FABRICATING WOMEN

The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791

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For my parents, Taka and Wallace Crowston

The Lackey: Miss, here is your seamstress.

Colombine: Ah! Margot, have you brought my mantua?

Margot: Yes, miss; I think it will suit you perfectly well. Since I started working, I've never seen an outfit so well-cut.

Arlequin: Now, there's a charming little creature. My dear, how would you like to make me a shirt and some leggings?

Margot: If you please, sir; we don't work for men at our place.

Colombine: But it seems to me, Margot, that this dress comes up very high; you can't see my bosom at all.

Margot: It's perhaps not the fault of the dress, miss.

Colombine: Be quiet, Margot, you stupid thing. Take back your dress, I look like I don't know what in it.

Arlequin: The more I see that child, the more she pleases me . . . a word with you: I need a chamber maid; I think that you would suit me well; can you shave?

Margot: Me, shave? I can see you're a kidder; I'd die of fear just touching a man with the tip of my finger. Goodbye, miss; I'll bring your mantua back in a quarter of an hour with some bosom.

—REGNARD, *La Coquette* (1691)

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List of Abbreviations

AC	Archives communales
AD	Archives départementales
AN	Archives nationales
AN MC	Archives nationales Minutier Central
BA	Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal
BN	Bibliothèque nationale
BN MSS	Bibliothèque nationale manuscript collection

Money and Measurements

1 livres = 20 sous
1 sol = 12 deniers
1 écu = 3 livres
1 louis = 6 livres
1 aune = 1.18 meters or 46.5 inches

Note on French language usage: Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in the text from French language sources have been translated into English by the author.

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Introduction

"The needle and the sword cannot be manipulated by the same hands. If I were sovereign, I would permit sewing and the needle trades only to women and to cripples reduced to occupying themselves like them." Writing *Emile* in 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau dismissed the centuries-old male trade of tailoring, recasting needlework as an essentially feminine activity. An emasculating occupation for men, needlework was a natural and appropriate vocation for women. For Rousseau, women's affinity to the needle stemmed from their innate love of clothing and finery, itself a product of their biological need to seduce men in order to produce children. As a toddler, his fictional character Sophie was drawn to needlework as a means to decorate her doll, a stand-in for the grown woman she would become. The pen and the sword held scant interest for her, being futile to her reproductive needs. Rousseau thus pitied the Italians their sad streets and shops, where gross male hands traded in delicate fabrics and lace. Each sex, he declared, should wield only the tools appropriate to it.[1]

What Rousseau did not acknowledge was that women's capacity to work in the needle trades was not a universally enshrined aspect of French life. For centuries, male tailors' guilds enjoyed a monopoly over the fabrication of custom-made clothing in French towns and cities. Women breached this preserve for the first time in 1652 when the tailors' guild of Aix-en-Provence started accepting female members, and more decisively in 1675 when seamstresses in Paris and Rouen acquired independent, exclusively female guilds. After this date, seamstresses in numerous cities across France entered tailors' guilds as subordinate members. Until they joined

the guild system—and in the many cities where they did not—women were legally forbidden from making and selling clothing, despite the proclamations of social commentators such as Rousseau. This book is about the seamstresses of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, and the process by which their trade became both a major actor in the urban economy and a quintessentially feminine occupation.

The French word for seamstress is *couturière,* often translated as "dressmaker" or "milliner." These choices are misleading, because the word was derived from the fact that they were women who sewed for a living, not from the specific articles of clothing they made. *Couturière* comes from *coudre,* to sew, while the French *tailleur,* or tailor, derives from *tailler,* to cut.[2] Given the risks involved, cutting was considered the most difficult and most noble element of the garment trades. One could easily remove and restitch a faulty seam, but an error in cutting might ruin an entire piece of valuable cloth. The statutes of the thirteenth-century Parisian tailors' guild reserved cutting cloth for established masters, leaving sewing to subordinate workers called *valets cousturiers.*[3] The origins of their trade appellations thus reflect disparities in privilege and reputation between tailors and seamstresses, which persisted throughout the Old Regime.

The male form of *cousturier* appeared occasionally during the sixteenth century, but it faded from usage by the end of the next century.[4] In 1680, Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois* defined the word as a provincial term for tailor: "This word means Tailor. It is said in some Provinces, but in Paris one does not make use of it."[5] By 1694, the dictionary of the *Académie française* was succinct: "Whose trade is sewing . . . It is hardly used anymore."[6] The *couturier* did not reemerge until the end of the nineteenth century, when the predominance of mechanized mass production accorded new glamor to the bespoke trade. In this period, the *couturier* lost his medieval humility to become the creative genius of fashion, the driving force behind the luxury and prestige of custom-made clothing. In late-twentieth-century France, a *couturière* is a modest female artisan who performs mending and alterations for a neighborhood clientele, while the *couturier* is a world-famous artist and businessman.

As the male form of the word declined in the seventeenth century, the female version gained ground. The female term had come into use in medieval times to describe a woman who sewed, either professionally or for private purposes.[7] With the growth of women's participation in the trade and their attainment of guild privileges in 1675, *couturière* acquired stricter professional and gender connotations. In 1680, Richelet defined

the term as "she who earns her living sewing linen or cloth."[8] By 1694, the Académie française had arrived at the conclusion that a *couturière* was defined not only by her own sex, but by the sex of her clients: "Who works in sewing, either linen, or dresses . . . who makes women's and children's dresses."[9] By the mid-eighteenth century, the notion of corporate privilege was intrinsically associated with the term. The *Encyclopédie* thus opened its definition of *couturière* in 1754 with "woman authorized to work in different garments, as a member of a guild established in 1675."[10]

These definitions reflected a sexual division of labor within the garment trades, which was enshrined by the seamstresses' guild statutes. When they entered guilds, seamstresses in Aix-en-Provence, Paris, and Rouen acquired the right to make articles of clothing for women and children, but not for men or boys over age eight. This sexual division of labor reappeared in every French town or city where seamstresses joined guilds. The eighteenth-century *couturière* thus emerged from the intersection of three distinct forces: first, from cultural conceptions of femininity that cast needlework as an appropriate female trade and encouraged women to work for clients of their own sex; second, from a practical sexual division of labor in the garment trades that intensified over the seventeenth century; and, finally, from the legal and institutional reification of this situation with the creation of the seamstresses' guild in 1675. Drawing on these origins, seamstresses played a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural production of eighteenth-century France, creating goods, social relations, and cultural meaning.

Within their trade limitations, the seamstresses' empire ranged from mending to *modes.* Seamstresses performed simple darning and alterations, raising hems and patching petticoats for women of the middling and lower orders. They also made fine dresses of delicate silk or plush velvet for members of the royal family and the court aristocracy. In twelve-hour workdays in ateliers scattered across the urban landscape, they fabricated garments for prominent noblewomen, rich bourgeois ladies, and masters' wives, garments that later circulated down to the humblest washerwoman or street hawker through networks of gift giving, resale, and theft. Seamstresses stood at one end of a complex process of production and distribution, which started with the importation of cloth or its domestic manufacture, passed through the hands of Parisian wholesale and retail merchants, and drew on the services and products of an array of ancillary trades, including merchant mercers, linen-drapers, ribbonmakers and lacemakers, fashion merchants, embroiderers, and peddlers of pins and needles.

