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ABSTRACT

Regarded by some as women's power tool and by others as instruments of torture, high heels constitute one of the most polarizing marketplace icons today. Why did the noblemen's footwear of choice become one of the most celebrated icons of femininity, and how? This article attempts to shed light on these questions by focusing on the actors and practices that have influenced the development of cultural meanings we come to associate with high heels.

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I was in the 12th arrondissement, one sunny Friday afternoon in September, busy making my way toward the metro station. I looked up and caught a glimpse of something I found truly impressive: a woman riding a bicycle ... in high heels. She is captured in the photo given in [Figure 1](#).

Having spent several months in the fashion capital, I can assert that if French women, like North American ones, tend to favor flats and sneakers on the weekend they continue to proudly sport high heels during the week. They do so despite the fact that such heels are routinely contested, decried, and ridiculed. (Consider, for example, CEO Jorge Cortell's condescending tweet at a New York City tech-event: "Event supposed to be for entrepreneurs, VCs, but these heels (I've seen several like this) ... WTF? #brainsnotrequired" (Garber 2013).) It seems no uneven cobblestone, scooter, or bicycle can come between a Parisienne and her stylish footwear. One explanation behind this resistance to fully embrace "sensible shoes" is that high heels remain evocative – and for some transformative – tokens of power, femininity, seduction, glamor, and fantasy. In what follows, I examine how and why this polarizing object – as marketplace icons tend to be (Gopaldas 2015) – has come to embody such rich meanings.

1. These shoes are not made for walking

The first burning question is obviously: how high? The most basic definition suggests high heels, or "heels," are shoes that raise the heel of the foot higher than the toes. On websites such as celebrity shoe designer Christian Louboutin's, one will find different categories ranging from mid-heel (3 inches) to high (4 inches), to sky high (5 inches and up). In the online fashion community *The Fashion Spot*, a discussion about the topic of heel height has been ongoing for years. The thread is competitively entitled: "How high are the heels you wore today?" and contains only 78 posts, but has nevertheless managed to generate more than 19,000 views.¹ That may be because choosing to wear high heels commands respect.

This respect is partly because wearing heels is not only notoriously difficult – making "How to walk in heels" one of Google's top searches in 2015 (Bobila 2015) – but also hazardous: one only



Figure 1. Parisienne in heels on her bicycle, 2015. Photograph by Marie-Agnès Parmentier.

needs to look at [Figure 2](#) of a young Naomi Campbell falling off her spectacular 12-inch Vivienne Westwood platform heels to be reminded.

Or think of actress Chloë Sevigny losing four of her front teeth after tumbling off her Balenciaga high heel boots (“Sevigny Being Mouthy” 2003). Or watch some of the countless YouTube videos documenting the treacherous falls of fashion models (e.g. “Funniest Runway Models Falls of All Time”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y18iHbl-Ha8>). Or read the news, and find out that some heels, like the stiletto – which actually means dagger in Italian – can literally be used to kill a man (e.g. “Woman Convicted in ‘Stiletto Murder’ Re-Enacts How She Killed Boyfriend.”; Strauss, Siversten, and Efron 2014).

The respect that high heels garner is also partially because historically heels have been markers of social class, wealth, and authority. At least this has been the case for men.

2. Men in heels

That is right. If we strongly associate heels with the realm of the feminine today, there was a time when they were also worn by – and perhaps more importantly seen on – men.² Women, on the other hand, had to protect their modesty and hide their feet under their skirts. But heels were not to be worn by everyone, of course; they were the privilege of the elite. Aristocrats had a lifestyle that made wearing impractical shoes possible, and they also had servants to perform the trying task of breaking them in. Red heels, in particular, were loaded signifiers: the poster child for noblemen in heels, France’s Sun King Louis XIV (1638–1715), a short man, is said to have been particularly fond of 4-inch red heels (see coronation portrait ([Figure 3](#))). Through him and the male



Figure 2. Naomi Campbell in a Vivienne Westwood Fashion Show, Paris, France, 1993. Used by permission.

denizens of the Royal Court, red heels became strongly associated with the grandees of Versailles (Small 2014). And in case you were wondering, there is no evidence that today's Christian Louboutin's trademarked red soles pay homage to the Sun King's heels. But given that a pair of Louboutins can sell for more than US\$1500, red heels continue to signal privilege nonetheless.

