France’s history of caricature began in a country torn by Revolution, in the clenched fists of artists seeking to unmask the true nature of the tumultuous events surrounding them. The artistic documents that they produced were widely distributed through print shops and newspapers, and were able to captivate the often illiterate people of France in ways that *philosophe* writings, newspapers, and other contemporary literature could not. Caricature is both a reaction and a representation intended to provoke a reaction. At the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, most of France was still relying on traditional oral communication for news. An estimated one-half to two-thirds of the population was illiterate. Visual images played a large role in making the revolutionary message accessible to those who couldn’t read newspaper articles and other printed materials. Every time a caricature was presented, it influenced whoever was reading it. A French person who picked up and studied a cartoon could not help but be affected by it. He may have thought that he was only being entertained, but these were political pieces of art, and were created to alter, sway, or draw into light the reader’s personal feelings for the subject. The old adage tells us that, “A picture is worth thousand words.” In this respect, caricature was possibly more efficient than other written mediums. However, one obvious problem with this is that the audience never received a unbiased view of an event. They were entirely subject to the artist’s allegorical interpretation of the subject being portrayed. Cartoons and caricatures are symbolic and metaphorical, and as such can
hardly be taken as factual representations. They were created to arouse an emotional response from their audience, not necessarily to give them reliable information. However, there is evidence that the utility of caricatures rivaled that of the printed press. In this respect, caricature had the potential to greatly affect public opinion. I would assert that it did, in fact, have a hand in creating public opinion, and was at times instrumental in mobilizing the social base. One conservative journalist, Jacques-Marie Boyer-Brun, wrote in his *Histoire des caricatures de la révolte des Francaise*, “Caricatures are the thermometer which indicates the temperature of political opinion.”¹ Is this true? Or was political opinion the thermometer that indicated the success of the artists in producing stimulating caricatures?

Very often published anonymously, caricature brought political views and criticisms into the open that were otherwise taboo. One such topic was King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie-Antoinette, who were routinely defiled through caricature beginning in the early days of the Revolution and through their demises by guillotine in 1793. One can track the evolution of public sentiment surrounding the monarchy through these images, from the pre-revolutionary Diamond Necklace Scandal to theories on their reception in the afterlife post-mortem. Through wide-circulation and their emotional nature, caricatures aided in the destruction of monarchial power using symbolism and representative language.

But this had not always been so easy to do. “There was no freedom of the press under the Old Regime, because from the earliest days of its power the Crown established surveillance of printers and booksellers and a mechanism for controlling the

dissemination of ideas,”2 This rigorous censorship suggests that the monarchy was aware of the power and importance of printed materials, and accordingly, the censorship laws during the Old Regime left writers, printers, and publishers with little freedom. The Book Police took control of regulating printed material at the end of the 17th century and persisted until the Revolution. Using a system of repression and prevention, they oversaw, examined, and inspected the production and distribution of all printed materials, domestic and international. Although not totally effective, the last decades of the Old Regime were characterized by the destruction and expulsion of philosophical material that was deemed capable of impugning “religion, established power, or accepted morality,”3. The punishments for infractions were harsh: 500 livres for selling forbidden materials; banishment, whipping, or the galleys for repeat offenses. Later, the widening influence of the Enlightenment emboldened authors and made life more difficult for the censors. The royalist state, not wanting to be outdone, increased the number of censors and assigned them to specialized departments in order to facilitate the approval or disapproval of material. These jobs were usually a part-time occupation given to men of letters, although not necessary published writers. As the 18th century wore on, censorship gradually became more of a career, albeit one riddled with bribery and special privileges. One frustrated author once compared the system to “a flock of eagles submitted to the governance of turkeys.”4

Although the art of engraving was unrestricted, the sale of these prints was just as closely regulated as everything else that came off the press. As a result, caricature was

3 Darnton 14.
4 Darnton 12.
unable to develop in France at the rate that had been experienced in Italy, Holland, and England since the beginning of the 18th century. Caricature was present, but repressed, especially when it openly criticized the monarchy. During the reign of Louis XIV, one caricaturist was infamously burned at the stake for depicting the king with his mistresses.

