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Historical Attempts in Late Eighteenth-Century French Dramatic Costume

Setting the Stage: Factors in Fashion

A number of factors contributed to the change in fashion, and fashion on the stage, which occurred in late eighteenth-century France. These factors include the influence of the changing art aesthetic on portraiture and fancy dress costumes, the increase in publications on the topic of dress and fashion, and a general shift in fashion toward *la mode anglaise* on the eve of the Revolution.

The late 1770s and early 1780s in France marked a culminating point of the whole century's work towards the ideals of taste, art, and fashion as put forth through such uniquely French endeavors as Didero and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, published between 1751 and 1772. Aileen Ribeiro, in her beautiful book *Dress in Eighteenth-Century*

Europe writes:

Particularly from the middle of the century, a variety of tastes were allowed to be fashionable in all the arts; these include the exotic, the historical, the picturesque and a taste for classical antiquity, all of which manifested themselves in portraiture, fashionable clothing and the fancy-dress entertainments that were such an important aspect of social life.¹

By 1780 the florid, playful, and curvilinear aesthetics of the Rococo style were, after over 50 years, finally beginning to fall from favor. The discoveries at Herculaneum earlier in the century, published in the lavish book *Le Antichità di Ercolano* (1757-92), and an

¹ A. Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789*, (New Haven, 2002), p. 12.

increased general knowledge of antiquity caused trends in décor and fashion to become more linear, classical, staid, and grandiose. This shift marked the very beginning of what the Revolution and Empire would adopt as its official costume: neoclassical.

The second half of the century had witnessed a profusion of publications on the subjects of current and past fashion, catalogs of art holdings of French institutions such as the Louvre Palace, and travel journals from faraway lands. Seminal publications include Garsault's *L'Art du tailleur* (1769) and *L'Art de la lingerie* (1771) in which he describes the industries of the tailor and linen (undergarment) maker. Also provided in the texts are a number of engravings that show articles of clothing, basic patterns, and a cursory illustrated costume history of France from the reign of Philip IV (1285-1314) to contemporary times. Current French fashions and mores were immortalized in Moreau le Jeune's *Suites d'Estampes pour servir à l'Histoire des Moeurs et du Costume dans le dix-huitième siècle* (1775), which not only showcases clothing, but furniture and popular pastimes as well, telling a pictorial story of the life of a fashionable woman.

At this time too, the printing presses began churning out countless fashion magazines. Throughout the century there had been random publications “but only from the 1770s can the regular appearance of information on dress be noted, firstly with the rather prosaic *Lady's Magazine* from 1770, and then the comprehensive and beautifully illustrated *Galerie des modes et costume française* from 1778 to 1787.”² These magazines helped to move fashion from wearer to wearer at an alarming rate. The traveling dressed fashion dolls from earlier in the century disappeared in favor of color plates from fashion magazines hot off the press. With the atmosphere of self consciousness in fashion the magazines served to “emphasize the way in which

² A Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820*, (New Haven, 1995), p.76.

ceremonial and court dress had frozen into a kind of uniform; for court dress in particular, there is a valedictory feel to the almost icon-like splendour that could never occur again in the vastly different world of post-Revolutionary Europe.”³

Though court dress, and in many ways theatrical dress, seemed frozen at the close of the eighteenth century, daily fashion was rapidly changing. Jennifer M. Jones, in her study on gender and fashion of this period, addresses the new accessibility of fashion:

By the late eighteenth century, fashionable dressing was no longer exclusively the privilege of the elite but something in which men and women across a broader range of stations and incomes could indulge. The wardrobes of virtually all Parisians, from manual workers to aristocrats, had increased significantly in value, in number of garments, and in varieties of clothing.⁴

This blossoming coincides with the suppression and reorganization of the craft guilds (corporations) by Minister Turgot in 1776. In the same year a new profession was officially established and given corporation rights: the *modistes* or *marchandes de modes*, the brilliant minds responsible for trimming and styling women’s gowns. Ribeiro elaborates:

In 1776, almost one hundred years after women were officially established as *couturiers*, the complementary profession of *modiste* was recognized. In a period when the basic styles of dress did not undergo radical change, decoration – ribbons, flounces, lace, flowers, etc. – became all-important... Like the publisher of prints, the *modiste* had to be up to the minute in catching the public mood... In the rage for novelty which is the main guiding force of fashion, the *modiste* cast her net wide for inspiration – which she might find in sources as varied as politics, courtly pastimes, fashionable literature, pastoral paintings and the romance of the past.⁵

The head of the corporation was Rose Bertin, Marie Antoinette’s favorite fashion supplier and the first *modiste* to truly reach celebrity status.

³ Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789*, p. 12.

⁴ J. M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France*, (Oxford, 2004), p. 74.

⁵ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 76.

During the reign of Louis XVI (1774-1791) the seat of fashion power shifted from the halls of Versailles to the streets of Paris: “an entirely new fashion culture had emerged in which Versailles was partially eclipsed as the center of fashion and in which young fops, Parisian actresses, and *marchandes de modes* vied with the king and queen as arbiters of taste.”⁶ The clothes these “newly fashionable” chose to wear were heavily influenced by English Country style. Women first adopted the *robe à l’anglaise*, altering the *robe à la française* “by sewing down the back pleats, and thus forming a continuous line from the bodice into the skirt.”⁷ In the 1780s the style required a separate bodice and skirt bolstered at the hips with pads and often swagged to achieve a soft, billowy silhouette. Often made of plain muslin, this style presaged the coming craze for neoclassical dress.

French men of the late eighteenth century donned an entirely English Riding look, casting off the dense embroidery and *petit four* colors of the previous years. By the 1780s “fashionable men had adopted dark, workman-like colours and cloths, boots, unpowdered hair instead of a wig, and even pantaloons, the trousers which had been worn by working men and sailors throughout the eighteenth century.”⁸ These informal sporting clothes in muted colors, paired with the much simplified muslin dresses worn by women of the decade, helped to further democratize fashion, blurring the line between aristocrat and working *citoyen*.

⁶ Jones, *Sexing La Mode*. p. 74.

⁷ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 66.

⁸ Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, p. 10.

Overture: Fashion on the Stage

All of these changes, however, were slow to reach the Parisian stage. After nearly a century of grumblings for reform the costumes of two major French theatrical institutions of which we are concerned in this paper, *la Comédie-Française* and *la Comédie-Italienne* (opera), continued to reflect official court dress with little regard for theatrical verisimilitude.

Although artists had been working increasingly on historical accuracy in their paintings, historical costuming was slow to reach the stage for a number of reasons. One factor was that traditionally French actors were responsible for supplying their own costumes. Diana de Marly in her book *Costume on the Stage 1600-1940* describes the hardships actors faced:

In both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries actors were responsible for providing the whole or some part of their costumes. This pattern became firmly established in France from 1600 to the Revolution in 1789, and given the difference between tragic and comic plays the cost hit the serious actors the most...Some help from the French company would be forthcoming if it could be proved that the costume required for a particular play was so extraordinary and unusual that it could not be used by the actor in other plays, in which case the manager would pay for the costume out of the company's budget. Given the cost of theatre costume it is not surprising that French actors tried to make the same costume do for several productions, and they greeted the idea of a new play with new clothes with black look.⁹

The costumes for comic actors were much more inexpensive, in part because they often represented stock comedic characters, and also because the Aristotelian philosophy of drama, (importance of time and place) did not apply to comedy. It is not difficult to understand why the cause of historical costuming was not championed by an actor who must foot the bill for his own costume.

⁹ D. de Marly, *Costume on the Stage 1600-1940*, (New Jersey, 1982) p. 25.

Costumes for the opera, on the other hand, were provided for the performers. Management was willing to pay for costumes because every opera was considered “extraordinary.” Spectacle, especially in the case of the ballet dancers who were not allowed to repeat a costume on stage in one night, was so important to the concept of opera. This caused an interesting double standard: “it was a different story when the management had to foot the whole bill, so in opera imitation gold and silver were allowed, while the poor tragic actor at the Comédie Française, the French national theatre, had to pay for real gold himself.”¹⁰ Because opera and ballet costumes were furnished by the company this meant that a dedicated “costume designer” was hired for opera.

