Fashioning *La Française*: The Invention of Good Taste in Revolutionary France

Olivia Kelley
Haverford College
Advisors: Lisa Jane Graham and David Sedley
Abstract

The image of the French in the cultural imagination is one of elegance and class, a people possessing a certain *je ne sais quoi* that sets them apart in their sense of style and sophistication. This idea of the French is so inherent to their image that it seems like it has always been that way. In my thesis I ask the question of how good taste became an integral part of French national identity.

I argue that good taste became part of the French identity during the French Revolution, as changing attitudes towards consumer culture and gender that occurred over the later half of the eighteenth century took on specifically nationalist characteristics in light of the Revolution. Over the course of the eighteenth century, French society transformed from a “moral economy,” in which dress signified social status, to a consumer economy, in which the middle and lower classes had access to fashion. This sartorial confusion broke down the traditional *Ancien Régime* visual hierarchy. As fashion ceased to signify social status, it became, instead, an indice of gender. Inspired by Rousseau’s model of domestic femininity, the luxury industry promoted fashion as a way for women to please men and fulfill feminine goals such as finding a husband. As fashionable consumption became a “natural” desire for women, it was rejected as equally “unnatural” for men.

In order to adapt to the changes in consumption wrought by the burgeoning consumer revolution, luxury industries adopted a new vocabulary of consumption. In the first half of the eighteenth century, luxury lost its sinful connotations and became a source of national prosperity. Moralists awkwardly tried to categorize different kinds of luxury with terms such as “useful” or “harmful” luxury. The concept of “taste” developed as an inclusive, egalitarian criterion for consumption that was well-suited to the rapidly expanding market. Taste acquired positive connotations of commerce, while the vocabulary of luxury was linked to the corruption of the *Ancien Régime*. In the world of fashion, “good taste” was associated with simplicity and naturalism. Taste and luxury thus acquired moral connotations that became politicized during the Revolution. Good taste was linked to republican virtue, while luxury represented aristocratic corruption.

During the Revolution, the moral judgments applied to luxury and taste solidified the boundary between men and women and relegated them to their respective places in the new political order. While the transformation from subject to citizen occurred easily for men, who renounced luxurious dress for republican sobriety, the role of women in the Revolution remained ambiguous. The fashion industry held up the stereotype of the female aristocrat- luxuriously dressed, sexually voracious, and meddling in politics- as the epitome of bad taste. Its definition of good taste emphasized modesty and feminine self-restriction. Nevertheless, it did not fully subscribe to the domestic ideal of the republican wife and mother. The fashion industry resolved this ambiguity by endowing women with symbolic power. As women found themselves excluded from the political sphere, the fashion industry repositioned them as nationalist symbols whose fashionable good taste projected the glory of the French Republic across Europe. As women had been disassociated from the political sphere, the myth of *La Francaise* long outlasted the French Revolution. It endures up to the present day in our image of the elegant French woman dressed with impeccable good taste.
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Introduction

The image of France and the French in the cultural imagination is one of elegance and class, a people possessing a certain je ne sais quoi that sets them apart in their sense of style and sophistication. This understanding of the French infuses popular culture; French words are used in any context to denote sophistication, French products (or those with French names) dominate the worlds of fashion and beauty. In short, they are considered a people blessed with a natural sense of good taste, which reveals itself in food, culture, and fashion. This idea of the fashionable French has a long tradition. In 1785, the first French fashion magazine Le Cabinet des modes asserted: "Ce goût, le Français le possède au plus haut degré ; il sait, avec l’toffe la plus simple, avec la gaze la plus légère, faire des ajustements, dont la valeur n’a point de proportion avec le prix de la matière dont ils sont composés." Such a quotation could easily have been written about French fashion today and it shows how deeply engrained the idea of good taste is in the French national identity. How, given the constructed nature of national identities, did good taste become an inherent characteristic of Frenchness?

I argue that good taste became part of the French identity during the French Revolution to reflect changing attitudes towards luxury, consumption and gender that had occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century took on specifically nationalist characteristics in light of the Revolution. This thesis traces the shift from luxury to taste in the context of fashion as dress moved from a visual display of social status to a reflection of individual taste and morality. In the context of the Revolution, moralists and politicians demonized luxury as the source of all the ills of the Ancien Régime, while the

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1 "This taste, the Frenchman possesses it to the highest degree. He knows how, with the simplest cloth, with the lightest gauze, to make a garment whose value is far beyond the price of the materials of which it is made." Cabinet des modes, November 15, 1785, 4.
fashion industry redefined "good taste" as a virtuous form of consumption that was compatible with republican values. This transformation from luxury to taste had different consequences for men and women. The social and political transformation from the effeminate courtier to the virile French citizen occurred easily, as men rejected luxurious dress in favor of republican severity. The new role for women, however, was more ambiguous. The French Revolution opposed two models of femininity, the tasteful republican wife/mother and the decadent female aristocrat. In reality, women and the fashion industry struggled to define their place in republican France. As women found themselves shut out of the political sphere, they acquired symbolic power through displays of good taste. The empowerment of the French woman turned tasteful consumption into a patriotic activity, because good taste broadcast the glory of the French Republic across Europe. By shifting the focus of fashion to women, France continued the civilized traditions of the Ancien Régime while distancing itself from its decadence.

Since the words "le luxe" (luxury), "la mode," (fashion) and "le goût" (taste) appear frequently throughout my thesis, I will begin by defining them. Le luxe refers to the idea of ostentatious dress based on a traditional political and social order in which a person’s appearance revealed their hereditary status. In the early eighteenth century, men of letters identified luxe as a positive source of economic growth. Several decades later, this positive image was tarnished and luxury acquired negative moral connotations of excess, corruption and sexual immorality. Luxury was intimately linked to la mode, which refers to the changing trends in fashion and the fashion industry. It was defined primarily by its novelty. La mode was often described in relation to le goût. Fashion writers sometimes employed "le dernier goût," the latest taste, as a synonym for la mode.
Le gout by itself referred to a universal aesthetic, beyond the whims of la mode, which was characterized by inherent elegance. Critics agreed that le bon goût (good taste) was best achieved through simplicity. In contrast to le luxe, moralists and fashion writers alike associated le gout with a lack of artifice and virtue, as well as egalitarianism because, hypothetically, anyone could achieve it.

My thesis sits at the crossroads of several fields of scholarship, notably the study of consumption and the consumer revolution in eighteenth century France, gender studies, and nationalism studies. In the field of consumption, The Culture of Clothing, historian Daniel Roche’s groundbreaking archival study of dress in Ancien Régime France, identified a consumer revolution in the opening decades of the eighteenth century. Roche describes two discourses about fashion in the Ancien Régime. The first reflected a “moral economy,” in which “everyone had their place and ought to consume according to their rank, where clothing revealed status.” The second addressed fashion itself and revealed the anxieties association with the transition from a moral economy to a consumer economy, in which all goods were available to whoever could afford them.

Building on Roche’s work, other historians have explored the material and mental crises caused by the new availability of consumer goods. This material abundance was made possible by the development of “populuxe goods”- a term coined by historian Cissie Fairchilds to refer to cheap imitations of luxury products. Historian John Shovlin addressed the destabilizing effects of populuxe goods on the moral economy, which lead

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to criticism of the use of luxury to express political authority.\textsuperscript{5} Meanwhile, other historians, such as Michael Kwass and Dena Goodman, have explored how the vocabulary of luxury adapted to the popularization of luxury goods. My thesis employs Goodman’s argument that the category of “taste” replaced the older luxury vocabulary as a positive, inclusive criterion for consumption.\textsuperscript{6}

My thesis also draws significantly from the field of gender studies. I rely on the work of historian Jennifer Jones who, like other historians such as Clare Crowston, study consumption through the lens of feminist studies. Jones’ book, \textit{Sexing La Mode}, is the most thorough exploration of the gendering of consumption in late eighteenth-century France. Jones demonstrates how popular opinion linked women and fashion and then pursues the consequences. In place of rank, gender became the defining factor of how men and women related to clothing.\textsuperscript{7} Jones concludes that the gendering of fashion supported the new feminine ideal of domesticity, in which proper women dressed for their husband’s gaze alone.\textsuperscript{8} This conclusion aligns with the thesis of Joan Landes, a feminist scholar of the French Revolution, that the Revolution, in explicit contrast to the \textit{Ancien Régime}, restricted women to the domestic sphere, where their political participation was limited to their duties as republican mothers.\textsuperscript{9} Although I agree with both Jones and Landes about women’s movement from the public to the private sphere, I argue that this transition is not as smooth as they say. In particular, my evidence suggests

\textsuperscript{6} Dena Goodman, “Furnishing Discourses,” 77.
that the years 1789-190 were filled with ambiguity about women's role in society and that fashion played a key role in their active participation in the Revolution.

I resolve the ambiguity of women's desire for political action and its subsequent denial in the role of women in the creation of the French national identity. David Bell, a historian of French nationalism, argues that revolutionaries rejected the corrupt character of the Ancien Régime when they set about to remake the French national identity.\(^\text{10}\) I combine Bell's suggestion with Landes' scholarship on the use of female iconography to define the republican French identity. According to Landes, the nascent Republic used the female body to instill nationalism by aligning patriotism with heterosexual desire.\(^\text{11}\) Recognizing Landes' argument for the symbolic power of women and Bell's need to create a new French identity, I use these arguments to offer a more nuanced explanation of the role of women and fashion under the Republic.

My research focuses on the leading French fashion journal of the late eighteenth century. It appeared under the title Cabinet des modes from 1785 to 1786, Magasin des modes nouvelles françaises et anglaises from 1787 to 1789, and Journal de la mode et du goût from 1790 to 1793. In my thesis, I will refer to "the Journal" for the publication as a whole and by specific titles to invoke a specific year or era. The Journal began as a bi-monthly journal with 24 issues per year, then expanded to 36 issues in its second year. After its expansion, the subscription was fixed at 21 livres, which put it within the price range of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Its subscribers totaled around a thousand across Europe and it was primarily intended to inform those in the French provinces and in other


countries about the Parisian fashion scene. In addition, the Journal occasionally ran advertisements for luxury boutiques and the shops of marchandes de modes. Each issue included eight pages of text and three colored engravings, except for the Journal de la mode et du goût, which published sheet music in lieu of the third fashion plate. In addition to the engravings, the Journal contained poetry, anecdotes and trivia, and stories about contemporary events. The Journal’s editor was François Buisson, who employed several journalists, including Jean-Antoine Lebrun Tossa. Lebrun had no initial connection to the fashion trade. Instead, he was an aspiring writer from the provinces who had come to Paris hoping to break into the world of journalism. By the late eighteenth century, many young provincial men had migrated to Paris in hopes of finding fame and fortune as journalists. Lebrun was lucky; the majority of these men ended up in poverty, embittered by their failure to break into the literary world.

At the end of 1789 the Journal underwent a major overhaul intended to freshen its spirit and reflect the revolutionary excitement of the time. Buisson fired the former staff, except Lebrun, whose pro-revolutionary views energized the Journal. Due to the nature of its audience and its subject matter, the Journal was initially slow to embrace the Revolution’s effect on fashion. Lebrun’s pro-revolutionary attitude turned out to be relatively short-lived, lasting only through 1790. As the Revolution radicalized in 1792 the journal abandoned all political discussion and began to display counter-revolutionary

13 Jones, “Repackaging Rousseau,” 950.
14 Historian Robert Darnton dubbed this group of struggling writers the denizens of “Grub Street.” For more on the desire for fame and fortune that brought them to Paris, and the failure most of them encountered, see the chapter “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature” in The Literary Underground of the Old Regime (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
15 Kleinert, “La Mode,” 70.
fashions. It staggered into 1793, irregularly releasing issues with old fashion plates, before finally shutting down in April.

The Journal was the unchallenged leader its genre and played an important role in establishing the discourse of fashion. The creation of women’s journals marked a significant development in the press, particularly in the last decades of the eighteenth century, in which a wide variety of specialized journals appeared, appealing to the increasingly literate population.\(^\text{16}\) Although female literacy rates remained low at the end of the eighteenth century, 35% compared to 65% for men in the Parisian region in 1786-90 and often more than 20 percentage points lower in the provinces, they had significantly increased since 1700.\(^\text{17}\) Although its price and the requirement of literacy limited its immediate readers to an elite audience, evidence exists that the ideas it espoused permeated more of the population. In both 1786 and 1788, the editor complained that low-quality counterfeits of the Journal were circulating, indicating an interest in fashion and openness to the Journal’s ideas amongst a population that could not afford to purchase it.\(^\text{18}\)

I supplemented my research with two pamphlets, entitled *Comment m’habillerai-je? Réflexions politiques et philosophiques sur l’habillement français, et sur la nécessité d’un costume national* (How Shall I Dress Myself? Political and Philosophical Reflections on French Dress and on the Necessity of a National Costume) by Claude-


\(^{17}\) François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 32-49.

\(^{18}\) *Magasin des modes nouvelles*, December 20, 1786, 27-28 and July 30 1788, 203-204.
François-Xavier Mercier de Compiègne and *Apperçu sur les modes françaises (Insights on French Fashions)* by Nicolas Ponce. These pamphlets were written, respectively, in 1793 and sometime between 1795 and 1799. Both support the arguments of the Journal regarding questions of taste, morality and nationalism. These pamphlets support the theory that questions of taste influenced the consumption practices of a broad section of French society.

My thesis is divided into four sections. The first section discusses how consumption of fashion shifted from an indication of rank to a mark of gender. I trace how fashion was linked to femininity and how this association contributed to a new model of domestic femininity. Additionally, I address how the Journal adapted its discourse to market fashion for a female consumer. Section two examines how the luxury debates developed a new vocabulary for understanding the impact of the consumer revolution. I then discuss how this change broke down the social order of the *Ancien Régime* and how the Journal created an inclusive discourse of consumption based on taste. The third section explores how good and bad taste for men and women assumed moral and political connotations during the Revolution. For both sexes, bad taste was linked to luxury and the *Ancien Régime*. Masculine good taste required the sober costume of the citizen, whereas feminine good taste remained ambiguous, caught between the female aristocrat and the republican mother. In the final section, I show how fashion reinforced women’s role in the Republic and created the new French national identity by turning women into symbolic representations of the glory of the French Republic.
The Gendering of Consumption

The inherent connection between women and fashion is an unquestioned principle of modern western culture. Billion dollar industries revolve around the fact that women, for the most part, are consumers of fashion- and men are not. The apparent banality of such a statement demonstrates how thoroughly gendered ideas about consumption have impacted western culture, despite their recent roots. During the eighteenth century, a fundamental shift occurred in consumption of fashion. Although this shift took place in all European countries with developing commercial cultures, its effects in France acquired particular significance in the shifting contexts of the Ancien Régime and the Revolution. These patterns of consumption defined gender roles as revolutionary leaders reformed French society.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, consumption of fashion shifted from an indicator of social class to a sign post for gender. Specifically, fashionable consumption was gendered female and consequentially gender became the criterion that determined how both men and women participated in consumption. Historian Jennifer Jones described this transformation as the process in which “…all of the categories which had once shaped fashion, such as class, privilege, or rank, were collapsed onto the category of gender, which became the primary device…for organizing the fashion culture of late eighteenth century Paris.”¹⁹ This transformation reflected the new emphasis on difference as the basis of gender roles. In response to this change, the fashion industry, exemplified by the attitudes of the Journal, targeted and defined the new female consumer. During the Revolution, the fashion industry adjusted the image of feminine consumption in response to hostile Revolutionary ideology.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, and for centuries previously, both noble men and women employed fashionable consumption to display their social status. According to historian Daniel Roche, this reflected the values of a “moral economy” at the core of the traditional society of the three estates. The working principles of this “moral economy” required that “the nature of something or somebody must be expressed by its appearance, [and] that ostentation and luxury must be rejected except when they are in keeping with the social hierarchies of power…”20 Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, industrial advances and cheap imitations of luxury goods sparked a consumer revolution that made more goods available to a broader market. The ensuing democratization of fashion disrupted traditional sartorial displays of class because appearances were no longer trustworthy guides. On the other hand, consumption assumed a new role, drawing distinctions along the lines of gender.