Individual seamstresses were usually modest artisans, operating out of their own households with a handful of workers at most. Together, they formed a vast and highly effective labor force. Once they had acquired legal standing, they quickly became one of the largest skilled crafts in France, numbering up to ten thousand women and girls in Paris by the end of the eighteenth century. Mistress seamstresses were major employers in a huge, specialized labor market. They offered jobs to thousands of working women, allowing them to accumulate a dowry or support their families. Across the century, the trade offered strong stimulus to French economic development, encouraging the growth of cloth production, the expansion and diversification of the garment trades, and the flourishing of the accessory trades on which they depended.

With the dresses, corsets, and hoopskirts they made, seamstresses helped produce, reproduce, and ultimately change the gender ideologies of their society. These articles of clothing were highly visible markers of femininity, serving to transform their clients from a state of imperfect nature, with all its bulges, boniness, and wrinkles, to a culturally sanctioned feminine appearance comprised of molded breasts, tightly restrained waists, and copious skirts. By highlighting a bustline or skillfully concealing a flawed figure, the seamstress endowed her client with the seductive charms recognized by French men and women as a form of particularly female power. Within their own social world, seamstresses transmitted to their workers and apprentices the professional and cultural skills they acquired through work. With hundreds of new apprentices in Paris and the provinces each year, Old Regime seamstresses trained generations of girls not only to be skilled needleworkers but to be French women. They taught teenage girls the female comportment, self-restraint, delicacy, and taste they learned from their elite clients, thereby helping to convey the civilizing process from the nobility to the working women of Paris. For both client and apprentice, therefore, the mistress seamstress provided one of the most important rites of passage from rough nature to civilized culture.

These different aspects of their trade—size, institutional organization, economic weight, and the "gendered" definition of their work—place the seamstresses at the heart of a range of issues important to historians of early modern Europe. One of these issues is the ongoing reappraisal of the guild system and its place in Old Regime economy and society. French guilds dated from the early Middle Ages at least, and they persisted until their abolition in 1791 under the French Revolution. They were called *communautés* or *corps de métier* in the Old Regime and have been known since the

nineteenth century as "corporations," a word I will use interchangeably with "guild" throughout this book.[11] Corporations were formal, trade-based associations, whose members drafted regulations for their craft or commerce and set criteria for admission. Royally approved statutes enshrined the guild's collective legal personality as well as its monopoly over a carefully defined economic or commercial sector. Artisans who belonged to guilds held the status of master or, more rarely, mistress. Masters' workers and apprentices were not guild members, although they participated in the aura of corporate prestige and honor to a certain extent.

Guilds received surprisingly little attention from the proponents of the new labor and social history of the 1960s and 1970s. One reason for their reticence was the consensus that had congealed—in a line from Turgot to contemporary economic liberals—that the guilds were antimodern and antieconomic institutions. Accepting this assumption, many historians dismissed Old Regime corporations as backward, exclusionary, and resistant to new technology. As doomed relics of medieval society, guilds held little attraction for historians more interested in the progressive narratives of industrial and political revolution. Moreover, the fascination the guilds exercised over late-nineteenth-century Social Catholics and proto-fascist economists of the 1930s offered further proof of their essentially pathological character. The self-declared "corporate" nature of the Vichy regime finally cast them beyond the pale of historical research during the postwar period.[12]

In the last fifteen years, however, scholars have returned to the guilds, seeking to understand their functions and significance in a manner unburdened by the teleology of the Revolution and subsequent corporatist revivals.[13] Their reassessment of the guilds has vividly demonstrated the close relationship between the regulation of work and wider systems of social classification and control, and the depth of knowledge that a study of work can offer about the society and culture in which it is performed. As this scholarship has shown, guilds were numerically inferior in the world of work, yet they organized and oversaw many forms of urban production and commerce, including rich luxury trades involved in national and international distribution networks. They provided training for generations of French youths, overseeing the transmission of practical skills and imparting social values of self-discipline, respect, and hard work. Guild masters delivered finished products to meet the myriad needs and desires of city dwellers, they supervised jostling urban labor markets, and they provided an anchor amidst the floating working population of large cities.

Corporations did not operate solely in narrow economic domains, but were an essential part of the fabric of municipal life. Guild leaders engaged in a constant process of negotiation with royal officials regarding the imposition of taxes, production rights, and corporate financial administration. Along with other corps, they formed a link in the chain of credit that supplied the crown with a substantial portion of its income. When royal financial credibility waned in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ministers passed the burden to corporate institutions, whose members acquired loans based in part on their collective credentials. This service in turn provided the trade corps with a form of moral obligation over the king, giving them leverage to extract protection, sympathetic arbitration, and indirect financial recompense for their expenditures.[14] Individual corporations were more or less equipped to succeed in these negotiations, depending on their privileges and prestige, their economic force, their leaders' savvy, and their lawyers' skill. We know less about the ways guilds cooperated and competed with the multitude of nongovernmental institutions that shared an intense interest in urban social order. Parish foundations sponsored orphaned children's apprenticeship, hospitals offered forms of vocational training and sometimes mastership for the poor, and some convents or monastic orders allowed artisans to sell goods freely on their territory. The role of these institutions in urban networks of craftsmanship and commerce remains to be elucidated.

If recent studies have clarified the crucial place of guilds in urban communities, they have also emphasized the distance between the daily lives of individual guilds and the corporate vision of a harmonious order of mutual solidarity and social integration. Trade corporations were characterized by a high degree of internal strife, between the elite and the rank and file and among factions of masters divided by wealth, specialization, or family ties. Guild masters continually transgressed the legal and ideological barriers that ostensibly separated them from the outside world, maintaining complex relations with competing corporations, illegal workers, and inhabitants of suburban areas free from guild control. Steven Kaplan's work on the faubourg Saint-Antoine emphasizes the wide-ranging economic ties between Parisian masters and the inhabitants of that unincorporated suburb. Michael Sonenscher has characterized preindustrial systems of production and distribution as a "bazaar economy," far from the highly regimented and segmented template envisioned in guild statutes.[15]

One issue on which scholars have not always agreed has been the social and cultural aspects of corporate organization. Steven Kaplan has argued

that the guilds' social significance preceded and surpassed their economic functions. According to Kaplan, guild membership conveyed a fixed and privileged status within the Third Estate. A guild master's place in the social taxonomy was as important as his economic or commercial privileges.[16] Others have found that relations between master and guild included as much cynicism, opposition, and strategic self-interest as they did loyalty and self-identification. Michael Sonenscher has thus drawn the counterportrait of a guild system characterized by high rates of failure among apprentices, an extremely mobile and transient labor force, and widespread recourse to the law to settle endemic conflicts between masters and journeymen. In a study of guilds in eighteenth-century Turin, Simona Cerutti argued that membership in the tailors' guild fulfilled economic and familial strategies that had almost nothing to do with the trade of tailoring itself.[17]

It is no doubt true, as Cerutti and Sonenscher insist, that guild membership did not convey a simple or singular identity on these privileged artisans. The memoirs of the Parisian glazier Jacques-Louis Ménétra offer vivid testimony to the antipathy and indifference ordinary masters might feel toward overbearing corporate elites.[18] It would be a mistake, however, to reduce the social and cultural weight of guild membership to mere self-interest or to dismiss guilds as hollow institutions. Masters and mistresses of Old Regime corporations consistently identified themselves as such to notaries, policemen, judges, and other interlocutors. Their status carried economic force, enabling them to operate in specialized labor and product markets, to train apprentices, and to participate fully in their sphere of trade. While people argued about the respect due to members of different corps, it is clear that guild membership was also an important source of honor in the urban context. Masters' and mistresses' conception of their place in the city, of their rights and duties, and of their relationship to other social actors and institutions were fundamentally affected by guild membership.

