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WRETCHED EXCESS?: CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AMONGST THE  
ARISTOCRACY IN 18TH CENTURY FRANCE

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## ABSTRACT

While this mass consumption of luxury items is oftentimes talked about as a factor in leading to the French Revolution, that spending is presented as little more than selfishness in the face of an ever-growing population. However, the aristocracy linked their conspicuous consumption and ostentation to their rights and privileges, and their dominance over society hinged upon that display.

Chapter One uses the writings of the Marquis de Sade to present a unique perspective into consumption from the point-of-view of a member of the aristocracy who argued that conspicuous luxury was a method of maintaining social inequity. Chapter Two discusses the origins of the consumptive habits of the aristocracy as being reactionary to the threats of social disorder against the State in the seventeenth century. Finally, Chapter Three examines a year of expenditures in the last full year of Louis XIV's life that shows what spending had become normalized at Versailles by the early eighteenth century.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2006, while speaking to an undergraduate Graphic Design class at Middle Tennessee State University, Professor Barry B. Buxkamper offered his students advice about the advantages and disadvantages of ostentatious aesthetics. He stated, “If you’re going to be excessive, be wretchedly excessive.” While his message at first seemed to justify excess for its own sake, further discussion revealed the truth behind his maxim: If one’s purpose is to be excessive, then there can be no timidity. That aesthetic can only be successful when it is allowed to do what it is designed to do—to be garish, to be grandiose, to be conspicuous. The same holds true for how and why the French aristocracy spent as it did during the eighteenth century. The massive spending on luxury items that were purposefully visible, facilitated by tradition and duty-bound by a sense of honor, gave the aristocracy the means to maintain their position in society as the controllers of land and advisors to the king’s policy. Their excess embodied their privilege, the tastes of their sovereign, and a spirit of entitlement that could not be limited by a depletion of the State treasury.

While this mass consumption of luxury items is oftentimes talked about as a factor in leading the Third Estate (the business owners and lower classes) to take action against the aristocracy and the First Estate (the clergy) in the buildup to the French Revolution, that spending is presented as little more than salt in the open wounds of a starving and ever-growing population that had been growing evermore destitute since the beginnings of the early modern era. However, the causes and context of the conspicuous consumption as practiced by the aristocracy reveals how they directly correlate to the

social tensions that persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until they erupted in the 1790s. The tenuous hold that the aristocracy had on their positions of power within the State began to slip away as more bourgeois business owners, through an increasing mercantile economy, had the financial means and connections to gain noble titles of their own that the State, willing to ennoble anyone who could afford the fee, doled out, even if it meant dividing up the positions held by the aristocratic elite. As they became increasingly functionless within the State, the nobility stubbornly clung to conspicuous consumption as a way to visually justify the privileges they continued to maintain, such as exemption from certain taxes, such as the salt tax (*gabelle*). As discussed in Chapter One, the Marquis de Sade saw the privileges bestowed by birth into an aristocratic family to be nothing more than luck that had nothing to do with divine rights, hereditary superiority, or the protection of French society. His writings are unique in that, while subjective, they do give a primary source from which to see the aristocracy from an insider's perspective, even though Sade often found himself at odds with his own class. With his fictions, Sade portrayed luxury as a form of social control, making it seem desirable yet always connected with it the ugliness behind its conventions when social inequity is allowed to exist.

When the aristocracy rebelled against the State during the seventeenth century during the Fronde, the measures taken by Louis XIV to maintain order created an absolutist State, relocating his courtiers away from Paris to Versailles. As examined in Chapter Two, the isolation and the dictation of taste and style that Louis XIV commanded through Versailles and State-run luxury workshops became commonplace

within a generation after the Fronde in which the nobles had engaged during the previous century. Versailles allowed the new generation of the aristocracy to be placated with petty privileges that developed out of the rigorous court etiquette, and their conspicuous consumption only increased as the need to compete with others at Court and those newly ennobled continued.

Chapter Three outlines the expenditures of 1714, the last year of Louis XIV's life. This year typifies how excessive luxury spending in the wake of decreased State revenue had become normalized by the early eighteenth century. Through the last decade of Louis XIV's reign, large-scale building projects that had characterized the late seventeenth century at Versailles ceased almost entirely with the exception of renovations to pre-existing structures. The aristocracy, living at the palace, who lost the majority of their wealth in three decades of being at Court, depended upon the King for their basic subsistence. The largest expenditure for the State treasury was the pensions and rents paid to the courtiers along with the salaries due to the artisans who built, furnished, and maintained Versailles. The sudden drop in spending in 1715 can be explained by Louis XIV's death and the abandonment of Versailles for Paris during the Regency of Louis XV.

This study examines a materialistic culture alongside its material culture, focusing on explaining the expenditures of the aristocracy without becoming enamored by the spectacle of wealth itself, a point that Jules Guiffrey warned his contemporaries against in the late nineteenth century while he was compiling the accounts of Versailles for *les*



*Archives Nationale* in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The goods and services that the French aristocracy indulged in purchasing were not simply marks of luxury; they represented social ideals about order and privilege. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Versailles allowed Louis XIV to control his nobles while simultaneously reflecting the order and the stability of the State in the architecture and gardens.

French historians Daniel Roche and Colin Jones sought to further explain the context of the consumerism of the aristocracy in the eighteenth century as being indicative of an active economy. Roche, in *The Culture of Clothing*, stated, “The ostentatious spending of the Versailles and Paris aristocracy deserves one day to be re-examined as a whole, within the context of the total cost entailed by the canons of etiquette and fashion and in relation to resources.”<sup>2</sup> Most recently, Donna J. Bohanan called for a reexamination of eighteenth century aristocratic spending and argued that the decades prior to 1715 are the tipping point for “nonessential” consumption that would continue to be commonplace within France in the years leading to the Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Guiffrey, ed., *Comptes des Bâtiments du Roi sous le Règne de Louis XIV* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1881), 1:i.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 213; see also Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon, 1715-1799* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Bohanan, Donna J. *Fashion beyond Versailles: Consumption and Design in Seventeenth Century France*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012, 1-2.

Using the Marquis de Sade's writing along with the account ledgers from Versailles during the early 1700s, *Wretched Excess* outlines the origins of the growth of luxury spending amongst the aristocracy as being rooted the absolutist evolution of the State, the changes within the social hierarchy that thinned the already dwindling authority of the nobility, and the mercantilist expansion of the French economy. The spending habits of the French aristocracy in the eighteenth century cannot be dismissed as the self-indulgent tendencies of a leisure-seeking elite. Though the consumption of conspicuous luxury was wretched in that it became the last vestige of social control that the aristocracy had as the bourgeoisie grew wealthier and more powerful, the aristocracy saw it as necessary to maintain their position in the social hierarchy and protect the stability of society as a whole.

## Chapter I

## VOYEURISTIC INTENTIONS: THE MARQUIS DE SADE AND CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

In 1772, within a crystal candy dish in a gray silk pocket rested the seed— or, rather, pastille candy— of the destruction of the Marquis de Sade’s reputation. However innocuous the pastille appeared, the sugary confection contained neither *crème* nor liqueur; beneath the taste of anise lurked a supposed aphrodisiac that could easily make an unsuspecting consumer violently ill. For Sade, the unintended poisoning of a prostitute that he tempted with the sugary sweet led to an arrest warrant issued for the nobleman’s capture.<sup>1</sup> Sade fled Marseilles, where he and his valet pursued sensual pleasures, even as the Marquis’s finances were in tatters. The already faltering reputation of Sade’s character and family fell apart through his judicial disgrace, running from province-to-province to evade justice; Sade himself, however, continued to enjoy his time away from his manor houses and ancestral estates by frequenting brothels and spending nights at the theatre with his mistress, even as he turned into a fugitive.<sup>2</sup>

The possession of items, such as sugared sweets and even cantharid drugs, only purchased by those with wealth to afford luxury goods and with the leisure time to pursue prurient interests, proved too tempting for a working class prostitute. Luxury food items potentially accounted for a month or more’s wages for a day laborer, and a prostitute

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<sup>1</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 124-126.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-131.

might only expect to receive them from a client.<sup>3</sup> From the outside, the pastille that Sade plied his victim with was nothing but simple flavored sugar, but it only became possible by sugar replacing honey as the sweetener of choice for Europe's aristocracy. Sugar, through French colonies and slave labor abroad, rose to become France's chief export during the 18th century.<sup>4</sup> Sugar was exotic and malleable, able to be formed into all manner of candies and jellies to grace the tables of those wealthy enough to purchase them.<sup>5</sup> Though Sade himself enjoyed his wealth, authority, and position due to his noble birth, he eventually delivered sharp criticism through the words of one of the aristocratic "heroes" in his work, *120 Days of Sodom*, claiming that, in his experience, the typical mindset of the upper classes held the belief that "[an] enjoyment that is shared is enfeebled. This is a recognized truth ... one must absolutely think only of oneself."<sup>6</sup> In Sade's estimation, the motivation of the aristocracy, himself included, derived not only

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>4</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Maxine Berg, "Luxury, the Luxury Trades, and the Roots of Industrial Growth: A Global Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), 181; Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 244-245. See also Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Donatien Alphonse François Sade, *Aline et Valcour, ou Le Roman Philosophique*, Vol. 1 (1795; Project Gutenberg: 2005), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16885/16885-h/16885-h.htm>; Donatien Alphonse François Sade, *120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, Vol. 2, eds. and trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 209-210.

by outright selfishness, fostered by a feeling of superiority, but that anyone of lesser social status should be denied the ability to participate in leisure activities and to purchase luxury goods.<sup>7</sup>

The study of the French Revolution and its causes often legitimizes the efforts of the working and middle classes against an oppressive upper class and disorganized government. Historians examine the economic systems, political dissatisfaction, and environmental factors, obscuring individuals into a nameless, faceless mass.<sup>8</sup> However, since the 1950s, scholars turned to social history to understand the culture of the various classes and how it affected daily life and to understand the one element earlier *Annales* and Marxist historians “relegated to the 'dust' of ephemeral events”—power.<sup>9</sup> Between the study of economics and the analysis of the social classes, the concept of power arises as a convergence between the two, i.e. how it is exerted, how it is viewed by those subjected to it, and how that power perpetuates itself. Power, to work most effectively, must

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<sup>7</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: MacMillan, 1899; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>8</sup> See also Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); William Doyle, *The Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris: Maison du livre française, 1939); Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes* (1968; repr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, ed. trans. Gerald Bevan (1856; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Hunt, “French History in the Last Twenty Years: The Rise and Fall of the *Annales* Paradigm,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 21 (Apr. 1986), 221-222.

contain visual elements to reach the public to either instill awe, fear, or loyalty in order to maintain itself.<sup>10</sup> For the French aristocracy, the ostentatious display of luxury goods became a way to do just that. When the middle class's wealth began to grow and their purchasing power exceeded that of the nobility, the upper classes, whether they could afford to or not, began spending with overzealous abandon with the sole purpose of being seen and to reinforce their position in society. For historians, however, the context for the aristocracy's spending—the exact nature of how an individual noble viewed his/her own wealth and why s/he chose to spend it—is largely lost. As the Revolution's participants often attacked and destroyed symbols of conspicuous consumption, such as aristocratic homes, many records of the spending amongst the upper classes no longer exists.<sup>11</sup> The basis for how the aristocracy lived largely depended on the Palace of Versailles in Paris that housed the French Court, leaving out members of the Second Estate who lived abroad in rural areas. However, Daniel Roche, who began publishing significant cultural studies of 18th century France in the 1970s, illuminates the subject with his work on the consumption of material wealth in *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century* (published in 1987) and, most recently, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, utilizing postmortem inventories to capture how the people of France from different social strata participated in consumerism

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<sup>10</sup> Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in the Revolutionary France* (London: Berg, 2002), 20-21.

prior to the Industrial Revolution. According to Roche, many more decades of work lie ahead to reconstruct the exact nature of how and why the aristocracy spent as it did.<sup>12</sup>

When considering the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes of France in the 18th century, one's thoughts do not immediately leap to picture the Marquis de Sade, yet he embodied the attitudes about consumption that existed within the nobility and enjoyed a lifestyle above the laws that applied to others. Then, why and how, if he was so immersed in that world, could his works be used as a subjective source to examine those activities? Why look to Sade at all? As a French aristocrat, statesman, and author, Sade wrote extensively for the stage, for publication, and for his own personal correspondence, leaving behind a wealth of primary source material that covers over forty years before, during, and after the French Revolution, giving him a unique perspective to events as they unfolded. Though part of the aristocracy and a participant in the lavish spending afforded to him by his noble birth, Sade appeared, at times, to be estranged from his own class because of his legal problems and imprisonment, stemming from his licentious lifestyle. After the Revolution, he joined the new government and became a politician on behalf of the working class. However, while never truly part of either class, Sade's writing expressed that he played the part of a voyeur, always outside, looking inward as he recorded what he saw. Though Sade's opinions cannot be thought of as typical of other aristocrats, his frank and candid descriptions of his own life and his opinions on the behavior of the nobility provide a unique overview of the downfall of a class addicted to

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century*, trans. Marie Evans (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 186.

overspending and the rise of a new class that, thus far, remains relatively untouched by historians outside of literary criticism and psycho-sexual topics.

