In a critique of Bernard Mandeville’s 1723 poem, The Fable of the Bees, George Blewhitt quips that it is relatively easy “to convince young Fellows, that in the midst of their debauchery they are promoting the publick Good” (222). As I chuckled to myself over the truth of this, I realized that it explained why I dread teaching Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* to my tenth grade World Civilizations class each year: they are so easily persuaded by Adam Smith’s economic logic not only because it is by now so widely accepted in our consumer society as to appear to be common sense, but also because (at least as it is typically taught) it tells them what they want to hear: buy things; it’s for the greater good. This idea is so appealingly self-evident to 21st century American teenagers, that they have a hard time imagining that it could’ve taken mankind until 1776 to discover it.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, moral resistance to and critiques of consumption were extremely widespread—as the hostile reactions to Mandeville’s argument for the economic benefits of vice, which in France included his being burnt in effigy (McKendrick 16-17), suggest. These critiques of consumption were rooted in the medieval belief that consumption needed vigorous patrolling in order to maintain the stability of the social order—a belief that had been enshrined in the sumptuary code during the Middle Ages. Rather than weakening this view of consumption, England’s growing economy, which created new opportunities for people from all classes to participate in the market as consumers, appears to have originally bolstered it. In other words, the medieval view of consumption—and of the economy in general—proved surprisingly persistent, lingering well after capitalist practices had taken hold. Indeed, this view was only overcome when 18th century economic writers reframed consumption as a benign and explicable force that guaranteed rather than undermined a well-ordered society—thus downplaying capitalism’s potential for large-scale social disruption, which earlier writers and
legal discourse had drawn so much attention to. The broader argument of this paper, then, is that the triumph of classical economics, so complete by now that my students can hardly imagine another way of looking at the economy, was neither inevitable nor the result of its superior rationality.

Anxiety over consumption was hardly new; in Europe, these anxieties had in fact already been formalized during the Middle Ages in the form of sumptuary laws. Sumptuary laws first appeared in Genoa in 1157; laws in France, Germany and Italy followed by the 13th century (Muzzarelli 605). On the whole, they evince a concern that “excess spending” on luxuries would “ruin both families and society at large” (Muzzarelli 602), and in this sense they can be viewed as an example of a paternalistic authority endeavoring to protect people from what were then considered to be their own worst instincts or desires. Furthermore, Medieval sumptuary laws were not just moral, or political, or theological—they were all of these things at once because these things were themselves inextricably related in medieval society. As one scholar puts it, in the context of the ecclesiastical polity and a law that was explicitly both divine and human, the regulation of dress, ornament, and food was linked to a theological and moral concern with proper signs of identity and community… The regulation of apparel and appearance was always and crucially a matter of theological significance, a question of moral governance of the means or media through which an invisible and divine order was to be seen and honored in its manifest form. (Goodrich 711-712)

The medieval social order was considered to be static, and clothing was a way of making differences in rank more visible. For this reason, it makes sense that rules about who could wear what would be formally codified: they both expressed and sought to preserve the divinely-ordained social order, and this could hardly be left up to chance or individual whim. That sumptuary laws were also probably always a reflection of anxiety over the supposed stability or permanence of the social order is also suggested by evidence that sumptuary laws proliferated after the Black Death, when higher incomes may have led to increased consumption by members of all social orders (Muzzarelli 608). In light of this, it seems safe to conclude that, already during the Middle Ages, sumptuary laws reflected a certain measure of concern that the divinely ordained social order might fail to hold. A static social hierarchy was considered desirable, but by no means guaranteed.
These medieval concerns with social order and stability—and the fear that the social order might be susceptible to change—are in evidence in English sumptuary laws right through the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, the last English monarch to issue a new sumptuary code. A chart designed to convey the basic mandates of an Elizabethan sumptuary law to the populace conveys this point nicely. Its function is indicated by its title: The briefe content of certayne acts of Parliament agaynst thinordiante use of apparell (1559). Designed to familiarize the public with the Queen’s reissued sumptuary code, it is a broadside containing a large chart on which luxury items are listed in stunning specificity and the class that is allowed to wear each is duly noted. For example, velvet in “gownes, coates, or outer most garments” is prohibited to all but barons, knights, and those who have an estate providing a certain yearly income, while cloth made of gold or silver is restricted to earls (though viscounts and barons are permitted to wear them in their doublets). In its minute codification of social distinctions, this document would make a nice companion piece to a text like William Harrison’s A Description of Elizabethan England (1577), the first chapter of which lists and describes (in descending order of rank, naturally) each social group in England. Both reflect a society in which a permanent social order is, paradoxically, both assumed and in need of vigorous patrolling.

