

NAPOLEON, FAMILY VALUES, AND THE FATE OF EUROPE

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Napoleon Bonaparte is renowned for his ambitions as a general, statesman, nation-builder, and law-maker. Many forces contributed to his successes as well as failures in those related fields.

An underappreciated dimension of Napoleon's endeavors was wielding his family as both a vital end and means of power. Indeed, Napoleon may have been history's greatest nepotist.

Family members, both as players and pawns, were essential to Napoleon Bonaparte's diplomacy through most of his political life. His brothers, stepson, and brother-in-law would serve as diplomats, soldiers, politicians, and eventually rulers of states. His sisters would play a more subtle although at times just as vital a game. All along they would wield their formidable feminine charms, backed by the promise of a hand in Napoleon's generosity, to entice powerful men to share secrets and devote their allegiances. Eventually Caroline and Elisa would assert the

power of state, but behind rather than atop thrones crowded by their husbands; Pauline was the least clever of the clan but at least knew not to meddle in complex issues beyond her understanding.



Emperor Napoleon during a campaign
(by Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier)

Like most autocrats, Napoleon saw marriage primarily as a means to promote national and family interests by cementing alliances and spawning the requisite heir and spare; lust or love was best satisfied with someone other than one's spouse. To that end he made and broke marriages, including his own. The most notorious was when he bullied his wayward youngest brother Jerome to trade his beloved pregnant American wife for a Wurttemberg princess. Nearly as heartless was forcing Louis to give up the woman he adored for a bitter marriage with Josephine's daughter

Hortense.

Yet he did not always get his way. He initially opposed the marriage of Caroline, perhaps the

most Machiavellian of the Bonapartes after himself, with his valiant but rather dense cavalry commander Joachim Murat. He later despaired when they plotted against him. And then there was Lucien, the most politically astute and courageous of Napoleon's brothers, who was eventually driven into exile. What was his crime? On the eve of Napoleon's transformation from the First Consul into the Emperor, Lucien put love before international diplomacy by refusing to divorce his commoner wife for the promise of being united one day with a princess. Instead he fled with his family to Rome. When Napoleon found out he stripped Lucien of his Senate seat and his place in the line of succession. It seems that most of the family secretly sided with Lucien. Letizia, their formidable mother, did so openly. She was so disgusted by Napoleon's behavior that she pointedly joined Lucien and his family in Rome and refused to return for the coronation.

While, as the saying goes, blood may be thicker than water, it guarantees neither competence nor loyalty. Napoleon conquered and awarded realms to his brothers and sisters, then, to his irritation, found himself as mired in diplomacy with those new rulers as if he were dealing any other regimes. In all it was about as easy for the emperor to coordinate policies among those of his siblings that he had plopped on thrones as it was to herd as many cats. Napoleon would actually deprive Louis of his Dutch crown after he ignored repeated demands to desist from putting his subjects' interests before those of France.

While his siblings mocked or bristled at his commands, Napoleon fumed at their ingratitude. Where would they be without all his sacrifices, for his prowess on scores of battlefields and negotiating tables, for his endless eighteen hour work days devoted to advancing his vision for France, Europe, and their family? He lamented that "my family does not back me up. They are all

insanely ambitious, ruinously extravagant, and devoid of talent."¹

And even when they actually bothered to follow his directions, they often got lost along the way. Not only did none of them enjoy his natural gift to command and create, they often made a mess of things when they tried to emulate him. Lucien was perhaps the only one who might have neared Napoleon's dynamism as a ruler, but was lost forever to his plans after that squabble over his choice of a wife.

Ironically, the most loyal and dependable of Napoleon's family was not related by blood. His stepson Eugene Beauharnais far exceeded the others as a general and statesman.² That was understandable for two reasons. The lad had lost his aloof father to the guillotine. Undoubtedly he had mixed feelings when Napoleon began courting his mother, but the awkward and passionate suitor proved to be far more loving and interested in Eugene and his sister Hortense than their real father had ever been. Moreover he would carefully groom Eugene into a succession of ever more important military, diplomatic, and government posts until he finally became the viceroy of Italy. So Eugene's gratitude swelled into life-long devotion when at age fifteen he found himself apprenticed as a staff officer to one of history's greatest generals and statesmen. He would be at Napoleon's side through both campaigns in Italy, and the Egyptian odyssey squeezed in between. As important were the lessons in statecraft he learned from observing his stepfather in the field or at Paris as he dealt decisively with the endless array of political and diplomatic challenges.

¹ Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia: The Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza*, ed. Jean Hanoteau (New York, 1935), 14.

² Carola Oman, *Napoleon's Viceroy: Eugene de Beauharnais* (London, 1966).

After nine years together, Napoleon was confident that his understudy was ready to rule. On February 1, 1805, he named Eugene the arch chancellor of Italy and promoted him to brigadier general. Then on June 7, 1805, the newly crowned king of Italy raised his son's status to viceroy. In his own version of "The Prince," Napoleon issued Eugene with a very wise set of instructions for ruling Italy on his behalf: "Be very prudent and circumspect. Never give anyone your complete confidence...The less you talk, the better...Learn to listen and remember that silence is often as impressive as knowledge. But do not hesitate to ask questions. You are only twenty-three, and however much people will try to flatter you, they know all too well your limitations. Do not try to imitate me. You must be more reserved...Take the greatest care not to expose yourself to any insult. However, should that happen... no matter who the offender is, have him arrested on the spot...Cultivate the younger Italians. The older ones are all useless. Italians are naturally more deceitful than the French. Nonetheless show respect for them, and all the more so as you become more disillusioned. There really is little difference among countries. You will gradually realize this. Your duty is to make my Italian subjects happy... Consider yourself a failure if you cannot get the Italians to love you. They know there is no love without respect. Learn to speak good Italian. Go around and show yourself. Find valuable people as assets. Admire what they admire. Get to know them and their families. Never form a clique...See that your orders are

obeyed...never allow them to be disobeyed."³ And so on.

