GROOMED FOR POWER:
A CULTURAL ECONOMY OF THE MALE BODY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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by

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ABSTRACT

Groomed for Power tells the story of how men’s bodies are made: whose labor produces them, and how meanings are inscribed upon them. It tells this story by focusing on one of the most dynamic moments in the history of men’s fashion: the nineteenth-century American ‘beard movement,’ in which tens of millions of men adopted elaborate facial hair for the first time in centuries.

A cultural history from the bottom up, Groomed for Power asks readers to reconsider both fashion and body care in light of the work that makes them possible. As such, it shows how four communities of workers – including African-American barbers, British razor makers, patent hair product advertisers, and women’s fashion writers – helped shape and lend meaning to this movement.

What emerges is an ‘accidental’ history of the most important development in men’s fashion between the decline of knee breeches and the rise of blue jeans: a history that none of its participants set out to make, but which proved enormously consequential nonetheless. Intimately linked to many of the ‘big stories’ of nineteenth-century American history – including the hardening of white supremacy, the rise of American economic nationalism, and the emergence of a ‘natural’ ideal of manhood – the story of the ‘beard movement’ offers a body’s-eye-view on the American past.
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INTRODUCTION:
AN ‘ACCIDENTAL’ HISTORY OF MEN’S GROOMING IN AMERICA

In September of 1832, a prophet of God lost his beard. Born Robert Matthews, the Prophet Matthias – herald of the New Jerusalem and founder of the Kingdom of God on earth – was arrested by New York City police and ignominiously shorn of his long, grey-flecked beard.¹

It was not the beard to which police objected. Rather, they were following up on claims that the prophet was deranged in his senses and defrauding his followers. But his style of grooming didn’t help matters. The men and women who saw his massive beard – as well as his long mane and fingernails – perceived it as an outer manifestation of something more deeply troubling: evidence of his fanaticism, his perversion, and his insanity. Indeed, when Matthews finally faced fraud charges in 1835, the presiding judge singled out the prophet’s hair for special reproach, advising him to “serve his sentence, shave off his beard, lay aside his peculiar doctrines, and go to work like an honest man.”² Echoing an opinion most likely shared by a majority of New Yorkers, the magistrate made it clear that honesty, industry, and orthodoxy – as well as a host of other virtues – were all at variance with the practice of beard-wearing.

The judge’s neighbors to the north apparently felt similarly. Two years before Matthews’s encounter with the New York police, Joseph Palmer, a citizen of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, found himself behind bars after resisting an armed mob intent on forcibly shaving his long, unruly beard. There he remained for nearly a year, until his jailors, exasperated by Palmer’s tireless letter-writing campaign, finally agreed to his release. But a half-century later, the incident still stung. When Palmer died in 1875, his family erected a large memorial –

² Ibid., 164.
complete with bearded bas-relief bust – that bore the inscription “Persecuted for Wearing the Beard.”

By that time, however, the sitting President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, sported a beard – as would every elected Republican president from Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) to Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893). Nor was this a recent development. As early as 1853, roughly one-in-eight New Yorkers, according to a decidedly unscientific survey in *Scientific American*, favored the style. And by the early 1860s, half of all general officers in the Union and Confederate armies were bearded, with less than one-tenth appearing wholly clean-shaven. The style became so popular, in fact, that in the later years of his life, Palmer discovered that a minister who had once upbraided the Fitchburg native for his facial hair now wore a “luxuriant growth” of his own. According to his son’s recollection, an incensed Palmer “went up to the man of God and stroking his whiskers, said to him, ‘Knoweth that thy redeemer liveth?’”

It was not just the prevalence of facial hair that had changed, however. It was also its meaning. Previously maligned as a marker of deviancy, the beard was now celebrated in books, articles, poems, and pamphlets as an emblem of what the *Home Journal* termed “manly power and dignity.” Echoing this sentiment, an author for the *American Phrenological Journal* claimed that facial hair “gives to the male countenance that true masculine character, indicative of energy, bold daring, and decision. … [I]t becomes both a sign and promoter of masculine power

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4 “Bearded Civilization,” *Scientific American* III (Jul. 9, 1853), 342.
5 For more on these calculations, see note 10 in chapter four below for details of this analysis.
and beauty.” Still others claimed that the beard was conducive to health, saved its wearers time and money, and accorded with both divine and natural law.

Thus, in just over two decades, the style for which Joseph Palmer had spent a year in jail, had become a vital appendage of elite masculine self-presentation – an index of one’s respectability, moral character, and fitness for power. Adopted by tens of millions of men in the fifty years between 1845 and 1895, the beard proved the most important development in men’s fashion between the decline of knee breeches and wigs at the turn of the nineteenth century and the rise of blue jeans in the mid-twentieth.

The origins and meaning of this transformation in men’s grooming are the subject of *Groomed for Power: A Cultural Economy of the Male Body in Nineteenth Century America* – the first book-length scholarly study of the facial hair fashion that swept the antebellum and Civil War-era United States. The project – which spans the years between 1800, when the powdered wigs of the colonial gentry fell into disfavor, and 1865, when beard-wearing achieved cultural

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9 For more on this subject, see chapter four below.
11 While a number of popular histories on this subject exist (see note 16 below), scholarly works have been slower to follow. For article or chapter-length exceptions, see Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men: The Revealing History of Facial Hair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015 [forthcoming]), esp. chs. 8 and 9, both of which deal, at least in part, with the history of facial hair-wearing in the United States. N.B. This work makes reference to a pre-print version of *Of Beards and Men*. See also Sarah Gold McBride, “‘Power Is on the Side of the Beard’: Masculinity and Facial Hair in Nineteenth-Century America,” *U.S. History Scene*, Jan. 28, 2013 (online publication). On the ‘beard movement’ in Victorian Britain, see Christopher R. Oldstone-Moore, “The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain,” *Victorian Studies* 48 (Fall 2005), 7-34; Robinson, “Fashions in Shaving and Trimming of the Beard.”
hegemony – devotes particular attention to the elite white men who most enthusiastically embraced the new style of grooming, as well as the emerging urban centers, both North and South, that dominated the landscape of American fashion. Though anchored in case studies of four regionally-representative cities – Boston (New England), Cincinnati (Northwest), Richmond (Upper South), and New Orleans (Lower South) – the project ranges widely over sources from cities large and small throughout the United States.

