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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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The Lévite Dress: Untangling the Cultural Influences of Eighteenth-Century French Fashion

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In May 1785, an Englishwoman wrote, “A lady who left Paris last autumn told me that the Queen & everybody wore white linnen levettes & nightgowns all day long.”¹ The “levette” mentioned here was the lévite, one of the most popular styles in late eighteenth-century French fashion. In this period, Paris and Versailles themselves served as cross-cultural contact zones in which French people absorbed and adapted information about the dress of other nations through a myriad of sources, including costume albums, traveler’s accounts, paintings and other artwork, masquerades, and the theater. The lévite began as a cultural fusion between French and Ottoman dress, then merged with other popular styles with their own foreign references, including the English-inspired robe à l’anglaise and redingote, as well as the Caribbean-derived chemise à la reine. This style’s fluidity makes it an excellent lens through which to examine how French people used dress to experiment with, and redefine, national and cultural identity in the late eighteenth century.

The early modern period saw a large expansion of European trade networks into the Middle East and Asia, resulting in a marked increase in information about, and interest in, the Ottoman Empire.² French ambassadors, merchants, and artists traveled to this region, primarily driven by interest in the goods that came from or through the Ottoman Empire. As they did, information and commodities traveled back and forth, increasing knowledge and fascination in both directions, and Turkish goods and cultural references became integral to many aspects of French culture. What scholars call “turquerie” – Turkish-focused Orientalism – allowed French people to define themselves through contrast to a foreign culture and to experiment with concepts of national and cultural identity.

This interest in Ottoman culture had a direct influence on French dress.³ From the thirteenth

² On French interest in the Ottoman Empire in this period, see Nebahat Avcıoğlu, “Turquerie” and the Politics of Representation, 1728-1876 (Farnham; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Pub., 2011); Inge E. Boer and Mieke Bal, Disorienting Vision: Rereading Stereotypes in French Orientalist Texts and Images (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2004); Ashi Çırakman, From the “Terror of the World” to the “Sick Man of Europe”: European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth (New York: P. Lang, 2002); and Jean-François Solnon, Le Turban et la stambouline. L’Empire Ottoman et l’Europe, XVe-XXe siècle, affrontement et fascination réciproques (Paris: Perrin, 2009).
century, French dressmakers took advantage of the wide cloths made by newly introduced looms to cut garments with curved and bias seams, which allowed them to make clothing that was both tight-fitting and voluminous. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, structured garments were typical for both men and women, as men wore padded and reinforced doublets, while women’s figures were molded by boned and stiffened bodices or separate stays. However, fashion took a turn in the late seventeenth century. Drawing on the dress of the Middle East and Asia, loose, simply cut dressing gowns were introduced for both genders as at-home wear, and these became fashionable women’s dress with the addition of structured stays worn underneath.

As they continued in popularity, the cuts of these gowns became increasingly complex and therefore Gallicized. Subsequent styles of the early and mid-eighteenth century repeated this process. By the 1760s and 1770s, the most popular gowns in France included the robes à la polonaise (Polish) and circassienne (Circassia), which drew on Ottoman inspiration with semi-loose fits, emphasized layering, and looped-up overskirts.

Ottoman Influence: The First Lévite

It was into this cross-cultural milieu that the lévite was introduced. The fashion magazine Gallerie des modes et costumes français records that the inspiration for the dress came from costumes worn in the Comédie Française’s 1779 production of Racine’s Athalie. The story is set in the ancient kingdom of Judah, now part of modern-day Israel but in the eighteenth century under Ottoman control. The Gallerie writes, “The first inspiration [for the lévite gown] is due to clothing created for actresses of the Théâtre Français, when it presented the tragedy of Athalie, with the chorus. These clothes were copied from those of the lêtes [a Jewish priestly caste] and priests, consisting of a kind of ecclesiastical robe, with a stole that crossed in front. That which

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was sacred was subtracted from this ensemble; the stole was transformed into a sash, and soon became a fashionable dress.”7 Surviving costume designs from the period give an idea of the original theatrical inspiration, although none depict the lévite characters (figure 1).8 These designs all feature a series of layered Ottoman-style kafāns, with swagged skirts and sashes. The women’s costumes are worn over wide hoops, a traditional element of French theater costumes.