The feminine gendering of fashion did not appear in ideology alone; a measurable transformation in men and women’s consumption habits resulted in women becoming the dominant consumers of fashion at all levels of society. By examining possession inventories after death, Roche charts how women’s fashionable consumption outpaced men’s at all levels of society over the course of the eighteenth century. In 1700, a marked sexual dimorphism existed between noble men and women: the value of women’s wardrobes was double that of men’s, except at the highest levels of the nobility where they tended to spend equally.21 In contrast, poor wage-earners dressed according

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to an equality of necessity. Men and women’s wardrobes were of approximately equal value, with the former worth slightly more than the latter. 22 Among the bourgeoisie, male wardrobes were generally worth half the value of female wardrobes. 23 Thus at the beginning of the eighteenth century, fashionable consumption was the most gendered among the bourgeoisie and the lower nobility. Men and women of the highest nobility consumed equally as a display of status, whereas the wardrobe of the poor was limited according to necessity.

By 1789, a profound change had occurred, above all at the lowest levels of society. The average value of lower-class wardrobe was now marked by strong sexual dimorphism: the average male wardrobe was worth 36 livres, double its value in 1700, compared to the average female wardrobe, which was now worth 92 livres—six times its value in 1700. 24 The high nobility continued to spend equally on clothing, except amongst families of the parlementaires, where women’s wardrobes were often worth more than men’s. 25 Bourgeois consumption habits upheld the earlier sexual dimorphism, with women’s wardrobes generally worth twice those of men. Bourgeois men, however, spent less on clothing than men at the beginning of the century. 26 This data shows two important trends in the gendering of clothing consumption. By the end of the eighteenth century, except amongst the highest nobility, women spent twice as much as their husbands across the social spectrum. Conversely, men’s consumption increased at a much lower rate and, among the bourgeoisie, it decreased in relative value from the beginning of the century.

22 Ibid, 100
23 Ibid, 104-105
24 Ibid. 110
25 Ibid. 112
26 Ibid. 113
These changes in men and women’s consumption patterns coincided with the emergence of commercial ideologies that explicitly linked women and fashion. Before the late seventeenth century, male tailors possessed the exclusive legal privilege to make clothing for men, women and children. Female seamstresses, couturières, worked independently on the outskirts of this guild. In 1675, however, the seamstresses of Paris succeeded in gaining legal privileges to make and sell a wide variety of clothing for women and children. Making clothing for men, however, with the exception of boys under eight, was strictly forbidden. Once established, the couturière guild became the fourth-largest trade organization in early modern Paris, including about 10,000 women by the end of the eighteenth century.27 Clare Crowston’s study of the couturière guild in ancien régime Paris shows how seamstresses, in order to protect their business from male tailleurs, propagated the idea that fashion was a feminine concern. In order to obtain their privileges, seamstresses originally argued that it was keeping with “propriety, decency, and modesty” for women to be clothed by their own sex.28 They emphasized the intimate bond between the seamstress and her female client in order to reinforce a natural connection between women and clothing that transcended all other differences.29

The appearance of a new group of women working in fashion, the marchandes de modes, in the mid-eighteenth century, threatened the seamstresses’ business, while reinforcing the claims that they had originally established about the connection between women and fashion. The marchandes de modes emerged through cracks in the guild system and worked both within and outside of the corporate structure. They dominated

27 Jones, Sexing La Mode, 80-83.
28 Ibid. 84
the fashion scene of late eighteenth century Paris, performing tasks that were also performed by female seamstresses, linen drapers, and hairdressers, such as finishing garments, decorating hats, selling lace and ribbons, designing hairstyles, and making simple ready-made items such as capes and fichus. Although marchandes de modes were technically limited to the role of trimming and accessorizing, they claimed to be the true creators of la mode.30 Despite their internal competition, seamstresses and marchandes de modes successfully dominated the feminine fashion market. In doing so, they established notions of feminized fashion consumption based on a sexual division of labor, an innate and exclusive connection between women and fashion, and an emphasis on displaying femininity through clothing and appearances.31 In the end, the strongest legacy of eighteenth-century seamstresses was the supposedly “natural” relationship between women, needlework and fashion, summarized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s declaration: “L’aiguille et l’épée ne sauroient être maniées par les memes mains.”32

The seamstresses’ arguments about the natural link between femininity and fashion reflected a larger Enlightenment debate about the nature of women. In elite society, the woman of the Ancien Régime was a public figure. As a courtier, she played a role in the symbolic display of the monarchy, as well as having access to the political machinations of the Court. As a salonnière, she directed the careers of men of the Enlightenment and passed judgment on matters of culture and taste. Even if she did not formally participate in these institutions, she appeared at the theater, promenaded in public gardens, and participated in public life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed a new

30 Jones, Sexing La Mode, 91-92.
31 Crowston, 12.
model of femininity in response to what he denounced as the decadent public woman of the Ancien Régime. In his Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater, Rousseau criticized contemporary Paris, where “la femme la plus estimée est celle qui fait le plus de bruit; de qui l'on parle le plus; qu'on voit le plus dans le monde; chez qui l'on dîne le plus souvent; qui donne le plus impérieusement le ton…” Rousseau vilified public women, especially those who sought to draw attention to themselves, remarking that:

“…rechercher les regards des hommes c'est déjà s'en laisser corrompre, et que toute femme qui se montre se déshonore.” Luxurious fashion according to Rousseau, was more than feminine frivolity. It was a tool employed by women to attract male attention and a sign of both their personal immorality and social decay.

Instead, Rousseau proposed a model of femininity based on what he saw as women’s natural characteristics: modesty, timidity, domesticity, and the desire to please men. Rousseau described his ideal domestic woman in the following image:

“Y a-t-il au monde un spectacle aussi touchant, aussi respectable, que celui d'une mère de famille entourée de ses enfants, régissant les travaux de ses domestiques, procurant à son mari une vie heureuse, et gouvernant sagement la maison? C'est là qu'elle se montre dans toute la dignité d'une honnête femme; c'est là qu'elle impose vraiment du respect, et que la beauté partage avec honneur les hommages rendus à la vertu. Une maison dont la maîtresse est absente est un corps sans âme qui bientôt tombe en corruption; une femme hors de sa maison perd son plus grand lustre, et dépouillée de ses vrais ornements, elle se montre avec indécence.”

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33 “The most esteemed woman is the one who makes the most noise, of whom the most is said, who is seen the most in society, at whose home one dines the most frequently, who most imperiously sets the tone…” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lettre à Mr. d'Alembert sur les spectacles, ed. M. Fuchs (Lille: Giard, 1948). University of Chicago : ARTFL Project, http://artflx.uchicago.edu (Accessed Jan. 26, 2010), 65.
34 “To seek the stares of men is already to be corrupted. Any woman who shows herself dishonors herself.” Ibid. 110
35 “Is there a sight as touching, as respectable, as that of a mother surrounded by her children, directing her servants, assuring a happy life for her husband, and wisely governing the household? It is in this context that she appears with all the dignity of an honest woman, in which she truly imposes respect, and in which beauty and honor share the praises of virtue. A house whose mistress is absent is a body without a soul that is quickly corrupted. A woman outside of her home loses her splendor and, stripped of her true ornaments, she shows herself indecently.” Ibid. 117
Although Rousseau implied that luxurious fashion, worn to attract the attention of others, was an immoral substitute for feminine beauty that came from good morals, he was not categorically opposed to women having an interest in fashion. Rousseau believed that women's interest in fashion came from their inherent desire to please men and it was therefore an inevitable, even commendable, part of their nature. As he explained in *Emile*, “Les petites filles presque en naissant aiment la parure: non contentes d'être jolies elles veulent qu'on les trouve telles; on voit dans leurs petits airs que ce soin les occupe déjà, et à peine sont elles en état d'entendre ce qu'on leur dit qu'on les gouverne en leur parlant de ce qu'on pensera d'elles.” As long as women dressed in order to please men, preferably in simple fashions that emphasized their moral beauty, they were obeying the natural feminine role.

Although Rousseau's definition of feminine nature now appears misogynistic, it was embraced by women from all social classes as progressive in its time. Although he attacked the cultural influence of elite women, Rousseau placed real value on motherhood and domestic duty, which were accessible to women of any social class. While denying them any formal public position, he created a private sphere in which any woman could be powerful and entrusted to her the task of educating the future generation. Rousseau spread his model of domestic womanhood through the heroines of his novels such as Sophie of *Emile* and Julie of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. These novels had a profound impact on French society and devoted readers fell in love, married, and raised

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37 “Almost as soon as they are born, little girls love to adorn themselves. Not content to be pretty, they want others to find them so as well; one sees I their little airs that this already concerns them, and scarcely as soon as they can understand what one says to them, one can control them by telling them what one will think of them.” Rousseau, *Emile*, 703-704.
38 Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, 67.
families according to their lessons. The result was a revolution in gender roles and behavior expectations for both women and men.

Rousseau’s model of domesticity was accompanied by a new model for masculinity based on his insistence on mutually compatible but distinct gender roles for men and women. This gender exclusivity manifested itself in the realm of fashionable consumption by what historian J.C. Flugel called the “great masculine renunciation.”

As Roche’s research showed, masculine consumption in almost every social class had fallen far behind feminine fashionable consumption by the end of the eighteenth century. Additionally, masculine fashion became increasingly sober starting in the 1770s, progressing through the 1780s and 90s, and peaking during the Terror. Despite the Magasin des modes nouvelles’ commitment to discussing male fashion, it often noted that there was simply nothing to say. Already, in 1787, the editor remarked, “Nous avons épuisé tout ce qu’il fallait dire sur la Mode pour les hommes,” and during the Revolution it admitted, “Depuis quelque temps, le costume des hommes ne vaut pas la peine qu’on s’en occupe…” Utility became the key purpose of male clothing. In one fashion plate, Journal de la mode et du goût excused its portrayal of a man in a redingote that covered his suit on the basis of practicality: “L’habillement des hommes est toujours des plus simples; les pluies continuelles rendent la redingote nécessaire: c’est pourquoi l’homme représenté dans cette planche en porte une pardessus son habit.”

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40 Jones, Sexing La Mode 214.
41 “We have exhausted all there is to say on men’s fashion.” Magasin des modes nouvelles, May 20, 1787, 145-146.
42 “For some time now, men’s fashion has not been worth talking about…” Journal de la mode et du goût, February 5, 1792, 2-3.
43 “Men’s dress is always extremely simple. Continual rain makes a redingote necessary, which is why the man represented in this plate wears one over his coat.” JMG, January 25, 1791, 1-2.
himself with sobriety and utility, the late-eighteenth-century man aligned himself with a new model of masculinity that emphasized male rationality and rejected frivolity.

The masculine renunciation of fashion went deeper, however, than the appearance of men's clothes. In accordance with Rousseauian gender dichotomy, if an interest in fashion was natural for women, it was therefore unnatural for men. If women's interest in fashion aimed to please men, it was inappropriate for men, who exist to be pleased, to display an interest in fashion. The Journal insisted,

"[La mode des hommes] change beaucoup moins, soit parce qu'ils doivent beaucoup moins s'occuper de plaire, comme elles, soit parce que leur esprit est moins inventif en ce genre. A Dieu ne plaise que nous leur en fassions un reproche! Ils ne sont points appelés par la nature, ni par leur rang dans l'état social, à travailler aux moyens de plaire. Leur sexe, trop inhabile en ce point, serait beaucoup trop ridicule. Qu'ils laissent ces soins à l'autre sexe, beaucoup plus fin, beaucoup plus aimable, & qui semble né pour ne devoir point avoir d'autre emploï. C'est la charge de celui-ci. Toute autre charge qu'il supporte, nous paraît contrarier entièrement les vues de la nature."\textsuperscript{44}

The Journal reinforced the link between fashion and display for women. Women appeared as objects designed to please the male gaze, whereas masculine display was condemned as unnatural. As a part of the luxury industry, however, the Journal did not imply that fashion was useless for men. Instead, it defined the times when it was appropriate for them. Whereas the fashion plates depicting female fashion addressed all women, the Journal always specified that male fashion plates depicted a young man. It was therefore appropriate for young men to be interested in fashion at the age when they were trying to attract and court women, in order to fulfill their natural roles as husbands,

\textsuperscript{44} "Men's fashion changes much less, perhaps because they have much less need than women to please, perhaps because their spirit is much less inventive in this realm. We certainly do not reproach them for this! They are neither called by nature, nor by their place in society, to try to please. Men, too inept in this regard, would be ridiculous. Let them leave these concerns to the other sex, which is much more adept, much more loveable, and which seems born for no other task. This is women's duty. Any other charge appears to us to be entirely contrary to the views of nature." \textit{MMN}, May 20, 1787, 145-146.
fathers and heads of households. If an interest in fashion extended beyond this point in a man’s life, however, it became dangerous and unnatural. Accordingly, men’s role as consumers of fashion was limited.

The Journal provides an excellent example of how shifting gender roles influenced the fashion industry. When the Cabinet des modes first appeared in 1785, consumption of fashion had already been gendered mostly female. It did not yet, however, exclude men. The Cabinet des modes appealed to the widest possible public, targeting both men and women. The first issue of the Journal declared it was “[un] ouvrage qui donne un connoissance exacte & prompte, tant des Habillemens & Parures nouvelles des personnes de l’un & de l’autre Sexe…” The Cabinet des modes initially resisted Rousseau’s idea that fashion was an exclusively feminine method for pleasing men, noting that “Dans tous les temps, dans tous les lieux, les deux sexes, dans la vue de se plaire mutuellement, ont cherché à se parer.”