Opera and ballet began as court pastimes, and even at the end of the eighteenth century Louis XVI continued to grant a specific license to the *Académie Royale de Musique* for the performance of opera in French. Costume designers at the *Académie* were tantamount to court employees and worked on both operas and masquerades. *La Comédie-Italienne*, which officially became an opera company when they merged with the *Théâtre national de l'Opéra-Comique* in 1762, received partial funding from the crown and was obligated to perform at Versailles throughout the year. Historical costuming for the stage was dealt another blow at the hands of opera, where spectacle was more important than anything else, and the costume designers (often celebrity personalities in their own right) were in the pocket of the king.

James Laver, in his book *Costume in the Theatre* describes some work of the *dessinateur des Habillements de l'Opéra*, Jean-Bapstiste Martin, in the mid eighteenth century:

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 25.

His female characters borrowed the toilettes of the fashionable woman of his day, slightly modified by various garnitures: a Medea wearing enormous panniers garnished with cabalistic signs, an Indian queen with colored plumes in her hair, a dryad with a boarder of oak leaves, a fury with serpents... We find Neptune covered with shells and Hercules clad in furs, but the realism is very thin. Everything is quite obviously in the Louis XV style, completely rococo. In the place of magnificence there is grace, instead of the noble attitude the elegant gesture; heavy embroideries have yielded to gay ribbons. In one sense the clothes are much simpler: light, closely fitting vests replace the Roman corselets, the materials are more delicate, the colors more tender. On the other hand, the Roman skirts have swelled out to astonishing proportions, and all the women are in wide hoops.¹¹

The great name in opera costume design of the century was Louis-René Boquet who was employed at the *Académie Royale de Musique*, from 1758 on. His style was unadulterated Rococo for the stage:

...Neat heads carefully powdered and adorned with roses, a deep square *décolletage* over a corsage ending almost in a point, so narrow is the waist. Below that spreads out the billowing skirt: a wide canvas treated almost as a separate picture over which riot all the delicate ornaments of rococo. His male figures are in ballet skirts too, but much shorter ones, and the upper part of their bodies is enclosed in a smooth vestlike garment fitting the figure.¹²

The public went to see theatre expecting to be transported, not to the place of gritty realism of the tragedy they were watching, but to a place where they could imagine themselves, clothing and all, brushing elbows with the exquisitely dressed characters.

In fact, right up until the 1770s, theatre spectators, often young fashionable men, were seated in benches and boxes that were literally on the stage, brushing elbows with the actors. The action of the play was sometimes secondary to the action of the audience, dressed in their own "costumes." A passage in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, a satirical work published in 1721, elaborates on the meta-theatrical nature of having audience on stage:

¹¹ J. Laver, *Costume in the Theatre*, (New York, 1964), p. 131.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 136.

Yesterday I saw a rather singular thing, even though it happens every day in Paris.

Everybody assembles towards the end of the afternoon and goes to act out a kind of scene that I have heard referred to as a *play*. The important action takes place on a platform called the *stage*. At either side, one sees, in little nooks which are called loges, men and women playing mute scenes together, a bit like those which are customary in our Persia.

Here, an afflicted mistress languishes; another, more animated, devours her lover with her eyes, and is devoured in turn by him: all sorts of passions are painted on their faces and expressed with an eloquence no less lively for being mute. There, the actress can only be seen from the waist up...Below stands a horde of people making fun of those up above on the stage: the latter in turn laugh at those below.¹³

It is no wonder, competing with their own audience for attention, that dramatic actors were required to outfit themselves in fabulously ornate costumes that might have little to do with the time and place of the play.

By the 1770s most companies had moved into new theatres and done away with loges and benches on stage in favor of state of the art scenic equipment which required wing space on either side of the stage.¹⁴ Audience tastes changed as well: with *la mode anglaise* they were no longer dressing in the gilded Rococo style. Aided by the great volume of publications on historical and exotic topics, the audience was beginning to turn an increasingly educated eye towards the sets and costumes that failed to represent time and place.

Introduction to the Players: Voices of Reform

Throughout the century there were concerned actors, directors, and spectators who attempted to change the way costume was portrayed on the French stage. Among early dissenters were the great tragic actress of *la Comédie-Française* Adrienne

¹³ B. G. Mittman, *Spectators on the Paris Stage in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, (Ann Arbor, 1984), p. 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 102.