It should not be surprising, then, that the maintenance of this social order was imbued with great moral weight in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. A 1562 proclamation by Elizabeth I, written to remind her “Justices and other ministers” to better enforce already existent laws, manifests a moral concern by linking “the monstrous abuse of Apparell” to rising rates of crime in general; the preamble thus notes that though the “Realme” is “well… furnished with good lawes and orders, for redresse of many enormities,” transgressions “neverthelesse do rather growe than abate.” What the Queen here implies is that allowing sumptuary laws to be ignored is likely to lead to a more generalized lawlessness. Similarly, the preamble to a law issued by James I, By the King: A Proclamation for the wearing of Woolen Clothes (1616) ends by invoking “evill effects in corruption of Maners tending to pride and riot” as a justification for the restrictions that follow, implying that sumptuary laws are justified because excessive consumption not only blurs important social distinctions, but also unleashes dangerous desires within His Majesty’s subjects. Restricting consumption thus becomes a way of preventing a more generalized form of disorder. What these examples show is that sumptuary laws were
thought to contribute to a more generalized state of order within the realm (and their violation was thus a matter of grave monarchial concern).

On the one hand, then, early modern English sumptuary laws reflect a “medieval” or “pre-modern” view of the social order. But this social order was, according to many historians, already being transformed by new economic conditions. Though there is considerable debate amongst historians about exactly when a “modern,” economy emerged in Great Britain, few would dispute the idea that economic changes provide the immediate context for the debates over luxuries that erupted in the 17th and 18th centuries. In particular, Neil McKendrick has argued that there was a “commercial revolution” during the 18th century such that “the first of the world’s consumer societies had unmistakably emerged by 1800” (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 13). Of course, wealthy aristocrats had long been consumers of expensive luxury goods (and sumptuary laws had provided them specific dispensation to do just that), and so it is no surprise that they continued what McKendrick describes as their “orgy of spending” during the 18th century (10). What was new, according to McKendrick (and what he suggests provided a new dynamism to the economy) was the increased levels of consumption by members of the middle and lower classes: “In imitation of the rich the middle ranks spent more frenziedly than ever before, and in imitation of them the rest of society joined in as best they might—and that best was unprecedented in the importance of its impact on aggregate demand” (11). Evidence of a widespread dispersal of luxury spending can also be found in a 1697 broadside, which, in the course of proposing a licensing-system for luxury consumption, lists the amount each social group would be asked to pay for such a license. Unlike earlier sumptuary laws, which make no reference to anyone below the rank of gentleman, this broadside includes references to “Yeoman and Rich Farmers,” “Retale Trades-Men,” “Handy-Craft Trades[men]” and even “Servants” as potential luxury consumers (Malkin).

However, while McKendrick’s analysis suggests that a consumer frenzy—a sort of 18th century equivalent to the modern-day spectacle of mobs of shoppers trampling one another to be the first in the door at a Wal-Mart sale—emerged dramatically and quite abruptly during the 18th century, other historians have argued that the “revolution” in attitudes and practices of consumption was more of a gradual evolution, and that it was already well underway in the early 17th century. Even J.H. Plumb, McKendrick’s co-author, acknowledges that consumption habits did not change overnight. As he puts it, the consumer mindset “still had to seep through the lives
of ordinary men and women,” and he claims this only started to happen by the end of the 17th century (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 317). Taking this even further, Jan de Vries, in his *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis*, outlines two “demand-limiting” factors (factors which, he emphasizes, had to be overcome before growth could be achieved in the early modern economy): the tendency of farmers to produce most of what they consumed, and the tendency of workers to reduce their working hours when wages rose, and thus maintain their disposable income at a constant—and low—level (178-79). More recently, de Vries has backtracked from this somewhat, in light of the fact that much of his earlier analysis of the “backward bending labor supply curve” was based upon 18th century accounts of lazy, indolent laborers written by the class that employed them; as de Vries puts it, “[such] commentary is not usually the product of disinterested observation” (“Industrious” 258). In a later essay, de Vries thus revises his earlier work, arguing that consumer demand triggered “reallocations of the productive resources of households” (255) during the 17th century; this “industrious revolution,” de Vries argues, paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. De Vries’ work suggests we should be cautious in attempting to pinpoint the key moment in which the economy (and people’s attitudes towards it) became “modern.”

