theresa into *the* symbolic figurehead of Austrian statehood.⁴ It is equally difficult to imagine a time when she was seen any differently. Shortly after 1800, one contemporary wrote: “I have often wondered how it came about that Maria Theresa, a woman of true greatness, could so easily have been forgotten.”⁵ During the revolutionary period from 1789 to 1848, it was hard to know what to make of her. Her son, Joseph II, had replaced her in public favor as the hero of the hour—the sober rationalist, despiser of court ceremony, and would-be revolutionary, even if he did not live to see much of the revolution himself. From this nadir in her public fortunes, she was catapulted to the opposite extreme as the nineteenth century progressed. Maria Theresa now grew into a national icon, the “ideal embodiment of Austrian greatness and beauty.”⁶ The more territories were forfeited by the Habsburg monarchy in the decades leading up to the First World War, the more imposing and glorious the empress was made to appear.

Her public image has been shaped to this day by two awe-inspiring monuments. The first is the gigantic memorial on the Ringstrasse in

Vienna featuring sculptures by Caspar von Zumbusch. Unveiled by Emperor Franz Joseph in 1888, it was unprecedented in both scale and expense.⁷ It was accompanied by a commemorative volume designed to be read “by every family in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, their friends and loved ones,” as well as by soldiers and students.⁸ The plan for the monument had been conceived after the defeat at Königgrätz in 1866. It would have been unseemly for Maria Theresa, as a woman, to be immortalized astride a warhorse, the pose in which Joseph II had been commemorated in 1807 or Prince Eugene in 1865; a different iconography conveying no less imperial an impression had to be found. The solution hit upon in the end brings to mind female allegories of good government: a larger-than-life Maria Theresa sits enthroned in majesty above the great men of her realm, who gather around the massive pedestal in the form of equestrian statues, sculptures, and half-reliefs. In her left hand she holds aloft the Pragmatic Sanction, a kind of constitutional charter for the Austrian monarchy; with her right hand she gestures toward spectators, her people. As she sits there in regal majesty, flanked by allegories of virtue, she appears less an individual historical personage than the patroness and mother of the state itself, a second *Magna Mater Austriae* towering far above the base reality of history. There was no place in this enormous ensemble for her husband, the Holy Roman emperor Francis I; nobody wanted to be reminded of that long-vanished empire. Maria Theresa instead finds herself surrounded by “great men who made history”: generals, ministers, scholars, artists.⁹

The other, perhaps even more influential monument to Maria Theresa is the ten-volume biography by Alfred Ritter von Arneth, director of the State Archive and president of the Academy of Sciences in Vienna, who also came up with the idea for the memorial on the Ringstrasse. Without Arneth’s immense work, which appeared between 1863 and 1879 and was buttressed by a myriad of primary source editions, the Maria Theresa renaissance in the last third of the nineteenth century could never have occurred. His biography is unsurpassed to this day in its exhaustiveness and sheer wealth of detail. A knight of the realm, von Arneth (1819–1897) epitomizes the scholar whose first loyalty lies with

the state, a type that produced reams of national-heroic history writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1848–49 he had sat in the first freely elected German parliament in Frankfurt as a representative of pan-German constitutionalism. He later became a member of the Lower Austrian provincial assembly. Over the second half of the century, his interests shifted away from parliament and toward archival and academic work, historical research, and academic politics, a move that secured him an all but unchallenged interpretive monopoly over the Theresian period.¹⁰ While his biography is not entirely free of critical undertones, on the whole it attests to the same hero-worshipping attitude as the memorial on the Ringstrasse. “Grasping the vital essence of this exalted woman, her way of looking at the world, her views and opinions—this must be one of the worthiest tasks an Austrian historian could set himself.” The motivation behind his archival research was, he wrote, the “ardent desire to see the real treasures retrieved from the archives by a trustworthy pair of hands and then, in a manner befitting so great a subject, turn them over to the people: as much to the glory of the Empress herself and her illustrious house as to the honor of our Fatherland.”¹¹

While the two monuments were still under construction, the Habsburg monarchy was losing its former greatness bit by bit. In 1859 it handed over Lombardy to the new Italian nation-state; Venetia followed in 1866, when it also suffered defeat at the hands of Prussia and left the German Confederation; the following year it had to accept Hungary’s *de facto* independence; and in 1871 the foundation of the German Empire put an end to all hopes of a “Greater German” solution (that is, one that included Austria in the unified nation-state)—not to mention the nationalistically motivated secessionist movements in the Balkans and the deep economic upheavals of the *fin de siècle*. Amid these vicissitudes, a sense of hope and orientation for the future could be won by contemplating past crises that had been heroically overcome. The majesty of a memorial does not just elevate those it commemorates but also—and above all—those who erect it. Both memorials to Maria Theresia, one in bronze and the other in paper, are deluxe examples of monumental history in the sense of Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous second Untimely Meditation, “On the Uses and Disadvantage of History for

