Napoleon and Josephine

An interesting couple if ever there was one… Bonaparte then is not the portly man we have come to associate with traditional Napoleonic imagery. He has not yet crowned himself Emperor of the French, but he has seized power a year earlier in a bloodless coup.

In 1800 Bonaparte is only 31. His valet describes him as thin to the point of emaciation, with a sallow complexion, deep set blue eyes, a high forehead, and already thinning hair. He is of average height for the late 18th century (5 feet six and a half inches in English measurements.)

Josephine is 37, six years older than her husband, and the Bonaparte siblings, who hate her, call her la vieille (“the hag.”) In fact she looks rather younger than her age, a gracious, elegant brunette.

What about the state of things between them? Sadly, the romance is gone. Oh, Napoléon was utterly smitten in the beginning of their marriage, but within a few months of the wedding, while he was waging war in Italy, she dashed his illusions by taking a lover. He retaliated in kind, and a string of mistresses ensued.

Now she is the one who is jealous. There are a few other clouds on the horizon: Bonaparte would like a son and heir, but a middle-aged Joséphine shows no signs of fertility. Yet Bonaparte’s immediate concerns are to consolidate his grip on power, not -quite yet- to establish a dynasty.

There is also the small matter that Joséphine receives enormous sums, 1,000 francs a day, from Fouché, the redoubtable Minister of Police, to spy on her husband. If Bonaparte knew about this, he would not take kindly to this new kind of betrayal, but the important thing is that he doesn’t know.

The truth of the matter is that Joséphine is a compulsive spender, far more so than Marie-Antoinette ever was, and that she is always in debt in spite of the generous stipend she receives as the wife of the First Consul. Bonaparte cannot comprehend where all that money goes, and she dreads asking for still more to pacify her creditors. This too creates great stress in their marriage.

But what matters in 1800 is that Napoléon and Joséphine are political allies. He knows he owes his rise in the army and national politics to her and her connections. Without those, it is unlikely that his coup would have succeeded. Napoléon and Joséphine planned it together, they would have shared the consequences of any failures, and now they bask together in the glow of success. He may no longer be madly in love, but he values his wife as his closest associate, and also, because he is very superstitious, his lucky star. Maybe, in his mind, she is the one who allowed him to escape the bomb detonated on their path on Christmas Eve 1800.

The story of Napoleon Bonaparte and Josephine de Beauharnais has got to be one of the most passionate and stormy love affairs in history.

Josephine's husband had been executed at the guillotine during the Terror in Paris in 1794. As a widow however, she did not remain idle for long and became mistress to several prominent politicians of the time. In 1795 she started a relationship with Napoleon, who was 6 years younger than her and married him in March of the following year after an intense an all-consuming love affair. In 1810, after years of failing to produce an heir for him they both agreed to divorce.

The intensity of their relationship comes across very strongly in Napoleon's letters to her, an example of which is the below:

"Dec. 29, 1795

I awake all filled with you. Your image and the intoxicating pleasures of last night, allow my senses no rest.

Sweet and matchless Josephine, how strangely you work upon my heart.

Are you angry with me? Are you unhappy? Are you upset?

My soul is broken with grief and my love for you forbids repose. But how can I rest any more, when I yield to the feeling that masters my inmost self, when I quaff from your lips and from your heart a scorching flame?

Yes! One night has taught me how far your portrait falls short of yourself!

You start at midday: in three hours I shall see you again.

Till then, a thousand kisses, mio dolce amor! but give me none back for they set my blood on fire. "