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Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. xix + 424 pp. Tables, illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 (hb). ISBN-10: 0822355280. \$27.95 (pb). ISBN-13: 978-0822355281.

Response by Clare Haru Crowston, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

It is a tremendous honor and privilege for my work to be the subject of a forum in the central electronic meeting place of my field. I am grateful to the editors of *H-France Forum* for selecting the book, and I also thank each of the reviewers for their careful readings and thought-provoking responses. I was impressed by each of the reviewer's summary of the major arguments and evidence of the various chapters, long and detailed as those chapters are. With scant exceptions, I cannot complain of being seriously misunderstood or mischaracterized. While it is gratifying to hear the book described as "important" or "big," I also recognize that reviewers mixed their praise with a number of substantive criticisms. I welcome the opportunity to respond here.

As each of the reviews notes, at the heart of the book lies a set of deeply felt methodological concerns. It was clear, as I embarked on what became *Credit, Fashion, Sex*, that historians and humanists in general were entering a period of unprecedented possibilities and challenges in terms of available sources and techniques for exploiting them. Over the ensuing decade (or so), my impression of an underlying methodological and even epistemological crisis produced by this ever-increasing abundance has only deepened. Given that our discipline tends to favor thematic innovation and debate over methodological reflection, I found few practical or theoretical models to guide me as I confronted these problems.

My project in writing this book was therefore to exploit the then-brand new possibilities at hand, but also to take stock of the difficulties and challenges they engendered. (Thus, the "pained awareness" to which Jennifer Jones alludes). I admit to hoping that the book would be highly provocative, partly in terms of its thesis about the "regime of credit" and the connections I trace among credit, fashion and sex, but also in its aim to spark an overdue methodological dialogue among historians of France and elsewhere. What new questions will we be able to ask, and what new kinds of history will we write? What will get left out and which scholars will enjoy access to the new wealth of digitized sources? How can we frame feasible projects based on limitless sources, and how will we determine standards of "representativeness," "evidence" and "proof"? How will we train graduate students in new techniques, given that few of us have been trained in even the most basic "digital" skills, departments are strapped for resources, and boosters of digital humanities often have surprisingly shallow intellectual concerns? Perhaps most importantly for this book, what will happen to the nascent project of re-uniting fields of history (or *l'histoire connectée* evoked by Natacha Coquery), when the sources available for any approach have taken an unfathomable leap forward?

This book, imperfect as it is, represents one attempt to address these questions. It might clarify both the stakes and the reviewers' critique to explain its approach briefly in my own words. As a first step in understanding what credit meant and how it circulated, I read, *pace* Jeff Horn, deeply in the secondary literature on all kinds of credit. I also exploited the vast number of sources available in a number of online databases (primarily ARTFL, ECCO, Making of the

Modern World, Gallica, Googlebooks, and Le gazetier universel). I searched for the term *crédit*, performed proximity searches for words used in tandem with it, read closely the results of the searches, established analytical categories and interpretations, and sought out secondary literature on the genres and authors represented. I performed similar operations for words and phrases like *mode* and *marchandes de modes*. To gain quantitative purchase on usage, I undertook frequency analyses in different databases over time, and I compared the number of occurrences of credit with that of other words. I also examined a small number of non-French works in translation to gage the “Frenchness” of the term. (My brief response to Charles Walton’s question on this crucial issue is that within the backdrop of European-wide concerns with reputation, honor, virtue, etc, the use of “credit” in this sense seems to be both empirically “French” and recognized to a certain extent as such, as indicated by the comments of the Abbé de Vermond in chapter six. More research, as Walton notes, would be welcome on this point).

These searches turned up results that were far from what I expected. My original hope had been to compare depictions of the circulation of economic credit with those of the circulation of fashionable goods and libidinal economies. Much to my surprise, I found instead evidence across many different genres of a notion of “credit” as a form of accrued reputation and influence that opened the door to accessing resources of all kinds. The problem I faced was not, as Horn suggests, the paucity of evidence, but rather the overwhelming amount of it. The difficulty was how to craft a coherent and convincing analysis based on thousands of “hits” in all the multiple contexts I describe in the book. Despite the more-or-less artisanal techniques on which I relied, the ability to search huge corpuses with amazing rapidity transformed not only how much I could access, but also the kinds of ideas I could investigate. Rather than pursuing concepts that elicited a great deal of debate and lengthy, highly differentiated treatments in the early modern period (such as honor and virtue), I suggest that it enabled me to uncover a widely shared, accepted, and largely uncontroversial notion that yet did major work in framing perceptions and behavior. (I will return to my major claims below).