Life" (1874). History writing is monumental, in Nietzsche's terms, if it places the past in the service of modern-day hopes and expectations: "history as a means against resignation." It teaches "that the greatness that once existed was in any event possible and may thus be possible again." Such history writing works by flattening out the differences between past and present: "the individuality of the past has to be forced into a general form and all its sharp angles and lines broken to pieces for the sake of the comparison."¹²

Nineteenth-century monumental history stands between us and the historical figure of Maria Theresa, preventing us from seeing her without distortion. Between her age, the ancien régime of the eighteenth century, and our own, so many revolutionary changes have taken place that it is difficult for us to peer behind them. It is tempting to use her as an occasion for wish fulfillment, to project our own identity politics onto her majestic person, and to find it reflecting back at us our present-day concerns. In doing so, we all too easily forget that the politics ruled over by Maria Theresa—the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, with its ancient imperial dignity, and the patchwork of territories controlled by the "All-Highest Archducal House" (Allerhöchstes Erzhaus), that strange, nameless monarchy held together solely by dynastic allegiance—have long since ceased to exist. And their various successor states—the Austrian Empire of 1804, the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy of 1867, the Prussian-led German Empire—did not long outlast them, swept away in the cataclysmic deluge of the First World War.

More was at stake in all these upheavals than just the redrawing and renaming of state borders. In the course of the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, political structures were transformed beyond recognition. These deep, successive shocks were accompanied and cushioned from the outset, however, by narratives and symbols of continuity, which made it easier to overlook the chasms that had opened up between past and present. For has not Vienna remained the capital of Austria? Does not the head of state still reside in the old imperial palace, the Hofburg? Are we not therefore justified in concluding that Maria Theresa and her ministers were the creators of modern Austria?¹³ Yet this is an optical illusion. There were as many different narratives of

continuity—or discontinuity—as there were successor states to the old Habsburg monarchy. Apart from an Austrian history of Maria Theresa, a German, Hungarian, Czech, Slovak, Slovene, Serbian, Romanian, Belgian, or Italian version could also be told, each in monarchist, socialist, or liberal democratic variants. Maria Theresa would play a different role in each of these narratives.¹⁴ It is not easy to keep such constructions of continuity at a distance, yet such is the intention of this book. And even if another approach is ventured, we should remain ever mindful that a postmodern, postnationalist perspective on Maria Theresa, three hundred years after her birth, is also one among many possible perspectives and has no claim to objective validity. The only difference is that here a perspective of foreignness has been deliberately adopted. Unlike in Nietzsche's monumental history, the chasms separating us from the eighteenth century will not be filled in, nor will Maria Theresa's rough edges be smoothed over. In short: no false intimacy with Maria Theresa will be presumed. The heroine shall be kept at arm's length.¹⁵

Male Fantasies

In large part, what makes the traditional story of Maria Theresa read so much like a fairytale is its unexpectedly happy ending—unexpected not least because the near-miraculous salvation of the monarchy was the work of a woman. Her eulogists already saw things this way at the time: “What could we do to combat dangers so numerous and so pressing? Such steadfastness, courage, and resolve . . . had not been expected of a woman, since even a male ruler seemed incapable of shouldering so heavy a burden.”¹⁶ Through her extraordinary mix of masculine heroism and feminine virtue, her “maternal majesty,” Maria Theresa became a source of endless fascination.¹⁷ She was known not only as an empress but also as a faithful wife and mother of sixteen. Sensational fertility and virile leadership, female and male perfection in a single person, made her an exceptional figure. She appeared exceptional even when compared with other famous female rulers of world history such as Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, or Catherine II. Whereas these other monarchs had neglected their roles as spouse and mother—they were unmarried, or

childless, or sexually promiscuous, or all at once—Maria Theresa alone united wise governance, conjugal fidelity, impeccable morals, and teeming fecundity in her capacious bosom. She appeared, in other words, to be an exception among exceptions.¹⁸

For the eighteenth century, a period when the dynastic principle still largely held sway throughout Europe, there was nothing especially unusual about a female head of state. While a woman on the throne was perceived even then as less desirable, she was not yet a contradiction; the spheres of the public and the private, politics and the family were not yet categorically distinct. Maria Theresa's contemporaries already found it remarkable that a representative of the lesser sex could wield such power. But they did not regard her rule as entirely anomalous: she was "a woman, and a mother to her country, just as a prince can be a man and father to his country." Her rule proved that "the greatest of all the arts, that of governing kingdoms, is not beyond the soul of a lady."¹⁹ What was extraordinary, in the eighteenth-century context, was less the fact that a woman held the scepter of power than that a monarch, whether male or female, took the task of government so seriously. Princes came in many forms—patrons of the arts, skirt-chasers, war heroes, family fathers, scholars, philosophers—and each prince could shape his everyday life as he saw fit. Very few approached the task of rule with the single-minded dedication of a Maria Theresa. She met the criteria of a conscientious ruler to a remarkable degree, far more than most other sovereigns of the time.

