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Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2013. xvii + 424 pp. Illustrations, tables, money and measurements, notes, bibliography, and index. \$78.27 U.S. (hb.) ISBN-10: 0822355132; \$23.19 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13 987-0-8223-5528-1

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In her important and provocative book, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*, Clare Haru Crowston offers a bold new interpretation of how early modern French men and women perceived their world. “Credit,” Crowston argues, was a “key explanatory mechanism for the operation of power throughout Old Regime society and culture” (p.21). By credit, Crowston means not only economic credit but also a host of nonmaterial qualities, including authority, reputation, favor, faith, esteem and even, in the case of women, beauty. In short, early modern French men and women believed that to have “credit” was to have power to do something or power to wield over someone. Thus credit, Crowston posits, was a “central ‘category of analysis’ for old regime France,” “a hidden but omnipresent lever of power [that] shaped the perceptions of men and women throughout French society, whether at court, in salons, workshops, abbeys and churches, the tavern, the street, or the boudoir” (pp. 21-22).

Crowston admits early on in her book that historians will not be “terribly surprised” to learn that in a society in which money was scarce, prices were open to negotiation, and many people were paid in goods, credit was a central part of daily lives. But, she insists,

[w]hat is new and important is to realize that French men and women themselves had a concept to describe the multidimensional world they inhabited. The word *credit*, as they used it, gives a name to everything historians already know about the operation of power in this period and shows, in addition, that contemporaries themselves were fully aware how influence and reputation shaped access to political, social, cultural, and economic resources and how similar dynamics affected and intimately connected all of these realms” (p. 3).

There is much to unpack in that quotation alone, including Crowston’s insistence, so crucial to her argument, that the men and women of early modern France, from aristocrats to merchants, were “fully aware” of the many registers of the word “credit.”

Crowston’s support for her thesis that credit was “one of the most important concepts people had in Old Regime France to comprehend the dynamics of their lives” (p.1) rests on two very different kinds of evidence. In the first two chapters she draws on a selection of literary and print sources collected from a variety of databases, including ARTFL, Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO) and Gallica, to explore broadly the multiple and intersecting usages of the concept of credit by elite men and women. In the rest of the book, she turns to clothing merchants’ receipts, bankruptcy cases, ledger books, fashion magazines, and police records to bring to life the fascinating relationship forged between elite women and their (often) female fashion merchants through the practices of credit and the dynamic of fashion.

As a leading sector of the French economy and the motor of the consumer revolution, fashion consumption and retailing is in many ways the ideal case study for Crowston’s argument.

Moreover, as the author of the prize-winning study *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791*, Crowston knows the culture of eighteenth-century French fashion inside and out.[1] She argues that her extended case study of the *marchandes de modes* and their female clients is essential to demonstrate the full workings of the “regime of credit.” As she explains, “[t]o tie the knot between credit as a form of power and influence, on the one hand, and economic credit, on the other, this book focuses on a trade that seems to encapsulate their relationship in the most striking manner possible” (p. 8). *Marchandes de modes* played a crucial role in “tying the knot” because of their role in what Crowston calls “economies of regard” in Old Regime France. That is, the fantastical creations invented by fashion merchants such as Rose Bertin made the elite women who sported them fashionable, distinctive, and *au courant* and thus augmented their customers’ cultural credit as well as their own. (However, as we see in the case of Marie Antoinette, the queen’s attempt to use fashion to increase her credit at court not only worried her mother, who urged restraint, but also positively backfired in the eyes of the people of Paris, who mocked her as “Madame Déficit.”)

Each of the two separate sections of Crowston’s book offers conceptual and empirical riches to historians. Because many readers will rest their assessment of the overall success of Crowston’s book on how effectively the author “ties the knot” between the two sections of her book, the broad cultural discourse on credit and the purchasing practices of elite consumers and their *marchandes de modes*, it is worth examining the two sections of the book separately, and then assessing how well they work together.