In its early years, the Cabinet des modes presented both men’s and women’s fashions, as well as plates showing “objects of taste,” such as furniture, clocks, decorative objects and carriages, which the editors intended to appeal to both sexes. By early 1787, however, the editors announced that they were cutting back on non-fashion items because they had received letters from women complaining that they wanted to see more fashion plates. In 1788 the editors excused the publication of an issue with a single plate devoted entirely to furniture and decorative objects, writing, “…Si nous ne donnons qu’une pareille Planche par année, les Souscripteurs, seulement avides d’habits & de

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45 “A work that gives exact and up to date knowledge of clothing and adornment for both sexes.” CM, November 15, 1785, 1.
46 “In all times and places, both sexes have adorned themselves in order to please one another.” Ibid. 5
47 MMN, January 20, 1787, 51.
parures pour le corps, ne pourront pas nous reprocher de prendre trop sur le plaisir, & de leur causer trop d'impatience."

Although the Journal never eliminated the male fashion plates, nor the "objects of taste," it steadily reduced the amount of space it devoted to them in order to focus on its female audience. The *Cabinet des modes* (1785-1786) devoted 45% of its plates to female dress and accessories, 23% to male dress, and 32% to objects of taste. The *Magasin des modes nouvelles* (1787-1789) devoted 69% of its plates to feminine fashion, 16% to masculine fashion, and 15% to objects of taste. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* (1790-1793) devoted 85% of its plates to feminine fashion, 12% to masculine fashion, and only 3% to objects of taste. The shift to a female audience occurred during the *Journal de la mode et du goût*, the revolutionary incarnation of the journal. The Revolution solidified the gendering of fashion consumption by assigning it political value. In republican ideology fashion officially became the domain of women to the exclusion of men. The Journal's editors recognized this shift and sought to target the feminine market, admitting that "cet Ouvrage devant être plus particulièrement pour elles, nous avons dû penser à les satisfaire premièremement." 

The fashion industry in the late eighteenth century faced two challenges: reorienting itself to an almost exclusively feminine market and promoting consumption in a time when simplicity was in style and luxury acquired negative connotations. In order to justify feminine consumption, the Journal relied on Rousseau's notion that an interest in fashion was natural for women, who sought to please men. The Journal portrayed

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48 "Our subscribers, avid only for news of clothing and adornment for the body, cannot reproach us for taking the pleasure of showing one such plate per year and causing them too much irritation." *MMN*, May 10, 1788, 137-138.
49 "As this work is particularly for women, we must think of satisfying them first." *MMN*, May 20, 1787 145.
consumption as an appropriate means for women to achieve "natural" feminine goals. The first such goal was to find a husband. In one of its early issues, the *Cabinet des modes* published a letter from a reader announcing her upcoming marriage to the man of her dreams. She explained how she had used fashion to win his heart and triumph over the superior fortune of a rival: "Je dois cette victoire Messieurs, à votre charmant *Cabinet*. J’avois mis ce jour-là une robe à la Turque, & ma coiffure étoit un chapeau à la Captif; mon Amant balancoit encore entre l’or de ma Rivale & mes foibles appas ; mais aidée de ce galant costume, j’achevai de le vaincre & de le décider en ma faveur." 50

Thanks to her reliance on the Journal’s fashion advice, good taste trumped fortune and the writer won her husband. If the Journal directed feminine consumption towards the all-important goal of marriage, it nevertheless allowed women more control over their lives than they might have otherwise had. According to the Journal, dressing tastefully improved a woman’s chances of ascending the social ladder and therefore empowering herself while fulfilling her natural goal of marriage.

The Journal insisted that once a woman had found a husband, an interest in fashion was integral to keeping him. It presented fashion as an intermediary between two conflicting instincts that could upset domestic harmony: women wanted to please men, while men wanted a variety of women. The letter writer continued that now that she had a husband, "[elle] tâche de le retenir. Et quelle moyen plus sûr que celui de paraître tous les jours nouvelles à ses yeux, en variant [ses] ajustemens?" 51 The necessity of varying

50 "I owe this victory, Messieurs, to your charming *Cabinet*. That day I had worn a dress à la Turque and a hat à la Captif. My lover was still deciding between my rival’s gold and my charms, but aided by this dress I managed to win him and make him decide in my favor." *CM*, March 1, 1786, 60-61.

51 "She is going to strive to keep him. And what better means of doing so than each day appearing new to his eyes by varying how she dresses?" *Ibid.* 61
fashion in order to retain a husband's interest reoccurred throughout the journal. The

*Magasin des modes nouvelles* declared:

"Quelque honnête que soit une femme, elle peut toujours plaire, et pour y réussir, il faut qu'elle présente continuellement ses charmes sous un nouveau jour. Par là elle ménage, en quelque sorte, à son amant ou à son mari, les plaisirs du changement. Le bonnet, le chapeau, le déshabillé, la robe, etc. trop longtemps de la même forme, la rendraient toujours la même, et quelque belle qu'elle fût, elle ne serait aussi piquante que la première fois ; l'uniformité jointe à la jouissance, engendrerait bientôt l'ennui et le dégoût."  

The Journal recognized boredom as a threat to conjugal life and promoted fashion as a means of assuring happy domesticity. Although it encouraged ideology that restricted women to the domestic sphere, the Journal gave women the tools—fashion—to keep them and their husbands fulfilled. The Journal's sales emphasized assumptions about the natural and essential differences between men and women. Rousseau's ideas laid the foundation for these beliefs, but men and women's decisions about how to dress themselves, influenced by the Journal's advice, translated them into the tangible reality of visibly sexed bodies. Fashion came to express an innate gender identity and a way for men and women to navigate their roles in society and ensure domestic harmony.

Even during the Revolution, the *Journal de la mode et du goût* presented feminine consumption as the appropriate way for women to fulfill their duties as *citoyennes*.

Under the influence of Jean-Antoine Lebrun Tossa, the *Journal de la mode et du goût* embraced the spirit of the Revolution's early years. He appreciated the Revolution's contributions to fashion and fashion's ability to mold women to republican domesticity.

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52 "No matter how honorable a woman is, she always wants to please. And to succeed at that it is necessary that she continually present her charms in a new light. By this means she provides for her husband, or lover, the pleasures of variety. The same bonnet, hat, déshabillé, or dress for too long will make her look the same. No matter how beautiful she is, she will never be as exciting as the first time. Uniformity and pleasure, too long mixed together, will lead to boredom and disgust." *JMG*, November 5, 1790, 1.
Following the lead of political reform, the *Journal de la mode et du goût* took up the cause of the abolition of convents. Lebrun Tossa included short stories highlighting the fate of novices whose mother superiors forced them to remain in the convent and published an epic poem entitled “La Liberté du Cloître” that continued for three months. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* suggested fashion could help integrate former nuns into society: “Sans doute que nous désirons que les jeunes qui quitteront leurs cloîtres, fassent leur devoir de citoyennes, en donnant des enfants à l’Etat. En bien, pour avoir bientôt un amant, ensuite un mari, il faut un peu d’aisance avec un grain de coquetterie, se mettre comme tout le monde, suivre la mode enfin.” Fashion was thus harnessed to the Revolution’s natalist agenda.

The Journal even featured fashion plates with fashions appropriate for former nuns who had recently re-entered society. One plate showed “…une robe à la Vestale de linon. Cette robe blanche, ainsi que le jupon, est ornée d’un léger galon d’or très-brillant, de même que les cordons de la pièce ; les petits parements et le tour-de-gorge.” The editor noted, “On voit, à l’air modeste et même un peu austère de cette femme, qu’elle n’est pas encore familiarisée avec le grand goût, et qu’elle a vécu long-temps dans l’ennui et le désespoir. Quelques-unes de nos élégantes prennent un peu de cet air, pour paraître novices, et se rendre intéressantes.”

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53 “There is no doubt that we wish young women to leave their cloisters, do their duty as citizens, and give children to the state. Very well, but in order to have a lover, then a husband, one must be poised, be a little coquetish, and one must dress like everyone else, that is to say, follow fashion.” *JMG*, March 25, 1790, 1.

54 For more on the pro-natalist revolutionary agenda, see the chapter “Population Politics in Revolution” in Carol Blum’s *Strength in Numbers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), particularly pages 155-163 on the campaign against clerical celibacy.

55 “A linen dress à la Vestale. This white dress, as well as the petticoat, is decorated with a light, shining, gold braid, which likewise decorates the lacings, the facing and the neckline.” “One sees, in this woman’s modest- even austere- air, that she is not familiar with great taste and that she has lived for a long time in boredom and despair. Some of our elegant young ladies affect this air in order to appear novices and make themselves more interesting.” *JMG*, March 25, 1790. 2-3.
Figure 1: Une religieuse nouvellement rendue à la société. (JMG, March 25, 1790)
proposed that feminine consumption of fashion was integral to reforming the *Ancien Régime* models of femininity in order to create the new French *citoyenne*. While the aristocratic *courtisanne* and *salonnière* were rejected as models of revolutionary femininity, the chastity of the *religieuse* was equally problematic because it prevented her from fulfilling her natural duties to procreate. A former nun could transform herself into a *citoyenne*, however, by accepting her duty to use fashion to please men, attract a husband, and bear children for the state.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, as the traditional social order broke down, fashionable consumption ceased to reflect social class and took on gendered associations with femininity. New gender models, popularized by Rousseau, were vastly influential in establishing a dichotomy of male and female behavior, in which women existed to please men and the natural interest they took in fashion therefore rendered it inappropriate for men, who did not need to please women. As fashionable consumption became increasingly gendered female, earlier distinctions that determined one's consumption, such as social class or age, were collapsed into the category of “female.” The Journal reassured its readers that “la Mode est une & qu’elle est la même pour tous les âges.”\(^{56}\) It increasingly presented fashions as appropriate for all social classes.

The survival of the Journal, and the fashion industry as a whole, depended on its ability to adapt to the vogue for simplicity and the demographic changes of its customers. At the same time that the fashion industry lost the majority of male customers, it gained a much broader female market through the cheap luxury products that allowed even lower-class women to participate in the culture of fashion. The Journal’s success reflected its ability to craft a new vocabulary for fashion, which disassociated it from luxury - a term

\(^{56}\) *CM*, July 1, 1786.
laden with both elitist and negative moral connotations by the end of the century. The Journal developed the discourse of taste to appeal to a socially diverse, but overwhelmingly feminine, market in order to convince women of the merits, and even necessity, of fashionable consumption at a time when the social and political contexts condemned luxury.
The Struggle Between Luxury and Taste

Throughout the eighteenth century, no word was subject to as much debate as "le luxe": Luxury. Moralists, as well as political and economic theorists, debated the word’s definition. Their discussions earned the name the “luxury debates,” which altered both the meaning of the word and expanded the vocabulary of consumption. The luxury debates changed how people viewed the material world and the commodities available to them due to the burgeoning consumer revolution. In the midst of these debates, the word “luxury” became confused, acquiring multiple sub-categories from which emerged the concept of “le goût”: Taste. By 1789, luxury had acquired negative connotations that encompassed the political and social ills of the Ancien Régime. In contrast, the concept of “taste” acquired the positive connotations of industrious commerce and personal expression that earlier writers had ascribed to luxury.

The shift from luxury to taste emerged in the world of fashion given its importance as a visual indice of social hierarchy. Contemporary observers remarked on changes wrought by the consumer revolution and the undermining of the traditional sartorial hierarchy when the middle and lower classes participated in the fashion economy. Throughout this transformation, fashion remained a symbolic language in accordance with the French tradition of representation. The shift from luxury to taste, however, demonstrated the extent to which values and the hierarchy it represented had changed. During the Revolution, good taste gained importance as a republican form of consumption due to its emphasis on simplicity and its egalitarian nature. As the

Revolution politicized consumption, good taste replaced luxury as the foundation of a new social hierarchy based on utility, merit, and individual moral worth rather than birth.

Over the course of the century, the concept of luxury shifted dramatically. According to the Christian worldview that supported the moral economy, luxury was a sin, except for those whose high place in the social order required them to display their superior status. Near the end of the seventeenth century, however, economic and social theorists questioned the traditional definition of luxury and its impact on France’s economy and society. This reevaluation of luxury coincided with the explosion of an import market in foreign products such as coffee, chocolate, cottons, silk, porcelain, lacquer and paper goods. Not only did France’s expanding commercial empire bring these products to domestic markets in increasing quantities, but French manufactures quickly learned to recreate them both as high-quality luxury products and as cheaper, imitation goods. Observers associated this expansion in luxury commodities with trade and commerce and thus argued that it benefitted the country as a whole.

Intellectuals, such as Bernard Mandeville and Voltaire, put forward a new thesis that dominated the luxury debates from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. Mandeville’s poem *The Fable of the Bees*, originally published in London in 1705, declared that luxury was not a destructive vice, but a source of prosperity. According to Mandeville, when individuals pursued their self-interest and indulged in luxuries, they contributed to commercial growth, the employment of the poor, and the growth of the nation’s power. In his “hive,” Mandeville wrote that, “...Luxury Employ’d a million of the poor, And odious pride a million more; Envy itself, and vanity, Were

ministers of industry; Their darling folly, fickleness, In diet, furniture, and dress, That strange ridic'lous vice was made The very wheel that turn'd the trade.” As a result, “Thus ev’ry part was full of vice, Yet the whole mass a paradise…Such were the blessing of that state; Their crimes conspired to make them great.” Voltaire popularized Mandeville’s views in France during the first half of the eighteenth century.

After 1750, Rousseau launched a critique of luxury. According to Rousseau, luxury led to moral corruption and consequentially the destruction of society. In his 1758 Letter to d’Alembert, he denounced the plan to introduce the theater in Geneva. He predicted: “Nos mœurs altérées, nos gouts changés, ne se rétabliront pas comme ils se seront corrompus…” The theater threatened political and moral order: “un monument du luxe…élévé sur les ruines de notre antique simplicité [qui menace]… la liberté publique.” Furthermore, he linked the corrupting influence of luxury to France, as virtuous Genevan morals were replaced by “les bons airs de France.” In Rousseau’s hand, luxury became the catch-all term for Ancien Régime’s decadence, creating an intellectual climate on the eve of the Revolution that called for moral regeneration as well as political reform.

As intellectuals and moralists parsed the benefits and harms of luxury for society, the debates grew more muddled. In an attempt to reconcile the traditional definition of “luxury as vice” with apologists’ definition of “luxury as public benefit,” economic and social theorists of the 1730s and 1740s developed nuanced definitions of

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60 “Our morals altered, our tastes changed, they will not reestablish themselves as before, so greatly they will have been corrupted.” Rousseau, Lettre à Mr. D’Alembert, 167.
61 “A monument to luxury…raised on the ruins of our antique simplicity that threatens public freedom.” Ibid., 129.
62 “The fine airs of France.” Ibid., 149.
different types of luxury, such as *le luxe utile* (useful luxury) and *le luxe vicieux* (harmful luxury.) The *Encyclopédie* went to great lengths to distinguish these two types of luxury. It summarized *le luxe utile* as “le luxe [qui est] avantageux à la population & à la richesse des états” and *le luxe vicieux* as “le désir des richesses & leur usage contraire aux mœurs & au bien de l’état.” Despite these distinctions, Saint-Lambert ultimately abandoned his search for a comprehensive definition and admitted: “Je ne prétends pas rassembler ici tout le bien & le mal qu’on a dit du luxe, je me borne à dire le principal, soit des éloges, soit des censures, & à montrer que l’histoire contredit les unes & les autres.”