Maria Theresa's contemporaries already praised this as her "manliness of soul," her *virilità d'anima*.²⁰ Some even called her a "*Grand-Homme*";²¹ "in the attractive body of a queen" she was "fully a king, in the most glorious, all-encompassing sense of the word."²² Later historians reprised the theme, describing her as a "man filled with insight and vigor."²³ That a masculine soul could reside in a female body had long been a commonplace, albeit one used less to elevate women than to cast shame on men. Praising a woman for her manly bravery or resolution, her masculine courage or spirit, served above all as an indirect criticism of men—something that holds true even to this day, as when Margaret Thatcher or Angela Merkel is described as the "only man in the cabinet."²⁴

It was in this sense that Frederick II wrote about the empress: “for once the Habsburgs have a man, and it is a woman.”²⁵ Conversely, a pro-Habsburg pamphlet in the War of Succession scoffed that Frederick had “met his man” in a woman.²⁶ When a woman is said to be the better man, this casts a devastating judgment on all her male peers. The key point is that calling an exceptional woman like Maria Theresa a “real man” consolidates the sexual hierarchy rather than calling it into question. Such praise assumes that masculinity is a compliment and that the male sex is and remains superior.

Over the course of time, the idea of female rule came increasingly to be seen as a provocation and a paradox. This was not yet the case in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the Age of Reason, a clear distinction could still be made between physical constitution and political role, in keeping with the adage “Reason has no sex.”²⁷ If, in the words of one contemporary, “queens . . . cease to be women as soon as they ascend the throne,”²⁸ then this was not to say that they instantly changed sex upon coming to power, only that their gender was immaterial to their ability to govern. Differentiating in this way between physical and political existence was no longer possible in the nineteenth century: women now seemed to be ever more dominated by their flesh. For revolutionaries around 1800, female rule was a symptom of the decadent ancien régime, which tied the exercise of power to the vagaries of birth rather than to popular election and merit. Women were far more rigorously excluded from the new bourgeois sexual order than they had ever been from the aristocratic society of old. As the discipline of history gained in prestige as an instrument of national legitimation, its practitioners therefore regarded women as essentially irrelevant to their craft. For them, the highest object of history was politics—the realm of freedom and progress, an exclusively masculine domain. Women, by contrast, belonged to the realm of nature: the kingdom of necessity and fleshly reality, to which they were bound by the unchanging reproductive cycle. The medievalist Heinrich Finke summed up the point with unsurpassed clarity in 1913: “World history is the history of the human race, that is, the history of man and his development. Woman, and the history of her development, appear only incidentally. That is why

only—or predominantly—the deeds of men are inscribed on the historical record.”²⁹

A female ruler like Maria Theresa could best be integrated into this worldview by being treated as the great exception that proved the rule. For a rule only properly takes shape once it has been transgressed; crossing a border first makes the border visible as such—provided that the exception remains just that. Normative orders are sustained by such exceptions. What has been said of exceptional women in art holds equally true for female rulers like Maria Theresa: they “received institutional recognition solely on the condition that they could be described as an exception or remained the exception.”³⁰ As an exceptional woman, Maria Theresa posed no threat to established gender roles. On the contrary, she allowed historians to wax lyrical about her femininity, beauty, fertility, naturalness, charm, warmth, and devotion. “The harmony of woman and queen is what . . . lends Maria Theresa her incomparable appeal: the fact that she performed her life’s work without the least distraction to her feminine being.”³¹ “Everything about her is instinctive, sprung from a rich temperament and a clever mind not given to reflection and abstraction, full of charm even when it is illogical and unsystematic.”³² Maria Theresa, her gentleman admirers found, did not rule by abstract reasoning; she acted naïvely, impelled by female intuition, with a “heart better educated than her head.”³³ Her womanly essence was manifested in her “practical” and “natural domestic understanding,” which was “utterly focused on the particulars.” Ever “the loving, caring mother,” she exuded “tact” and “feminine charm,” “touching kindness and a certain reliance on support.”³⁴ She always let “her mind follow her heart,” and so on—the quotes extolling such stereotypically feminine virtues could be multiplied at will.³⁵ In a panegyric written for her two hundredth birthday in 1917, and reprinted as late as 1980 in an official commemorative volume, Hugo von Hofmannsthal elevated her to almost supernatural status, glorifying her enchanting persona and mystique. In his eyes, what made Maria Theresa one of a kind was the fusion in her person of two otherwise incompatible qualities: maternity and kingship. Hofmannsthal took the title *Magna Mater Austriae* literally, attributing to Maria Theresa a kind of political childbearing capacity:

