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A Fantastic Frenzy of Consumption in Early Modern France

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Article abstract

The enthusiastic (even excessive) consumerism of contemporary western society has its roots, according to some, in the expansion of the consumption of goods in Renaissance Europe. Early modern men and women were ardent, even “passionate” consumers. Such self-indulgence was regarded as decadent and socially perilous; religious and other moral authorities of the era sought to eradicate or at least control these sins of excess. My study examines criticism of “crimes of consumption” in both serious and satirical French literature of the early modern era, including such pamphlets as *Frenaizie fantastique Française Sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottez de ce temps* and *Pasquil de la Cour pour apprendre à discourir et s’habiller à la mode*. Scrutiny of these texts suggest that women’s “crimes of consumption” tended to reveal who they “really were”—bad women, sinful women, dangerous women who led men into sin. Men’s crimes of passionate consumption sometimes also revealed their sinful selves—some were seen as gluttons, for example. But men’s consumption was also, at times, condemned as an attempt to appear to be what they were not; their display of acquired objects revealed an effort to claim membership in a social class to which they did not belong.

A Fantastic Frenzy of Consumption in Early Modern France

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The enthusiastic (even excessive) consumerism of contemporary western society has its roots, according to some, in the expansion of the consumption of goods in Renaissance Europe. Early modern men and women were ardent, even “passionate” consumers. Such self-indulgence was regarded as decadent and socially perilous; religious and other moral authorities of the era sought to eradicate or at least control these sins of excess. My study examines criticism of “crimes of consumption” in both serious and satirical French literature of the early modern era, including such pamphlets as Frenaizie fantastique Françoise Sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottez de ce temps and Pasquil de la Cour pour apprendre à discourir et s’habiller à la mode. Scrutiny of these texts suggest that women’s “crimes of consumption” tended to reveal who they “really were”—bad women, sinful women, dangerous women who led men into sin. Men’s crimes of passionate consumption sometimes also revealed their sinful selves—some were seen as gluttons, for example. But men’s consumption was also, at times, condemned as an attempt to appear to be what they were not; their display of acquired objects revealed an effort to claim membership in a social class to which they did not belong.

Le consumérisme enthousiaste (et même démesuré) de la société occidentale contemporaine a ses racines, d’après certains, dans l’expansion de la consommation de biens en Europe pendant la Renaissance. Dès les débuts de la modernité, hommes et femmes furent des consommateurs ardents, voire « passionnés ». S’adonner au plaisir d’acquérir était sévèrement condamné par les théologiens et les moralistes. Cet article examine la critique de ces passions excessives dans la littérature morale et satirique de l’époque, incluant les pamphlets tels que Frenaizie fantastique Françoise Sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottez de ce temps et Pasquil de la Cour pour apprendre à discourir et s’habiller à la mode. Une analyse approfondie de ces textes montre combien la question du genre influe sur l’interprétation de ces passions : la femme coupable de tels excès y est vue mauvaise, pécheresse, dangereuse pour l’homme ; l’homme, quant à lui, est condamné pour dissimuler et vouloir paraître autre que ce qu’il est, entendre d’une autre classe que celle à laquelle il appartient.

Early modern men and women were enthusiastic, even “passionate” consumers of food and coveted objects. Such self-indulgence was observed and judged in many forms of literature of the era, including sermons, manuals of comportment, fiction, and satirical tracts. This essay examines criticism of these “crimes of consumption” in both serious and satirical French literature of

the early modern era. Because both passion and possibilities for consumption are seemingly infinite, I limit my study to observations on consumption of food and drink—what early modern men and women put into their bodies—and comments regarding what they put on their bodies, particularly on their feet.

It seems that “passionate consumption” (or conspicuous consumption) may have been an especially French phenomenon during the early modern era. We see in the anonymous pamphlet *La Commodité des Bottes, en tout temps. Sans Chevaux, sans Mulets, et sans Asnes*¹ that “les Français sont changeants comme des Prothées”² and that “leur esprit [...] se plaît toujours à inventer quelque nouvelle mode [et] change d’invention aussi souvent que la Lune fait de forme.”³ Nevertheless, claims the author of this text, the French remain passionate about their boots: “[I]l demeure toujours en même état pour les bottes.”⁴

Unsurprisingly, men and women are treated differently in early modern literature, regarding their habits and sins of excessive consumption. What is perhaps surprising is some of the ways in which they are treated differently; those differences are the focus of this essay. As Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell maintain, “It can be argued that every text in the early modern period had the potential to be viewed as didactic.”⁵ In what follows I will examine attitudes toward excessive consumption both in straightforwardly didactic texts—sermons and other moral literature—and in what might be considered satirical didactic texts, in the form of anonymous pamphlets.

The study of sermons reveals to us the thoughts, lessons, and goals of clergy at the time they were written (and thereby which transgressions were regarded as serious and frequently enough committed that they merited public correction). The “normal” Sunday sermon was generally not recorded

1. *La Commodité des Bottes, en tout temps. Sans Chevaux, sans Mulets, et sans Asnes* (Paris: Chez Jean Martin, 1629). In this and other texts published in Middle French, I have made the following changes for readability: substituted *s* for *f*, *c* for *ff*, *v* for *u*, *u* for *v*, *s* for *z*, *j* for *i*, *en* or *em* for *ẽ*, *on* or *om* for *õ*, *an* or *am* for *ā*, *ê* or *é* for *ef*, and *et* for *ẽ*, and *u* for *ü*, and added accents (*à*, *è*, *é*, *ù*) and an apostrophe where appropriate.

2. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 16.

3. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 16.

4. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 16.

5. Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell, “Introduction,” in *Didactic Literature in England 1500–1800: Expertise Constructed*, ed. Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 2.

for posterity, but those that were written down saw much use. Peter Bayley explains:

Although ecclesiastical authority required a sermon or homily at Mass on Sundays, these were often brief instructions and were rarely reprinted. The full dress sermon was normally delivered at a separate time, often in the afternoon, on certain major feast days, on Sundays in fashionable town churches, and above all during Lent and Advent. It also formed part of the elaborate ceremonies for the Octave of Corpus Christi. There were also, of course, sermons for special occasions like missions or professions into the religious orders, but few of these survive. The funeral oration, to which distinguished or noble figures had a right, forms a separate genre and was almost always published separately. The printed collections of Catholic sermons reflect these customs faithfully [...]. There is considerable evidence that such published collections were widely drawn on by other preachers.⁶

Sermons have as their purported goal teaching the readers (and listeners) how to be like Christ, how to live well and die well.

Pamphlets, on the other hand, aim lower, making observations on *this* life, and satirical observations at that, rather than offering counsel on how to make a felicitous voyage to the afterlife. The pamphlets that I consider in this essay are in fact a bit wicked, slyly mocking the very conspicuous consumption of comestibles, clothing, and boots among particular groups of early modern French men and women. It is noteworthy that the vestimentary satire reveals at least to some degree tactics for social advancement. We will see that while boots will not get you into heaven, they can nevertheless help you climb the social ladder, at least a little bit.

Though lacking the prestige of lengthy or elaborate texts, pamphlets were lucrative business for early printers,⁷ and they were abundantly published and widely distributed. Early pamphlets were largely religious in nature:

6. Peter Bayley, *French Pulpit Oratory, 1598–1650: A Study in Themes and Styles, with a Descriptive Catalogue of Printed Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 14–15.

7. According to Andrew Pettegree, “The first printers were not oblivious to the potential of cheap print.” Pettegree explains: “Such commissions brought in welcome income, and did not occupy much press time. It was seldom necessary to interrupt production of substantial projects for more than a day or

indulgences, prayers, and other devotional material. News pamphlets in France became popular in wartime, beginning with the Italian campaigns of Louis XII in 1507–09 and reaching a crescendo with the conflict between Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and François I, King of France, between 1538 and 1544.⁸ During the sixteenth century, both the volume and the variety of subject matter treated in pamphlets expanded immensely. The pamphlets that I examine in the present study were written early in the seventeenth century. According to Carl Goldstein, by that time, “pamphlets offering collections of puns, jokes, riddles, festive songs, and the like [...] constituted the bulk of print production.”⁹ That particular segment of the print industry was largely unregulated, and those pamphlets were generally written by anonymous authors and printed by unidentified publishers.¹⁰

We cannot know, or even begin to guess, how many pamphlets on overindulgent dining, inappropriate clothing, or unsuitable boots were published during the early modern era, or whether there was a comparable market for pamphlets on, for example, inappropriate headwear or belts. Books were treasured possessions in early modern France and often handed down from one generation to the next. However, the history and survival rate of pamphlets is considerably different, as Andrew Pettegree explains:

Many [pamphlets] survived only because a sixteenth-century purchaser gathered a handful together and bound them into a volume, making them more like their other, respectable books: in this way the literature of the

two to finish the job.” See Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 130–31.

8. Pettegree, 138–41.

9. Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50.

10. Sara Beam describes the state of the pamphlet industry in early modern France: “Pamphlet writing was a largely unregulated business during the Ancien Régime. Until 1618, there was no mechanism for systematically censoring printed matter, and unlike book production, which did eventually tighten as the century progressed, pamphlet publishing remained notoriously difficult to control. As a result, we cannot know for certain who wrote these short, cheaply produced tracts. Most pamphlets appeared anonymously and with no indication of the place of publication. Such information did not have to be revealed since pamphlets were usually published without a *privilège du roy*, a copyright issued by the king.” Sara Beam, *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 168.

streets was domesticated. But this occurred only with a fraction of those published. Overall less than 1 per cent of the total copies of books printed in the sixteenth century have survived to the present day. For pamphlets the figure is even lower.¹¹

Because of limited access to surviving pamphlets and recorded sermons, our window into the thinking of early modern French preachers and satirists is small, but it is a window nonetheless. By examining the documents that survive, we can gather some idea of what sort of passionate consumption was criticized and why those behaviours, and the people who engaged in them, were targeted.

Conspicuously criticized consumption

Certain sins of excessive consumption seem to be primarily the province of men, according to early modern writers. Intemperance, for example.¹² It is true that early modern conduct manuals warn women not to eat too much, or drink too much wine. However, such intemperance on the part of women is often mentioned just in passing, or even blamed on others, as we see in Hector de Beaulieu's 1565 *Doctrine et instruction des filles chrétiennes désirans vivre selon la parole de Dieu*. Beaulieu recommends that young women not eat too much, and especially that they not drink to excess: "Entre autres choses, je vous admoneste que si vous voulez être chastes de votre corps, que vous soyez donc sobres de la bouche et principalement de vin,"¹³ for he fears that drinking too much wine might lead to debauchery. But it appears that, according to Beaulieu, this is the responsibility of their parents: he tells the young ladies of his fervent hope

11. Pettegree, 334. Pettegree explains what happened to the lost documents: "Paper was too precious to waste. Books and pamphlets were torn up for wrapping, for stuffing bindings (and later furniture), and for use in the toilet. Blank spaces or the reverse sides of printed broadsheets were used for scribbling notes. Even valued texts grew out of date or dog-eared. Fire, damp, moths, mice, worms and time did the rest. Nineteenth-century revolutions and twentieth-century bombs picked off more of the survivors" (334).