This complicated interaction of institutions, individuals, and external forces defies any singular or linear chronology. The corporate system did not follow a simple downward path from the High Middle Ages to the Revolution, but rather a series of different trajectories that waxed and waned over time. Guilds varied a great deal from trade to trade, from city to city, and from region to region. They endured waves of adhesion or alienation among their members, caused by economic conjunctures, royal legislation, internal politics, wars, and a host of other conditions. There is

no way to predict the accessibility of a particular guild, the efficacy of its regulations, or the loyalty of its members, certainly not by its place on a teleological path of downward degeneration. In these shifting tides, one event nonetheless stands out sharply. Turgot's abolition of the guilds in 1776, and their reestablishment shortly thereafter, marked a crucial moment of rupture. These events profoundly changed and destabilized the corporate system in ways that historians are only beginning to understand.

A final aspect of the reassessment of the guilds has been a new interest in women's place in the corporate sphere. Historians such as Daryl Hafter, Cynthia Truant, Judith Coffin, and Carol Loats have drawn attention to the possibilities available to women in corporate life, either as wives of male masters, as apprentices, or as members of a small number of independent female guilds. This literature has successfully challenged the neglect of women and gender in revisionist studies of the guilds, emphasizing the social and legal advantages women acquired through guild membership.[19] As these historians have pointed out, guildswomen gained the right to conduct independent businesses and defend their trade prerogatives in court. They also held exceptional prominence among women by sponsoring public guild ceremonies and negotiating with royal and municipal officials.[20]

Building on previous studies, this study is on one level a close examination of the vicissitudes of an individual guild. It is the first to scrutinize a women's corporation and to analyze its organization and function both synchronically and across time. It investigates the process by which a women's corporate body came into being and the means by which it governed and reproduced itself, and it examines the relationship between the corporation, the royal government, and other urban institutions. The female nature of the guild offers both advantages and disadvantages for a study of eighteenth-century corporatism. The Parisian seamstresses were clearly exceptional. One of only four women's guilds in the city, their experiences differed to a significant extent from those of their male colleagues.[21] Moreover, their trade prerogatives were explicitly defined by gender, a fact that placed them in a unique position among Parisian guilds. Nevertheless, the distinctive nature of this corporation is also helpful for a general understanding of the system, highlighting the underlying elements deemed essential regardless of gender as well as the variables that could and did change with the introduction of women. The comparative aspect of gender history thus reveals as much about the "normal" case as it does about the "exceptional." In order to bolster this comparative ap-

proach, throughout this book I have used the tailors as a foil for the seamstresses.

Apart from asking general questions about corporate organization, in this book I investigate the effects of gender on this female trade and the possible relationship between women and guilds. Approaching the guild system from the perspective of women and gender, I examine the place envisaged for women in the corporate world, on the part of royal and municipal governments, male guild members, and female artisans themselves. Could a woman be a master? Or, in other words, what kind of master was a mistress? Under what circumstances was the creation of a woman's guild seen to be possible? What inspired women, at different periods in different cities, to demand incorporation, and why did the official responses vary over time and space? Finally, how did women's new guild privileges intersect with existing ones that women held as members of guild families or other corporate groups?

By placing women at the center of the analysis, I draw heavily on previous scholarship in women's and gender history. Previous work in female labor history by Natalie Zemon Davis, Olwen Hufton, Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, Tessie Liu, and Gay Gullickson documented the wide range of women's economic activities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The notion of the "family economy" described in their studies provides a crucial starting point for understanding women's role in the early modern economy. As argued by these scholars, women's—and men's—work took place within the context of family orientations and strategies, rather than as a solitary activity performed to meet individual needs or aspirations. Women's decisions about work and career were thus fundamentally shaped by the demands of male family members. While this book offers new perspectives on women's work and the family economy, it would have been impossible without the foundations established by earlier historians.[22]

The concept of "gender" as developed by feminist theorists and historians has also been central to my research and writing. In this volume I use gender to refer to culturally and socially constructed notions of the characteristics associated with sexual difference. My definition assumes that conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings regarding these characteristics and appropriate male and female behavior coexist within any given culture. Subject to change over time, gender ideologies are by nature unstable, contradictory, and in a constant process of negotiation. Their contents do not change at a uniform pace but unevenly, with certain elements undergoing rapid transformation while others endure. My defini-

tion of gender also presumes that historians must attend to male and female experiences, to concepts of both masculinity and femininity, in order to elucidate its meaning and change over time. Men's and women's lives cannot be understood in isolation from each other because they have lived most often in societies and households composed of both sexes. Gender definitions operate as interdependent binaries rather than distinct or autonomous notions. As a result, their nuances emerge most clearly in the interaction between men and women or between symbolic representations of masculinity and femininity.[23]

For all its debts to previous scholars of women and gender, my work in this book rubs against the grain of at least two tenets of existing historiography. One is the widespread impression of an essential discord between women and corporate organization. Women's work has been characterized as essentially informal and heavily influenced by family and reproductive functions and thus as incompatible with the formal training and hierarchical career ladder enshrined in guild statutes. Moreover, historians have often agreed that the consolidation of corporate control over urban trades in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to women's exclusion from skilled work. According to this argument, male guilds formed one element of an unholy triumvirate whose two other branches were encroaching centralized government and the patriarchal family, with the church offering its ideological blessing on them all. Over the early modern period, the argument goes, these forces colluded to submit women's lives to ever greater male control. Historians who have focused on late-medieval guilds, such as Martha Howell, Lyndal Roper, or Merry Wiesner, have generally confirmed a narrowing of women's economic opportunities with the rise of the corporate system. Given these preconceptions, studies of European women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have tended to turn away from the guilds, focusing instead on spheres of activity coded as feminine and dominated by women, such as domestic service, midwifery, wet-nursing, and prostitution.[24]

This study demonstrates, by contrast, that women could thrive in corporate organization and that authorities did not uniformly discriminate against female labor. In contrast to the accepted narrative, the seamstresses of France acquired new access to the guild system at the moment when absolutizing power in France reached an apex under Louis XIV. In this case, the centralizing and unifying tendencies of the royal state acted to extend women's economic and legal privileges, not to curtail them. Moreover, French women proved extremely willing and eager to profit from

their new corporate prerogatives. Over its history, more women joined the seamstresses' guild every year than any other male or female corporation; the number of apprentices who began training every year also outstripped male trades. Incorporation offered mixed results to women—particularly to those who could not or would not join the corporate sphere—but clearly women had much greater access to formal structures of trade organization and training than previous studies have suggested.

The second issue I challenge in this book is the notion that modern gender ideologies emerged in the late Old Regime as a result of Enlightenment philosophes and political criticism of the absolutist state. The idea that the world is best explained and run according to binary distinctions centered on an essentialized male-female opposition may indeed be a development of the late eighteenth century, but this book will argue that a long history in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries paved the way for that change. The seamstresses demonstrate very clearly that cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity shaped a sexual division of labor during the seventeenth century. A seamstress was a woman who sewed clothing for other women and children, not merely one who sewed for a living. Gender did not await the arrival of the Enlightenment or the Revolution to manifest itself in the garment trades.

Indeed, I suggest in this study that seamstresses not only reflected existing ideas about gender, they were themselves important contributors to changing gender ideologies. Their guild offered a concrete and highly visible symbol of the affinity between women and needlework, transforming a customary affiliation into a set of state-sponsored legal privileges. After 1675, the example of the guild encouraged a growing "feminization" of the garment trades, as new forms of commerce and craft were taken up mostly by women, and men's participation in needlework was increasingly stigmatized as unnatural and undesirable. By the end of the eighteenth century, partly through their example, needlework was hailed not as an appropriate female trade but as a biologically innate feminine skill. Rousseau's dogmatic proclamations would become the received wisdom of the nineteenth century, as all sides agreed that women were naturally made for sewing.