From Eugene's arrival at Milan in March 1805, he would consciously follow that advice and prove his mettle as chief of the *Consulta* or State Council with much of his stepfather's dynamism. Thanks largely to Eugene's efforts there, for nearly another decade the Kingdom of Italy would be among the best run of Napoleon's satellites. Indeed Eugene was so diligent that at times Napoleon, the ultimate workaholic and slave-driver, actually implored him to take it easier: "My son, You are working too hard; your life is too monotonous...You have a young wife...I think you should arrange to pass the evening with her...Why not go to the theater once a week...I have more work to do than you, yet I can honestly say that I set aside more time for pleasure and fun than you."⁴



A porcelain figure of Viceroy Eugene

Of all the marital bonds the emperor forged, perhaps only that between Eugene and Auguste Amelie, the Bavarian elector's beautiful and accomplished daughter, was truly happy. Yet few of Napoleon's matchmaking efforts demanded more persistent and prolonged diplomacy. He expressed his interest as early as July 14, 1804, when he asked Ambassador Louis Guillaume Otto to get all the information he could on the girl as a possible wife. Hints of his intentions to her father

³ Instructions for Prince Eugene, June 7, 1805, in *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier de Napoleon Ier* (Paris, 1858–1869), No. 8852.

⁴ Napoleon to Eugene, April 14, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 10099.

began not long after. At first, Maximilien Joseph was dead-set against the match. Although he not would dare say so openly, he disdained losing his daughter to the stepson of some Corsican parvenu as much as he feared being straitjacketed within that upstart's ever more powerful empire. So he deftly sidestepped ever more obvious hints by both Napoleon and Talleyrand throughout 1805 that Eugene and Auguste would make a wonderful pair. He used the excuse that his daughter was already promised to Charles Louis Frederick, the heir to the duchy of Baden.⁵

As it did for other rulers across the continent, Austerlitz changed Maximilien's emotional and political calculus. When Napoleon again raised the issue with a formal request penned on December 21, and had Gerard Duroc, his chief aide-de, hand-deliver it, the man he had newly promoted to king was eager to discuss the terms. The stickiest issue was what to do about Auguste's hapless fiancée. Napoleon promised to compensate Charles by marrying him within his own clan. The king then talked his daughter into breaking her engagement.⁶

With that done the emperor sent a courier galloping to Milan with the wedding announcement. His December 31 letter was curt but promising: "I have arranged your marriage with Princess Auguste; it has been announced...She is very pretty." The summons came with a letter penned on January 3, 1806: "Twelve hours after

receiving this letter you will with all diligence embark for Munich."⁷

Eugene faithfully followed his orders. He swiftly organized his packing, transportation, and a military escort, and then set forth on that long road across the winter-bound Alps. Eugene and Auguste were undoubtedly nervous when they met for the first time on January 10, 1806, but, as a close observer put it, "they loved each other as if they had known each other for years because never were two persons better made for loving each other."⁸ On the morning of January 13, Napoleon officially adopted Eugene. Then a little later that day, with Napoleon and Josephine beaming happily, the couple was wed in a civil ceremony; the church wedding came the next day.⁹

Napoleon had not forgotten poor Charles of Baden who was heart-broken and resentful at having his fiancée snatched away. The emperor sent his condolences and fixed him up with Josephine's niece, Stephanie de Beauharnais, whom he adopted on March 3, 1806. That match was not made in heaven. Like Hortense, Stephanie was noted for her beauty and gaiety. Charles was a cold, stern, corpulent young man. Stephanie wept throughout the wedding ceremony on April 7, 1806. Napoleon later sent her a letter beseeching her to "love your husband...Be friendly with the [father]; this is your first duty; he is your father now. Moreover, he is a prince whom I have always esteemed. Treat your



"The Imperial Family"
This unique silver snuffbox depicts Emperor Napoleon, Napoléon François Joseph Charles (the King of Rome), Empress Marie Louise, and her parents Emperor Francis of Austria and Maria Theresa of Naples and Sicily

⁵ Napoleon to Otto, July 12, 1804, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, 7856.

⁶ Napoleon to Bavarian Elector, December 21, 1805, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, 9599.

⁷ Napoleon to Eugene, December 31, 1805, January 33, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, Nos. 9636, 9638; Napoleon to Duroc, January 3, 1805, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, 639.

⁸ Louis Constant, *Memoires Intimes de Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1967), I, 359.

⁹ Message to the Senate, January 12, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 9663.

subjects well; sovereigns are only made for the welfare of their people."¹⁰

From Napoleon's point of view linking with marriage the throne of France with Baden and Bavaria made perfect strategic sense as territorial stepping stones to the Austrian frontier and heart of Germany. And his Italian subjects would thrill at having such a lovely couple reign so graciously over them on his behalf. For a wedding gift to Eugene and Auguste, Napoleon sent General Auguste Marmont with a small army to occupy Istria and Dalmatia which, along with Venetia, he took from Austria under the Pressburg treaty and annexed to the kingdom of Italy.