These costumes reference real elements seen in eighteenth-century Ottoman dress, whose overarching theme was the layering of multiple garments, all designed for display through open fronts, slashed sleeves, and garment hems tucked up into the sash (figures 2 and 3).9 Gender distinctions existed but were less prominent than in the West, being characterized by accessories like headwear and jewelry as well as specific methods of garment layering. Both men and women wore shirts and full trousers, over which they wore loose, front-opening kafāns with short or long sleeves.10 Some were belted at the waist with a sash, others hung open.

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7 Galerie des modes et costumes français, dessinés d’après nature, 1778-1787, edited by Paul Cornu (Paris: É. Lévy, 1912), pl. 83.
10 The term “kafān” is frequently used as a generic term for the long robes worn in Islamic cultures. The word derives from the Persian “xaftān” and was in use in this period in Russia (Irena Turnau, History of Dress in Central and Eastern Europe from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century [Warszawa: Institute of the History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1991], 161). Despite its lack of applicability to the other areas under study, I employ it here due not only to its widespread recognition among Western readers, but also because it handily
construction of these garments was based on the rectangular method, where full lengths of narrow fabrics were slashed and seamed where needed, with triangular insets added to accommodate curves and movement, which was different from the curved seams seen in Western dress. Other elements typical of Turkish dress in this period were striped fabrics, wide bands of fur trim, fringed trim and tassels, feathers, and asymmetry.

The earliest lévite gowns appear to have been cut similarly to Ottoman kaftans, from full widths of fabric and without a waist seam. The Encyclopédie méthodique, the successor to Diderot’s Encyclopedia, records that the style “was first almost like a loose men’s dressing gown,” these having been based on Middle Eastern and Asian garments. According to the Galerie des modes, early lévites were cut with two wide, soft pleats at the back neckline that continued into the floor-length, untrained skirt. The first few plates to depict the style illustrate long, open-front kaftan-like gowns with full-length sleeves.

Critical to the definition of the lévite was the collar and sash (figure 4). The front edges of the gown merged into a fold-over or shawl collar, which simulated the line of the wide fur trims seen on many Ottoman garments. The sash was an item of clothing that had not been seen in French women’s fashion for over a century, and was directly inspired by Ottoman dress. Initially, the sash was used to draw the gown in at the waist and provide torso definition, just as it did in Turkish ensembles. The Encyclopédie méthodique records that the lévite “was worn in such a loose way for undress wear; then some thought of wearing a sash over it, thus bringing it in close to the body.” In fashion plates, these sashes are usually worn over the gown, but occasionally they are laid underneath; they almost always have long ends left trailing, sometimes with tassels or fringe. The collar and sash were so important that when other gowns were worn with these elements, they were frequently described in reference to the lévite, like a robe à la turque that “had a collar like a robe en Lévite,” or a “New Robe called la Longchamps” that had a “sash à la Lévite.”

Ottoman women did not wear boned or stiffened garments, such as stays or hoops. By contrast, since the late sixteenth century, French women had shaped and supported their bust and torso with heavily boned and stiffened bodices or separate stays. In the eighteenth century, it was typical to wear a gown or jacket over heavily boned stays called corps baleiné. However, in the last few decades of the eighteenth century, more lightly boned stays called “corsets” were differentiates from the French term “robe,” which means “dress” in the Western sense.

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11 Rectangular construction did persist in the West, where it was primarily used on undergarments like men’s shirts and women’s chemises.
13 Galerie des modes, pl. 83.
14 “Couturiere,” 224-5.
15 Galerie des modes, pl. 114; and Ibid., pl. 81. “Longchamps” is a reference to the racecourse.
coming into fashion. What is intriguing is that the lévite appears to have been more frequently worn over these lighter corsets than other contemporary styles. Most other fashionable dresses of the period, including the traditional robe à la française as well as more fashion-forward styles like the robes à la polonaise and anglaise, are almost always depicted in portraiture over the smooth cone shape that indicates a corps baleiné. However, the majority of portraits in which the sitter is wearing a lévite show a definite bust curve that is far more naturalistic than that usually seen in French fashionable dress, reinforcing the style’s Ottoman references.  