Similarly, in his study of the early modern British economy, *Earthly Necessities*, Keith Wrightson characterized this transformation from a more agrarian to a more commercial economy as a gradual process that took place over the course of several centuries, rather than the dramatic “revolution” envisioned by McKendrick. Indeed, Wrightson argues that household economies were already becoming more enmeshed with local markets as early as the 16th century in England. But Wrightson also emphasizes the cultural forces that would’ve affected how middle class households conceptualized and interacted with such markets. He points out that while consumption had always been an important part of the social identity of aristocrats, for the “middling sort” this was not the case—and adopting the role of a consumer was therefore likely to have been met with more resistance and skepticism within the lower ranks of society. As he puts it, “It was not [for the middle classes] simply a matter of their enjoying greater access to a wider variety of desirable domestic goods. A propensity to indulge in greater consumer spending cannot simply be assumed, especially among people whose values placed such emphasis upon prudence and thrift in the management of the domestic economy” (299). In fact, he even points out that some of the attitudes and behaviors that had aided the earlier period of
economic growth following agricultural and urban reorganization would’ve been somewhat at odds with consumption (299). What the work of Wrightson, de Vries, and Plumb suggests, then, is that there was a prolonged period—extending from the late 16th century all the way through the 18th—in which attitudes towards (and practices of) consumption were in flux. Old attitudes persisted even as new market conditions began to apply pressure to them.

Certainly both trends are in evidence within the sumptuary code and broader anti-consumption discourse. Already in the Elizabethan era, we can see anxiety about the consumption habits of the lower classes in specific instances, and this seems to reflect the economic changes occurring during this time. Consider, for example, a set of articles issued in 1559 by the Queen’s Privy Council “for a reformation of … servauntes in certayne abuses of apparell.” This document asks “[e]very Lord and Mayster” to examine his servants and “cause them to understand what is lawefull for them to weare in their apparel, and take order to reforme it.” Wrightson reports that in the early 16th century, an estimated 60 percent of the English population between fifteen and twenty-four were servants in wealthy households (32-33), so this set of acts seems to reflect new economic realities while at the same time trying to hedge against them. But the document is not merely concerned with the dangerous aspects of dress—its propensity to confuse social class and thus subvert the medieval social order—it also expresses the idea that dress has a positive social function, since it can make the invisible visible. The final paragraph emphasizes this: “Yet it is mete and convenient that all Lordes servauntes (specially in the Courte) shoulde go semely and cumly for the honor of their Maister, which may be well done, weyering the commodities of this Realme, and brynge measure in all shape and forme of apparell.” Leaving aside for the moment the subtle condemnation of foreign articles (more on that later), what is important here is the assumption that the servant’s dress can bring honor to his master by making the otherwise invisible distinctions in order visibly apparent. While these articles reflect new social and economic realities, then, these changes are presented within the context of a social order still considered to be permanent, God-given, and unchangeable. In other words, though the new attention now being given to the consumption habits of servants (a class that did not merit consideration in medieval sumptuary codes) seems to point towards economic changes taking place in advance of McKendrick’s “commercial revolution,” these changes are still placed within the earlier framework which viewed consumption as a means by which the social order is made visible and thus preserved or stabilized.
The debate over “luxuries” that erupted in the late 17th century and continued well into the 18th needs to be viewed in two contexts: on the one hand as a continuation of medieval ideas about consumption’s potential for social disruption, and on the other, as a reaction to an entirely new set of social conditions. Indeed, even when a new economic view of consumption was introduced in the late 16th century in the form of mercantilism, the medieval idea of consumption persisted. The mercantilist understanding of consumption (in which consumption is thought to secure the well-being of the state) in fact tended to bolster rather than banish the earlier view of consumption as the means by which the social order was to be stabilized. Starting in the late 16th century, a mercantilist argument against “foreign luxuries” was added to the existing anti-consumption reasoning. In 1588, Elizabeth I recodified and reissued the sumptuary laws of her predecessors, Henry VII and Philip and Mary, with a preamble explaining why it was necessary to remind the public of these laws (and warning that this time, she meant business and the laws would be enforced). In the preamble, an economic argument against luxurious imported clothing takes its place alongside the already familiar moral arguments:

The Queenes Majestie hath considered into what extremities a great number of her Subjects are fallen by the inordinate excesse in apparell, contrary both to the good lawes of the Realme, and to her Majesties former admonitions by her Proclamations, and to the confusion of all estates, amongst whom diversitie of apparell hath bene alwayes a speciall and laudable marke, and finally to the impoverishing of the Realme, by dayly bringing into the same of superfluitie of forraine and unnecessarie commodities, not able to be answered with the naturall marchandise of the Realme” (A Declaration of the Queenes Majesties Will).

While the emphasis is decidedly on the potential of clothing to upset the social order by creating “confusion of all estates,” the last few clauses quoted here add something new by shifting attention to the economic effects of such consumption. A few decades later, King James’ Proclamation for the Wearing of Woolen Clothes, is even more specific about the potential ill economic effects of consuming imported fashions. The “excesse of Apparel” is now said to weaken not just particular persons or the power of the state but “the generall flocke of the Kingdome… by receiving in a greater quantitie and value of forraine Commodities, then the native Commodities exported do countervaile.” The Proclamation also notes that this weakens the domestic cloth industry “whereby infinite numbers of good people are set on worke.” In just a few short decades, the economic argument against consumption (which is, of course, essentially a mercantilist argument) had become significantly more prominent in the legal
discourse. However, because most “luxuries” consumed in England were foreign imports, this economic view was perfectly compatible with the earlier medieval discourse. Both viewed unregulated consumption as a grave threat to England’s preeminence.

Furthermore, though there were no more sumptuary laws passed after the Reign of James I, 17th century anti-consumption writers picked up where these left off and kept the medieval idea of consumption alive well into the 18th century. In these later arguments against consumption, which often argue directly for the resumption of sumptuary laws, consumption continues to be critiqued as a threat to social stability and the general well-being of the “Commonwealth”—and both the new, economic/mercantilist argument and the established medieval reasoning are used to make this claim. In a 1661 tract titled *Tyrranus, or The Mode, in a discourse of Sumptuary Laws*, for example, John Evelyn put forward a biting satirical indictment of the proliferation of fashion. Evelyn was the son of a wealthy gunpowder manufacturer who became, after the Restoration, a founding member of the Royal Society. As such, he was able to influence the policy of Charles II, which seems to be his intent in *Tyrrannus*. More specifically, the text urges Charles II not only to reinstate sumptuary laws but also to restrain the members of his own court from ostentation in their dress.

Evelyn employs a variety of rhetorical strategies to make this case—but the mercantilist/economic argument is perhaps most prominent. The text begins by complaining that English gentlemen (presumably those of Charles II’s court in particular) are much too enamored of French fashions (7). This critique of French fashion might at first appear to be motivated by simple chauvinism or xenophobia. However, it can also be understood as mercantilist in light of what comes next. As he begins to make his main appeal for the renewal of sumptuary laws, Evelyn increasingly relies upon mercantilist economic reasoning: he argues that sumptuary laws will encourage domestic consumption and employ “many thousand hands,” bring glory to “our Prince, when he should behold all his Subjects clad with the Production of his own country, and the People Universally inrich’d” (21-22). The essay is thus a prime example of the mercantilist view of luxury consumption as a threat to the economic well being of the state. However, *Tyrrannus* also remains deep invested in the earlier medieval view of consumption as means of stabilizing the social order. The text subtly hints at the instability of the social order of late 17th century England, implying that the proliferation of interest in fashion will lead to a confusion of social roles. For example, Evelyn at one point mentions that he is now more likely
to mistake a servant for a Gentleman (since even servants have caught the craze for fashion), and he then wistfully notes that Roman servants wore a “peculiar Habit, till the Common-wealth grew dissolute” (19-20). In this way, Evelyn hints at what might be the fate of England should this confusion between servant and master not be stopped: it may go the way of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Evelyn implies that the upper classes have a responsibility to prevent this from happening. His comical description of what can only be described as a fop, which he uses to launch his critique of fashion, demonstrates this:

It was a fine silken thing which I spied walking th’ other day through Westminster-Hall, that had as much ribbon on him as would have plundered six shops, and set up twenty Country Pedlars […] A Fregat newly rigg’d kept not half such a clatter in a Storme, as this Puppets Streamers did when the wind was in his Shroud’s; the Motion to behold […] but so was our Gallant over charg’d […] that whether he were clad with this Garment, or (as a Porter) only carried it, was not resolv’d. (11-12)

The implication here is clear: the over-decorated gentleman has burdened himself so much with luxury that, unbeknownst to himself, he has jeopardized his very status as gentleman (and thus now resembles a porter). In this sense it echoes the James I’s 1616 Proclamation, which expressed a concern that an interest in fashion had “wasted and weakened” both the state and the “meanes of particular persons (chiefly the Nobilitie and Gentlemen).” Furthermore, by comparing this man to a ship in a storm, and setting the entire scene in Westminster-Hall, at the center of English political power, Evelyn’s brief anecdote implies that such a gentleman is a threat not only to his own class interests, but also to the well-being and security of the nation. This appears even more pointed when one considers that Evelyn was writing this in between the first and second Anglo-Dutch Wars. Surely, the metaphor of a capsizing ship would’ve touched on a whole slew of national anxieties to Evelyn’s educated, aristocratic readers.

Evelyn’s tract seems to reflect the very specific concerns of his age (the new ability of servants to dress above their station and the decadence of Charles’ court) and demonstrates a familiarity with the new economic arguments concerning luxury consumption—but these contemporary concerns are framed in terms that would’ve been familiar in the Middle Ages. As we’ve seen, Evelyn’s mercantilist argument against unregulated consumption is embedded within a broader vision of a social order comprised of discrete classes knit together by mutual obligation. New economic conditions and the introduction of new economic ideas into the debates over consumption thus appear to have reenergized the earlier critiques of consumption.
by providing more ammunition to the argument that unregulated consumption was a grave threat to the well-being of the state.

What the preceding examples show is that the medieval understanding of consumption as the key to a well-ordered society persisted in the face of both new economic conditions and new economic ideas (mercantilism). However, the union between mercantilist and medieval arguments for the regulation of consumption was perhaps more fragile than it might appear in a text like *Tyrannus*. After all, from a mercantilist perspective consumption wasn’t a problem in itself, but only insofar as it transferred bullion from the domestic economy to a foreign one. If luxuries could be produced domestically, the mercantilist argument against them would disappear. According to Maxine Berg, this is precisely what happened in the 18th century: luxury was “domesticated” and the medieval idea of consumption was at last destroyed and replaced by a more modern understanding of it as an economic phenomenon, clearing the way for a “commercial revolution.”

In her article, “In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century,” Berg describes how, over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the English domesticated foreign luxury goods by, essentially, creating cheap knock-offs using more “modern” methods of production. This made such luxuries affordable to a broader swath of the population (thus possibly triggering de Vries’ “industrious revolution”) at the same time that it made their consumption unobjectionable from a mercantilist perspective. According to Berg, this domestication of luxury accelerated as Britain acquired a global empire, in that obtaining products like sugar, tea, and coffee from their own colonies, allowed those products to be marketed as “‘indigenous’ consumer goods” rather than as foreign luxuries (135). As a result of these processes, Berg argues, “Luxury as debated during the Enlightenment was disentangled from its long association with corruption and vice, and transformed into an economic concept covering production, trade and the civilizing impact of superfluous commodities” (94). For Berg, then, a modern economic view of consumption emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries and was the direct result of efforts by British manufacturers to make domestic luxuries.

Berg has helpfully summarized a key change in England’s economy that would’ve greatly weakened the mercantilist argument against consumption while also changing middle class consumption habits. It is also true that, by the 18th century, consumption was being discussed more and more in economic terms, and in terms that will strike us as quite modern, by
a good number of writers, including Bernard Mandeville, Daniel Defoe, Dudley North, and David Hume. Furthermore, by the late 18th century, even those who wished to criticize unregulated consumption found it increasingly necessary to address the idea that consumption might be economically beneficial. We might consider, for example, Henry Fielding’s 1751 essay “An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase in Robbers,” which is a particularly vitriolic attack on lower and middle class consumption habits. Though Fielding characterizes consumption as a grave threat to the social order, he also feels the need to acknowledge that it can be economically beneficial. He therefore includes, as part of his defense of upper class spending, the following: “The more Toys which Children of all Ages consume, the brisker will be the Circulation of Money, and the greater the Increase of Trade” (353). So there is some evidence to support Berg’s claim that consumption was “transformed” into an “economic concept” during the 18th century.