*Groomed for Power* argues that the nineteenth-century facial hair fashion was instrumental in inscribing ideas about race, nation, and gender on the bodies of the white male elite. Facial hair, however, was not a self-conscious expression of white men’s identity. Rather, it emerged as an ‘accidental’ embodiment of white supremacy, economic nationalism, and patriarchy, as these ideologies collided with the people whose work made grooming possible.

The relationships between white male elites and these communities of body workers are the subject of *Groomed for Power*’s four chapters. Focusing on African-American barbers, British razor makers, patent hair product advertisers, and American women’s fashion writers, the project shows how conflicts between members of these groups and the elites they served precipitated the facial hair fashion and shaped contemporary understandings of race, nation, and gender.

Throughout the project, I use a handful of specialized terms, several of which require definition at the outset. I use the word ‘elites,’ for instance, to refer to white men of wealth and education who had the material resources to make marked changes in their appearance, as well as...
the cultural resources to publicize the meaning of those choices.\(^\text{12}\) The word ‘grooming,’ refers primarily to shaving and beard-wearing, although coiffure and the use of patent hair products also fall under this heading.\(^\text{13}\) And the phrase ‘patent hair products’ refers to a range of chemical hair products – from tonics, restoratives, and dyes to pomatum, shampoos, and conditioners. Though few of these products were actually patented, the term patent hair products emphasizes their close resemblance – in both their chemical composition and marketing techniques – to patent medicines.\(^\text{14}\)

Two terms, however, deserve special attention. The first of these is the term ‘cultural economy.’ This term connotes the mutually constitutive relationship between meaning and work, culture and production. *Groomed for Power* demonstrates, for instance, how ideas about race shaped the practice of barbering; how changes in barbering reshaped white men’s bodies; and how white men’s bodies, in turn, called forth new ideas about race. Inspired by works in the so-called ‘new’ history of capitalism, I take neither ‘culture’ nor the ‘economy’ as primary or causative.\(^\text{15}\)

The second term is the word ‘beard,’ which was used in markedly different ways in the nineteenth century than it is in the twenty-first century. Today, the word ‘beard’ connotes an

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\(^\text{12}\) I have chosen to focus on elites, rather than men more broadly, primarily for purposes of manageability. As I revise the manuscript of this dissertation for publication as a monograph, I hope to incorporate the grooming styles of men from a wider variety of social, ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds.

\(^\text{13}\) The project’s focus on shaving and beard-wearing does not reflect a belief on my part that these practices were inherently more important than the others, but simply the fact that they underwent more dramatic transformations during the period in question.


uninterrupted band of facial hair stretching from ear to ear by way of the chin. Beards can be
long or short, full or sparse, worn with or without a moustache. But, so long as they meet the
criteria above, they may, with justice, be called beards.\(^{16}\) In the nineteenth-century, however, the
word ‘beard’ could be used to designate anything from what we would call a moustache to a full,
antamed wreath of facial hair.\(^{17}\)

Clearly, then, it was not the physiological extent of one’s growth that defined the beard.
Instead, nineteenth-century Americans typically defined the word ideologically. The beard, in
their eyes, was an idea, not a thing – one that connoted a rugged and rational manhood, as
opposed to effete, fashionable urbanity. The Biblical prophet Moses and financier Jay Gould,

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\(^{16}\) For examples of contemporary usages of these terms, see Allan Peterkin, *One Thousand Beards: A Cultural

\(^{17}\) For examples of instances in which the word ‘beard’ is used to refer to moustaches, see ch. four below.
according to nineteenth-century usage, possessed beards; Nathaniel P. Willis, the dandified editor of the New York Mirror, did not (see Figs. 1 and 2).  

This is not to suggest, of course, that the definition of the word ‘beard’ was completely unmoored from the physical configuration of men’s facial hair. Anticipating our own usage, the latter term was most commonly used to refer to full, wreath-like growths meeting under the chin, while words like ‘whiskers’ or ‘mustachios’ were typically reserved for short, partial, and well-manicured styles. But there were numerous exceptions to the usage. Abraham Lincoln’s facial hair, for instance – dubbed “the most famous beard in the history of the world” by historian Adam Goodheart – was, in fact, widely referred to as ‘whiskers’ in the months following his decision to grow it. And the word ‘beard,’ as noted previously, could be used to designate as little as a moustache. Thus, the essential definition of the beard resided, not in the physical pattern of grooming it designated, but rather in the gendered meanings with which it was associated.

In light of this definition, Groomed for Power argues that the history of the beard and the history of facial hair were not, in the nineteenth century at least, one and the same. Facial hair emerged first and was only gradually transformed into the ideological category of the beard. The first half of the project, therefore, addresses the emergence of facial hair; the latter half addresses the rise of the ‘beard.’

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I. Project Overview

Why did men grow facial hair? Previous scholarship on the rise of facial hair has emphasized the role of self-fashioning by both European and American men. Art historian Charles Colbert, for instance, has pointed to facial hair as an idiosyncratic emblem of men’s affiliation with the popular science of phrenology as well as Sylvester Graham’s vegetarian health reform movement. Historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore, in his forthcoming Of Beards and Men: The Revealing History of Facial Hair, has linked the style to expressions of German nationalism, French Romanticism, and British radicalism. And others have drawn connections between facial hair and transatlantic currents in religious extremism. In the eyes of these scholars, then, facial hair offered men an avenue for self-expression – a way to self-consciously elaborate aspects of their identity.

The present work offers an alternative explanation. It argues that men grew facial hair because shaving became more painful; and that shaving became more painful because men took up the operation themselves, often using low-quality razors. Why a growing number of men assumed a task that had previously been the province of skilled barbers, many of them African Americans, is the subject of chapter one. Why razors declined in quality and increased in price is the subject of chapter two.