With the embrace of the heel by King Louis XIV, by his successor King Louis XV, and more broadly by France's elite class, the popularity of heels for both men and women spread throughout Europe. Until the eighteenth century, anything that could masculinize a woman's outfit was all the rage: from shorter hair, to smoking pipes to ... wearing heels (Kremer 2013). Only after the mid-eighteenth century did heels become strictly a woman's affair. Shoemakers began making distinctive shoes for the left and the right foot, men finally saw heels as impractical, and shoes became gendered: sturdy and chunky heels for men, and thin, curvaceous, and decorative heels for women (Angle and Bernaschina 2014; Mars 2014). Then, as the Enlightenment movement gained traction and the French Revolution erupted, heels, a symbol intimately linked with the nobility, suddenly went out of style.

Today, some believe that if heels were to become signifiers of those in actual power again, men would return to wearing them (Kremer 2013). Given that androgyny is having a moment in fashion it seems possible to imagine that heels may reclaim more fluid gendered meanings in the future (e.g.



Figure 3. Portrait of Louis XIV, after Hyacinthe Rigaud (French, 1659–1743), The J. Paul Getty Museum. Gift of J. Paul Getty. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.

Bowstead 2015; Romano 2011). In the meantime, they continue to be metaphors of femininity. In 2014, *Time Magazine* even chose to feature on its cover the overused cliché of a leg in heels (admittedly lower heels, but heels nonetheless) dangerously threatening a miniature man to illustrate Hillary Clinton’s pursuit of power.

3. The higher the heel, the closer to heaven

Like anything in fashion, heels eventually made a comeback, this time in late nineteenth-century Victorian England. Tiny feet were in vogue, and an arched foot does tend to look smaller. But heels would be seldom seen, hidden under a lady’s proper floor-skimming dress, yet again. At the same time, however, heels grew in popularity with the demi-monde, namely, showgirls and artists’ models. Think of Claude Manet’s *Nana* or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Moulin Rouge* posters (Small 2014). And at the end of the First War, the ever-so roaring flappers – who were not afraid of sporting higher hemlines and showing off their ankles – further entrenched the association between heels and seduction. In 1929, Louise Brooks, a former Broadway dancer, would be one of the first actresses to unveil her heel-clad ankles in the provocative moving picture “Pandora’s Box” (Small 2014). Betty Boop, the first sexualized animated character, would soon follow.

Freud's essay on fetishism – in which he drew parallels between a mother's foot or shoe and the phallus – obviously played a role in shaping the sexual meanings of heels as well (Persson 2015; Small 2014). But so did photography, as embraced by pornographers (Kremer 2013). Heels that could not possibly be walked in proved to be the ideal footwear for a new kind of seductress: the pin-up who adorned the G.I.s barracks. Interestingly, the actual stiletto was not available for mass consumption until after World War II. Manufacturers had to figure out first how to stabilize a shoe with so little support. They eventually did so by inserting a steel rod into the heel of the shoe.

Stilettoes were, of course, a favorite of the Hollywood bombshells of the 1950s. They were particularly beloved by one of celebrity shoe designer Salvatore Ferragamo's most famous clients: Marilyn Monroe, a former pin-up herself. Monroe would come to own more than 40 pairs of Ferragamo's custom-made 4-inch heels; heels that most likely contributed to her unmatched lascivious walk (Small 2014).

As the war ended and as the G.I.s returned home, fashion embraced a new feminine silhouette that shared some similarities with that of the pin-up: a nipped waist, round hips, and a raised bust. This "hourglass figure" would take center stage in Christian Dior's 1947 haute-couture collection "The New Look," one of the most influential fashion collections of that decade and indeed of the last century. Suddenly, the chunky, practical heels of the working women of the 1940s seemed



Figure 4. Roger Vivier exhibition poster, *Dans les Pas de Roger Vivier* [In the Footsteps of Roger Vivier], 2013. Photograph by Van Vincent, used by kind permission of the photographer and Roger Vivier.

outdated. Instead, shoe designer Roger Vivier's demure and elegant pumps would prove to be the perfect complement to Dior's new chic. Vivier, whose artistry and innovative craftsmanship would lead him to produce all sorts of whimsical heels, including the iconic "talon virgule" (which translates less poetically as "comma heel" in English, see Figure 4), was bestowed the honor of designing Queen Elizabeth II's enchanting coronation slippers in 1953.