In addition to calling attention to sexual difference as a means of structuring work in the garment trades, seamstresses also played a central role in disseminating the notion that fashion was a particularly feminine concern. Seventeenth-century observers criticized male fops almost as frequently as female fashion addicts, in a social and political context in which

ostentatious dress could be equally important for men and women. The link drawn between the female seamstresses and their female customers encouraged the notion of a natural connection between women and clothing that transcended the division between humble needleworker and illustrious client. As abundant and cheap female labor streamed into the seamstresses' trade, women's consumption of clothing quickly began to outpace men's, giving visible support to this idea. Women became privileged consumers of whimsy, caprice, and choice, all furnished by the many hands of the seamstresses. By the end of the eighteenth century, therefore, the seamstresses' labor had helped implant three interrelated notions in French conceptions of gender: a sexual division of labor based on essentialized gender characteristics, an innate and exclusive connection between women and fashion, and an emphasis on learning and displaying femininity through clothing and appearances.

Defined by their own gender and that of their clients, the seamstresses' trade also provides an important perspective on debates regarding the origins of consumer culture in France.[25] Daniel Roche has shown that a "clothing revolution" took place in eighteenth-century Paris as wardrobes grew in size and value across a wide social spectrum, particularly among women. According to Roche, the most important symbol of this revolution was the dress, which moved from being a noble women's monopoly in 1700 to become by 1789 a commonplace of all Parisian women's wardrobes.[26] A closer look at the garments produced by seamstresses reveals that this development more likely took place between the 1670s and 1700, suggesting that crucial changes in mentalities and attitudes may have occurred a century earlier than Roche and others have argued. More profoundly, the seamstresses also underline the constant interrelation between production and consumption. The very definition of their trade identified female producers of clothing with the female consumers who purchased and wore it. An examination of the seamstresses' trade therefore suggests that evolving attitudes toward the material world, the self, and gender ideologies cannot be separated from evolving techniques of production, the creation of corporate institutions regulating work, or the sexual division of labor.

In a similar vein, a final area of historiographical debate I address in this book is the relationship between social and cultural history, a subject of strong interest in both France and the United States in recent years.[27] Joining scholars with similar ambitions, this study strives to overcome the gap that has grown between the two fields, bringing together the meth-

ods and problems of social history with the insight and innovation of the new cultural history. To do so, I start with a close examination of seamstresses' techniques of production and distribution—the manner by which they made and sold dresses, skirts, and other female garments—and the social relations that grew out of their labor. I discuss the hierarchy of work within the trade and the characteristics of the female labor market, composed of thousands of women of varying backgrounds, competencies, and ambitions. I also examine the process by which the guild reproduced itself, through the apprenticeship of young girls and the recruitment of new mistresses.

While viewing seamstresses as makers of goods and social relations, in this study I also investigate the cultural meanings associated with them. This effort requires, first of all, understanding and reconstructing as far as possible the seamstresses' cultural habitus. As we have learned, all historical subjects lived within cultures and apprehended "reality" through culturally constructed filters. Culture limits, shapes, and ultimately makes possible social actors' conception of the world. Seamstresses thus drew on and shared collective notions about women and femininity, appropriate female labor, honor, and family life. They formed their perceptions of themselves, their trade, and guild identities from available ideas, which were shaped by discourses constructed within unequal power relations. To understand the seamstresses or other social groups, historians must situate them within the context of their own cultures. In the absence of first-person memoirs or journals, one way to approach this question is through the significance assigned to the *couturière* in contemporary almanacs, plays, engravings, satirical literature, and in eighteenth-century debates about fashion, femininity, and women's work.

A second step in assessing seamstresses' "cultural meaning," however, is to investigate needleworkers as creators of culture. This study begins with the assumption that men and women create meaning, fabricate culture, and produce significance in the work they perform in their ateliers, and indeed in all the mundane gestures of their everyday lives. They are not only subject to culture but are subjects of it, collectively producing and reproducing their worlds of meaning, of social relations, and of goods. This perspective informs my understanding of seamstresses' influence on changing perceptions of fashion and femininity. It also has important methodological implications. While insisting on connections between texts written by seamstresses and broader debates about "femininity" or "women in the public sphere," I also view their documents as strategic statements aimed

at achieving goals in specific situations of conflict or competition. An important element of my task has been to uncover and explain those goals and the particular stakes attached to them. I have also tried to use archival documents, in a sensitive and self-critical manner, as a means to access the nuances of culture and social life that went without saying, that were expressed in gestures, looks, laughter, and the hard sweat of physical labor. For these purposes, material culture and visual images offer an intriguing alternative to written sources. The techniques employed for making a dress—and the dress itself hanging in a museum vault—may say as much about seamstresses as the legal briefs written by their lawyers. By taking equally seriously the problems posed by social and cultural history, and informing them with a strong interest in material culture, I offer one attempt at synthesis between the two fields.

My work in this volume is based on archival research in Paris and two French provinces. In order to address the seamstresses in the broadest possible perspective, I offer a limited geographic comparison. To be sure, Paris dominates this book in many ways. The ideological and practical importance of the Parisian guilds—not to mention the abundance of source material on them—argued for a primary focus on the capital city. However, I also devote significant attention to the cities of Aix-en-Provence and Marseilles in Provence and Caen in Normandy. These cities straddled the imaginary line that divided southern and northern France into two distinct cultural, legal, and even linguistic zones, with very different histories of corporate organization. Provincial examples help illuminate the specificity of the Parisian experience and underline the way in which seamstresses evolved in similar ways in very different regions.

The sources for this study consist of notarial, police, and government documents as well as engravings and printed materials. Notarized contracts offered perhaps the most important source of information. In Paris, archives of the notarial office (*étude*) that served the guild for much of the period constituted a crucial set of documents. These include minutes from the guild's assembly meetings, spanning fifty years of the eighteenth century. Given the destruction of the Parisian guilds' archives in the 1871 Hôtel de Ville fire, to my knowledge this study is the first to make use of assembly minutes from a Parisian guild. Although the notarial filter eliminates the seamstresses' actual voices, these minutes offered valuable insight into the guild's internal administration and its interaction with the royal government. They stand in sharp contrast to the loquacious minutes from the

Aix tailors' guild assembly, which exist for a 120-year period in the city's communal archives.[28]

The guild's notary also preserved a large number of seamstresses' apprenticeship contracts, including over four hundred from the year 1716 as well as scattered samples from the 1710s to the 1740s. I supplemented this group with a sample of apprenticeship contracts encompassing all Parisian notaries from the years 1751 and 1761, generating a total of approximately eight hundred contracts. These documents allowed me to investigate practices of apprenticeship and to reconstruct the socioeconomic characteristics of the trade, based on their information regarding apprentices' geographic origins and fathers' professions as well as mistresses' addresses and marital status. A group of seventeenth-century apprenticeship contracts helped clarify the nature of the seamstresses' trade prior to the guild's creation in 1675.

Outside of guild-related documents, notarial contracts provided vital information about seamstresses at two major life events: marriage and death. Marriage contracts included important details about seamstresses and their families, including their fathers' and their grooms' names and professions, brides' and grooms' geographic origins, and the fortunes each partner brought to marriage. This information called for cautious interpretation, because marriage negotiations are not conducive to honesty or transparency. Nevertheless, the contracts offered important insight into marriage strategies among seamstresses and their grooms, including the role of female guild membership in creating matrimonial alliances.