12. The relative lack of gluttonous women in early modern sermons and novellas is somewhat surprising, given the popularity of such female characters in fabliaux.

13. Hector de Beaulieu, *Doctrine et instruction des filles chrétiennes désirans vivre selon la parole de Dieu* (Lyon: J. Saugrain, 1565), 18. Beaulieu was a French poet, musician, and Catholic priest. He eventually embraced the teachings of Calvin, moved to Geneva, and became a Protestant minister.

that “vos parents ne vous nourrissent pas en délices et voluptés.”¹⁴ His chapter on “la bouche et la langue”¹⁵ deals only with what comes out of the young lady’s mouth—she is not to shout or babble or lie or sing indecent songs—and nothing about what should or should not go in.

The author of *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses des Femmes et Filles de ce temps* categorizes women according to their personalities, which is to say their faults, and among those faults is *gourmandise*, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. “La Gourmande, trouve tout bon,”¹⁶ he declares. “[C]’est signe de bonne complexion: une personne qui mange noix, poires, pommes, choux, et autres choses sans en être malade, ou offensée.”¹⁷ Some of these *femmes et filles*, though, tend to be more epicurean than gourmand, savouring each delicate morsel, making the meal last as long as possible. “La Cérémonieuse,” for example, insists upon being served “un [...] mets plus savoureux et de meilleur goust, et qui fait demeurer¹⁸ plus longtemps à table à la douceur de tels morceaux.”¹⁹ The author describes, too, “La Délicate.” This is a woman who “succe le bout: il y a icy de la friandise, et du hault goust, il ne se faut pas haster, peur de se brusler: il faut savourer, puis manger de courage: on flaire le melon au cul bon appetit quand il est bien meur.”²⁰ His description of this woman grows more and more sensual as he continues: “elle le succe un peu puis l’avale doucement, et de fort bon appetit, parce que, l’ance de chair et nerfs ne blesse point à mort.”²¹ One might well interpret the author’s description of women’s dining not as consumption of food, but rather as code for sexual activity, and these epicures seem to be connoisseurs of fine sex as much as they are of fine food. Indeed, even his *Gourmande* enjoys a thoroughly sensuous experience at the table: “se delechant merveilleusement à ceste sorte de chair que les Italiens

14. Beaulieu, 18.

15. Beaulieu, 14–15.

16. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses des Femmes et Filles de ce temps* (Paris: Julien Le Dinde, gouverneur de Mau-gouvert, à l’enseigne de la pierre de bois, 1621), 11.

17. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses*, 11. Author’s correction for “offencé.”

18. Author’s correction for “demeumeurer.”

19. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses*, 7.

20. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses*, 8–9.

21. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses*, 9.

nomment, Carne braguesse.”²² Furthermore, he informs us that she prefers her food hot, not cold, and she is eager to consume it pronto.

Men are inclined to give themselves over entirely and sinfully to the pleasures of the table, as the seventeenth-century Jesuit Claude de La Colombière warns us:

On se plaint tous les jours de ce que les hommes rapportent tout aux plaisirs de la table, qu'ils en font leur dernière fin, qu'ils ne travaillent que dans cette vue. Ce sont des gens dont le corps n'est d'aucun usage à l'esprit. Au lieu que les sages se plaignent d'avoir un corps qui gêne l'esprit, ceux-ci voudraient être destitué de cette âme spirituelle qui trouble, par ses lumières, les plaisirs sensuels qu'ils recherchent.²³

These shameless men are so passionately epicurean that they favour their stomachs over their souls.

Women's excessive consumption shows itself primarily in their attempts to enhance their appearance. The author of the anonymous pamphlet *Pasquil de la court pour apprendre à discourir et à s'habiller à la mode* identifies the intended recipients of his “advice”:

À vous Dames et Damoiselles
Qui désirez passer pour belles
Et que sur vous on ait les yeux [...] ²⁴

The author goes on to counsel his reader to wear a fashionable dress, “La robe à la commodité,”²⁵ and pearls that are very white, “D'une blancheur tres-excellente.”²⁶ The lady should wear blue satin shoes and a large furry hat that resembles an animal sitting on her head. The *Pasquil* is replete with counsel on augmenting one's beauty: curl your hair, hide your rotting teeth,

22. *Les Belles et diverses complexions amoureuses*, 11.

23. Claude de La Colombière, “De l'intempérance,” in *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés du premier et du second ordre*, vol. 7, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1844), 1585.

24. *Pasquil de la court pour apprendre à discourir et à s'habiller à la mode* (1622), 3.

25. *Pasquil de la court*, 9.

26. *Pasquil de la court*, 8.

paint arched eyebrows on your face, and add a *mouche*—an artificial beauty mark. Superficial advice, to be sure, but not nearly as disparaging as the author's recommendation to

Relever ses testons en butte,
Encore qu'ils fussent pendans,
Ou par l'aage ou par accidens.²⁷

It is for these (obviously vain) attempts at preserving or augmenting their physical attractiveness that women are mocked and criticized by this pamphleteer.