That was hardly the only change he had in mind for the peninsula. The emperor was determined that Ferdinand IV and Marie Caroline would suffer severely for betraying their neutrality agreement with him by inviting that 25,000 Anglo-Russian expedition into their realm. What led them to dare violate their promise to Napoleon? Although the queen served as the king's political backbone, she in turn had been influenced by three powerful men, all English. Sir William Hamilton had been England's ambassador there from 1768 until his recent death in April 1803; Hugh Eliot replaced him. Then there was Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson whose attempts to defend the kingdom may have been as much guided by his love for the ambassador's wife, Lady Emma Hamilton, as British strategic interests; Nelson perished at Trafalgar in October 1805; Nelson was irreplaceable. Finally, the redoubtable Sir John Acton remained very much their prime minister.

Napoleon was well aware that Marie Caroline wore the political pants in that Bourbon family. "I am going to punish that bitch," he promised Talleyrand. And so he did. On December 27, 1805,

¹⁰ Napoleon to Stephanie de Beauharnais, July 13, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 10491. See also, Decision to Adopt Stephanie, March 3, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 9914; Napoleon to Baden Elector, January 4, 1804, *Ibid.*, No. 9649; Napoleon to Baden Margrave, February 21, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 9862; Message to Senate, March 4, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 9923.

the emperor publicly declared that the "dynasty of Naples has ceased to reign. Its existence is incompatible with the repose of Europe and the honor of my crown." He gave Marshal Gouvion St. Cyr orders to carry out that mission. The *Moniteur*, Napoleon's official newspaper, elaborated the justification for conquering the Kingdom of Naples, denouncing the queen as "vicious and immoral" who "has brought humiliation to her husband" for conspiring with foreign powers. Such an enraged tone and fervor suggests that the emperor may have had some issues with the queen beyond geopolitics. Although many rulers would betray his trust over his years in power, none provoked quite the rage in him that Marie Caroline did.¹¹

That Anglo-Russian force was not strong enough to resist St. Cyr's rapidly approaching army. The British packed their troops aboard most of the fleet and sailed away from Naples on January 14, 1806 for Gibraltar; two days later the Russians embarked their troops and lifted anchor for Corfu.

While the trembling king sailed for Palermo aboard a British warship on January 21, his tougher half lingered and sought to defend her throne by appealing to Napoleon's sense of mercy. On February 7, Marie Caroline wrote him a letter in which she confessed her mistake and begged his forgiveness. He replied with silent contempt. She waited with worsening anxiety until February 11, when Acton finally convinced her to flee aboard a British warship before it was too late. Three days later St. Cyr's army marched into Naples. The man who would soon be the new king of that realm arrived on February 15.

Napoleon had tapped his elder brother for that role on New Year's Eve, 1805. It was perhaps the best choice under the circumstances. Joseph had already proven his political worth as a skilled

¹¹ Napoleon to Talleyrand, December 14, 1805, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No 9573; Proclamation to the Army, December 27, 1805, *Ibid.*, No. 9616; *Le Moniteur Universal*, December 28, 1805.

diplomat, legislator, and advisor. As a genuine liberal and romantic, he was eager to bring progressive changes to the kingdom. Yet he was hardly the perfect match for that mission. He tended toward indecision, indolence, and, in times of danger, timidity.¹²

Nonetheless, the two generally worked well together. Of all his brothers, Joseph was the closest to Napoleon. In scores of heart-felt letters from their boyhood onward, Napoleon revealed his deepest feelings and thoughts, exchanged views on a range of subjects, plotted to advance the family's fortunes, and even asked Joseph's aid in his courtship of Desirée Clary, the younger sister of Julie, who Joseph had married in August 1794. And from an early age, Napoleon had dominated Joseph, giving him advice on career, love, politics, writing style, family, and, later, the craft of government and diplomacy.

Napoleon helped him land an ever more powerful series of posts including his army's commissary general on the first Italian campaign, ambassador first to Parma and then Rome, and a member of the Council of Five Hundred. After the November 1799 coup, the First Consul named him a state councilor and senator, and gave him such important diplomatic missions as negotiating the 1801 Concordat with Rome, the 1802 peace treaty of Amiens with Britain, and the

1803 sale of Louisiana to the United States. In 1804, the new emperor named him a prince and grand elector, and in 1805 left him to run the empire while he embarked on his campaign that would be capped by Austerlitz. After that distinguished apprenticeship, Joseph was a natural choice to rule the kingdom of Naples. On March 30, 1806, after the French army had secured southern Italy, Napoleon officially decreed that his brother was now Joseph I, the king of Naples.



As in other French possessions across Europe, the mission was to modernize and integrate the realm into the empire. Joseph certainly had his work cut out for him. Southern Italy was a feudal backwater with a population of mostly poverty-stricken, superstitious peasants, a bureaucracy renowned for being corrupt, inept, and brutal, and an armed uniformed mob which passed for an army. Although the new king was no workaholic, he did know how to study a problem, make a decision, and then delegate the policy to those who could best carry it out. Napoleon hand-picked a

talented group to serve as Joseph's state council.

Gradually the reforms began to take effect. Government was revolutionized with a French-style constitution and the Code Napoleon. Well-trained police and inspectors began to root out petty crime and corruption. The economy was stimulated with investments that bettered transportation and communications by land and sea. Revenues from taxes and tariffs rose and were reinvested in the economy and administration. The army was professionalized. Two years later Napoleon would be so pleased that he would tap Joseph to try to perform similar wonders as the

¹² Napoleon to Joseph Fesch, June 25, 1784, *General Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, 1. Napoleon to Berthier, December 27, 1805, *Ibid.*, No. 9627; Napoleon to Joseph, December 31, 1805, January 12, 31, February 7, 9, March 2, 1806, *Ibid.*, Nos. 9633, 9665, 9724, 9773, 9788, 9911. For the best biography in English, see: Owen Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte: A Biography of Joseph, Napoleon's Elder Brother* (New York, 1968).

king of another very backward realm. He would not be quite as successful atop his second throne.