The following is an examination of three of the Marquis de Sade's works and his personal papers. *Aline et Valcour* defines Sade's views on the aristocracy, namely the happenstance of noble birth, social inequity, and the invalidity of property rights. *120 Days in Sodom*, Sade's magnum opus, presents an allegorical vision of the upper class of French society consuming both those of the lower classes and themselves in a destructive orgy of violence and control. Lastly, *Philosophy in the Boudoir* explores Sade's positivist view on the dissolution of the monarchy and the nobility and is a demand for the abolition of other societal institutions that infringe on the rights of French citizens. Together these works reveal that the Marquis de Sade believed that the economic excesses practiced by the French aristocracy of the late 18th century emerged as the direct result of a desire to prove their property rights and the arbitrary values they placed on material possessions, imposing their self-importance on and subverting the liberty of the lower classes.

Before examining the nature of the aristocracy's effects on and participation in both the society of 18th century France and its economy, it is important to define several key terms about consumption and luxury. How one defines consumption often conflates with how the viewer believes the consumers should live, but, at its core, consumption is "goods, activities, and representations associated with those goods and activities."<sup>13</sup> As noted above, lack of knowledge about the French economy and how the aristocrats at all

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<sup>13</sup> Trentmann, *History of Consumption*, 1, 8.



levels of wealth interacted with it “[hinders] our understanding of the crucial role of ostentatious expenditure.”<sup>14</sup> The noble social circle, from the reign of Louis XIV to the reign of Louis XVI, created tension amongst all social classes due to its very public overindulgence and lavish spending on extravagances (that the average French person could never afford), a rising national deficit, and the exorbitant taxes needed to pay the incomes and pensions of thousands of courtiers, favorites, and other assorted nobility.<sup>15</sup> Consumption takes many forms, from the necessary to the luxurious. Self-affirmation and visual representations of social status helped to elevate conspicuous consumption amongst the aristocracy.<sup>16</sup> “Over time, the inexhaustible character of human needs would serve to blur the boundary between what was necessary, convenient and luxurious while the potentially infinite capacity of human ingenuity in devising new fashions would serve to drive the progress of the human imagination forward, working to reinforce and magnify the interdependence between necessities, conveniences and luxuries.”<sup>17</sup> The progress of the ability to create goods and the expansion of a population facilitated the

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<sup>14</sup> Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 186.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-187.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Sonenscher, “Fashion’s Empire: Trade and Power in Early 18th Century France,” in Robert Fox and Anthony Turner, *Luxury Trade and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris: Studies in the History of the Skilled Workforce* (London: Ashgate, 1998), 242.

transformation from need-based wants and desires to those outside of the basic necessities required to sustain life.<sup>18</sup>

The possession and consumption of unproductive goods is an example of luxury.<sup>19</sup> Water, for instance, is a necessity for living, but channeling that water through an expensive and elaborate fountain that one does not drink from nor get any use from besides being decorative is a luxury.<sup>20</sup> Having time devoted to the pursuit of luxury without occupation or profession, in 18th century France, marked the nobility, and, as economic theorist Thorstein Veblen states, “Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure.”<sup>21</sup> Especially with the rise of the wealthy middle class, the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy needed ways to further delineate itself from others of wealth, even as their own wealth declined. “[Their] consciousness of being the ‘upper crust’” reflected the desire and outright need to be on display.<sup>22</sup> Bèat-Louis de Muralt, a Swiss writer in the 18th century, argues that “this exercise [of following the volatility of fashion and luxury], in which [the French] take a pleasure, is liberty to them, in which they are like prisoners that have their irons chang’d every day and on that account might think themselves at large.”<sup>23</sup> The compulsion to display wealth

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<sup>18</sup> Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Trentmann, *History of Consumption*, 176-180.

<sup>20</sup> Roche, *Everyday Things*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Trentmann, *History of Consumption*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Roche, *The People*, 2; Sonenscher, in Fox, *Luxury Trade*, 242-245.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Sonenscher, in Fox, *Luxury Trade*, 245.

trapped the aristocracy in a prison of their own making. To affirm their position in French society, they followed the rules that they and their ancestors created. To not do so undermined their power and authority over the lower classes because that authority hinged upon its visibility.

From outward appearances, the French aristocracy in the 18th century seemed “relatively dissolute” in morality in comparison to the “qualities [of stability and uprightness] found more readily in the bourgeoisie.”<sup>24</sup> The monetary gap between the wealthy First and Second Estates (the clergy and the aristocracy) and the Third Estate (the business owners/bourgeoisie and the impoverished working class), in part, caused the French Revolution. The culture of the French aristocracy revolved around the conspicuous consumption of material wealth, including opulent building projects, clothing, furniture, food, and other goods. Twelve miles from Paris sat the heart of this activity at the Palace of Versailles, home of the king and his Court, visible to the poorest of France’s populace. Those with nothing witnessed firsthand the spectacle of waste and wantonness from the upper classes. In a brief autobiographical letter in his utopian fiction, *Aline et Valcour*, Sade writes of his own place in the aristocracy as “the results of the illusions of ancestry in which we so often take pride in with so little reason; it is an advantage that owes to chance.”<sup>25</sup> As part of the aristocracy, he saw himself and others ignore the random nature of their birth and what it afforded them in society and, instead,

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<sup>24</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 124-126.

<sup>25</sup> Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*, 124.

imagined that “the entire universe must encourage [our] caprices,” including abundant wealth and luxury.<sup>26</sup>

Sade’s life embodied the consumptive attitudes and a lifestyle above the law, reflecting the behavior of the aristocracy taken to an extreme that broke the boundaries of what his society found acceptable. The environment that birthed the Marquis de Sade, encompassing both the man himself and the legend, fostered the selfish, arrogant nature of the crimes the Marquis committed later in his life. Due, in part, to his upbringing amongst the decadence of the royal retinue of the Prince de Condé, Sade believed that his fate, in terms of his own desires, jealousy, and temperament, sealed itself.<sup>27</sup> “I assumed that everything must yield to me, that the entire universe had to flatter my whims, and that I had the right to satisfy them at will.”<sup>28</sup> His family was “rife with licentious behavior.”<sup>29</sup> Before the birth of Sade, undercover agents arrested his father, the Comte Jean-Baptiste de Sade, for propositioning a male prostitute in a park.<sup>30</sup> “[The] officer of the watch who had observed them and who learned from the young man’s signal that a reprobate was actively soliciting him, attempted to arrest the man but in view of his

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Sade, *Aline et Valcour*.

<sup>29</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 25-27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

quality did not, and instead released him after taking his name and address.”<sup>31</sup> Because of the Comte's rank and privilege, he received no punishment for his perceived crime; for those also of the Comte's status, this behavior appeared relatively normal. “Comte de Sade's erotic activities ... should be seen in the context of a particularly libertine phase of French culture.”<sup>32</sup> The period of French history, between the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XVI, leading up to the Revolution, “was the most dissolute period in French history and might well vie with the late Roman Empire as the most debauched era of Western civilization.”<sup>33</sup> This debauchery extended beyond the sensual pleasures of the aristocracy and evolved into the very way the nobility conducted themselves publicly and privately through their ostentatious purchases and appearances.

As defined by William Doyle, “[The] *Ancien Régime*,” under which the Marquis de Sade was born, “was ... a form of society. It had been dominated by the ‘privileged orders’ of clergy and nobility, who had been exempt from many common burdens but who had monopolized all public power and profits. Privileged self-perpetuating oligarchies, in fact, that made the whole of pre-revolutionary society a chaotic, irrational jungle of special cases, exemptions and inequalities.”<sup>34</sup> About eighty percent of the

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<sup>31</sup> Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris (manuscript of the Bastille Archives, 10265). Cited in Maurice Lever, *Donatien Alphonse François de Sade* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1991), 61, in Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> William Doyle, *The Ancien Régime* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986; reprint, 1988), 3.

French population prior to the French Revolution (around twenty million people) made up the Third Estate, leaving the remaining twenty percent to fill the ranks of the wealthy aristocracy and clergy who benefitted from the labors of the majority.<sup>35</sup> Though the exact number of Second Estate members is unknown, historians estimate between 120,000 and 350,000 lived in the mid-1700s, and together owned between one-fourth and one-third of all the land in France, along with the most coveted offices in the French government, the land-based industry, and the highest ranks in the judiciary system, the military, the education system, and the French Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup> The additional one-fourth of land owned by the Church, orchestrated by clergy of noble birth, raised the total holdings of French soil by the aristocracy to a half.<sup>37</sup> In the south of France, where the family Sade resided, “so much of this prosperous handful [fed] off from the bulk of their fellow inhabitants. They alone had no fear of ruin if famine or disease struck.”<sup>38</sup> The lords possessed the lands, the farms, the means of producing goods, and the ability to give jobs.<sup>39</sup> When the majority of French citizens feared a rise in the price of a bread loaf, the lavish spending of the elite rose continuously in the mid-to-late 1700s.<sup>40</sup> The gap between

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<sup>35</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 16, 22; Peter McPhee, *A Social History of France, 1780-1880* (London: Routledge, 1992), 17-21.

<sup>36</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 16, 22, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17; McPhee, *A Social History*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 114.

rich and poor became increasingly apparent as more of the wealthy business class, the bourgeoisie, gained status and power through the expansion of commercial interests in the 18th century, moving farther away from the center of the economic hierarchy and closer towards resources and holdings akin to that of the aristocracy and clergy.<sup>41</sup> The “middle” class imitated the nobles however possible. “Soft hands, formal clothing, servants, effortless literacy, and incomes and possessions far beyond the dreams of the average Frenchman or woman marked out members of the dominant classes.”<sup>42</sup> “Nobility was a club which every wealthy man felt entitled, indeed obliged, to join. Not all nobles, by any means, were rich, but sooner or later all the rich ended up noble.”<sup>43</sup> Returning to the topic of sugar, one French bourgeois, Claude Pèrier bought a noble title for one million *livres*, money earned from his profitable sugar plantation in St-Domingue. The annual salary earned by a bourgeois through his status amongst the French Court potentially paid off the amount of the title itself within decades.<sup>44</sup>

Those who could afford to mimic the nobles often bought titles outright, becoming nobles through the power of their expenditures because money alone meant little in terms of the social hierarchy; the privileges associated with the nobility exceeded those money could buy.<sup>45</sup> The nobles displayed this privilege on their bodies, carrying

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28; McPhee, *A Social History*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> McPhee, *A Social History*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 26-27.

their wealth upon themselves in the form of lavish fashions, swords, coats of arms, and other luxury goods, physically and visually separating themselves from the rest of society.<sup>46</sup> Their influence permeated into every aspect of public life.<sup>47</sup> Families like Sade's remained at the top of a social ladder, encased in their grand homes, sprawling estates, and cathedrals.<sup>48</sup>

After his imprisonment in the Bastille in the mid-1780s, Sade found the inspiration and the solitude to write his most extensive works, including *Aline et Valcour*, *120 Days in Sodom*, and *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. Working between 1785 and 1788, Sade completed the epic multi-volume collection of letters that made up *Aline et Valcour*.<sup>49</sup> With that book, the Marquis de Sade attached his name to his work's publication, for the first time, and he felt particular pride in it, promoting it in 1795 after his release from prison as he rarely did with his other works.<sup>50</sup> In this book, Sade gives an autobiographical account of his own position in society, placing himself in the role of the tragic hero Valcour. He writes:

I was born in Paris amidst luxury and abundance. As soon as reason so enabled, I believed myself overfilled by the gifts of nature and fortune united—believed it because I was stupidly told as much; this ridiculous preconception made me arrogant, despotic, and rageful.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 29-30, 48, 99.

<sup>48</sup> McPhee, *A Social History*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 268.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 268, 357.

<sup>51</sup> Sade, "The Story of Valcour," *Aline et Valcour*.



Sade recognizes, characteristically, that his place in society was determined without any divine right to be an aristocrat but was only luck on his part to have not been born impoverished. In one letter, Aline writes to Valcour about her loathing of noble patents. She states that titles, without money, are like “phosphorescent worms-- only [shining] in the dark.”<sup>52</sup> Money supports the privileges that the nobility enjoy; without money to spend, the title is meaningless because an impoverished noble cannot fully participate within a society that encourages excesses. The pursuit of funds leads those nobles to reclaim a fortune however possible in order to regain that status, as Aline's father attempts to do by selling her into an unwanted marriage within Sade's story.<sup>53</sup>

The plot of *Aline et Valcour* encompasses the social institutions that Sade felt proved most detrimental to civilization while telling the story of two sets of separated lovers. The titular Aline is caught between Valcour, whom she loves, and the licentious libertine to whom her aristocratic father, for all intents and purposes, sells her. Through the travels of the characters and their letters, the reader experiences a metaphor for the common social practices of marriage arrangement and property that the aristocrats of the 18th century held both towards literal property and towards women. These obstacles to the happiness of Aline and Valcour are represented by the cannibalistic African kingdom of Butua, where an absolute monarch controls and represses an increasingly vice-riddled and unreasonable public. Aline and Valcour are unable to break away from the systematic

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., “Lettre Seconde.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

oppression they face living within the noble class with its contradictory codes of conduct. Aline's father, for example, places importance on Aline's virginity, yet he attempts to marry her off in hopes of both gaining wealth and being able to debauch her himself, a hyperbolic plot thread twisted from aristocratic parental rights and the restrictions placed on women's sexuality as an object to be owned. Trapped within the *Ancien Régime*, Aline commits suicide in despair. The corruption of perfection and virtue in favor of a society predicated upon inequality and abuse eventually causes the downfall of Butua as a kingdom as well.<sup>54</sup>

In the France Sade experienced under the *Ancien Régime*, the aristocracy and clergy continued to be not only overrepresented but overindulged.<sup>55</sup> The blindness, either willingly or not, to their excesses in the face of mounting economic inequity, unlike what existed prior to the 17th and 18th centuries, appeared baffling, even to Sade who actively participated in the privilege of his class. The wealth of the Court aristocracy, in particular, depended upon the taxation of all the Court's subjects. Taxes taken from the poorest subjects, upwards of forty percent of their incomes in some areas, went into the royal coffers and then paid the annual salaries and pensions of courtiers and the favorites of the royal family.<sup>56</sup> The money that circulated amongst the wealthy through business, trade, and the creation and distribution of goods, including luxury clothing, closely intertwined with the social structure, culture, and absolute monarchy of France in the

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<sup>54</sup> Sade, *Aline et Valcour*.