Saint-Lambert’s entry reveals the problems that confronted theorists’ application of the traditional vocabulary of luxury to a rapidly transforming social and economic order. Saint-Lambert needed a new classification system to help people make sense of their changing world. In response to this dilemma, theorists developed a new vocabulary of consumption, which included the term “une commodité” - a category of objects that were not necessary for survival, and therefore technically luxuries, but which were so useful that they were beyond reproach. Commodities included furniture, simple clothing, tools, and any object that relieved the physical burdens of life or, in a positive sense, made life more pleasant. This expanded vocabulary of luxury encompassed terms such as utility, comfort, convenience, and above all, taste.

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64 “I do not claim to include here all the good and bad that has been said of luxury. I limit myself to repeating the most important claims, be they praise or condemnation, and to showing that history contradicts both of them.” *Ibid.*

Taste, “le goût,” was especially useful in this new vocabulary because it clarified the problem of the muddled sub-categories of luxury. The discourse of taste replaced the definition of “le luxe utile” as the productive luxury that benefited commerce and increased the strength of the nation. It allowed moralists to condemn ostentatious consumption as bad taste, while allowing merchants to offer a wide variety of products that fell under the category of good taste. Taste also appealed to the broadening consumer market because it relied on an individual capacity for discernment, rather than wealth. Taste provided the ideological support that allowed members of the lower classes to consume products that had previously been above their station.

As the discourse of taste took on the positive connotations of commerce, the discourse of luxury became associated with an ostentatious and negative display of social status. Luxury as a positive marker of elite social status lost its value from two different directions. Cheap, imitation luxury products—dubbed “Populuxe goods” by historian Cissie Fairchilds—became easily accessible to a broad market, which reduced the impact of ostentatious display by the elites. Amidst this wash of luxury and populuxe products, taste offered a criterion for distinguishing and adding value to products. In other words, it was no longer enough for a dress or suit to be richly ornamented, it must also display good taste. At the same time, luxury was devalued from above, as wealthy bourgeois and newly ennobled families competed with the old nobility through ostentatious consumption. This competitive display of luxury undermined the nobility’s claim to

67 For more on populuxe goods, see Cissie Fairchilds’ essay “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” in which she traces the origins of populuxe goods to the desire of lower class consumers to imitate aristocratic consumption and follows the process by which they were produced in eighteenth century Paris.
distinction as a class founded on honor and birth, not money.\textsuperscript{69} As the system of 
représentation broke down and eroded the honor of the nobility, public opinion turned 
against luxury as a basis for political authority and social rank.\textsuperscript{70}

The transition from luxury to taste reinforced two fashion trends during the 
second half of the eighteenth century that contributed to the democratization of fashion: a 
vogue for simplicity that began in the mid-1770s and reached its peak during the 
Revolution, and the consumer revolution that made fashion accessible to the lower 
classes. The vogue for simplicity began in the mid-1770s when the robe à la polonaise 
replaced the robe à la française that had dominated fashion since the 1730s. The robe à 
la polonaise’s swept-up skirt was the first step towards practicality in fashion. The 1780s 
introduced simpler, unpowdered hairstyles, the simply-cut robe à l’anglaise for women 
and men’s fashions inspired by English country garb, and the abandonment of silk in 
favor of printed cottons and muslin for women and wool for men.\textsuperscript{71} The combination of 
less ornate styles with cheaper materials, and the wider availability of fashionable goods 
undermined the visual display of social order.

The vogue for simplicity arose from the anti-luxury, anti-aristocratic discourse 
that equated luxury with corruption, as well as the impact of Rousseau’s call to return to 
nature. Rousseau criticized civilization as a corrupting influence on man’s natural state 
and he popularized the rejection of society in order to return to a simpler, natural state of 
moral existence. As these ideas pulsed through all levels of French society, people used 
fashion as a means of embracing them. These impulses led to bizarre combinations of the

\textsuperscript{69} John Shovlin, The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French 
Revolution (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 120.
\textsuperscript{70} Shovlin, “The Cultural Politics of Luxury,” 604-605.
\textsuperscript{71} For more on the evolution of fashion in late eighteenth century France, see Aileen Ribeiro, The Art of 
Figure 2: 1780-85 Robe à la polonaise

Figure 3: 1784-87 Robe à l’anglaise

old style of dress focused on luxurious display and the new style focused on simplicity and naturalism, such as a dress described in the *Magasin des modes nouvelles* as a “robe à la paysanne de Cour.”

In a conscious rejection of luxury, the fashion industry declared simplicity to be a defining characteristic of good taste. The *Magasin des modes nouvelles* pitted luxury against taste in stark terms when describing two fashion plates: “Dans ce dernier cas, on veut montrer plus de faste, & dans le premier, plus de goût, avec plus de simplicité. Ceci justifie pleinement, que le goût marche indépendamment du faste.” It scorned luxury as an inadequate substitute for natural beauty, insisting: “Ce n’est que quand on n’est pas belle qu’il faut se faire riche. Qui a jamais osé dorer la Vénus de Praxitèle?” In a cultural climate where public opinion condemned luxury and linked it to the problems of the *Ancien Régime*, the fashion industry embraced the discourse of taste as a way to promote consumption. It encouraged tasteful consumption, which specifically meant a rejection of luxury in favor of simple, natural dress.

The fashion industry also encouraged tasteful consumption as an integral part of commerce, taking over the old justification of *le luxe utile*. Sometimes it retained the old vocabulary of luxury, particularly in the early years of the Journal, but no matter what the vocabulary, it declared that the fashion industry was essential for the well-being of French society. In the introduction to the first issue of the *Cabinet des modes*, the editor justified the French fashion industry according by emphasizing the redistribution of wealth and the growth of commerce. He wrote:

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72 *MMN*, September 10, 1788, 235.
73 “In the second example, greater pomp is displayed; in the first, greater taste and simplicity. This fully justifies that taste and pomp are independent.” *MMN*, February 20, 1787, 75.
74 “It is only when one is not beautiful that one must dress richly. Who would ever dare to gild the Venus of Praxitèle?” *MMN*, Introduction to 4th Year, November/December 1788, 2.
"On sait que dans les grandes Sociétés, où il y a de l'inégalité dans les fortunes & dans les conditions, des richesses & par conséquent du superflu, il doit y avoir nécessairement du luxe & que le luxe est utile; car si le riche n'emploie son superflu à des objets de consommation qui deviennent son nécessaire par l'habitude, il n'est plus de moyen de faire refluer ce superflu dans la classe nombreuse qui s'occupe des Arts & de l'Industrie. Le luxe restitue donc au pauvre ce que l'inégalité lui fait perdre; c'est à lui que nous devons l'activité du Commerce, l'encouragement des Manufactures, la création des Beaux-Arts, les succès de l'Agriculture, qui fleurit en raison d'une plus grande consommation; en un mot, de plus grandes ressources & de plus grandes jouissances." 

A few years later, the *Magasin des modes nouvelles* repeated this argument in a letter to the editor, but the author distanced himself from the discourse of *le luxe utile*. Instead, he framed the benefits of consumption within the language of good taste. After a similar justification of luxury, he qualified it with the note that the nation only reaped these benefits if consumption relied upon "les connaissances réfléchies du bon goût."  

Although the fashion industry recycled the argument of *le luxe utile*, it embraced the discourse of taste to promote commerce and national strength, while distancing itself from the negative connotations of luxury.

The Journal convinced women to consume despite the vogue for simplicity. It managed this feat by appealing to the inclusive nature of the discourse of taste to make consumption accessible to all women. Where luxury remained a privilege of noble birth and wealth, taste promised an egalitarian concept accessible to anyone. The Journal implied that anyone could be born with good taste and this instinct, not the clothes she

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75 "In great societies, where there is an inequality of wealth and conditions- and therefore excess- there must necessarily be luxury and this luxury is useful. If the rich did not put their excess towards consuming objects that become necessities out of habit, there would be no way to redistribute this excess wealth amongst the numerous people who occupy themselves with the arts and industry. Luxury therefore restores to the poor what inequality takes from them. We are indebted to luxury for the activity of commerce, the encouragement of manufacturing, the creation of the fine arts, and the success of agriculture, all of which flourish because of consumption. Simply put: It grants us the greatest resources, as well as the greatest pleasures." *CM*, Introduction to first issue, November 15, 1785, 4.

wore, made her fashionable. The editor described a woman with in-born taste, writing,
“...Elle ne contrarioit point la nature, elle ne s’étudiait pas. Née avec ses grâces
infinies...elle les offusquoit point...[II] faut de l’esprit & un assez bon esprit pour avoir
du goût. Un sot portera un habit à la Mode, il fera bien couvert ; mais il s’en faudra bien
que l’on aperçoive en lui le moindre goût. Il sera affecté, il sera guindé.”

The concept of taste invoked a higher aesthetic that remained eternally elegant despite the whims of
fashion. Its achievement required a certain *je ne sais quoi*. It arose not from an
individual’s careful study of fashion trends, but from an innate instinct that expressed
itself naturally through her whole being. The Journal appealed to its female readers by
citing examples of anonymous, tasteful women who inspired its plates. When discussing
the new fashion for *chemise* dresses, the editor stated that it would be too difficult to say
who invented it, but that,

“Très-certainement elle est due à une femme de beaucoup de goût. Qui
est-elle? Nous l’ignorons. Si nous nous imposions le devoir de rendre
compte de toutes les personnes qui ont produit & produisent chaque jour
des modes nouvelles, il faudroit que nous nous imposassions celui de
connaître par leur nom, par leurs mœurs, & par leurs manières toutes les
personnes de Paris qui peuvent avoir du goût...”

The Journal implied that the reader herself could be the anonymous woman setting
fashion for all of France, thereby encouraging women to consume in the hopes of being a
leader of fashion.

If this was the glamorous ideal the Journal presented, it also acknowledged that
not every woman was born with taste. Nonetheless, any woman could learn to dress

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77 “...She is not unnatural, she is not affected. Born with her infinite graces...she doesn’t offend them.
One must have spirit, and lots of spirit at that, to have taste. A fool can wear a fashionable suit, he will be
well-covered, but one will not perceive in him the slightest bit of taste. He will be affected, he will appear
stuffy.” *CM*, June 15, 1786, 113.

78 “Certainly it is due to a very tasteful woman. Who is she? We do not know. If we imposed on ourselves
the duty of naming every person who created and creates new fashions, we would be forced to learn the
names, morals, and manners of all the tasteful people in Paris.” *MMN*, November 10, 1787, 283-284.
tastefully in order to appear as though she were born with it. As taste was accessible to all, a woman could learn it through observation or- preferably- by reading the Journal and following its advice. The Journal exploited the gap between the image it presented and reality, using the tension between “innate taste” and “learned taste” to attract women through a mixture of flattery and promises of what they could become. It offered tips to help women develop their sense of taste such by advising them how to choose hats that suited them according to their height and figure.79 By promoting the discourse of taste, the Journal opened the consumption of fashion to the broadest possible market. It established taste, and not luxury, as the key element of fashionable dress, thus rendering it accessible to all. Compared to luxury, taste de-politicized fashion, stripping it of its traditional hierarchical exclusivity. Although the Journal presented the ideal of the inherently tasteful woman to appeal to its readers, it encouraged consumption by teaching them how to dress according to the new criteria of taste.

Even before the Revolution, the concept of taste emerged in response to the breakdown of the Ancien Régime. In the 1770s and 1780s, the center of fashion shifted from the Court, where fashion enforced the system of représentation, to Paris where the democratization of fashion was in full force. In the pre-Revolutionary years, the Journal made little mention of court fashion, except for occasional notes that formal robes de grande parure and habits à la française were almost never worn and therefore not a great concern for the Journal.80 Instead, the Journal reported on urban styles inspired by actresses, marchandes de modes, and anonymous women of the capital. The editor remarked on this shift, noting that, “…Les modes ne doivent plus leur nom & leur forme

79 CM, November 1, 1786, 189.
80 CM, May 15, 1786, 99.
qu’àu goût & à l’imagination des spectateurs ou des auteurs bénévoles des modes."

Indeed, the best advertisement for a shop was no longer noble patronage, but the reputation of the marchande and the actresses who shopped there. Women no longer looked to the Court as a leader of fashion because it appeared ossified and irrelevant. Instead, they followed the leads of actresses and marchandes, who were well-suited to lead fashion based on their personal style and good taste, as well as their ability to promote themselves. One marchande de modes, Mademoiselle Roussaud, placed an advertisement in the Magasin des modes nouvelles for her shop near the Théâtre française. The piece advertised that, "Le voisinage de la Comédie, qui engage Mademoiselle Roussaud à développer tout son talent pour la création des bonnets, fait qu’elle en invente plus qu’aucune autre, & avec plus de goût, & qu’elle en met plus à la mode. Elle est la Marchande de plusieurs Actrices, qui, par état sont presque asservies à inventer les plus élégants ; elle a l’avantage de réunir à son goût celui des Actrices." The influence of marchandes de modes shocked traditional sensibilities because women of common birth were dictating fashion to their social superiors. Urban fashion thereby established a new social hierarchy for women based on taste. Fashionable merit triumphed over birth and blood. Women of all ranks now competed on equal footing and those with good taste dictated fashion for all, including their social superiors.

81 “Now, fashions owe their names and forms only to the taste and imagination of the spectators or benevolent authors of fashions.” MMN, November 10, 1788, 284.
82 “Thanks to her location next to the Theater, which engages Mademoiselle Roussaud to employ all her talent for the creation of bonnets, she invents more fashionable, more tasteful bonnets than anyone else. She is the marchande of several actresses, who, by their situation, are almost required to invent the most elegant styles. She has the advantage of uniting her good taste with that of the actresses.” MMN, July 30, 1787, 206-207.
During the Revolution, taste acquired greater significance as the Revolution politicized luxury. The fashion industry contrasted luxury and taste, demonizing luxury as aristocratic, while praising taste as patriotic. The Journal emphasized taste’s egalitarianism and the important role of fashion consumption in supporting the crippled French economy. It encouraged women to consume tastefully in order to support French commerce. As the fashion industry had already linked good taste to simple dress, it was well-situated for the Revolutionary climate. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* described the new, tasteful manner of dress and comportment:

“Ce n’est plus un air riant, mol & folâtre qui est à la mode. C’est un contraire un air, un ton décidé, la tête haute, la démarche ferme, un peu moins de babil ; la figure ouverte, mais tournant vers le *penser* & la réflexion. Au reste, plus de propreté qu’autrefois ; très peu de poudre, presque point de pomade, beaucoup de bains ; en un mot, la plus grande fraîcheur dans tout ce qui regarde la toilette & le maintien, & une grande simplicité.”