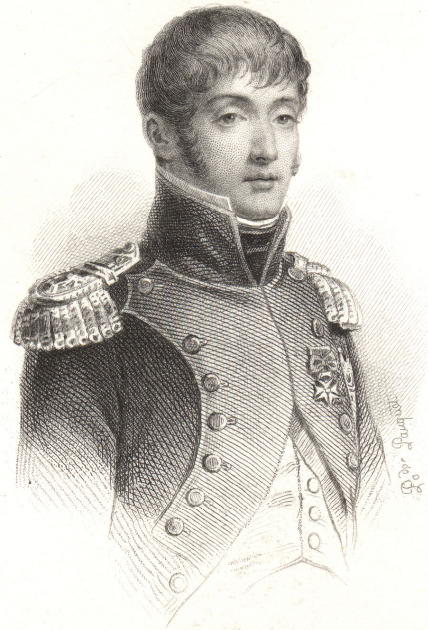
Joseph was not the only brother who received a crown in 1806. Louis would also be so blessed or cursed by Napoleon's ambitions. The realm that Napoleon had tapped Louis to rule was the former United Provinces of the Netherlands, which was transformed into the Batavian Republic during the French Revolution, and would soon be the Kingdom of Holland. In 1805, the emperor had abolished the republic's directory, replaced it with an executive "Great Committee" led by a "grand pensioner," and entrusted that post to Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, who had served as Dutch ambassador in Paris. That leader would soon be pensioned off as soon as he and the committee fulfilled the latest decree from Paris.

On March 14, 1806, Napoleon had Talleyrand write a letter to the Dutch leaders that they either invite Louis to be their king or else agree to have their land annexed to France.¹³

It took another two months of bitter debate before the Great Committee chose the lesser of two evils on May 3. French and Dutch envoys then began to negotiate the details of life under King Louis. On May 24, a treaty was signed whereby Schimmelpenninck would resign and a delegation would journey to Paris to beseech the emperor to grant them both independence and his brother as their monarch. The catch was that the Kingdom of

Holland would be independent in name only and the monarch not at all. The delegation arrived on June 5 and presented its petition to the emperor.

That same day Napoleon announced his latest royal creation to the Senate. After citing the familiar sophism that the Dutch had freely chosen to dissolve their republic into a monarchy, he explained the real reasons. The most vital was to bolster the Bonaparte clan's lineage since he had adopted Louis's son as his heir. Holland, of course, had strategic military and economic importance as well. Finally, he explained that Louis, "being without a single personal ambition," was making a sacrifice for France. There were certainly worst sacrifices that the emperor would call upon his subjects to make!¹⁴



LOUIS BONAPARTE

Roi de Hollande

Napoleon's parting words to his brother were: "Never cease being French." Louis was formally enthroned as the king

of Holland at The Hague on June 23. One line in particular of his inaugural speech was designed at once to sooth his subjects and irritate his brother: "From the moment I set foot on Dutch soil I became Dutch."¹⁵ He would soon prove wrong the emperor's hope that he was merely uttering an insincere platitude. Over the next four years the relations between the two brothers would fray to the snapping point as Louis found an array of passive aggressive ways to defy virtually every one of Napoleon's demands.

The source of that political estrangement was thoroughly personal. Louis now had the means of getting back at his big brother for years of real, exaggerated, and imagined affronts. Louis was

¹³ Napoleon to Talleyrand, March 14, June 5, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, Nos. 9970, 10319; Bonaparte to Talleyrand, April 17, August 20, 1804, *Ibid.*, Nos. 7718, 7946; Napoleon to Schimmelpenninck, May 12, 1805, *Ibid.*, No. 8719.

¹⁴ Napoleon to Senate, June 5, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 10317.

¹⁵ Constant, II, 549.

bright, modest, honest, secretive, hard-working, peace-loving, and apparently kind-hearted to nearly everyone but his wife. He suffered from bouts of depression and ill health. Although he was fit to be neither a soldier nor statesman, Napoleon had tried to mold him into both. Like Eugene, Louis had been attached to Napoleon's staff during his first three campaigns. The two young aides were complete opposites, with Eugene as energetic, courageous, and charismatic as Louis was lethargic, moody, and sickly. Napoleon bullied Louis to be as outstanding as Eugene, which of course only worsened his brother's hatred for them both.

That barely concealed rage culminated when Napoleon forced him to end his courtship of Emilie de Beauharnais, and marry her cousin Hortense, Josephine's daughter. Like her mother, Hortense was pretty, vivacious, and passionate. She was no more attracted to Louis than he was to her. Louis was twenty-four and Hortense a mere eighteen years old when they were wed on the bitterly cold day of January 4, 1802. The ceremony was hardly a girl's dream come true. Louis made no secret that he despised Hortense and she naturally returned the contempt. They also had to share the stage with another tempestuous couple, Murat and Caroline, who picked that day and place to renew their vows. Throughout the ceremony, Louis's face was an angry mask while Hortense wept uncontrollably. The relationship deteriorated from there.¹⁶

Beyond court ceremonies they stayed far apart, him to brood mostly alone or with a few

confidants, and her to share her natural vivacity and intelligence with others, including eventually lovers. Napoleon pestered Louis continually about fulfilling the unceasing flow of decrees that he sent him. Louis had been in power only a month when Napoleon complained that "every day you write me things that make me miserable."¹⁷ He would eventually depose Louis for his failure to follow his commands.