Unfortunately, it was quickly apparent when Louis XIV’s great-grandson ascended the throne in 1774 that Louis XVI would have more to worry about than his grandfather’s accusations of adultery. A keen, mild-mannered man, but with little interest in politics and a passionate love for food and drink, Louis XVI was unprepared to deal with the financial and political crises that he had inherited. He consistently underestimated the discontent and rallying power of the Third Estate, and struggled to remain a dignified figure throughout the Revolution. His marriage to the Austrian-born Marie-Antoinette in 1772 fueled his unfavorable reputation. The French people regarded the Austrian alliance with intense dislike, and the queen was seen as an unwelcome foreigner. As the marriage wore on, she developed a taste for lavish expenditures, vanity, and promiscuity. This last point, coupled with the king’s own lackluster sexuality and struggle to consummate their marriage, aided in the dismantling of respect for the monarchy.

The growing hatred toward and presumed promiscuity of the queen manifested itself in pornographic caricatures even pre-1789. She is depicted embracing countless men and women, including the king’s own brother. One example of this genre from the revolutionary decade is Ma Constitution (image 1). The queen is shown sitting in a lewd position while Lafayette, the Hero of Two Worlds, lays his hand on the symbolic center

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of power, which rests between her legs. Although deeply unflattering to both parties, the cartoon does not seem to have been created to insult Lafayette, who was widely respected by the people of France at this time. Rather, his influential presence accentuates the queen’s display of authoritative power and the tools with which she wielded it.

Aside from her pornographic images, the queen is also frequently represented as an evil of mythological proportions. *La Boîte à Pandore*⁶ (image 2), published around 1791, depicts a group of aristocrats eagerly leaning over a box presented by the Austrian ambassador. Decorated with the imperial arms of Austria, the box reads, “Of all evils, this is the worst.” Standing inside is a doll labeled “Antoinette”. The caricature alludes to the Greek legend of Pandora, who was sent to earth by Jupiter and, despite instructions not to, opened the box that released all the evil into the world. The queen has also been habitually represented as a mythological beast and a harpy.

Diamond necklaces are often seen in caricatures of the queen - an overt reference to the infamous Diamond Necklace Affair. The central figures of the affair were Cardinal Rohan, who sought the favor of the queen for personal gain, and Jeanne de Valois, the comtesse de Lamotte, who feigned being a confidant of the queen to exploit Rohan. She forged letters from the queen and delivered them to Rohan, and arranged for him to meet with a prostitute disguised as the queen. When Rohan was thoroughly convinced of the queen’s favor, the comtesse urged Rohan to act as an intermediary for the purchase of a lavish diamond necklace. When the bill for the necklace was not paid, the intrigue was revealed, and Rohan was put on trial. Gossip flew that he was the queen’s lover, and that she herself had set up the scandal in order for them to carry out their affair. The fact that a prostitute had successfully impersonated the queen supported the public’s image of her as

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⁶ *Pandora’s Box*
sexually immoral. Rohan’s subsequent acquittal was seen as proof of her guilt. The event was imprinted on the public mind and was frequently utilized as a satire against the queen.

These licentious images served to damage more than just tarnish the queen’s reputation; they called into question the legitimacy of the king’s children. If the paternity of the king’s heirs was in question, so was the belief in hereditary kingship itself. The chastity of the queen was crucial to the purity of the dynasty. Even more unusual, the king did not take any mistresses. This was a typical privilege of the king, and symbolically represented the health and vitality of the dynasty. At the time when an absolute monarchy was already beginning to be thought of as an archaic form of government, this caused serious damage to the public image of the regency. The king became a cuckold, and lost respect as a ruler. As a result, he was less of patriarch and became familiar, more accessible. One can see these public sentiments reflected thematically in caricature depicting the king and queen: the queen at the center of intrigue, humiliating her husband; the king infantilized or as a foolish drunkard, often with the horns of a cuckold; the use of the informal “tu” form in captions that address the king; references to the king as “Louis Capet”, a surname given to him by the new revolutionary government, derived from his descent from the Capetian dynasty. The use of this last name not only served to “de-royalize” the name of the king; addressing him as such in caricature symbolically criticized not only Louis XVI, but also all of the past kings of France.