If marriage contracts revealed seamstresses as they established families, probate inventories listed the objects and individuals present in their apartments when they died. The inventories thus provided a summary of the seamstresses' lives, albeit at moments of illness or old age. They allow the historian to glimpse the interior of their homes, meet their family members, and delve into their commercial and personal affairs. The professional gaze of the notary, with its lacunae and distortions, imposes limitations on this glimpse, yet it is extremely valuable nonetheless. The inventories showed me seamstresses' workshops, tools, and something about the kind of garments they made. They also revealed the composition of seamstresses' households and their employment of workers. Personal papers provided information about clients and income, while clothing, books, and engravings indicate cultural preoccupations. Calculating seamstresses' fortunes from these documents was an extremely risky business; however,

the rarity of information regarding working women's fortunes made the risk worthwhile.

Police documents provided a second set of crucial sources. Many of these documents emanated from the office of the king's procurator at the Châtelet of Paris. After 1658, this royal official held jurisdiction over the Parisian guilds, including the responsibility for receiving oaths of loyalty from all new guild members. Records from the procurator's office named the men and women accepted to the Parisian guilds from 1735 to 1791 and their path of entry. This source permitted me to draw conclusions about patterns of trade transmission as well as the accessibility of the seamstresses' and tailors' guilds over time. The king's procurator at Châtelet also acted as magistrate for guild affairs. From the late seventeenth century to the end of the Old Regime, guild leaders brought offenders before his court for judgment, testifying to the corporation's role in policing its own members along with outsiders who illegally practiced the trade.

Neighborhood police *commissaires* offered another vital source of information. In their districts, the police *commissaires* filled the joint functions of police officer, ombudsman, and magistrate. Their records illustrated the daily life of the trades, including conflicts among mistresses, workers, and apprentices. Seamstresses shared the common tragedies of working men and women: they quarreled with their neighbors and spouses; they were robbed; they stole; they committed suicide; and they died suddenly in extreme poverty. Police records also highlighted the prevalence of sexually related difficulties. Seamstresses experienced sexual harassment in the workshop; they were seduced and impregnated by fickle lovers. When misery—or temptation—pushed them to it, they joined the swelling ranks of prostitutes.[29]

Another important group of sources came from the royal government itself, including royal edicts, tax records, surveys, and other documents. This material contained valuable information about the guilds, including their size, assets, and the fiscal contributions they made to the crown. Given the nature of the sources, they also provided crucial insight into the interaction between guild and royal government. Audits conducted by a royal commission created to liquidate guild debts constituted another major source for this investigation. These audits offered a wealth of financial information about the seamstresses' guild and documented the extent of royal control over corporate administration.

A variety of different sources supplied information about the ways seamstresses actually made and sold garments, and the way their labor was

perceived by contemporaries. Bankruptcy records contained precious detail about the daily practice of the trade, including the purchase of supplies, cycles of production, and relationships between seamstresses and their clients. Contemporary technical literature, such as François de Garsault's 1769 *L'Art du tailleur,* the *Encyclopédie,* and the *Encyclopédie méthodique,* also helped me understand the different types of garments manufactured and the precise steps followed to produce them. Published almanacs listed the most famous members of the garment trades, sometimes indicating the particular specialties for which they were known. Social commentators like Louis-Sébastien Mercier or Nicolas-Edmé Restif de la Bretonne, as well as philosophers and medical writers, all conveyed vivid impressions of the cultural and social weight of clothing in Old Regime France and the place that garment trades occupied in discourses about the female body, fashion, and appearances.

In the realm of nondiscursive sources, contemporary engravings furnished precious images of the division of space in artisanal workshops and the tools and gestures employed by men and women at work, filtered, of course, through the artists' perceptions and biases. Surviving garments held in museum collections, kindly explicated by museum curators, did much to kindle my imagination and make concrete what might have been far too abstract. These dresses, corsets, hoopskirts, petticoats, and jackets offered poignant testimony to the many hours of painstaking labor furnished by individual seamstresses. Close examination of them aided me a great deal in understanding how seamstresses worked.

The nine chapters of this book are divided into three parts. The first part, "Making the Goods," focuses on the seamstresses as producers of clothing by examining the types of garments they made, the composition of the workforce that made them, and the concrete techniques they employed to do so. The first chapter investigates the evolution of women's clothing from the late seventeenth to the eighteenth century, relating changing styles of fashion to discourses about fashion and femininity and the vicissitudes of the garment trades over the same period. This chapter draws a strong connection between the rise in women's consumption of clothing over the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the seamstresses' organization and success as a guild. Chapter 2 explores different forms of specialization in the trade, vertical hierarchies dividing success and failure, and the seamstresses' labor market. This chapter emphasizes the diversity of the trade population, the informal nature of hiring processes, and the cyclical problems of unemployment. Finally, Chapter 3 focuses on

seamstresses' and tailors' techniques of production and distribution. It examines the tools they used, the division of labor in the workshop, their interaction with clients and credit systems, and the steps they followed to produce dresses, skirts, and corsets.

The second part, "Making the Guild," addresses the institutional organization of the seamstresses' trade in Paris, Normandy, and Provence. Chapter 4 is an investigation of the origins of the Parisian seamstresses' guild in 1675 and the process by which provincial seamstresses attained membership in provincial tailors' guilds. In order to clarify the significance of these events, I place the seamstresses within the context of the broader principles underlying the guild system as well as the evolving attitudes of the royal government toward corporate structures and the possibility of incorporating women's labor. Chapter 5 explores the conflict between seamstresses' new guild privileges and the preexisting prerogatives of master tailors and their female relatives in the cities of Paris, Caen, and Marseilles. Drawing on these disputes, I reveal the consequences of women's inclusion in guilds both for their own legal and social identities as well as for the men and women who had belonged to the guild system before them. Chapter 6 focuses on the administration of the Parisian seamstresses' guild during the eighteenth century. In it I analyze the composition and recruitment of the guild elite and assess the extent to which the closed circle of corporate leaders was able to intervene in the trade. I also provide a close examination of the relationship between the royal government and the guild in order to assess royal control over this female corporation and over the guilds in general.

The final part, "Making the Mistresses," turns to an examination of the trade population itself and the lives of the women who composed it. Chapter 7 examines the production and reproduction of the trade through a study of guild admissions and apprenticeship. In this chapter I document the overwhelming demand for access to the trade and the gender-specific patterns of trade transmission that existed among tailors and seamstresses. Chapter 8 sketches a portrait of family life and marriage patterns among seamstresses. I find that trade qualifications featured prominently in matrimonial and life strategies and enabled a substantial group of women to survive outside of marriage. This chapter also explores seamstresses' lifestyles, examining their cultural interests, wardrobes, and widely varying levels of fortune. As I make clear, their private and professional lives were virtually inseparable because they lived and worked in the same space, often with the same people.

The final chapter of the book takes the seamstresses' story through the French Revolution and to the turn of the twentieth century, seeking to explain continuity and change in the trade after the fall of the Old Regime. With the rise of mass production in ready-to-wear clothing and the accompanying processes of consolidation and proletarianization, the garment trades underwent fundamental change. Nonetheless, certain aspects of production persisted. This was particularly true of forms of specialization and the fact that workers felt loyal toward their trade affiliations, rather than to their gender or class as a whole. Professional association also recurred among seamstresses, but this must be read as a result of the Old Regime feminization of the garment trades, rather than a direct product of corporate experience. The strongest legacy eighteenth-century seamstresses offered their successors was the conceptual association of femininity with needlework and fashion, an ambivalent inheritance that we continue to share today.