<sup>55</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Roche, *Everyday Things*, 40; McPhee, *A Social History*, 17.

18th century, creating the concept of “*l’empire de la mode*”/“the empire of fashion.”<sup>57</sup>

Because of the predilection for luxury goods and services amongst the Second Estate, the money spent back into the French economy by aristocrats rarely went further than the merchants and skilled craftspersons needed to produce high quality and much-sought-after items.<sup>58</sup> For example, the price of a gown suitable for the Court equated to what an average laborer made over the course of a decade.<sup>59</sup> A seamstress/dressmaker possessing the specialized skills to make a dress of refined quality required time and funding. “Skill, highly developed skill worthy to be deployed on the noblest, richest, and rarest of materials is a prerequisite of the making of luxury goods.”<sup>60</sup> The cost of becoming such a craftsperson prevented most of France’s poor from ever having the opportunity to participate in these trades.<sup>61</sup> “It is understandable that the Court was increasingly made one of the targets of criticism ... by the increased taxation and royal expenditure.”<sup>62</sup> The benefits of taxation, therefore, rarely trickled down to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. This “unproductive expenditure,” meaning those who controlled and participated most actively hindered rather than helped the economy were not furthering the economy by their spending, embodied the continual decline of France’s financial state

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<sup>57</sup> Sonenscher, in Fox, *Luxury Trade*, 234.

<sup>58</sup> Roche, *Everyday Things*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Fox, *Luxury Trade*, xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Doyle, *French Revolution*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Roche, *Everyday Things*, 40.

as a whole as it approached the Revolution.<sup>63</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Sade's use of nudity in *Aline et Valcour* exists less for pornographic purposes and more for the description of a utopian ideal.<sup>64</sup> Nudity becomes a metaphor for the freedom from the cultural restraint of material necessity and the way in which the aristocracy visually separated themselves from the other classes rather than a method to titillate.

Just as labor became divided by the level of skill (in turn, by income level as one contextualizes the cost of becoming "skilled"), the commodification of materials became divided as well. Sumptuary laws in the 17th century, neither new nor isolated to France, gave the aristocracy the legal right to express their power and wealth through their fashion and accessories by designating certain materials for no other class's use. Other European countries, such as England, maintained such laws as early as the fourteenth century.<sup>65</sup> Like the sumptuary laws of other countries, France's laws prevented its subjects in lower social classes from wearing or, in some instances, owning certain materials and fabrics.<sup>66</sup> Even natural commodities, such as water and wood, became incorporated and restricted in usage by the nobility. Used as entertainment at parties, channeled through fountains, "[water] was above all an element of decor in the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17, 32, 40.

<sup>64</sup> Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 425.

<sup>65</sup> Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 103-104.

<sup>66</sup> Roche, *Everyday Things*, 40-41.

aristocratic civilization of appearances.”<sup>67</sup> Whereas cool, fresh water was a rarity to the average person living within a city without a close water supply, constantly running fountains, like the ones that dot the gardens at the Palace at Versailles, represented another deliberate display of luxury.<sup>68</sup>

However, Sade poses a happier solution and an alternative by introducing a second set of lovers, Léonore and Sainville. Instead of working within Sade’s metaphorical boundaries of French society, the pair break away. Just as Aline and Valcour’s troubles mirror Butua, Léonore and Sainville mirror the kingdom of Tamoé. Though this kingdom does have an absolute monarch, it presents a utopian ideal. The problems that Sade saw within his own society– social and economic inequity– resolve through the abandonment of personal property, the scorning of material luxuries, and the relationships between men and women rest on the equality of both parties. “Wherever the institution of private property is found, even in a slightly developed form, the economic process bears the character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods.”<sup>69</sup> Deliverance from the need for material goods potentially alleviates some of the tension between the social classes, just as social equality poses a resolution to the problems faced by the “civilized world.”

In a letter to his wife after being taken into custody for the incident with the sugar pastilles, the Marquis de Sade wrote to his wife his own confession of his misdeeds,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 21.

though with his own biased perspective of his actions. He truly saw no harm in what he had done since the young woman who imbibed the sweet survived her exposure to the cantharid drug within the candy shell. He saw himself victimized while, as he estimated, other wealthier noblemen went free for far worse crimes:

But in France they do not punish people who have a hundred thousand *livres* income, and below them are set small victims whom they can offer to those voracious monsters who live on sucking the blood of unfortunate victims. They ask for their small victims; they are handed over; they are satisfied. That is why I am in prison.<sup>70</sup>

This strange dichotomy of views epitomizes Sade's focus on the aristocracy as villains in his writing. While Sade himself engaged in the very activities that he condemns his licentious protagonists and antagonists for participating in, he puts himself above them because they escape punishment for their crimes whereas the authorities imprisoned Sade. This contention encapsulates the interesting gap between *Aline et Valcour* and *120 Days of Sodom*. In *Aline et Valcour*, Sade sets up a concept of a reformatory prison system as a utopian ideal, one in which death penalties cease to exist for capital crimes and judicial efforts focus on the prevention of crimes rather than revenge for them on behalf of the State.<sup>71</sup> In *120 Days of Sodom*, Sade describes what would occur if the men, like himself and, furthermore, like the wealthier "voracious monsters," act in absolute seclusion to engage in their basest fantasies, enacting their privilege literally upon the bodies of the defenseless.

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<sup>70</sup> Donatien Alphonse François Sade, "Letter VII," in *Selected Letters*, ed. W. J. Strachan (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1965), 69.

<sup>71</sup> Sade, *Aline et Valcour*.

Within *120 Days of Sodom*, Sade delivers sharp rebuke to all the elites through his villains within the lengthy story. Each of the four main characters represents a facet of French upper class society— a duke, a bishop of noble birth, a judge (also of noble birth), and a wealthy bourgeois (with enough wealth to buy a title for himself).<sup>72</sup> Together, these men, made rich by military campaigns under the reign of Louis XIV (an allusion to the wealth accrued by the elite military ranks, often unattainable for the lower classes), purchase the kidnapping of sixteen children, some from noble families, for the purposes of rape and torture.<sup>73</sup>

Sade portrays these characters as men that he knew, weaving characters out of amalgamations of those he encountered. Sade likely bases his duke, Blangis, on Comte de Charlois, a member of the royal family who murdered “peasants for sheer sport the way other men went hunting.”<sup>74</sup> For the bishop, Sade draws from his own uncle, Abbé de Sade, or one of the clergy from his order in Saumane where Sade lived after attacking the Prince de Condé during a childhood fight. Sade's view of the clergy formed in his youth while exposed to the libraries of Abbé de Sade, brimming with prurient literature depicting sexual activity amongst members of the Church.<sup>75</sup> A young Sade also realized

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<sup>72</sup> Sade, *120 Days*, 209-210.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.; Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 264

<sup>74</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 25-27.

the laxness of the papacy in France, watching them ignore or condone affairs between aristocrats and those that could afford dispensations.<sup>76</sup>

Over the course of four months in *120 Days*, the four conspirators devolve into “a primeval, cannibalistic stage not yet curbed by the most fundamental taboos.”<sup>77</sup> The children they purchased for their debauchery mean nothing to them, and the men discard them as quickly as they eat the lavish feasts only to just as swiftly forget them.

Dehumanizing to imagine, for these characters, the children are no more than luxury items purchased for their own pleasure. If consumerism and luxury need a carefully defined context, Sade provides one:

The extensive wars wherewith Louis XIV was burdened during his reign, while draining the State’s treasury and exhausting the substance of the people, none the less contained the secret that led to the prosperity of a swarm of those bloodsuckers who are always on the watch for public calamities, which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously.<sup>78</sup>

As with *Aline et Valcour*, the libertines exercise their powers over everyone around them, selling off their daughters to one another for the purpose of perpetuating incestuous activities, corrupting the innocent, and gaining pleasure from the pain and misery they inflict, whether through the torture they dole out to their victims or the continued drain on the State’s finances through their pensions and salaries. Though the consumption of these unfortunate children, eventually resulting in their deaths, occurs in seclusion, the perverse

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>78</sup> Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*, 191.



acts and lavish spending on food, drink, and clothing, is on display for each of the participants (as each of a slightly different social strata) and for the servants and victims alike.

However, a silent witness exists in the form of the audience. As sickened as Sade hopes his readers will react to the treatment of the children, he never misses an opportunity to describe in sumptuous detail each meal, outfit, and *coiffure*. One finds the clothing to sound attractive or the food delicious:

This meal, much heavier than the one which had been eaten earlier in the day, was served with far greater opulence and splendor. It began with a shellfish soup and hors d'oeuvres composed of twenty dishes; twenty entrees came on next, and soon gave way to another twenty lighter entrees made up entirely of breasts of chicken, or assorted game prepared in every possible way ... Dessert finally appeared: a prodigious number and variety of fruits, though the season was winter, then ices, chocolate, and the liqueurs ...<sup>79</sup>

[The children] would have by way of ordinary dress ... this jacket ... was of pink satin lined with white taffeta, the cuffs and trim were white satin, underneath was to be worn a kind of short vest or waistcoat, also of white satin, and the breeches were to match ...<sup>80</sup>

A moment of disgust arises, for the reader, when one realizes that she or he fell into Sade's trap. Coveting or desiring, even for a moment, those luxury goods makes one feel complicit in the four villains' crime. The audience realizes Sade's true intent, beyond the shock, and his purpose is that feeling of revulsion that comes from knowing that one briefly desired a lovely material object or an enticing dessert in the midst of a horrible act

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 322.

being perpetrated. Sade shows how something that appears so outwardly beautiful can be truly ugly beneath the surface of the façade:

I must reply to the reproach leveled at me when *Aline and Valcour* was published. My brush, t'was said, was too vivid. I depict vice with too hateful a countenance. Would anyone care to know why? I have no desire to make vice seem attractive. Unlike Crébillon and Dorat, I have not set myself the dangerous goal of enticing women to love characters who deceive them; on the contrary, I want them to loathe these characters. 'Tis the only way whereby one can avoid being duped by them. And, in order to succeed in that purpose, I painted that hero who treads the path of vice with features so frightful that they will most assuredly not inspire either pity or love. In so doing, I dare say, I am become more moral than those who believe they have license to embellish them. The pernicious works by these authors are like those fruits ... beneath whose highly polished skins there lurk the seeds of death ... I wish people to see crime laid bare, I want them to fear it and detest it, and I know no other way to achieve this end than to paint it in all its horror.<sup>81</sup>

For Sade, if the audience falls under the sway of some of the luxurious trappings of the four villains' surroundings, then one can only blame oneself. Though he does not beautify the vice, making desirable the objects surrounding the vice seems cruel, but it suits Sade's purpose. The ugliness of the main characters' actions is always apparent, described in just as graphic detail. Sade uses the opportunity of the quiet moments of the publicly “acceptable” pleasures, such as the meals and clothing, to illustrate how destructive any pleasure, that requires taking away the power from another individual, can be for those within a society. Unfortunately, this leaves unresolved possibilities about the *libertinage* Sade engaged in his personal life and his stand against the subversion of liberty. The pastille he gave to a prostitute, knowing that a potentially poisonous drug lurked inside, is ironically like the story of *120 Days*. He tempted a person with a luxury

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<sup>81</sup> Sade, “Reflections on the Novel,” in *120 Days*, 115-116.

good that she could not afford on her own, and the danger remained unnoticed by the young woman until she ate the candy. As stated in his letter to his wife, Sade absolves himself of any wrongdoing. He fails to see that he too is a “voracious monster,” yet, to himself, he walks the path of a moral teacher, though some of his other characters espouse the same ironic views.

