



HISTORY STORIES

How Marie Antoinette's Legacy Was Sullied By Vicious Songs About Her Death

The execution ballads about the last queen of France spread myths about her that most people still believe.

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Few women in history have inspired as many myths as [Marie-Antoinette](#), the last queen of France, typically portrayed as the embodiment of excess and debauchery. Many of those myths are based on the [vicious and often pornographic](#) Revolutionary propaganda that poured from French printing presses in the last days of the 18th century. The effect of this propaganda has meant that for centuries she was falsely blamed for the downfall of the monarchy.

Antoinette's supposed crimes against both France and nature itself often took the form of [songs](#), and her [beheading](#) on October 16, 1793 inspired a slew of execution ballads, known in French as *complaintes*. [Execution ballads](#) were a popular genre of news song throughout early modern Europe, cheaply printed songs set to a familiar tune. They all recounted the crimes of the condemned, with some in the [first-person voice of the criminal](#), singing of their remorse at their evil actions, and their fear of execution.

Often execution ballads showed compassion for the criminal who was presented as repentant, but for the despised queen these ballads reveled in delight at her beheading for high treason. Ballads were sold on busy streets, marketplaces and bridges by [ballad sellers](#), and then re-performed in taverns, cafés, theaters and at home by all classes of society. Thus, all could participate in the communal tarnishing of her reputation.

The songs are often brutal in their attacks on her: she is 'Antoinette the tigress', 'the monster escaped from Germany', 'cursed creature', 'the scourge of the French', 'cruel', 'detestable' and 'hussy'. They

attack her gross pride and her unnatural ambition: 'I, who believed myself divine', she sings in [The Pride of Marie-Antoinette](#). In another, [The Complainte of Marie Antoinette widow of L\[ouis\] Capet](#), she admits 'From my most tender childhood/My hard and perverse heart/ Burned with impatience / To destroy the universe'.

But this naked ambition is what proves her downfall: 'my pride / Drives me to my coffin' she bemoans in [The Death of Marie-Antoinette](#). And her *Complainte* ends with the claim that 'her arrogant soul / Burns in Hell'. This ambition led directly, in the minds of her opponents, to thoughts of treason. That there was no evidence for any treasonous activity on her part made no difference to her bloodthirsty critics.

Marie-Antoinette, like most French queens, was a foreign-born princess, from the illustrious Austrian Habsburg dynasty. As was expected of princesses who had been married off to secure foreign alliances, she was in regular contact with her family, especially her mother, Empress Maria-Theresa. However, at the time, the Habsburgs were seen as enemies of France. Marie-Antoinette was therefore regularly accused of plotting with Austria against France.

Although she was only performing her royal duties, she was accused of having ulterior motives. In one song, she sings: 'I had great hope / That the kings, my relatives / Would re-establish in France / The power of the nobility'. She tried to accomplish this, claimed the revolutionaries, by holding secret meetings at court and paying agents to betray military plans to the Austrians.

[The Crimes of Marie-Antoinette](#), one of the most ferocious ballads, claimed:

*It's there also that you preside
And, to serve your plots,
Appoint perfidious ministers,
Agents of your secret deals.
To conspiring kings and brigands
Our plans are sent by you*

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She wasn't simply supplying the Austrians with military plans, claimed her critics; she was also siphoning millions of *livres* of treasury money to Austria: 'For [a brother that you protect](#) / You despoil the French empire.' In her *Complainte* the queen is depicted as pitiless: 'I drain your finances,/ And I laugh at your pains: / By my foolish expenditure / France is a tomb.'

She managed to get away with this corrupt abuse, they claimed, by [hoodwinking Louis XVI](#), the husband she married at just 14. The king is portrayed throughout the songs as 'stupid and badly-advised'. It was his wife who 'charmed' him, 'Abusing a too-enamoured heart' and 'Profiting from his weakness/ Made his credulous love/ Serve the conspiracies that unceasingly machinated/ From your black spirit and court'. Even after executing the king for treason, Revolutionaries still managed to blame his wife for all the ills of the kingdom.

Marie-Antoinette was nothing short of pure evil, they claimed. She was a 'woman in fury', a murderous plotter who dreamed of ['Swimming in the blood of the French'](#). 'We should all, by your works,/ Perish one after the other, our throats slit', shrieks one song. Another asks 'How many innocent victims have you made perish?'. Evidence of her bloodlust came in her alleged orchestration of the massacre of the [Insurrection of 10 August 1792](#), when two thirds of the Swiss Guards defending the royal palace were slaughtered by revolutionary forces. Multiple songs claim that Marie-Antoinette deliberately plotted their deaths: 'I must in conscience / Say that on 10 August / I connived with my late husband / We were able to win over/ the Swiss with finesse'.

However, it is probably the debauchery and sexual deviance that she was accused of that was the most damaging. She was alleged to have orchestrated orgies in Versailles, engaged in lesbian sex with her ladies-in-waiting, and—according to one song—conducted adulterous affairs with 'Gardes-du-Corps', soldiers of lower rank: 'I see her encourage them/In her eyes, to profane our tricolor cap'. In one ballad, the queen bids 'Farewell to all my lovers', and seeks especially for the [Marquis de Lafayette](#), who notably had tried to protect her in October 1789 and later appeared with her on the royal balcony. This is interpreted in the songs as a sexual relationship; she sings 'O that you would come dear La Fayette / To console me in my pain'.

The most shocking accusation of sexual deviance leveled at her, and one that she simply refused to answer when on trial, was that she'd committed incest with her son, [Louis Charles](#), then eight years old:

Horror never leaves your side,
And, prodigious with your charms,
You are the guilty mother of your children,
Having no longer any restraint.

With such a vast array of accusations against her, not one of which was supported by any concrete evidence, the trial by the Revolutionary Tribunal was a formality, conceived merely as a step towards completing the Revolution: Marie-Antoinette was declared guilty on 16 October and [executed](#) only hours later at the age of 37. 'Madame Guillotine', she sings in one ballad, 'is my lady-in-waiting'.

But the venomous polemic against her was simply the culmination of a long history of misogyny that attacked powerful women. Like previous French queens such as the much-maligned [Catherine de](#)

[Medici](#), [Fredegund](#) and [Isabeau of Bavaria](#), who were also falsely accused of murderous ambition, sexual deviance and treasonous disloyalty, Marie-Antoinette was the last in a long line of unfortunate foreign princesses who married into the French crown. She never stood a chance.

During the earlier part of her reign, when she enjoyed the popularity of the masses, Marie-Antoinette was associated with sweet pastoral songs about shepherdesses, like the 1780 '[il pleut, il pleut, bergère](#)'. The virulence of the songs rejoicing at her brutal execution remind us how quickly her reputation had fallen in just a few years. Those songs would help to influence her posthumous reputation for centuries, resulting in the caricature of excess that has become her cruelly undeserved legacy. There is [no evidence](#) that she ever said, "Let them eat cake," but it is the line that defines her reign today.

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