CAROLINE MURAT

Reine de Naples.

Publié par Furne, à Paris.

The problems that Napoleon had with Louis went beyond state affairs. He received ever more reports from various sources, especially an upset Josephine, that Louis mistreated Hortense. Amidst his 1807 campaign, Napoleon sent his brother a long letter in which he systematically denigrated him as a king and a husband: "Your quarrels with the queen have penetrated the public. You have in your household the same authoritarian and effeminate character that you show in your government, and have in those affairs a rigidity that you show in your family.

You treat a young woman as if you were heading a regiment...You have the best and most virtuous woman, and you make her unhappy. Let her dance as much as she wants...Make happy the mother of your children."¹⁸

Ah yes, the children. That last line may have been the most cutting of all. Hortense would give birth to three sons; only the second was undoubtedly her husband's. It is quite possible that Napoleon fathered her first son, Napoleon Louis Charles, who was born on October 10, 1802. Louis Constant, Napoleon's valet, hints strongly and repeatedly that was so and insists that "I knew

¹⁶ Constant, I, 137-44, 536-37.

¹⁷ Napoleon to Louis, July 21, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 10534.

¹⁸ Napoleon to Louis, April 4, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 12294.

better than anyone the emperor's loves."¹⁹ Certainly Napoleon always expressed a love for Hortense beyond that of a doting step-father. Was it possible that Josephine, herself unable to bear any more children, was happy to have her daughter act as a surrogate, especially since the lad who was at once her grandson and secret stepson would inherit the French empire?

Napoleon legally adopted that son as his own and designated him as his successor to the French throne, with Louis and Hortense acting as regent as long as he was less than eighteen years old. Napoleon was a doting father to his heir. He would be less affectionate with the next two boys, Napoleon Louis who was born on October 11, 1804, and Charles Louis Napoleon, the future Napoleon III, on April 20, 1808; the third son's paternity would also be questioned. Napoleon was heartbroken when his heir died of croup on May 5, 1807. Although the second son took his older brother's place in succession, the emperor chose not to adopt him. Instead, that death precipitated his goal of eventually divorcing Josephine and finding a fertile royal womb to marry. That second son would be disinherited from the French crown in 1811 when a son was born to Napoleon and Marie Louise.²⁰

Elisa was the third beneficiary that year of Napoleon's family ambitions. After his coronation, he had granted all his siblings royal titles; it would take a bit longer to find them lands and peoples to rule. On March 18, 1805, he granted his least favorite sister Elisa and her husband Felix Bacciochi, the minor city-state of Piombino. On March 30, 1806, he joined an expanded duchy of Lucca to Piombino to create a grand duchy.²¹

Although Elisa was not pretty, coquettish, and conniving like Caroline and Pauline, she proved to be an able ruler. She had no sooner asserted power

over her expanded realm when she becomes embroiled in a conflict with Rome. The catalyst was her implementation of her brother's orders to subordinate the church to the state and nationalize its property, as had been done in France and the Kingdom of Italy. The Archbishop of Lucca and the Pope condemned her actions. Napoleon told her to hang tough and defended her among his other policies that offended Catholicism in his letters to the pope and the archbishop. Elisa herself wrote a powerful defense of her actions to Pius VII. She also embarked on a policy of economic and social reforms for her people which prompted a letter of glowing praise from her brother. Napoleon would eventually reward Elisa's loyalty and competence by giving her all of Tuscany.²²

Among the Bonaparte sisters, Pauline was the most beautiful, least talented, and closest to Napoleon. Her first husband, Victor Leclerc, actually bore a physical resemblance and lively personality similar to that of her brother.²³ She accompanied him when he led the expedition to retake St. Domingue. Her mourning did not last long after yellow fever killed him on October 22, 1802. She returned to France and soon wed Camillo Borghese, a rich powerful Roman noble. Marriage hardly curbed her gaiety and frivolity. Indeed her excesses were so great that in April 1804 Napoleon wrote her a stern letter demanding that she behave with dignity, and asked Cardinal Fesch, their uncle and his ambassador to Rome, to keep her in line.²⁴ Although her behavior changed little, Napoleon granted her the duchy of Gustalla on March 30, 1806. With a realm of her own, Pauline now could party to her heart's content and there was nothing Napoleon's subsequent diplomacy could do to stop her.

¹⁹ Constant, I, 139, 336-37, 429-35, 536-37.

²⁰ Constant, 434; John Bierman, *Napoleon III and His Carnival Empire* (New York, 1988), 3-17.

²¹ Napoleon Message to Senate, March 18, 1805, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 8447; Napoleon to Elisa, March 31, 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 10036.

²² Napoleon to Elisa, May 24, June 13, September 4, 1806, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, Nos. 10265, 10359; Napoleon to Pius, May [n.d.], 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 10266; Elisa to Pius, May 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 10266; Napoleon to Archbishop of Lucca, May 1806, *Ibid.*, No. 10267; Napoleon to Talleyrand, April 25, May 24, 1806, *Ibid.*, Nos. 10133, 10264.

²³ Constant, *Memoires*, 1:546.

²⁴ Bonaparte to Pauline, April 6, 1804, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 7674; Bonaparte to Fesch, April 10, 1804, *Ibid.*, No. 7678.

