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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

Review Essay by Charles Walton, University of Warwick

In *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*, Clare Haru Crowston identifies “credit” as a key concept of the old regime, one that cut across and linked its various cultural, economic, social, and political aspects. Whereas the Enlightenment’s legacy has conditioned us to see these as separate spheres, Crowston shows us how credit (or discredit) in one sphere could bolster (or undermine) credit in another. Credit amounted to clout, allowing one to command all sorts of capital: financial, social, and political. Ideally (at least for some), it was to be tethered to honor, virtue, and merit. In practice, however, it was frequently earned—and *seen* to be earned—through sex and skullduggery. Precarious and sometimes ephemeral, credit could follow the vicissitudes of opinion. Yet managing credit was an essential, agonizing aspect of daily life for those seeking to advance in business, *le monde*, or the court—or at least not sink.

Although the book begins by sketching out the broad contours of credit in early modern France, it focuses mostly on the multiple kinds of credit at play in the exploding world of fashion. Mastering fashion meant being in the “right” information circuits to know which styles were “creditable” or having the artistic and political acumen to impose the standards separating the reputable from the ridiculous. (Convincing people to take seriously a two-foot high ship on the head, it must be said, was a quite an achievement.) Success in fashion increased one’s social, political and economic capital, which was, it seems, the main point of the exercise. Fashion’s empire spread across the top of society (*le monde*, the court) but also trickled down to lower levels. As the craze for fashion increased over the eighteenth century, so, too, did indebtedness. Few paid cash for their fashion items since aristocratic etiquette required fashion merchants, the social inferiors of their clients, to be patient. Sometimes elites did not pay at all, or forced their merchants to slash prices, even months or years after delivery.

In addition to treating the politics of consumption, *Credit, Fashion, Sex* also deals with the inner workings of the fashion industry. Building on her vast knowledge of the garment trade (the topic of her first book), Crowston describes the business practices of the Paris fashion industry in great detail, especially for the period following the creation of the fashion merchants guild in 1776.[1] (More, though, might have been said about the internal politics of this institution.) The climactic sections of the study show what this industry looked like at its summit, where Marie-Antoinette and her fashion designer, the talented commoner Rose Bertin, collaborated to set fashion trends. Crowston shows how the two women’s work (it was unusual and somewhat shocking for a queen to engage in work) increased various kinds of credit for them. At the same time, their collaboration became a lightning rod for growing anxieties about the moral and financial dangers of fashion and abuses of credit in politics. These anxieties mixed with those about the regime more generally, which, by the 1780s, was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. For many, the lifestyles of “Madame Déficit” (Marie-Antoinette) and Rose Bertin were emblematic of all that was rotten in the regime.

In chapter one, Crowston examines online text collections to determine the frequency rates and multiple meanings of the term “crédit,” from 1600 to the present. She concludes that “the importance of credit as a conceptual category peaked in the Old Regime” (p. 24). Contemporaries understood credit as key to exercising power and influence, not only at court but also in other domains, such as religion and literature. Moreover, women were commonly understood to be key brokers of credit,

although this fact would come in for greater criticism across the eighteenth century. Crowston also makes the point that contemporaries were adept at converting credit from one form (political, cultural, social, or economic) to another, even if they nevertheless could distinguish between various types.

Chapter two explores this convertibility further by looking at critiques of the notion of “credit” from the late-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century. Contemporaries began separating out economic credit (increasingly the purview of political economy) from social and political forms of it. This transformation shows in Charles Duclos’s *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle* (1751). Duclos tried to tether social and political credit to merit rather than to sex and intrigue. Crowston identifies two important absences in his text: first, women as credit brokers and, second, economic credit. His silence about women might have had to do with the long history of attacks on female credit brokers and the fact that Duclos’s patron was Madame de Pompadour. His silence about economic credit, Crowston insightfully speculates, is revealing of the tendency at the time to separate out “the economic” from “the political” and “the social” during the Enlightenment. This conceptual separation seems to have had the effect of intensifying moral criticism of women’s ongoing role in managing credit while racking up colossal debts.

