

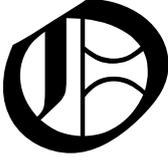


*How to Ruin a Queen: Marie
Antoinette, The Stolen Diamonds
and the Scandal That Shook the
French Throne*

Jonathan Beckman
(London: John Murray, 2014).

Review by: Stephanie Russo

How to Ruin a Queen: Marie Antoinette, The Stolen Diamonds and the Scandal That Shook the French Throne. By Jonathan Beckman. London, John Murray, 2014. ISBN 978-1-848-54998-2. xxii + 386 pp. £20.

n the evening of 12 August 1784, Louis, Cardinal de Rohan, the prince-bishop of Strasbourg and grand almoner of France, met a woman he believed to be Marie Antoinette at the Bosquet de Venus in the gardens of Versailles. The meeting had been orchestrated by Jeanne de la Motte, the self-styled Comtesse de la Motte-Valois. The woman Rohan believed to be Marie Antoinette later wrote to him asking for his help in negotiating the purchase of a 647 diamond, 2800 carat necklace that was so grotesquely over-the-top that the wearer had to be weighted down at the back in order to avoid toppling forward. To his dismay, Rohan later discovered that the woman he believed to have been Marie Antoinette was a prostitute, and that he had become ensnared in a plot orchestrated by Jeanne, her husband Nicholas, and a friend of the family, Rétaux de Villette.

The Diamond Necklace Affair is frequently evoked in accounts of the French Revolution, but is seldom given the spotlight it deserves. Beckman's account brings to life the details of this stranger-than-fiction tale as a way of explaining how this event formed part of a chain of circumstances that led to the demise of the French queen. While evidently aimed at a general audience, *How to Ruin a Queen* is meticulously researched and extremely detailed. Indeed, the level of detail threatens to overwhelm the reader at times, such is Beckman's meticulous exploration of events and personalities. The publishers seem to have recognized this, though, including a very useful list of 'dramatis personae' at the beginning of the book, which I found the need to consult constantly.

Beckman is at his best when analyzing the strange behaviour of the principal participants in the Diamond Necklace Affair. Why would Rohan believe that Marie Antoinette, a woman who had long obviously disliked him, would start writing secret letters to him? How could Jeanne and Nicholas de la Motte think they could get away with such a transparently flawed scheme? Beckman traces Rohan's naivety and gullibility to his position within the powerful and influential Rohan family, second only to the Bourbons. Rohan evidently believed that he deserved royal favour, but was lazy and boastful. As Beckman outlines, Rohan's behaviour while serving as ambassador in Vienna earned Marie Antoinette's enmity, and his attempts to ingratiate himself with the French Queen led to his eager acceptance of the de la Motte forgeries. Beckman's analysis of Jeanne de la Motte is perhaps even more convincing. Beckman outlines how Jeanne's position as descendant of an illegitimate branch of the Valois dynasty impacted upon her perception of herself as Marie Antoinette's equal, despite the impoverished nature of her upbringing.

The self-dramatizing, histrionic Jeanne is the book's most colourful character, and emerges as a strangely sympathetic character, such is her ability to adapt to changing circumstances and think on her feet.

Of course, the most interesting question that the Diamond Necklace Affair raises is how and why the scandal had such a detrimental impact upon the reputation of Marie Antoinette, given that she was wholly innocent of any involvement in the purchase of the necklace. Even at her trial, she was asked about her alleged complicity in the scandal, as well as her relationship with Jeanne. The key here, Beckman suggests, was image management, as he argues that "the Diamond Necklace Affair brought to the surface a realization which had been brewing for some time – the royal family no longer governed their own image" (240). Widespread public support for Rohan, as well as perceptions that Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette had acted tyrannically in their treatment of him, meant that the Queen's innocence counted for little to an increasingly hostile French populace. As Beckman points out, too, the mere fact that the Queen could be imitated by a prostitute, or that her signature could be replicated by a skilled forger, rather took the gloss off the sanctity of the bodies of the royal family: "the Bourbons were no longer the uniquely glorious individuals prescribed by royal ideology" (307).

Beckman also outlines how Jeanne's escape from prison, widely rumored to have been orchestrated by the Queen's circle, strengthened perceptions that Marie Antoinette was trying to silence a potential exposé of her complicity in events. Jeanne's memoirs, published in 1789 and smuggled into France, were explosive in their implications about the nature of Marie Antoinette and Jeanne's relationship. Beckman points out that "there is a sexual shimmer to Jeanne's ambivalent language" (276), which seems to be an obvious attempt by Jeanne to tap into speculation that the Queen had engaged in a sexual relationship with Madame de Polignac, among others. While it is hard to determine whether these claims were taken seriously, such allegations, levelled at a deeply unpopular Queen, evidently did not help Marie Antoinette with her image problem. Further, as Beckman says, astutely, "the necklace is not simply a McGuffin: it embodies all that is dysfunctional at Court" (278). The Diamond Necklace Affair crystallized what the French had already begun to believe about their monarchs.

Image-making—or perhaps more accurately, self-fashioning—is central to *How to Ruin a Queen*. Beckman ably demonstrates how every character in the affair attempted to shape their own image, from Jeanne's attempts to position herself as quasi-royal, to the bizarre mysticism of the adventurer and fraudster, Count di Cagliostro. The inset narrative of Cagliostro's various schemes, including quasi-séances with obedient children and Egyptian rites designed to capitalize on "his quicksilver talents as a thespian and huckster" (115), is one of the most entertaining and deeply strange parts of the

book. An obsession with the creation and maintenance of one's public image ties all the main players in the Diamond Necklace Affair together. Beckman cannily draws out how image, rather than truth, shaped both the event itself, and its implications for everyone even tangentially involved in the scandal. He is especially good at exposing Jeanne's ongoing attempts to try to shape her public image, as well as her ambiguous role in the Revolution, as somebody both potentially useful to the republicans, yet fiercely royalist in her beliefs.

How to Ruin a Queen reads as a piece of true crime writing, with a long account of the trial of Rohan and Jeanne operating as the central set-piece of the book. One of the most appealing aspects of the book is Beckman's accounts of the afterlives of his main characters: rather than simply ending his account at the end of the trial, Beckman shows us "what happens next", which, given that the Revolution happened so soon afterwards, is actually the most interesting part of the story. Beckman's lively, authoritative account of the Diamond Necklace Affair will broadly appeal to anyone interested in the French Revolution, Marie Antoinette, the French royal family, or historical scandals generally. *How to Ruin a Queen* is also a valuable and timely contribution to our understanding of the impact of the Diamond Necklace Affair on the demise of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

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