One last sibling, Caroline along with her husband Joachim Murat, would receive a realm in 1806, the Duchy of Berg and Cleves. Napoleon's other siblings as rulers were merely, at worst, inept and corrupt; Caroline and Murat would eventually be outright treacherous after they took the throne of Naples in 1808. And for now, Murat's impetuosity would bring France to the brink of war with Prussia.

If Napoleon was unsentimental, indeed ruthless, in making and at times breaking the power and relationships of his loved ones, he eventually sacrificed his own marriage on the altar of *raison d'état*. In late 1809, having won his latest war with Austria, another diplomatic problem loomed ever larger in Napoleon's mind. He needed a new wife or, to be more precise, womb, within which to plant an enduring dynasty of Bonapartes to rule the French empire.²⁵ Although for some time he had toyed with the idea of divorcing Josephine and marrying another, news from Warsaw settled the matter. His faithful mistress Marie Walewska was pregnant. Until then he was not completely certain that he could seed a child; a mistress and Hortense (if his valet Louis Constant was correct) had born children, but there was a chance they were not his. Clearly, however, Josephine had conceived two children with her first husband but none with him.

Dissolving his marriage would be a sticky diplomatic matter.²⁶ First of all he had to convince Josephine to yield her crown for the good of France. Although divorce itself was a simple civil

act, they then had to convince the Church that their marriage should be annulled.

Profoundly complicating all that was his deep



A snuff box with the portrait of Josephine

love for Josephine. The nature of that love, however, as with most relationships, had changed with the years. His fiery passion for her during their initial sojourn as lovers had died with news of her infidelity. Eventually he forgave her, but his love for her thereafter was transformed into a deep affection.

Josephine undoubtedly sensed that something serious was troubling her husband after they were reunited at

Fontainebleau on October 26. He was distant and irritable. How much of his behavior was a conscious attempt to harden her before giving her the crushing news and how much reflected his inability to quell a troubled conscience is impossible to say. He put off telling her for nearly a month. Hortense refused his plea that she acts as his messenger. Asking Josephine for a divorce on November 30 was among his life's most wrenching emotional experiences.²⁷

Two weeks later on December 14, 1809, tears streamed down their faces when they appeared before the Bonaparte clan and State Council. Each read a statement explaining why a divorce was essential for the interests of France. Napoleon praised their thirteen years of marriage and the wonderful role Josephine had played as the empress, but lamented her inability to provide an heir for the throne. The next day the documents

²⁵ Waresquiel, 411.

²⁶ Napoleon to Fouché, June 3, 1810, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 16529.

²⁷ Napoleon to Clarke, June 23, 24, 1810, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, Nos. 16580, 16586; Napoleon to Champagny, June 24, 1810, *Ibid.*, No. 16583.

were sent on to the Senate which granted its approval. Napoleon was typically generous in his final settlement with Josephine--she would be compensated with Malmaison, the Elysee palace as a Parisian home, the pay off of all her existing debts, and an annual allowance of 3 million francs.

But the dissolution of their marriage was hardly done. It was essential that an annulment follow the divorce. According to Catholic doctrine someone who remarries without an annulment is a bigamist. Few fecund princesses would be interested in marrying Napoleon with that stigma clouding him. On December 22, Arch Chancellor Jean Jacques Regis Cambaceres filed on behalf of the couple for an annulment to the ecclesiastical court of Paris.

The Bonapartes did have a good annulment case. Their civil marriage on March 6, 1796 was certified with false documents that shrank the six year age gap between Josephine and Napoleon to one. The official who performed the marriage was apparently unqualified to do so and the person who witnessed it was underage. As for their church marriage on December 1, 1804, none of those who watched the ceremony signed their names as witnesses.

However, getting the pope to go along could not have been more diplomatically awkward. After all it was under Napoleon's orders that Pius VII had been abducted from his palace in Rome and eventually incarcerated in the bishop's palace at Savona. When asked his response was a curt no.

Once again French clerics were caught in a wrenching political tug-of-war between the emperor and pope. On January 3, 1810, Napoleon was finally able to arm-twist a makeshift group in Paris, which included two cardinals, an archbishop, and four bishops, to issue an opinion favoring an annulment. That helped push the ecclesiastical court into granting an annulment on January 14.

It might be thought that finding a pretty, fertile royal wife would be an easy and enjoyable enough

task. Surely virtually all of Europe's eligible princesses would line up for a chance to become the French empress. But that was not the case. The trouble was that not any royal princess would do. Ideally the marriage would bind France with one of the other great powers. Over the months as Napoleon shed his first wife, he supervised a diplomatic offensive to find her successor.

A Russian princess was clearly a prime choice. Indeed Napoleon had first informally raised the issue with Alexander at Erfurt in October 1808 and had Caulaincourt make another query in November 1809. Each time the tsar must have inwardly shuddered with disgust at the image of one of his beloved sisters married to a man that he increasingly despised as "the Minotaur."

Napoleon had certainly given Alexander ample cause for complaint. At Tilsit and Erfurt the tsar had witnessed the emperor's displays of false charm which at times dissolved into boorish outbursts of rage. Indeed, at times Napoleon had treated him more like a child than a sovereign. Even worse than those personal affronts was the cost of the alliance to Russia. The Continental System was a steadily tightening vice on the Russian economy. Ever more voices from his state council and the court, and powerful merchants and manufacturers beyond called for Russia to break with France and resume trade with Britain. But Alexander and most of his advisors agreed that the time was not yet ripe for that.