20 The prominent exception here is Dwight Robinson, who, as the quote above suggests, argues that changes in facial hair fashion are effectively indicative of timeless cycles that, in some respects, defy meaning. In making this claim, he is echoing the famous argument made in Jane Richardson and A. L. Kroeber, “Three Centuries of Women’s Dress Fashions: A Quantitative Analysis,” Anthropological Records 5 (1940), 111-153. Richardson and Kroeber famously argued that women’s dress forms have gone through the same cycle for the past several centuries – with roughly one-third of every one-hundred year period dominated by either the bell, tubular, or bustled form of dress. See Robinson, “Fashions in Shaving and Trimming of the Beard.” See also, Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), esp. ch. 3, “Sentimental Culture and the Problem of Fashion,” 56-91.
22 Christopher Oldstone-Moore, Of Beards and Men.
23 Johnson and Wilentz, The Kingdom of Matthias.
The slow but steady movement of shaving from the barber shop to the home stemmed from the intersection of white supremacy and the rising fortunes of antebellum black barbers. Inside the segregated shop, white customers were confronted, not only with the normal power inversions of the space – in which men of color held deadly blades to the throats of white men – but with a new set of developments as well. Growing wealthier and more powerful over the course of the early nineteenth century, many African-American barbers struck their white customers as uniquely troubling embodiments of social inversion and disorder. As a result, white men felt increasingly fearful in the presence of their tonsors – a scenario exemplified by the literary trope of the murderous black barber. Mistaking their own cultural imaginings for reality, many customers chose to abandon the shop altogether and try their hand at home shaving, rather than submit to the touch of wealthy barbers of color.


Home shaving, however, proved difficult, vexing, and painful – a situation that was only exacerbated by the declining quality and increased price of razors. The latter predicament resulted from the intersection of home shavers’ economic nationalism – the conceit that the United States’ glory and security were contingent upon severing its dependence on foreign manufactures – and the harsh reality that the period’s best razors were made by English cutlers in the city of Sheffield. Culminating in the so-called ‘Black Tariff’ of 1842, Americans’ economic nationalism forced home shavers to choose between foreign razors, which suffered in quality as Sheffield producers cut corners to stay competitive on price, and the expensive, low-quality productions of a desperately immature domestic razor industry. For many, this choice portended nothing but pain. In desperation, a growing number of men decided to dispense with their razors altogether and instead grow facial hair. These ‘disgruntled ex-shavers,’ as *Groomed for Power* calls them, came to constitute the nexus of the American facial hair fashion.

The proliferation of facial hair, however, cannot explain how and why these growths came to be understood as beards. The latter process stemmed from hirsute men’s aggressive response to the ‘feminization of facial hair’ – itself the unlikely result of a dramatic increase in patent hair product advertisements. Alarmed by Americans’ growing tendency to view all men’s hair through the emasculating lenses of dandyism and fashion, these men embarked on efforts to endow all facial hair with the manly virtues of the beard. Chapter three thus examines the inadvertent role of patent hair product advertisers in this feminization of facial hair. And chapter four details hirsute men’s efforts to reinvent the facial hair fashion as a ‘beard movement’ – often using arguments borrowed from women’s fashion writers.

How, specifically, did the dramatic growth in patent hair product advertisements help precipitate the feminization of facial hair? These advertisements, the present study argues, were
widely believed to be directed at dandies: effeminate men of fashion who, in the public imagination, were characterized by the use, or overuse, of tonics, restorative, and dyes. Thus, as a result of this close association between dandyism and patent hair products, the proliferation of advertisements for the latter category of goods seemed, in turn, to imply the spread of dandyism. Opening their morning newspapers to find numerous, column-length advertisements for Barry’s Tricopherous or Bogle’s Electric Hair Dye, many American readers must have wondered whether the use of these products – and the ethos they embodied – was not, in fact, more wide-spread than previously believed. Turning to the disgruntled ex-shavers who increasingly populated the landscape of American men’s grooming, some must have detected in their desperate whiskers the subtle taint of dandyism.

In response to this feminization of facial hair, hirsute American men embarked on what chapter four calls the pro-beard polemic: a collection of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lengthy, earnest articles on the virtues of beard-wearing that appeared in the American press between roughly 1845 and 1865. The goals of the pro-beard polemic were twofold. Its first aim was to endow men’s facial hair with the manly ideology of the beard by changing what physical configurations of hair counted as a beard. Polemicists sought to make scraggly whiskers manly, in other words, by making whiskers legible as beards. Its second aim, meanwhile, involved smoothing the beard’s ideological rough edges. Long associated with the Biblical patriarch and frontiersman, as well as more recent figures like Matthias and Joseph Palmer, the beard was untainted by dandyism and effeminacy. But it was also typically regarded as uncivilized and even unhinged. Thus, pro-beard polemicists tempered their celebrations of physical strength and

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manly independence, with paeans to health, frugality, and piety. Drawing on both ‘natural’ and ‘restrained’ discourses of manhood – as well as a body of arguments adapted from women’s fashion writings – pro-beard polemicists served up a heterogeneous vision of hirsute manhood. But, whatever its deficiencies as a logical statement, these efforts were incredibly successful, helping to make facial hair-wearing the dominant mode of male comportment by the end of the American Civil War in 1865.

II. Overall Contribution

Taken as a whole, Groomed for Power offers a portrait of American manhood as derivative, even ‘accidental.’ Manhood, in other words, emerges from the pages of this project, not as a self-portrait but rather as a palimpsest: the accumulated residue of other people’s labor and ideas. The facial hair fad, Groomed for Power argues, was the evidence of absence: the unforeseen consequence of white supremacy and American economic nationalism, as elites placed cultural and legal barriers between the people and things that made shaving possible. The ideology of the beard, meanwhile, emerged not through a feat of self-fashioning, but rather from a position of defensiveness and derivation. Made necessary by a motley community of patent hair product advertisers – and the feminization of facial hair that their ads entailed – the pro-beard polemic was made possible by the work of women’s fashion writers. In the final analysis, then, the bearded manhood that emerged from the antebellum period was roughly akin to economist Joseph Schumpeter’s famous comments on the origins of modern capitalism. The capitalist order, Schumpeter wrote, “rests on props made of extra-capitalist material.”

from ingredients that were neither white, American, nor male, white American manhood might, with justice, be characterized similarly.

Why does this story matter? First, because, in the realms of both scholarship and public life more broadly, manhood – and the manhood of white elites, in particular – continues to enjoy an unearned reputation for primacy and originality. Although a shrinking number of Americans would openly articulate ideas about women as the ‘second sex,’ about African-Americans as an ‘imitative people,’ or about members of the working class as ‘inarticulate,’ the residue of these ideas lingers in a public discourse that rarely, if ever, asks white men to acknowledge their indebtedness or obligation to anyone else. 28 Groomed for Power challenges this idea at the most fundamental level: suggesting that the identities and even the physical persons of the white male elite were not of their own making.

