

In the Shadow of the Empress Reading Group Guide

- (1) Throughout her reign, Maria Theresa strove to improve her subjects' lives. She shifted the burden of taxation away from the peasantry by forcing the aristocracy to pay their fair share (a visionary measure without precedent in Austrian history); she introduced smallpox vaccination and did her best to reform healthcare and education; and she modernized the army. But she also had many faults, chief among them her religious intolerance and especially her hatred of Jews and adoption of anti-Semitic policies. Do you think that, ultimately, she deserves to be remembered as a great leader, or does her bigotry disqualify her from that distinction?
- (2) Maria Theresa had the very modern problem of having to juggle the responsibilities of a full-time career with her role as wife and mother. (Of sixteen children!) How well do you think she succeeded at this delicate balancing act? It is clear that she tried to defer to her husband's and eldest son's wishes whenever possible—how did that work out for her? Why do you think that she, who understood how difficult it was to rule, prepared her daughters so little for it?
- (3) In one of her letters, Isabella of Parma counseled that, as the daughter of a great prince, Maria Christina should dissemble her true feelings and adopt a pose of outward obedience until such time as she would perhaps be in a better position to exert control over her life. What do you think of Isabella's advice? Would you say that in some ways, women are still grappling with societal expectations of meekness and compliance?

- (4) Like her mother, Mimi espoused policies that encouraged progressively moderate government. How do you think the history of Europe might have been changed if she, rather than Joseph, had been allowed to inherit her mother's throne?
- (5) Unlike her sister Marie Antoinette, Maria Carolina worked tirelessly to improve her subjects' lives. She improved schools, introduced smallpox vaccination, organized prompt government relief programs for the victims of Naples's numerous earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, established shipyards and a navy, and ushered in a golden age of prosperity. And yet today she is as hated in Italy as Marie Antoinette is in France. Do you think that, historically, women rulers faced a higher standard than men? Despite the recent accomplishments of the women's movement, do you believe women in politics are still judged more harshly than men?
- (6) In the U.K., Emma Hamilton's influence over Admiral Nelson, and her intervention on his behalf with Maria Carolina, is still considered (as it was in the 18th century) to be a source of embarrassment rather than a diplomatic or military achievement. Do you agree with that assessment? Do you consider her a heroine for overcoming a life of poverty and forced teenaged prostitution, or an adventuress who bargained her looks and talents to climb up the social ladder and ensnare another woman's husband?
- (7) What do you think of Marie Antoinette's long-term affair with Count Fersen? Her emotional and sexual relations with her husband were clearly unsatisfactory, in large part due to Louis XVI's disorder, which neither she nor anyone else at court could have possibly understood. Do you believe that under these circumstances, she had a right to fall in love and experience real passion, or is this just another black mark against her?

(8) They say that history is written by the winners. But until very recently, it was also written almost exclusively by men, for whom Marie Antoinette made an easy target. Given the challenges presented by her husband's disorder, her numerous attempts to protect him and her children, the considerable bravery she demonstrated on the three occasions that she was attacked by the mob and during her captivity, trial, and execution, do you believe she deserves the scorn with which she is still routinely treated?