So instead Alexander's diplomatic response was essentially the same as the one that Talleyrand had fed him during the congress at Erfurt in October 1808 when Napoleon first casually broached the notion. He explained: "If only I were concerned I would gladly give my consent, but mine is not the only one that must be obtained. My mother has retained an authority over her daughters which it is not for me to contest. I can try to give her some guidance."²⁸ He then "discovered" that his mother

²⁸ Constant, II, 141-42; Instructions for Prince Lebrun, July 9, 1810, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 16620; Napoleon to the Government Commission, July 9, 1810, *Ibid.*, No. 16621;

had already promised his sister to another. There was some truth in that. At least the idea of Catherine marrying Frederick George de Holstein, the heir to the duchy of Oldenburg, had been considered. Now it was consummated with a hasty wedding. As for the tsar's younger sister, Anne, she was then only thirteen and Napoleon would have to be patient for three or four years until she came of age. That was an easy promise to make since he knew that patience in anything, especially diplomacy, was not among the emperor's gifts. Caulaincourt's report reached the Tuileries on January 22, 1810.

A similar informal probe over whether one of Emperor Francis's eligible daughters, most notably Marie Louise, the eldest, would be willing to marry Napoleon was raised with Austrian Ambassador Karl Philip, Prince Schwarzenberg on December 20, 1809. He immediately passed on word to Chancellor Metternich who raised the issue with Francis and his other advisors. The political wisdom of such a marriage would be a recurring and heated issue in the Hofburg palace over the next couple of months. A consensus in favor of the marriage for reasons of state gradually emerged. It would take far longer if ever for Francis to reconcile sacrificing his daughter.

It was not much easier for Napoleon to forge a consensus over the best candidate among his own family and advisors. The issue arose numerous times over the months but it was not until January

28, 1810 that they reached a consensus.²⁹ Napoleon had narrowed his first round picks to three kingdoms--Russia, Prussia, and Saxony. Perhaps from embarrassment he had Foreign Minister Jean Baptiste de Nompere Champagny present those choices and guide the subsequent discussion. The ministers split over which liaison would render France the most political advantages. Cambaceres initiated the debate with an appeal that for strategic reasons it made sense for Napoleon to wait until Anne came of age. Lebrun countered with an argument for a Saxon. Murat and Fouché rallied to Cambaceres. Talleyrand typically thought outside Napoleon's box and called for an Austrian wife.



A gilded snuffbox commemorating the marriage of Napoleon and Marie-Louise

The Emperor's first response to Talleyrand was to snort that a marriage alliance with Russia was strategically far more important than one with Austria, and besides, Anne was much prettier than Marie Louise. He softened when Talleyrand explained just how fertile Habsburg girls were. Suddenly he exclaimed: "That is just the kind of womb I want to marry."³⁰

Napoleon's choice of the envoy who would officially convey his proposal to marry Marie Louise appears rather insensitive. It was Eugene, Josephine's son, who presented the letter to Ambassador Schwarzenberg on February 7. While that formal request upset Francis and Marie Louise, Metternich could not have been more pleased. That marriage could be the first step into restoring a portion of the prestige and power

Napoleon to Lebrun, July 10, 15, 22, 1810, *Ibid.*, Nos. 16622, 16660, 16701; Napoleon to Champagny, July 21, 1810, *Ibid.*, No. 16692.

²⁹ Napoleon to Murat, August 30, 1811, quoted in Thierry Lentz, *Nouvelle Histoire du Premier Empire: L'Effondrement du Systeme Napoleonien, 1810-1814* (Paris, 2004), 46-47.

³⁰ Hubert Cole, *The Betrayers: Joachim and Caroline Murat* (New York, 1972), 150, 159, 166.

Austria had lost over the past dozen years to Napoleon. However, it took no little effort on Metternich's part to talk the girl's father into yielding his "adorable doll," his favorite among his thirteen children, to a man who he loathed as much as Alexander did. Once that mission was accomplished, Metternich then sent word to Paris that Francis was reluctant but not firmly opposed to the match. That letter marked the start of the diplomatic haggling.³¹

Napoleon replied with a hint that he might be willing to swap Illyria for Marie Louise and Galicia. That was a good deal economically for Austria. The Illyrian coast was dotted with prosperous ports which yielded high revenues. Why would the emperor be willing to part with that for the impoverished, remote region of Galicia? The only reason was strategic--invasions of Russia or Austria could be launched from that land. That in turn would boost his power to pressure both realms diplomatically and war against them if need be. Metternich agreed to the trade. Those were the most important deals struck. It then remained to work out all the protocol for the array of ceremonies and celebrations that lay ahead to unite the two royal families. Somewhat ominously they used the procession of Marie Antoinette from Vienna to Paris to guide that passage for her niece.³²

With the terms settled, on February 23 Napoleon wrote Francis a formal letter asking for his daughter's hand in marriage and a separate letter to Marie Louise asking her to marry him. His letter to his future wife is touching; he recognized her doubtlessly mixed feelings and expressed his hope that one day she might genuinely love him. His chief of staff, Marshal Louis Alexandre Berthier, handed the respective proposals to the father and daughter at the Hofburg palace on March 8.