With regard to the concern raised by Jennifer Jones about arguments from absence, I considered neither abundance nor absence of occurrences of *crédit* or any other word to be significant in and of itself. As Jones acknowledges, I certainly did not describe credit as a theory of any kind, much less a “grand unified” one. On the contrary, I argued that credit was rarely the subject of explicit theorization precisely because its dynamics were so familiar and widespread. I also sought throughout to distinguish particular textual “representations” of credit from the “real” emotions and motivations of their creators. My argument thus focused on what writers presented to readers as plausible rather than on the truth of those accounts themselves, which spanned fictional, semi-fictional, and ostensibly non-fictional genres. I am thus taken aback to hear that Charles Walton found I sometimes read documents as transparent and empirically true, an error I self-consciously resisted.

Having uncovered, much to my surprise, what one contemporary commentator described as a French “regime of credit,” I considered devoting an entire volume to mapping out its contours, with a chapter on each of the areas (the royal court, law courts, marriage, proto-ethnography, religion, popular literature) described in the current chapter one. Such a choice would have allowed me to provide a much richer evidentiary source base than I was able to include in *Credit, Fashion, Sex*. My decision to forge on to fashion merchants and their credit practices was two-fold. First, the evidence appeared so overwhelming for credit as a framework for conceiving and explaining exchange across multiple spheres of life that it seemed unduly repetitive to catalogue all of the thousands of references, many of which furnished basically the same account from the 1640s through the Restoration. Chapter one is thus intended as an indicative and representative sampler, destined hopefully to inspire further research; it is by no means an exhaustive account.

Second, I remained committed to executing a project that placed practices of representing credit in intense dialogue with an original, archivally-based case study of the dynamics of reputation, influence, reciprocity, and unequal social relations in a sector of daily life involving production and economic exchange. I refused to derive one element of the project from secondary sources, for example, to use either economic studies of credit or descriptions of courtly credit as “context” or “background” for a primarily “cultural” or “social” history. I was also determined to follow through on my original plan of writing a history of credit that was both sexed and gendered and that juxtaposed dynamics of credit with those of fashion, a comparison that I had long foreseen to be intellectually exciting and fruitful. This was, in retrospect, what one might describe as a hubristically ambitious agenda. The only feasible way to achieve these ambitions was to remain within a world I already knew intimately: Parisian garment workers, in this case the little-studied *marchandes de modes*.

The “digital” aspect of my case study primarily involved photographing and transcribing bankruptcy dossiers and account books, including surviving records of the accounts of Rose Bertin (who has already benefited from a recent biography).^[1] Once again, the abundance of data was overwhelming, a dilemma created by the speed and ease of digital photography, a tool that has transformed archival practice in a manner that calls for reflection. It took two years to digitize, with the aid of graduate assistants, 39 bankruptcy dossiers and the complete contents of nine fashion merchants’ account books (including Bertin). Like many scholars in the digital camera era, I ended the project with many more sources than I could possibly use; the 100 account books remaining in my archive will one day allow me to investigate further such issues as the rapidity of innovation, specialization of production, supply networks, and taxonomies of quality.

As Jennifer Jones rightly notes, the proof is in the pudding. Turning now to the major claims of the book, I was struck by the wide range of reviewer reactions to my thesis of credit as a hitherto unnoticed, central “category of analysis” of old regime France (with gratitude to Joan Scott as always). These ranged from Natacha Coquery’s relative silence, to Charles Walton’s apparent enthusiasm, to Jennifer Jones’s skepticism, to a confusingly ambivalent response from Jeff Horn. Horn writes that my argument is convincing, based on sufficient primary sources and already well-established, but also that my evidence is thin and my claims exaggerated. The book apparently both points out a commonplace and makes an argument so bold and sweeping that, for Horn and Jones, it cannot be accepted without another 400 pages of argument and evidence. This paradox seems to me to illuminate the crux of the concept I am identifying, one that is both utterly obvious and quotidian, but also—as I explore in chapter two—susceptible to ethical criticism and disavowal.