Just as the duke was based on Charlois, the same aristocrat fashioned the model for the “protagonist” of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, a work that blurs the line between social critique and pornography. The main character, Dolmancé, based on Charlois and on Sade himself, seeks to introduce, Éugénie, a young woman, into the world of *libertinage*, spurning all social constraints in pursuit of pleasure. He does so with the help of his manservant who aids him in debauchery and kidnapping.<sup>82</sup> “In aristocratic society a vast hierarchy of often useless servants was part of the ostentatious expense of the privileged.”<sup>83</sup> Beyond the servants that actually fulfilled a function in the daily routine of an aristocrat, such as a hair stylist or a chef, some servants remained employed simply to aid in the pageantry of the noble’s retinue, to stand in a prim and polished, handsomely-made uniform for the specific purpose to be on display. Just as Sade employed a valet in many of his affairs to procure or aid him in enacting his fantasies with prostitutes, including the sugar pastille episode that resulted in Sade's imprisonment in the 1780s,

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<sup>82</sup> Donatien Alphonse François Sade, *The Complete Justine, Philosophy of the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, Vol. 1, eds. and trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 185-187. I have chosen to translate the French title, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, as *Philosophy in the Boudoir* rather than *Philosophy of the Bedroom* because, I feel, it is more accurate to Sade’s original intent.

<sup>83</sup> Roche, *The People of Paris*, 276.

Dolmancé pursues the same course in this story, yet clear delineations exist between the rich protagonist and his servants. The servant acts as a part of the pageantry, like a piece of equipment to do the bidding of his master but to never be in control.<sup>84</sup> By owning another person's time, the aristocrat views his servant as merely another consumable good to be enjoyed while fashionable and then discarded.

In the oddly placed political treatise “Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if You Would Become Republicans” found in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Sade outlines a course for direct action to cast off the *Ancien Régime*. He describes a descent into *libertinage* as the only route for the Revolution. If the Revolution requires the deaths and debasement of tens of thousands of people, then only further licentious behavior can support a system built upon anarchy, even though Sade, in his personal life, supported a parliamentary system of governance.<sup>85</sup> Though Sade's treatise is primarily satirical, his suggestion to the revolutionaries is another way to rebuke the aristocracy. The baser needs being fulfilled by the Revolution's violence in full view of the public are reactions to the public displays of luxury presented by the aristocracy during the century. For Sade, the public executions and murders in the wake of The Terror remind him of the private atrocities committed by noblemen like himself and Comte de Charlois.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Sade, *The Complete Justine*, 360-365; Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 338.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-298; Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 359-360.

<sup>86</sup> Sade, *The Complete Justine*, 309-313; Doyle, *French Revolution*, 27, 253-254, 259.

Sade attempts to explain these continuing contradictions between his feelings towards private property, luxury, and the aristocracy and his own behavior in his private writings. In a letter to his wife while he was in the Bastille in 1782, prior to writing any of the works discussed above, Sade states:

Our behavior does not depend on ourselves, it is the result of physique and our constitution. Our responsibility is limited to not spreading the poison and seeing that those who are around us not only do not suffer but are even unaware of our weaknesses ... You cannot create your own virtues, nor is it any more possible to adopt anybody else's tastes in these matters than to become upright if one is born a cripple, nor to be able to adopt this or that opinion by way of moral system than to make oneself dark if one is born red-headed. This is my permanent philosophy and I shall always cleave to it.<sup>87</sup>

Sade recognizes that the cause of his needs, not by a conscious effort, but by the nature of who he was, that he possessed a predilection for sexual violence and fetishes.<sup>88</sup> However, he knows that part of his person, whether by chance or not, formed because of his experiences, his family life, and the aristocratic environment that raised him where sexual liaisons and social impropriety can be covered up with a bribe or two. Like his father, the Comte de Sade, and his dalliances with male prostitutes, Sade faced being outed for his sexual exploits, but, unlike his father, the lengths he went through to achieve his purposes exposed him to ridicule and shame. In many ways, Sade's downfall and his desire to publish his fantasies (though, usually, he did so anonymously) is the strongest rebuke to the aristocracy he could deliver. If the aristocracy wanted to display the plumage of their wealth on their bodies in the forms of their jewels, coiffed wigs, and finery, then Sade

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<sup>87</sup> Sade, "Letter XIII," in *Selected Letters*, 114-115.

<sup>88</sup> Plessix Gray, *At Home*, 359-360.

one-upped them by displaying the kinds of luxury that they kept private, the hidden, ugly underbelly of consumption out in the open for anyone literate to read. By being imprisoned, Sade saved himself from being executed; his openness about what luxuries he indulged in, publicly and privately, that led to his arrest (though he never actively got caught for his actions) ultimately prevented a death by guillotine that countless other aristocrats suffered.

As Sade describes them, the adornments of luxury of the aristocracy evolved not simply as the pride, greed, or lust of one class, but as a grab for power and the need to maintain, exert, and display that power. The morals of his tales serve as a warning that the indulgent spending of the nobility led to consequences other than an overinflated national debt; these attitudes and habits created unwilling participants and victims, both those subjected to the caprices of the nobility and those trapped within its cycle of excess. Collectively, *Aline et Valcour*, *120 Days of Sodom*, and *Philosophy in the Boudoir* reveal Sade's description of the aristocracy in 18th century France. Both in the cities and in the provinces, in public and in private, the nobles displayed their wealth like badges of honor without care towards the well-being of others beneath them. The constant need to present an air of superiority and appear apart from the rest of society drove France deeper into debt and raised taxes beyond what meager offerings the Third Estate could pay. The labor and taxes of the poorest of France paid for each ermine-lined cloak and silk-toed slipper of the elite classes, and their spending was unproductive in the economy as a whole.

## Chapter II

*LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE: THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES, SELF-FASHIONING,  
AND THE COMING OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION*

Monsieur Léonard, hairdresser to Queen Marie Antoinette, stumbled into the tattered remains of his patron's apartments at the palace of Versailles on October 6th, 1789. The mob that stormed the palace had departed long before, leaving shattered glass, ripped tapestries, and broken panels in their wake. The National Guard escorted the royal family away from Versailles and into Paris amidst the cries of the raucous crowd, who carried the heads of the bodyguards meant to protect the occupants of Versailles upon pikes, and those under the King and Queen's employ, who survived the ordeal and remained at the palace, found themselves dealing with the aftermath.

After taking account of the damage in the rooms where he had styled many of the Queen's more elaborate coiffures that the propagandists often satirized, Monsieur Léonard found a pair of Marie Antoinette's shoes unscathed. Over two centuries later, Paris Druout placed a pair of the Queen's heels, perhaps not too dissimilar to the ones that survived the Parisian mob at the dawn of the French Revolution, upon the auction block (ironically, just a day after the 219th anniversary of Marie Antoinette's death at the *Place de la Révolution*).<sup>1</sup> The shoes, a gift to one of the many servants who attended her, had been preserved and passed down through the generations until they arrived in the

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<sup>1</sup> Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 297; Terri Pous, "Marie Antoinette's Shoes Sell for \$65,000 at French Auction," Time.com, October 18, 2012, under "Fashion & Beauty," <http://style.time.com/2012/10/18/marie-antoinettes-shoes-sell-for-65000-at-french-auction> (accessed July 9, 2013).

care of the auction house, weathering the Revolution in far better condition than the members of the aristocracy.

The winning bid of \$65,000, placed anonymously, exceeded the expectations of Paris Druout by almost five fold. An individual's peculiarities, tastes, and fervor as a collector could explain why this lot of royal footwear was so drastically underestimated in comparison to the value placed upon them by the bidder. However, a desire to possess a "piece" of the aristocracy existed prior to the advent of the Revolution. Servants, lower ranking courtiers, and favorites received clothing from both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette that were then passed down through wills, stolen, or, as these particular shoes were, auctioned. "Royal items of clothing were, it would seem, given with a clear sense of the intense value attached to them, and that they might provide a tangible stimulus to enduring fidelity to the crown, even, or especially, when it was all but effaced."<sup>2</sup> These items also remained after their owners' deaths as morbid souvenirs, relics of the Revolution's victory over a desolate monarchy, or simply taken for the valuable materials from which they were made.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Alexandre-Bernard Ju-Des-Retz, the manservant to whom Marie Antoinette gifted her shoes, she merely intended for them to be a souvenir of his service to her, and he likely kept them for that reason.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, clothing became a way to denote privilege amongst the aristocracy. The more expensive the materials and the more elaborate (and

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<sup>2</sup> Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Pous, "Marie Antoinette's Shoes."



seemingly impractical) the garment was, the higher in status the owner appeared to be.<sup>5</sup> Many *coiffures* and gowns made physical activity very restricted, denoting to the viewer of said articles that they were clearly meant for someone at leisure. Catherine Beecher, in her 1814 *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School*, argued, “In past ages, and in aristocratic countries, leisure and indolence and frivolous pursuits have been deemed lady-like and refined, because those classes, which were the most refined, patronized, such an impression.”<sup>6</sup> These codes of etiquette and behavior existed not simply as a distraction for the extremely wealthy but as a stage that was constructed a century prior to the French Revolution when Louis XIV first prepared to move his court away from Paris, hoping to turn an inherited hunting lodge into a palace fit for the image he was constructing for himself.<sup>7</sup>

As much as clothing and the elaborate trappings of privilege created barriers that attempted to exclude others from stepping onto the stage of courtly life, they also existed for public display.<sup>8</sup> From his birth, Louis XIV was an actor in an epic drama, and, as a king, divine right cast his roles (as warrior, as saint, as supreme authority) and the

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<sup>5</sup> Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 6-9.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 306.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 47; see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xiv; Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 184; Doyle, *French Revolution*, 27; Andrew Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French Monarchy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, University Press, 1994), 114.

spotlight that shone on him. Much as his moniker suggested, Louis was the Sun King, and the court surrounded him as a planetary mass of loyal subjects, cajolers, and those in-between who hoped that a modicum of glory might be bestowed upon them.<sup>9</sup> However, this power relied upon those nobles who bowed to the king's authority, and conflict between the monarchy and the First and Second Estates arose when the status granted for submission to the king's authority appeared to be threatened by that same authority.<sup>10</sup>

From the sixteenth century onward, a growing sense of self-image and self-awareness grew amongst those both high- and low-born in Europe. Just as a monarch could use public relations and (what now could be considered) media campaigns to fashion a persona that his or her subjects could readily identify, men with education, connections, and ambition could attempt the same on a smaller scale regardless of rank. A misconception about the powerlessness of the average individual prior to the Industrial Revolution is that they lacked privilege. The popular image of the French Revolution is that no one held any privilege outside the First and Second Estates, and, while it is true that they held most of the power, the members of the Third Estate had access to privilege. Too easily are the castes, particularly in French society of the eighteenth century, categorized as those with privilege and those without it. Regardless of social standing or personal property, "[the] most valuable property that a person had was his 'privilege.'"<sup>11</sup> Privilege, as defined by those prior to the modern era, included all the rights a person had

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<sup>9</sup> Burke, *The Fabrication*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31; Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1.

as determined by the laws that governed them, but the privileges of a merchant or a peasant farmer could hardly be called equal to those enjoyed by a member of the royal family. However disproportionate the benefits, those that recognized their own privilege “clung to it with equal tenacity” as someone who had more wealth and status, and, in combination with the growth of self-consciousness (not the philosophical understanding of the term but rather the awareness of one’s presence in society), it became apparent that the possibility of fashioning identity for oneself was just as possible as dictating that of others.<sup>12</sup>

Even though members of the nobility balked at the repressive measures being enacted by Louis XIV and Cardinal Richelieu after the Thirty Years War and the civil wars of the Fronde, the Second Estate did not attempt to parcel their own lands into factions, choosing instead to draw closer to the monarchy, hoping to gain more influence in policymaking, even as they despised the efforts of the crown to centralize the government.<sup>13</sup> The creation of appointments to those outside the Second Estate composed the main opposition many in the aristocracy had with Louis XIV’s early reign. The royal treasury relied upon two sources of income—taxes and the fees paid by those upon their appointment as an officer of the French government. To remove someone from his prescribed post, the treasury faced reimbursement of the fee, which was often spent

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 24; Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564-1572: A Contribution to the History of Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and Calvinist Resistance Theory* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967), 395.

without funds to replace it, meaning that the officer's position was permanent.<sup>14</sup> For example, a noble named Pierre Billard continued to receive a pension for the position of *Lieutenant-Criminel de Robe Courte* in Bourbonnais long after the post had been declared defunct and it had been proven that he did not have any knowledge of the laws he was supposed to uphold.<sup>15</sup> Though both Louis XIV and Cardinal Richelieu hazarded to meddle with the privileges already established, the creation of new offices that could be filled by those of the rising middle class, the bourgeoisie, who had benefitted from the upswing in France's economy, could take the place of income lost by not having the ability to tax the Second Estate without threat of further revolt.<sup>16</sup> Privilege, therefore, as ephemeral as it could be, became ingrained as the paramount of society; the mandates and rules surrounding it appeared to those living with its consequences to fashion how the country operated, and, in terms of economy, that assumption is not wholly incorrect.<sup>17</sup>

As absolutist as Louis XIV's measures were, the centralization could not dismantle what had been established as fundamental to how society functioned. The King's ability to negotiate with the aristocracy remained limited. If he dealt with them too harshly, open revolt could erupt, but he could neither bribe them (without risking

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<sup>14</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 5, 19; Guy Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Davis Bitton, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560-1640* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 47.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Breunig, *The Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1789-1850* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 31.