“The demonically maternal side of her was decisive. She transferred her ability to animate a body, to bring into the world a being through whose veins flows the sensation of life and unity, onto the part of the world that had been entrusted to her care.”³⁶ The act of state creation appeared as parturition, the Habsburg complex of territories as an animate being that, like her sixteen children, owed its existence to the maternal ruler.

But Maria Theresa’s extraordinary combination of femininity and power also made her attractive to those who turned the gender hierarchy on its head by giving the woman the dominant sexual role. It is therefore unsurprising that Leopold von Sacher-Masoch idolized the empress. Inspired—or, rather, turned on—by the portrait *Maria Theresa as Sultana* (color plate 22), he imagined her as the heroine of an “erotic legend” and the “fairest of her sex,” a woman whose “lust for power” had awakened early on “with truly demonic energy,” causing not only her “bridegroom, intoxicated by his own happiness,” but even her state chancellor, Kaunitz, “to obey her as her slaves.”³⁷

Maria Theresa’s pronounced femininity cried out for a masculine counterpart. Nothing could have been easier than to stylize the lifelong conflict between her and her near-contemporary, the king of Prussia, as a battle between the sexes, thereby inscribing it into the timelessly universal, natural opposition between man and woman. This was the step taken, above all, by historians who advocated the so-called lesser German solution to the German Question, involving the unification of German territories under Prussian dominance and without the inclusion of Austria. For historians such as Ranke, Droysen, and Treitschke,³⁸ the masculine/feminine dichotomy served as a convenient binary code for ordering the world and the course of history: male Prussia versus female Austria, thrusting attack versus lackluster defense, the forces of progress versus the forces of inertia, Protestantism versus Catholicism, the future versus the past, decisive action versus indecisive vacillation, homogeneity versus heterogeneity, and so on. According to this template, Frederick II stood in relation to Maria Theresa as intellect to emotion, mind to heart, sterility to fertility, cold rationality to maternal warmth, tragic inner turmoil to imperturbable repose. Austrian culture was feminine, Prussian masculine. Everything fitted neatly into the eternal antagonism of man and woman.

The masculine/feminine binary could be adapted to suit changing circumstances. Depending on political exigency, the two sexes could either be presented as irreconcilable opposites—this was the Prussian, “lesser German” reading—or they could be depicted as counterpoles that needed each other to form a whole, as in the “greater German” account. Antithetical yet evenly matched in their “monumental greatness,” Maria Theresa and Frederick II were transformed into something like the dream couple of “greater German” history, their romance sadly thwarted by an inimical fate. In 1925, writing in the book series *Die deutschen Führer*, German Leaders, Heinrich Kretschmayr imagined the greatness Germany might have achieved if only their parents had married them off to each other. He thought it a tragedy that “Prussia could become a state only at the cost of German unity.” “Austria and Prussia had pushed each other to stellar achievements, to the honor of both,” but Germany “had had to pay for their antagonism by all but irrevocably forgoing its unity.”³⁹ Maria Theresa appeared not just as the greatest but also as “the most German woman of the time, perhaps of all time: open, true, warm-hearted, virtuous, an exemplary wife and mother,” gushed the Bohemian-Austrian writer Richard von Kralik in 1916.⁴⁰ And in 1930 the German historian Willy Andreas invoked the higher unity of the German people in the contrast between Maria Theresa and Frederick II, South and North, Catholic and Protestant. Just as the opposition between man and woman was harmoniously resolved in matrimony, so too both sovereigns together constituted the essence of the era: “Not by chance does the period take its name from Frederick the Second and Maria Theresa.”⁴¹