Second and similarly, the project takes a novel approach to decentering the white male subject in American historical narratives. Previous efforts in this vein, including those of feminist historians, labor historians, and historians of race and slavery, have concentrated on demonstrating the role of subaltern peoples in constituting canonical institutions, ideologies, or structures of power. Perhaps the most obvious of these is capitalism. By turns, scholars have highlighted the role of groups ranging from women and working class white men to free and enslaved African Americans in contributing to the emergence of this institution. 29 But other

28 For evidence of this, consider the outraged response to President Barack Obama’s infamous “You Didn’t Build That Speech” of July 2012. When Obama suggested that business owners owed at least part of their success to America’s physical, financial, legal, and educational infrastructure, a portion of the American right erupted in fury. The notion that roads and bridges; water and electricity; a currency and financial system; public education; courts and police; as well as property and contract law might have contributed to entrepreneurs’ business success apparently sat poorly with many of these individuals (as well as persons who consider themselves the latter group’s allies).

institutions and ideologies – including democracy, antislavery, and Manifest Destiny – have been subjected to similar critiques.\(^\text{30}\) The present study builds on the perspective of these works, but nevertheless pursues a different strategy, focusing on the white male body in an effort to demonstrate its contingency upon subalterns’ physical and cultural labor. The body itself, I believe, is in many ways a more fruitful location for this kind of analysis than abstract institutions and ideologies. Possessed of a concreteness that the latter subjects lack, the body offers an extraordinarily potent site for demonstrating elites’ indebtedness to the physical and cultural labor of subaltern communities.

III. Historiographical Engagements

\textit{Groomed for Power} makes a number of important contributions to an emerging corpus of interdisciplinary scholarship on grooming and the body. The most important of these involves redressing a chronological and regional gap in the existing scholarship. While the social and cultural history of men’s hair has long been a vibrant subject of inquiry in sociology, psychology, art history, medieval and early modern studies, and, to a lesser extent, in twentieth-century historical scholarship, it has nevertheless been stubbornly neglected by historians of the

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nineteenth-century – and particularly the nineteenth-century United States. Among the few scholars who have addressed the latter period, the work of historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore looms large. Though the bulk of his work focuses on the European context of the transatlantic facial hair fashion, Oldstone-Moore has recently taken notable forays into the study of men’s grooming in America. Building on Oldstone-Moore’s outstanding work, Groomed for Power seeks to fill a notable gap in scholarship on grooming and the body. Arguably the most significant period in the history of men’s grooming since the heyday of tonsorial politics in

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Cromwell’s Britain, the nineteenth-century American facial hair fashion demands far more robust historical analysis.

The present work, however, does not simply build on Oldstone-Moore’s insightful conclusions. It also engages them critically – seeking to revisit some of his key insights regarding the European component of a transatlantic ‘beard movement’ within a uniquely Americanist context. My disagreements with his scholarship are twofold. First, I believe it overstates the role of self-fashioning in the origins of the facial hair fashion. This is not to suggest, of course, that attempts at self-fashioning were wholly irrelevant to the rise of the style. *Groomed for Power* identifies four communities of self-fashioning men – including soldiers, religious extremists, social and health reformers, and young men of fashion – all of whom were highly visible early adopters of facial hair. But it also argues that these small, minority communities did not – in fact, *could* not – constitute the demographic locus of a movement that by the 1850s already encompassed several million men.

Second, I believe Oldstone-Moore’s work misstates the relationship between pro-beard discourse and the embodied progress of the style. The pro-beard polemic no doubt played a role in this proliferation of facial hair, which continued apace as it assumed a more prominent place in men’s body discourse. But, as previous scholarship freely acknowledges, beards – or, at least, what twenty-first century Americans would call ‘beards’ – were already well in evidence when

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34 This is not to suggest that these groups were uninfluential. Popular science and health reform movements, in particular, had an extraordinary cultural reach in the decades before 1860 – both in the U.S. and in Europe. Still, any account of the mid-century facial hair fashion must take stock of the overwhelming majority of American and European men who had no affiliation with the fine arts, phrenology, health reform, religious and political radicalism, the military, or dandyism. See, for ex., John D. Davies, *Phrenology, Fad and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Madeline B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).
the polemics commenced in earnest in the mid-1850s. Why, then, would nineteenth-century readers and writers devote such extraordinary time and energy to popularizing a style that was already quite popular? The answer is that polemicists were not primarily interested in popularizing facial-hair – or even, with few exceptions, in altering the patterns of facial hair that many men were already wearing. Rather, they were interested in altering the cultural connotations of existing facial hair. They were concerned, in other words, with transforming facial hair into beards – ideologically instead of physically. This, then, is *Groomed for Power*’s primary departure from Oldstone-Moore’s assessment of the nineteenth-century ‘beard movement’: its insistence that the pro-beard polemic was mainly concerned with altering the meaning of styles that men were already wearing, rather than calling more facial hair into existence.

*Groomed for Power*’s engagement, however, is not limited to scholarship on coiffure and grooming. It also attempts to more fully integrate work on gender, labor, and the body. The intersection of these three subjects is still relatively novel. While both gender and the body as well as gender and labor have long been considered in relation to one another, it is only in recent years that all three of these perspectives have coalesced. Perhaps the most successful of these

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35 Responding to G. M. Trevelyan’s claim that the beard style was born in imitation of hairy veterans returning from the Crimea, Oldstone-Moore notes that “the trend was well underway before the war began in 1854.” Unfortunately, only one-in-five of the scholar’s sources date from before 1854, and fewer than one-in-ten date from before 1850, suggesting that the bulk of this discourse was aimed at justifying rather than inspiring the practice of beard-wearing. See Oldstone-Moore, “The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain,” 7; George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942), 549. See also Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men*; Gold McBride, “Power is on the Side of the Beard.”

efforts, at least in the context of scholarship on early America, include Kathleen M. Brown’s *Foul Bodies* and Michael Zakim’s *Ready-Made Democracy*. The former highlights the role of women’s ‘body work’ in enabling an emerging culture of cleanliness in colonial America and the early American republic, while the latter points to the role of both female seamstresses, as well as male tailors and clothiers in transforming the material and ideological content of nineteenth-century men’s dress.\(^{37}\) Rich and illuminating works, Brown and Zakim’s books suggest some of the potential intellectual benefits offered by viewing gender, labor, and the body in the same frame.