The main problem with this argument, however, is that (as we have seen) the link between consumption and the well being of the State pre-dated (and was not dependent upon) mercantilism. Removing the mercantilist argument against consumption hardly guaranteed that the new, economic view of consumption would now acquire hegemony. Indeed, the idea that consumption’s function was to stabilize the social order by making class distinctions readily apparent persisted well into the 18th century. To support this, we need only to return to Fielding’s “An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase in Robbers.” Though it was written nearly a century after Evelyn’s Tyranthus, its arguments are strikingly similar. Like Evelyn, Fielding draws a link between a disordered society and luxury consumption, arguing that the cause of the social ills then plaguing England in the form of banditry is to be found in trade, and specifically in the desire for luxuries. The difference between his argument and Evelyn’s, however, is that while Evelyn focused mostly upon the responsibility of the upper classes to set a good example (and maintain control) by reigning in their own consumption habits, Fielding’s attention is focused squarely upon the lower classes or, as he calls them, “very Dregs of the People” (345). This no doubt reflects changed consumption patterns in the intervening century between Evelyn and Fielding, itself a result of de Vries’ “industrious revolution” and the domestication of luxury described by Berg. Fielding notes that there are now far too many tempting diversions or “Places of Pleasure” for the lower classes (348). Overcome by “Voluptuousness” or the “Love of Pleasure,” the lower classes quickly squander what little
means they have (347). Thus, Fielding concludes that while the indulgences of the rich are not a significant social problem (“among [them] luxury is probably rather a moral than a political evil” [345]), the same cannot be said of the lowers classes:

aspiring still to a Degree beyond that which their Industry would intitle them; and abandoning themselves to Idleness, the more simple and poor-spirited betake themselves to a State of Starving and Beggary, while those of more Art and Courage become Thieves, Sharpers, and Robbers. (345)

Fielding thus advocates a law to restrict diversions and luxuries amongst the lower classes, though he does not use the phrase “sumptuary law,” which perhaps indicates a shift in public opinion towards such laws in the intervening years since Evelyn’s *Tyrannus*.

While Fielding’s argument seems quite different from Evelyn’s in that he is specifically concerned with luxury consumption amongst the lower classes, in fact the concern of both is with the stability of the social order, which they see as jeopardized by unreigned consumer desires. Fielding thus begins by summarizing how the relations between estates have been altered in the preceding century or so. He notes that “Even Servants, in Process of Time, acquired a State of Freedom and Independency, unknown to this Rank in any other Nation” and concludes that “nothing hath wrought such an Alteration in this Order of People, as the Introduction of Trade” (336). For Fielding, then, patrolling the consumption habits of the lower classes is a way of protecting the social order—and for Fielding (as for Evelyn) this is the moral responsibility of the elite. Fielding makes this transparent when he writes that the main purpose of his essay is to “rouse the CIVIL Power from its present lethargic state,” which he fears has rendered it “not able to govern [the Commonalty]” (341, 340). Both Fielding and Evelyn thus see it as the moral duty of elites to protect the social order from the disordering effects of trade.

It might be tempting to dismiss such arguments as evidence only of a small minority of backward-thinking elitists clinging to their traditional privileges even as the world around them was changing in ways that would soon make such critiques irrelevant. This is certainly how some of the 17th and 18th century defenders of consumption themselves viewed their anti-luxury foes. Perhaps most memorably, in *The Complete English Tradesman*, Daniel Defoe points out that the rise of the tradesman has been accompanied (almost naturally) by the decline of the aristocrat: “How many noble seats… do we see erected within a few miles of this city by tradesmen… while the seats and castles of the ancient gentry, like their families, look worn out and fallen into decay!” (244). The implication here is clear: the tradesmen is the gentlemen of the future, and
any aristocratic grousing about the uppity tradesmen with their pretensions to grandeur (as manifested in their sumptuous new estates) is merely the last gasp of a dying order, desperately struggling to maintain its position. Certainly there is some truth in Defoe’s assessment. Evelyn and Fielding’s protests against consumption no doubt reflect a certain awareness that the landed interest no longer exerts the same social and political influence that it once did. We might be tempted, therefore, to share Defoe’s brash confidence that the economic and ideological triumph of the “tradesman” was inevitable—and that the arguments in favor of regulations on consumption made by people like Fielding and Evelyn were doomed to succumb to the superior economic reasoning introduced in the 18th century, which at long last rationalized the market and ushered in more modern attitudes towards consumption.