Lecouvreur, who was praised for her naturalistic acting style, and Mlle Dangeville, the famous comedic actress.¹⁵ Mlle Clairon, who spent 22 years at *la Comédie-Française* specializing in classical roles, attempted to rid the company of panier-wearing. Boucher tells us that in Mlle Clairon's memoirs, published in 1799, under the title *Réflexions sur l'art dramatique*:

She urged her colleagues to avoid fashions 'of the moment', particularly where hairstyles were concerned; she condemned as absurd the tradition which dictated that Electra must be played in pink court costume trimmed with jet, and taught that designers should seek inspiration in the shapes of Greek and Roman costumes to insure their historical accuracy.¹⁶

Not even the outspoken reformers always stayed true to historical vision. For instance, when she appeared as Athalie (a Hebrew queen) at Marie Antoinette's wedding celebrations, Mlle Clairon wore a costume indistinguishable from contemporary court dress.

In the opera world a handful of performers attempted to make changes to their highly stylized costumes. Mme Saint-Huberty, the French soprano, was lauded in 1784 when she sang Dido in classical dress without hoops. The innovative ballet dancer Marie Anne de Cupis de Camargo, known simply as *La Camargo*, was the first to raise the length of her skirts to mid calf in 1730. This necessitated a second costume development for modesty's sake: the addition of close fitting knickers which became known as *maillot* or tights.¹⁷ In 1734, Mlle Sallé, a French dancer and choreographer, appeared in a London ballet "without panniers, petticoat, and bodice, her hair loose and without any ornament on her head: she was dressed only in a single muslin robe which was draped about her in

¹⁵ F. Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment*, (New York, 1987), p. 314.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 314.

¹⁷ Laver, *Costume in the Theatre*, p. 146.

the manner of Greek statue.”¹⁸ This early instance of historical costuming did not cause any immediate overhaul. However, the mid-century balletmaster Jean-George Noverre was inspired in part by these women to write on the subject of costume many times in his seminal work *Les Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760). He calls for the abolition of hoops, masks, and towering wigs, as they prevent the performers from practicing their art correctly and with grace:

Away with those lifeless masks but feeble copies of nature; they hide your features, the stifle, so to speak, your emotions and thus deprive you of your most important means of expression; take off those enormous wigs and those gigantic head-dresses which destroy the true proportions of the head with the body; discard the use of those stiff and cumbersome hoops which detract from the beauties of execution, which disfigure the elegance of your attitudes and mar the beauties of contour which the bust should exhibit in different positions.¹⁹

From his calls for change we can gain a picture of what costume looked like in the period. It is also telling that *Les Lettres* went through several republications, one as late as 1803: the opera and dance world was interested to read Noverre’s ideas, but slow to put them in practice.

In one passage, Noverre gives us a glimpse of what a staged battle might look like in an eighteenth-century opera:

At the *Opéra*, few things to be encountered are more curious than the sight of a band of warriors who come to do battle, fight and carry off the victory. Do they bring in their wake all the horrors of carnage? Are their features aflame? Are their looks ferocious? Is their hair disheveled? No, Sir, nothing of the kind. They are dressed as if going on parade and resemble effeminate men fresh from a perfumed bath rather than survivors of a desperate struggle.²⁰

Noverre praised the actor Lekain who attempted to wear classical costume on stage in the early part of the century. It was not until the artist David and actor Talma teamed up,

¹⁸ C. W. Beaumont, *Five Centuries of Ballet Design* (London, 1939), p. 15.

¹⁹ J. G. Noverre, *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, Trans. by C. W. Beaumont, (New York, 1966), p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 73.

after the Revolution, that a good approximation of classical male dress was seen on stage in France.