France's finances further) nor raise their rank any higher than what they already had. An opportunity to solve many of these issues presented itself when renovations to the Louvre, which had been the Parisian royal residence since the Middle Ages, were proposed. Though he had the option of keeping his court within Paris, Louis turned his attention to the isolated hunting lodge of Versailles, twenty kilometres away.<sup>18</sup>

Moving the court to a more secluded location, by 1680, allowed for the development of codes of conduct and etiquette that were both elaborate and calculated. It created "marks of distinction" based upon proximity to Louis XIV himself that "cost him nothing except courtesy, which came to him naturally."<sup>19</sup> The symmetrical construction of the palace of Versailles mimicked the order that Louis created amongst his courtiers, making the days structured and regimented, glorifying everyday activities into theatrical productions (such as daytime meals that would occasionally be open to public spectacle), and refining taste in furniture, art, and music to a State-approved operation.<sup>20</sup>

The construction of Versailles and the institutionalization of Louis XIV's codes of conduct into a form that would eventually be featured in books on manners for other European courts to copy took a considerable amount of time and financial means. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's finance minister and superintendent over the *Bâtiments du Roi*, became quite successful at funding his king's massive building projects. He focused

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 114; Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 114; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 36-37; Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 47.

on centering France's economy on mercantilism with the number of exported goods outnumbering those imported. His encouragement of national spending internally created new opportunities to stimulate the economy, including the production of government-approved luxury goods as well as promoting the use of products being imported from the French colonies. Rather than import Italian marble for the palace, Colbert ordered the opening of French quarries. Versailles itself "became a vast showroom of the best luxury items to come out of the government workshops. And the French bought at home rather than from abroad, restraining the traditional outflow for luxury goods."<sup>21</sup> The centrality of the economy and the appearance of prosperity gave Colbert the ability to then justify the centrality of the government as the construction of Versailles continued through the decades leading to the eighteenth century, and the State control over luxury items made to suit the King's taste gave Louis XIV significant control over what was being consumed by his Court.<sup>22</sup>

The bourgeoisie, specifically the merchants and landowners, benefitted significantly from this economic arrangement. With taxation being one of the few ways in which the treasury could be replenished and with members of the nobility exempt from the highest levied taxes (the *taille* and the *gabelle*, the salt tax), the middle class carried the burden of supporting the country with their profits and faced higher taxes as their station improved. Though they were often unable to sell their goods to other nations, those who operated colonial plantations found the French market to be largely free of

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<sup>21</sup> Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 49; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

competition with foreign imports. The taxation, along with the restrictions preventing them from fully enjoying the privileges of the high nobility, left the bourgeoisie with little recourse, outside of marrying into a noble family, buying a title, or outright rebellion against those institutions. In order to incorporate this influx of income into the royal coffers so that the state could meet its financial obligations, Louis XIV created many new appointments and divided up duties among existing offices in order to take advantage of the fee that would need to be paid upon being granted entry into the *noblesse de robe*.<sup>23</sup> Along with those measures, he also used the intricate court etiquette at Versailles to create more posts, such as the Service of the King at *le Grand Commun*, where Louis XIV took his meals and required thirty-six gentlemen to attend him along with seventeen officials to oversee the seven offices associated with the dining service.<sup>24</sup> The aristocracy actively detested these measures, and the bourgeoisie, even those who obtained noble rank by purchasing it, continued to struggle against the privileges that remained out of their reach, no more so than the wealthiest merchants who “in mode of life they were so like the nobility, but the resentment against the aristocratic privilege and discrimination based on birth was shared as well by the lesser bourgeoisie—the shopkeepers, artisans, and petty bureaucrats.”<sup>25</sup> The bourgeoisie possessed lands and

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<sup>23</sup> Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> James Eugene Farmer, *Versailles and the Court under Louis XIV* (New York: The Century Co., 1905), 58-60.

<sup>25</sup> Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 6; Doyle, *The French Revolution*, 26-27.

could afford to play the part, enjoying all the leisure activities and luxury goods, as the nobility did, but the desire for the equality of their privileges remained.

By the time of the completion of the last of Louis XIV's construction projects in 1710, the cost for the building of Versailles alone totaled sixty million *livres*, roughly 509 million dollars.<sup>26</sup> This consumed over three percent of the annual expenditures for the French government between the 1660s and 1670s, reaching its peak in 1685 (with a total of eleven million *livres* being spent in that year alone).<sup>27</sup> This final round of construction before Louis XIV's death ushered in a new period of decadence, centered around the concept of *gloire*, to glorify the King and the State through the amassing of great artistic and architectural works that displayed both refinement of taste and uniqueness to the

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<sup>26</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 115; Robert A. Selig, "Appendix 2: Conversions between Eighteenth Century Currencies," in *The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route in the State of Delaware, 1781-1783: An Historical and Architectural Survey* (State of Delaware: Dover, 2003); Measuring Worth, "Purchasing Power of British Pounds: 1245 to Present, MeasuringWorth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/> (accessed September 10, 2013); Currency Converter, Google, <https://www.google.com/finance/converter> (accessed October 10, 2013). The conversion of the eighteenth century *livre* into a dollar amount was accomplished by taking Dr. Selig's currency chart, which lists the British pound sterling to be equivalent to 23 *livres* 3 *sols* 6 *deniers* (23.2 *livres*) in the 1700s. The eighteenth century pound sterling is equal to the value of 122 pounds (adjusting for retail price and inflation, as of 2012, through the Measuring Worth calculator), which is equivalent to 2,830.40 *livres*. The final step, converting the *livre* to dollars, was done by comparing the dollar's worth to pounds via Google.com's currency converter (with the USD being roughly equivalent, as of October 2013, to 0.62 GBP, meaning that 122 GBP is equal to 196.77 USD. Using that conversion chain [23.2 *livres* = 1 GBP (1714) = 122 GBP (2012) = 196.77 USD (2012)], it is possible to calculate the value of what was being spent on Versailles's construction into a modern sum.

<sup>27</sup> Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 50-51, 141.



owner.<sup>28</sup> After purchasing the Palace of Saint-Cloud for over 200,000 *livres*, the Duc d'Orleans (brother of Louis XIV), handpicked artists from across Europe to commission in order to fill his home. The palace, which would later be purchased by Marie Antoinette for six million *livres* in the 1780s and was subsequently destroyed a century later during the Prussian siege of Paris, boasted art considered to be so fine that even the guidebooks refused to print much about them, considering them to be only for the royal family's pleasure.<sup>29</sup> Even a mini-Ice Age during the beginning of the 1700s could not impede the finishing touches on the Palace of Versailles, despite the detriment it wrought upon France's economy. With France relying on its agriculture, the failure of its staple crops and important exports due to frost plagued most of France's population with ill health, starvation, and higher taxes.

The centralization of the government did not equate to order on the whole. While the microcosm of Versailles could be structured and tempers assuaged with petty indulgences, the country itself dealt with its own subjects and other European nations tenuously, resulting in "a period of 'general' crisis ..."<sup>30</sup> Though the aristocracy and the middle classes saw a sufficient increase in their incomes, the monarchy's financial hardships that began in the latter half of Louis XIV's reign through Louis XV's and into that of Louis XVI's, remained problematic. From the outset of the eighteenth century, the aristocracy appeared much altered after several decades of being cloistered at Versailles,

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>29</sup> Gerard Levy, "The Tainted Lady," London: *The Sunday Times*, October 6, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 181.

less likely to rebel against the monarchy as had happened during the Fronde. A new generation of courtiers, raised at Versailles, accepted and depended upon their monarch's generosity for their upkeep as courtly life at the palace had drained the finances of many aristocratic families. These aristocrats lived at the chateaus and subsidiary buildings surrounding Versailles, such as the *Maisons Royales*, and had their food, heating, and lighting provided for them.<sup>31</sup> They no longer held the same connections to their ancestral lands and family estates as their ancestors once had to support in any full-scale revolt against State authority.<sup>32</sup> What the aristocracy that lived at Versailles lacked in autonomy, it made up for in adherence to etiquette and the pursuit of new luxury items, even when they could not afford them. While there had been a balance between the king's desires and the capacity to which the State could meet his ambition, Louis XIV's attitude shifted from a guarded centrality to what can now be defined as absolutist policies, and the inability for the King to give up his own personal wants in favor of dealing with growing financial concerns ushered in a "new sense of unreality" that placed Versailles (as it represented the French state to the public) and the country's needs at odds with one another.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Frances Buckland, "Gobelins Tapestries and Paintings as a Source of Information about the Silver Furniture of Louis XIV," *The Burlington Magazine* 125 (May 1983), 272.

<sup>32</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 174.

The Duc de Saint-Simon described the King's obsession with Versailles in his

*Memoirs of Louis XIV:*

As for the King himself, nobody ever approached his magnificence. His buildings, who could number them? At the same time, who was there who did not deplore the pride, the caprice, the bad taste seen in them? He built nothing useful or ornamental in Paris, except the Pont Royal, and that simply by necessity; so that despite its incomparable extent, Paris is inferior to many cities of Europe. Saint-Germain, a lovely spot, with a marvellous [sic] view, rich forest, terraces, gardens, and water he abandoned for Versailles; the dullest and most ungrateful of all places, without prospect, without wood, without water, without soil; for the ground is all shifting sand or swamp, the air accordingly bad.

But he liked to subjugate nature by art and treasure ... Such was the bad taste of the King in all things, and his proud haughty pleasure in forcing nature; which neither the most mighty war, nor devotion could subdue!<sup>34</sup>

From Saint-Simon's words, one imagines that Louis XIV thought he could tame the nobility as he had tamed Versailles, but his efforts proved to be nothing more fruitful than hiding a broken mirror with a finely crafted tapestry—he only provided subterfuge to mask the problems rather than solving them, unwittingly leaving his successors to deal with the repercussions.

Popular belief maintains that Louis XVI and his ministers failed to control the economy as Colbert had during Louis XIV's reign, but the beginnings of Louis XVI's fourteen years on the throne showed some financial prosperity. France experienced an economic upswing in the decades prior to 1789 as the burgeoning Industrial Revolution produced more products to be exported and the rise of foreign trade within France's

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<sup>34</sup> Saint-Simon, *Memoirs on the Reign of Louis XIV, and the Regency*, vol. 4, trans. Bayle St. John (1857; Project Gutenberg: 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3875/3875-h/3875-h.htm#link2HCH0028>.

colonies continued. However, this prosperity was not experienced universally. The merchants, due to the increased interest in trade, and the landowning First and Second Estates, due to increased cost of staple foods in a country with a rapidly expanding population who could not find ample work or sufficient wages to support themselves in the inflated economy, reaped the most benefits.<sup>35</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, reflecting in the mid-nineteenth century, argued that it was this visible and apparent prosperity that hastened the French Revolution by revealing the inequity within the country to an increasingly upwardly mobile middle class:

The sight of this prosperity, already so great and so flourishing, gives good grounds for astonishment if we think of all the defects still evident inside government and of all the obstacles still encountered by industry. It may even be that many politicians deny this fact because they cannot account for it, assuming, like Molière's doctor, that a patient cannot get better in the face of the rules. In fact, how can we believe that France could prosper and grow wealthy with inequality of taxation, differences of local practices, internal customs barriers, feudal rights, union guilds and sales of office, etc.? In spite of all that, France was, nevertheless, beginning to prosper and improve everywhere because, alongside all this badly built and badly geared machinery which appeared likely to slow down the social engine more than drive it forward, there were concealed two very strong and simple springs which were already enough to hold the entire mechanism together and to enable this whole to advance towards its aim of public prosperity: a still very powerful but no longer despotic government which maintained order everywhere; a nation whose upper classes were already the most enlightened and free on the continent of Europe and a nation in whose midst every individual was capable of growing wealthy in his own way and of keeping that fortune once acquired.<sup>36</sup>

Upon his deathbed in 1715, Louis XIV uttered his final words, imparting that his legacy would be the State that he had built though he would be a part of it no longer. Those

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<sup>35</sup> Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 2; Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. ed. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 168.

<sup>36</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 172-173.

present at his side doubted that the regime he had instituted could last without its figurehead.<sup>37</sup> However, along with the lasting effects of creating an absolutist monarchy, the codification of exorbitant spending into courtly life, enshrined in the palace of Versailles, endured as part of Louis XIV's legacy.

A few months prior to her arrest, Marie Antoinette prepared for a procession of the royal family from Paris to Versailles. Léonard, who had come to *coiff* her hair, noted that the Queen of France appeared withdrawn and disheartened. She lamented, "I must go like an actress, exhibit myself to a public that may hiss at me."<sup>38</sup> The public may have had reason to jeer their queen, viewing her as the cause of much of their suffering. By 1788, the economic prosperity of the last few decades, which had never trickled completely up or down, disappeared. France's debt swelled, and the interest on that debt devoured fifty percent of the national budget.<sup>39</sup> Though the rotating assortment of finance ministers attempted to reform France's laws in order to compel the taxation of the aristocracy, none had been successful.<sup>40</sup> Both Louis XV and Louis XVI, who grew up in that environment, spent as they pleased, continuing to add to Versailles even as the national debt increased. Louis XV did not concern himself with renovations to the palace and large building projects as his great-grandfather had done. His spending habits tended to reflect more ribald behavior, subjecting himself to public ridicule and scandal. Though

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<sup>37</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 294-296.