Early modern preachers, too, seem to consider "artificial beauty" the primary form of excessive consumption on the part of women. A woman enhancing her appearance is particularly sinful, in part, of course, because doing so inspires lust or is intended to do so. Larissa Taylor remarks that "The sinful lure of woman was a common theme among preachers, although its importance has been exaggerated by historians. [...] Female beauty, and its capacity for inspiring lust, lay at the heart of the problem."²⁸ The French Jesuit Jean Lejeune (1592–1672), following this line of thought, warns women that "Ce n'est qu'un peu de vanité qui vous porte à vous ajuster et à vous parer curieusement: mais avec cette vanité, vous êtes un piège à la folle jeunesse, une pierre d'achoppement et un objet de mauvaises pensées."²⁹ Beaulieu is wise to the tricks and excuses of young women who wish to tempt men using their feminine wiles:

Touchant votre col et votre poitrine, vous serez plus songeuses de les tenir
sous couverture honnête, qu'à les découvrir devant tous, sous l'excuse
d'avoir trop chaud. Car combien que telle excuse ne soit pas suffisante,
pour éteindre le soupçon de quelque autre intention folle: encore est elle

27. Pasquil de la court, 7.

28. Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 158. In this fundamental book, indispensable for anyone studying early modern preachers, Taylor examines over 1,600 sermons delivered in France between 1460 and 1560. She devotes a chapter to "The Preachers and Women" (ch. 9, pp. 156–78). Also see chapter 4: which sermons were published (53) and women reading sermons (54).

29. Jean Lejeune, "Sermon XL. Du péché véniel," in *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés du premier et du second ordre*, vol. 3, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1844), 448.

du tout à rejeter, pour le scandale et occasion de péché que vous donneriez à plusieurs qui vous regarderaient, auxquels vous seriez comme un filet, ou rets, pour les enlasser et attraper, en la concupiscence de votre chair.³⁰

According to Beaulieu, women are not just alluring, they intentionally set traps, tools of the devil. Women's alluring garments, then, are a threat to men's immortal souls. According to Taylor, certain aspects of women's attire were more vigorously criticized than others. "Besides the headdresses, which were symbols of cuckoldry analogous to the devil's horns, the style of long trains and sleeves provoked the preachers' indignation."³¹

Furthermore, the women's own souls are in danger as a result of their fondness for fashion. Père Lejeune expresses concern about a number of problems that result from all this dressing up, from the mundane to the grievous: "L'affection à vos ajustements vous fait faire des dépenses qui incommode votre famille, vous élève et grossit le cœur, vous remplit de distractions de vos prières, vous fait murmurer contre vos compagnes et impatienter contre vos domestiques."³² Lejeune scolds these women: When you go to confession,

[...] vous ne dites pas que vous perdez les deux et trois heures entières à vous habiller et accommoder; que cela vous empêche de prier Dieu, et de vous préparer à la communion, vous remplit de distractions et de pensées volages en vous oraisons; que votre cœur est tout en vous et en votre beauté prétendue, et fort peu en votre Dieu et en sa bonté infinie. Vous ne dites pas que, si vous êtes fille, pour entretenir cette vanité, il faut dérober au père et à la mère, être cause qu'on en accuse les servantes; ou si vous êtes mariée, il faut que votre mari suce le sang des pauvres gens, pour vous faire porter la soie, qu'il paie de refus et de menaces les tailleurs et autres créanciers.³³

Men, too, are sometimes criticized for their desire and efforts to enhance their physical appearance. Another seventeenth-century French Jesuit,

30. Beaulieu, 17.

31. Taylor, 159.

32. Lejeune, "Du péché véniel," 448.

33. Jean Lejeune, "Sermon LXI. Contre les vains ornements des femmes," in *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés*, 3:715.

Jean-François Senault, claims that “Enfin c’est le désir de plaire aux femmes qui a obligé les hommes à démentir leur condition, à friser et poudrer leurs cheveux, à peindre leurs barbes, à chercher des ornements dans leurs habits.”³⁴ All this effort comes at a price, for, as Senault concludes, it makes them less “manly”: “[...] et pour le dire en un mot, à se rendre semblables à celles dont ils sont les esclaves et les amants.”³⁵ However, this vein of criticism of men, as far as I have been able to determine, is quite rare.

Nevertheless, men’s excessive vestimentary consumption is amply disparaged, but for a different reason from that for which women are criticized, and in a different medium. Men are criticized not in sermons, but in satirical tracts. And they are chided for their choice of footwear: boots. For example, we discover in the 1623 pamphlet *Frenaizie fantastique Française sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottés de ce temps*³⁶ that men took to wearing those fashionable boots all the time, not just when they were riding horses, for it made them look nobler, braver, wealthier, as if they were gentlemen. As if they did, in fact, own a horse. After some initial hyperbole—“De toutes les inventions qui ont jamais été treuvées pour l’ornement et pour la commodité des hommes, il n’y en a point de plus estimable que celle des bottes”³⁷—the author settles into a steady tone of irony, consistent with the title.

There are other pamphlets written in early seventeenth-century France that address the same topic—boots worn by the undeserving—and they were written in the same tone. These include *La Commodité des bottes en tout temps, Sans Chevaux, sans Mulets, et sans Anes*, and *Frenaizie fantastique Française Sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottés de ce temps*, as we have seen, as well as *La louange et l’utilité des bottes*³⁸ and *La Grande Propriété des bottes sans cheval en tout temps*.³⁹ There is nothing in these pamphlets about beauty,

34. Jean-François Senault, “Panégryrique de Saint Jacques et de Saint Philippe,” in *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés du premier et du second ordre*, vol. 6, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1844), 160.

35. Senault, 160.

36. Amadis de Gaules, *Frenaizie fantastique Française Sur la Nouvelle Mode des Nouveaux Courtisans bottés de ce temps*. The author’s name is in all likelihood a pseudonym.