Noverre did not consider his audience to be particularly sophisticated when it came to costumes and sets. He urged designers not to be swayed by the lowest common spectator:

Obstinacy in adhering to out-worn traditions is the same in every part of opera; it is the monarch of all it surveys. Greek, Roman, Shepherd, Hunter, Warrior, Faun, Forester... - all these characters are cut to the same pattern and differ only in colour and in the ornaments with which a desire for ostentatious display rather than good taste has caused them to be bespattered at caprice. Tinsel glitters everywhere: Peasant, Sailor, Hero – all are covered alike. The more a costume is decorated with gewgaws, spangles, gauze and net, the greater the admiration it produces the player and the ignorant spectator.²¹

In fact, Noverre had been a great admirer of Boquet, who was seen as the master costume designer for opera in the century. However, by the latter part of the century Noverre's tastes had moved on and Boquet was falling out of fashion. Laver writes:

...Boquet's [costumes] were fantastications of contemporary dress with such minor concessions to character and period as a Turkish turban here and a Roman tunic there. Their fundamental lines changed with the fluctuations of fashion in the outside world.

What brought all this to an end was the growing knowledge of the costumes of former epochs and distant countries...The splendid unity of the Louis XIV and Louis XV styles had been to some extent preserved by the ignorance of the spectators as regards the costume of far away and long ago. They did not know enough to be critical...Once the mold of rococo had been broken up, the way was clear for the pursuit of "historical accuracy." Most lovers of the theatre (and therefore of the theatrical) would today be inclined to regard the change from the stylization of Boquet to the fumbling attempts at realism that followed as a disaster.²²

The newly educated audience was now calling out for what a few actors and designers had been attempting for over fifty years. What follows are two of these "fumbling attempts."

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 72-3.

²² Laver, *Costume in the Theatre*, p. 136-7.

Act I: Opera: *Richard Cœur-de-Lion*

In 1784, *la Comédie-Italienne* debuted an opera entitled *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* that became an instant success for them. The opera, by André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry with libretto by Sedaine, tells a tale of King Richard's imprisonment in Linz Castle on his journey home from the Third Crusade in 1193. While a love story plays out in the background, Richard is ultimately rescued by his squire and troubadour, Blondel, and the opera ends with a triumphant battle scene. *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* was popular for many reasons. It had the rich spectacle that people came to expect. It was one of the first true rescue operas and the first opera to employ a medieval melody as a repeating theme in its music.²³ As David Charlton writes, in his book on Grétry and the genre *Opéra-Comique*:

Richard Cœur-de-lion treats a semiserious theme in a 'new and popular manner'. With its less than canonical literary ancestry it could be worked so as to focus on a musical and dramatic kernel: the Romance 'Une fièvre brûlante', the 'rescue' song. As Grétry wrote, 'Never was a subject more proper for musical treatment'. But in the wider sense the story of Richard was a catalytic subject: in Sedaine's hands it encompassed gothic taste, local colour, historical fact, a moral imperative, the spectacle of armed combat, and released royalist sentiments without being directly patriotic.²⁴

The public loved *Richard* so much that it eventually toured to England and Boston and was performed well into the nineteenth century.

Coinciding with the premier of *Richard* was a burgeoning craze for the Medieval. This would become in the early nineteenth century the basis for artistic and literary movements such as the Romantics and Gothics. In the late eighteenth century the fondness was called *troubadorism* and was bolstered in popularity by an increasing number of publications including "Dom Bernard de Montfaucon's *Monumens de la monarchie française* (1729-33) in five volumes, describing and illustrating the visual

²³ D. Charlton, "Richard Coeur-de-Lion", *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, online.

²⁴ D. Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique*, (Cambridge, 1986), p. 231.

remains of the monarchy from the Middle Ages...”²⁵ *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* can be seen as fitting into this larger trend that included “plays such as Dormont de Belloy’s *Siège de Calais* (1765) and *Gaston et Bayard* (1771) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Mort de Louis XI* (1783).”²⁶ Ribeiro reminds us that, “as with the painting of similar themes, the costume on the stage was a mixture of the contemporary with late sixteenth-century dress; eighteenth-century styles were inimical to medieval clothing.”²⁷

Marie Antoinette herself, who had always been a fan of masquerades and fancy dress, hosted a medieval tournament in 1775, at Choisy “in which knights in full armour jousted – the first glimmerings of the *style troubadour*, or the romantic harking back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.”²⁸ Marie Antoinette did not, however, get her costume quite right. In conjunction with the *style troubadour*, artists and specifically portrait painters were in search of a truly timeless manner of dress in which to clothe and paint their subjects. They were less interested in historical accuracy.