*Groomed for Power* adopts this perspective and situates it squarely within the context of conversations on antebellum American manhood. This, in its own right, is an important contribution, as studies of manhood and the body – let alone labor histories of men’s bodies – have been few and far between in nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship.\(^{38}\) By importing this perspective – one that combines gender, labor, and the body – into the context of scholarship on nineteenth-century American manhood, I hope to do for the latter field what works like Jeanne Boydston’s *Home and Work* or Seth Rockman’s *Scraping By* have done for the study of

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capitalism. Revisiting men’s bodies in light of the subaltern physical and cultural labor that produced them, *Groomed for Power* offers readers a new way to de-center elite white men within American historical narratives.

This is not the current project’s only contribution to studies of American manhood, however. In addition, it asks scholars to reconsider elements of a binary model of male gender norms that, in recent years, has become increasingly popular among historians of nineteenth-century American manhood. This binary model contends that two norms of manhood competed for dominance in the antebellum and Civil War-era United States. The first of these, variously titled ‘natural’ or ‘martial’ manhood, was embodied by ‘roughs,’ ‘swells,’ and sporting men. These men, scholars argue, anchored their masculine prerogative in their bodies and defined manhood in terms of the physical, often violent, domination of women, racial ‘inferiors,’ and other communities of men. Opposed to this ‘natural manhood’ was an alternative ideal of ‘bourgeois’ or ‘restrained manhood,’ embodied by respectable ‘gentlemen’ who defined their gender in terms of their business acumen, their religious piety, and their role as companionate husbands and loving fathers.

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While the present work does not dispute the existence of these two competing ideals, it does question whether these ideals were attached to real, living men in any permanent sort of way. Its critique, in other words, concerns restrained and natural men, rather than restrained and natural manhood. Instead, Groomed for Power suggests that these ideologies of gender offered American men a repertoire of ideas and arguments that they could mix and match as they saw fit. This reality was particularly apparent in the heterogeneous ideal of hirsute manhood that emerged from the pro-beard polemic. Prodigiously blending arguments culled from both restrained and martial ideals of manhood, hirsute manhood reflected the exigencies of the feminization of facial hair, rather than the binary model of male gender identification.

In adopting this perspective, Groomed for Power emphasizes the instrumentality of gender norms. While gender norms can and do function as deep-seated and meaningful sources of identity, they are also instruments with which to bludgeon one’s opponents and discipline one’s allies. The originators of the binary model of male gender norms understood this well, examining how new ideas about manhood were generated and circulated in efforts to achieve various social and political aims. But, more recently, the very success of the binary model has caused subsequent students of manhood to lose sight of the relationship between ideology and

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41 Many of the proponents of a binary fully understand this distinction. It is only recent years that student of manhood and masculinity in the early nineteenth-century have begun to collapse this distinction in troublesome ways. See note 43 below.

42 See, for ex., Greenberg, Manifest Manhood, for a well-managed discussion of the role of gender norms in naturalizing the imperial projects associated with Manifest Destiny.
the individual, means and end.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Groomed for Power}, by contrast, seeks to avoid this pitfall by anchoring the emergence of hirsute manhood, not in an abstract realm of ideas and values, but in concrete questions of power, privilege, and prerogative. Petrified by accusations of dandyism, men effectively invented a hybrid model of manhood to reinforce their access to social and cultural authority. They were groomed, quite literally, for power.

Last but not least, the present project attempts to more tightly integrate bodies of feminist theory with nineteenth-century American manhood studies. The first and most integral of these is a corpus of theory surrounding the concept of ‘intersectionality’: the notion that the intersection of social and cultural identities in an individual or group is not simply cumulative. The canonical example of intersectionality in action involves a hypothetical woman of color, who faces challenges that are fundamentally different from the cumulative impediments encountered by a black man and white woman.\textsuperscript{44} But the theory is equally applicable to elite white American men whose class, racial, national, and gender identifications compounded in ways that were both complex and counterintuitive. Utilizing this perspective throughout, \textit{Groomed for Power} shows how the effects of its subjects’ white supremacy were compounded by the fallout of their economic nationalism, and how both were subsequently implicated in the conversations that emerged around gender, facial hair, and the body. The result is a portrait, not of men or manhood in transition, but rather \textit{elite white American manhood} as it changed over time.

In addition to theories of intersectionality, the present work also incorporates performative theories of gender. These are neither new nor revolutionary – save, perhaps, in the sometimes theoretically atavistic realm of manhood studies. Pioneered by Judith Butler and other

\textsuperscript{43} See, for ex., the panel entitled “Meanings of Masculinity in the Early Republic,” annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic (Philadelphia, PA), Jul. 17-20, 2014.

feminist theorists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, performative theories of gender treat the latter realm as a culturally-constructed set of behaviors and ideas that makes individuals legible as men and women, and not vice versa. In the context of Groomed for Power, performative theories of gender offer a particularly useful reminder that the subjects of this study could take neither their manhood nor their legibility as men for granted. Indeed, much of the story’s action is devoted to producing and reproducing ideals of embodied manhood that changed dramatically over time. And the study’s dramatic denouement involves elite white American men’s collective efforts to rethink the kinds of bodily practices that constitute manhood. As such, Groomed for Power offers a portrait of how grooming makes men, rather than how men make grooming.

IV. Methodology

With respect to methodology, Groomed for Power makes use of a mixture of approaches. One of the project’s most notable features is its use of quantitative methods to help answer a number of questions: what portion of a barber’s business, for instance, consisted of shaving? How did the number of barbers relative to the populations they served change over time? How frequently did grooming-related newspaper articles contain complaints about the painfulness of shaving? How did the price of razors change over time? What percentage of grooming-related newspaper advertisements consisted of notices for tonics, dyes, and restoratives?

These questions are central to the present project. Their answers, which would have been inaccessible in the absence of quantitative methods, have allowed me to chart vital changes in the work and material conditions of men’s grooming. The ratio of barbers to the populations they

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served, for instance, functions as a ready index of a far more important concept: namely, demand for barbers’ services. And changes in the price of British razors offer a good indication of how easily and cheaply Americans might have obtained these tools.