French women had worn hoops under their gowns since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Most informal women’s dresses of the lévite’s era were worn with smaller versions of these hoops than those of previous decades. Alternatively, women could wear their gowns over the newly introduced, more rounded hip and rear pads called “cu” or “cul” (“rump” or “bum”). However, the lévite differs from most other styles in that it appears to have been worn over very little, if any, skirt supports -- at least in its first iterations -- which once again reinforces a connection to the soft, natural silhouette of Ottoman dress. The first three lévites featured in the Gallerie des Modes (all from 1779) do not have enough lift at the hips or rear to indicate anything more than one or more petticoats worn underneath. In the description of one of these plates, the Gallerie declares that “the first Levites; one wore them first unies [plain], without hoops, or rumps.”

**English Influence: The Lévite Meets the Robe à l’Anglaise**

The late eighteenth century was a period when the French were fascinated by many foreign cultures. England was of interest because of their constitutional monarchy, so different from France’s autocratic system, as well as their more casual way of life. Sources indicate that over time, the lévite merged with two different English-inspired gowns, the first of which was the robe à l’anglaise.

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17 Galerie des modes, pl. 83.

The robe à l’anglaise was a French reinterpretation of the English mantua (also called nightgown). The mantua/nightgown originated with the late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century French manteau, an open-front gown derived from Middle Eastern and Asian-inspired dressing gowns. In England, the gown became more stylized over time, with a tightly fitted bodice cut separately from the skirt except in the very center back, which was pleated and stitched down from the neckline to the waist. The front had a V-shaped bodice opening, filled in by a stomacher, and an inverted-V-shaped skirt opening displaying a petticoat. This fitted English gown became popular in France in the late 1770s, where it was modified: the center fronts were extended to meet edge to edge, while the back pleats were removed; eventually the center back pieces were cut entirely separate from the skirt (figures 5 and 6).

As time wore on, the lévite gown became more fitted in such a way that its cut became almost indistinguishable from the robe à l’anglaise. The Encyclopédie méthodique records this process in which the neckline deepened, the sleeves shortened, and a train was added; the waist became fitted, while the sash remained as a decorative element:

“Soon the neckline got deeper, the collar went further down, and the dress became pleated to cinch the waist: but those very pleats still seemed to make it look wider; the bodice was cut off and made to fit at the waist, and the skirt was pleated over the hips and attached to it; it had a train, and the sleeves that first went down to the wrist became gradually shorter; they got narrower and decorated with trim; they went up the arm and now only go to below the elbow; while straying away from its original plainness, this dress slowly turned into a fancier one; the sash, which was not needed anymore over such a close fitting gown, remained as a decorative element, and thus appeared, in quite a ridiculous fashion, on a stiff and rigid figure no longer showing the bending and gracious outlines caused by moving, which would make a sash look more like it has a function and is appropriate. The little chiffonnage [either “gathering” or “nonchalance”] of trims also comes back into fashion and transforms the front pieces into something very different from the elegant and noble plainness of the robe à l’anglaise, which it has gotten close to in terms of shape.” 19

One of these lévites is illustrated in its plates, and it indeed looks very much like the anglaise: a fitted bodice, the very center back pieces cut in one between the bodice and skirt, with the skirt

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19 “Couturiere,” 225.
cut separately and pleated to the waist from the front to the side back seams (figure 7).20

It is frustratingly difficult to determine what separates the two styles. The Encyclopédie indicates that the lévite was more fussily trimmed than the anglaise, but otherwise, “the only thing that is different in an anglaise is that the three back seams always get closer to the small of the back, almost like a fourreau.”21 The fourreau was originally a dress worn by young girls, “fitted at the waist & untrained ,” that was increasingly becoming fashionable for adult women.22 The fourreau is also difficult to separate from the anglaise. The version worn by young girls had a back opening, but this practice does not appear to have been continued in the adult woman’s gown. The Encyclopédie Méthodique further connected the cut of the lévite to the anglaise: “The bodice of the lévite and of the anglaise is made separately out of several pieces, like stays used to be cut and corsets are still cut, it is boned very lightly; the skirt is pleated and sewn onto it .”23