To dismiss Fielding too quickly, however, is to ignore or overlook the persistence of the earlier view of consumption as the means by which the social order was made visible and thus preserved. Indeed, arguments like Fielding’s continued to resonate because they were absolutely correct to perceive in trade a powerful, transformative, and destabilizing force—capable of utterly destroying (and remaking in its own image) the social order. In order for consumption to be “freed” from its medieval baggage and transformed into an economic concept, then, it was not enough to convince people that it would lead to economic growth; they had to be convinced, too, that that economic growth was good—that trade and the consumer desires it unleashed were not the dangerous and unpredictable forces that they had long been held to be. In short, what had been described as disorder in writings on consumption from medieval sumptuary laws right through Fielding had to be reframed as itself a kind of order. And this is precisely what the most innovative economic writers of the 18th century did.

The persuasive power of both Mandeville’s “Fable of the Bees” and Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* lies in the fact that they present just such a vision of a morally ordered universe governed by the predictable and fathomable laws of trade. Mandeville’s poem describes two hives, one in which vice proliferates in every possible aspect of life, and the other that has repented of its vices. No surprise here (to a modern reader at least): the vice-filled hive flourishes, whereas the virtuous one stagnates. Thus, we get the pithy lesson, “Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live, /While we the Benefits receive” (217). It is this line of reasoning, no doubt, that provoked such a strong reaction amongst Mandeville’s early readers. Indeed, the poem was considered an affront to morality when it was first published in 1714, with protests of it often
taking violent form, as already mentioned. Clearly, to many of Mandeville’s contemporaries, his poem appeared to flout traditional morality, and its embrace of consumerism seemed little more than self-interested indulgence.

These moralistic objections to Mandeville would have found a better target in the work of another pro-luxury poet of the 18th century, Voltaire. Voltaire’s poems, “The Worldling” and “Man of the World: An Apology for Luxury,” praise luxury and its pursuit as the cause of individual human happiness. “The Worldling” is mostly an account of all the pleasures of the modern world; thus it begins with the announcement, “For my part, I thank Nature sage, /That she placed me in this age” (266). “Man of the World,” which was written as a defense of “The Worldling” after it (much like Mandeville’s poem) was savaged by the public, is more argumentative. It addresses an imagined critical reader and, essentially, unmask his as a hypocrite who enjoys and benefits from luxury just as much as Voltaire does (“For thee the world at work has been, /That thou at ease might vent thy spleen /Against that world, which for thy pleasure /Has quite exhausted all its treasure” [273]). In both poems, Voltaire’s perspective is essentially amoral (or immoral): he brazenly flaunts the fact that he likes the modern age not because it produces great wealth for the public at large (in fact, he acknowledges that the poor “maintain” the wealthy without sharing most of the benefits of growth), but because it furnishes him with a comfortable lifestyle.

Comparing Voltaire’s pro-luxury poems with Mandeville’s Fable allows us to grasp the extent to which the latter does, indeed, present a deeply moral vision. It is certainly true that moral chaos and general disorder appear to prevail in any one segment of the hive. For example, Mandeville writes that the civil servants are all corrupt and “Rob… the very Crown they slaved” (208), then goes on to add that such corruption spreads to every quarter of society: “For there was not a Bee but would /Get more, I won’t say, than he should; /But than he dar’d to let them know” (208). However, Mandeville counters this in his descriptions of the hive in its entirety. Consider, for example, the following description of the sinful, commercial hive given in the poem’s third stanza: “Vast Numbers throng’d the fruitful Hive; /Yet those vast Numbers made ‘em thrive; /Millions endeavouring to supply /Each other’s Lust and Vanity” (205). Here we have millions of bees who, without knowing it, are actively engaged in supplying each other’s wants—each within his or her own proper sphere, as the poem goes on to make clear by describing each sector in its own stanza. This “zoomed out” image of the hive as a whole makes
it clear that the moral chaos that thrives within each of the hive’s individual sectors is part of a larger order. In other words, the poem’s most important argument is that the disorder that the anti-luxury writers feared would spring from unbridled consumption has not and will not come to pass, for commerce creates its own order. True, the medieval idea of a social order knit together by mutual obligation (and made visible through properly regulated consumption) has been replaced by a social order held together by production and consumption. But the key point is that the earlier medieval view of the social order has been transformed rather than eschewed.