Taste included a new discourse of hygiene, as well as a rejection of artifice, represented by the use of powder and make up in the *Ancien Régime*.

Taste entailed more than a manner of dressing, it reflected character as well. Outward displays of simplicity and sobriety indicated an emotional embrace of republican values. Although natural dress had been popular before the Revolution, republican ideology aligned good taste and nature. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* advised its readers, “Soyez jolie, soyez belle c’est un grand avantage; mais un autre, qui n’est pas moindre, c’est d’avoir le goût exercé...Il embellit la simple nature...” Good

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84 “A laughing, soft, and playful air is no longer in style. On the contrary, now it is a decided tone, a head held high, a firm step, and a little less idle chatter. The figure is open, but turned towards thought and reflection. For the rest, more cleanliness than before, very little powder, almost no pomade, lots of baths. In short, the greatest freshness in all matters of toilette and upkeep, and great simplicity.” *JMG*, May 10, 1792, 3.

85 “Be pretty, be beautiful, this is a great advantage. But another, which is no less important, is to exercise taste, which embellishes simple nature.” *JMG*, June 10, 1792, 2-3.
taste enhanced nature, it did not distort or mask it. The pamphlet *Appercu sur les modes françaises*, written by Nicolas Ponce during the Revolution, echoed the importance of naturalism, defining good taste as something that “relever l’éclat [des charmes des femmes], embellir la nature, ou réparer en elles ce qu’elle a pu former de défectueux.”

The emphasis on nature implied that good taste was more than outward appearance; it implied a lack of artifice that demonstrated adherence to Revolutionary principles of transparency and virtue.

The transformation from luxury to taste in the second half of the eighteenth century reflected the changes associated with the consumer revolution. Taste provided an alternative discourse that incorporated positive aspects of luxury, such as commerce, redistribution of wealth, and national strength. In contrast, luxury became the language for describing the social and political problems of the Ancien Régime and developed anti-aristocratic connotations. While luxury was elitist, a privilege of the highest ranks of society, taste was egalitarian, open to all through birth or education. Taste thus formed the basis of a new social hierarchy, in which women could distinguish themselves through personal merit and industry in the world of fashion. The editor of the *Journal de la mode et du goût* reflected on this transformation during the Revolution, writing:

“Le luxe tombe, s’écrit les marchands; déjà l’or et l’argent ne sont plus employés dans la parure; l’on ne porte plus que de l’uni. Tant mieux pour tout le monde leur répondrai-je... Si l’usage barbare de couvrir ses vêtements de métal est disparu, le goût ne l’est pas en France, et va reprendre une nouvelle vigueur, parce qu’il sera désormais le seul moyen de se distinguer... Alors le luxe ne consistera plus que dans l’aisance, la propreté et l’élégance des formes.”

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87 “Luxury falls, cry the merchants. Already gold and silver are no longer used in adornment, only plain fabric is worn now. All the better, I say to them. If the barbarous custom of covering our clothing with metal has disappeared, taste has not and will resurge with a new vigor because from now on it will be the
The fashion industry continued to encourage women to consume despite the vogue for simplicity and the Revolutionary context. It did so by sanctifying tasteful consumption as a patriotic form of consumption that reflected principles of egalitarianism and simplicity. As the Revolution politicized taste, however, it developed a moral component. Tasteful dress expressed a woman's commitment to the ideals of the Revolution. The connection between good taste and feminine virtue redefined femininity in alignment with republican ideals.

sole means of distinguishing oneself. Luxury, from now on, will only consist of comfort, cleanliness, and the elegance of forms.” JMG, July 5, 1790, 1-2.
Bad Morals and Good Taste

The French Revolution politicized the moral connotations of luxury and good taste that had developed over the past half-century. As consumption shifted to an exclusively feminine domain, the moral connotations of luxury and taste took on distinct gendered meanings. During the Revolution, these connotations acquired different meanings for men and women linked to their different roles in the polity. In both cases, luxury was associated with the immoral aristocracy and good taste was equated with republican virtues. In the revolutionary context, good taste for men meant dressing for their new roles as active citizens. On the other hand, good taste for women required self-restraint, rejecting the ostentatious display of aristocratic women in favor of their roles as wives and mothers. During the Revolution, the moral judgments applied to luxury and taste solidified the boundary between men and women and relegated them to their respective places in the new political order. While the transformation from subject to citoyen occurred easily for men, the role of women in the Revolution remained ambiguous and the fashion industry struggled to define the citoyenne.

Revolutionaries established the conflict between luxury and taste in moral and political terms that opposed aristocratic corruption to revolutionary virtue. At the peak of its revolutionary fervor, the Journal de la mode et du goût established an inverse relationship between luxury and morality, observing: “Nos mœurs commencent à s’épurer que le luxe tombe.” 88 Citizen Ponce made the links among politics, fashion, and morality explicit, stating: “Je pense que la régénération des modes doit suivre de près celle des mœurs.” 89 According to Ponce, the regeneration of morality required a revolution in

88 “Our morals are beginning to purify themselves now that luxury is falling.” JMG, November 5, 1790, 2.
89 “I think that the regeneration of fashion must follow closely that of morals.” Ponce, 10.
fashion based on good taste. Due to its visibility, fashion offered a useful tool for revolutionary leaders eager to distinguish themselves from the Ancien Régime. Within the political morality of fashion, gendered connotations of consumption aided revolutionaries as they constructed a new social and political order in opposition to the Ancien Régime.

The "great masculine renunciation" of fashion reflected both the political and social transformation of the Revolution.90 By rejecting fashion, men distanced themselves from the courtiers of the Ancien Régime and strengthened the gender dichotomy between men and women. From the perspective of male revolutionaries, these two aspects of renunciation were intertwined and the regeneration of French society required both. Revolutionaries criticized the excessive influence of women as the source of Ancien Régime corruption. Not only did women exercise excessive power, they made men effeminate, sapping the strength of the country and weakening its morals.91 In his Lettre to D'Alembert, Rousseau criticized the mixing of the sexes in French society because it resulted in the feminization of men in a society controlled by women. "...Ce sexe plus foible," he wrote of women, "hors d'état de prendre notre manière de vivre trop pénible pour lui, nous force de prendre la sienne trop molle pour nous; et ne voulant plus souffrir de séparation, faute de pouvoir se rendre hommes, les femmes nous rendent femmes."92 He painted a devastating picture of the salonnière and her emasculated devotees: "...Chaque femme de Paris rassemble dans son appartement un sérail d'hommes plus femmes qu'elle...tandis que l'idole étendue sans mouvement dans sa

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90 Jones, Sexing La Mode 214.
91 Bell, 128.
92 "The weaker sex, unable to adopt our manner of living, which is too difficult for it, forces us to adopt its manner of living, which is too soft for us. Not wanting to be separated, and unable to make themselves into men, women turn us into women." Rousseau, Lettre à M. D'Alembert, 135.
chaise longue, n'a d'actif que la langue et les yeux.93 According to Rousseau, the Ancien Régime had violated natural gender roles, which could only result in the feminization of men and consequentially the weakening of the nation as a whole.

Prior to 1789, the emasculated man— the fop or petit maître— was a pervasive figure in literature and politics under the Ancien Régime. The Magasin des modes nouvelles, commenting on the masculine-inspired feminine fashions that appeared in the 1780s, declared that “ce mal est bien moindre que celui dont les hommes se rendoient coapables autrefois, en cherchant à imiter les femmes dans leurs parures, & quelque peu dans leur effémination, dans leur mollesse.”94 It also mocked the “pâles Petits-Maîtres [qui] font graver aujourd’hui les travaux d’Hercule [sur des larges boutons].”95 These quotations show the general disdain directed at fops as effeminate, weak, corrupted males, as well as to what extent the fashion industry had ceased to orient itself toward male consumers.

Revolutionaries mixed the image of the fop with another figure with that of the male courtier. Although, ideologically speaking, the courtier, as a member of the nobility, dressed to display his social rank and power, for the revolutionaries he was indistinguishable from the effeminate fop. In both instances, the result was a man overly concerned with appearances and therefore indistinguishable from women. The figure of the courtier symbolized the corrupting influence of despotism and luxury. Under the despotism of the Ancien Régime, male courtiers had no purpose and thus, in their

93 “Each woman of Paris assembles a seraglio of men in her apartment, each one more womanly than she..., while their idol lies motionless on her chaise lounge, only moving her tongue and her eycs.” Ibid., 136.
94 “This wrong is much less than before, when men were guilty of trying to imitate women in their adornments, effeminacy, and softness.” MMN, August 30, 1787, 225-226.
95 “…who have the works of Hercules engraved on large buttons.” MMN, Introduction to 4th Year, November/December 1788, 3.
idleness, devoted themselves to the effeminate pursuit of fashion. As Rousseau concluded: “Qu’un monarque gouverne des hommes ou des femmes, cela lui doit être assés indifférent pourvu qu’il soit obéi ; mais dans une république, il faut des hommes.”

The effeminate man, rendered impotent by luxury and despotism, symbolized the antithesis of republican manhood in the political context of a republic.

The republican man, in contrast, was a virile, active citizen, passionately engaged in public affairs, who was concerned with his duties, not his appearance. Citizen Amar captured this redefinition of masculinity before the National Convention in his 1793 speech to abolish women’s political clubs. He wrote:

“L’homme est fort, robuste, né avec une grand énergie, de l’audace et du courage; il brave les périls...il est propre aux arts, aux travaux pénibles ; et comme il est presque exclusivement destiné à l’agriculture, au commerce... à la guerre, à tout ce qui exige de la force, de l’intelligence, de la capacité, de même paraît seul propre aux méditations profondes et sérieuses qui exigent une grande contention d’esprit...”

The republican man was opposed trait by trait to his emasculated predecessor.

Revolutionary gender ideology emphasized man’s physical strength and capacity for serious thought, in contrast to the weak fop whose intellectual capacities had been dulled by luxury, despotism, and feminine domination. Men used fashion to reinforce their new identity by redefining masculine good taste as the rejection of ostentatious clothing and the acceptance of simplicity. The Journal de la mode et du goût validated this masculinity, contrasting the Petit Maître who “se distinguoit par des habits riches d’étoffe

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96 “A monarch is indifferent as to whether he governs men or women, so long as he is obeyed, but in a republic, men are required.” Rousseau, Lettre à D’Alembert, 135.
97 “Man is strong, robust, born with great energy, audacity, and courage. He braves all perils...He is suited for the arts, for difficult work, and as he is almost exclusively destined to work in agriculture, commerce, war, and all that requires strength, intelligence, and capability. He alone is capable of the profound and serious meditations that require a great and intelligent mind.” Jean Baptiste André Amar, “Discours sur l’interdiction des clubs de femmes,” Notes et Archives, 1789-1794, Royet.org, http://www.royet.org (accessed February 27, 2010).
de soie, d’or ou d’argent, par une coiffure souvent recherchée jusqu’au ridicule,” with the republican man, “aujourd’hui [caractérisé par] la plus grande simplicité.”98 Masculine good taste entailed the rejection of foppish fashions in favor of practicality in the political public sphere. When the *Journal de la mode et du goût* published a fashion plate of a mayor in his tricolor sash, it noted that he was represented “en habit noir, comme le plus decent.”99 Masculine good taste meant simplicity, which was equated with republican civic virtue. Instead of using fashion to connote anything about himself, a republican man shunned artifice and dressed simply. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* described one of its male figures as wearing a cravat that “fait porter la tête haute, & donne à cet homme un air de résolution.”100 A man’s bearing and character were now the most important factors in how he presented himself.

The Revolution gradually broke down the political and social barriers between men by expanding suffrage to all men in 1792. As historian Jennifer Jones summarized: “Men’s essence was now rooted in the fixed self and their capacity for individual action and moral judgment…”101 Therefore, masculine good taste required simplicity because men’s place in the public sphere was only determined by their personal civic virtue. Luxurious fashion did not contribute to this virtue; indeed, it appeared suspicious. At best, it was a sign of effeminate weakness, and, at worst, it concealed a man’s character. Once all French men became active participants in political life, civic virtue, not personal display, became the defining factor of a man’s public life.

98 “…who distinguished himself with suits of rich silk, silver, and gold, with a hairstyle so elaborate that it was ridiculous” compared to the republican man, “who is today characterized by the greatest simplicity.” *JMG*, November 15, 1790, 1.
99 “In a black suit, as is most decent.” *JMG*, May 5, 1790, 4.
100 “Keeps the head held high and gives this man a resolute air.” *JMG*, February 25, 1790, 2.
101 Jones, *Sexing La Mode*, 213.
Figure 4: Men’s fashion “caractérisé par la plus grande simplicité.” (JMG, November 15, 1790)
While the specter of the effeminate fop horrified revolutionaries, it was nothing compared to the loathing inspired by his counterpart: the powerful female aristocrat. In the revolutionary critique of the Ancien Régime, aristocratic women came to embody the misuse of power and wanton extravagance of the Ancien Régime as a whole. Historian Mita Choudry explores the demonization of the aristocratic woman in her essay, “Women, Gender and the Image of Aristocracy.” She argues that this negative, gendered construction of aristocracy arose out of the visibility of certain prominent noble women in Ancien Régime society, particularly female courtiers and salonnières. Their critics believed that they inhabited an inverted world, in which powerful women worked behind the scenes to control appointments and favors, excluding deserving individuals from power. They portrayed female aristocrats as unruly creatures who subverted authority to satisfy their personal desires. Often these critics were fellow members of the nobility who had lost out in struggles for power due to court intrigue.

As the intertwined critique of Ancien Régime social and political problems, luxury, aristocracy, and public women entered popular discourse, the image of aristocracy and women intersected to create a monstrous image. This corrupt, scheming, unruly aristocratic woman symbolized the Ancien Régime as a whole. Moralists and revolutionaries aimed their criticism at symbolic public women of the Ancien Régime, such as Madame du Barry and Marie Antoinette, who were seen as meddling in politics and granting favors on personal whims, as well as indulging in luxury. The image of the aristocratic woman became a powerful weapon in the revolutionaries’ attack on the

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103 Ibid. 169.
Ancien Régime, which they represented as inherently unnatural and illegitimate because of the prominent role of women in the court and society.

Luxurious dress distinguished the female aristocrat, which moralists linked to unnatural gender relations and sexual immorality. According to Rousseau, the appropriate feminine use of fashion was to attract and please men. The luxurious dress of the female aristocrat inverted this gender dynamic. Luxurious dress allowed women to draw attention to themselves, to flaunt their status and power. Rousseau couched feminine self-display in the vocabulary of morality, writing: “Toute femme sans pudeur est coupable et dépravée.”¹⁰⁴ Not only did luxurious dress overturn the “natural” gender order, it encouraged sexual immorality. According to Rousseau, women used luxurious dress to attract inappropriate male attention. Rousseau asked, referring to women who dressed luxuriously to attract men, “Si elle a un mari, que cherche-t-elle parmi les hommes?”¹⁰⁵ Luxurious dress was immoral because it empowered women, violating the “natural” order between men and women and disrupting conjugal relations. It helped women assert themselves in society and to dominate men as sexual aggressors.