In the first and foundational chapter, “Credit and Old Regime Economies of Regard,” Crowston examines the multiple connotations of what she calls, inelegantly and perhaps problematically, “credit in its nonmaterial guises” (p. 22). She begins by exploring credit and patronage at court and then quickly moves on to analyze the use of the term credit outside of court in religious, intellectual and domestic contexts. Her sources are disparate—memoirs, plays, sermons, almanacs, and novels—because, as she points out, there were no formal treatises on this kind of “credit.” Crowston explains, “[s]cholars have hitherto neglected this central ‘category of analysis’ of Old Regime France in part because there is so little formal writing on nonmaterial forms of credit. This is not because credit was unimportant. Rather, credit was the common sense and realpolitik of the era, the open secret of the operation of power, and the constant low-level current thrumming through their lives. It did not call for philosophical speculation or explanation because ‘everyone knew’ that flows of credit directed events” (p. 22). While some readers may appreciate the power of “arguing from an absence,” or Crowston’s use of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus*, that quotation may raise red flags in some readers’ minds about the potential for ARTFL-type database searches to reify the nouns for which one searches and to create a false coherence in widely disparate sources.[2] Crowston, a careful scholar and painstaking researcher, is conscious of the potential risks of her strategy of surveying the multiple genres opened up by online databases. In her introduction she readily admits that “the databases arguably open the field so wide and so capriciously as to render any analysis incoherent and scattershot” (p. 17). In another aside, she notes her “painful awareness” that her method sacrifices “canonical coherence and close reading” of primary sources and does not allow her to analyze “the voluminous secondary literature devoted to each of the texts in question” (p. 17). While this aside to the reader is no doubt sincere, it also sidesteps the more important question of whether or not her method can support the very bold claims of her thesis regarding early modern men’s and women’s self-conscious understanding of an all-encompassing “regime of credit.”

Crowston argues that the many different usages of the word “credit” evoking abstract personal qualities, like merit or fashionability, were in fact manifestations of a larger conception of “how the world works,” a kind of “grand unified theory” (not, to be clear, a term Crowston uses) of

early modern social relations. Each kind of credit—honor, fame, or reputation, among other qualities—was fungible (a word that Crowston also does not use but that seems apt). Importantly, Crowston contends that a “constant process of conversion and reconversion took place among different forms of credit and across the material and nonmaterial divide” (p. 54). As she elaborates, “[m]onetary value was but one among a series of other values, not the primary end of transactions or the ‘real’ underlying value” (p. 54). Although Bourdieu’s sociological theory informs much of her study, she firmly rejects Bourdieu’s notion that “economic capital” was the driving force behind all other forms of capital (p. 14). Crowston makes this point quite strikingly when discussing bankrupt merchants’ inability to attain sufficient profit margins in the second half of her book. She speculates that some *marchandes de modes* neglected to balance their books because “the purpose of their business was not monetary profit alone or above all else” (p. 200). “It is plausible,” she conjectures, “that these women wanted to be independent and respected merchants as much as they wanted to be rich merchants” (p. 200). This is the sort of startling insight that makes us feel like the past is truly a foreign country.

Crowston states in her introduction that “one of the most vexing questions in writing this book has been the question of change over time” (p. 18). Throughout much of her work, Crowston argues for constancy rather than change in French men’s and women’s perceptions of the “regime of credit.” Indeed, in a telling anecdote, Louis XVIII searched for Rose Bertin when he returned to power in 1814 because the members of the royal family needed her services to play their roles at court. In her conclusion, Crowston explains, “the language of credit as a form of power and influence continued to appear, if with decreasing frequency, during and well beyond the revolution” (p. 325). Yet, in chapter two, “Critiques and Crises of the Credit System,” the author explores key moments in the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV when satirists and critics of the court, as well as *philosophes* and political economists, began to condemn the pernicious effect of credit (particularly in the form of influence and sexuality) on virtuous politics and good government.