37. *Frenaizie fantastique*, 3.

38. Le Chevalier de Rozandre, *La Louange et l’utilité des bottes* (Paris: Robert Daufresne, 1622). The author’s name is probably also a pseudonym.

39. *La Grande Propriété des bottes sans cheval en tout temps* (Paris: Pierre Menier, 1644).

about handsomeness, or about attracting the attention of women. What we do find in those texts is social climbing: real, or attempted, or pretended. This is where criticism of men's excessive consumption differs radically from criticism of women. Women are chastised for trying to augment their attractiveness to men, thereby inflaming lust and emptying pocketbooks. Men are criticized for trying to appear braver, richer, and most importantly, as belonging to a higher social class than they actually do. For in seventeenth-century France, only the wealthy and the military elite were to wear boots.⁴⁰

These satirical tracts are humorous to be sure, but they spring from a serious place. The appropriation of boot-wearing by the un-noble and un-horsed was a theft of social status, or at least it was perceived as such, because in that era objects signified the identity and status of their owner. As David LaGuardia has demonstrated, "the social status or being of individuals was determined by their relationships to objects, predicated on the notion of the proper."⁴¹ Manner of dress was part of the social code that distinguished those who were noble from those who were not, and there was without a doubt desire on the part of the powerful to maintain the visible signs that separated social classes. Pascal Bastien explains: "Le discours visant à réserver à la noblesse le port de vêtements somptueux apparut sans doute lorsque le développement de la situation économique et sociale du royaume ne lui en conservait plus l'exclusivité."⁴² Now that non-nobles could afford to purchase and flaunt items that had been the prerogative of nobles, new means were sought to preserve the signs that had belonged exclusively to the elite.

The very concept of nobility had its origins on the battlefield, where a knight might be dubbed because of his heroic deeds. He must also be a man of honour, of course, and he must be in command of subordinates. The military component of nobility remained well after the end of the Middle

40. Unlike lowly foot soldiers, members of the light cavalry were entitled to wear rigid boots. See Daniel Roche, *La Culture des apparences: Une histoire du vêtement, XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 230. Regarding civilian footwear, Roche remarks that "La botte est affaire des riches" (143). "Boots were confined to the rich," translation from Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the "ancien régime"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145.

41. David LaGuardia, "Interrogation and the Performance of Truth in the *Registre Criminel du Châtelet de Paris, 1389-1392*," *Yale French Studies* 110 (2006): 155.

42. Pascal Bastien, "'Aux trésors dissipez l'on cognoist le malfaict': Hiérarchie sociale et transgression des ordonnances somptuaires en France, 1543-1606," *Renaissance and Reformation* 23. 4 (1999): 24.

Ages; noblemen were expected to serve in the royal army when called. Arlette Jouanna affirms that among the most important “virtues” shared by noblemen was “La magnanimité, ou la grandeur et la force de l’âme.”⁴³ This quality was to manifest itself “essentiellement sur les champs de bataille par la vaillance et la prouesse.”⁴⁴ However, as Jouanna explains, by the sixteenth century few nobles actually participated in military service. One might certainly deduce from this that noblemen wanted to protect their image as valiant warriors, made fragile by the fact that few of them actually were. Furthermore, by the late sixteenth century, the concept of nobility was undergoing a profound change in France, described by Ellery Schalk as “the demise of the medieval view of nobility.”⁴⁵ The change was not sudden. According to Schalk, “the old and the new tended to be mixed together and confused.”⁴⁶ Because of the blurring and shifting of social roles, some nobles may have felt that their status rested on uncertain ground, hence their sensibility to non-nobles adopting a piece of their social code: boots, the footwear of the warrior class.

By the sixteenth century, only the king could create nobles. This meant that one must be born noble, or occupy a position of such prestige and importance that the king would respond to an aspiring gentleman’s petition and issue a letter ennobling him—daunting conditions. But it also meant that it was indeed possible to *become* noble. As Robert J. Knecht puts it, “Nobility was not a closed caste.”⁴⁷ It was also possible to acquire nobility through the purchase of royal *office*. A third path to nobility, and the most usual for the commoner (though it was hardly “usual”) was via assimilation, or *aggrégation*, that is, by adopting a noble lifestyle: amass a fortune, acquire a rural estate, behave as lord of the manor, foster a military reputation, and call yourself *seigneur* or *écuyer*. After several generations your family could be considered and declared noble.

43. Arlette Jouanna, *La France du XVI^e siècle: 1483–1598* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 61.

44. Jouanna, 61.

45. Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 115.

46. Schalk, 120.

47. Robert J. Knecht, *The French Renaissance Court: 1483–1589* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 25. See also Donna Bonahan, *Crown and Nobility in Early Modern France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 7–33.

None of these paths to nobility was likely available to the “gens bottés, sans cheval”;⁴⁸ nor was the noble way of life, including military service with its implication of such positive personal characteristics as “courage, strength, and loyalty.”⁴⁹ Boots, however, apparently *were* available, and wearing them, or so some thought, conferred upon the wearer the implication of military prowess and its accompanying glory. All this without the expense of a horse or the danger of battle. These ignoble boot-wearers aspired not to actual nobility but rather to the appearance of it; to being seen and treated as if they were noble; to being able to imagine themselves that way. The emphatic reactions of others—in the form of these witty and scathing pamphlets—suggest that their attempts at appearing to belong to a more elevated social class did work, at least to some degree.