With Hitler’s annexation of Austria in 1938, this kind of history writing came into vogue for obvious reasons. Four years later, when Heinrich Ritter von Srbik celebrated the longed-for “greater German *Volksreich*, born of the will of the nation and created by the deeds of one German genius,” he found that the time had finally come to unite Maria Theresa and Frederick the Great “in the proud symphony of our entire nation.” Their “opposing life principles,” and the conflicting needs of the states they led, may have prevented them from building “the inner bridge to each other” during their own lifetimes. But this should not

stop later generations from reclaiming them both as “the proud possession of the people as a whole.”⁴² For Srbik, Maria Theresa was the ideal “embodiment of German womanhood”: “German was her thinking and feeling, German her temperament, . . . German the loyalty and love she gave her pleasure-loving husband and her troop of children.” She had “created a true state” along Prussian lines, one that was “essentially a German” state, “with a fixed chain of command and a soundly organized administration.” The German culture she revitalized had “spilled out beyond the civilizational gradient of the monarchy towards the far east of Central Europe,” extending “the soil of the German people” into Transylvania and the Banat. Nor should it be forgotten that “she was an instinctive enemy of Judaism.” In short, “the creation of a woman who felt fully German and was conscious of her own Germanness,” in whom “the old German imperial idea . . . lived on unperceived,” could not be praised highly enough.⁴³

Following the Second World War, the Austrian side gave up emphasizing the higher unity of opposites, preferring instead to reidentify with just one of the two poles, the feminine-Theresian. In 1958 the writer Friedrich Heer described the empress in his essay “*Humanitas austriaca*” as the embodiment of a specifically Austrian type that was “strongly conditioned by the feminine element” and characterized by its levity, humanity, and hostility to barren “abstraction.” While *Homo austriacus* was inherently tolerant, the centuries-long policy of forced re-Catholicization pursued by the Habsburgs was decidedly un-Austrian. “In opposing Frederick II, Maria Theresa fights against a very one-sided, strong-willed man, as well as against an Enlightenment in which she senses a masculine, willful, violently ideological element.”⁴⁴ Now that establishing distance from National Socialist Germany had become the order of the day, the old antagonism between Maria Theresa and Frederick II took on new relevance: trustfulness, love, and benevolence on the one side, suspicion, violence, and ideological blindness on the other.

The sexual codification of the contrast between Austria and Prussia once again bore garish fruit. A particularly fine example is the description of Vienna by Wilhelm Hausenstein, who argued for the “matriarchal character of the Austrian Baroque empire.”⁴⁵ In his reading, Maria

Theresa's maternal fertility and voluptuousness stood opposed to Frederick II's sterility and austerity. Hausenstein literally follows this idea step by step as he walks from the outskirts of the city toward the center. Vienna is the heart of the Habsburg monarchy, the city center is Baroque, and Viennese Baroque is archetypally feminine: "It could be said metaphorically that Viennese Baroque gives the appearance of striving to reach the center of Austrian culture named Maria Theresa. . . . Certainly, the Viennese Baroque is older than Maria Theresa, . . . but the history of Vienna still suggests to the observer a river destined to flow into this maternal delta." In contrast to "masculine-Baroque" cities such as Rome and Berlin, Vienna has no "powerfully ostentatious, clearly oriented *Via triumphalis*"; there reigns here "rather a deeply rooted law of gentle, non-axial agglomeration." In feminine-Baroque Vienna even sexual differences become blurred, such that "busts of men and women cannot always be told apart at first glance": Francis I is effeminate, while Maria Theresa strikes a pose of masculine command. "This strange contrast expresses something of Vienna's innermost essence: the axial element (man) seems overwhelmed by feminine abundance and force, and everything gathers in concentric circles around a central maternal figure." The topographical midpoint of this deeply female Vienna is the imperial palace, the Hofburg; its center, in turn, is the white and gold State Bedroom; and at the heart of the bedchamber lies the imperial matrimonial bed, the shrine awaiting Hausenstein at the end of his pilgrimage through the city. Maria Theresa's "heavy and luxurious bed of state, the bed of a majestic love," already preserved under Franz Joseph as a memorial to the empress, sets the author's fantasy aflame as "the most unconventional and special place in the Hofburg," the place where "this entire palace's being is rooted," "the pulsating heart of life in the Hofburg." The bed and its counterpart, the conjugal sarcophagus in the crypt, together form the "center of the dynasty, the summit of Austrian history": "Vienna's head and heart—in womanly form!"