PART ONE

Making the Goods

ONE

Seamstresses and the Culture of Clothing in Old Regime France

Eighteenth-century France witnessed a dramatic rise in the consumption of clothing, particularly in Paris and other cities. Daniel Roche has documented a "clothing revolution" between 1700 and 1789, characterized by a substantial growth in the size and value of Parisian wardrobes as well as a new level of diversity in garments and accessories, colors, and fabrics. For the first time, elements of personal taste, choice, and superfluity entered the attire of the middling orders and the working people. Across Parisian society, women significantly outconsumed men, acquiring larger and more expensive wardrobes than their husbands, brothers, and fathers. A new fashion industry sprang to life to meet increasing demand, staffed by legions of female artisans and merchants working for a predominantly female clientele. The realm of fashion, it was increasingly agreed, was a woman's land in which citizenship was acquired by birth alone.[1]

Contemporaries and modern observers have both often accepted this conclusion, tacitly agreeing that women are drawn by their very nature to clothing and consumption. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, critics began to refute this view by arguing that the femininity of fashion was a cultural and social phenomenon, called into being by the very prevalence of such ideas about women. According to burgeoning feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, women invested more than men in money and attention to their clothing because they had been taught that appearances were their female destiny.[2] This argument found echoes in sociological and historical studies of the consumption of material goods in early modern Europe. In his classic study of the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen interpreted women's disproportionate consumption of clothing and other

goods as a function of the social role they filled in displaying family wealth and status.[3] Many historians followed Veblen's lead in analyzing women's role in the rise of consumer culture in eighteenth-century Europe. Recently, scholars have taken this analysis further by focusing on the ways in which new practices of shopping and fashionable dressing were coded as "feminine" by contemporary observers, and they have even suggested that the construction of a "modern female subject" was fundamentally tied up with the emergence of a gendered consumer culture.[4]

This gendered examination of consumption is part of a wider effort to uncover the cultural and social origins behind European economic transformation. Pioneering studies of consumer culture in the 1980s complained about the excessive attention accorded to technological innovation and economic production in accounts of the Industrial Revolution. In particular, they criticized the reigning assumption that demand for finished goods naturally expanded with a growth in supply. In developing cultural explanations for rising consumption, their studies focused on shifts in attitudes toward material goods and on the commercial techniques adopted to incite demand. This cultural turn was a necessary corrective but it may have moved too far, encouraging historians to focus on the meaning and dynamics of material culture and consumption to the exclusion of production. The seamstresses' trade provides an important example of the need to balance these factors and to reconstruct the complex imbrication among production, consumption, and the specific nature of the goods themselves.

The very definition of the seamstresses' trade underlines the close ties that existed between production and consumption in contemporaries' minds. According to the 1675 statutes, a seamstress was a woman who made articles of clothing for other women and for children. Producer and consumer were thus united by their sex and their privileged relation to clothing. The timing of the guild's creation further supports the link between production and consumption. From 1675 on, the seamstresses' guild attracted legions of new participants eager to profit from the social and economic privileges it offered in a labor market with restricted opportunities for women. The result was a large, skilled, and relatively inexpensive labor force keen to make and sell articles of female clothing. A push from the production side thus acted as a major catalyst for women's capacity to acquire new, custom-made garments in the latest styles and fashions. It was not merely new ways of conceiving of consumption or femininity that encouraged them to do so. Seamstresses acquired their trade niche as a re-

sult of cultural associations of femininity with needlework, yet once they gained legal status their swelling numbers inspired a growth in consumption, which ultimately reinforced and subtly transformed existing ideas about women's work and femininity.[5]

Another factor intervening between the forces of production and consumption was the clothing itself. To some degree, fashion was an independent variable, generated neither by changes in the organization of production nor by cultural ideas about femininity, consumption, and clothing. The origins of new fashions were often as mystifying for contemporaries as they presently are for historians. Nevertheless, the introduction of new styles in clothing and accessories could have a major impact on production and consumtpion. This was particularly true of novelties that did not conform to existing guild monopolies, as we will see below. Fashion generated conflict and competition in the garment trades even as it stimulated discussion and debate among observers. Together, these three factors—the practice and organization of labor; cultural concepts of gender, consumption, and fashion; and the objects of fashion itself—shaped, influenced, and informed each other over time. They did not always operate in synchronicity, but their evolution cannot be understood separately and no absolute causal primacy may be assigned among them.

In this chapter, I will develop these arguments by examining three moments in the history of fashion. Located from the 1670s to the 1780s, each of these moments witnessed a striking change in women's styles of apparel, accompanied by a flurry of published debates about fashion as well as significant developments in the garment trades. The first moment took place in the 1670s, when the seamstresses of Paris acquired an exclusively female guild with the right to make clothing for women and children but not for men. At the same time, a crucial transformation was taking place in the female wardrobe, as the expensive and cumbersome two-piece formal ladies' dress was replaced by a simpler, one-piece gown. Seamstresses soon monopolized the new *manteau* dress, which they produced for women from a surprisingly wide social spectrum. Not coincidentally, the 1670s also witnessed the birth of the first contemporary periodical to focus on fashion, which reported on the spread of the *manteau* and the growing role of fashion professionals outside the royal court.

The second break occurred some fifty years later in the 1720s, with the emergence of hoopskirts, which were worn under the loose *robe volante,* or "sack dress" as it was known in England. With flowing back pleats and voluminous skirts, women now appeared in a shockingly new silhouette.

The garments quickly generated a stir among observers who condemned them from a religious point of view or mocked them from a satirical one. In 1725, this debate entered the world of work with a violent raid by tailors' officials on a mistress seamstress. In the subsequent legal battle, tailors and seamstresses disputed the right to make the hoopskirts and whalebone stays worn under the new dresses. Together, debates about women's fashions and legal conflicts among tailors and seamstresses helped to propagate the growing notion that the sphere of fashion and appearances was an essentially female domain, despite the persistence of male production rights.

The final moment is located in the 1770s and 1780s, with a third major change in the female wardrobe. Instead of ushering in a new dress standard, this period witnessed a proliferation of different styles of female attire and accessories. It was also marked by a new insistence on "natural" forms of dress and a turn away from heavy stays or hoopskirts. This transition echoed wider cultural developments in which medical writers and social critics increasingly insisted on a deference to nature in human society. In the late 1770s, women gained extended guild prerogatives in the production of female clothing, as the legal rights women had acquired in this sector were strengthened by the idea of a "natural" female role in needlework. The French Revolution formally consecrated innate labor rights in 1791, abolishing all guilds and permitting men and women to work freely in whatever trades they chose. From being a tacit or underlying force that informed, supported, or even contradicted law, "nature" thus emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century as the most important standard for judging society and culture, including women, fashion, and work.

This chapter begins with a reflection on the social and cultural role of clothing in Old Regime France, which serves as a background for the three moments discussed in detail. I then turn to an overview of the major developments in French women's fashion in each of the three time periods chosen. This review of fashion history is followed by an examination of the interplay in each period between discourses and representations of fashion on the one hand, and the vicissitudes of the garment trades on the other. As we will see, seamstresses usually did not create new styles. In all likelihood, they cannot lay claim to the *manteau* dress, the hoopskirt, or the many new styles of the 1770s. Nonetheless, it was seamstresses' capacity to make and sell such fashions in large quantities that made their diffusion possible. In turn, developments in the consumption and production of clothing together helped to change cultural ideas about clothing,

fashion, and women's relation to them. The seamstresses were particularly important in this interplay because of their strong gender identity and the explicit link their trade drew between female creators and consumers of clothing.