It is possible that the authors of these pamphlets were mocking not only futilely aspiring nobles but certain true nobles as well: specifically, those lacking the military service for which they would be recognized as courageous, strong, and loyal, but wearing boots nonetheless. For though military service among nobles was actually quite rare, boot-wearing was not. Indeed, boots became a very fashionable accessory for the wealthy man in the early part of the seventeenth century, exactly when these pamphlets were written. Louise Godard de Donville explains:

La botte est la chaussure de prédilection du règne de Louis XIII. [...] Elle tient, dans la toilette du gentilhomme, une place de choix, aussi le bottier était-il un personnage important. En daim, en chevreau, la botte portée avec les grègues, monte jusqu'à mi-cuisse, épousant étroitement le galbe de la jambe. À la ville on la rabat jusqu'au mollet, puis on en relève les bords

48. *La Grande Propriété des bottes*, 8.

49. William Beik describes the concept of nobility in early modern France: “[It] was a mixture of realities and illusions, incorporating three underlying characteristics. First and foremost was lordship over seigneurial estates, which implied a rural lifestyle, the exercise of public authority over other people, and the idea of living without engaging in degrading labor. Second was the connection to military activity, usually in service to an overlord. Military skill, with all that it implied about courage, strength, and loyalty, was a reserve source of status and respect. A third characteristic was the connection between the nobility and the crown. Part of the noble ethic was military service to a lord, and that lord was increasingly the king himself.” William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72.

de manière à former un entonnoir. Cette partie de botte, ou genouillère, est doublée de riche tissu sur lequel s'épanouissent les dentelles du bas de botte.⁵⁰

Hardly something to wear into battle.

One might expect that the elite would turn to sumptuary laws to suppress the wearing of boots by non-nobles, but for a number of reasons those laws were largely immaterial in this case. Didier Course summarizes the goals of sumptuary laws in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France: "Relevant à la fois de la morale et de l'économie, elles servent à limiter le retrait du marché de richesses gelées, à assurer les distinctions sociales qui doivent rester apparentes et à seconder l'Église dans sa guerre contre la vanité,"⁵¹ though he proposes that those laws might have ultimately had less to do with conserving France's wealth and its exterior signs of social status, and more to do with "la dénonciation de la frivolité et de la convoitise."⁵² Bastien's study of sumptuary laws reveals that by the late sixteenth century they no longer distinguished by social rank: "[...] les ordonnances d'Henri IV [...] concernaient et s'appliquaient à tous les sujets sans insister sur la hiérarchie sociale."⁵³ Moreover, sumptuary laws were utterly ineffective. According to Bastien, "Le pouvoir royal accumulait ainsi, ordonnance après ordonnance, les aveux d'impuissance."⁵⁴ And finally, though a vast number of sumptuary laws were enacted in early modern France that attempted to restrict specific clothing styles and limit the use of precious metals and prestigious fabrics, they did not restrict the wearing of boots. Nobles who actually merited their significant and signifying footwear could not control those undeserving boot-wearers; the unworthy could not be prevented from buying boots, nor could they be prevented from wearing them, even by law.

However, and fortunately for those of us who have inherited these scathing pamphlets, the meritorious boot-wearers were left with one very effective way

50. Louise Godard de Donville, *Signification de la mode sous Louis XIII* (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 1978), 225.

51. Didier Course, "'La façon de quoi nos lois essayent à régler les folles et vaines dépenses.' Rôles et limites des lois somptuaires au XVIIe siècle." *Littératures classiques* 56.1 (2005): 107.

52. Course, 113.

53. Bastien, 35.

54. Bastien, 29.

to demonstrate their superiority—to establish mastery over the undeservingly shod—and that was to reduce them to their rightful state by making them the object of comic satire. Satirical pamphlets are particularly revealing to us regarding the mindset of early modern France precisely because they are not timeless literature, universally applicable; in all likelihood they do not reveal profound truths about the human experience. Instead these pamphlets expose a very specific dispute occurring in a particular time and place. As Edward Rosenheim suggests, satire is an “attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars.”⁵⁵

These pamphlets were anonymous; we cannot know who wrote them. Natalie Zemon Davis remarks that, “Popular books are not necessarily written by *petites gens*.”⁵⁶ The writers and also the readers of these particular pamphlets will, in all likelihood, remain forever unknown to us. However, the mordant and aggressive satire of the pamphlets suggests to us who the authors might have been, and who their implied and intended readers were.

The choice of satire as the dominant mode in these pamphlets defines the relationship between the writer and his subject. Linda V. Troost maintains that “Of all modes of literary discourse, satire depends most on underscoring difference, of isolating the ‘other,’ usually for attack.”⁵⁷ Many pamphlets of the era targeted particular social groups. Sara Beam notes that some pamphlet writers “ventured into the realm of more topical satire by ridiculing particular French social types.”⁵⁸ The social target of these pamphlets could not be clearer. I suggest that the anti-unearned-boot pamphlets may have been written by peeved and witty nobles, annoyed that others were impinging on their

55. Edward Rosenheim, Jr., *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 31.

56. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 191.

57. Linda V. Troost, “Economic Discourse in the Savoy Operas of W. S. Gilbert,” in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 193.

58. Beam cites the example of *The Stroll along the Pré aux Clercs*, in which “a gentilhomme tells of wandering the Paris streets one evening to catch Tabarin's latest performance and muses about the absurdities of Parisian society: the pretensions of bourgeois officers, the corruption of the Jesuits, and the fallibility of the aristocracy. The pamphlet *The Ballet of Turlupin* presents a series of racy tales about apothecaries, lawyers, and their clerks. Turlupin tells these tales, including one about a solicitor's clerk who seduces a young woman in the back room of a boot maker's shop, in some detail, leaving few physical details to the imagination” (*Laughing Matters*, 170).

boot-wearing privileges, or perhaps by those seeking to curry favour with nobles important enough to actually merit that footwear.