In England from the middle of the eighteenth century the painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) had been held as the gold standard for timelessness in portraiture. Prominent women wanted to be painted in the manner of Rubens’s wife, adopting a strange highbred of dress between their contemporary silhouette and colors and early Baroque details. In France this caught on, but was attributed to the Flemish artist Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641):

...The artists of the Rococo period now looked for another form of timeless dress, as the feeling had grown the Baroque Grand Manner of Roman dress and flowing draperies was too grandiose for the new taste, which stressed neatness and small scale, intimacy not grandeur. It seemed to the Rococo eyes that the most elegant

²⁵ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 171.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 171.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 171.

²⁸ Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, p. 259.

painter of clothes had been Sir Anthony van Dyck in the 1630s, and his portraits seemed to have a timeless sophistication and grace which might be reproduced in the 1700s, and which might give their paintings the same eternal values.²⁹

For the French the era of Van Dyck also evoked that of a beloved king, Henri IV, who reigned from 1589 to 1610. Henri IV was admired as an “enlightened monarch” and Louis XVI was hailed as the new Henri upon taking the throne in 1774.³⁰

Marie Antoinette, once again, helped solidify the trend by appearing in public dressed in a costume specific to the reign of Henri IV:

Marie-Antoinette, who loved masquerades and dances, decided on her accession to the throne to introduce ‘historical’ ball dress...The large whaleboned farthingale of late-sixteenth century fashion could be equated with the court hoop of the late eighteenth; the be-ribboned and feathered hats in vogue during the 1770s could – at a pinch – resemble the plumed *chapeau à la Henri IV*.³¹

A few years later Marie Antoinette commissioned P.-N. Sarrazin, the royal tailor, to costume her as Gabrielle d’Estrées, mistress of Henri IV. He made for her “a dress of white and silver gauze with puffed slashed sleeves and a black hat with white feathers and diamonds” which she wore in 1782, to a ball held in honor of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Russia.³² It did not take long until Van Dyck dress “was approved for portraits, for masquerade parties, where it was worn in abundance, and for the theatre.”³³ Its perceived timelessness was used to portray any historical era from Medieval through early Baroque.

The descriptions above begin to hint at what Van Dyck dress looked like and what the costumes seen in *Richard* might have been. De Marly gives us a specific and realistic account of how the contemporary Van Dyck dress differs from the historic:

²⁹ de Marly, *Costume on the Stage*, p. 53.

³⁰ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 167.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 168.

³² Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, p. 276.

³³ de Marly, *Costume on the Stage*, p. 53.

...Not that eighteenth-century Van Dyck dress was perfectly accurate – it could not be, as the fashions had changed. In the 1630s high waists had been in fashion, but in the eighteenth century the stress was on a normal waistline so they made their Van Dycks with *their* waist, not his. Moreover they did not copy Van Dyck's sleeves, which had been very full and round, because their own sleeves were narrow in accordance with the new artistic vogue in neatness, so they gave Van Dyck suits their sleeves. Van Dyck's sitters had worn very wide collars, but these seemed too big to a period which now idolized the small scale, so they reduced the collars. The gentleman of Van Dyck's day had worn straight breeches reaching down to the top of the calf, but in the eighteenth century the knee breech was now universal in Western Europe, so they gave Van Dyck's suits contemporary knee breeches. Thus the whole scale of an original Van Dyck was reduced.³⁴

We are fortunate to have many portraits from the period in which the subject wears

Rubens or Van Dyck dress:

Raised collars, often with 'vandyked' lace edging, looped-up, often rouched overskirts, sleeves either slashed or decorated with ribbons, and feathered hats characterized the outfits worn by many of Gainsborough's fashionable sitters in the 1770s and 1780s and at the court of Marie Antoinette.³⁵

We are also lucky to have a set of engravings by Claude Bornet published in 1786, that depict scenes from a production of *Richard Cœur-de-Lion*. It is clear the emphasis of the engravings is on the set and stage direction, rather than costume:

The artist has mirrored the stage directions printed in the score: the king is being handed a sword by Blondel which the latter has snatched from a soldier he has slain; at the same time Richard is struggling with three guards. Marguerite is falling into the arms of her women. Some of the anachronisms of dress have been discussed by René Lanson: Blondel's lace wristbands in act I, with the men's overcoats à *brandebourgs*; the woman's shaped dress and plume of feathers; and the vaguely Louis XVI clothes of the peasants.³⁶

The costumes are a mishmash of contemporary, *la mode anglaise*, and Van Dyck dress with some details, like the soldiers' helmets and tunics, which are influenced by the sixteenth century. In spite of fairly accurate engravings of Medieval art and sculpture that

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 53.

