

La Belle et la Bête: The Palace of Versailles, Self-Fashioning, and the Coming of the French Revolution

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Abstract

While the mass consumption of luxury items is oftentimes described as a factor leading the Third Estate to take action against the First and Second Estates in the buildup to the French Revolution, that spending is presented as little more than salt in the open wounds of a starving and ever-growing population that had been growing evermore destitute since the beginnings of the early modern era. However, the causes and contexts of the conspicuous consumption as practiced by the aristocracy reveal how they directly correlate to the social tensions that persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until they erupted in the 1790s. The isolation and the dictation of taste and style that Louis XIV commanded through Versailles and State-run luxury workshops became commonplace within a generation after the Fronde in which the nobles had engaged during the previous century. Versailles allowed the new generation of the aristocracy to be placated with petty privileges that developed out of the rigorous court etiquette, and their conspicuous consumption only increased as the need to compete with others at Court and those newly ennobled continued. This study examines a materialistic culture alongside its material culture, focusing on explaining the expenditures of the aristocracy without becoming enamored by the spectacle of wealth itself. The goods and services that the French aristocracy indulged in purchasing were not simply marks of luxury; they represented social ideals about order and privilege. Versailles allowed Louis XIV and his heirs to control their nobles while simultaneously reflecting the order and the stability of the State in the architecture and gardens.

When Monsieur Léonard, hairdresser to Queen Marie Antoinette, stumbled into the tattered remains of his patron's apartments at the palace of Versailles on October 6th, 1789, the mob that had stormed the palace earlier had long since left, leaving shattered glass, ripped tapestries, and broken panels in their wake. The National Guard had already escorted the royal family away from Versailles and into Paris, amidst the cries of a raucous crowd who carried the heads of Versailles bodyguards upon pikes. Those remaining people under the King's and Queen's employ, who both survived the ordeal and remained at the palace, found themselves dealing with the aftermath.

After taking account of the damage in the rooms where he had styled many of the Queen's more elaborate *coiffures* (often satirized by propagandists), Monsieur Léonard found a pair of Marie Antoinette's shoes unscathed.¹ Over two centuries later, Paris Druout, one of the largest auction houses in France, would place a pair of the Queen's heels, perhaps not too dissimilar to the ones that survived the Parisian mob at the dawn of the French Revolution, upon the auction block (ironically, just a day after the 219th anniversary of Marie Antoinette's death at the *Place de la Révolution*).² The shoes, a gift to one of the many servants who attended her, had been preserved and passed down through the generations until they arrived in the care of the auction house, weathering the Revolution in far better condition than the members of the aristocracy.

The winning bid of \$65,000, placed anonymously, exceeded the expectations of Paris Druout by almost five fold. One collector's peculiarities, tastes, and fervor could explain why this lot of royal footwear had been so drastically underestimated, at least compared to the value placed upon them by the bidder. However, the desire to possess a "piece" of the aristocracy existed prior to the advent of the Revolution. Servants—such as lower-ranking courtiers and favorites—received clothing from both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, which was then passed down through wills, stolen, or, as these particular shoes were, auctioned. "Royal items of clothing were, it would seem, given with a clear sense of the intense value attached to them, and that they might provide a tangible stimulus to enduring fidelity to the crown, even, or especially, when it was all but effaced."³ These items also remained after their owners' deaths as morbid souvenirs,

1. Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 297.

2. Terri Pous, "Marie Antoinette's Shoes Sell for \$65,000 at French Auction," *Time.com*, October 18, 2012, under "Fashion & Beauty," <http://style.time.com/2012/10/18/marie-antoinettes-shoes-sell-for-65000-at-french-auction> (accessed July 9, 2013).

3. Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances*, 20.

relics of the Revolution's victory over a desolate monarchy, or simply taken for the valuable resources from which they were made.⁴

While it might seem overly simplistic to argue that the fashion, etiquette, and material goods coveted by French aristocratic culture in the eighteenth century purposefully denoted social status and wealth, the rationale behind the continually more ostentatious choices in clothing and hairstyles became deeply ingrained into the aristocracy long before Dr. Guillotin purposed the use of a more humane method of beheading. The following argues that, before the blood spilled of the Revolution, the clash between the nobility and the increasingly wealthy middle classes—who desired the same wealth and privilege of those inhabiting the Palace of Versailles—was a fight first waged with velvet and brocade.

