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**Jennifer M. Jones**, *Sexing la mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004. xviii + 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$89.95 U.S (cl). ISBN 185973-830-3; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 185973-835-4.

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The recent release of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*, with its lavish and detailed depiction of eighteenth-century court dress, suggests an enduring interest in the topic of fashion. As someone with a deep personal interest in *la mode*, I was enormously pleased to be assigned the task of reviewing Jennifer M. Jones's book on fashion, gender and shopping under the Old Regime, especially since it is well-written and engaging. But Jones is grappling with larger historiographical questions as well, including issues of class and gender identity, the rise of commercial culture, and the French assertion of supremacy in the worlds of taste and fashion. Like many historians studying trends in politics, family life, and gender, Jones sees the eighteenth century as a crucial turning point, a time when fashion and *la mode* were feminized; when femininity, fashion, and frivolity became firmly linked in the public mind, in a manner that was not entirely negative, but certainly had political implications, as well as close links to the rise of domesticity as an ideology. Jones "focuses less on men's and women's clothing styles and how they diverged in the latter eighteenth century than on how men's and women's relationship to fashion itself—to commercial culture, the production of commodities, and to matters of aesthetics and taste—was transformed over the course of the eighteenth century, as the production and consumption of clothing were increasingly conceptualized as feminine/effeminate and *la mode* was conceived as a female goddess" (pp. 3-4).

Jones traces this transformation by examining two key sites of fashion formulation. In the seventeenth century, the court of Louis XIV was the key arbiter of fashion and taste for both men and women. The French sought to extend this control beyond the court to the rest of the European world, arguing that the *la mode* was rightfully a French creation; that French style and taste trumped that of the rest of the world. By the eighteenth century, this court monopoly no longer held sway; the creation of fashion had moved from the court to the emerging marketplace, heralding (or perhaps reflecting) the rise of commercial culture, with competing voices all claiming a hand in the shaping of *la mode*. While Louis XIV, demonstrating his absolutist pretensions, tried (with mixed success) to impose a top-down model on the world of fashion, the chaotic marketplace of the eighteenth century was far less hierarchical, with multiple influences affecting the ever-changing world of style.

The organization of the book highlights this division. Part one, "*La Cour: Absolutism and Appearance*" examines the role of fashion and style at Versailles. Jones argues that, "Louis XIV devoted much of his long reign (1654-1715) to harnessing the artifice, the inconstancy, and the Frenchness of *la mode* as he strove to extend his power—politically, economically, and culturally—throughout France and across Europe. He did so by asserting a distinctively French style, by deploying the artifice of fashion for the purpose of court spectacles, and by disciplining fickle fashion to the theater of absolutism" (p. 9). Courtly sartorial splendor was essential to Louis's kingly persona, and both men and women of the court sought to clothe themselves in ways that displayed their exalted social status and proximity to power. Men were no less sumptuously attired than women. The *Mercure galant*, the first French journal to report on fashion, covered men's fashions as assiduously as those of women: "In both the structure and the content of the articles, male and female fashions were not presented as fundamentally different from or opposed to one another but rather as variations on the same theme" (p. 35). Clothing was primarily a marker of

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class status and privilege; sumptuary laws sought to guarantee that sartorial differences would be based on class in an aristocratic, court-based fashion culture.

But a commercial element entered in as well; sumptuary laws also shored up mercantilist principles. In the 1660s and 1670s, Louis and his finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert tried to use sumptuary laws to restrict the importation of gold and silver, and to encourage local silk, linen and lace-making industries. These efforts were far from successful—fashion was a slippery tool to master. As Jones points out, “Focusing exclusively on the glittering iconic economy at Versailles obscures the commercial economy growing within the absolutist state. Although an absolutist monarch could ‘decree’ court costume, Louis was less successful in marshaling an elusive and capricious *modè*” (p. 11). Even Louis could not successfully contain the goddess of fashion, nor could he entirely mask “the cracks and fissures that were already, in the late seventeenth century, beginning to mar the glittering surface of the Old Regime of looks and to foreshadow a new fashion culture in which femininity would eclipse absolutism as the ruling principle” (p. 12).

Part two, on “*La Ville: Clothing and Consumption in a Society of Taste*” shifts focus from the court to the commercial culture of Paris in the eighteenth century. In this section of the book, Jones’s lens broadens considerably; primarily, she argues, because the locus of *la mode* broadens considerably: “By the late eighteenth century, fashionable dressing was no longer exclusively the privilege of the elite but something in which men and women across a broader range of stations and incomes could indulge. The wardrobes of virtually all Parisians, from manual workers to aristocrats, had increased significantly in value, in number of garments, and in varieties of clothing.” Furthermore, gender increasingly came to shape fashion culture: “Women’s consumption patterns began to diverge dramatically from men’s in the eighteenth century. From the mid-eighteenth century onward the relative value of women’s wardrobes across all classes increased, often five to ten times more rapidly than their husbands” (p. 74). Like women, fashion was fickle and ever-changing, thus making it an ideal motor of the consumer-driven economy.