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The timeline of royal caricature can be divided into two parts: pre- and post-Flight to Varennes. Before June 21, 1791, Louis XVI was criticized for being weak, childish, impotent, and conservative, but other groups bore the brunt of political criticism. In the wake of the storming of the Bastille, the complex system of censorship lay in shambles, and the special privileges that had been accrued by publishers and printers were worthless. As a result, writers and revolutionary publications flourished. One of their major constraints was literacy, and it was quickly discovered that the utility of engravings could rival that of the printing press. The royal family was of course included in the subjects of these images, but more popular were broadsides depicting major revolutionary events, and caricatures slandering the First and Second estates, and Old Regime ideals. This was most likely because, following the fall of the Bastille in 1789, the king’s authority was weakened through legislation put forth by the Constituent Assembly. Then, after the March to Versailles on October 5, the royal family was effectively imprisoned in the Palais des Tuilleries. Louis, never a truly intimidating figure to begin with, was not seen as a real threat to the Revolutionary movement. Already floundering under his weak reputation, he was rendered effectively harmless to the political movement he was swept up in. Additionally, the king was traditionally seen as a sacred figure, and despite his incompetence, slandering him outright possibly seemed too sacrilegious. This may be one reason Louis XVI was saved from the same open degeneration the queen experienced before and throughout the revolutionary years. The queen, however, was never truly accepted as truly French, and thus never completely accepted as monarch. She never shed her reputation as the Autrichienne (“the Austrian bitch”).

8 Darnton
Before Varennes, the king was most often depicted as a gluttonous giant, gorging himself on the labor of others— a common theme still used to characterize the politically powerful today. One example of this theme is a caricature entitled Le Gargantua du siècle / ou / l’Oracle de la dive bouteille⁹ (image 3). Published in 1790, a red-faced Louis sits astride a tiny horse, emphasizing his corpulence. The caption informs us that he has come to hear the “Oracle of the Divine Bottle” foresee future events. The bottle’s predictions hang on two trees behind it and read “The yoke of the oppression of France will be opened” and “A people, fully free to win its Liberty”— not what a king would want to hear. He is flanked by a flock of birds dressed as clerics, which the caption informs us are “very dirty, stinky, conceited, and voracious”. Marie-Antoinette is surprisingly absent, as her tendency towards vice was even more infamous than her husband’s, but this only serves to concentrate the reader’s focus on the embarrassing ineptitude of the king.¹⁰

The floodgates were unlocked when the royal family was captured on their way to Montmédy and brought back to a silent and outraged Paris. Images attacking the royal family began circulating with much greater frequency. They were also much more malicious. One of the most disturbing ways that the king and his family are repeatedly portrayed is as animals, in order to allude to their “bestial” nature and fall from high to lowest low. The “rulers” of today are often elected individuals and therefore only human, often temporary, able to fall from grace and have it easily satirized in the form of comic or caricature without the criticism itself having a larger significance. A king is the father of his people. He occupies a quasi-divine position whose sole purpose was to ensure the

⁹ The Gargantua of the Century; / or, / The Oracle of the Divine Bottle
well-being of his “children”; in this case, the people of France. But a king must be respected in order to be obeyed; whether through fear or love, it is the key to his power. It is disturbing to see how far Louis XVI fell in the eyes of his people, and this is plainly evident in the caricatures of him in the last few years of his life. One comic, entitled *La Famille des cochons ramenée dans l’étable*¹¹ (image 4), depicts the royal family as pigs in a straw-covered wagon being brought back to Paris by triumphant national guardsman. One can easily make the leap and also assume that they were en route to the slaughter. In another image, *Entrée franche*¹² (image 5), the king, depicted as a small sheep with the horns of a cuckold, is unglamorously captured by a member of the Third Estate, a smiling man in yellow *culottes*. Portraying the king as beast in countless caricatures explicitly shows that his disgrace and failure as a monarch had diminished him to less than human in the eyes of his people.

One more image, similar to the first but lacking bestial representation, is *Retour de la famille royale, à Paris le 25 juin 1791*¹³ (image 6). Here, the gravity of the situation is shown through the solemn faces of the crowd. They do not remove their hats as the carriage rolls by, and the crowds seem to dwarf the tiny figures of the royal family. This sober reflection promotes the power of the National Guard and the shame of the monarchy.