³⁵ Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, p. 276.

³⁶ Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique*, p. 233. (Referencing René Lanson, *Le goût du moyen age en France au XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris, Brussels, 1926) p. 31.

had been published throughout the century, popular taste still dictates a strange combination of styles that attempt timeless, while not achieving anything close to the twelfth century, when *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* is set.

Act II: Drama: Racine's *Athalie*

The great French playwright Jean Racine's last work was the biblical drama *Athalie*. It was heralded as his most perfect tragedy, but was not performed until after his death. *Athalie* is based on the biblical story of a Hebrew queen who attempts to rule by eliminating her entire family. One grandson survives, and with the help of the high priest he is brought to power and Athalie is executed. After making its debut at *la Comédie-Française*, the play was performed frequently throughout the century. Mlle Clairon performed the title role at the wedding celebrations in 1770 of Marie Antoinette and the soon to be Louis XVI.

The play was popular with the public because it included a strong female lead, exoticness of time and place, and death on stage. It made the century long transition from grandiose Baroque, florid Rococo, to the beginnings of historic Neoclassicism. The story's setting, in faraway Judea in the long ago eighth century B.C., make *Athalie* readily adaptable to the visual whims of the viewer. Throughout the century artists used scenes from *Athalie* as the subjects of their historical paintings and engravings. Costume accuracy in biblical paintings had been improving since the early eighteenth century, far before Medieval scenes were depicted correctly. However, the translation to historical stage costume was not made until the Revolution.

By the 1770s the beginnings of Neoclassicism were influencing art, literature and dress. The decade was marked by several publications on the subject of ancient dress:

It was unfortunate that during this decade the first history of fashion in France was published, Guillaume-François-Roger Molé's *Histoire des modes française* (1773) for the book was ignored in favor of histories of classical dress which also appeared, such as Michel-François Dandré Bardon's *Costume des anciens peuples* (1772) and André Lens's *Les Costume des peuples de l'antiquité* (1776)...Both dress and art were increasingly influenced by a powerful movement towards antiquity, which grew as knowledge about the past, mainly acquired from archeological discoveries, became more wide spread.³⁷

Thus, in this decade the viewer of *Athalie* was potentially well versed in the costume styles of the ancient world.

It is also in the 1770s that Jacques-Louis David, the artist that would champion Neoclassicism and define the Revolution through art, began to work as a costume designer:

David began to draw stage costumes from the late 1770s, with a particular interest in the design of classical roles. By this time, under the impact of Neoclassicism, theatre costume was beginning to rid itself of the plumes, stiffened gilded corselets and embroidered silks which were *de rigueur* until that time.³⁸

Even so, it took well into the 1780s for a true "historic" classical costume to be scene on stage, and even then viewers were shocked. The great actor François-Joseph Talma wore Roman dress on stage for his role as Brutus in the late 1780s and was applauded. He recalled the earlier attempts of the actor Lekain to wear classical costume on stage:

the simplicity of it was lost in a profusion of ridiculous embroidery... Would he have dared to risk naked arms, the antique sandals, hair without powder, long draperies and woollen stuffs?...Such a toilet would have been regarded as filthy and abominable and certainly most indecent.³⁹

³⁷ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 139.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 140.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 141.

For women the exotic and classical trends on stage, however timid, must not have caused such a negative reaction, for many of them found their way into every day dress.