<sup>38</sup> Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Breunig, *The Age of Revolution*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

it was no secret that kings across Europe kept mistresses, Louis XV refused to keep his mistresses *dans le boudoir*. In the cases of Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, two of his official mistresses, Louis XV spent lavishly on them, gave them allowances of 100,000 *livres*, and raised them to the nobility, much to the ire of the other aristocrats.<sup>41</sup> The other courtiers, particularly those belonging to the royal family, demanded the compensation that was due to their standing. What constituted a necessity and what was simply a desire became hopelessly intertwined from birth, never to be fully untangled. The personal debt of the Comte d'Artois (Louis XVI's younger brother), for example, ran upwards of twenty-one million *livres*, over twenty-five times that of Marie Antoinette's expenditure early in her marriage.<sup>42</sup>

Though Marie Antoinette disliked the public displays, she nonetheless called for Léonard, who was responsible for creating her grander hairstyles meant for special occasions. Court ritual, like the looming spectre of Louis XIV, expected her compliance with the spectacle she was to perform.<sup>43</sup> First as the *Dauphine* and later as the Queen of France, Marie Antoinette knew that her position came with certain expectations of appearance and dress. Marie Antoinette represented the height of fashion as her predecessors had done, employing the finest artisans for her clothing and jewelry and commissioning artists to furnish her apartments. The luxury trades flourished in Paris to

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<sup>41</sup> Eleanor Herman, *Sex with Kings: Five Hundred Years of Adultery, Power, Rivalry, and Revenge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 175-177; Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 148-149.

<sup>42</sup> Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 149-150.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

support the spending habits of the court, even as the countryside continued to suffer from the ill effects of poor harvests and high taxation. “Paris was a city dependent on the financial support of the noble and rich to maintain its industries, which were in the main to do with luxury and semi-luxury goods.”<sup>44</sup> This system, however, failed to acknowledge that the cyclical nature of its tax system upon which it relied solely for its economic stability could not last, i.e. the impoverished cannot pay taxes; the aristocracy does not pay taxes, but they do spend money amongst the luxury trades; the merchants and wealthy bourgeoisie pay taxes out of money spent by the aristocracy; the taxes go back into the treasury to be doled out to the aristocracy to be spent into the luxury trades again. Ultimately, it was unsustainable, especially when the taxes had to be raised to meet the demands of the State, nor could it trickle down to benefit anyone below the middle classes. This, in addition to the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy that had been building since Louis XIV, opened new offices for the middle classes to refashion themselves into the image of nobility, crippled the State’s ability to function and spilled over into a need for reform and revolution amongst the urban Third Estate.

With the swift fall of the guillotine upon the necks of the fallen monarchs, so too closed the curtains on the stage that was Versailles. Those that cherished the memory of the King and Queen, those that wanted a curious souvenir from the end of French absolutism, those that wanted to make a profit on valuable materials and those that simply desired to touch *gloire* held onto pieces of what luxury was left behind swooped in like carrion birds to collect what they could—a sleeve from a dressing gown, a cipher

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 148.

from a gilt panel, a pair of silk shoes. The roots of the spending that so easily can be blamed for the French Revolution, began decades before the births of either Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette. Their habits and routines within the court became as institutionalized as the taxes levied against the Third Estate and the privileges of the First and Second Estates they hoped to attain. Under the design of Louis XIV and his ministers, Versailles and the Court it embodied represented both a beauty and a beast; its loveliness only masked tensions both inside and outside the palace gates, but, while aristocracy could be placated with fine furnishings, food, and trivial pastimes, those that sought those same privileges would not be so easily assuaged.



## Chapter III

1714: A YEAR OF EXPENDITURES AT THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES AND ITS  
SUBSIDIARY BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS

One criticism that the 19th century archivist for *les Archives nationale* Jules Guiffrey leveled against those who sought to study Versailles and the spending habits of its inhabitants, in the palace's grandness and its excessive luxury, was that many focused too much on the accounts of jewelry and costume.

The Accounts on the contrary remained, until recently, buried in a profound oblivion. Except a small privileged number, few documents belonging to this category seemed worthy of the honor of printing. Is it their scope or their monotony that repels workers? Even the few exceptions we find they have to quote almost exclusively focused on the goldsmith accounts or wardrobe on those, in short, that we could learn the ways of the past, luxury furniture, the incessant changes of costume. These lists, often very detailed, of jewelry, of dresses, of hats, of gloves, have always had the gift of highly excited curiosity.

However the Accounts possess an incontestable advantage over the inventories. While they pile a multitude of disparate objects from any source and any time, whose same description is often imperfectly transcribed by an ignorant or pressed copyist, the articles carried in an Account receive, of this very circumstance, a certificate of origin and authenticity, or at least a certain date, crucial point when one studies the art or the industry of our fathers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 1:i. Any direct quotes from Guiffrey's writing in *les Comptes* are presented in their original French.

*“Les Comptes au contraire sont restés jusqu'à ces derniers temps ensevelis dans un profond oubli. Sauf un petit nombre de privilégiés, peu de documents appartenant à cette catégorie ont paru dignes des honneurs de l'impression. Est-ce leur étendue ou leur monotonie qui rebute les travailleurs? Encore les rares exceptions qu'on trouverait à citer ont-elles presque exclusivement porté sur des comptes d'orfèvrerie ou de garde-robe, sur ceux, en un mot, qui pouvaient nous initier aux modes du temps passé, au luxe du mobilier, aux incessantes transformations du costume. Ces énumérations, souvent fort détaillées, de bijoux, de robes, de chapeaux, de gants, ont toujours eu le don d'exciter vivement la curiosité.*

To Guiffrey, the buildings themselves and the everyday expenses of living offered more insight into the inner workings of the court and how it functioned on an economic level. In his *Comptes des Bâtiments du Roi*, he compiled five volumes that faithfully record the expenditures during the reign of Louis XIV from the seventeenth century to the beginnings of the eighteenth.

Even with resources like *les Comptes*, getting a clear picture of day to day expenditure can be difficult to discern. The accounts, for example, do not list the daily expenses for food, lighting, or heating, nor do they provide rolls of how many courtiers were present at Versailles.<sup>2</sup> The museum at the Palace of Versailles currently estimates that there were anywhere from three thousand to ten thousand courtiers occupying Versailles on any given day, and according to the personal correspondence of Madame de Maintenon, mistress of Louis XIV, the cost of feeding and providing light for twelve

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*Les Comptes possèdent cependant sur les Inventaires un incontestable avantage. Tandis que ceux-ci entassent une multitude d'objets disparates de toute provenance et de toute époque, dont la description même est souvent fort imparfaitement transcrite par un copiste ignorant ou pressé, les articles portés dans un Compte reçoivent, de cette circonstance même, un certificat d'origine et d'authenticité, ou tout au moins une date certaine, point capital quand on étudie l'art ou l'industrie de nos pères."*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1:LXI.

*"Toutefois, comme on a parfois prétendu que nos Comptes ne comprenaient pas toutes les dépenses des bâtiments royaux, nous croyons utile d'insister sur un point dont il a déjà été question plus haut, afin de prévenir une confusion possible."* ["However, as has sometimes been claimed that our statements do not include all the expenses of the royal buildings, we believe it is useful to emphasize a point that it has already been discussed above, in order to prevent possible confusion."]

persons amounted to fourteen *livres* and three *sols* per day as of 1679.<sup>3</sup> For three thousand to ten thousand courtiers at Versailles that totals to roughly 42,000 to 140,000 *livres* a day. The average unskilled laborer earned only 250 *livres* per year and would need to work consistently for 168 years to earn what was spent on food and lighting at Versailles when it was at its lowest occupancy.<sup>4</sup> Madame de Maintenon's estimation likely does not include the cost of raising the animals housed or the transportation of goods into Versailles nor could she predict the rise in costs in the coming decades, though there are clues scattered within *les Comptes*. For example, while the cost of candles at Versailles during the time period covered by the fifth volume of *les Comptes* is not listed, a notation for the expenditure on candles (along with paper, pens, and other articles) for the *Académies d'Architecture, Peinture et Sculpture de Paris* for six months in 1707 totaled 335 *livres*.<sup>5</sup> As to dining, ever-present amongst the bevy of foods on Versailles's banquet tables included a variety of gamefowl.<sup>6</sup> A year's worth of providing chicken,

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Buckland, "Gobelins Tapestries," 272; The Public Establishment of Versailles, "The Courtiers: The Nobility Surrounding the King," Château de Versailles, [http://en.chateauversailles.fr/?option=com\\_cdvfiche&idf=D49E0D38-2622-D151-2217-6E71CAB84BE0](http://en.chateauversailles.fr/?option=com_cdvfiche&idf=D49E0D38-2622-D151-2217-6E71CAB84BE0) (accessed October 1, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Jean DeJean *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:150.

<sup>6</sup> Lee C. Wallick, "A Banquet for Louis XIV, Recreated at the Palace of Versailles," *Telegraph*, January 10, 2010, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/7037298/A-banquet-for-Louis-XIV-recreated-at-the-Palace-of-Versailles.html>; Raymond Oliver, *Gastronomy of France*, trans. Claude Derrell (Cleveland: Wine and Food Society, 1967), 300-1; The Public Establishment of Versailles, "A Day in the Life of Louis XIV: The King's Daily Routine," Château de

partridge, and pheasant eggs to Versailles from the grounds of Fontainebleau cost the treasury 550 *livres 6 deniers*, and the grain to feed those gamefowl per year amounted to 548 *livres*.<sup>7</sup> Unexpected (and somewhat amusing) expenses that occurred in raising and breeding large amounts of stock animals included 56 *livres 5 sols* for wicker baskets to prevent the pheasants from eating the flowers in the Trianon's winter nurseries and 232 *livres 10 sols* to keep cows from sleeping on the avenues and in the copses at the park of Vincennes.<sup>8</sup>

Versailles's evolution can be seen in its public works. These ups and downs in expenditure reflected the happenings within the French state during the earliest years of the eighteenth century. The first construction project of the 1700s (and one of the last of Louis XIV's reign) included the restoration of the Chapel at Versailles. With the previous construction representing the French monarchy's secular rule, the renovated chapel sought to link the Bourbon reign with divine authority in a grandiose amalgamation of Italian baroque and Classicism, reflected in the white marble and Romanesque influences in the ceiling paintings.<sup>9</sup> Built after the Nine Years' War, a conflict between France and the League of Augsburg (England, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, Savoy, and other principalities) that garnered neither land nor monetary gain for Louis XIV, the chapel

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Versailles, <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/history/versailles-during-the-centuries/living-at-the-court/a-day-in-the-life-of-louis-xiv> (accessed October 1, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:640

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:145, 5:594.

<sup>9</sup> Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 195-205.

attempted to reflect a military prowess more akin to the Louis XIV in mid-seventeenth century rather than in the latter half.<sup>10</sup> During the war, the depletion of the treasury required Louis XIV to have much of the ornate silver furnishings and ornamentation (“famed for their craftsmanship and ostentation”) originally designed for Versailles to be melted down into bullion, a heavy blow to the king’s pride.<sup>11</sup>

To display the wealth of France and to restore some of the shine back to his own patina’d glory, Louis commissioned the white marble of the chapel be gilded and painted with floral motifs. One of the painters whose work survives in Versailles today, Jean-Baptiste Blin de Fontenay, renowned amongst the stable of artisans at the Gobelins Manufactory for his floral murals, created similar works that incorporated Louis XIV’s victories in battle into his paintings in the form of sabres and military accoutrement (see fig. 1-2). In 1714, Fontenay received a four hundred *livres* pension plus boarding at the Louvre, and his commissions (providing paintings to serve the basis of several tapestries being woven at Gobelins) amounted to 2,345 *livres* out of the roughly 97,000 *livres* spent at Gobelins and the Savonnerie (the royal carpet manufacturer) for that year.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mississippi University for Women, “The Splendors of Versailles,” Mississippi State University, <http://splendors-versailles.org/TeachersGuide/Building/index.middleFrame.html> (accessed October 3, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Buckland, “Gobelins Tapestries,” 271.

<sup>12</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:795-796.



Figures 1 and 2. Jean-Baptiste Blin de Fontenay, *Helmet and Sabre with Flowers*, Versailles, The Splendors of Versailles, <http://splendors-versailles.org/TeachersGuide/Building/ppage9.html> (accessed October 15, 2013).

By 1710, the major construction, like that of the restoration of the chapel of Versailles, ceased, and a large portion of the work being done in 1714 amounted to repairs, maintenance, and additions to completed projects (such as the Fontenay floral paintings), yet the expenditure during this year equaled that of eight years prior, when large-scale projects were still in-progress (see fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> One explanation, as several notations suggest, for this high expenditure when production had decreased could be a rising cost of materials and the wages of day-laborers, which added thousands of *livres*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5:951-952; Walton, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 210.

onto the bills for finished projects.<sup>14</sup> The sudden drop in expenditure in 1715 resulted from the death of Louis XIV in that year and the removal of the Court from Versailles back to Paris during the Regency, halting many projects in the area until Louis XV came of age.

