
H-France Review Vol. 16 (February 2016), No. 22

Audrey Provost, *Le luxe, les Lumières, et la Révolution*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 2014. 262 pp. Notes. 25€ (cl). ISBN: 978-2-87673-979-6.

Review by Sarah Maza, Northwestern University.

In the 1760s, '70s and '80s in France, publishing a book with the word *luxe* in the title could give a writer a toe-hold in the literary world. In the most entertaining chapter of her concise and engaging book *Le luxe, les Lumières et la Révolution*, Audrey Provost has some good stories to tell about the various strategies employed by aspiring authors to get their *luxe*-themed works into print and noticed. One, Antoine-Prospér Lottin, penned a treatise in response to an announced 1782 *concours* of the Academy of Besançon, then, when the competition was delayed, begged the Academy worthies to let him out of the rules forbidding publication prior to the contest. When they demurred, he chose early publication. Another author, Rabelleau, followed the popular strategy of pasting a subtitle (“*ou les effets du luxe*”) onto a 1772 work about something else altogether, in the hope of boosting sales. Best of all is the Chevalier du Coudray, a musketeer turned, in Provost’s words “serial *publicateur*,” who sent a copy of his 1773 poem on luxury to Voltaire. Lucky enough to get a response from the Great Man but too thick to recognize its withering irony (“Quand au luxe dont vous parlez, vous faites bien de déclamer contre lui et d’en avoir un peu chez vous” [p. 41]), du Coudray went into a frenzy of rhyming sycophancy (“O vieillard agréable! O plume beinfaisante!” [p. 41]) while abruptly changing his views on luxury to bring them into line with those of the Sage of Ferney. A common strategy among minor writers was to boost their credentials by appending to their name the phrase “auteur de quelque chose sur le luxe.”

Audrey Provost is far from the first scholar to ponder the astonishing ubiquity of the rubric “luxury” in eighteenth-century French writings on economy and society starting in the 1730s but especially between 1760 and the Revolution. Many dozens of titles were explicitly devoted to the subject, and hundreds more contained some discussion of the pros and (mostly) cons of *le luxe*. It was, indeed, almost impossible to address social issues of the day in any form without raising the matter. Provost acknowledges and builds upon previous work on the subject by Ellen Ross, Renato Galliani, and John Shovlin.[1] Her distinctive approach, as the stories above suggest, is to focus on the role of luxury-themed literature in the self-fashioning, claims, and ambitions of writers as a social group, rather than on the themes and content of that corpus and its relation to the “real world.” The playing field here is very much the *champ littéraire*.

Prior to the 1760s, lasting statements on luxury were made by writers very famous in their own day: Voltaire notoriously pro in *Le Mondain*, Rousseau vehemently con, Helvétius agnostic but co-opted by the anti-*luxe* camp. After 1760, Provost reports, on the basis of researching some thirty authors, the subject mostly attracted obscure writers whom Provost variously describes as “petits auteurs,” “petits polygraphes,” or “les sans-grade de la République des lettres” (pp. 27, 67). Why, then, did these aspiring writers fasten onto the theme of *le luxe*? For Provost the reason for the theme’s popularity devolved less from ideological conviction (while that might have been present) than from authorial strategy. Much of the late-century literature on luxury, Provost notes, is highly repetitive, made up of commonplaces and quotations such as Rousseau’s endlessly recycled observation that while luxury might be necessary to provide bread for the poor, there would be no poor if there were no *luxe*. Producing a work on luxury

allowed writers to draw on a wealth of previous texts, to position themselves within the world of letters, and to lay claim to the weightiest and most ambitious themes in contemporary socio-political commentary.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, most of this literature, Provost notes, fell clearly into the anti-*luxe* camp, articulated as a critique of commercialism, of the monetization of social relations, the corruption of the old nobility, the shocking growth of social inequalities. All of this was cast in a Rousseauian mold which allowed writers to insist that theirs was not a reactionary or religious jeremiad, that one could be, like Jean-Jacques, a progressive philosophe *and* a moralistic foe of modern life. Once in a while a writer would take up the cudgels in defense of luxury: the free-trade advocate Georges-Marie Butel-Dumont did just that in his anti-physiocratic 1771 *Théorie du luxe*, touching off a volley of indignant responses from the physiocrats' numerous followers. Mostly, however, railing against luxury was a way, Provost argues, for minor intellectuals to lay claim to public discourse on the weightiest matters of social and political life. And while she is rightly wary of intellectual teleology, the author does point to the ways in which the themes of this literature were re-framed and recycled in the pamphlet literature of 1788-89.

While Provost's emphasis on literary strategies is novel and welcome, it also makes for a rather hermetic reading of this material. Only in the book's opening lines does the author allude to the concrete backdrop to all of this anxiety about materialism and excess, namely the eighteenth-century "consumer revolution." (Cissie Fairchilds and Maxine Berg are mentioned in a note, but the works of Annick Pardailhé-Galabrun, Daniel Roche, Colin Jones and Michael Kwass are nowhere to be found.[2]) For better or worse this is a book about writers in conversation with other writers, as if the anxieties coursing through a literary corpus obsessively concerned with sterility, urban alienation, and the moral bankruptcy of the traditional elites had nothing to do with the century's massive socio-economic changes, including France's heavy involvement in colonial commerce.

Even more puzzling is the lack of any systematic account, at the start of the book or elsewhere, of the actual themes of this literature, such as the hand-wringing over the "celibacy" of urban dwellers, the obsession with the confusion of social roles (servants aping their masters, nouveaux riches usurping aristocratic trappings, and so on), and the endless panegyrics to the healthy and productive lives of an idealized peasantry. Most of these are referred to in passing, but on the whole, the discussion of literary camps and strategies proceeds as if the standard content of these texts were already known. This makes for some confusion as to the book's intended audience, since the volume concludes with an eighty-page anthology of well-chosen short excerpts from the most famous or representative eighteenth-century texts on luxury (from Voltaire and the *Encyclopédie* through Sébastien Mercier via many of the minor but representative writers whom Provost discusses): is this work aimed at students or at specialists? One final gripe should be directed not at the author but at the publisher: Anglophone readers are resigned to the lack of thematic indexes in French books, but the absence of even an index of proper names in an intellectual history such as this makes for a lot of annoying back-and-forth through the pages to retrieve details about a previously-mentioned author.

In the end, though, Provost's central argument about the function of this literature in the professional self-fashioning and ideological positioning of second-wave (and second-string) Enlightenment writers makes for a novel, ingenious, and convincing addition to the history of the Republic of Letters.

NOTES

[1] Ellen Ross, "The Debate on Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France: A Study in the Language of Opposition to Change" (Phd. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975); Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1989); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy*

of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French Revolution (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[2] Cissie Fairchilds, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in John Brewer, ed., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993), 228-248; Maxine Berg, "New Commodities, Luxuries, and their Consumers in Eighteenth-Century England" in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 63-85; Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'intime: 3000 foyers parisiens, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988); Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionnelles, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101 (February 1996): 13-40; Michael Kwass, "Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France," *American Historical Review* 111 (June 2006): 631-59. Kwass's *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014) probably appeared too late for Provost to consult it.

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ISSN 1553-9172