Caricatures can also be found where the ancestors of the monarchs find their descendants hiding following their flight to Varennes, and berate them for their shameful conduct. For example, in one caricature, the first Bourbon king of France, Henry IV (1553-1610) appears and discovers his descendant, Louis XVI as a pig with the ears of an

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¹¹ *The Family of Pigs Brought Back to the Sty*  
¹² *Frank Entrance*  
¹³ *Return of the royal family to Paris on 25 June 1791*
ass in a barrel, equipped with a faucet standing over a chamber pot and surrounded by wine bottles. The bottles symbolize his drunkenness and disgrace, while the dry faucet alludes to his impotence. The caption reads “Ventre Saint-Gris ou est mon fils? / Quoi! C’est un cochon? / C’est lui meme, il noye sa honte” (image 7). The intention of this cartoon is to allude that through Louis XVI’s conduct as king, he has brought down the proud kingdom that his forefathers had built.

Similarly, in another anonymous caricature, the queen is found hiding in a well by her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. She points to her own crown to remind her daughter of her royal ancestry. The title reads: Que faites vous / ma fille? / Quel désespoir?/ J’étois alterée du sang des François / n’ayant pu éteindre ma soif? Mon désespoir m’a plongé au fonds de ce / puits / Ah! Maudits Français pourquoi m’arretiez vous?” (image 8) As this suggests, the queen, unable to quench her thirst for “du sang des Francois” has hurled herself to the bottom of a well. This violence is surprising when compared to the similar cartoon shown previously featuring the king. Yes, there is shame depicted here, too, but the king’s presentation as a weak fool pales in severity when compared to the virulent accusation that the queen was a true enemy to the French and wished to bring about their downfall. The queen was never able to shake her public reputation as a foreigner. As mentioned before, she had long been referred to l’Autrichienne- an insulting slur, but at its core it is an identification as non-French. During the Revolution, it was widely believed that because of her Hapsburg family connections, the queen was transferring information to the Austrian enemy in order to

14 Duprat 113. Gadzooks! Where is my son? What! He’s a pig? It’s himself, he drowns his shame
15 What are you doing / my daughter? / What despair? / I was thirsty for the blood of the French / Unable to quench my thirst / My despair hurled me to the bottom of this / well / Ah! Damned French why did you stop me?
facilitate a foreign invasion. This seems highly unlikely, as her family was slow, almost unwilling, to help her and her husband as they spiraled downward from power and grace.

Caricatures of the flight appear to be very similar in structure and theme. Firstly, Marie-Antoinette, epically coiffed, is very often seen pushing, pulling, or carrying the king—an action that characterizes her as the “driving force” behind the debacle. It is very intriguing that the majority of French cartoonists chose to present the scenario in this light. This characterization cements in the mind of the audience the traitorous nature of the queen, but also victimizes the king. I hesitate to say that this depicts his innocence; more, it suggests weakness on his part, a bumbling ineptitude of a powerful individual who had invested too much faith in the hands of a traitor. The fact that this theme is seen over and over again insinuates that it was not only enforced, by widely believed. Caricatures had to be circulated in order to be effective, and the newspapers that were publishing them would not have done included them in their pages unless they thought they would be well received.

The royalist stronghold of Montmédy is also frequently represented by a mountain (the word mont means ‘mountain’ in French) crowned with a clock pointing to high noon (midi, which is pronounced very similarly to –média, is French for ‘noon’). With such overt symbolism there is little doubt left in the audience’s mind about the destination. The two monarchs are often flanked by a parade of unsavorily represented individuals. In some cases, they are nobles known to have been involved in coordinating the flight, such as Count Axel von Fersen and the baron de Breteuil. In other images, they are prostitutes, animals, or demons. It is not unusual to see one of these characters holding a diamond necklace aloft, in case the audience should forget that this is not the first time the royal house has displayed disgraceful behavior. The depiction of this
entourage slanders the royal family through their assumed association with these disagreeable characters, and serves to enhance the theme of sin and ignominy (images 9 & 10).