With regard to the fashion merchants as exemplars of the interaction of what we might call “social” with “cultural” and “economic” credit, Jones is not convinced that the fashion merchants alone suffice to make the broader case. Leaving aside the relative slimness of Rose Bertin’s shoulders (which appear rather substantial in extant portraits), I would remind Jones—whose expertise needs no reminding—that female garment workers comprised a very substantial portion of the Parisian labor market. Seamstresses were the third largest Parisian guild, at 3,000 mistresses, with a labor force I have elsewhere estimated at around 10,000 women. Fashion merchants comprised a fraction of that number, but they exercised enormous influence as employers and sub-contractors in a large number of additional trades. Given the weight of luxury production and consumption within Paris, it seems very safe, indeed self-evident, to argue that the dynamics of credit/fashion and the constant process of conversion among cultural, economic, and social credit that I describe in the first three chapters of the book were familiar to a great many entrepreneurs and skilled workers within the city, many of whom were women. Their livelihood depended on it.

Of course, making my case for “credit, fashion, sex” with a very different female trade—market hawkers, for example—might have been a steeper climb. However, it is clear from the work of many outstanding scholars that all kinds of laborers, in all kinds of industries, struggled with issues of credit and debt in their daily lives on the job and at home. On this point, I cite, for example, the work of Natacha Coquery, Laurence Fontaine, Julie Hardwick, and Craig Muldrew. If I chose not to conduct archival research on additional trades, as Jeff Horn would have had me do, or on other forms of economic credit (such as gambling, annuities, long-distance trade) as Jennifer Jones suggests, it is precisely because my colleagues have already done such a compelling job of establishing the ubiquity of economic credit in its many varieties and for all social groups. Working people clearly understood the powerful impact of reputation and the access to many forms of resources that it afforded. Having said that, to pursue a key question, does that mean that they used the term *crédit* to think through their lives in a more abstract way? Did they turn to *crédit* to describe their influence over others, encounters with the law, or their conception of the divine? Direct evidence on this question is of course much harder to find, but my reading of the *Bibliothèque bleue* in chapter one (not discussed by reviewers) shows that texts addressed to socially diverse audiences expected readers/listeners to understand the term in exactly these ways.

To return to the specific comments of Jeff Horn, I am bewildered by his suggestion that my book neglects or diminishes in any way the scholarship of colleagues whose work, on the contrary, I esteem and praise highly in the book itself, including Coquery and the other scholars mentioned above. I must also refute his assertion that I neglect issues of economic production or the social and economic context in which fashion merchants operated. For example, chapter three, which Horn does not discuss, analyzes the impact of fashion innovation on clothing and other commodities in the 1670s. I extend this discussion to the mid-eighteenth century in chapter four, using new material from contemporary periodicals. In addition to the few references he cites, interested readers will find in the endnote below a long list of passages that discuss economic production in detail and from many different angles.^[2] Even more importantly, Horn’s insistence on “economic production” misses the point that my study views as inextricably linked, and therefore investigates simultaneously, the fashion merchants as producers of economic goods, social relations, and cultural meaning. This is not the result of my own vision as a historian; it was the consensus of contemporary observers who—as I note in chapter four—paid as much attention to the neologisms invented by *marchandes de modes* to describe their endless innovations as to the products themselves. Cultural production—the production and dissemination of knowledge about new fashions—was a form of production with high economic and social stakes.

Natacha Coquery and Jennifer Jones ask, “Where is the sex?” By putting “sex” alongside credit and fashion (and allowing the designer to feature the glaring typeface and heaving bosom on the cover), I do indeed beg this question. I would respond by conceding that yes, gender does figure more consistently as a category of analysis than sex, but nonetheless there is considerably more sex in the book than the reviews acknowledge and that this analysis is central in many places. For example, chapters one and two repeatedly take up the role of sexual relations in allowing women to accrue credit, a lever subject to mundane observation or strident critique in contexts that I describe in detail. Chapter three opens with a story on the credit of a libertine and contains a long discussion of the relation among fashion, credit, female desire, and libertinage. Chapter six complicates the well-known account of Marie-Antoinette’s alleged sexual excesses by placing her unregulated libidinal economy in the context of her spending on fashions with Rose Bertin. Nonetheless, I accept that much more remains to be said on “sexual credit” and on the relationship between changing gender norms and sexuality in this period.