As Davis suggests, print can be viewed “as a carrier of relationships,”⁵⁹ and the writers of these pamphlets establish a clear relationship of superiority over their readers. Their pamphlets usually begin with a suggestion of their vast knowledge, their expertise in the subject at hand. *La Commodité des Bottes* opens with the declaration “Maintenant que pour marque de sagesse et de pureté d’esprit.”⁶⁰ This tells his reader that not only does the author *know* which characteristics will indicate *sagesse* and *pureté d’esprit*, but also that his expertise is current, that he knows what used to be important but no longer is, and that he stays on top of such things. This entitles him to express his opinion and to impose it on others. Erin Mackie points out that

The most crucial condition for the satirist is that of his own authority, his license to speak. One convention of satiric discourse grants the satirist a privileged distance above or outside the object of his critique; this provides his immunity from the conditions he exposes and so validates his own authority.⁶¹

The writers of these pamphlets establish their authority early and often in the texts. The author of *La Louange et l’Utilité des Bottes* demonstrates his expertise concerning all inventions ever conceived for the human body: “De toutes les inventions qui ont jamais été treuvées pour l’ornement et pour la commodité des corps des hommes, il n’y en a point de plus estimable que celle des bottes.”⁶² He leaves no doubt as to his superiority over pretty much everyone when he declares: “veritablement nous devons à juste raison accuser de negligence et de stupidité ceux qui se sont méfiez de faire l’histoire ancienne.”⁶³ The reason for their being considered negligent and stupid? They did not identify and memorialize the person who first made boots popular. Pamphleteers commonly

59. Davis, 192.

60. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 3.

61. Erin Mackie, “The Culture Market, the Marriage Market, and the Exchange of Language: Swift and the Progress of Desire,” in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 173.

62. *La Louange et l’Utilité des Bottes*, 3.

63. *La Louange et l’Utilité des Bottes*, 3.

use the imperative to assert their authority. In *La Commodité des Bottes en tous temps*, the author instructs his reader: “Regardez un peu combien l’on se tient glorifié d’avoir des bottes.”⁶⁴ He directs his readers’ gaze to the subject he wishes to discuss, so that they will share is point of view, in every sense.

Who then, were the readers of these satiric texts? Pamphlets were economical to produce and cost very little to purchase, but, as Pettegree observes, “most cheap print was bought by readers who also bought more expensive books.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, pamphlets commonly passed from one reader to another, and might be read aloud in a group setting, further obscuring the identity of their readers. Nevertheless, in studying these pamphlets we can ascertain the reader inscribed in them by their authors. Or more precisely, the readers. For as Dustin Griffin explains, “a satire’s audience is never unitary or homogeneous: its audience comprehends those readers with whom it seeks to ingratiate itself, those it expects to antagonize, those whose prejudices it flatters, those whose attitudes it may actually hope to alter.”⁶⁶ The undeserving boot-wearers are the obvious target of the pamphleteers’ antagonism. The author of *La Louange et l’utilité des bottes* addresses them directly:

O vous Chevaliers de la Samaritaine, Courtizans du cheval de bronze, [...] vous êtes contraints de battre tous les jours le pavé de la semelle de vos bottes, afin qu’elles trompent ceux qui ne vous connoissent pas, et qu’elles vous servent comme de passe-port et de fidèles compagnes en tous les lieux où vous allez pour exercer vostre mestier.⁶⁷

He calls them *Chevaliers* and *Courtizans*, but mocks them directly, revealing that he knows their tricks, and now that those tricks have been written down and made public, everyone will be aware of them. The counterfeit Chevaliers will now find it harder to fool people who do not know them.

The pamphleteer also, and perhaps primarily, seeks a complicit reader, one who is expected to take the side of the writer against his target. This reader

64. *La Commodité des Bottes en tous temps*, 12.

65. Pettegree, 198.

66. Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 188.

67. *La Louange et l’utilité des bottes*, 9.

must be sophisticated enough to understand the unstated (though sometimes very strongly implied) message of the text. Irony requires a sophisticated reader, who is in collusion with the writer. The author of *Frenaizie fantastique Française temps* appears to align himself with his readers, at least temporarily. He reports that *we* are advised to wear boots all of the time: “nous sommes bien plus avisez d’en user en tout temps, non seulement à cheval, mais encore à pied: Car savoir où trouver quelque chose de plus commode pour épargner les bas de soye à qui les crottes font une guerre continuelle, principalement dedans la ville de Paris.”⁶⁸ But even a moderately sophisticated reader will perceive the irony in the author’s declaration that “C’est donc une nécessité aux braves hommes de se botter, s’ils veulent paroistre ce qu’ils⁶⁹ sont, et à beaucoup d’autres pour paroistre ce qu’ils⁷⁰ ne sont pas.”⁷¹ The reader may not immediately and automatically share the author’s opinion, and the author knows this: part of the “work” of the text is to persuade his reader of his point of view, to convince that reader to side with him. Pamphlets offer the not-quite-convinced an opportunity to join the superior set, at least in their attitude toward the target of the satire. To the reader already convinced of the author’s point of view, the satirical pamphlet offers the opportunity to commune with a kindred spirit and see his beliefs and attitude confirmed by an “authority.”