Fashion plates depicting this anglaise-like lévite show a more fitted silhouette, with bodice fronts meeting edge-to-edge or over a stomacher, and seams at center and side back, which the Gallerie describes as “made à l’Anglaise ” (figure 8).24 Sometimes magazines refer to a “fitted” or “adjusté” lévite, at least one example of which has “a train like the robes a l’Anglaises ” (figure 9), which may refer to the more anglaise-like style.25 In fashion plates, these fitted lévites continue to feature collars and sashes, which suggests that these persisted as distinguishing characteristics of the style . Over time, the neckline

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20 It is important to note that this one-piece cut in the very center back is not specific to the lévite; it can also be seen on the redingote gown, early examples of the robe à l’anglaise, as well as many jacket styles.
21 “Couturiere,” 225.
23 “Couturiere,” 225.
24 Galerie des modes, pl. 154.
25 Ibid., pl. 163.
opened to display an underbodice, probably the same stomacher or sleeveless bodice worn with other open-front styles.

These fitted lévites appear to have been worn with more substantial skirt supports than the prototypical version, so much so that some appear to be worn over small hoops. Nonetheless, as late as 1785, the Encyclopédie méthodique wrote that the lévite should be worn with a comparatively simple, unstructured horsehair half-skirt: “the bouffantes [skirt supports] for lévite are not stitched, but they are pleated & lined with more horsehair than the quilted bouffantes; they are without cane or frame… & tighten in such a manner that they only cover the back & sides, without covering the front at all; this sort of bouffante is pleated like a petticoat, & cut about half a yard high.”

Since the lévite is so indistinguishable from the anglaise, at least in this later form, it is difficult to identify any extant examples, except for one rare example in the historic costume collection of Tirelli Costumi. This gown features the fold-over or shawl collar so key to the lévite, with the back bodice fitted with numerous tiny pleats, the skirt cut separately from the bodice all around and pleated to fit, and long, cuffed sleeves.

English Influence: The Lévite Meets the Redingote

Although the lévite was initially a soft, loose style, over time another variant became associated with the more tailored redingote, which had primarily English associations. The term “redingote” is a Gallicization of the English “riding coat,” and was used from the 1720s to refer to a man’s overcoat (figure 10). Soon after the women’s lévite came into fashion, a longer version of the man’s redingote was introduced under that same name (lévite). Determining what makes these men’s redingotes into lévites is difficult. Compared to the redingotes in the Gallerie, the three lévites ends at mid-calf, while the non-lévite styles are knee-length. Despite the new name, these lévite overcoats appear to have retained the redingote’s English associations. For example, the redingote a la Lévite is also called a “redingote anglaise” (figure 11), while the “Young elegant man of the Palais Royal in lévite anglaise” makes no mention of

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“redingote” at all.\textsuperscript{28}

Some women’s \textit{lévites} of this era are suggestive of overcoats, like the “\textit{lévite pelisse}” featured in the \textit{Gallerie des modes}, which was made of fur and meant to be worn as a cold weather gown/coat hybrid.\textsuperscript{29} In the late 1780s, a woman’s dress version of the \textit{redingote} was introduced. The gown was styled like the man’s overcoat, with seams at the side and center back and one or more wide collars, which differed from the \textit{lévite}’s collar in being more pointed and, sometimes, sectioned (figure 12). Following the same pattern seen in menswear, a few years after the introduction of the \textit{redingote} dress, the term \textit{lévite} appears as an alternative for the woman’s gown. In 1791, the \textit{Journal de la mode et du goût} announced that many were wearing the “\textit{redingote} or \textit{lévite}… as the cold is beginning to be felt” (figure 13).\textsuperscript{30}

\subsection*{Caribbean Influence: The \textit{Lévite} Meets the \textit{Chemise à la Reine}}

The \textit{chemise à la reine} is a particularly interesting fashion, given the scandal that was caused when a portrait of French Queen Marie-Antoinette in this dress was exhibited in 1783. Thus far, historians have connected the \textit{chemise} to gowns worn in the French colonies in the Caribbean, as well as to dressing gowns.\textsuperscript{31} However, contemporary sources suggest that the \textit{lévite} also played more than one role in the \textit{chemise}’s evolution, which adds a previously unexamined Ottoman layer to its cultural meanings.