Chapter six, which focuses on Marie-Antoinette’s relationship with her *marchandes de modes*, serves in many ways as a pendant to chapter two. In this chapter Crowston examines in detail the denouement of the old regime of credit as public outrage exploded over Marie Antoinette’s alleged abuses of traditional practices of “credit” (including power, reputation, sexuality, and responsibly paying financial debts). Crowston emphasizes that in many ways Marie Antoinette and Rose Bertin “partook of long-standing traditions for proving credibility and acquiring reputation” (p. 281). Indeed, for Crowston, the queen’s relationship with her *marchande de modes* perfectly encapsulated the complex and intertwining circuits through which the “regime of credit” has always operated in the old regime. How, then, does Crowston explain why Marie Antoinette’s “fashion addiction” became a problem for contemporaries? And how did her spendthrift ways fuel the arguments of those who opposed the old regime “credit system”? Crowston attributes Marie Antoinette’s loss of “credit” to a number of plausible factors, including “political movements,” her marital circumstances, the public nature of her intimacy with Rose Bertin, new networks of publicity and information, economic change, and the creation of the modern fashion system (pp. 281-282). Yet throughout her book Crowston emphasizes that Marie Antoinette’s downfall was caused not by changes in the “credit system” itself, but rather by new perceptions of how economic credit should operate distinctly from political credit. Crowston elaborates this point with a graphic image: “One might see the Marie Antoinette moment as an instant of conceptual fusing of all the intermingled forms of credit onto one female and sexed body, before they were flung apart in the revolutionary maelstrom, henceforth to occupy discrete spheres: political economy, public opinion, women’s fashions, personal wealth, republican government, and the intimacy of sex in private bedrooms” (p. 325).

Crowston's image of the credit system embodied by Marie Antoinette and torn asunder by the "revolutionary maelstrom" is arresting, but it suggests a more important role for the French Revolution in the demise of the old regime of credit than Crowston herself is willing to acknowledge. Instead of politics, Crowston points to "the cultural and intellectual shift—identified by Michael Foucault in *The Order of Things*" (p. 94) as responsible for the growing sense that political, social, cultural, and financial credit were separate systems. In her conclusion, she underscores the particular role of the political economists of the late Enlightenment in discrediting "the language of credit as a form of power and influence" (p. 325), as they began to imagine the economy as a discrete and autonomous sphere.

Doubtless, cultural and intellectual shifts and the growth of the field of political economy played a key role in destabilizing perceptions of how credit did—and should—operate in society and in politics. Still, I am surprised that Crowston, a skilled social historian, does not emphasize additional factors, including new practices of urban life, as agents in transforming perceptions of credit in the second half of the eighteenth century. Surely the sheer increase in the urban population of Paris, new commercial networks and the multiplication of new kinds of goods and services, produced both within France and in its colonies, must have stimulated changes in how French men and women perceived how their world worked. But Crowston clings to her somewhat static model of the "regime of credit" in part because sources in her databases lead her to this conclusion and in part because of her insistence that ordinary men and women have long understood credit—in all its senses—far better than historians have given them credit for. For example, she refuses to concede Michael McKeon's and Margo Finn's point that the eighteenth-century novel evinced a new preoccupation with credit and moral character, arguing that "readers would have been long accustomed to dealing in credit as buyers and sellers in a commercial culture that had functioned on credit for centuries" (p. 185).^[3] Moreover, she is intent to avoid the problem of "economism" (p. 14) by emphasizing that economic capital and economic credit was not "primordial" (p. 15). Surely, though, the explosion of consumption and the "industrious revolution" of the eighteenth century stimulated men and women to think about the relationships between different kinds of credit in new ways. Indeed, the growing prominence of the *marchandes de modes*, the subject of much of the second half of Crowston's book, suggests how rapidly all aspects of the credit regime and "economies of regard" were changing in the eighteenth century. Would Crowston be willing to acknowledge that female consumers and fashion merchants were agents, as well as "victims," in the demise of the old regime's "economies of regard" and its "credit system"?