Since Louis XIV first turned his attention to remodeling Versailles in the mid-seventeenth century, his finance minister Colbert concerned himself with focusing the French economy and trade inward. The varieties of marble being ordered and delivered to the royal stores originated in Languedoc, Bourbonnais, and Campan, rather than being imported from foreign quarries, at a little over six and a half *livres* per square foot.<sup>15</sup> By 1714, the purchasing of the majority of marble, stone, gravel, bronze, and gilding occurred for the *Maisons Royales*, the various royal residences surrounding Versailles

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<sup>14</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:757-759. For example:

“15 février 1715: à [GUILLAUME LEDUC], pour son indemnité de la perte qu’il a faite sur les ouvrages de maçonnerie qu’il a faits au château de Versailles et dépendances pendant les six premiers mois 1714, à cause de l’augmentation du prix des matériaux, voitures et journées d’ouvriers depuis son marché ...” [“15 February 1715: To (GUILLAUME LEDUC), for his compensation of the loss that he made on the masonry work he did at the palace of Versailles and dependences during the first six months 1714, due to the rising cost of materials, valets, and day laborers from its market.”]

“15 février 1715: à [JEAN MALET], pour son indemnité de la perte qu’il a faite sur les ouvrages de charpenterie qu’il a faits aud. château et dépendances pendant les six premiers mois 1714, à cause de l’augmentation du prix des bois, voitures et journées d’ouvriers depuis son marché ...” [“15 February 1715: To (JEAN MALET), for his compensation of the loss that he made on the carpentry he did at the palace of Versailles and dependences during the first six months 1714, due to the rising cost of wood, valets, and day laborers from its market.”]

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:756-757.

(including the Trianon), while those purchases for the palace itself begins to taper off to negligible amounts (see fig. 4-6).<sup>16</sup>

Total Building Expenditures in 1706 through 1715

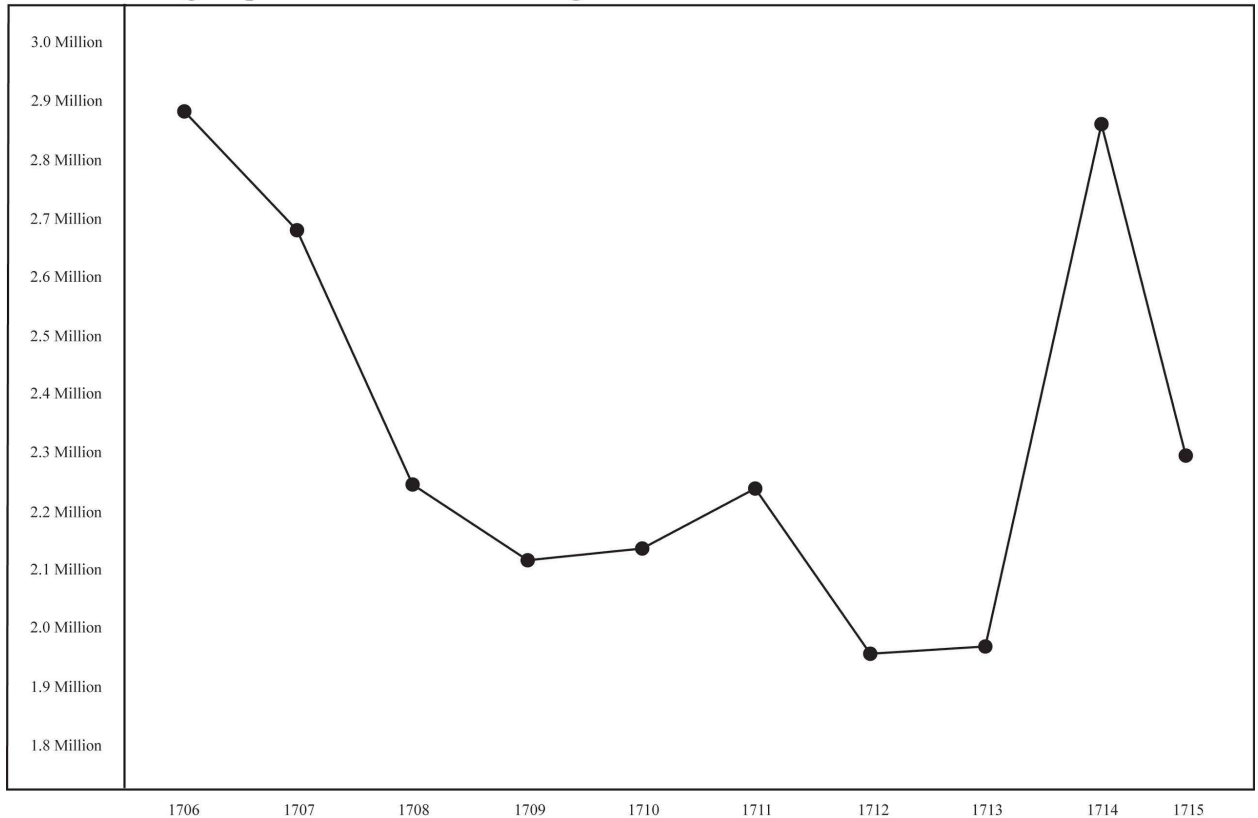


Figure 3. Fluctuations in the spending done on buildings, grounds, and other expenditures between 1706 and 1715 from the Buildings of the King. Information from Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:951-952.

With construction long since completed, the *Machine de Marly* (or “*Machine de la Rivière Seyne*” as *les Comptes* refers to it) consistently pumped copious quantities of

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5: 941-942, 949-950.



water into Versailles's gardens and fountains. In 1714, the cost for repairs and materials (such as plaster, wicker, and sand) needed for the work done there amounted to over 1,200 *livres*.<sup>17</sup> Hydraulic machines, such as this one, represented another luxury concerning both Versailles and the *Maisons Royales*. "Hydraulic organs ... were hardly a novelty in noble pleasure gardens: they had been a staple for over a century ... [The] conspicuously nonutilitarian display of water in garden fountains, pools, and canals broadcast the affluence of the castle's owner, his privileged access to technology and engineering exemplified by hydraulic works, and at times also allegorically evokes mercantile investment."<sup>18</sup> Much like the use of red marble from Languedoc rather than stone imported from Italy, Versailles, its hydraulic works, and its displayed luxury reminded the viewer of both the global trade that the State engaged in as well as the "local" wealth (both in goods and in intellectual wealth of the designers, artisans, and engineers) that France had to offer to the consumer.<sup>19</sup>

The manufactories of Gobelins and the Savonnerie also exemplify the supremacy of mercantilism in France in the early eighteenth century. Gobelins and the Savonnerie provided tapestries and carpets to the palace of Versailles and its ancillary buildings through their State-approved workshops. Along with paying the appointments and pensions of the artists and officials within these manufactories, the State also funded

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5:817.

<sup>18</sup> Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriation, Erasures, and Accidents That Made Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 190.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 184-185; Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 99-101.

*Académies* to furnish Versailles with paintings and other luxury goods, including *Académie Royale de Rome*, part of the *Académies de Peinture, Sculpture et Architecture de Paris*, that gave artists Classical training. In 1714, the cost of supplying materials, paying salaries, and buying goods from the *manufactories and Académies* totaled more than 127,000 *livres*.<sup>20</sup> Though it does not appear in the 1714 *Comptes*, Louis XIV also created the *Académie Royale de la Danse*. ““Having danced in ballets since childhood, Louis knew their ideological potential and intended to exploit it to enhance his monarchical prestige [that] necessitated the confiscation of ballet from the hands of would-be competitors of the noble class.””<sup>21</sup> The institution of *lettres patentes* for dance, as well as the development of French architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, and dramatic aesthetics, could be brought under the control of the State, under the administration of Colbert and Louis XIV’s own wishes (see fig. 7).

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<sup>20</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:792-796.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Franco, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108-109 as quoted in Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles*, 48-49.

## Expenditure on Marble at Versailles in 1706 through 1715

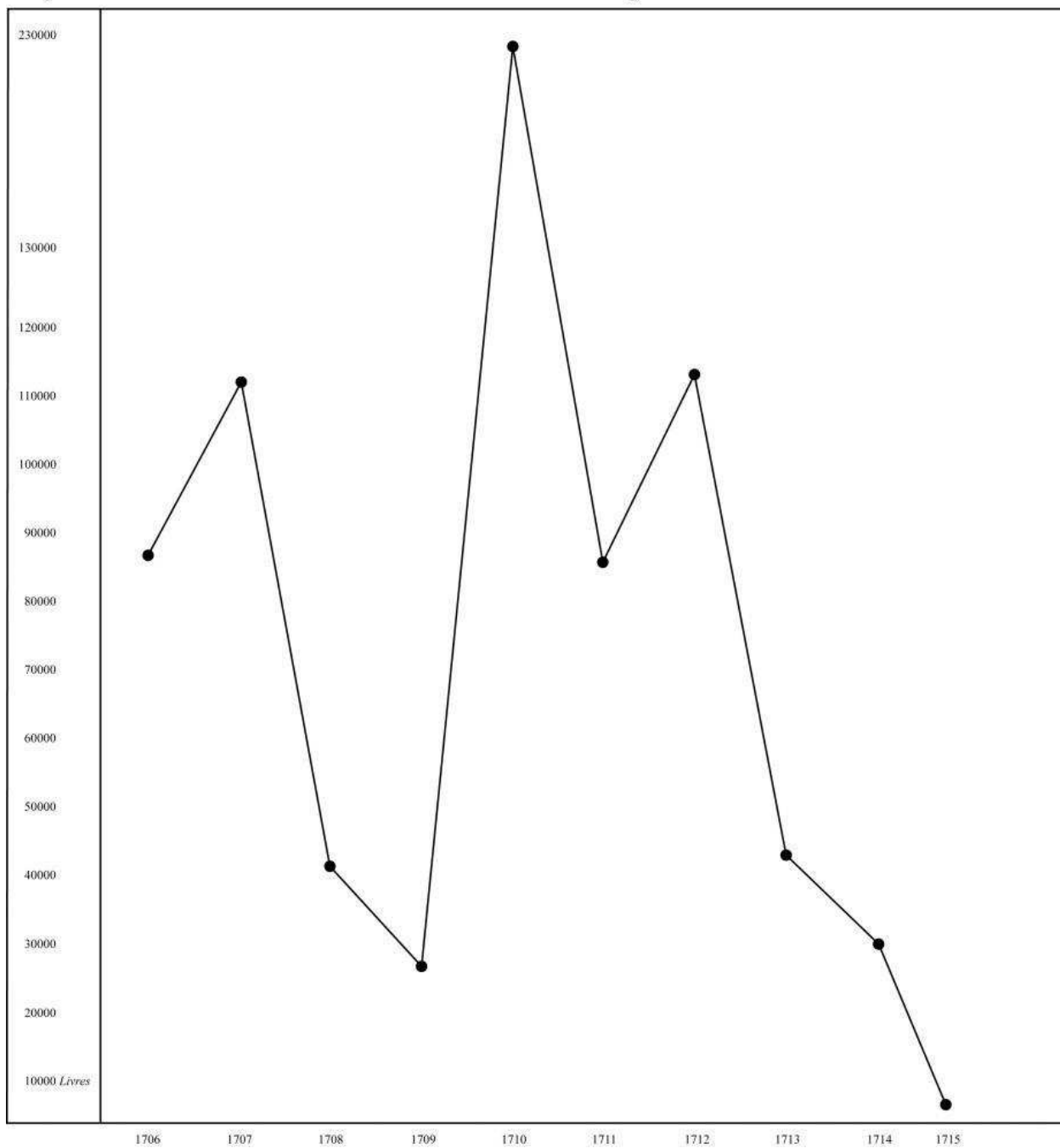


Figure 4. Graph of the total *livres* spent on marble for masonry between 1706 and 1715 for Versailles (excluding marble listed with the *pavé* and bronze). Information compiled from Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:941-942.