As a scholar trained in the first and second decades of the twenty-first century, I am well acquainted with the pitfalls of quantitative analysis. Despite the larger culture’s sunny optimism regarding ‘big data,’ historians have long memories of the excesses of cliometrics. I do not, therefore, suppose that all things can be measured quantitatively. Moreover, I am well acquainted with the problems of the sources on which I have based my analyses. As Seth Rockman and others have noted, city directories – on which I base several of my more important analyses – exclude a large number of the people they purport to represent. Nor, as historians know too well, are issues with the accuracy of sources limited to city directories alone. I have therefore proceeded with caution throughout, deploying relatively basic statistical analyses of all sources. And I have included only those analyses in which the results are sufficiently dramatic to outweigh any marginal inaccuracies in the sources on which they are based.

Taken collectively, I use the results of these analyses to chart the broad trajectory of men’s grooming: to convey the contours of social and cultural transformations that were often too vast or considered too trivial to be noted by contemporaries in textual or visual sources. Charts, graphs, and scatter plots therefore constitute the skeleton – to use a bodily metaphor – of the narrative that follows. The flesh of that body, however, consists of efforts to make sense of these quantitative findings using qualitative approaches. While the latter includes visual analyses, it consists primarily of close readings of printed and manuscript materials – including barbers’ diaries and published biographies, newspaper reflections on the history and meaning of facial hair-wearing, as well as contemporary literary texts, both canonical and obscure.


V. Conclusion

Dramatic though these body workers’ impact may have been, however, *Groomed for Power* is not, ultimately, a sanguine story of subaltern agency. While African-American barbers, working-class English cutlers, ambitious patent hair product producers, and antebellum women’s fashion writers may have inaugurated and shaped the early stages of the American ‘beard movement,’ it was ultimately elite white men themselves who determined its outcome. In some cases, elites’ choices were detrimental to body workers’ interests; in others, they were beneficial. Indeed, one of the great ironies of the pro-beard polemic, with its profound emphasis on frugality, the natural body, and personal independence, is that it did little to diminish American men’s material reliance on body work. During the 1850s and 1860s, in fact, demand for barbers’ services increased, razor sales boomed, and the market for patent hair products remained strong.

Nevertheless, the body care industries that emerged from the age of the pro-beard polemic were markedly different from those that entered the period. While the number of urban barbers rose relative to the populations they served, for example, the number of African-American barbers – especially in the North – fell dramatically, supplanted in large measure by immigrant barbers from Germany. The Sheffield cutlery industry, meanwhile, lost considerable ground to American razor manufacturers. And patent hair product producers were confronted with the first tentative efforts to regulate both the content of their wares and the substance of their advertisements. The products and ads that emerged from this shift were sturdier in their image, more reliable in their content, and – most importantly – far less reminiscent of dandies and dissimulation. Patent hair products, in other words, were on the road to respectability, while both barbering and the razor trade were busily being scrubbed of their most objectionable features.
What did all of this mean? First, it suggests that the pro-beard polemics, as noted previously, were never about changing actual grooming practices, but rather about altering the ways in which existing styles were perceived. If anything, the data indicate that the pro-beard polemic may have even had the effect of enabling, rather than restricting, more elaborate grooming practices – providing men with an ideological defense of both their facial hair and their manhood, even as they visited the barber for regular applications of tonics, dyes, and other dandified concoctions.

Second, this story suggests that men’s commitment to the specific ideals that the beard ostensibly represented were, at best, skin deep. Arguments about health, piety, and virility were, as the material history of men’s grooming indicates, largely a means to an end. The real substance of the fraught history of the beard, by contrast, was a more basic and brutal question of mastery: who, in a variety situations, would hold the balance of power? Would it be black barbers or white patrons? British razors makers or American consumers? And would hirsute white American men allow their enemies to impair their manhood – and, with it, their claims to social and cultural power?

*Groomed for Power*’s conclusion tells the story of how men answered these questions. Reinforcing their impaired manhood through a collective feat of rhetoric, they used their command of labor and capital to remake the economic relationships that had once proved so vexing: replacing black barbers with white ones; a foreign razor industry with a domestic one; and dubiously healthful patent hair products with more reliable ones. As such, the conclusion offers a reflection on how power and privilege worked in the Civil War-era United States. Even elites, the project argues, could not choose how their stories began. But they could, more often than not, choose how their stories ended.
What the prophet Matthias might have thought of all this we will never know. A disgraced Matthews died in 1841, wandering the American West in search of a new flock, long before the facial hair fashion hit its stride. But, in many respects, Matthias proved a remarkable harbinger of the style that was to come. Like him, the advocates of the beard yearned for a bygone era of manly virility and prophetic patriarchy; like Matthews, with his faux-military tunic and gold epaulettes, his hirsute antecedents fetishized the violent mastery of the military man; and like the would-be prophet, pro-beard polemicists were enchanted by the most questionable claims of science, medicine, and religion.\textsuperscript{46}

But perhaps their most striking similarity was this: both were frauds.

\textsuperscript{46} Johnson and Wilentz, \textit{Kingdom of Matthias}, 95-96, 106 [on Robert Matthews’s patriarchal aspirations], 98 [on his attire].
PART I:
An Era of Facial Hair
CHAPTER ONE:
RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN BARBER SHOP

African-American Barbers and the End of Clean-Shaveness

In the early years of the nineteenth century, white American customers described the barber shop as a place of sensory pleasure. Patrons entered the shop, removed their collars, and put up their feet. They were attended by trained professionals – often convivial and well-dressed – pampered with scented soaps and oils, and shaved or coifed in peace and pleasure. While there, they might enjoy the most recent edition of the newspaper, have a drink, or chat with friends and neighbors. It was a space of what historian Richard Stott has referred to as ‘jolly fellowship’ – rough but convivial all-male sociability.¹ But it was also a key site of American racial politics. Though many, if not most, barber shops were owned and operated by men of color, their clientele was usually exclusively white. And no small part of the pleasure of the shop resided in white customers’ ability to command another’s labor and subservience – an increasingly elusive experience in an America where traditional economic and familial hierarchies were quickly crumbling.

Beginning in the 1830s and continuing through the 1850s, however, all of that would change. American writers – echoing their British and Continental counterparts – would begin to imagine the barber shop as a site of upended hierarchies, of physical and moral danger. Over the course of these decades, a new and terrifying figure appeared in American fiction and journalism with growing regularity – a character who seemed a singular embodiment of all that was unwell in the shop. That figure was the murderous barber.