Artifice was another “unnatural” and therefore immoral aspect of aristocratic feminine dress. The excesses of court fashion, long since démodé for the general public, dominated the image of the aristocratic woman. These included wide panniers, a gaping décolleté, towering hairstyles, and heavy make up. Moralists forged a clear connection between artifice, luxury and immorality that condemned the female aristocrat. In Appercu sur les modes françaises, Citizen Ponce denounced artifice in moral terms. He described rouge as “un masque choquant” that “malgré la loi impérieuse de l’habitude, un

¹⁰⁴ “All women without modesty are guilty and depraved.” Rousseau, Lettre à M. d’Alembert, 114.
¹⁰⁵ “If she has a husband, what is she looking for among men?” Ibid., 117.
homme de goûт ne pouvait s'empêcher de reculer à la vue...” Ponce also criticized tight lacing of corsets as “la dépravation du goûт” that caused unnatural and awkward movement, as well as allowing fat women to deceive men by squeezing themselves into fashionable dress. 107 Aristocratic artifice was criticized as bad taste because it deceived men and prevented them from seeing a woman’s physical flaws. Artifice conformed to the stereotype of the aristocratic woman as calculating and manipulative in the political sphere, much as she was in her dress.

During the Revolution, the *Journal de la mode et du goûт* perpetuated the image of the aristocratic woman as an enemy, in order to establish a counter-model to republican femininity. In April 1790, after pensions had been awarded to former nobles who had lost their incomes with the abolition of feudalism in August 1789, the Journal published a letter from an anonymous source detailing the luxurious and sensuous life that one former noblewoman enjoyed with her pension. The anonymous writer reported:

“Tous les soirs, après que ses femmes l’ont déshabillée, elle est portée au lit par quatre laquais dans une espèce de couverture doublée de satin ou de taffetas rose, suivant la saison... Alors trois femmes-de-chambre s’emparent de la délicate comtesse tirent de dessous elle, avec beaucoup de précaution et en mesure, la couverture rose. Ensuite elles prennent de beaux petits coussins, bien blancs et bien mollets, ornés de dentelles ; elles en posent un à côté de chaque joue ; plusieurs petits au bas de l’aisselle, entre les flans et le bras, pour soutenir la gorge ; un large à côté de chaque hanche ; un en forme de coin sous l’un et l’autre jarret, entre le bas extérieur de la cuisse et le mollet de la jambe ; un oblong sous le bas de la jambe près de la cheville du pied ; un fort long entre les cuisses, pointu par le haut, et qui va en s’élargissant jusqu’à sa base entre les deux talons ; et un carré, en forme d’oreiller, sous la plate des pieds ; de manière que la dame se trouve parfaitement et moelleusement calée dans toutes les parties de son corps.

Trois fois la semaine un de ses amants vient coucher avec elle. Pendant ces nuits-là les trois femmes de chambre ne dorment point, parce

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106 “A shocking mask” that “despite the imperious law of habit, a man of taste could not prevent himself from recoiling at the sight of.” Ponce, 12-13.

The author’s description of the noblewoman and his emphasis on the luxuriousness of her surroundings is almost pornographic. He took particular care to emphasize the soft and lacy pillows, the fine fabrics of her bedding, and the sexualized description of her body. He also emphasized her despotic treatment of her servants, who are made to suffer because of her sexual tastes. The reference to her three lovers is almost an afterthought, yet it completes the image of the aristocratic women, in which luxury, despotism, and sexuality intersected to embody an “enemy” of the Revolution.

In response to the female aristocrat, the Revolution offered the republican mother as the antithesis of the powerful, public female aristocrat. Modeled on Rousseau’s image of domestic femininity, she was politicized in the context of the Revolution. In his same speech that abolished women’s political clubs, Citizen Amar defined the proper role of women in the domestic sphere:

“Quel est le caractére propre à la femme? Les mœurs et la nature même lui ont assigné ses fonctions: commencer l’éducation des hommes, préparer l’esprit et le cœur des enfants aux vertus publiques, les diriger de bonne heure vers le bien, élever leur âme et les instruire dans le culte politique de la liberté; telles sont leurs fonctions après les soins du ménage, la femme est naturellement destinée à faire aimer la vertu. Quand elles auront rempli tous ces devoirs, elles auront bien mérité de la patrie.”

108 “Every night, after her ladies have undressed her, she is carried to bed by four lackeys in a type of blanket of satin or pink taffeta, according to the season... Then three chambermaids cover the delicate countess, with great care, with the pink blanket. Then they take some pretty little cushions, very white and soft, decorated with lace. They place one on each side of her cheek, several under her armpit, some in between her sides and her arms to support her bosom, a large one beside each hip, a square one under each leg, in between the thigh and the calf, an oblong cushion under her legs near the ankle, a long, pointed one between her thighs that spread outwards down to her heels, and a square pillow under her feet. Thus the lady finds herself softly enveloped in all parts of her body. Three times a week, one of her lovers comes to sleep with her. These nights, the three chambermaids do not sleep because they have to repair the disorder and confusion that arises between the cushions and put them back in order.” JMG, April 25, 1790, 5-6.

109 “What is the proper character for a woman? Morals and nature have assigned her her functions: to begin the education of men, to prepare the spirit and heart of their children for public virtues, teach them to do...”
According to republican gender ideology, women were excluded from the public sphere, but their domestic roles acquired political significance, as they reared young citizens and instilled the home with a powerful political function.\textsuperscript{110} In the world of fashion, the Revolution harnessed feminine consumption and placed women firmly under the gaze of her husband. The proper republican wife performed neither for the court, nor the public, but for her husband’s eyes alone. This view of consumption reaffirmed the exclusively domestic role that the Revolution assigned to women and centered it in the family.\textsuperscript{111}

Many historians agree that the French Revolution was an era of transition for women from the public to the private spheres, as the Constitution of 1791 swept away the partial civil rights exercised by some women under the \textit{Ancien Régime} and as the government suppressed female political organizations during the Terror.\textsuperscript{112} For the republican mother, fashion served the goals of the Revolution by helping her attract a husband, who would then father children with her for the nation.

In contrast, the Journal presented an image of the aristocratic woman as unable to adapt to the Revolution due to her unwillingness to embrace republican motherhood. The \textit{Journal de la mode et du goût} mocked the inability of aristocratic women to adapt to this good, raise their soul and instruct them in the political cult of liberty. Such are a woman’s functions after the care of her household. Women are naturally destined to make virtue loved. When they have fulfilled all these duties, they will be worthy of the fatherland.” Amar, “Discours sur l’interdiction des clubs de femmes.”

\textsuperscript{110} Landes, 106.
\textsuperscript{111} Jones, \textit{Sexing La Mode}, 216.
\textsuperscript{112} Historians Joan Landes and Jennifer Jones in particular espouse this theory, with which I agree, though I offer a more nuanced interpretation. Landes’ book \textit{Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution} is based on the premise that the modern, masculine public sphere arose during the Revolution due to the explicit exclusion of women in reaction against the \textit{Ancien Régime}. Jones agrees with Landes’ conclusions, viewing the fashion as one of the few forms of self-expression available to women after their exclusion from the public sphere (See \textit{Sexing la Mode}, 216).
new order by portraying them as bad wives and mothers. Shortly after the abolition of nobility in June 1790, the Journal reported:

“Quelques femmes ci-devant titrées, [qui] après avoir épuisé l’eau des Carmes voyant que leurs pamoisons, leurs spasmes convulsifs, leurs palpitations aristocratiques ne guérissent point, ont fait entre elles une coalition pour refuser le devoir à leurs maris ; elles ne peuvent pas soutenir l’idée de n’être plus aptes qu’à donner le jour à de simples citoyens actifs.”  

By refusing *le devoir conjugal* to their husbands, aristocratic women were both bad wives and bad mothers. In refusing to have sex with their husbands, they also refused their duty to the nation as republican mothers who bore children for the state. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* used the image of the aristocratic woman to educate women on how *not* to behave and how *not* to consume. The Journal offered her as a model for its republican readers to avoid, appealing to their desire to dress with good taste and defining aristocratic, luxurious fashions as bad taste.

By rejecting the female aristocrat’s lifestyle as “bad taste”, the Journal’s definition of good taste implicitly restricted women’s behavior. In order to encourage consumption, and thereby its commercial survival, the fashion industry harnessed good taste to good morals, while avoiding the negative connotations of luxury. This relationship was already well established before the Revolution. One of the early issues of *Cabinet des modes* equated good taste and personal virtue in the woman who inspired the issue’s fashion plates. The editor wrote that, “son goût & son élégance l’emporta sur

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113 “Some formerly titled women, after having drunk the Carmelite waters, seeing that their swooning, convulsive spasms, and aristocratic palpitations have not healed, made a coalition to refuse *their duty* to their husbands. They cannot support the idea that they are now only suited to give the time of day to simple active citizens.” *JMG*, July 5, 1790, 7.
le plus profond respect, que sa bonté & ses autres vertus lui attirent journellement."114

The Journal trained women to consume tastefully, in order to protect their virtue. It advised women, when adopting hair styles made popular by actresses, "Qu'on y prenne garde; avec ces coiffures, il faut le ton le plus modeste, le plus décent, le plus ingénu, le plus liant, le plus circonspect : la moindre liberté, la moindre prétention marquée, la moindre affectation donneroit un air fille."115 Although the Journal looked to actresses to inspire fashions, they were not appropriate models of behavior for virtuous women- a fact underlined by the pejorative use of the term "fille," meaning prostitute.116 The Journal imposed restrictions on feminine behavior in order to ensure that women were moral and tasteful. Trying to define an aesthetic between the luxurious aristocrat, the fashionable but immoral actress, and the ultimate public woman- the prostitute- the Journal’s definition of good taste contributed to the restriction of feminine behavior that ultimately confined women to the domestic sphere by the end of the Revolution.

Despite the Journal’s effort to restrict female behavior in the name of good taste, it remained ambiguous about limiting women exclusively to the role of wife and mother. Although it imposed restrictions of women in the name of good taste, it did so without specifically linking it to domesticity. Although much of the Journal’s editorial commentary worked to convince women that they needed to consume in order to find and keep a husband, it never advocated restricting women and fashion exclusively to the domestic sphere. This ambivalence is understandable, given that the fashion industry

114 "Her taste and elegant bring her the most profound respect, which her goodness and other virtues also attract daily." CM, September 1, 1786, 153.
115 "Take care with these hairstyles. They must be worn with the most modest, decent, innocence, discreet tone. The slightest liberty, the slightest noticeable pretention, the slightest affection would give the appearance of a prostitute." MMN, November 20, 1786, 2.
depended on women’s sustained desire for fashion, which, even at its simplest and most modest, required interaction with the public sphere—seeing and being seen. Even as the Journal imposed restrictions on women in the name of good taste, it expressed regret about the exclusion of women from the public sphere:

“Parmi les gens de qualité, ce sont les femmes qui perdent le plus à la révolution; éloignées de noms, plus de titres imposants, et ne partageant point avec leurs maris leur honneurs des places qu’ils occupent, iront-elles se vouer à la simple pratique des vertus domestiques? Que de temps pour se faire une réputation! Que de peines pour parvenir à se faire remarquer du public! La jeunesse, cette saison du plaisir et de la coquetterie, seroit usée dans la retraite, avant d’avoir entendu parler de soi. Il ne reste donc plus à celles qui veulent jouir promptement, et frapper les jeux d’un vif éclat, que la singularité, la richesse et l’élégance du costume.”

The Journal acknowledged women’s right to a place in the public sphere in the world of fashion. Young women, according to their natural desire to please, were right to be coquettes, to be celebrated for their beauty, so long as they did so with good taste. The Journal regretted that the Revolution restricted women to the domestic sphere and suggested fashion as one of the few ways for women to express themselves via the “vif éclat, la singularité, la richesse et l’élégance” of their dress. This point accounts for what Jennifer Jones describes as the “great female acceptance” of fashion, in which women embraced fashion as the only means of expressing their public identities, lost during the Revolution.  

Although luxury and good taste were already moral categories before 1789, the Revolution politicized them and used them to impose gender distinctions on the public.

117 “Among the people of quality, it is the women who lose the most because of the revolution. Separated from family names, no more imposing titles, and unable to share with their husbands the honors of the places they occupy, are they going to devote themselves to the simple practice of domestic virtues? What a time to make a reputation for oneself! How difficult it is to make oneself remarked by the public! Youth, this season of pleasure and coquetry, would have been wasted in retirement, before having heard oneself talked about. All that remains for those women who wish to enjoy themselves immediately, and to make an impression, is the singularity, richness, and elegance of their dress.” JMG, April 15, 1791, 1-2.
118 Jones, Sexing La Mode, 214.
sphere. For both men and women, good taste was equated with good morals and
republican virtue, whereas bad taste was equated with luxury and aristocratic corruption.
Revolutionaries applied these moral judgments in response to the corrupt gender
hierarchy of the *Ancien Régime*. Good taste for men meant sobriety that removed them
from the effeminate world of fashion and salons, and allowed them to focus on their
duties as citizens. The sartorial transformation from subject to *citoyen* happened with
relative ease, as it was fundamentally empowering for all men. In contrast, feminine
good taste remained problematic, as the Journal struggled between the rejection of
immoral, aristocratic luxury and the domestic restriction of the republican mother. All
the while insisting on a definition of good taste that embodied a restrictive definition of
feminine morality, the Journal sought to define a space in the republican public sphere
compatible with public, tasteful feminine consumption.
Fashioning La Francaise: Good Taste and Nationalism

The French sense of national identity combines the country’s legacy of the Ancien Régime with the republican tradition. Prior to the Revolution, the French were described as frivolous and "léger," in part due to the importance of fashion and display in French culture. The prosperous luxury industry promoted frivolity as a source of national wealth and pride. It valorized French women, citing their creativity, which, combined with their good taste, promoted the luxury industries and cemented France’s reputation as the most civilized nation in the world. By the end of the century, however, these same traits connoted weakness and decay.