For Maria Theresa historiography, as indeed for the discipline of history in Germany and Austria as a whole, 1945 did not mark a clean break with the past. Historians still clung to the perspective of obsequious subjects, writing about Maria Theresa in the lofty strains of panegyric.⁴⁶

This tone was still resurfacing in the commemorative writings published on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of her death in 1980, when Hugo von Hofmannsthal's essay was reprinted. The uncontested dominance of the nationalist-conservative myth evidently made Maria Theresa uninteresting for other approaches. Even in a recent overview of the research literature, she is described as "perhaps the least controversial figure in Habsburg history"; her image, it is said, still tends "to be overly kitschy."⁴⁷ The feminist movement of the 1970s, which invented first the history of woman and then that of gender, was strikingly uninterested in Maria Theresa and initially made no attempt to enlist her for its cause. It almost sounded ironic when, writing in the feminist magazine *Emma* in 2010, Barbara Sichtermann reclaimed the empress as the model of an emancipated wife and mother who enjoyed autonomy in her marriage and struck an effortless balance between family and career.⁴⁸ First-generation feminist historians were more preoccupied with giving a voice to the invisible and downtrodden women in history. The "housewife empress," transfigured by generations of male historians into an exceptional figure, was hardly an obvious candidate for a new, emancipatory women's history, in stark contrast to her daughter Marie Antoinette. Feminists could do without this staid icon of national-conservative political history. Maria Theresa fitted no less awkwardly into the categories of feminist historians, intent on liberating women from their role as victims, than she had into those of traditional historians, who insisted that history was made exclusively by men.

At any rate, the lack of interest in Maria Theresa is conspicuous. It is significant that a number of recent research projects on the Habsburg monarchy in general, and the Viennese court in particular, end with her accession to the throne in 1740.⁴⁹ There has been moderate interest in her husband, Francis I, and in some of her top officials, aristocrats, and ministers,⁵⁰ as well as in selected topics such as frontier policy, religious policy, or cross-cultural contact with the Ottoman Empire⁵¹—but very little in the person of the empress-queen. The sole exception is representations of her in the visual media, which have been intensively discussed by art historians.⁵² Until the three hundredth anniversary of her birth in 2017, no scholarly biography in German had been published

since the jubilee year of 1917, which saw the appearance of Eugen Guglia's two-volume work.⁵³ This left the field open to French and British historians, who were less contaminated by nationalist mythmaking,⁵⁴ as well as authors of popular nonfiction, who promised readers a glimpse through the Hofburg keyhole with titles like "Children, Church and Corset."⁵⁵

The fact that the younger generation of historians has previously steered clear of Maria Theresa has ensured that her broader public image is still shaped to a remarkable degree by the viewpoint of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Austrian historians. As presented by these men, Maria Theresa is either particularly feminine or particularly masculine, authentically Austrian or *echt deutsch*. She is the heroine who prevailed against the superior force of her enemies and defended right against might. She is the "empress of Austria" who relegated her husband—no less eminent a figure than the Holy Roman emperor—to the role of helpmate. She is the respectably bourgeois housewife-empress who put an end to aristocratic dominance at court and its stuffy ceremonial. She is the resolute founder of a modern, bureaucratic administration that did away with privilege and patronage. And, finally, she is the queen of hearts, a monarch who loved her people as her own children and was loved by them in turn, gladly lending an ear to the lowliest of her subjects.⁵⁶ In somewhat exaggerated form, those are the stereotypes that any biography of Maria Theresa must confront today.

An Extraordinary Ordinary Case

It is high time, then, for the figure of Maria Theresa to be historicized and contemplated in its foreignness. Yet it would be naïve to think that we are now finally in a position to tell her *true* story. Arneth's monumental biography is by no means wrong—on the contrary, it has yet to be surpassed in its exhaustiveness and wealth of descriptive detail. Anyone looking for a painstaking account of diplomatic negotiations in times of war and peace could do no better than consult his masterpiece. Yet biographical narrative cannot be handled in the same way today as in Arneth's time—unless, that is, a deliberately novelistic approach is attempted.⁵⁷

To be sure, the genre of biography is no longer treated with the suspicion or even contempt that it was shown in the 1970s. As we have become increasingly aware of the constructive achievement of the narrator and the suggestive power of narrative, historical narrative, including the narration of individual lives, has long since been rehabilitated as a legitimate form of historical knowledge. When strict deconstructionists refer to the “biographical illusion,” this is no objection to the genre as such. It goes without saying that a life is not intrinsically a story but is first shaped into one at the hands of a storyteller.

Yet historians today can no longer retroactively transform a multifaceted, contingent plethora of historical events into an unambiguous, unidirectional narrative. They can no longer present themselves as omniscient narrators, tacitly purporting to arrive at timelessly valid psychological truths through introspection and divining their subject’s motives through direct empathy. Such an approach necessarily results in anachronistic misinterpretations—such as the one that imputes the feelings of a nineteenth-century middle-class mother to a ruler like Maria Theresa. It would be better to start off by acknowledging that the era we are seeking to recreate was structurally different to our own. We can then ask which of these differences are “noteworthy and meaningful” for understanding our cast of characters.⁵⁸ For when it comes to historical understanding, foreignness is not a barrier but a necessary starting point. Historical understanding cannot be had free of charge; it demands determined hermeneutic effort. For instance: what did people take for granted back then; which conceptual categories did they apply; which social distinctions did they make; what was the unspoken logic underlying their actions; on which expectations, rules, and conventions did they orient their behavior; what stock of common knowledge could they draw on; which habitualized routines did they employ; how did they typically express their feelings; what limits were set to their actions? Potentially, all these things were fundamentally different from what appears self-evident to us today, and the gap separating “now” from “then” needs to be gauged as precisely as possible.