Chapter three examines literary sources to show how credit and fashion were represented and how they combined to produce new forms of inequality, ones not based on traditional social distinctions. Crowston’s thesis about the importance of “economies of regard,” indicated in the book’s subtitle and borrowed from the work of Avner Offer, is developed here at length.^[2] The concept of economies of regard refers to how people viewed each other and accorded esteem and, as a corollary, financial credit. Fashion was at the center of old regime economies of regard. To master fashion was not only to wear the “right” clothes but also to demonstrate that one was well-positioned in the “right” information networks, where decisions about taste were decreed and circulated. This chapter also develops the theme of “sex”: the determination of a man’s fashion “quotient” in *le monde* or at court was increasingly seen to depend on sleeping with the right women. The insights of this chapter are stimulating, though they do not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with old regime elite culture. A shortcoming of this chapter is that Crowston tends to read literary sources—novels, newspapers, etc.—as transparent windows into eighteenth-century reality. This is most evident in the chapter’s conclusion, where general statements about fashion, gender and sex in eighteenth-century France are made, based largely on the representations of them in texts discussed throughout the chapter.

With chapters four and five, Crowston takes us into the world of the rapidly expanding fashion industry in Paris, showing us not only the opportunities that opened up for women but also the challenges they faced. One of the greatest challenges was negotiating debts. Fashion merchants (men and women) were pinched between aristocratic clients, who often strung out payments over months or years only to impose a lower price in the end, and suppliers whose patience for reimbursement might run out, especially if the fashion merchant’s reputation, or that of a substantial client, declined. These chapters outline bookkeeping practices, bankruptcy rates, and the gender dimensions of the industry. While social hierarchy clearly impinged on the finances of this industry (it was polite not to insist that elite customers pay up), it does not appear that gender mattered all that much: being a female fashion merchant did not reduce one’s chances for receiving supplies on credit. This book also contributes to our understanding of old regime business practices, right down to bookkeeping strategies. Account books were essential for merchants who might need to show them in suing a delinquent client, to whom, for etiquette’s sake, they might not have provided bills or receipts.

Chapters six and seven discuss Mademoiselle Bertin’s and Marie-Antoinette’s business relationship and family management of credit. Previous understandings of Marie-Antoinette are more or less confirmed here.^[3] Given her husband’s political and sexual weaknesses, Marie-Antoinette used fashion to command influence. She collaborated closely with Bertin, who became a celebrity in her own right. Though Bertin’s business was deeply indebted, her association with the crown kept her credit afloat. With her credit she purchased country houses and buildings in Paris and hobnobbed with ambassadors and nobles from around Europe. Yet in the climate of the 1780s, this credit was double-edged. Both women were publicly vilipended (though perhaps slightly less than Crowston

acknowledges, since we now know that many libels against Marie-Antoinette were held in the Bastille and did not circulate until after 1789).^[4] At any rate, as the regime edged towards bankruptcy, the public saw in these women all that was driving the regime into a moral and financial abyss: corruption, arrogance, excess.

Credit, Fashion, Sex is a lengthy, detailed study, replete with copious details drawn from literature and archival material. At times, it reads like a “thèse d’état,” and one might wish for a more streamlined version. Its contributions, however, are important. First, the study shows that women managed and brokered credit in the old regime. Second, it shows that criticism of this fact grew alongside the rise of political economy as a science, which sought to separate out *economic* credit from other forms, making women’s role in combining and converting these various kinds of credit appear to be dangerous and corrupt. Third, it suggests that the ideological disavowal of this old credit regime (partly the result of this conceptual “separating out”) was so complete that theorists of the late-nineteenth or twentieth centuries (Crowston discusses Gabriel Tarde (p. 326)) who sought to tether economic credit to other forms of it conceptualized from scratch. This last point is subtle but important. Crowston seems to be drawing on the perspectives of the new sub-field of “deep history.” Practitioners of deep history have a textured view of continuity and change over the ages: while sociological dynamics persist across vast swathes of time (say, for example, concerns with dress or debt), perceptions about these dynamics and the practices and institutions to which they give rise vary. So, while conversions of financial, political, social and cultural credit continue to this day, *our awareness of them* has become blinkered by an ideological conditioning that conceptually sets these forms of credit apart from each other. In short, if we had the critical perspective prevalent in eighteenth-century France, we would not need to read Foucault or Bourdieu. The power inherent in conceptual categories and the way power cuts across various spheres of life would be obvious.

