

Comtesse du Barry

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(1743-1793)

Comtesse du (countess of) Barry, (Marie-) Jeanne B+rcu, last of the mistresses of the French king Louis XV (reigned 1715-74). Although she exercised little political influence at the French court, her unpopularity contributed to the decline of the prestige of the crown in the early 1770s.

She was born Marie-Jeanne B+rcu, the illegitimate daughter of lower-class parents. After a convent education, she was a shop assistant, under the name Jeanne Vaubernier, in a fashion house in Paris. While there she became the mistress of Jean du Barry, a Gascon nobleman who had made a fortune as a war contractor. He introduced her into Parisian high society, and her beauty captivated a succession of nobly born lovers before she attracted Louis XV's attention in 1768. She could not qualify as official royal mistress (ma+«tresse en titre), a position vacant since the death of Madame de Pompadour in 1764, unless she was married to a noble. Hence, du Barry arranged a nominal marriage between Jeanne and his brother, Guillaume du Barry; in April 1769 she joined Louis XV's court.

The comtesse immediately joined the faction that brought about the downfall of Louis XV's powerful minister of foreign affairs, the Duke de Choiseul, in December 1770; and she then supported the drastic judicial reforms instituted by her friend the chancellor Ren+«Nicolas de Maupeou, in 1771. She spent much of her time on the estates that Louis had given her near Louveciennes, where she earned a reputation as a generous patron of the arts. On the death of Louis XV (May 1774) and the accession of Louis XVI, Madame du Barry was banished to a nunnery; from 1776 until the outbreak of the Revolution she lived on her estates with the Duke de Brissac. In 1792 she made several trips to London, probably to give financial aid to French +«migr+«s. Condemned as a counter-revolutionary by the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris in December 1793, she was guillotined.

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Last update: **2014/03/20 21:41**