There is no need for the figure being investigated in this way to be “representative” in a sociological sense. Microhistorians speak of

“extraordinary normality,” a paradoxical concept that is relevant in this context.⁵⁹ Exceptions are usually far better documented than regular cases, those which “go without saying.” Yet precisely a case that is rare, unusual, and abnormal allows us to draw conclusions about what is considered normal and self-evident, which it always presupposes as its background. The individual person and the general structure inform each other rather than standing starkly opposed. Microhistorians have used this argument since the 1980s to justify the broader historical relevance and value of their unusual individual case studies, which mostly concern marginalized “little people.” What holds true of figures like the completely unknown miller Menocchio applies just as much to famous historical personages such as Maria Theresa. She too was a thoroughly unusual exception, and yet her story reveals a great deal about the rules and norms that made her exceptional in the first place. In this case, however, the challenge is precisely the opposite of that faced by microhistorians: Maria Theresa has no need to be awakened to historical life; she must instead be retrieved from the various historiographical projections that have been superimposed on her over time.

A biography does not simply tell itself. It is up to the author to establish its narrative structure and continuity. I have followed three principles in this biography. First I have attempted to avoid the illusion of omniscience as well as the “natural complicity” of the biographer with her subject.⁶⁰ I have instead juxtaposed multiple perspectives and modes of perception in the belief that variety and even incompatibility in source perspectives, far from representing an obstacle that the narrator ought to eliminate, are what first give a narrative its richness.⁶¹ Second, I have attempted to combine narrative and analytic elements throughout, switching between close-up and wide-angle, microscopic and macroscopic approaches to the subject. Third, I have adopted a distancing, “ethnological” gaze that seeks to avoid any false intimacy with my heroine.⁶² This includes letting the alien-sounding, prickly language of the primary sources be heard as often as possible. The goal is to understand Maria Theresa in her time—and, conversely, to disclose her time *pars pro toto* through Maria Theresa.

What makes her particularly well suited to this approach is that, as the subject and object of diverse contemporary testimonies, she stands at the point where so many different gazes intersect. Her court looks quite different depending on whether it is seen from the perspective of Khevenhüller, the lord high chamberlain (*Oberstkämmerer*), or the “court Tyrolean” Peter Prosch, in the mirror of ceremonial protocol or satire. Her administrative reforms made an altogether different impression on an aristocrat like Friedrich August von Harrach than on a senior official like Johann Christoph Bartenstein, and they are depicted differently in ministerial memoirs than in a private journal entry or in the empress’s own account. A battle in the War of Succession is not the same in the reports filed by the commanding officers as in the diary of a common soldier, while the expulsion of the Jews from Prague or of Protestants from Styria appears in a different light in the minutes recording the decision than in the letters and testimony of those who suffered its consequences. What was understood by “Enlightenment” varied enormously depending on perspective: it could be the salon banter of godless, fashionable philosophers or the eradication of prejudice and superstition by a Christian monarch. Finally, the royal family itself is presented in correspondence as a haven of tender intimacy or as a viper’s nest of malicious intrigue, depending on who was writing to whom and in what context. In all these cases, it is less a matter of identifying areas of intersection than of comprehending and juxtaposing divergent perceptions of reality.

the French king with a knife. Maria Theresa clearly wanted to avoid such a grisly spectacle.

Yet she drew lessons of her own from the assault. Not only were doorkeepers to be reinforced by military personnel in future, but rules of access for supplicants were also formalized and tightened. The lord high chamberlain was instructed to restrict “public audiences, to which by age-old custom even unknown persons could be registered and admitted,” so that nobody could now be placed on the audience list who had not previously established his credentials in writing with the lord high chamberlain. This forced everyone to obtain the signature of the *capo*, or head, of the relevant authority. Foreigners from the Empire had to turn to the imperial vice-chancellor, all other aliens to the court and state chancellor (Kaunitz at the time). Khevenhüller cautioned the empress that “personal feelings, for example,” would cause the highest office-holders at court to block “access to the throne,” leading to a situation where “supplicants might well be denied the hearing they need.” He therefore advised that she allow supplicants to address her, “where necessary, through me or through alternative channels by means of secret memoranda.”⁷⁷ In any event, the new ruling did a great deal to impede access to the empress. In 1755 the Prussian emissary Fürst reported that it had earlier been far easier to procure an audience; now a letter had to be brought to the lord high chamberlain, “signed by the minister of the department to which the matter in question pertains; and the possibility of bringing complaints before the throne is thereby considerably reduced.”⁷⁸