This aspect of Mandeville’s reasoning was, more or less, adopted by Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations*. As anyone who has bothered to crack Smith’s massive tome will no doubt quickly realize, however, The Wealth of Nations has little to say about consumption; the “invisible hand” is introduced in a discussion of the supply of labor. Nevertheless, what Smith’s work does is provide an economic law to replace the political law that was still, in Mandeville’s Fable, awkwardly necessary in order to guarantee the virtue of the hive. The law or “justice” is in fact the secret sauce that makes Mandeville’s vision of consumption as a moral good work: “So Vice is beneficial found, /When it’s by Justice lopt and bound” (218). Smith’s description of the way in which individuals pursuing their own self-interest end up “naturally, or rather necessarily” serving the greater interests of society, allows Mandeville’s hive to be virtuous without the constant intervention and supervision of the Law. Together, they constitute a powerful moral argument for consumption—one that is heavily indebted to earlier ideas about consumption’s key role in making the social order visible and permanent.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Smith’s economic theory also presents, like Mandeville’s Fable, a vision of a well-ordered market. Indeed, Smith’s descriptions of the commercial world emphasize the extent to which it is well ordered and well governed by laws. In other words, Smith’s commercial world is, like Queen Elizabeth’s realm, “furnished with good lawes and orders” (By the Quene [1562]). The text’s obsession with orderliness is in evidence, for example, in the following description of the division of labor:

The division of labour, however, so far as it can be introduced, occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour. The separation of different trades and employments from one another, seems to have taken place in consequence of this advantage. This separation, too, is generally carried furthest in those countries which enjoy the highest degree of industry and improvement; what is the work of one man, in a rude state of society, being generally that of several in an
improved one. In every improved society, the farmer is generally nothing but a farmer; the manufacturer, nothing but a manufacturer. The labour, too, which is necessary to produce any one complete manufacture, is almost always divided among a great number of hands. How many different trades are employed in each branch of the linen and woollen manufactures, from the growers of the flax and the wool, to the bleachers and smoothers of the linen, or to the dyers and dressers of the cloth!

What an orderly world we have here, with each individual performing one unique function, and with no confusion of roles. This passion for division and classification, and for discovering order within the seemingly chaotic obviously reflects the intellectual climate of Smith’s own day, the Scottish Enlightenment. What I have hopefully shown here, though, is that the urge to imbue the social and economic realm with a moral order connects The Wealth of Nations not only to Mandeville’s Fable, but also to earlier critiques of consumption. Like Mandeville, Smith zooms between broad angles and close-ups to help us understand how the chaos of our lives constitutes a larger commercial order. In doing so, both writers mount a powerful response to those who would argue that unfettered consumption will lead to profound social disorder.

As we know, it would soon become nearly impossible to conceptualize consumption outside of the classical economic framework that was being hammered out in the late 18th century. However, what I’ve been trying to suggest here is that this new view of consumption was not necessarily more “correct” or “rational” even if it did stimulate economic growth. Indeed, my analysis suggests that the supposed “rationalization” of the market accomplished in the late 18th century may itself have involved some sleight of hand: consumer desire, which had so long been perceived as a dangerous and disorderly force, had to be described as both incredibly powerful and entirely benign. This was no small feat. Indeed, if our modern media are any indication, we’re still not entirely convinced that unregulated consumer desires serve the greater good. We have only to think of the recent hullabaloo on Fox News over the luxurious indulgences of people living on welfare, who have the audacity to own such luxury goods as microwaves and refrigerators (Shere)—or, on the other end of the economic spectrum, the scandalized reportage on the sumptuous wedding of a Facebook executive (Kirkpatrick)—to recognize this. In the end, then, it is perhaps not a coincidence that the text that perhaps did the most to make the world safe for unfettered consumerism, The Wealth of Nations, says little about consumption. Even now, it seems, it may be easier to imagine that an “invisible hand” is silently
ordering the market if that market is a place in which industrious workers have come to sell their labor rather than the messy realm of consumption, where human desire reigns.

Works Cited
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