Most memorably exemplified in the English character of Sweeney Todd, the ‘Demon Barber of Fleet Street,’ the homicidal hairdresser had an equally rich literary history in North America. There, the character assumed a novel set of racial characteristics, reflecting the demographics of America’s predominately black barbering class, as well as white Americans’ growing fears of black violence. Consider, for instance, the short story “A Narrow Escape.” Among the most widely-circulated tales of tonsorial bloodshed, the anonymously-authored vignette appeared in dozens of newspapers in the late 1840s and early 1850s, appealing directly to white fears of black violence, as well as broader anxieties about the shop’s strange intimacies.

In this crudely rendered Gothic vignette, a wandering sailor enters a Mobile, Alabama barber shop, operated by an enslaved African-American barber. Sitting down for a shave, the two chat idly about the barber’s business and life prospects. Soon, however, the scene takes a far more sinister turn. Scraping at the sailor’s chin – his hand trembling, his eyes “like coals of fire” – the barber reminds the sailor that he holds in his hand a deadly weapon, musing aloud about “how easy it would be for me to cut your throat.” Brave seafarer that he is, the sailor bears up under the threat and advises the barber not “to try the experiment.”

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2 The words ‘barber’ and ‘hairdresser’ were used more-or-less interchangeably in the early-nineteenth century United States, though they did occasionally carry gendered connotations, with the word ‘barber’ referring to artists in men’s hair, and the word ‘hairdresser’ referring to artists in women’s hair. Following more common contemporary usage, however, I have used the words as synonyms.


5 “A Narrow Escape,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH), May 15, 1847
Proceeding in silence, the barber shaves his customer without incident, after which the sailor rises from the chair, offering the seat to an older gentleman patiently waiting for the hairdresser’s services. But just as the sailor leaves the shop, his ears are assaulted by a dreadful, evil sound – “something like a suppressed shriek, a gurgling horrible sound, that made my blood run cold.” Turning, the sailor takes in the terrible scene: “there sat the unfortunate gentleman, covered with blood, his throat cut from ear to ear, and the barber, now a raving maniac, dashing the razor with tremendous violence into the mangled neck.” Catching the sailor’s eye, the murderous barber falls down in a fit. Securing the assailant, the sailor soon learns that the barber “had been drinking deeply the night before, and was laboring under mania potu [delirium tremens].”

This was not, of course, the only appearance of a murderous barber in American letters. In addition to a number of less skillful renderings, the homicidal hairdresser also appeared in the guise of Babo, the ringleader of the slave rebellion at the heart of Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno. In one of the novella’s most memorable scenes, Babo, posing as the body servant of Don Benito, captain of the slaving vessel aboard which a rebellion has occurred, menacingly

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6 Ibid. N.B. Much of the tale’s language seems to have been inspired by a similarly pregnant scene in Charles Dickens’s Martin Chuzzlewit (published in 1844 and which contains its own reference to murderous barbers). The following scene depicts a conversation between Jonas Chuzzlewit and Dr. John Jobling concerning the latter’s lancets, which, as it turns out, Jonas subsequently uses to commit a murder:

“Jonas has opened one of the shining little instruments; and was scrutinizing it with a look as sharp and eager as its own bright edge.

‘Good steel, doctor. Good steel, eh?’

‘Ye-es,’ replied the doctor, with the faltering modesty of ownership. ‘One might open a vein pretty dexterously with that, Mr Chuzzlewit.’

‘It has opened a good many in its time, I suppose?’ said Jonas, looking at it with growing interest.

‘Not a few, my dear sir, not a few. It has been engaged in a – in a pretty good practice, I believe I may say,’ said the doctor, coughing as if the matter-of-fact were so very dry and literal that he couldn’t help it. ‘In a pretty good practice,’ said the doctor, putting another glass of wine to his lips.

‘Now, could you cut a man’s throat with such a thing as this?’ demanded Jonas.

‘Oh, certainly, certainly, if you took him in the right place,’ returned the doctor. ‘It all depends on that.’”

shaves his ‘master’ in a burlesque of servitude intended to disguise the true nature of power relations from the clueless visitor Amasa Delano. And yet even the latter figure, presently unaware of the true state of affairs, could not resist the “vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block.” His ‘vagary,’ as it were, turns out to be all too accurate. The trickle of blood that Babo ‘accidentally’ draws from Don Benito’s neck while shaving is merely the first of a torrent to come.\(^7\)

Nor were these fears of tonsorial bloodshed confined to fiction. By the late 1850s, the trope of the murderous barber had escaped the bounds of literature and taken up residence in the minds of even opponents of slavery. Speaking before a gathering of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1858, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would later lead a regiment of African-American troops during the American Civil War, noted the following. “I have wondered in times past,” Higginson reflected, “when I have been so weak-minded as to submit my chin to the razor of a coloured [sic] brother, as sharp steel grazed my skin, at the patience of the negro shaving the white man for many years yet [keeping] the razor outside the throat.”\(^8\) Thus, even in the most unlikely corners of American society, the experience of the shop seems to have been consumed by the specter and threat of violence.

It would be easy to dismiss these stories – and dozens of others like them – as little more than bizarre but inconsequential racist fantasies, were it not for a striking phenomenon: in the decades surrounding the publication of these stories, the act of shaving moved out of the barbershop and into the home. Acting on the fears expressed in these stories, a growing portion

\(^7\) Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno,” *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 203.

of American men refused the services of their barbers and began to undertake the operation themselves.

This dramatic shift in the location and agent of shaving is reflected in contemporary written commentary. In 1851, for instance, an aging contributor to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* recalled a time, sixty years past, when “the operation of shaving … was almost exclusively performed by the barbers” and “gentlemen shavers were unknown.” A Five years later, a New England editorialist and self-proclaimed authority on shaving and beard-wearing insisted that only one-in-six men were still being shaved at barber shops. But the trend is perhaps most powerfully manifest in demographic data from three major American cities from throughout the first fifty years of the nineteenth century (see Fig. 3). Indeed, in Boston, Cincinnati, and New

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9 *Gentleman’s Magazine* quoted in “Dealings with the Dead. No. CXLVII,” *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston, MA), Sep. 13, 1851.
11 For the barbers and hairdressers in each of these cities, see *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, 1800); *The Boston Directory* (Boston: Edward Cotton, 1810); *The Boston City Directory* (Boston: John H. A. Frost and Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1820); *The Boston Directory* (Boston: Charles Stimpson, 1830); *Stimpson’s Boston Directory* (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1840); *The Directory of the City of Boston* (Boston: George Adams, 1850); *The Cincinnati
Orleans alike, the number of barbers in each city relative to the shaving-age white male population declined dramatically between 1800 and 1850, indicating waning demand for their services among those most likely to purchase them.

