

The Riddle of Louis XVI

Summary

Although a staunch royalist, the duchess, like many nobles, feared that the king might be tempted to enter an alliance with influential members of the Third Estate against the nobility and clergy. He could do this in a bid to break out of the political and financial straitjacket which some contemporaries argued those two 'privileged Orders' had stitched the monarchy into over the course of the eighteenth-century. In this extract the duchess struggles to decipher the king's true beliefs and future intentions, made more complicated by rumours about the influence Jacques Necker, a controversial banker-turned finance minister, held over him.

Date and place of writing

15 April 1790, Moreuil

Themes

- National Politics
- Monarchy
- Nobility

Letter

Moreuil. 15 April 1790

Our greatest misfortune is that His Majesty does not seem able to act well or trust in his brave and loyal subjects. To judge by his conduct in his prison, one would think he fancied himself a member of the Third, and that he is happy to see the clergy and nobility brought to ruin on the grounds that his own income will much increase as a result. However, those who see the king from morning to night say that he often weeps, makes complaints about his wretchedness and is visibly losing weight. Then compare such talk with the visits he makes to the National Assembly from time to time and the speeches he pronounces there in the unique style of Monsieur Necker. These speeches have him voluntarily commit to renouncing his royal status in order to remain a mere sub-delegate of the nation, for the apparent good of the people. They also have him exhorting the two Orders who have been stripped bare already to sacrifice themselves in the same way.¹ I therefore confess, Madame, that I really do not know how to reconcile what people are saying [about the king] with what is actually happening. And so let us honour Louis XVI simply by pitying him, while also allowing ourselves to shed the tears which this situation merits.

Notes

1. The duchess is here referring to the First Estate (clergy) and Second Estate (nobility).

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, p. 35).

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