There will be no surprise in the dénouement of the pamphlet, so if there is to be pleasure in reading the text, it must come from elsewhere; the writer must create surprise and pleasure along the way with humour. These pamphlets are hilarious for readers today, but what is most relevant when considering the authors of the texts and their intended reader is what was funny, what was laughed at, during the era in which they were written. For an idea of what was funny and why in early modern France we can turn to Laurent Joubert’s sixteenth-century treatise, *Traité du ris*. According to Joubert, the object or phenomenon that provokes laughter must be “laid, difforme, deshonnête,

68. *Frenaizie fantastique*, 3–4.

69. Author’s correction for “il.”

70. Author’s correction for “il.”

71. *Frenaizie fantastique*, 10–11.

indécent, mal-séant, et peu convenable.”⁷² Boots on undeserving feet in early modern France? That meets all of Joubert’s criteria.

What do these authors say, then, to make us laugh at the ugly, deformed, indecent fools wearing improper, unfitting, and indecorous footwear? We discover in the *Frenaizie fantastique* that boot-wearing commoners will fool onlookers, or at least the boot-wearers think they will: “[...] n’est-ce pas un grand avantage que de paraître Chevalier étant botté, bien que l’on n’ait point de cheval, d’autant que ceux qui vous voient s’imaginent que votre monture n’est pas loin?”⁷³ The anonymous author of *La Commodité des Bottes, en tout temps* urges us: “Regardez un peu combien l’on se tient glorifié d’avoir des bottes.”⁷⁴ How very distinguished one is, thanks to one’s footwear! The author then goes on to tell the tale of a valet who puts on a pair of boots and is suddenly addressed as Monsieur instead of Georges. And our Monsieur Georges finds a new job as an *écuyer*. So instead of serving people he is serving horses. “Métamorphose admirable!”⁷⁵ declares the author.

As soon as a man puts on a pair of boots he possesses the qualities of a soldier, declares the same author, and this without risking a thousand wounds from battle or the loss of his best body parts:

Voyez comme pour avoir des bottes l’on possède incontinent la qualité de Soldat et de brave homme, qualité dis-je que l’on ne peut acquérir dans l’Art militaire, qu’avec autant de temps qu’il en faut pour rendre un homme vieux, et le plus souvent encore avec mille marques de sang, et la perte des meilleurs membres du corps.⁷⁶

So our “Chevalier” is not only an imposter, he is also a coward. We learn in the *Frenaizie fantastique* that boots on your feet make you look like you’re ready to leap onto your horse and charge off to battle: “Et cela se fait pour paraître plus

72. Laurent Joubert, *Traité du ris, contenant son essence, ses causes, et merveilleux effets, curieusement recherchés raisonnés & observés ... Item, La cause morale du ris de Democrite, expliquée & temoignée par Hippocras* (Paris, Nicolas Chesneau, 1579), 16. Translation from Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 20.

73. *Frenaizie fantastique*, 4.

74. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 12.

75. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 13–14.

76. *La Commodité des Bottes*, 14.

brave Chevalier [...] et pour être toujours prêt à monter à cheval,”⁷⁷ “paraître” being the operative word here, of course. The author of *La Louange et l'utilité des bottes* expresses the same thought, declaring: “C'est donc une nécessité aux braves hommes de se botter, s'ils veulent paraître ce qu'ils sont, et à beaucoup d'autres pour paraître ce qu'ils ne sont pas.”⁷⁸

There are stories in these pamphlets about improperly booted men being made fools of in a variety of ways. One young lady convinces a man to take off his boots before enjoying her favours (which he was about to force on her). But she escapes him because it is difficult for him to get out of his boots quickly.⁷⁹ Another booted man is tricked into admitting he has no horse in order to be acquitted of a crime reportedly committed by a man on a horse (a crime that never happened, a crime made up to force the man to confess his horselessness in public).⁸⁰ There are jokes about foreigners wondering how France could possibly feed all the horses that *must* be overcrowding the country because they see so very many men walking about in boots, obviously about to bestride their horses.⁸¹ And so forth. And there is casting of aspersions on the very boots that are worn by the unworthy; suggestions that those boots were purchased used, which means that some real gentleman had worn them, and that the commoner who wears them now cannot possibly fill them, at least in the metaphorical sense.

I propose that these satirical pamphlets were written in defense of the rightful boot-wearers because they perceived the threat of social advancement by the undeserving booted, who encroached on their territory of wealth, status, and courage. Even if the undeserving wore boots as a sort of disguise, knowing full well that no social climbing was possible, at least for them, they still represented a perceived threat, for some people might actually be deceived by those boots.

Early modern men and women were mocked and scolded for their passionate consumption of products to eat and to wear, what we might think of as passionate attention to their own bodies—nourishing and adorning them with

77. *Frenaizie fantastique*, 6.

78. *La Louange et l'utilité des bottes*, 10.

79. *La Louange et l'utilité des bottes*, 13–14.

80. *La Louange et l'utilité des bottes*, 11–13.

81. *La Louange et l'utilité des bottes*, 5.

entirely too much tender loving care. An examination of sermons and satires of the early modern era suggests that women's "crimes of consumption" tended to be seen as indicative of who they "really were"—bad, sinful, dangerous women who relished their own sinful behaviour, whether that be gustatory or sexual, and who led men into sin. While men's crimes of passionate consumption were also sometimes thought to reveal their sinful selves—some were seen as gluttons, for example—their consumption and display of acquired objects were also, at times, condemned as an attempt to appear to be what they were not, and to claim membership in a social class to which they did not belong. The quantity of anti-purloined-boot literature in early modern France strongly suggests that those boots provided some social benefits for the commoner who wore them, at least for the ones who wore them well.