In 1792, after the failed flight to Varennes, documents belonging to the king were discovered that declared his opposition to the Revolution. Correspondence with foreign countries outlining “royal intrigues” was also found. This information was critical in the king’s continuous fall from favor and instrumental in the decision to try him for his crimes. Then, on the 20 June 1792, on the anniversary of the Tennis Court Oath (and nearly the anniversary of the flight), the people of France held a great demonstration in an attempt to persuade the king to retract his power of veto from the Legislative Assembly’s decrees, and to recall the Girondin ministers he had recently dismissed. The king was forced to toast to the health of the nation and don the Phrygian cap, but he did not comply with their demands. Political caricatures centering on this theme are highly sarcastic, and display themes of dishonesty and insincerity. One such popular cartoon satirizes a famous portrait of the king painted by the artist Joseph Boze in 1775. In it, the king is shown from the waist up, bare-headed, dignified, his coat decorated with medals. The caption reads, Louis Seize / Roi de France et de Navarre (image 11a). In 1792, the image was altered and turned into a caricature (image 11b). The king holds himself just as stoically, but his head is ironically decorated with the Phrygian cap of liberty, which the people of France had presented to the king during the demonstration of 20 June 1792. The caption

16 Cuno 178.
17 Louis XVI / King of France and Navarre
was also modified, and the king’s title became *Roi des Francais* 18 - a reference to the Constitution Assembly’s decision to change his title in 1789. 19

Another similar caricature focuses on the toast to the nation’s health that the king was forced to make (*image 12*). Louis stands, a bit stiff, dressed in fine but not extravagant clothes, as he raises a bottle to the reader. This seems to be yet another allusion to the king’s drunkenness; whether or not a bottle was actually used in the event, a glass should have been sufficient. Next to his mouth is written *Vive la Nation* in tiny print, as if it had been whispered or muttered under his breath. Indeed, his whole demeanor is one of obvious insincerity. Any pro-revolutionary reader would immediately be able to recognize that the king did not share their sympathies.

The king’s flight had shattered “the myth of kingship” for many Parisians. Timothy Tacket writes, “Once Louis had been brought back from Varennes, led through the streets of Paris, and reinstated at the Palais des Tuilleries, the great question in everyone’s mind was what should be come of the monarch and monarchy.” 20 Louis was king in name alone. Many different solutions to this delicate and awkward problem were proposed, from stripping him of his power and instating him as a figurehead king, to exiling him from the country. In the end, the public felt so deeply betrayed, deemed the king’s behavior so reprehensible, that they could never again trust him with the responsibilities of government. 21 Louis XVI no longer reigned in the hearts of his people, who now despised him. After the decision to judge the king was made, one begins to witness the first direct acts of violence against the king through caricature. His title had

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18 *King of the French*
19 Cuno 179.
21 Tacket 193.
lost whatever precious dignity it had retained, and now, as a traitor to his country, he was
fair game to bear the assault of the violent anger of the people of France.

One passionate caricature entitled *L’Idole renversée* (image 13) portrays France
as a beautiful woman, wearing the royal robes decorated with fleurs-de-lis. Using a club,
she has knocked a bust of Louis XVI off its pedestal, and leans over it as if preparing for
one final, destructive swing. Behind her, revolutionaries continue to hold the crown aloft
with the tips of their bayonets, and a banner over the image lets the reader know that they
will protect the monarchy to their last drop of blood, even if they do not trust the current
king. It is, at first, surprising that it is a crown they bear, and not, for example, a
constitution. But there is strong evidence that many still favored a constitutional
monarchy; the daunting topic of contention on this subject was who would occupy the
throne after Louis was gone. It was even at one time proposed that a cabinet of ministers
be given the authority of the crown. The fact that the crown, still a symbol of
government, is supported by soldiers, guards, and sans-culottes informs the reader that,
more than any one specific person, the revolutionary ideals would endure and that the
people, together, could create a strong government. They would no longer be ruled by an
unfit idol.