As impractical as they may have been then, high heels became nonetheless synonymous with the era. Madison Avenue's star, the domestic goddess (think of the fictional character Betty Draper in the critically acclaimed television series *Mad Men*), wore (or was imagined to wear) heels to perform pretty much every chore of daily life. The 2008 American *TV Guide* cover for the hit-show *Desperate Housewives* shown in Figure 5 is another tongue-in-check reference to the stereotypical feminine ideal promoted by cultural producers of the 1950s. It is no surprise, then, that the quintessential doll of the period, Barbie, was molded with tiptoed feet making her permanently poised to perch on a pair of heels.

By the 1970s, second-wave feminist leagues would firmly take a stand against heels, framing them as demeaning and linking them to tools of female oppression (see popular illustration of the period (Figure 6)).

4. One shoe can change your life – Cinderella

Fast forward to today, and heels continue to hold strong meanings of femininity, seduction, glamor and fantasy, thanks in part to Candice Bushnell's modern princess, Carrie Bradshaw. In the late 1990s, the American television network Home Box Office (HBO) launched one of the most popular series of the turn of the twenty-first century: *Sex and the City* (SATC, 1998–2004). A tale of the single life, female friendship, and empowered femininity in contemporary New York City, SATC starred Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie, a post-feminist sex columnist enjoying a serious love affair with



Figure 5. *TV Guide*, 29 September–5 October 2008. Photograph by Andrew Eccles. Used by permission. *TV Guide* Magazine cover courtesy of *TV Guide* Magazine LLC © 2008.

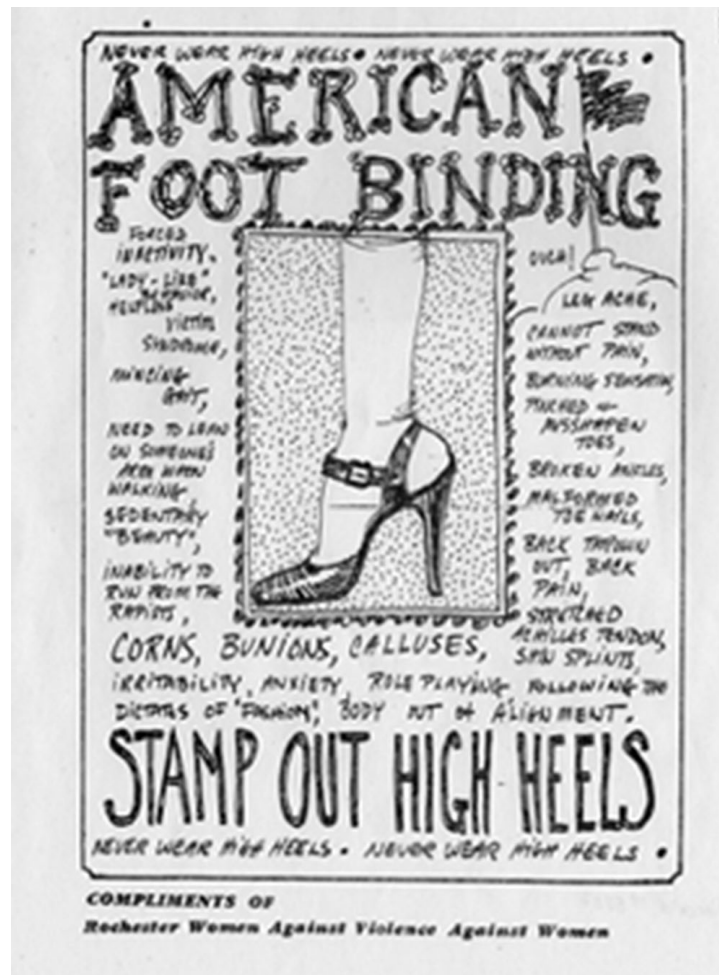


Figure 6. Flyer “American Foot Binding – Stamp Out High Heels,” Rochester Women Against Violence Against Women, n.d. Five College Archives & Manuscript Collections, <http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnsss371.html>.