After reading this book, I cannot imagine lecturing on the old regime without devoting attention to the theme of credit. Still, I find myself at pains to explain how credit hierarchies related to other social hierarchies. How much did caste and privilege impinge upon the regime of credit? Did the proportional weight of credit, compared with other markers of distinction, change over the course of the eighteenth century? Crowston offers no clear answers. Given her evidence, though, one might hypothesize that the importance of credit, as a marker of confidence, influence, and power, had become so great over the course of the eighteenth century that it was easy for revolutionaries to abolish feudal distinctions. The terms of the new credit regime—reputation within public opinion, access to valuable information and financial resources, possession of high status luxury goods—rendered feudal distinctions superfluous.

In addition, the book’s conclusions might have been brought into dialogue with some recent scholarship of the period by historians and other social scientists. In her *L’économie morale: pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l’Europe préindustrielle* (which Crowston reviewed in a *H-France Forum*), Laurence Fontaine argues that two forms of credit, aristocratic and bourgeois, rubbed up against each other in the early modern period. Whereas aristocratic credit was highly personalized and hierarchical (it belonged to the sphere of what cultural anthropologists call “the gift,” a literature that Crowston also discusses), bourgeois credit was impersonal and rational.^[5] Fontaine’s view chimes with that of the economic sociologists Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast.^[6] They argue that the eighteenth century marked a period when early modern society was on the cusp of transitioning from a “natural state,” characterized by personalized power relations understood as simultaneously political and economic, to an “open access” society, characterized by rational laws and a proliferation of competitive institutions that, together, fostered impersonal power relations. These impersonal relations led personalized power relations to look corrupt and, quite importantly, created the illusion that politics and the economy constituted separate spheres. Crowston’s evidence and arguments, it seems to me, resonate with these interpretations.

Readers familiar with the recent work of William Sewall, especially his most recent article that appeared well after Crowston’s book, might discern differences between their views on the relationship between the commercial fashion trades and the French Revolution. Sewall sees the

fashion industry fostering notions of civil equality. As the enforcement of sumptuary laws declined across the eighteenth century and fashionable people gathered in increasing numbers along Paris's promenades, visually apprehending someone's social status became difficult. People became used to "the co-presence of individuals whose real statuses were uncertain but who were treated as abstract equals."^[7] Civil equality thus became thinkable. Crowston, however, shows us a fashion world generating new hierarchies as consumers agonized over which shop they should patronize in order to gain access not only to the "right" apparel but also to the "right" information networks connected to *le monde* or the court. In Crowston's story, fashion brought about new terms and practices for establishing hierarchies, not egalitarian thinking. Perhaps both historians have a case, but their differences merit discussion.

A final question about "crédit": Are Crowston's conclusions generalizable beyond France? In chapter one, she shows how a wide variety of English and Latin concepts—authority, honor, reputation, force, interest—were all translated into early modern French as "crédit." Does this use of a single term for diverse phenomena suggest that these phenomena were more deeply intertwined in France than elsewhere? The question is important because if the French use of a single term for different phenomena is incidental, then there is the risk that polysemy is being presented here as "thesis." Could a book making the same point be written for, say, eighteenth-century Britain or the Hapsburg Empire? Of course, seeing these phenomena as interrelated is not new. Historians often relate honor, reputation, interests, public opinion and political authority in their studies. What is new is seeing these phenomena all encapsulated in one term. The historical significance of this (revealing or incidental?) encapsulation requires further elucidation.

NOTES

[1] Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).

[2] Avner Offer, "Between the Gift and the Market: The Economy of Regard," *Economic History Review* 50, no. 3 (August 1997): 450–476.

[3] There are many recent studies on Marie-Antoinette. A good place to begin is with Dena Goodman, ed., *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie-Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: H. Holt, 2006).

[4] Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution: London's French libellistes, 1758–92* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), esp. chapter five.

[5] Laurence Fontaine, *L'économie morale: pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l'Europe préindustrielle* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008)

[6] Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[7] William Sewell, "Connecting Capitalism to the French Revolution: The Parisian Promenade and the Origins of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France," *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 39.

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