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Louis XIV's spikes became milady's — Heels

by Martha Glenn, H. Ec. 4

If present day America is any sort of guide, men have always been ridiculing, degrading, and in every way, mocking the footwear of the damsels of the day. The man you love most will give you an admiring look from head to toe, stop at the feet, look back up at you, and say, "Your spurs are pointed the wrong way aren't they, dear?"

The next time this happens, count ten—slowly, refrain from making your "spurs" connect with his shins, and remind him of the crackowc shoe that his sex wore back in the eleventh century. It all started with the crusaders who returned from the East with talk about the Eastern peaked toe.

As the talk increased so did the length of the toe. Soon they had to be stuffed with moss, hay or wool, or be formed with whalebone to keep their shape. Then it became impossible to keep the toes from dragging without having a chain connected to a garter at the knee and supporting the toe on the other end. Finally laws were passed to regulate the length of toes on men's shoes.

A commoner was allowed six inches, a gentleman could have a foot, while the toes of nobility could extend two feet if so desired. The Pope condemned the shoes, but this only seemed to stimulate the gallant men into longer toes, and adding bells to the tips to make more noise than the regular flip-flop of the toe had before.

Or if that didn't squelch your handsome friend with ideas on women's footwear, try this. Ask him if he would rather have you wear shoes with a duck's bill toe. When the fashion of flopping toes finally subsided, fashion went the other way. You guessed it, soon Queen Mary had to limit the width of toes to six inches! These toes were also stuffed and usually slashed to show off the bright colors of the stuffing material.

Or you might ask your doubting friend; "What do you want me to wear, chopines?" Then you can explain that chopines are a simple kind of sandal put on a foot shaped platform or still-like pieces at both ends of the sandal. They were first designed as harem shoes, then revived in Venice many years later. There they towered to the stupendous heights of thirteen inches.

How often have you heard something like, "Those spikes you are wearing could be used to build a house?" Well, don't let any man get by with remarks like that. Just remind him that another of his sex is given much of the credit for the advent of the high-heeled shoe.

When Louis XIV was in command of things in France, he felt lacking in height so he tried to raise himself by putting high cork heels on his shoes. Well, immediately everyone followed suit and any advantage he got from the higher shoes was completely annulled. However, the idea caught on and this was the real start of today's high heeled shoes.

The women during the period of Louis XV wore the same type of shoe only the heels were a little higher. The heel was called the French or Louis heel and is often seen in a modified, slimmer version today. For goodness sake don't let him find out about the ladies of this same period who not only wanted high heels, but would bind their feet with a heavily waxed linen tape so that they could force their feet into shoes many times too small.

Luckily for those ladies they were carried nearly everywhere they went in sedan chairs, for when they got on their feet to stand or walk it nearly always resulted in a fainting spell from the pain and pressure on the feet.

By 1774, when Louis XVI took the throne, the height of women's shoes had gone to such extremes that they had to start carrying walking sticks to keep their balance. Servants were called in to help them up and down stairs. But then came the French Revolution and such aristocratic dress became an automatic invitation to the guillotine. Such thoughts seemed to bring the women back to their senses and back to earth in sandals and other soft shoes without a heel. These styles were reflected across the Atlantic to the American shores and shoes.

To the men then, we extend most of the blame or praise as the case may be for the shoes we are wearing today. Perhaps in complete fairness we will even have to give the men credit for their common shoe sense, while we go on, gluttons for punishment.