The conflict between men and women over the right to dress women’s hair and bodies, as well as the flattening of class differences between women in regard to fashion, style, and taste is at the heart of this section. Jones outlines the turf battles between tailors and seamstresses, linen drapers and mercers, hairdressers and wigmakers, and the emergence of the *marchandes de modes* to demonstrate the high stakes involved in the fight over access to the newly feminized world of fashion. These individuals were coming to see themselves as artists, rather than mere artisans, and consequently, exempt from the rigid rules regulating *corporations*. Ultimately, fashion was relegated to the status of the *arts frivoles*, and the women who influenced style were denied the title of artist. Still, by the time of the Revolution, merchants and fashion editors, among others, touted “frivolous” fashion as enormously useful to the French commercial economy. This was a double-edged sword: “Contemporaries’ conclusions about women’s distinctive taste had a profound impact on the roles that were available to women in French society, restricting women’s participation in many areas of production and potentially valorizing a new space for women as consumers” (p. 138). Women might show taste as consumers, but it was men such as the celebrated nineteenth-century couturier Charles-Frédéric Worth who would ultimately be recognized as fashion geniuses. However, a new world of commerce opened in the eighteenth century, a world in which women could flaunt their style as consumers of fashion, and sometimes, as producers of it. The transformation of the ephemeral *boutique* into the fixed *magasin* brought even elite and bourgeois women into public spaces to make their purchases.

In assessing Jones’s book, it is impossible to avoid comparison with other works tracing the commercialization of fashion. Daniel Roche’s seminal work on *La Culture des apparences*, like that of Jones, emphasized the wider import of the rise of a fashion culture in the eighteenth century. [1] Jones

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places her treatment of fashion in the context of Rousseau's pronouncements on the nature of women, the rise of domesticity, the essentialization of womanhood, the political ramifications of gender roles, and the emergence of conspicuous consumption, all of which other historians have also located in the eighteenth century, all of which have been exhaustively treated in other contexts. In particular, her chapter on "A Natural Right to Dress Women," detailing the efforts of the seamstresses to claim their rights against male tailors, covers the same ground that Clare Crowston treated much more extensively in her recent prize-winning book.<sup>[2]</sup> Her primary sources—fashion magazines, didactic literature, the letters and memoirs of aristocratic women and men, Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, and other assorted printed primary source material, have been scoured by other historians. In most cases, her analysis supports, rather than refines, existing interpretations, and her conclusion about fashion reinforcing the new domestic view of women is a little too neat. Jones's greatest strength is an essayist, but because she tries to locate fashion at the center of so many trends and issues—absolutism, shifting class and gender roles, the rise of commercial consumption, legal conflicts in the clothing trades, and over the right to work, the relationship among art, production, taste and utility, and French nationalism, among others—her narrative sometimes loses focus.

What Jones does particularly well is to paint a vivid picture of eighteenth-century life, and what it was like to shop—as she points out, "Before the mid eighteenth century most shops would have been almost unrecognizable as such to a consumer accustomed to modern-day boutiques" (p. 152). Her effort to enter imaginatively into this world, and her portrayal of that world, is one of the greatest pleasures of the book. She is less successful at entering into the thoughts of the woman she traces in her prologue—the young Parisian woman at her morning *toilette*, circa 1785, but as Jones acknowledges, that imaginary lady is "either mute or deaf to our queries" (p. xvii). In her conclusion, Jones argues that "The great female acceptance of fashion begs to be explained, instead of naturalized" (p. 214). This is still the case—her book doesn't really provide the answer, perhaps because that mysterious lady in the prologue truly is silent. And yet, we do get a hint. In what is perhaps a sign of a "post-feminist" era, I found Jones's non-judgmental, indeed positive, attitude towards women and fashion refreshing. She argues that this linkage of women and *la mode* allowed women, in some sense, to pose the eternal question in a different way: "[W]hat do *women* want?" She concludes that "The answer would surely be fashionable hats, pretty dresses, and the right to choose whether or not to wear maternity clothes, but would also include a whole lot more as well....At least that's what elusive, insatiable, carefree, vagabond, revolutionary and ever-changing *la mode* would want of women" (p. 218). Jones may be claiming too much for fashion here, but perhaps historians in the past have claimed too little.

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## NOTES

[1] *La Culture des apparences: Une Histoire du vêtement, XVII-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), translated by Jean Birrell as *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the "Ancien Régime"* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[2] Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

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