shoes. Manhattan socialites’ brands of choice, Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo, were some of her favorites, propelling these niche luxury brands into household names as the series gained in popularity (Lawson 2014). Heels definitely played more than a supportive role on the show: they were essential to Carrie’s gendered identity (Tuncay Zayer et al. 2012) and to her adventures. From episodes such as “What Goes Around Comes Around” (Season 3) in which Carrie’s Manolos got stolen at gunpoint, to “Ring a Ding Ding” (Season 4) when she realized that the reason she could not afford a down payment on her apartment was because she had spent more than US\$40,000 on shoes, to “The Real Me” (Season 4) when she fell off her stilettos while walking down the catwalk, all the scenes and plot twists that heels could possibly have inspired were woven into the series’ narrative, making them a distinctive element of the SATC brand itself. And in the mythology surrounding the transformative power of celebrity shoe designer brands that SATC helped fuel, nothing would beat the moment when Mr. Big, Carrie’s on-again off-again romantic interest, finally got on one knee and proposed ... with a *Manolo Blahnik* “*Something Blue*” satin pump instead of a traditional engagement ring (SATC: The Movie. The scene is available at the time of this writing at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQEHTGdq1mE>).

Parker’s own love affair with shoes has led the actress to recently launch a successful line of footwear: *SJP Collection*, which includes and echoes some key heels featured on SATC, including a pair of sparkly Mary Jane heels (Goldberg 2015) and a set of colored bridal satin pumps, two styles obviously imbued with fantasy.

5. Slipping away?

A decade has passed since SATC ended. Some say the pre-crash era series now feels retro (e.g. Lawson 2014). And so, perhaps, does the lifestyle of upscale brunches, Cosmopolitan cocktails, cupcakes, and celebrity shoe-designer heels. One thing is for certain, though. The year 2015 was a tumultuous one for heels. Consider the online backlash targeted at the Cannes Film Festival after a group of women wearing flat shoes were turned away from the red carpet (e.g. Freeman 2015), demonstrating in the process how tenacious the dress code of the conservative elite remains today. Or contemplate the celebrations over Barbie finally finding herself free from the tyranny of permanent tiptoes thanks to her new articulated ankles (e.g. Coorsh 2015) (and potentially leading the ever versatile working girl to a new professional challenge: physiotherapy and the treatment of muscle atrophy that inevitably results from years in heels). Even *The Wall Street Journal* pondered about the relevance of heels in a modern world (Madsen 2015).

Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) their bad press, heels continue to hold a fascination. News of rocket scientists hard at work re-engineering high heels to ensure better distribution of weight and better support has been reported (e.g. Bloomberg 2015). And some of the most prestigious museums in the world have held exhibits focused on heels, tying together issues of gender, class, labor, cultural appropriation, esthetics, industrial development, popular culture, and consumer behavior (e.g. “Standing Tall: The Curious History of Men in Heels,” Bata Museum, Toronto, 2015–2016; “Killer Heels,” Brooklyn Museum, NY, 2014–2015; “Shoes: Pleasure and Pain,” Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2015–2016; “Roger Vivier,” Palais de Kyoto, Paris, 2013). This interest from the hard sciences, “museumification,” and the popular marketing tactic of sharing brand content rooted in romantic ideals of craftsmanship (e.g. Dior’s “Dioressence Know-How” campaign: http://www.dior.com/diortv/fr_be/videos/mode-femme/escarpin-dioressence-savoir-faire) may signal the development of new meanings in heels’ history: that of being engineering and design marvels.

Whatever its fate as footwear, the heel as a marketplace icon seems poised to march forward with flair.

Notes

1. As of October 2015.
2. The history of heels is obviously a lot richer than anything I could possibly hope to account for in a 2000 word article. In this piece, I focus on some key Western historical figures and developments that contributed strongly to the meanings heels have come to embody today.

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