



HAL
open science

Recension de Chrisman-Campbell, "Fashion Victims. Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette"

Aurore Chery

► **To cite this version:**

Aurore Chery. Recension de Chrisman-Campbell, "Fashion Victims. Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette". Royal Studies Journal, 2016, III. halshs-01419530

HAL Id: halshs-01419530

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01419530>

Submitted on 19 Dec 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



*Fashion Victims. Dress at the Court of
Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette,*
Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell,
University of Otago
(New Haven: Yale University Press,
2015).

Review by: Aurore Chery

Fashion Victims. Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. By Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-300-15438-2. 352 pp. £35.

F*ashion Victims* is a long-awaited, necessary and useful synthesis regarding the question of fashion in eighteenth-century France. Precise and well documented, it will be of help for any court historian, but it is also accessible to any person interested in this question. The abundant iconography contributes to making it the essential reference book on this topic. The subtitle indicates a focus on the reign of Louis XVI. Quite rightly, it is the period when fashion changed at a frenetic pace, and for which many sources are available, especially regarding the queen's attire. Yet, insofar as garb at the court of Louis XVI is now also a well-known subject, a retrospective enquiry could also have been a judicious approach. It seems necessary, nowadays, to investigate with more precision the role played by Marie Leszczyńska and of the King's mistresses, Pompadour and Du Barry.

The first part of the book consists in a sociological approach highlighting three main figures of the fashion world, whether they played a real and/or mostly fantasized role. The first one is Marie-Antoinette, and the association she formed with the famous Rose Bertin is historically situated. While this chapter presents a good summary of the by-now well-known topic, it would have benefited from a new perspective, tempering for instance the influence of the queen and reinstating more clearly her actions in the larger economic-political context. After the queen, the *petite maîtresse* is considered the second major of fashion in France. It is a rather loose terminology whose best synonym would be "fashion victim". It usually designates an urban woman, mostly Parisian, who is also frivolously elegant. It is the ancestor of the modern myth of the Parisian woman and she had a masculine counterpart, the *petit maître*, who was the paradigm of French men in British humorous sketches.

Finally, the *marchande de modes* herself, the real creator of fashion, is the third element of this section. We may regret that their independence as a guild, recognised in 1776, is not mentioned, since this constitutes an important change that explains the importance they acquired under the reign of Louis XVI. Chrisman-Campbell does however point out the disparity among people in the profession: the success of a Rose Bertin was not the rule and many *marchandes de modes* could not manage to make ends meet. As a consequence they often sold sexual favours and the prostitute *marchande de modes* became a leitmotiv of licentious literature.

The second part of the book traces an agenda of fashion. It highlights important moments of an aristocrat's life such as marriage, presentation at court and mourning, or certain religious events, such as the promenade to Longchamp during the Holy week, which progressively became a true fashion pageant. Chrisman-Campbell rightly insists on the significance of his kind of sartorial annual barometer, with its numerous onlookers being able to see the most dashing courtesans of Paris lavishly arraying their newest attires.

The third part offers a vivid reflection on the multiple elements that served as an inspiration for fashion. It covers such diverse trends as the American War of Independence, and the maritime *poufs* it inspired, the Anglomania that favoured simple and comfortable clothes, costumes inspired by the famous Figaro by Beaumarchais, and the vogue for Orientalism enhanced by the visit of Tippoo-Saib's ambassadors in 1788.

The last and fourth part deals with the period of the Revolution, and it appears very problematic and contestable. Already in the prologue, the French Revolution is described in a caricatural and reactionary way which has more to do with the 1905 play by Emma Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, than with a historiographical book. John Gideon Millingen's book, *Recollections of Republican France, from 1790 to 1801*, published in 1848, is considered a serious reference to support the description of 10 August 1792. Quotations from his work include phrases like "with savage ingenuity", or women and children sporting the "ears and noses [of the Swiss guards] pinned to their caps or their bosoms, like cannibal cockades" (XII). More generally, Chrisman-Campbell's conservative appreciation may have ensued from the reading of memoirs written by former close relations of the royal family such as Madame Campan, Comte de Ségur or Baron de Frénilly. Such references constitute the major part of the references quoted, though their reliability is never disputed. Similarly, Chrisman-Campbell asserts that "In fact, while fashion may have been driven by the elite, it was produced and increasingly imitated lower down the social scale" (19), but she never really questions what fashion was for non-members of the elite, and especially for the working class. Did a fashion "from below" exist, for instance? Of course, it is not an easy question to answer because museums favour the finest clothes but, at least, it is a necessary thing to keep in mind. If the works by Daniel Roche (*La culture des apparences*. 1990) and Nicole Pellegrin (*Les vêtements de la liberté. Abécédaire des pratiques vestimentaires française de 1780 à 1801*. 1989) are a bit old now, their concerns are still worthwhile. Failing that, this fourth part is biased, and fashion during the revolutionary period is reduced to the mere expression of political opinions. By refusing to consider originators of fashion other than the queen, the *petites maîtresses* and the *marchandes de modes*, Chrisman-Campbell eschews the opportunity to discuss the emergence of new trends during the

French Revolution. She circumvents this problem by stating that fashion was then in exile and she recounts how *marchandes de modes* and former French noblewomen earned a living by becoming embroiderers or selling straw hats elsewhere in Europe. It is unquestionably fascinating, yet also disconcerting, to speculate that fashion only returned to France in 1814, with the restoration of the monarchy and the Duchesse d'Angoulême. This amounts to a claim that no fashion was conceivable in France without a monarchy. Actually, a more exhaustive study of the sartorial appearance of Robespierre could have offered a substantial counter-argument. It could have been a more convincing option than merely studying the *gilet* in the LACMA (275-78). Without a doubt, the elements pointed out by the author tend to make it a counter-revolutionary artefact and not, as supposed, a patriotic one. But the schematic mention of Robespierre reflects a more general tendency in this book: masculine fashion is almost forgotten. It only appears incidentally even though in actuality it was as colorful and luxurious as feminine garb. That is why Juliette Trey had a special chapter dedicated to it in her *La mode à la cour de Marie-Antoinette* (2014), though a shorter book. This point and the treatment of the revolutionary period are the only real weaknesses of Chrisman-Campbell's work; it should still be regarded as the comprehensive work on upper-class clothing under the reign of Louis XVI.

AURORE CHERY

University of Lyon/LARHRA, France.