The Revolution sought to remake the national identity, replacing effeminacy with virility, frivolity with sobriety, and the servile court culture of the Ancien Régime with republican civic virtue for all citizens. As part of this process, the Revolution excluded women from active political roles. In the years 1789 to 1791, a transitional realm between the female aristocrat and the republican mother, the fashion industry struggled to define an appropriate way for women to consume in the charged ideological context. It succeeded by redefining the symbolic meaning of feminine consumption. In response to an initial burst of female political activity, particularly among the lower classes, which threatened republican gender ideology, the government officially excluded women from the public sphere in 1793 by banning female political clubs. As women lost political power, they gained symbolic power through the fashionably-dressed body of the individual French woman who displayed the glory of the French Republic. The Revolution transformed the image of the tasteful French woman into an aggressive form of nationalism that solidified French superiority in fashion and civilization.
Before the Revolution, both the French and other Europeans defined the French national character as frivolous, sociable, and refined. As David Bell argues: "To be French was to be particularly social, particularly refined and polite, and particularly cheerful or flighty (léger, implying a mix of vivaciousness, inconstancy, and perhaps also superficiality.)" \textsuperscript{119} Sociabilité implied, along with a certain gaiety, politeness and refinement. Légèreté, although it included gaiety, also implied a critical undertone that encompassed French frivolity, luxury and superficiality. \textsuperscript{120} As Bell notes, these traits were linked to the concept of civilization as a vision of "historical progress and cosmopolitan exchange between civilized people," at whose apex the French stood. \textsuperscript{121} If the French engaged in a high level of polite social interaction and devoted themselves to pleasure, it was because they had distanced themselves from the original state of savagery in which all people began. Additionally, according to both French and foreigners, the civilized traits of sociabilité and légèreté reflected the extraordinary influence of women on French society. As one anonymous author of a pamphlet suggested, "The Frenchman owes the amiable qualities which distinguish him from other peoples to interchange with women." \textsuperscript{122} The feminine influence on the French character gave it the necessary traits to make France the apogee of civilization.

From its inception to the Revolution, the Journal promoted the frivolous French character as a positive force for the nation. It accepted that the French were a frivolous people and humorously defended this characterization. It went so far as to blame the weather, asking its readers, "Est-il si étonnant que nous varions autant nos gouts, étant

\textsuperscript{119} Bell, 147.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 147-148.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 149.
\textsuperscript{122} Anonymous, \textit{Lettre d’un jeune homme}, quoted in Bell, \textit{The Cult of the Nation in France}, 149.
obligés, d'éprouver autant de variations dans nos humeurs, conséquemment dans notre caractère, parce que nous recevons les impressions d'une température aussi variable?"  123

It went on to justify the characters of other European nationalities according to their climates, particularly the somber and gloomy English. If, according to the Journal, frivolity and desire for novelty were inherent in the French character, they also enriched the French nation. The Journal embraced a Mandeville-inspired connection between frivolity and commerce, as the continual desire for novelty fueled economic growth. It declared: "C'est en vain que nos prétendus sages déclament depuis long-temps, & avec amertume, contre la frivolité de nos usages & de nos modes ; c'est précisément du sein de notre inconstance que sortent l'abondance & la circulation, qui font notre gloire nationale."  124 The Magasin de modes nouvelles published a letter from a contributor proposing the establishment of an "Académie des Modes" that would "en signalant notre goût, & en multipliant nos richesses, nous rendra l'admiration & le modèle des autres Nations."  125 The Journal countered critics who argued that frivolity was a sign of French weakness and decay. In response, the editors transformed it into a treasured resource that enhanced the glory and power of the French nation.  126

The idea that the French were a frivolous people inherently drawn to luxury consumption extended to all ranks of society. Historian Cissie Fairchilds discovered that the penchant for acquiring populuxe goods among the lower classes was unique to France. For example, when the English lower classes acquired disposable income, they

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123 "Is it so surprising that our tastes vary so much, given the variation of our humors that leads to the variation of our character, since we live in such a varied climate?" MMN, June 30, 1787, 177.
124 "In vain our so-called wise men have bitterly declaimed against the frivolity of our customs and fashions. It is precisely this lack of consistency that gives birth to the wide-spread abundance that brings glory to our nation." MMN, January 20, 1787, 53.
125 "While making known our taste and multiplying our riches, would inspire admiration from and provide a model for other nations." Ibid., 56.
126 Jones, "Repackaging Rousseau," 961.
tended to spend it on useful household goods, not populuxe items. The Journal commented on fashion’s widespread reach across all classes of French society. The editor declared: “L’empire des Modes agit puissamment sur toutes les têtes : son autorité passe des palais jusques dans les cabanes; & insensiblement les grands & les petits s’en rendent les esclaves.” No matter what class a French person belonged to, he or she was instinctively drawn, and submissive, to fashion. The Journal later stated, “...Cette annonce [la loi de la mode] est du domaine de tout le monde: elle ne peut être disputée qui que ce soit, & à nous encore moins qu’à tous autres.” Although everyone was subject to the law of fashion, the French were its devoted subjects at all levels of society, making it the most civilized nation. In the *Magasin des modes nouvelles* the editors pondered the power of this “law of fashion.” They wrote:

“...Nous cherchions à faire naître cette harmonie, cet air de ressemblance que plusieurs Philosophes de notre Nation ont paru désirer entre tous les Peuples de la Terre; & que nous pensions que nous parviendrions à leur faire adopter à tous les mêmes mœurs, les mêmes usages, peut-être le même langage, après leur avoir fait adopter les mêmes habits.”

The law of fashion implied that clothing could change the rest of a nation’s culture. The end result was a peaceful Europe, unified by the civilizing force of French fashion, which would then extend the civilizing power of French culture to other sources of disunity. The law of fashion had already unified all French people, regardless of class, which was the source of French prosperity and its civilized national character.

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127 Fairchilds, 230.
128 “The empire of fashion acts powerfully on all heads. Its authority reaches from the palaces to the huts and, without realizing, the great and the small make themselves its slave.” *MMN*, January 20, 1787, 55.
129 “This decree applies to everyone; no matter what, it cannot be disputed, by us even less than any others.” *MMN*, February 10, 1787, 67.
130 “We seek to create this harmony, this air of familiarity that many of our nation’s philosophes appeared to desire between all the people of the earth. We think that we could make them all adopt the same morals, the same customs, perhaps even the same language, after having made them adopt the same clothing.” *MMN*, December 20, 1786, 25.
The fashion industry established the French not only as the greatest devotees of fashion, but as the undisputed leaders of taste in Europe. The Journal supported the idea put forward in the letter proposing an "Académie de Mode" that good taste was part of a nation's glory. Establishing an académie would grant fashion royal patronage and recognize its significance to France's strength and culture, equal to the Académie Française or the Académie des Sciences. The Journal described taste in terms of a competition between nations, with the French emerging triumphant. This tendency became clear in the Journal's second incarnation, whose full title was *Magasin des modes nouvelles françaises et anglaises*. The editors played on the traditional rivalry between France and England and extended it to the world of fashion.

The Journal identified fashion as proof of France's creative superiority, compared to the English, who were only interested in money. The editor noted, "Ils ont prouvé que, pour donner de la vie à leur commerce, ils n'ont pas besoin de cette diversité continuelle que nos Marchands donnent à leurs marchandises, à qui elle est très nécessaire." As for the French, "Notre légèreté nous fait adopter tous les essais, & nous nous en contentons. La perfection nous ennuiroit sans doute." While the Journal admits the general superiority of English commerce, it insists that fashion is one realm where France can compete with England, thanks to French frivolity. More importantly, French légèreté in fashion is key to France's identity as the most civilized nation. While the English revealed their dull, bourgeois spirit in their obsession with money, French frivolity— and the innovation it produced— displayed a superior artistic and intellectual spirit.

131 "They have proved that in order to breathe life into their commerce they do not need the continuous diversity that our merchants give their merchandise, for which it is very necessary." *MMN*, March 1, 1789, 75.
132 "Our flightiness has made us adopt all the tries, and we are happy for it. Perfect, no doubt, would bore us." *Ibid.*, 76.
Prior to 1789, the national competition for good taste in the late eighteenth century focused on women as representatives of their countries. Creativity, according to the Journal, was one of the keys to good taste. It explained that “le goût...retrouvera dans cette extrême variété, le nouveau, qu’il recherche toujours, ou le beau qui a l’agrément de paraître toujours nouveau, & de plaire par-là seulement qu’il a paraît nouveau.”133 The Journal insisted that this creativity distinguished French women and allowed them to develop good taste above all others. The *Magasin de modes nouvelles* stated, as part of a series of issues that discussed fashion and taste in a comparative context:

“[Les Françaises], n’avoient-elles pas emprunté, en moins de deux ans, des Polonaises, des Anglaises, des Turques, des Chinoises? Elles empruntent aujourd’hui des Espagnoles. Il est vrai qu’elles rendent des espèces bien meilleures que celles qu’elles ont reçues; & même, à parler exactement, elles n’empruntent que les noms, & elles donnent les choses. Quand elles copient, elles corrigent, elles embellissent. Quand elles imitent, elles créent. D’une imagination trop inventive, trop féconde pour s’attacher servilement à leurs modèles, elles s’en emparent, elles les forment. Elles deviennent, en un mot, les maîtres de leurs auteurs.”134

Not only was *La Française* tasteful, she was the *most* tasteful of all women. When she borrowed fashions from other countries, she created something unique and improved, which she then claimed as her own.

The Journal delighted in contrasting her to the English woman and her pathetic lack of creativity. Describing English fashion (or the lack thereof), the Journal sneered,

133 “Taste will be found in extreme variety, novelty, or beauty, which has the advantage of always appearing new. It pleases only because it seems new.” *MMN*, January 10, 1788, 42.
134 “In less than two years, have not French women borrowed from the Polish, the English, the Turks, and the Chinese? Currently, they are borrowing from the Spanish. It is true that they give back fashions much better than those they took in the first place. To speak truthfully, they only borrow the names and they give back things. When they copy, they correct and embellish. When they imitate, they create. With an imagination that is too inventive, too fertile, to attach itself servilely to their models, they take control of them and reform them. They become, in a word, the masters of their authors.” *MMN*, January 10, 1787, 42-43.
"A l’exception des robes à l’Anglaise, & des redingotes d’homme, on ne voit pas que les Dames de Londres aient inventé beaucoup d’autres habillements. Les robes à l’Anglaise & les redingotes d’homme, les redingotes d’homme & les robes à l’Anglaise : voilà tout ce qu’elles portent ; à moins que l’on y joigne encore les vestes de drap."135 The *Magasin des modes nouvelles* gave a scathing critique of English women in the commentary on a fashion plate comparing English and French fashion. It asked:

"Qui l’emporte pour le goût, des Dames Anglaises ou des Dames Françaises? Qui sait mieux choisir ses couleurs, la forme de ses habits, la manière de sa coiffure, l’uniformité ou l’ensemble de ses habillements? Qui sait mieux parer tout son air, toute sa personne? Nous laissons cette question à décider à tout le monde, & nous présentons pour objet de comparaison les deux Bustes de femmes, représentés dans cette Planche... Si, comme nous penchons à le croire, les Dames Françaises sont supérieures, on aura moins de reproches à nous faire d’avoir incliné librement en faveur des Dames de notre Nation. Qu’on ne soit pas tenté d’accuser les Dessinateurs des défauts de grâce & de bon maintien qui sautent aux yeux dans cette Gravure : lorsqu’on a vu le plus grand nombre des Dames Anglaises, surtout de celles qui ne correspondent pas avec les Dames Françaises, qui n’étudient pas leurs modes, leurs manières, on est obligé de convenir que ces défauts tiennent particulièrement à leurs personnes, & que les Dessinateurs n’ont fait que rendre ce qu’ils ont aperçu...C’est la vérité seule, c’est l’amour de la vérité seule qui nous dirige dans notre jugement."136

According to the Journal, the superiority of French taste was undeniable, based on visual proof available to any observer. It also assumed that women best represented good taste and the national glory it brought. Although this national competition for good taste did

135 "With the exception of the dress à l’anglaise, and men’s redingotes the ladies of London have invented no other styles. Dresses à l’anglaise and men’s redingotes, men’s redingotes and dresses à l’anglaise, that’s all they wear, unless we include woolen jackets." May 30, 1787, 157.

136 "Who is more tasteful, English ladies or French ladies? Who knows best how to choose colors, the form of her dresses, hairstyles, and the overall look of her ensemble? Who knows best how to adorn her air, her whole person? We leave this question for all to decide and we present, as an object of comparison, the busts of two women, represented in this plate...If, as we are tempted to believe, French ladies are superior, one will not reproach us for being inclined in favor of the ladies of our nation. Do not be tempted to accuse the artists of the defaults of grace and bearing that leap to the eyes in this engraving. When one has seen a great number of English ladies, above all those who do not correspond with French ladies, who do not study their fashions and manners, one is obliged that these defaults arise from their bodies and that the artists have only rendered what they observed...This is the sole truth, the love of the sole truth that directs our judgment." *MMN*, February 10, 1787, 69.
not have political connotations in the pre-revolutionary context, the emphasis on the traditional rivalry with England established good taste as a source of national pride for France. Through these comparisons, the Journal established that French good taste was rooted in the refinement and légèreté of the national character and was one of the essential components of French superiority.

The Revolution sought to remake the French national identity by purging it of the traits linked to the corruption of the Ancien Régime. In the years leading up to 1789, social and political critics denounced the traditional characteristics of frivolity, légèreté, and refinement. Although foreigners associated these traits with the French as a whole, the French associated them particularly with the royal court and aristocracy. In the hands of revolutionaries, these characteristics became signs, not of civilization and culture, but
of corruption and decay. A pamphlet published in 1793, entitled *Comment m’habillerai-je? Reflexions politiques et philosophiques sur l’habilement français* attributed the weakening of the French national character to the corrupting effects of luxury. Mercier de Compiègne, the author, wrote: “Grâce à la fécondité du luxe ingénieux dans toutes ses productions, tout est jolie chez nous, tout est beau, tout est grand, les hommes seuls sont devenus petits. Il faut jouir, on déraisonne ; il faut s’enrichir, et l’on devient fripon.”

According to Mercier, luxury was not the source of the nation’s wealth and glory, but the source of its decay. Finally, as historian David Bell notes, the Revolution “replaced the story of a nation struggling to rise out of barbarism towards civilization by the story of a nation struggling to restore itself to a pristine condition of republican health, from which it had fallen into dangerous degeneration, in large part because of the reckless freedoms it allowed women.”

This danger manifested itself in the image of the female aristocrat who symbolized the corruption of the *Ancien Régime*.

Despite the anti-luxury stance of the Revolution, the fashion industry initially jumped at the chance to contribute to national regeneration. Although the Journal showed reluctance in the early days of the Revolution (the July 21, 1789 issue bemoaned “les circonstances trop fameuses & trop malheureuses où Paris s’est trouvé”139), it quickly embraced the possibilities that the Revolution offered to fashion. In September 1789, the editor remarked: “Il n’y avait pas de doute qu’une révolution comme celle qui s’opère en France, en dût fournir à la Capitale l’idée de quelques modes. C’est un assez

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137 “Thanks to the fecundity of ingenious luxury in all the things it produces, all is pretty in our land. All is beautiful, all is grand, only the men have become small. We must enjoy ourselves, we become mindless. We must get rich, we become loafers.” Claude-François-Xavier Mercier de Compiègne, *Comment m’habillerai-je ? Reflexions politiques et philosophiques sur l’habilement français, et sur la nécessité d’un costume national.* (Paris : L’Imprimerie de l’auteur, 1793), 8.