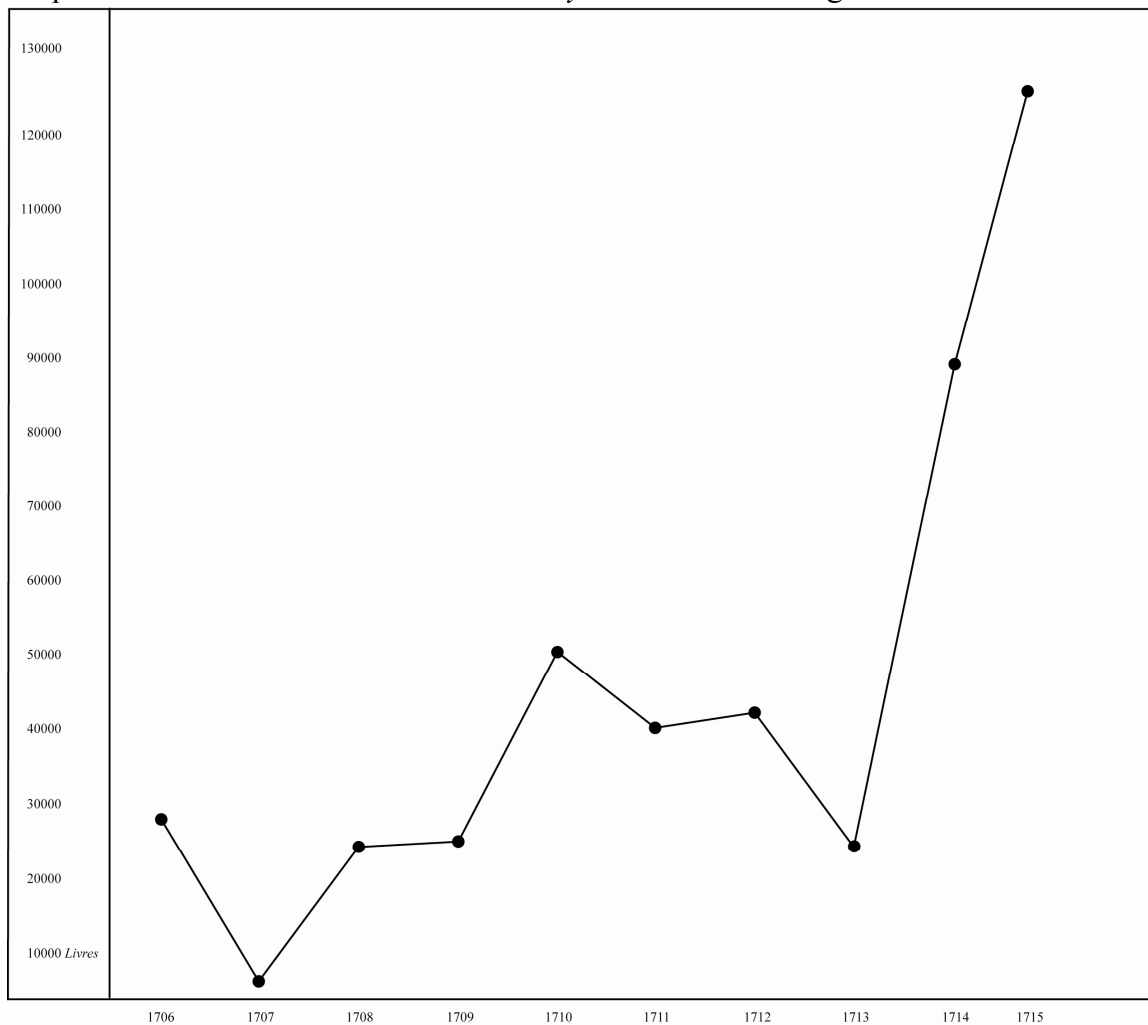
Expenditure on Marble at *les Maisons Royales* in 1706 through 1715

Figure 5. Graph of the total *livres* spent on marble for masonry between 1706 and 1715 for *Maisons Royales* (excluding marble listed with the *pavé* and bronze). Information compiled from Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:949-950.

Expenditure in 1714	Versailles	Environs	Maisons Royales
Masonry	30307 L. 8 s. 8 d.	64997 L. 4 s. 8 d.	89362 L. 12 s. 10 d.
Gardens, Trellises, and Terraces	7483 L. 15 s. 9 d.	57568 L. 19 s. 11 d.	39862 L. 15 s.
Carpentry	5008 L. 5 s. 5 d.	13236 L. 13 s.	48650 L. 13 s. 3 d.
Roofing	3698 L. 3 s. 3 d.	23645 L. 7 s. 4 d.	20454 L. 19 s.
Woodwork	20224 L. 14 s. 6 d.	39582 L. 11 s. 8 d.	30100 L. 4 s. 4 d.
Locksmithing	6515 L. 10 s. 7 d.	15098 L. 5 s. 7 d.	40077 L. 3 s. 1 d.
Plumbing	5678 L. 17 s. 1 d.	1656 L. 12 s. 6 d.	3934 L. 19 s. 5 d.
Copper Works	449 L. 10 s.	1363 L. 6 s.	339 L. 8 s. 3 d.
Gilding	3533 L. 5 s. 8 d.	2327 L. 2 s. 8 d.	5382 L. 17 s. 2 d.
Sculpture	18145 L. 2 s. 2 d.	7965 L. 3 s. 1 d.	57831 L. 11 s. 4 d.
Marble	3147 L. 13 s. 2 d.	1881 L. 9 s. 4 d.	24828 L. 5 s. 6 d.
Paving	1645 L. 14 s. 7 d.	11191 L. 7 s. 2 d.	10039 L. 10 s. 2 d.
Gilded Bronze	3753 L. 3 s.	1363 L. 6 s.	40405 L.
Cast Iron Pipes	5626 L. 11 s.	-----	-----
Tin Mirrors	2477 L.	-----	-----
Wheelwrights	697 L. 9 s. 6 d.	-----	-----
Chimney Sweeping	1776 L. 14 s.	1106 L. 18 s.	-----
Sewage/Drainage	2173 L. 11 s.	688 L. 6 s. 2 d.	-----
Workers/Day Laborers	18176 L. 7 s. 10 d.	52202 L. 1 s. 8 d.	-----
Glazing/Glass Works	-----	6247 L. 6 d.	38333 L. 10 s.
Painting/Engraving	9737 L. 6 s. 8 d.	5784 L. 1 s.	31354 L. 15 s. 4 d.
Fountains	-----	30280 L.	-----
Miscellaneous	5881 L. 8 s. 4 d.	20816 L. 12 s. 5 d.	19189 L. 8 s. 10 d.

Figure 6. Listing of individual items for maintenance, repair, and construction at Versailles, its grounds, and the *Maisons Royales*. Information compiled from Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:753-792.



Figure 7. Charles Le Brun and Pierre de Sève the Younger, *Louis XIV Visiting the Gobelins Factory*, Versailles, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Louis14-H.jpg> (accessed September 20, 2013).

With the manufactories educating and employing artisans capable of producing large amounts of luxury goods fit for the Court as well as for foreign markets, the whole of the luxury market exuded the king's tastes. These aesthetics influenced the design of secular domiciles and spaces, but also the Chapel of Versailles (as discussed above) as well as the *Dôme des Invalides* in Paris and Royal Church of Poissy (Church of Saint-Louis). Not including the pensions and funds provided to the priests of other religious institutions throughout the region, the repairs to glass-work, plumbing, and carpentry along with maintenance of the gardens required almost 25,000 *livres* in 1714 alone.<sup>22</sup> The *Hôtel des Invalides*, of which the *Dôme* was part, served to house injured and disabled soldiers after the many military conflicts Louis XIV, but, as impressive as the space was, it failed to meet the needs of the majority of veterans needing care, and the monasteries and missions offered one of the few options for soldiers.<sup>23</sup> These efforts, while considered part of the duties of the monarch and not done completely without compassion, occurred less because of piety or responsibility but were another way to confirm the glory of the State and the king.

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<sup>22</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:754-755, 97-99. For example:

“29 may: de luy, 3000 pour délivrer aux prestres de la Mission établis à Fontainebleau, pour leur subsistance et entretenement pendant les six premiers mois de la présente année 1714, y compris les taxations.” [“29 May: to him, 3000 for delivering to the priests of the Mission established at Fontainebleau, for their subsistence and upkeep during the first six months of the present year 1714, including the taxation.”]

“29 decembre: de luy, 3000 pour délivrer aux prestres de la Mission établis à Fontainebleau, pour leur subsistance et entretenement pendant les six derniers mois de la présente année 1714, y compris les taxations.” [“29 December: to him, 3000 for delivering to the priests of the Mission established at Fontainebleau, for their subsistence and upkeep during the last six months of the present year 1714, including the taxation.”]

<sup>23</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV*, 91-92.



The highest expenditures occurred in categories of the pensions, *Fonds Libellez*, and appointments paid to the artisans, craftspersons, courtiers, and favourites, amounting to 29 percent of the 2, 854,341 *livres* spent in 1714.<sup>24</sup> The pensions and appointments ranged in value from thirty *livres* to as high as thirty thousand *livres*.<sup>25</sup> They do not, however, include the allowances of the royal family or the gifts bestowed amongst them. In 1698, Louis XIV bestowed to the Duchess of Burgundy, the twelve year old wife of the then-Dauphin and one of the King's favourites at Court, her own theatre and renovated the *Ménagerie* for her, even as he shied away from large building projects.<sup>26</sup> Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, both mistresses of Louis XV, received substantial allowances for dresses and jewelry, rivaling that of the Queen. In order to have Madame du Barry become his official mistress, tradition and etiquette required that she be presented at Court by a member of the aristocracy. When no one wished to lose their respectability by introducing the former prostitute to their peers, Louis XV bribed Comtesse de Béarn, alleviating her of her substantial debts and procuring high-ranking military appointments for her sons. Du Barry, when presented to the nobility, wore a gold and silver gown and diamond jewelry worth 100,000 *livres*, a value that could have

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<sup>24</sup> Guiffrey, *Comptes*, 5:802-805, 832-842, 951-952

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:840. For example:

“A M. FRANÇOIS-NICOLAS AUBOURG, *aussy Conseiller du Roy, trésorier général desd. Bâtimens, pour pareils gages ...*” [“To M. FRANÇOIS-NICOLAS AUBOURG, also Advisor of the King, treasurer general of Buildings, for such wages ....”]

<sup>26</sup> Lossky, *Louis XIV's Versailles*, 182-183; Mississippi University for Women, “The Splendors of Versailles.”



covered one-fifth of the debt that Marie Antoinette would incur several years later in 1776.<sup>27</sup> Madame de Pompadour and du Barry, both of modest birth, received condemnations from the aristocracy for the luxury spending in which they indulged. As one noble stated in reference to du Barry, her spending habits “were carried to such an indecent pitch of luxury as to insult the poverty of the people.”<sup>28</sup> However, these rebukes, which are quite hypocritical when compared to the many aristocrats spending themselves into debt from which they could not pull themselves out reflect the tension between the nobility and the lower classes. Those that could spend as the aristocracy did and enjoy some of the privileges that they did threatened the power of the king and the State.<sup>29</sup>

Though the total spending at Versailles, its buildings, its grounds, and State-funded institutions in the year 1714 appears to be a sudden spike in a trend of lower expenditures in previous years, it is not extraordinary. The growing cost of materials and laborers, with buildings in desperate need of repair and maintenance represented only part of the explanation for the massive upswing in spending; the true drain on the treasury occurred in the area of pensions and wages. The creation of positions and titles allowed much needed revenue to flow back into the treasury as the holder of the post would have to pay a substantial fee to the State. The sudden appearance of more pensions being paid can be explained by this influx of newly ennobled persons and those within the

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<sup>27</sup> Herman, *Sex with Kings*, 175.

<sup>28</sup> Joan Haslip, *Madame du Barry: The Wages of Beauty*, 92, as quoted in Herman, *Sex with Kings*, 176-177.

<sup>29</sup> Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 148-149.

aristocracy vying for positions of power wherever they could find them within Louis XIV's Court. The sudden drop in expenditure by 1715 is explained by Louis XIV's death in that year and the abandonment of Versailles in favor of Paris during the Regency of Louis XV.

Though 1714 was the last full year of Louis XIV's life and reign, this year marked a tipping point for the future of Versailles. Versailles continued to expand slowly through most of the eighteenth century, but, by 1714, the rituals and institutions needed to facilitate the consumptive habits of the aristocracy existed and also were reinforced over several decades prior to the eighteenth century. Whether consciously or subconsciously, out of social pressure or pride, consumption and display of luxury occurred not simply out of greed or self-indulgence but as a means to perpetuate the rights and privileges long established and to maintain a sense of honor amongst one's peers and those who sought to climb the social hierarchy. "Saint-Simon famously described Versailles as a stinking swampland where peasants came to do their washing in the fountains, a difficult, malodorous, uncomfortable place that 'one admires and one flees ...'" yet it was also described by contemporaries as delightful and resplendent.<sup>30</sup> It is a fitting metaphor for the efforts of Louis XIV to centralize his nobles. While his absolutist tendencies brought order and structure to the Court and imposed his tastes in architecture and art, which set a new standard for elegance and refinement in the Western world, Versailles could not mask the tensions between the classes nor could the economic policies that funded the

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<sup>30</sup> Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles*, 156-60, 166-8. For example, from Simon Thomassin's *Recueil*: "Versailles and all of the singular beauties it contains can be more easily admired than described; one must see this enchanted place to judge it ...."

construction of it and its subsidiary structures prevent it from collapsing as the eighteenth century progressed.

## CONCLUSION

Though the Marquis de Sade placed more malice behind the intentions of the noble elite and their spending, the wretchedness of the conspicuous consumption of the French aristocracy in the eighteenth century is ultimately its futility in the face of a changing social landscape. The excessive luxury created a vicious cycle around itself. The display of art, clothing, and other finery constituted a very public way to separate oneself from others within society while reflecting one's place within that society. However, when privilege became a commodity that many others outside of the traditional family lineages of the aristocracy could afford, the nobility responded at first with rebellion against the monarchy but were soon placated by indulgences and the isolation of the extravagant life created by Louis XIV at Versailles. Louis XV and Louis XVI continued to rely on the rituals and routines along with the constant refreshing of furnishings and ornamentation enacted by Louis XIV, and they too fell into spending habits that paid little attention to the financial crisis that crippled France's economy. With expectations for their spending habits tied into the tastes displayed by the monarchy, the aristocracy continued to spend and display, even as their own fortunes diminished from decades of living within Versailles. Though they paid little in revenue back to the State, they depended upon their monarchs for their food and lodging. They bought artwork without being able to pay for it, and the legitimate purchases that they did make rarely reached the pockets of the lower classes. The money, instead, cycled once more through the State to be paid out in the form of pensions for posts that were continually divided up into less meaningful positions that then required more pensions for the office-holders.

Ultimately, the control that the aristocracy wished to maintain through their actions and conspicuous display of luxury items only proved how much they were being controlled by the State and how easily the power that they once held could be taken away.

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