The \textit{chemise à la reine} was a gown made of extremely fine, lightweight cotton—usually white—that was tightly gathered in front and back via cords at the neckline and waist.\textsuperscript{32} It was cut full-

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Gallerie des modes}, pl. 138 and 233.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Journal de la mode et du goût}, January 5, 1791, 1-2. It is possible that this transition was first made in England, as between 1785 and 1787 a London “Great-coat” maker was advertising “levettes… for ladies wear” (\textit{Daily Universal Register}, January 1, 1785; and \textit{Morning Herald}, September 8, 1787).
\textsuperscript{32} Styles related to the \textit{chemise à la reine} went by many different names: variations on the term “\textit{chemise}” (\textit{chemise, chemise à la reine, robe en chemise, chemise à la Floricourt, and chemise à la Jesus}) were most common, but \textit{aristote, gaulle, robe à la créole, and robe-peignoir} appear to refer to similar gowns.
length, without waist seam; some opened in front, and some were closed; its sleeves were full and gathered, usually both above and below the elbow (figure 14). At least one later version has a fitted back, with the fabric stitched down in tiny vertical pleats across the bodice back, and the skirt cut separately and pleated to the waist. Like the lévite, it was invariably worn with a sash at the waist.

Most historians argue that the chemise gown derived from the lightweight cotton clothing worn in the Caribbean. However, the Encyclopédie méthodique records that the chemise gown was in part a development of the lévite, which, “in its first form [the loose, prototypical version of the gown] was so practical for traveling and getting dressed that it came back, this time under the name of quinzevine; the collar and the wrists are gathered over a drawstring. The dress has known another incarnation, with some slight variations, in the robes en chemise [an alternate name for the chemise à la reine].” 33 Given the chemise’s Caribbean connection, it is particularly interesting that the Gallerie des modes describes a 1779 ensemble featuring a caraco or jacket à la lévite as being “called à la Créole… [It is] composed of that which our French Ladies wear in America…” (figure 15). 34 The jacket is the lévite portion of the ensemble, and it is worn very loose, completely open and unattached in front, with the wide, short oversleeves frequently seen in Turkish dress. Underneath is worn a “simarre,” whose name references the loose overgown worn by women in sixteenth century Italy (“zimarra” in Italian) that was itself based on Turkish kaftans. 35 Here it is made of a loose, sheer, striped gauze, and it looks much like a chemise à la reine without all the pleats or gathers and the extra fabric needed to accommodate them: “the robe is a bit fitted to the figure and detached around the neckline in the taste of a chemise… [and has] a sash with a ribbon like the Lévite.” 36 Another chemise in the Gallerie is described as being “open at the bottom [i.e. the skirt] like a lévite.” 37

33 Panckoucke, “Couturiere,” 225.
34 Galerie des modes, pl. 116.
36 Galerie des modes, pl. 116.
37 Galerie des modes, pl. 179.
Sources suggest that there was also a later version of the lévite that was nearly identical to the chemise à la reine. Specifically, one plate in the Gallerie des modes depicts a lévite made of cotton gauze fabric that has the sheerness and gathered sleeves typical of the chemise gown (figure 16). The main difference is the widely open skirt front (it is also worn with a fitted, sleeveless overbodice that is unfortunately not described in the plate’s text). Another contemporary fashion plate preserved in the Maciet Collection in the library of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs illustrates a “Lévite with three collars” that looks exactly like a chemise à la reine: a loose, gathered gown that is tied at the waist with a sash; the sleeves are full and gathered above the elbow by a ribbon; three layered collars are clearly gathered at the neckline.

