

JOSEPHINE DE BEAUHARNAIS

The Woman Napoleon Could Not Conquer.

COMPANION STUDY GUIDE | KEY FACTS - TIMELINE - QUESTIONS - SOURCES



From Rose to Empress: revolution, imprisonment, marriage, empire and the dynastic sacrifice that ended Napoleon's marriage to the woman he had crowned.

Who was Josephine?

Marie-Joséphine-Rose Tascher de La Pagerie (1763-1814), later known as Josephine de Beauharnais, was born in Martinique. She married Alexandre de Beauharnais, survived the Terror after his execution, and later married Napoleon Bonaparte in 1796. As Napoleon rose from general to First Consul and Emperor, Josephine became a central social figure of the regime and was crowned Empress in 1804.

Why she matters

Josephine's life crosses the colonial world, the French Revolution, the Directory, the Consulate and the First Empire. Her story also shows how reputation hardens into legend: later accounts amplified stories about lovers, extravagance, prophecy and political influence. The evidence is richer - and more complicated - than either saint or schemer.

Questions from the Hall

- How did imprisonment during the Terror change Rose de Beauharnais's choices and survival instincts?
- Why did Napoleon find her so compelling, and what did she bring to his political and social rise?
- How much of Josephine's reputation for infidelity is supported by evidence, and how much grew through gossip and hostile memoir?
- Did Malmaison make Josephine merely a fashionable collector, or also a serious patron of art, botany and scientific exchange?
- Why did dynastic politics finally outweigh personal attachment in 1809?
- What does Josephine's later royal family network reveal about legacy after Napoleon's empire collapsed?

A SHORT ROUTE THROUGH THE STORY

Date	Event
1763	Born at Les Trois-Ilets, Martinique, into the Tascher de La Pagerie planter family.
1779	Travels to France and marries Alexandre de Beauharnais.
1781 / 1783	Children Eugene and Hortense are born.
1785	Formal separation from Alexandre after a troubled marriage.
1794	Alexandre is executed during the Terror; Rose is imprisoned at Carmes and later released after Robespierre's fall.
1796	Marries Napoleon Bonaparte on 9 March; he leaves almost immediately for the Italian campaign.
1799	Napoleon becomes First Consul after the coup of 18 Brumaire; Josephine moves into the centre of the new regime.
1804	Napoleon crowns Josephine Empress of the French.
1809	Napoleon tells Josephine the marriage must end because the dynasty lacks a direct heir; the civil marriage is formally dissolved in December.
1810-1814	Josephine lives principally at Malmaison, maintains her collections and correspondence, and remains a figure of European interest.
1814	Dies at Malmaison on 29 May, shortly after Napoleon's first abdication.

Evidence to test

- Numerous lovers: the relationship with Hippolyte Charles is well supported; later lists often expand far beyond secure evidence.
- The fortune-teller prophecy: a memorable story, but its details grew clearer in later retellings and should not be treated as established fact.
- Slavery and colonial policy: Josephine was born into a slave-owning planter society. The claim that she personally caused Napoleon's 1802 colonial policy is not established by the surviving evidence and should be separated from the documented colonial system in which her family participated.
- The 'discarded wife': the marriage ended for dynastic reasons, but Napoleon preserved her title and continued contact after the separation.

Principal research anchors

- Musee national des chateaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Preau - biography, Malmaison collections, Josephine and slavery.
- Fondation Napoleon / napoleon.org - biographies, marriage and 1809 dissolution records, correspondence and First Empire chronology.
- Surviving letters between Napoleon and Josephine - essential primary evidence, but uneven because the correspondence survives incompletely.
- Civil and family records surrounding the 1796 marriage and the 1809 dissolution.
- Modern scholarship on the Revolution, the Directory, the Consulate, the First Empire, colonial Martinique and the culture of Malmaison.

How to use this guide

Use the timeline for quick revision, the Hall questions for classroom discussion or essay planning, and the evidence notes to separate documented events from later legend. Useful search terms include Josephine de Beauharnais, Rose Tascher de La Pagerie, Martinique, French Revolution, Carmes Prison, Alexandre de Beauharnais, Hippolyte Charles, Malmaison, coronation 1804, Napoleon divorce 1809, Empress Josephine and historical evidence.

Vicarii Productions approach: We do not put historical figures on trial. We bring surviving evidence back into the room, distinguish documented fact from later legend where possible, and ask the questions fame has pushed aside.