



Marie Antoinette and the Downfall of Royalty

Imbert de Saint-Amand

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Throughout history, a countless number of historical figures have had their lives overshadowed by the myths and legends that surround them to the extent that their legacy comes to define them. In French history, this is truer of Marie Antoinette than just about everyone else. Nearly 220 years after she was put to the guillotine, Marie Antoinette is more famous than ever, fairly or unfairly coming to epitomize royalty and everything that was wrong with it. As the youngest daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor, 14 year old Marie's marriage to the eventual Louis XVI made her Dauphine, and it initially seemed like a good fit. The charming and beautiful young girl pleased the French, but she had the misfortune of being queen at a time when the French were beginning to sour on their royalty and aristocratic classes. On top of that, France's participation in the American Revolution had left the nation broke, which only angered those who watched the King and Queen spend millions of livres for their own comfort at the expense of the state. Though Marie Antoinette was hardly the only French royal who liked to live lavishly, the French were particularly scornful of her, possibly due to her Austrian ancestry. As France slid toward its own Revolution, rumors and innuendo against the queen took hold, and she was accused of being promiscuous and even defrauding a jeweler in what became known as the "Diamond Necklace Affair". Though the rumors had no basis in truth, they were widely accepted and eventually used as partial justification for her execution. By 1792, with the Revolution in full swing, the Royal Family's attempt to escape Paris was thwarted, and in January 1793, Louis XVI lost his head at the hands of the Jacobins. With her own health failing, the Queen herself was tried the following October, accused of sexually abusing the sickly Dauphin. Given that she had spent the last few years of her life carefully doting on her children at the expense of almost everything else, it was a particularly heinous accusation. On October 16, 1793, Antoinette herself was executed at the guillotine. Since her death, Marie Antoinette has been the subject of sharp historical debate over whether she was actually a catalyst in the French Revolution or simply an insignificant scapegoat who was unfairly made a target. At the same time, the one thing everybody associates with Antoinette is the phrase "Let them eat cake", a spoiled and ignorant comment supposedly made in response to being informed that the peasants had no bread. While that phrase has been used far and wide to depict someone as being out of touch, there's no indication Antoinette ever said anything like it. Nevertheless, she remains a pop culture fixture across the West, perceived just as negatively in death as she was in life.

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