Given Crowston's keen insights into the relationship between the "credit system" and the "fashion system," she also misses an opportunity to examine the impact of the rise of the fashion system itself in destabilizing, or at least rendering problematic, key elements of the old regime credit system. Evidence for this argument hovers throughout her book. But the place where she might explicitly have made this argument is in chapter three, "Incredible Style," which serves as a transition from the first two chapters on the discourse of credit to the final four chapters on the practice of credit in the buying and selling of fashions. In this chapter, she makes the case that fashion and credit resembled one another as "homologous and intersecting circuits of influence and reputation" (p. 99). I found this chapter less original than the other chapters, perhaps because it covers the broad discourse on fashion, territory that other historians, including myself, have tread.^[4] By examining the emerging friction, in addition to the homologies, between the fashion and credit systems, Crowston would have enriched the argument of this chapter and of her whole book.

In chapters four through seven, Crowston moves from the broad discourse analysis of the first three chapters to a finely textured social and economic case study of female consumers and fashion merchants. Chapter four, "Credit in the Fashion Trades," offers, among other riches, a

detailed interpretation of how economic credit functioned. The high point of the chapter is Crowston's perceptive reading of a set of fashion purveyors' receipts found in the Musée Galliera in Paris. These receipts allow Crowston to chart the purchases of a wealthy member of the robe nobility, the Marquise de Bercy, from her wedding in 1734 through her old age in the 1770s. Crowston finds that it was not uncommon for Bercy to delay as much as two or three years in paying her dressmakers' bills, evoking "a culture in which commercial exchange was not a singular transaction but a process extending over time" (p. 175) and in which patrons and purveyors were bound by "the dynamic of shared risk" (p. 176). Chapter five draws on a sample of thirty-nine bankruptcy cases located in the Archives de Paris. Many social historians know that these bankruptcy records are notoriously challenging documents for those who are not deeply familiar with eighteenth-century merchants' accounting methods.[5] Thankfully, other scholars will now be able to profit from Crowston's stunning archival work. Rose Bertin's fascinating relationship with Marie Antoinette, insightfully analyzed in chapter six, will leave many readers wishing that Crowston had written an entire book on this remarkable merchant.[6]

Together these chapters are designed to support a key aim of Crowston's book: "to demonstrate the articulation of the sociopolitical credit of le monde with the merchant's economic world of credit" (p.10). Or, as Crowston explains in another passage, "the book confronts depictions of credit wielded by aristocrats, magistrates, and wealthy merchants" (p. 8). But it is important to note that Crowston's slippery words choices in these statements—"to articulate" and "to confront"—indicate the author's own vision as a historian more than that of her subjects. Except for perhaps in the case of the relationship between Rose Bertin and Marie Antoinette, Crowston's argument for merchants' and consumers' self-awareness of the fluid boundaries between economic, cultural, and political "credit" is not watertight. Nevertheless, Crowston's "articulation" and "confrontation" of the worlds of female consumers and their fashion merchants in these chapters is skillfully researched and richly suggestive. Often, as historians, to articulate and to confront is the very best we can do.

In Crowston's interpretation of eighteenth-century "economies of regard," sex would seem to be an obvious channel to convert one form of credit (cash or gifts) into another (power or worldly pleasures). Indeed, "sex" joins "credit" and "fashion" in the three terms in the book's title. Throughout her work, Crowston is certainly attentive to the ways in which women could "leverage sex into power" (p. 59), whether in the case of Madame de Pompadour at court or in that of shop girls who traded sexual favors with male customers in *marchandes de modes*' boutiques. Illicit sex and sexuality, however, hover in the background rather than the foreground of Crowston's argument.[8] Indeed, as I read I kept wondering, where is the sex? When I arrived at Crowston's impressive final chapter, "Family Affairs," I finally found the sex I had been primed for by the title of the book in the strangest of all places: in the *lit matrimonial*. Not the sexual act per se, but the marriage contract, Crowston argues, was in many ways the key to the old regime of credit and the bedrock of the consumer revolution. Crowston observes that although married women could not sign contracts or buy property on their own, French law gave women the tacit capacity to use their husbands' credit to purchase food and other consumer goods. Crowston explains, "As commodities expanded, fashion cycles accelerated, and even middling and common people aspired to fashionable consumption, this loophole became a gaping breach in the fortress of male privilege" (p. 285). The author's analysis of credit and married women raises more questions than she can answer about the wrangling that must have occurred between husbands and wives over wives' unpaid shopping bills and the different ways in which these marital negotiations over debt played across different social classes. Nevertheless, Crowston answers the important question of how women were able to run up such large debts in fashion shops and also provides a key insight into what enabled increased consumer spending in the eighteenth century.