The Social Role of Clothing

Clothing has long been recognized by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians as a key social and cultural signifying system. From the embroidered patterns on Indonesian betel-nut purses to the Old Regime nobleman's gold-embroidered suit and sword to the blue jeans of the late-twentieth century, styles of dress emit strong signals. First, they serve as visual markers that express and reinforce social taxonomies and their wearer's place within them. Even in today's apparently casual Western societies, a person's social status, economic situation, cultural values, and even political engagements can often at a glance be read in his or her attire. Clothing also conveys a visual interpretation of the ostensibly "natural" distinctions of age and gender, providing strictly delimited vocabularies within which men and women fashion their identities. It is the most vivid symbol of our transition from nature to culture, from biological male and female to men and women in society.[6]

As Georg Simmel insisted, dress furnishes a meeting point between the collective and the individual, a place where social structures and hierarchies intersect with personal choices and tastes. As anyone who has hesitated in front of the mirror can attest, the act of dressing oneself each day is a complicated negotiation between the norms and judgments of the social world and the expression of a private identity, itself forged through a lifetime of such encounters. In a given context, more or less room for individual choice and the elaboration of a personal style exists depending on wealth, the rigidity of social hierarchies, the circulation of information, and the availability of different types of garments and accessories. With the daily choices they make, men and women send important signals to the outside world and to the self.[7]

Of course, the interpretation of these messages is not straightforward; the possibility of intentional or accidental obscuring, misuse, or masquerading of social dress codes always exists. One constant anxiety is that individuals will take advantage of recognized codes to pass themselves off as something they are not. Literature is full of ambitious outsiders who ape the costume of their betters to gain illicit entry to the group. Like Mo-

lière's bourgeois gentleman, however, the bounder's constant failure to deceive, and the ridicule he or she attracts, reassuringly demonstrate that true nobility is in the blood and not in the suit. The same moral results from the unfailingly valiant character of the noble foundling dressed in peasant's clothing. Garments may serve to reflect and display one's superior status, these stories tell us, but they cannot substitute for it. The frequency of such tales, however, betrays strong misgivings about the possible discrepancy between appearances and social categories and the fear of outsiders who might successfully infiltrate the elite. The rise of a fashion system in fourteenth-century Europe has thus been explained as an attempt to secure the tools of social and cultural distinction. Following a "trickle-down" logic, fashion originated as courtiers introduced swift changes in their styles of apparel to reconfirm their social distance from wealthy commoners.[8]

The social weight of fashion, however, is not exhausted by strategies of upward social aspiration. In societies with a wide range of styles, a considerable play within and against established dress codes is possible. Marie-Antoinette bore very little resemblance to a real shepherdess when she dressed up at the Trianon in Versailles, but she acted out a broader, elite discourse preaching a return to "natural" ways of living. In contrast to the linguistic systems to which it is often compared, clothing permits its wearer to resist established hierarchies and traditions without manifesting overt defiance. If, for example, the rules regarding male and female attire at the court of Versailles were intended to ensure the visual prestige and honor of the absolutist monarchy, courtiers could exploit nuances within the established code to express their greater attachment to or alienation from the king. A circle of young aristocrats thus expressed their frustration with the tradition-bound court of the aging Louis XIV with an exaggeratedly fashionable, foppish way of dressing. Their dress choices allowed them to display a form of cultural resistance, without engaging in open political opposition.[9]

It is also doubtful that any society harbors a unitary clothing system that is transparent and meaningful to all its members in the same way. An article of clothing like a corset or a pair of pants could signify quite different things to different groups of people. If an aristocrat's strikingly luxurious attire emitted a clear message of superiority to those below him on the social scale, it also contained nuances of detail, such as the pattern of his lace sleeve cuffs or the design of his silver shoe buckles, which could only be read and appreciated by members of his own milieu. A number of distinct

taxonomies of clothing could thus coexist, clash, and overlap within one city or across multiple spaces constructed socially, visually, or politically. Choices of apparel could aim to fulfill aspirations apart from simple socio-economic emulation, including much more subtle and localized struggles over cultural or social power and self-identity.

As the proliferation of studies on French fashion attest, few societies have accorded as much explicit attention to clothing and appearances as Old Regime France.[10] From the seventeenth century to the Revolution, France was known by subjects and by foreigners as a place where one's exterior aspect counted more than anything else. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared in disgust, Paris was the city where "everything is judged on appearances."[11] Clothing formed a central part of the social and self-identity of an aristocrat, a Frenchman, a Parisian, a man, or a woman. The nobleman was instantly recognizable by his powdered wig, breeches, and jacket of fine cloth decorated with rich embroidery and precious stones, along with his hat and sword. By contrast, the working man's long pants were so well known that they would serve as a symbol of antiaristocratic fervor for the revolutionary sans-culottes.[12]

In addition to its social functions, clothing held a particular political importance in Old Regime France. Given the nature of absolutist monarchical ideology—in which the king literally embodied the nation—the royal body constituted the focal point of France. The king's appearance held enormous political symbolism as a visual display of the vitality and glory of his nation. His clothing accordingly occupied a crucial place in the representation and exercise of absolutist power, as portraitists depicted his sumptuous robes and courtiers vied for the right to participate in royal dressing and undressing ceremonies. In this monarchical society that overlapped politics, social status and cultural representation, appearances could be a potent political tool.[13] Fine attire not only distinguished the nobleman from the commoner, it also provided a means to win notice and favor at court. In 1636, Nicolas Faret's etiquette manual advised ambitious courtiers to invest in the most expensive clothing possible: "It is one of the most useful expenditures made at Court. It is almost the only one followed by those who know how to make use of it, and it opens doors which are often closed to high condition, and even more often to virtue."[14]

Beyond its borders, France's political and cultural domination of Europe manifested itself through the influence of its fashion. From Louis XIV on, the French set clothing styles for all the courts of Europe

and even the American elite, first through the dispatch of fashion dolls dressed in the latest styles and later through a commercialized fashion press. As the *Mercure galant* boasted in 1672: "Nothing pleases more than Fashions born in France . . . everything made there has a certain air that Foreigners cannot give to their Works."[15] The importance of clothing to Old Regime society and politics was further emphasized by the attention it received under the French Revolution. In their efforts to break completely with the Old Regime, revolutionary leaders accorded serious consideration to installing an entirely new dress code. French citizens, they esteemed, could not forget the aristocratic and monarchic society of the past while surrounded by visual reminders of it. Social equality was impossible if citizens' dress constantly evoked differences in wealth and status. These projects were never realized, but the debates around them demonstrate the perceived social and political importance of attire.[16]

Women's clothing in particular formed the focus of heated debate in eighteenth-century France, with philosophers from Montesquieu to Rousseau criticizing women's vestimentary extravagance. As recent historical studies have shown, the delegitimization of the Old Regime in the 1770s and 1780s occurred at least in part through an attack on female courtiers, and in particular through an assault on the queen's supposedly extravagant and corrupt lifestyle. In addition to a long list of political and sexual crimes, Marie-Antoinette was accused of bankrupting the state with outrageously expensive purchases from her fashion merchants. This heated political criticism reproduced on a magnified scale accusations that had been leveled at women for decades. Social observers ridiculed women for their selfish vanity, their devotion to superficial appearances, and their provocative sexuality. Female luxury is, of course, an ancient trope, but eighteenth-century France produced an uncommonly lively commentary on women's fashions and on the power and influence women might acquire through a beautiful and seductive appearance.[17]

As we will see, the perceived meaning and function of the "fashion system," and women's place in it, altered significantly across time. From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, commentators offered an evolving and ambiguous interpretation of the dynamics of fashion and its relation to gender and to systems of social distinction. Their ideas about fashion were shaped by the evolution of the garment trades and by the creation of a seamstresses' guild with rights over women's and children's clothing. Before we turn to these debates, however, let us take the simpler step of examining the evolution of styles of female clothing in France from the

1670s to the end of the Old Regime. This discussion will illuminate the different garments being made and worn as well as the shifting economic territory occupied by the seamstresses after 1675. This discussion is also necessary background to understand the intricate relations among concrete styles of clothing, the expansion of the garment trades, and debates about fashion and femininity in the Old Regime.