The empress was thus caught in a structural dilemma. On the one hand, access to her own person had to be channeled somehow. On the other, there was always the danger that those who controlled these channels would abuse their power for their own ends. The inevitable consequence was that many petitioners sought out other, informal avenues to come closer to their goals. Emissary Fürst, for example, maintained that one should first seek to win over one of the ladies-in-waiting who stood in the empress’s favor and then entrust her with one’s petition. Clergy cultivated good relations with their brethren, the confessors of the imperial family.⁷⁹ The most promising channel was

undoubtedly the privy cabinet secretary, who enjoyed the empress's unshakable confidence, yet getting through to him could be tricky.⁸⁰ Ordinary subjects could approach the lesser court personnel who passed in and out of the imperial apartments each day, from servants and waiting maids to stokers. From the imperial perspective, however, it was essential that such informal avenues be closed off. It was therefore strictly forbidden for chamber personnel to accept and convey petitions, "solicit" the empress, or submit an entreaty on another's behalf,⁸¹ let alone accept payment for their services as intermediaries. Maria Theresa also ordered her children not to fraternize with servants, intercede for others, or grant favors on their own initiative, demanding that they stick to standard administrative procedure at all times. Whenever one of her daughters married and left court, her parting advice was that she should never accept petitions as a matter of principle, or at least forward them to the relevant officials.⁸² Yet informal channels proved impossible to block; chamber personnel were understandably reluctant to forgo any opportunity to earn additional income. Many boasted of the ease and intimacy with which they conversed with the royal family in their private quarters; some also exploited the expectations of the outside world to play more or less cruel pranks. It was rumored, for example, that one of Archduke Maximilian's chamberlains had confided in a young lady that "his master was desperately in love with her." The lady bragged about her success in society; when the archduke came to hear of it, he brought shame on her by denying everything.⁸³ The episode shows the extent to which chamber personnel could exploit their supposed familiarity with the ruling family to impress—or in this case deceive—the outside world. It was only natural that they should seek to capitalize on it. If this was already true of ordinary man- and maidservants, then it was all the more so of noble members of the court household.

To make it more difficult for the countless courtiers to set themselves up as brokers and parasitical exploiters of imperial power, there was a clearly regulated procedure to be followed by those bidding for positions, promotions, pensions, outstanding payments, and the like.⁸⁴ The lord high steward's office, the apex of the entire court organization, bore overall responsibility for the process. Petitions were funneled through

his chancellery and then forwarded to the heads of the relevant offices at court, who were expected to provide a written opinion and return it to the chancellery. The lord high steward was thus the eye of the needle through which all the recommendations sent in by the various court departments passed; his task was to collate, consider, and evaluate them on their merits. He then composed a written report or “submission” to the empress and concluded it with a clear finding. The empress had the final say, scribbling her resolution in the margin of the report, then sent it back to the lord high steward for execution.

The files show the kinds of requests that were brought to Maria Theresa’s attention from day to day.⁸⁵ She had to decide, for example, whether someone was entitled to free medicine from the court apothecary, what would be the future pay scale for kitchen staff, and how much gamekeepers could charge the imperial head chef. The “former court singer Theresia Stinglin” demanded payment of her long overdue “salary of 222 fl 15 kreuzer and a further 120 fl for her role *seconda donna* as in the opera *Zenobia* anno 1740,” a debt dating back to the reign of Charles VI; the widow of the former *chef de cuisine* in Lorraine symbolically threw herself and her fatherless children at the empress’s feet and begged for “maternal mercy.” Such mercy was seldom denied: Maria Theresa usually added her *placet* beneath the lord high steward’s submission. Sometimes she also wrote marginal comments such as “Granted on this occasion, but not in future.” It is striking that the vast majority of petitioners appearing in the lord high steward’s files either served at court or had relatives there.⁸⁶ This could be because outsiders never gained access to his chancellery in the first place, or because their petitions were rejected without leaving any traces in the archives.⁸⁷ Members of the high nobility are also barely represented in the files, suggesting that they found oral communication both more convenient and more in keeping with their social status. One group of supplicants stood too far from the court to benefit from this form of communication, the other stood too close to the queen to have any need of it.

Subjects not only approached the empress with their requests, they also presented her with their complaints of unjust treatment at the hands of their immediate superiors. Traditionally, a good monarch was