As a historian who studies fashion, I finished the final chapter of Crowston's book feeling deeply satisfied by her sophisticated insights about the culture of credit and her detailed knowledge of the ways in which elite consumers and fashion merchants were indebted to each other. But I am not sure that a historian less interested in account books, *marchandes de modes*, or even Marie Antoinette would feel persuaded that Crowston's case study of fashion proves her larger argument about the old regime "credit system." Many historians will wish for a broader exploration of the use of credit in old regime France, including gambling, buying property, taking out annuities, and long-distance trade. Testing Crowston's thesis would require exploring practices of credit in less dynamic sectors of the economy including agricultural and rural settings. Crowston nods to these broader questions in her conclusion, suggesting that "[f]urther research is necessary to understand how these themes played out beyond the French capital, in the provinces, in the rest of Europe, and beyond" (p. 322). To be fair, these are not her questions in this study. In this case, you can judge a book by its cover: the word "fashion" figures prominently in the title. And the engraving on the cover of an aristocratic woman wearing a confection known as the "*coëffure à la Belle poule*" clearly showcases the heights of the *marchandes' de modes* talents and artistry that are the main focus of Crowston's study.

Like the coiffure, "*à la Belle poule*," Crowston's study is inventive, imaginative, and a tour de force. But is the "regime of credit" too big an interpretation to rest on the shoulders of the *marchandes de modes*? Does her bold argument collapse without other kinds of supporting evidence? Probably.... Nevertheless, this is a book teeming with insights about the economy and culture of the Old Regime. The twinning of credit and fashion in Crowston's analysis offers a refreshing new perspective on the history of fashion (something we need, a full quarter century after the publication of Daniel Roche's monumental *La culture des apparences*) and will doubtless inspire other scholars' research.[9] Crowston intervenes in important debates over how to integrate economic history into cultural and political history. She challenges reigning orthodoxies concerning eighteenth-century gender ideology, as well as the extent to which the French Revolution marked a rupture with the Old Regime. She reminds historians how much we can glean about the past by studying practices as well as ideologies. This is an important book that many early modern French historians will want to read and debate. Even if some historians will not entirely accept Crowston's sweeping argument, they will find that viewing eighteenth-century culture through Crowston's optic of "credit," in all its multiple senses, adds considerable depth and richness to their reading of eighteenth-century French sources and helps them understand the world as early modern French men and women understood it.

NOTES

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

[2] Crowston draws on Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990); and idem, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[3] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[4] See, for example, Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing la Mode: Gender, Fashion, and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication and Glamour* (New York: Free

Press, 2005); and Monique Vincent, *Le Mercure gallant. Présentation de la première revue féminine d'information et de culture, 1672-1710* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

[5] Crowston makes good use of Thomas Lockett's insights on Old Regime credit and bankruptcy. Thomas M. Lockett, "Credit and Commercial Society in France, 1740-1789" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1992.)

[6] Many French fashion historians appreciate Michelle Saponi's monograph on Rose Bertin, but there is no counterpart to her book in English. See, Michelle Saponi, *Rose Bertin: Ministre des modes de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 2003).

[7] Unfortunately Nina Kushner's fascinating book, *Erotic Exchanges: The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2013) was published too late for Crowston to incorporate it into her analysis.

[8] Daniel Roche, *La culture des apparences: Une histoire du vêtement (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

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