The portrayal of France as a beautiful woman was a revolutionary symbol of
increasing popularity that eventually manifested itself in the form of Marianne. After
royalty was abolished and a republic proclaimed in September 1792, the National
Convention chose for the emblem of its seal a female allegory based on the Roman
goddess of liberty. This abstract female was the antithesis of the images of the king, now

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22 *The Idol Overturned*
23 Tacket 192.
24 Tacket 194.
considered an archaic position associated with the Old Regime. While he was male, she is female, almost virginal, lacking family ties or connections. He represented the power of dynastic rule; she, collective ideals.\textsuperscript{25}

Another, less obviously violent caricature shows the king with two faces; one, crowned, is turned to the Constitution, promising to uphold it; the other, considering an émigré priest, promises to destroy the Constitution as his crown begins to slip off (image \textit{14}). This two-sided insincerity was characterized as a tactic of the defamed king, and it stems in truth; after his return to Paris, the king and queen increased their correspondence with foreign and domestic sympathizers, pleading for assistance, while at the same time struggling to preserve their poise in their own country.\textsuperscript{26}

Unfortunately, history has written the rest of their story. The king met his end by guillotine on 21 January 1793. His wife joined him later that year on 16 October. The caricature surrounding the execution ranges in theme from the explicitly violent to royalist images showing a heroic king bravely facing his death at the hands of bloodthirsty sans-culottes. Other images are more documentary. Perhaps more than any other caricatures of the king during his lifetime, the images of his death were just as invaluable to their contemporaries as they are to historians today. These images documented an event that few French personally witnessed but the entire nation was forever changed by. These depictions of the king’s death had intense shock-value, were deeply emotional, and far less humorous. They did not entertain; they informed. Whether or not one supported the decision to execute the king and queen, one message, perhaps unintended, but undeniably clear: no one was above retribution when it came to the

\textsuperscript{25} Hunt 38.
\textsuperscript{26} Tacket 211-212.
vitality of the Revolution and the nation. From this point on, you were with the Revolution, or against it.

The execution of the king tastes of patricide, and deeply affected the French people. Caricatures immediately following the executions portrayed the king and queen joining their supporters and ancestors in the afterlife. Although many obviously supported the decision to guillotine the monarchs, many others were obviously shocked by the violent and unanticipated decision. Those that had supported the Revolution to this point could have easily been taken aback by the overwhelming feeling that they had gone too far. The continuous publication and circulation of caricatures of the king and queen post-mortem being received by the enemies of the Revolution seem to drive the point home that this decision had been a service to the country. He could not be thought of as the king; he was an enemy of France, and would join the other enemies of the Revolution in Hell.

Still, it was inevitable that their country would mourn their lost king and queen. Highly allegorical caricatures depicting scenes of mourning were circulated, in deep contrast with others that can only be described as violently joyous. One tragic image by Pierre-Jean-Joseph-Denis Crussaire was printed c. 1793 (image 15). Entitled L’Urne mystérieuse,27 the image shows a weeping willow growing out of an urn, which contains the profiles of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette as silhouettes. A woman representing France grieves with a hand over her heart, emitting the feeling that she remembers and remains loyal to them.28 This caricature, and others like it, represents the people’s reluctance to accept the demise of the king and queen, however disagreeable they might have been

27 *The Mysterious Urn*  
28 Cuno 196-198.
have been in their lifetimes. It also gives a sense of the anticipated struggle to establish a system of government without them.

As I have expressed, the reception and perception of the king and queen by the French people, and of the system of monarchy in general, is nowhere more explicitly seen than in the caricature. Caricature is an instantaneous response, and could be created and published within days of an event. Through this medium, one can successfully witness the evolution of the downfall of the monarchy through these images, which, rather than displaying a factual representation, symbolically, metaphorically, and allegorically interpret collective ideas and questions of the day. Because of this, one can glean a truer understanding of the emotions surrounding an incident or a person, and responses from the French people that have otherwise largely gone uncatalogued. Additionally, their wide circulation and repetition of themes is evidence that they were used as propaganda in order to explain and convince the people of France of revolutionary ideals. At the time of their publication, these political images incited action and response from their audience. Caricatures are an invaluable tool that, if properly documented and indexed, could assist historians in drawing conclusions about the interpretation of events by the public in a way that no other medium contemporary to this time period can.
Catalogue of Images

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5