Although the decision had already been made, Marie Louise and Francis gave their formal consent.³³

A proxy wedding was held on March 11. Originally Berthier was to stand in for Napoleon. But from sensitivity to his bride, respect for the valiant and skilled general he had bested the previous year, and as a conciliatory gesture to Austria's court and people, the emperor allowed Archduke Charles to fill in for him. The bride's father expressed his feelings about losing Marie Louise to "the minotaur" through his choice of the opera performed that night as part of the marriage celebrations; "Iphigenia in Aulis" is the story of King Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter so that the gods would let him and his armada sail on to Troy, which the Greeks finally conquer only after a grueling decade of war. Not much escaped Napoleon, but the irony of that choice evidently did. That same opera would be performed at St. Cloud following the civil marriage ceremony two and a half weeks later.³⁴

The following day Marie Louis and Francis set off with a caravan of carriages toward Paris. Caroline Bonaparte and a French caravan met them at Branau on the frontier between Austria and Bavaria on March 16. The transition for Marie Louise was abrupt. Caroline rather brusquely took charge of her, helped her change into French-style clothing, and began instructing her on how to please her husband and his court. To ensure that spies did not infiltrate the Tuileries, Napoleon insisted that none of her ladies in waiting or even her governess would accompany her to Paris. Francis and his entourage mournfully bid his daughter farewell at the frontier and turned back toward Vienna. Metternich would lead an Austrian delegation on to Paris.

³¹ Schom, 571-75.

³² Napoleon to Joseph, January 10, 1809, Leon Lecestre, ed., *Lettres Inedites de Napoleon I* (Paris, 1897), I, 266; Joseph to Napoleon, February 19, 1809, Albert du Casse, ed., *Memoires et Correspondance Politique et Militaire du Roi Joseph*, (Paris, 1954-55), V, 60.

³³ Notes on a letter to Pope, January [n.d.], 1810, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, 16194; Explanation to Senate for Annexation of Rome, February 17, 1810, *Ibid.*, No. 16263; Senate-Consul Ratification of Annexation of Rome, *Ibid.*, No. 16264; Napoleon to religious affairs committee, March 16, 1811, *Ibid.*, No. 17478.

³⁴ Constant, II, 207, 577-78.

Napoleon fervently hoped that his bride would genuinely love him as a man. He was all too aware of the age gap between them--he was forty-one and she was eighteen. Despite the splendor of his court, he had retained his simple tastes in clothing. Yet to please his young wife, he was willing to sacrifice that comfort. He brought in haberdashers who advised him on the latest clothing styles; he then ordered an entire new wardrobe. Although he disliked dancing he got Hortense to give him lessons. Each day after their proxy marriage Napoleon wrote Marie Louise a love letter and sent a courier galloping off to hand deliver it.³⁵

Indeed Napoleon was so excited at the thought of his pretty new bride that he refused to impatiently await her in Paris for the official ceremony. Instead he met her near the chateau of Compiègne and whisked her off to the imperial bedchamber. He could not have been happier. To Francis he later wrote a thank you note in which he gushed that "she fulfills all my hopes. For two days we have not stopped exchanging proofs of the tenderest feelings which unite us. We suit each other perfectly."³⁶ Although Francis was undoubtedly relieved that his daughter appeared to be happy, Napoleon offered details that would have made most fathers squirm.

Napoleon and his probably blushing bride performed a civil wedding at St. Cloud on April 1 and a religious wedding presided over by Cardinal Fesch in the Louvre's Salon Carré the next day. Later that month they enjoyed a prolonged honeymoon tour of Brussels, Antwerp, and other recently acquired departments of France in the Low Countries. Napoleon was thrilled with his new wife. Metternich reported that the emperor "is so much in love with her that he cannot hide the fact even when in public," and that Marie Louise said that she was "not in the least afraid of the

Emperor but I begin to think that he is afraid of me."³⁷

The most important event, indeed the point of the marriage was yet to come. On March 20, 1811, the emperor's hopes were fulfilled when a healthy son was born. It was not, however, an easy delivery for Marie Louise. At one point when her life appeared to be in danger Napoleon gave permission to the doctor to sacrifice his child to save his wife. Fortunately that proved to be unnecessary but was a sign of how deeply he loved Marie Louise. The son was named Napoleon François Joseph Charles and received the title the King of Rome.³⁸

In the end, virtually all of the loved ones that benefited from Napoleon's "family values" either failed to live up to his expectations or outright betrayed him. The most notorious were Caroline and Murat, who switched sides not long after his disaster at Leipzig. When they did so Napoleon was no longer capable of retaliating against them. He certainly did not hesitate to dethrone Louis after he repeatedly defied imperial orders to subject Holland to French interests. Most wounding of all was Marie Louise who, after his exile to Elba, lived openly with her lover, Albrecht Adam von Neipperg; he would never hear again from her or their son. Both of the other brothers that he placed on thrones disappointed him. Joseph was a capable king for Naples but was bumbling on the throne of Spain. With his arrogance and extravagance, Jerome ended up alienating Westphalia's elite and masses alike. In the end, only one among the family members he entrusted with power was consistently competent and loyal. Eugene proved to be a first-rate general and administrator. Like so much else in Napoleon's dazzling years as emperor, his wielding of his family as both an end and means of power was grandiose and ultimately self-defeating.

³⁵ Napoleon to Savary, May 21, 1812, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier*, No. 18710.

³⁶ Napoleon to Champagny, May 16, 19, 1810, *Ibid.*, Nos. 16476, 16488.

³⁷ Napoleon to Charles XIII, September 6, 1810, *Ibid.*, No. 16875.

³⁸ Napoleon to Bernadotte, September 10, 1810, Lecestre, *Lettres Inédites de Napoleon I*, 2:66; Napoleon to Champagny, September 7, December 22, 1810, *Ibid.*, Nos. 16876, 17229.