SHE may never have said the words that got her in Bartlett's -- "Let them eat cake" -- but she might as well have. Nevertheless, the image of Marie Antoinette -- dauphine, villain, tea-party thrower in shepherdess garb -- is in the midst of an extreme rehab.

What with Sofia Coppola's movie, two sympathetic books ("Queen of Fashion," a biography by Caroline Weber, and "Abundance," a work of historical fiction by Sena Jeter Naslund); and a PBS documentary, we're having a Marie Antoinette moment. And she doesn't even have a publicist.

The question, then, might be less a matter of what to make of Marie Antoinette, than of why the makeover, and why now? Of all the victimizers in history, why are we suddenly flooded with these new narratives that show us Marie Antoinette -- vain, selfish, solipsistic and venal -- as a victim?

The simplest answer may be that most Americans don't have even the flimsiest grasp of who she was.

"Never underestimate our historical illiteracy," says the historian Ron Chernow, whose biography of Alexander Hamilton explored the Founding Fathers' disagreements over the excesses of the French Revolution. "Unburdened by an existing context through which to view her life, it becomes much easier to see her simply as a captive of the monarchy and a captive of her own celebrity."
Even in the packaging, the current depictions paint Marie Antoinette -- the most significant target of a most significant populist revolt -- as herself a revolutionary.

"Her required wardrobe included 12-foot wide hoopskirts," reads the jacket copy of Ms. Weber's book. "But when she became queen, Marie Antoinette rebelled, seeking to establish her own royal style as a way to seduce the public (and distract attention from her failure to conceive)."

The cover flap of "Abundance" describes her as "a heroine of inspiring stature, one whose nobility arises not from the circumstance of her birth but from her courageous spirit." And the lettering on the advertisements for Ms. Coppola's movie -- on crudely cut hot-pink banners -- recall the cover of the Sex Pistols' album "Never Mind the Bollocks." (God save the Queen, anyone?)

Americans' relationship to rebellion, in any case, is more complicated than you might think. "It was thought of as an attractive concept through much of the 20th century," Mr. Chernow says. "But at the moment, we're living in the aftermath of many failed revolutions -- Communism and Fascism come to mind -- and with the conspicuous exception of the jihadists, people are more attuned to the excesses of revolution."

Robert H. Frank, the Cornell economist whose books include "Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess," says that although the gap between the rich and the rest of us has only widened over the last 35 or 40 years, "Americans aren't known for great class resentment toward the wealthy.

"It's not that the extra spending of the rich hasn't caused problems for the middle class -- it has, particularly in the housing market," Professor Frank says.

But to be angry about that, Professor Frank says, is too complicated. "People in the U.S. don't look at what the people at the top have and say, 'That's making life more difficult for me.' They watch and say, 'That'll be me someday. So, I'd better vote
to abolish the estate tax, because you never know what the future may bring.'"

In other words, there are many Americans who see themselves - accurately or not -- in Marie Antoinette (just as there are people who spend their Sundays at open houses for $10 million dollar co-ops on Fifth Avenue, even though they're raising a family in a cramped two-bedroom where the oven doubles as a china closet).

On another level -- one of personal experience, rather than socioeconomic station -- we're an entire nation of Marie Antoinettes.

"I meet these people all the time: binge consumers, intentionally oblivious young people who see amassing a great shoe collection as their purpose in life," says Richard Florida, the author of the books "The Rise of the Creative Class" and "The Flight of the Creative Class."

"As our whole society is fundamentally challenged -- war, terrorism, globalism -- there is a large segment whose measured response has been self-expression through shopping and partying," he says. "They're constructing their own fantasy world, a bubble to seal themselves off from the trauma of our times."

Even in France, the revisionism has taken hold. It was only last May that Antonia Fraser's 2001 biography, "Mary Antoinette: The Journey" (on which Ms. Coppola's film is based), was finally translated into French and published by a French house.

"And when it finally happened, they refused to put the subtitle," Ms. Fraser says. "I was interested in the journey, her development. The French seemed not to want to acknowledge that."

On the other hand, and despite the fact that the movie was booed when it made its debut at Cannes, the American novelist Diane Johnson says over the phone from Paris, where she is
currently residing, that the French also have their "Marie Antoinette mania."

She cites "My Name Was Marie Antoinette," a play in Paris, at the end of which audience members were asked to vote on the Queen's ultimate fate. "The audience generally votes to let her live," she says. Today, she says, "in the stores, you see a lot fashion that's been very much influenced by her new popularity."

This has taken the form of taffeta gowns by Alexander McQueen, new shoes by Manolo Blahnik and dresses by John Galliano for Dior Couture.

"I guess you could call that tie-in merchandise," Ms. Johnson says. "If it were a Disney film, of course, they'd have made plastic figures."

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