I will close with the issue of change over time and the comments on this matter made by Charles Walton and Jennifer Jones. To Jones, I can only respond that the thrust of chapters three and four was to argue, indeed, for fashion and credit as reinforcing and often homologous in their dynamic circulation, but also for the perceived volatility and capriciousness of fashion as a destabilizing factor that drew attention to the risks inherent in credit. In this sense, I welcome her insightful suggestion that *marchandes de modes* were agents of change in thought and practice as one well worth further reflection.

I am grateful to Walton for drawing attention to the nuanced account of change over time that I try to sketch in the book (some things change, some stay the same) and for his reflections on the larger implications of my study for thinking through and beyond the old regime. As he suggests, I conclude by arguing that one outcome of the ideological transformations of the late old regime and revolution was a disavowal in formal terms of the overlaps and conversion among social relations, political power, money, and other forms of capital captured so well in the term *crédit*. This was a crucial development and one that subsequently took on causal power of its own as the story told about the separation of these spheres became a normative narrative of the “discovery” of empirically existing entities. The normative effects of this narrative meant that contemporaries lost the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus (of which *crédit* formed one tool) to acknowledge and analyze the fact that these spheres continued to overlap and intersect in many ways. If there is an advantage of my approach, it is thus to show how limited is the viewpoint from abstract works of political economy and how careful one must be not to project them backwards as the linear arc of history.

These convictions lead me to distance myself somewhat from Walton’s generous response to my book, which exceeds my own degree of serenity about mapping arching meta-narratives onto the complex, multiple realities of this period. None of the elements of the credit regime he identifies were new in the second half of the eighteenth century (I argue, for example, that a long-term characteristic of credit relations were that they both cut across and reinforced social hierarchies), so I would question the causal impact he imputes to them. Since he asks, I will go on record to state that similar concerns oblige me to differ from aspects of Laurence Fontaine’s study, whose dichotomous view of “aristocratic” and “bourgeois” credit I find to err toward the reductive and teleological, and also from William Sewell’s recent work on fashion and the French Revolution. This work seems premised on a notion of abstract commercial exchange that neglects the personal ties and reputation essential to acquire the credit that financed the vast majority of retail and wholesale commerce and also too trusting in anecdotal and satirical accounts of a new fashion system capable of effacing traces of social difference.[3]

These last comments are sure to open a new chapter of debate, in which we will want to include a growing number of works from historians mining similar veins, such as Michael Kwass on global smuggling networks and Rebecca Spang on money and its materiality in the French Revolution. Writing from a campus in which intellectual freedom is under attack, I very much look forward to the vociferous intellectual debate that is the greatest credit of our field.[4]

NOTES

[1] Michelle Saporì, *Rose Bertin. Ministre des modes de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Editions du regard, 2003).

[2] To be specific: apprenticeship, the size of the labor force, relations with mercers, and specific goods produced by fashion merchants (pp. 145-51); profit and risk in the fashion trades, the centrality of fashion merchants in driving product innovation, and the range of materials they used to make goods (pp. 151-55); the price of labor and products and relations between

seamstresses and fashion merchants (pp. 172-79); necessary skills for fashion merchants and how they acquired them, including a discussion of the difficulties involved in procuring supplies (pp. 184-91); the negotiations between clients and merchants about custom orders (pp. 202-3); the products and services provided by Rose Bertin and her relations with suppliers (pp. 207, 210-11); the geographic extent of merchants' sales and provisioning of supplies (pp. 214-15); analysis of the network of suppliers to fashion merchants and the role of gender and marital status in impacting access to credit from suppliers (pp. 232-35); analysis of six specific products sold by fashion merchants and price variations by cash and credit (pp. 235-38); and examination of cases of bankruptcy, including merchants' relations with suppliers (pp. 238-242).

[3] Laurence Fontaine, *L'Economie morale. Pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l'Europe préindustrielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). My review of this book appeared in *H-France Review* 12 (October 2012), no. 131. William H. Sewell Jr., "The Rise of Capitalism and the Empire of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 206 (February 2010): 81-120 and "Connecting Capitalism to the French Revolution: The Parisian Promenade and the Origins of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France," *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (spring 2014): 5-46.

[4] Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014) and Rebecca Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (forthcoming from Harvard University Press, January 2015).

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