138 Bell, 128.

139 “The famous and unfortunate circumstances in which Paris found itself.” *MMN*, July 21, 1789, 185.
grand événement pour cela." Soon thereafter, the Journal began to publish plates of revolutionary-inspired fashions such as bonnets and shoe buckles à la Bastille, tricolor cockades as fashion accessories.

![Figure 6: Boucle à la Bastille](MMN, November 11, 1789)


When the Journal re-launched in 1790 as the *Journal de la mode et du goût*, under the direction of Jean-Antoine Lebrun Tossa, it addressed not only what the Revolution contributed to fashion, but what fashion could contribute to the Revolution. In its report on the 1790 Fête de la Federation, the Journal informed its readers that fashion had its place within the Revolution, declaring: “Tout à Paris est soumis à l’empire de la mode; le patriotisme et la raison n’en sont pas exempt.” The Fête de la Federation marked a new beginning for France, the birth of a new order based on the gains of the

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140 "There was no doubt that a revolution such as the one occurring in France had to furnish the capital with some new ideas for fashion. It is a great enough event for that." *MMN*, September 21 1789, 227.

141 "All Paris submits to the empire of fashion; patriotism and reason are not exempt." *JMG*, July 15, 1790, 3.
Revolution. According to the Journal, fashion merited a place in this new society. Although the Revolution sought to purge society of the corrupting influences of luxury, it should not (or could not) take away the inherent French love for fashion.

During the early years of the Revolution, the Journal promoted fashion as a way to create a republican identity for both French men and women. Patriotic fashions offered popular expressions of the new French nationalism that later manifested itself in the wars that started in 1791. After the creation of the National Guard in July 1789, the new National Guard uniforms became fashionable dress for young men. The Journal observed that “l’habit militaire est une chose trop nouvelle pour le Français, pour qu’il ne soit pas lui-même un objet de mode. Aussi nos jeunes gens ne le quittent presque plus ; de même qu’ils ne quittent presque plus le fusil, la parade & l’exercice.” Composed of the tricolor, the uniform symbolized the new masculine identity, which required all men to take up arms in defense of the Republic. As a fashionable trend, the uniform embodied the perfect combination of egalitarianism and militaristic nationalism. Meanwhile, women dressed in tricolor ensembles adorned with national cockades.

The *Journal de la mode et du goût* praised women “aujourd’hui, [dont] le goût commence à se réveiller, et un grand nombre d’elles se montrent patriotes, en adoptant les couleurs de la Nation.” In this quotation, the Journal linked good taste to the adoption of revolutionary styles and politics. If the Journal agreed with the revolutionaries that luxury was harmful for the Nation, it continued its pre-revolutionary

143 “The military uniform is too much a novelty for the French for it not to become an object of fashion. Thus our young men almost never stop wearing it, just as they almost never leave their rifles or the parade ground and drills.” *MMN*, October 1, 1789, 235.
144 “Women nowadays, whose taste begins to reawaken. A large number of them show themselves to be patriots by adopting the colors of the nation.” *JMG*, March 5, 1790, 17.
Figure 7: Uniforme d’un chasseur dans la garde nationale (JMG, April 25, 1790)
Figure 8: Une femme dans une robe rayée des trois couleurs de la Nation (JMG, March 5, 1790)
philosophy that good taste enhanced France’s glory. Additionally, in the early years of the Revolution, women participated in this patriotic militarism by adapting elements of the National Guard uniform for their own fashions. The Journal showed a plate of a “femme patriote avec le nouvel uniforme” in blue, white, and red, inspired in cut and decoration by men’s National Guard uniforms. As it reported on these new styles, the Journal acknowledged that, for the first time, it was showing exclusively French fashions. It admitted, “La mode que nous donnons ici ne pourra peut-être pas devenir tout de suite celle de tous les pays, & peut-être à cet égard ne remplissions-nous pas entièrement l’objet de notre Journal ; mais nous donnons la mode qui règne à Paris, & c’est tout ce qu’on a le droit de nous demander.” Thanks to the Revolution, fashion became first and foremost an expression of republican Frenchness. Early in September 1789, the Journal commented on the militaristic, patriotic nature of Revolutionary fashion, saying that “en France nous sommes devenus tous Soldats.” The off-hand quip turned out to be prophetic, revealing the extent to which fashion fueled and reflected popular nationalism and predicted the future military expansion of the Revolution.

The Journal’s attitude towards female fashion reflected the ambiguity of women’s status in the early years of the Revolution. 1789 and 1790 were transitional years in terms of women’s political participation. Emerging republican ideology rejected the figure of the powerful female aristocrat and promoted the republican mother. In contrast to this image of domestic bliss, real women played an active role in revolutionary events, most famously in the October 1789 march to Versailles, but also as members of popular

145 “Female patriot with the new uniform.” JMG, August 25, 1790, 2.
146 “The fashion that we show here cannot perhaps immediately become that of all countries and perhaps in this regard we are not entirely fulfilling the goal of our Journal. Nevertheless, we are showing the fashion that reigns in Paris and that’s all that people have the right to ask of us.” MMN, October 1, 1789, 235.
147 “In France we have all become soldiers.” MMN, September 11 1789, 217.
Figure 9: Femme patriote avec le nouvel uniforme (*JMG*, August 25, 1790)
societies, participants in popular demonstrations, and as spectators at the National
Assembly.  

The Journal, particularly the *Journal de la mode et du goûт*, walked a fine line
between these opposing representations of femininity. It demonized the bad taste of the
female aristocrat and associated good taste with simplicity, modesty the domestic goals
of finding and pleasing a husband. As a fashion journal, however, it was neither in the
Journal’s interest nor spirit to insist on the confinement of women to the domestic sphere,
even if it agreed that women’s consumption should aim to please their husbands. In
addition, through its promotion of aggressively revolutionary fashion, the Journal saw a
place for women’s participation in the public sphere. It is no coincidence that the
nationalist, masculine fashions from 1789 and 1790 coincided with the height of
women’s active political involvement in the Revolution. As the ideological tide turned
against female activism, however, women’s fashion lost its patriotic fervor. Although
styles retained their revolutionary names, such as a *robe à l'égalité* from November,
1792, they softened considerably and became otherwise indistinguishable from
contemporary fashion in other countries. The taming of women’s fashion marked the end
of women’s active involvement in politics, but it did not end the *importance* of women
and feminine consumption of fashion.

As the Revolution excluded them from political life, women sought to redefine
their patriotic roles in the republican context. Historian Joan Landes claims in her book
*Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* that the
revolutionaries adopted a masculine discourse in order to construct a political culture that

148 For more on women’s political participation in the Revolution, particularly the march of Versailles, see
Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, and Mary Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795*
(Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 9-17.
Figure 10: A woman in a robe à l'égalité (JMG, November 20, 1792)
excluded women. Now silenced, women had recourse to the only means of public expression left to them: fashion. Jennifer Jones writes that although “women may have been shut out of the public sphere of politics, they were eagerly invited into the public sphere of commerce as consumers.” The Journal had always emphasized the commercial importance of consumption of fashion for the French economy and now women were urged to support the Republic by patriotic consumption that helped France’s economy. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* assured women after the declaration of the Republic in September 1792 that “notre nouvelle forme de gouvernement n’empêche pas les femmes de rechercher la parure ; seulement, elles associent à une certaine simplicité le luxe d’autrefois.” The key to virtuous republican consumption was simple fashions enlivened by good taste. Building on the dichotomy between the bad taste of the corrupt female aristocrat and the good taste of the modest republican wife, the fashion industry assured women and critics alike that tasteful consumption was non-threatening because it reinforced gendered republican ideology.

More importantly, as women lost their political power, they gained symbolic power as symbols of the Republic. In her study of representations of *la Patrie* through female allegories, Landes concludes that in this feminine embodiment of France, women were encouraged to identify themselves with the Republic, while men were encouraged to associate patriotic feeling and heterosexual love to create a literal “love of country” based on a mixture of patriotism and sexual desire. Through revolutionary symbolism, the feminine body became a site of display and political attachment, even as women

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150 “Our new form of government does not prevent women from seeking to adorn themselves. All it requires is that they associate a certain simplicity to the luxury of before.” *JMG*, November 10, 1792, 3.
found themselves excluded from political life. Tasteful French women became symbols of the glory of France, not in the depoliticized pre-Revolutionary context of the *Magasin des modes nouvelles*’ national competitions of good taste, but as symbolic agents of republican French nationalism. As the Revolutionary wars turned from defensive to expansionist, with the goal of liberating Europe and spreading republican ideals, France spread its civilizing “law of fashion” backed by military force. Although *Appercu sur les modes françaises* is undated, Ponce appears be writing no earlier than 1794, as French republican armies began their two-decade-long sweep across Europe. Ponce recounts the international influence of French fashion, writing:

> “Les modes françaises sont généralement adoptées dans toute l’Europe; les Anglais même, ce people, notre ennemi né, qui calcule jusqu’à ses plaisirs, sentant bien qu’il ne peut lutter favorablement avec nous en matière de goût, admet volontiers nos formes dans ses vêtements...Les françaises ont fait des progrès si rapides dans l’art de la toilette, qu’elles donnent le ton aujourd’hui à toutes les femmes de l’Europe.”

The tasteful French woman promoted by the Journal became, through the symbolic nationalism of republican France, the other face of Marianne, clad in the latest fashions instead of Grecian robes. As French republican armies dominated Europe, so, too, did French fashions, inspired by the inherent taste and superiority of *la Française*. Her good taste no longer passively represented the glory of the French nation, but actively spread it across Europe as the twin forces of the Republican army and French fashion swept across the continent.

The French Revolution sought to remake the French character by purging it of the corrupting traits associated with the *Ancien Régime*. These traits, such as refinement,
politeness, légèreté and gaiety, however, had traditionally been seen as the forces that placed France at the peak of civilization. These traits also explained the French fashion industry’s assertion that French women possessed superior good taste. Even before the Revolution, French good taste was thought to contribute to the nation’s glory and even though the Revolution wanted to erase these Ancien Régime characteristics, it wanted to preserve the national glory they created. The issue was resolved as part of the complex transition between the Ancien Régime and republican models of femininity, in which men and women, revolutionaries and moralists, and the French fashion industry all struggled to redefine the role of women in the revolutionary context. Although the fashion industry initially saw a vital role for itself in promoting the creation of a republican national character for men and women, it scaled back women’s engagement in the public sphere once the Revolution turned against politically active women. Instead, it repositioned women’s role in the Revolution as symbols of French nationalism. It created the image of La Française, whose good taste projected the glory of the French Republic across Europe who dominated the continent even more effectively than the rapidly advancing republican army.
Conclusion

By 1799, the end of the eighteenth century and of the Revolution, fashion was gendered female. The *Journal de la mode et du goût* shut down in April 1793 and for the next four years France remained without any fashion publication. Then in 1797, a new journal appeared under the name the *Journal des dames et des modes*. Whereas the *Cabinet des modes* had opened, in 1785, with an appeal to both sexes, the *Journal des dames et des modes* stated in the opening sentence of its prospectus: “C’est pour vous, Mesdames, qu’on entreprend cette feuille périodique.”¹⁵³ The *Journal des dames et des modes* signaled the end of dynamic masculine fashion. The three piece black suit popularized during the Revolution dominated the masculine wardrobe of the nineteenth century and defined formal men’s fashion up to the present day.

The feminine gendering of fashion provided consolation for women, a limited but unique realm where they could express their individuality within the confines of good taste. The *Journal des dames et des modes* established itself as a separate sphere for women, the inverse of the masculine political sphere. It criticized

“[Les plusieurs journaux qui] dans leurs rêves politiques, ont cherché à ridiculiser vos goûts, à déprécier vos talents, à nier vos vertus, à détruire l’ascendant de vos charmes, à vous ravin enfin de vos plus douces jouissances. Nous nous empressons, mesdames, à réparer tous ces torts. Vous plaire, vous instruire, défendre vos droits, préconiser vos qualités intéressantes, et fixer de nouveau sur vous l’estime et les égards que vous méritez, tel sera l’objet de nos efforts.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ “It is for you, Mesdames, that we undertake this periodical.” *Journal des dames et des modes*, Prospectus, March 31, 1797, 1.
¹⁵⁴ “Many journals, in their political dreams, tried to ridicule your tastes, depreciate your talents, deny your virtues, destroy the power of your charms, and to steal your sweetest joys away from you. We hope, Mesdames, to right these wrongs. To please you, to instruct you, to defend your rights, to advocate for your fascinating qualities, and to restore to you the esteem that you deserve, such is the goal of our efforts.” *Ibid.* 1-2.
The *Journal des dames et des modes* separated the political from the feminine sphere, proposing that reading a fashion journal, rather than engaging in politics, was the best way to defend women’s rights. Promoting the glory of France through tasteful consumption delineated the extent of women’s political participation until the twentieth century. By excluding women from political power and granting them symbolic power within the feminine realm of fashion, republican France reconciled its *Ancien Régime* tradition as the most civilized nation with the masculine power of the Republic.

Writing about the fad for National Guard uniforms, the *Magasin de modes nouvelles* predicted, “…Mais on finira par ne plus le porter que pour le service, & on changera tous les habits bourgeois, & aussi souvent que par le passé, & ce sera par-là que le caractère François reparaitra.”155 Although the editor was correct that patriotic fashions, and the Revolution itself, would eventually pass, the French character did not reemerge unchanged. The gendering of consumption and the moral judgments of republican ideology ensured that men would never embrace the frivolity and légèreté associated with the French character. Although the French man’s political status shifted throughout the nineteenth century to reflect political currents, his renunciation of fashion for citizenship remained permanent.

French women, however, became the guardians of French civilization and culture, embodied in their good taste and dress. The Revolution incorporated them as symbols of French republican glory, but it also officially excluded them from the political sphere. This glory, therefore, was detached from the political existence of the French Republic and continued after its destruction in 1799. Although she lost her republican militancy,

155 “…But in the end we will only wear them for service, we will return to our bourgeois suits, which will change according to fashion as much as they did in the past, and the French character will reappear.” *MMN*, October 1, 1789, 235.
La Française remained the embodiment of French good taste who dominated fashion across Europe and later the world. By creating the image of La Française that existed beyond a particular government or social context, revolutionary leaders created an enduring myth that has survived up to the present. From twentieth century icons such as Coco Chanel, to the past decade, which has produced books entitled French Women Don't Get Fat, Entre Nous: A Woman's Guide to Finding Her Inner French Girl, All You Need To Be Impossibly French, and Fatale: How French Women Do It, the image of La Française is alive and well. Through the French woman, French good taste has been passed down through time and, thanks to the aggressive nationalism of the Revolution, recognized by the French and others as a unique and inherent French characteristic.

Journalist Sharon Waxman, writing in the Washington Post, summed up the importance of taste to the French national identity, writing: "The French continue to intrigue. They possess, somehow, those unteachable, untouchable qualities that make them the undisputed world arbiters in matters of taste. They are, at their best, History and Civilization, Beauty and Grace and Art." This thesis pays one more tribute to the enduring seduction of that myth and its legacy.
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