Clothing marked privilege amongst the aristocracy; the more expensive the materials, or the more elaborate the garment (seemingly even to the point of impracticality), the higher in status the owner appeared to be.⁵ Many *coiffures* and gowns made physical activity very guarded, indicating someone of leisure. Catherine Beecher, in her 1814 *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School*, argues that, in “past ages, and in aristocratic countries, leisure and indolence and frivolous pursuits have been deemed lady-like and refined, because those classes, which were the most refined, patronized, such an impression.”⁶ These codes of etiquette and behavior existed not simply as a distraction for the extremely wealthy, but also as a stage constructed a century prior to the French Revolution, at a time when Louis XIV first prepared to move his court away from Paris, hoping to turn an inherited hunting lodge into a palace fit for the image he was constructing for himself.⁷

As much as clothing and the elaborate trappings of privilege created barriers that attempted to exclude others from stepping onto the stage of courtly life, they also existed for public display.⁸ From his birth, Louis XIV was an actor in an epic drama. As a king, divine right determined his roles (as warrior, as saint, as supreme authority); the spotlight shone on him.

4. *Ibid.*, 21.

5. Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 6-9.

6. As quoted in Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 306.

7. Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 47; see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

8. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xiv; Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 184; Doyle, *French Revolution*, 27; Andrew Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French Monarchy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, University Press, 1994), 114.

Much as his moniker suggested, Louis was the “Sun King,” and the court surrounded him as a planetary mass of loyal subjects, cajolers, and in-betweens who hoped a modicum of glory might be bestowed upon them.⁹ However, this power relied upon nobles bowing to the king’s authority, and conflict between the monarchy and the First and Second Estates arose when kingly authority appeared to threaten the status granted from submitting to that authority.¹⁰

From the sixteenth century onward, a growing sense of self-image and self-awareness grew amongst both high- and low-born in Europe. Just as a monarch could use public relations and (what now might be considered) “media” campaigns to fashion a persona readily identifiable by one’s subjects, men with education, connections, and ambition could attempt the same—regardless of rank—on a smaller scale. One misconception about the average individual prior to the Industrial Revolution is that they lacked privilege. Too easily are the castes, particularly in French society of the eighteenth century, categorized as those with privilege and those without. Regardless of social standing or personal property, the “most valuable property that a person had was his ‘privilege.’”¹¹ Privilege, as defined by those prior to the modern era, included all the person’s rights as determined by the laws governing them, but the privileges of a merchant or a peasant farmer could hardly be called equal to those enjoyed by a member of the royal family. However disproportionate the benefits, those that recognized their own privilege “clung to it with equal tenacity” as someone who had more wealth and status. In combination with the growth of self-consciousness (not the philosophical understanding of the term but rather in the awareness of one’s presence in society), it became apparent that the possibility of fashioning identity for oneself was just as possible as dictating identity to others.¹²

Even though members of the nobility balked at the repressive measures being enacted by Louis XIV and Cardinal Richelieu after the Thirty Years War—as well as the civil wars of the Fronde (an insurrection of nobility and Third Estate against the King, stretching from 1648 to 1653 and leading to absolute monarchy)—the Second Estate did not attempt to parcel their own lands into factions, choosing instead to draw closer to the monarchy, hoping to gain more influence in policymaking, even as

9. Burke, *The Fabrication*, 59.

10. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 26.

11. *Ibid.*, 31; Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1.

12. *Ibid.*; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xiv.

they despised the efforts of the crown to centralize the government.¹³ The creation of appointments for those outside the Second Estate constituted the main objection many aristocrats had with Louis XIV's early reign. The royal treasury relied upon two sources income—taxes for one, but also the fees paid by people freshly appointed as officers of the French government. To remove someone from his prescribed post, the treasury would face reimbursing the fee, which was often spent without funds to replace it, meaning that the officer's position was permanent.¹⁴ Though both Louis XIV and Cardinal Richelieu often dared to meddle with the privileges already established, the creation of new offices available to the rising middle class—who benefitted from the upswing in France's economy—could replace the income lost by being unable to tax the Second Estate without threat of further revolt.¹⁵ Privilege, therefore, as ephemeral as it could be, became ingrained as the paramount of society; the mandates and rules surrounding privilege appeared to fashion how the country operated. In terms of economy, that assumption is not wholly incorrect.¹⁶

As absolutist as Louis XIV's measures were, centralization could not dismantle something established as fundamental to how society functioned. The King's ability to negotiate with the aristocracy remained limited. If he dealt with them too harshly, open revolt could erupt, but he could neither bribe them (without risking France's finances further) nor raise their rank any higher than what they already had. An opportunity to solve many of these issues presented itself when renovations to the Louvre, which had been the Parisian royal residence since the Middle Ages, were proposed. Though he had the option of keeping his court within Paris, Louis turned his attention to the isolated hunting lodge of Versailles, twenty kilometers away.¹⁷

Moving the court to a more secluded location, by 1680, allowed for the development of codes of conduct and etiquette that were both elaborate and calculated. It created "marks of distinction" based upon proximity to Louis XIV himself that "cost him nothing except courtesy, which came

13. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 24; Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564-1572: A Contribution to the History of Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and Calvinist Resistance Theory* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967), 395.

14. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 5, 19; Guy Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 48.

15. Charles Breunig, *The Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1789-1850* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 3.

16. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 31.

17. *Ibid.*, 113.

to him naturally.”¹⁸ The symmetrical construction of the palace of Versailles mimicked the order that Louis had created amongst his courtiers, making the days structured and regimented, glorifying everyday activities into theatrical productions (such as daytime meals occasionally open to public spectacle), and refining taste in furniture, art, and music to a State-approved operation.¹⁹

The construction of Versailles and the institutionalization of Louis XIV's codes of conduct into a form that would eventually be featured in books on manners for other European courts to copy took a considerable amount of time and financial means. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's finance minister and superintendent over the *Bâtiments du Roi* (Buildings of the King), became quite successful at funding his king's massive building projects. He focused on centering France's economy on mercantilism, ensuring that the number of exported goods exceeded those imported. His encouragement of national spending internally created new opportunities to stimulate the economy, including the production of government-approved luxury goods as well as promoting the use of products being imported from the French colonies. Rather than import Italian marble for the palace, Colbert ordered the opening of French quarries. Versailles itself “became a vast showroom of the best luxury items to come out of the government workshops. And the French bought at home rather than from abroad, restraining the traditional outflow for luxury goods.”²⁰ The centrality of the economy and the appearance of prosperity gave Colbert the ability to then justify government centrality as Versailles's construction continued through the decades, leading into the eighteenth century.²¹

The bourgeoisie, specifically the merchants and landowners, benefitted significantly from this economic arrangement. With taxation being one of the few ways in which the treasury could be replenished and with members of the nobility exempt from the highest levied taxes (the *taille* and the *gabelle*, the salt tax), the middle class carried the burden of supporting the country with their profits. They therefore faced higher taxes as their station improved. Though they could not often sell their goods to other nations, those who operated colonial plantations found the French market largely free of competition with foreign imports. The taxation, along with the restrictions preventing them from fully enjoying the privileges of the high

18. *Ibid.*, 114; Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 114.

19. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 114; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 36-37; Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 47.

20. Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 49; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 36.

21. *Ibid.*, 48.

nobility, left the bourgeoisie with little recourse for greater privilege (outside of marrying into a noble family, buying a title, or outright rebellion against those institutions). In order to incorporate this influx of income into the royal coffers so that the state could meet its financial obligations, Louis XIV created many new appointments and divided up duties among existing offices in order to take advantage of the fee paid upon being granted entry into the *noblesse de robe* (“the nobility of the robe,” high-ranking officials who received their appointments through hereditary nobility).²² The aristocracy actively detested these measures, and the bourgeoisie—even those who obtained noble rank by purchasing it—continued to struggle against the privileges that remained out of their reach. The lesser middle-class shared something in common with the wealthiest merchants, since the “resentment against the aristocratic privilege and discrimination based on birth was shared as well by the lesser bourgeoisie—the shopkeepers, artisans, and petty bureaucrats.”²³ Although the bourgeoisie often possessed lands and could afford to play the part, enjoying all the leisure activities and luxury goods as the nobility, the desire for equality of privilege remained.

By the time the last of Louis XIV’s construction projects was completed in 1710, the cost for building Versailles alone totaled sixty million *livres*, roughly \$509 million.²⁴ This consumed over three percent of the annual expenditures for the French government between the 1660s and 1670s, reaching its peak in 1685 (with a total of eleven million *livres* being spent

22. Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 3.

23. *Ibid.*, 6; Doyle, *The French Revolution*, 26-27.

24. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 115; Robert A. Selig, “Appendix 2: Conversions between Eighteenth Century Currencies,” in *The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route in the State of Delaware, 1781-1783: An Historical and Architectural Survey* (State of Delaware: Dover, 2003); Measuring Worth, “Purchasing Power of British Pounds: 1245 to Present, MeasuringWorth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/> (accessed September 10, 2013); Currency Converter, Google, <https://www.google.com/finance/converter> (accessed October 10, 2013). The conversion of the eighteenth century *livre* into a dollar amount was accomplished by taking Dr. Selig’s currency chart, which lists the British pound sterling to be equivalent to 23 *livres 3 sols 6 deniers* (23.2 *livres*) in the 1700s. The eighteenth century pound sterling is equal to the value of 122 pounds (adjusting for retail price and inflation, as of 2012, through the Measuring Worth calculator), which is equivalent to 2,830.40 *livres*. The final step, converting the *livre* to dollars, was done by comparing the dollar’s value to pounds via Google.com’s currency converter (with the USD being roughly equivalent, as of October 2013, to 0.62 GBP, meaning that 122 GBP is equal to 196.77 USD. Using that conversion chain [23.2 *livres* = 1 GBP (1714) = 122 GBP (2012) = 196.77 USD (2012)], it is possible to calculate the value of what was being spent on Versailles’s construction into a modern sum.

in that year alone).²⁵ This final round of construction before Louis XIV's death ushered in a new period of decadence, centered around the concept of *gloire*, the glorification of the King and State through the amassing of great artistic and architectural works that displayed both refinement of taste and uniqueness to the owner.²⁶ Even a mini-Ice Age during the beginning of the 1700s could not impede the finishing touches on the palace, despite the detriment it wrought upon France's economy. With France relying on its agriculture, the failure due to frost of its staple crops and important exports plagued most of France's population with ill health, starvation, and higher taxes.

The centralization of the government did not equate to order on the whole. While the microcosm of Versailles could be structured, and tempers could be assuaged with petty indulgences, the country itself dealt tenuously with its own subjects and other European nations, resulting in "a period of 'general' crisis."²⁷ Though the aristocracy and middle classes saw a sufficient increase in their incomes, the monarchy's financial hardships—beginning in the latter half of Louis XIV's reign through Louis XV's reign and partly into Louis XVI's—remained problematic. From the outset of the eighteenth century, the aristocracy appeared much altered after several decades of being cloistered at Versailles, less likely to rebel against the monarchy as had happened during the Fronde. A new generation of courtiers, raised at Versailles, accepted and depended upon their monarch's generosity for their upkeep, since courtly life at the palace had drained the finances of many aristocratic families. They no longer held the same connections to their ancestral lands and family estates that had enabled their ancestors to support full-scale revolt against State authority.²⁸ What the aristocracy that lived at Versailles lacked in autonomy, it made up for in adherence to etiquette and the pursuit of new luxury items, even when they could not afford them. While a balance had been struck between the king's desires and the State's capacity to meet his ambition, Louis XIV's attitude shifted from a guarded centrality to what can now be defined as absolutist policy-making. The inability of the King to give up his own personal wants in favor of dealing with growing financial concerns ushered in a "new sense of unreality" that placed Versailles (as it represented the French state to the public) and the country's needs at odds with one another.²⁹

25. Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 50-51, 141.

26. *Ibid.*, 45-47.

27. *Ibid.*, 149, 181.

28. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 115.

29. Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 174.

Popular belief maintains that Louis XVI and his ministers failed to control the economy as Colbert did during Louis XIV's reign, but the beginnings of Louis XVI's fourteen years on the throne showed some financial prosperity. France experienced an economic upswing in the decades prior to 1789, as the burgeoning Industrial Revolution produced more products for export and foreign trade within France's colonies rose. However, this prosperity was not experienced unilaterally. The merchants (due to the increased interest in trade) and the landowning First and Second Estates (due to increased cost of staple crops in a country with a rapidly expanding population increasingly unable to support themselves in the inflated economy) reaped the most benefits.³⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, reflecting in the mid-nineteenth century, argued that it was this visible and apparent prosperity that hastened the French Revolution by revealing the inequity within the country to an increasingly upwardly mobile middle class:

The sight of this prosperity, already so great and so flourishing, gives good grounds for astonishment if we think of all the defects still evident inside government and of all the obstacles still encountered by industry. It may even be that many politicians deny this fact because they cannot account for it, assuming, like Molière's doctor, that a patient cannot get better in the face of the rules. In fact, how can we believe that France could prosper and grow wealthy with inequality of taxation, differences of local practices, internal customs barriers, feudal rights, union guilds and sales of office, etc.? In spite of all that, France was, nevertheless, beginning to prosper and improve everywhere because, alongside all this badly built and badly geared machinery which appeared likely to slow down the social engine more than drive it forward, there were concealed two very strong and simple springs which were already enough to hold the entire mechanism together and to enable this whole to advance towards its aim of public prosperity: a still very powerful but no longer despotic government which maintained order everywhere; a nation whose upper classes were already the most enlightened and free on the continent of Europe and a nation in whose midst every individual was capable of growing wealthy in his own way and of keeping that fortune once acquired.³¹

30. Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 2; Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. ed. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 168.

31. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 172-173.

Upon his deathbed in 1715, Louis XIV uttered his final words, imparting that his legacy would be the State that he had built, though he would be part of it no longer. Those present at his side doubted that the regime he had instituted could last without its figurehead.³² However, along with the lasting effects of creating an absolutist monarchy, the codification of exorbitant spending into courtly life, enshrined in the palace of Versailles, endured as part of Louis XIV's legacy.

A few months prior to her arrest, Marie Antoinette prepared for a procession of the royal family from Paris to Versailles. Léonard, who had come to coiff her hair, noted that the Queen of France appeared withdrawn and disheartened. She lamented, "I must go like an actress, exhibit myself to a public that may hiss at me."³³ The public may have had reason to jeer their queen, viewing her as the cause of much of their suffering. By 1788, the economic prosperity of the last few decades, which had never trickled completely up or down, disappeared. France's debt swelled, and the interest on that debt devoured fifty percent of the national budget.³⁴ Though a rotating assortment of finance ministers attempted to reform France's laws in order to compel the taxation of the aristocracy, none had been successful.³⁵ Both Louis XV and Louis XVI, who grew up in that environment, spent as they pleased, continuing to add to Versailles even as the national debt increased. The other courtiers, particularly those belonging to the royal family, demanded the compensation that was due to their standing. The differences between necessity and desire became hopelessly intertwined from birth, never to be fully untangled. The personal debt of the Comte d'Artois (Louis XVI's younger brother), for example, ran upwards of twenty-one million *livres*, over twenty-five times that of Marie Antoinette's expenditure early in her marriage.³⁶

Though Marie Antoinette disliked the public displays, she nonetheless called for Léonard, who was responsible for creating her grander hairstyles meant for special occasions. Court ritual, like the looming specter of Louis XIV, expected her compliance with the spectacle she was to perform.³⁷ First as the *Dauphine* and later as the Queen of France, Marie Antoinette knew that her position came with certain expectations of appearance and dress. Marie Antoinette represented the height of fashion, as had her pre-

32. Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 294-296.

33. Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 271.

34. Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 3.

35. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

36. Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 149-150.

37. *Ibid.*, 271.

decessors, employing the finest artisans for her clothing and jewelry and commissioning artists to furnish her apartments. The luxury trades flourished in Paris thanks to supporting the spending habits of the court, even as the countryside continued to suffer from the ill effects of poor harvests and high taxation: “Paris was a city dependent on the financial support of the noble and rich to maintain its industries, which were in the main to do with luxury and semi-luxury goods.”³⁸ This system, however, failed to acknowledge that the cyclical nature of its tax system—upon which it relied solely for its economic stability—could not last, i.e. the impoverished cannot pay taxes; the aristocracy does not pay taxes, but they do spend money amongst the luxury trades; the merchants and wealthy bourgeoisie pay taxes out of money spent by the aristocracy; the taxes go back into the treasury to be doled out to the aristocracy to be spent into the luxury trades again. Ultimately, it was unsustainable, especially when the taxes had to be raised to meet the demands of the State, nor could it trickle down to benefit anyone below the middle classes. This, in addition to the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy that had been building since Louis XIV opened new offices for the middle classes to refashion themselves into the image of nobility, crippled the State’s ability to function and spilled over into a need for reform and revolution amongst the urban Third Estate.

With the swift fall of the guillotine upon the necks of the fallen monarchs, so too closed the curtains on the stage that was Versailles. Those who cherished the memory of the King and Queen, those that wanted a curious souvenir from the end of French absolutism, those that wanted to make a profit on valuable materials, and those that simply desired to touch *gloire* held onto pieces of what luxury was left behind, swooped like carrion birds to collect what they could—a sleeve from a dressing gown, a cipher from a gilt panel, a pair of silk shoes. The roots of the spending that, so easily blamed for the French Revolution, began decades before the births of either Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette. Their habits and routines within the court became as institutionalized as the taxes levied against the Third Estate and the privileges of the First and Second Estates they hoped to attain.

38 Ibid., 148.

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