One gown even claimed to be inspired by costumes seen in *Athalie*:

A number of dresses in the 1780s derived from a mixture of sources – the neo-classical chemise gown, the oriental or theatrical styles and the masculine greatcoat. The wrapping gown was given a new lease on life in the period, made of light material and fastened at the waist with a sash. Walpole saw one of these garments, newly named the *lévite* (the name taken from the habits worn by actresses playing the Jewish priests in Racine’s *Athalie*) on Lady Ossory in 1779 and exclaimed, ‘where the deuce is the grace of a man’s nightgown bound round with a belt?’⁴⁰

The *lévite* was popular enough to survive the decade and live on into the 1780s, becoming more structured. Marie Antoinette was introduced to the gown by Rose Bertin and it became her favorite for pregnancy. The actress Madame du Barry wore this dress exclusively in her later years, according to the painter Vigée-Lebrun’s memoirs.⁴¹ The *lévite* was chic enough to be featured several times in *Galerie des modes* throughout its publication from 1778 to 1787. In terms of portraiture, the simple wrap style of the *lévite* found its way into countless paintings of the era and was seen “as a kind of ‘timeless’ costume parallel to the dressing gowns worn by men.”⁴²

Thus, we can gain some clues toward reconstructing the costumes for *Athalie* as seen on stage in the late eighteenth century. Another visual resource comes to us through the memoirs of a Parisian theatre go-er and dramatist Antoine Vincent Arnault. In 1829, Arnault published his theatrical memoirs *Les Souvenirs et les regrets du vieil amateur dramatique*, which include illustrations and descriptions of costumes for *Athalie*. The passage describes the costumes of Marie Françoise Dumesnil, who was famous at *la*

⁴⁰ Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, p. 228.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 228.

⁴² Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, p. 73.

Comeédie-Française for her classical roles. Mlle Demesnil retired from the stage in 1776, when Arnault was only ten years old. Perhaps Arnault is taking some artistic license with his memories, or maybe he was a fan from an early age. Either way, we have a description and an illustration to accompany it:

I must admit, my nephew, she [mademoiselle Dumesnil] was not observing the dress as far as Miss Clarion. Her clothes were not lacking, however, a certain magnificence. In the role of the Queen of Babylon, for instance, she wore a gown of crimson velvet, trimmed in ermine as well as skirt. Her corset [stomacher] was decorated with knots of diamonds. She wore a yoke collar of diamonds, and in her ears two chandelier diamond earrings, in the style of Versailles court ladies. It was so royal that if, instead of wearing human hair, such as etiquette demanded, she would have put with this dress a fitted cap of poppy colored ribbons and black lace, one would have taken her for the then reigning queen.

Her suit in *Athalie* was even more majestic, perhaps. Velvet and satin were not spared, and the richness of these fabrics was made even richer by the gold embroidery which they possessed. As Queen of the Jews, the actress did not forget to wear a radiant crown, in imitation of that of King David, King Herod, or the Queen of Sheba, and to include a plume of ostrich feathers, plucked from a bird of Africa.⁴³

Though Arnault does not verbally describe the gentleman's costume, we can see "eastern" details. I have also included the illustration for another exotically set play, Voltaire's *L'Orpheline de la Chine* which features Mlle Raucour, another great tragedian of the late eighteenth century.

Curtain Call

In conclusion, a number of factors contributed to the slow change in the way historical costumes were presented on the eighteenth-century Parisian stage. A wealth of pertinent publications and a growing awareness of the concepts of fashion, taste, and costume history created a more educated performer and spectator. A move away from the

⁴³ A. V. Arnault, *Les Souvenirs et les regrets du vieil amateur dramatique, ou Lettres d'un oncle à son neveu sur l'ancien Théâtre Français*, (Paris, 1829), p. 62-63. Translated by Emily Rhiger, 2010.

gilded Rococo style and into the more historical and linear Neoclassical style aided the general interest in the distant past and how it might have looked. This caused not only stage costumes to adapt, but also the daily dress of the average Parisian.

Taking into account the research above, I would like to execute four costumes that represent historical stage costumes from the mid 1780s. I plan on making costumes for the characters of King Richard (tenor) and Laurette (soprano) from the opera *Richard Cœur-de-Lion*, which is supposed to take place in 1193 and debuted in 1784. I will also make the costumes for Athalie and the high priest Joad of Racine's tragedy *Athalie*, which takes place in Judea in the eighth century B.C.

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