Seamstresses and Women's Clothing

When they acquired guild status in 1675, the seamstresses' statutes outlined a precise set of garments that they were entitled to make. They also placed two explicitly off-limits. As they stated:

> The mistress Seamstresses will have the faculty to make and sell Dressing Gowns [*robes de chambre*], Skirts, *Justaucorps, Manteaux, Hongrelines,* Camisoles, Bodices [*corps de jupes*] and all other Items of all kinds of fabric to clothe Women and Girls, with the exception of Dress Bodices [*corps de robes*] and Dress Skirts [*bas de robes*] only; in all of these Items that they are permitted to make, they will be able to make use of Whalebone and other things that will be appropriate for making and perfecting these Items.[18]

These garments included the most common elements of the female wardrobe of the late seventeenth century. Outside of the nobility, most women donned a combination of skirt, shirt, and bodice for everyday wear. Their full skirts reached to the floor, fastening at the waist with ribbons or hooks. Pockets were sewn onto a string tied around the waist and accessed through gaps in the side seams. Women might don several layers of skirts, depending on the season and their resources, including quilted or padded ones for extra warmth in the winter months (figure 1.1).

Men and women wore loose and ample shirts of white linen, or a linen-cotton blend, that descended past their hips. These shirts had wide, scooped necklines and full sleeves gathered just below the elbow, both of which could be decorated with lace or cloth ruffles. They belonged to the category of personal linen and were usually sold by linen-drapers. Seamstresses did, however, make the sleeveless *corps de jupe,* or skirt bodices, which many women wore over their shirts. These garments fastened with laces and ended at the bottom in scalloped or serrated edges. Some bodices contained strips of whalebone for extra stiffness and support (see figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 A woman in skirt and bodice (*corps de jupe*), showing the bodice laced in front and in back, as depicted in "A" and "B." Images "C" and "D" show the *robe à la française* of the 1760s. Image "E" shows a woman in skirt and *juste.* The latter corresponds to the *justaucorps* jacket mentioned in the seamstresses' 1675 statutes. Engravings From François de Garsault, *L'Art du tailleur* (1769)

Working women commonly wore a jacket over their shirt and bodice for warmth and protection from the elements. Bourgeois and noble ladies wore a similar ensemble for active endeavors such as hunting or traveling. The *justaucorps* named in the seamstresses' statutes was cut like the men's jacket of the same name, fitting tightly to the waist and flaring over the hips (see figure 1.1). The *hongreline* was another type of jacket, described in Antoine Furetière's 1690 dictionary as a "type of women's apparel made in the manner of a short-sleeved shirt [*chemisette*] which has large tabs." Both of these jackets disappeared from Parisian wardrobes during the eighteenth century.[19] At night, women wore *camisoles* to bed, which fit like loose bodices and tied in the back. Dressing gowns were long, loose, one-piece garments resembling the Japanese kimono with the sleeves cut as part of the front and back pieces. Both men and women of high social status wore dressing gowns in the morning before donning formal attire. As Furetière's 1690 dictionary explained: "A dressing-gown is what one wears [while] at ease and which serves while one combs one's hair, one grooms oneself, one keeps to one's room."[20]

The seamstresses were also permitted to make clothing for girls, and for boys up to age eight. As their absence from the statutes suggests, few specialized garments existed for children in this period. Mothers and wet

nurses wrapped infants in swaddling cloth to protect their fragile bodies. They dressed small children in long, one-piece cotton or linen gowns called *fourreaux,* which laced down the back. Underneath these gowns, boys and girls of high social status often wore stiff whaleboned bodices. Both parents and medical authorities believed that the child's body was like "soft wax," highly vulnerable to injury and improper growth.[21] They thus relied on bodices to prevent deformities and even to correct congenital spinal defects. Like many concerned grandparents, Madame de Sévigné advised her daughter to dress her grandson in a pair of stays, writing: "For his waist, that's another affair . . . you must put little stays on him, a bit hard, that hold his waist."[22] Roughly at the age of eight, the upper limit for male clothing established by the seamstresses' statutes, boys and girls adopted the dress styles of their elders. Like their fathers, boys wore short pants, a waistcoat and a jacket. Young girls continued to wear bodices, along with a skirt and jacket. For formal occasions, around age fifteen or sixteen girls of the upper classes began to wear dresses and skirts like their mothers.[23]

If the seamstresses' statutes permitted them to make virtually all elements of women's and children's everyday wear, they prohibited them from making two specific articles of clothing: the dress bodice (*corps de robe*) and the dress skirt (*bas de robe*). These garments composed the formal ladies' attire of the 1670s. The dress bodice was heavily whaleboned, lined with fine cloth, and covered with the same material as the dress skirt. The bottom half of the outfit consisted of a long trained skirt that hooked or buttoned onto the bodice. On very formal occasions, a servant carried the long train; otherwise it could be folded up and hooked or buttoned at the back.[24] Women usually wore the dress skirt open in the front to reveal a matching underskirt. The bodice with trained skirt and matching underskirt together formed the *habit,* which was called a *grand habit* when made for wear at court. This dress remained the official female attire of the French court until the Revolution (figures 1.2 and 1.3).[25]

Reinforced by numerous strips of whalebone and tightly laced down the back, the dress bodice held the spine erect, pulled the shoulders back, compressed the stomach and the waist, and molded the breasts. Cut low over the chest and shoulders, it did not serve to hide the woman's body, but to impose a rigid silhouette on it. In contrast to the informal skirt bodice (*corps de jupe*) that had shoulder straps, the dress bodice cut horizontally across the chest and shoulders, exposing the upper arms and chest and ending in short sleeves. Although the skirt bodice ended at the waist, the dress

FIGURE 1.2 Court dress of the late seventeenth century, including dress bodice ("a"), dress skirt ("b"), and matching underskirt ("c"). From François de Garsault, *L'Art du tailleur* (1769).

bodice descended to a long point over the abdomen. Women inserted a "busk," a thin strip of wood, metal, or whalebone, in a pocket down the front of the dress bodice to further compress the breasts and stomach.

Dress bodices were complicated creations, requiring hours of specialized labor to cut, fit, and stuff with whalebone. Their price, and the immobility they imposed, put them out of the reach of all but the most privileged women. The whaleboned bodice thus formed a key element of distinction in women's dress, conferring a "noble and majestic bearing" on the wearer.[26] Its rigid form was a visual reminder of the self-discipline and self-control imbuing contemporary notions of female honor, signalling the moral as well as social and economic superiority of noble and upper-bourgeois ladies. Madame de Maintenon insisted that the impoverished young noblewomen raised under her patronage at Saint-Cyr always wear the dress bodice and skirts. Lacking the wealth of their caste, she reasoned, they would at least retain its honorable appearance.

What motivated the royal government to forbid seamstresses from