Furthermore, while nearly all contemporary commentators call the gown worn by Marie-Antoinette in the 1783 painting a “chemise,” it is interesting that Grimm’s Correspondence littéraire refers to it as a lévite. The chemise à la reine was so connected with Marie-Antoinette, and yet there are no records of any such garment in the queen’s wardrobe inventories under any variation of “chemise” or any of its other less commonly used variants. These records are limited primarily to 1782, but that was the year before she was famously painted in the style by Vigée Le Brun and, therefore, it seems likely that the chemise should have been in the queen’s wardrobe. According to Henriette Campan, the queen’s lady-in-waiting, Marie-Antoinette and her ladies wore “robes of white percale” (a kind of cotton) as early as 1778, which some historians have taken to mean chemises à la reine. However, the Encyclopédie Méthodique is very specific in stating that it was the lévite that Marie-Antoinette wore during her first pregnancy (“this [early loose version] is the lévite the Queen wore during her first pregnancy”), which took place that same year, so it seems far more likely that Campan was referring to the lévite rather than the chemise. Furthermore, while no chemises are mentioned in the queen’s wardrobe inventories of 1782, lévites do appear as a regular and substantial portion of the queen’s wardrobe. Later records are sporadic, but famed marchande de modes Rose Bertin’s bill reductions for the queen (1783-84) similarly include lévites, but no chemises by any of its known name variations. Likewise, the more extensive, but still spotty, wardrobe accounts of the queen’s sister-in-law, the Comtesse d’Artois, include multiple lévites.

38 Collection d’habillements modernes et galants avec les habillements des princes et seigneurs [Gallerie Des Modes] (Paris, 1781), No. 47 G.  
42 Madame Campan, Mémoires sur la vie privée de Marie-Antoinette. T. 1 (Paris: Baudouin Frères; Mongie Aîné, 1823), 194.  
the first in 1779, but no chemises.44

On the other hand, multiple sources differentiate between the two gowns. For one, as mentioned above, the *Encyclopédie méthodique* states that the lévite was reinvented, first as the quinzevine and then the chemise à la reine.45 Meanwhile, in 1788 the *Tableau de Paris* noted the progression of “the chemise which succeeded the Angloise which succeeded the Lévite which succeeded the Polonaise which was preceded by the Françoise.”46 Both styles are listed concurrently in Parisian noblewomen’s wardrobe accounts.47 The last *Gallerie* plate featuring a lévite is from 1782, while plates for gowns named some variation of chemise span 1784 through 1787. It is possible that by the publication of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* in 1785, the two styles had become untangled, with the lévite going out of fashion and the chemise à la reine considered a distinct style. However, Sarah Lennox’s comment that “the Queen & everybody wore white linnen levettes & nightgowns all day long” is from 1785, and as late as 1792, a Paris dressmaker was advertising “Robes en Lévite.”48

One source that merges elements of the lévite and chemise is Jules Baudin’s 1789 “Portrait de Femme au Livre,” auctioned at Drouot in 2011.49 The sitter wears a white dress in a lightweight cotton or linen fabric with a colored sash. The gown has multiple vertical gathers across the entire bodice front, as would a chemise gown, but smoothly fitted sleeves and a wide pink collar that extends around the entire neckline, elements that better suit the lévite.

**Conclusion**

The lévite gown demonstrates the fascination with exoticism that dominated late eighteenth-century French dress. Moreover, the style’s development reveals that national and cultural identity were considered fluid ideas that could be mixed and adapted, and that the very processes of cultural appropriation and remixing were considered to be central to French culture. The evolution of the lévite suggests that the process of Gallicization was not necessarily a straightforward path from “foreign” to “French,” and that the practice of redesigning, reinterpreting, and mixing different cultural styles was a key part of that process.

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44 Papiers Bourbon-Busset, 1776-1787, T/265/8, Archives des particuliers émigrés ou condamnés pendant la Révolution, Première partie, Archives Nationales (France).
45 Panckoucke, “Couturiere,” 225.
46 “L’Anacade,” *Tableau de Paris*, vol. 9, 1788, 49.
47 Pascale Maillard, “Contributions à l’histoire du costume dans la noblesse parisienne à la fin du XVIIIe” (Université Paris 1, 1979).
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