Of course, the declines of barbers relative to the populations they served might also suggest two alternative conclusions. The first, that demand for barbers’ services slackened because fewer men were shaving, is unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. All available evidence suggests that clean-shavenness remained the dominant fashion throughout the first five decades of the nineteenth century. Antebellum images consistently depict American men with little or no facial hair (save for sideburns and muttonchops) prior to the advent of the beard movement in the 1840s and 1850s, and the few persons who dared defy the dominant fashion often faced considerable criticism. Describing mustachioed dandies in the early 1830s, for example, one journalist suggested that “but for the hairy argument in the negative upon their upper lips, [they] might be mistaken for rather sensible persons.”

Around the same time, Robert Matthews, the would-be prophet described in the introduction, faced even more dire approbation,
having his long beard forcibly shorn by an angry mob.\textsuperscript{13} If anything, then, standards of fastidiousness seemed to have increased over the course of the first half-century. Whereas members of the 1787 Constitutional convention, among the new republic’s most urbane elites, removed their hair no more than twice weekly according to contemporary receipts, by the late 1830s and early 1840s, one-tenth of barber William Johnson’s Natchez, Mississippi clientele shaved six times or more per week.\textsuperscript{14} And by the mid-1850s, even in the midst of the beard movement, an estimated one-sixth of all men shaved daily according to Massachusetts facial-hair authority Alonzo Lewis.\textsuperscript{15} Faced with dire social consequences for going unshaved, American men thus seemed to have removed their beards more, not less, frequently as the first half of the nineteenth century progressed.

The other potential explanation for the decreasing number of barbers relative to the populations of their cities – that mid-century barbers were more efficient than their predecessors – is also unsatisfactory. An aging Bostonian, for one, recalled that prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, “expedition” had been “a prime quality in a barber.”\textsuperscript{16} Chit-chat was kept to a minimum, and customers were hustled in and out of the barber’s chair. Decades later, however, the barber shop was described as a far more relaxing and luxuriant environment. All of this therefore indicates that barbers had not, in fact, become more efficient over the early decades of the nineteenth century. Thus, the declining ratio of barbers to the urban populations they served can be explained most readily by an increase in home shaving among American men.

\textsuperscript{13} Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, \textit{The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19\textsuperscript{th}-Century America} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{15} “The Beard,” \textit{Daily Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), Jul. 24, 1856.
\textsuperscript{16} “Dealings with the Dead. No. CXLVII,” \textit{Daily Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), Sep. 13, 1851.
Why did this happen? As the tales of tonsorial bloodshed suggest, white American men came to regard the barber shop as an increasingly dangerous space. This is not to suggest that customers literally feared for the lives – although the combination of sharp knives and near-strangers must have been unsettling for many. Rather, the shop – and most especially the shops of free African-American men – seemed to have posed serious threats to white customers’ sense of racial mastery, economic hegemony, and bodily control. Confronted by rising members of a black tonsorial community – men whose connections to the global marketplace of grooming brought them newfound wealth, learning, and power – a number of white customers began to wonder who was serving whom, who held the balance of power inside the fraught space of the shop. Rather than submit their bodies to the creative powers of racial ‘inferiors,’ many men withdrew from the barber shop altogether.

Racist fears were not, of course, the only reason white men abandoned the shop. Anxieties about alcohol and roughhousing male sociability convinced many to depart the rowdy, liquor-fueled space, as did broader transatlantic concerns about interpersonal touch, bodily boundaries, and the trustworthiness of strangers. The ready availability of grooming tools – including razors, strops, brushes, and soaps – also contributed to the shift, as did a bourgeois ethos, which prompted members of the rising elite to save money wherever possible, including by abandoning costly professional services in favor of cheaper home shaving. And the moral dangers ostensibly posed by the barber and his zeal for fashion also figured prominently in this process. The transition, in other words, was over-determined.¹⁷

But the vexed confrontation of elite white American men with a rising free black tonsorial class was undoubtedly the deciding factor in this shift. As such, it speaks to a broader history of racism in early American history. The barber shop was, after all, the location of some of white Americans’ most intimate encounters with people of color. In few other spaces did whites – most especially Northern and non-slaveholding Southern whites – talk, laugh, and come into contact with black men with such intimacy and regularity. That their opinions about the shop, shaving, and grooming were so thoroughly permeated by ideas about race – or, more specifically, by racist fears of black violence and power – should come as no great surprise.

What should come as a surprise are the long-term consequences of this shift. Removing the act of shaving from the shop, white American men soon discovered that they were wholly unequipped – both materially and technically – to perform the operation themselves. Making inept use of poorly-sharpened razors, shaving in poor light conditions, and equipped only with cold water, home shavers transformed what had previously been a source of pleasure into a daily parade of horrors. Shaving, in short, became a site of considerable pain – a situation to which thousands of men responded by growing beards.

The increasing discomfort of shaving was not the only reason men sprouted whiskers. Additional causes – many more explicitly cultural – are explored throughout Groomed for Power’s remaining chapters. But this dramatic shift in the sensory experience of grooming no doubt played a prominent role. As such, it begs us to consider racism – not just as a set of cultural norms for making sense of, or in many cases imagining otherwise invisible bodily

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difference – but rather as a factor in the very production of bodies.\(^{18}\) That white men grew beards was, in many respects, an effect of white supremacy – or perhaps more accurately, of perceived challenges to white supremacy. As such, it demonstrates the ongoing mark made by men of color on the bodies of the white male elite. From inscribing gentility on the persons of their patrons to implicitly challenging the social dynamics that had previously defined the shop, barbers of color made a lasting impact on the bodies of white American men.

What follows is the story of that mark – from the American Revolution to the eve of the American Civil War.

**I. The Work of the Barber, the Pleasure of the Shop**

Barbering had a long history in Europe and its colonies prior to the American Revolution, dating back to antiquity and beyond. Members of the tonsorial profession had hovered about the Roman bathhouses, performed surgery throughout the early modern period, and even inspired a cycle of plays about the charmingly irrepressible barber Figaro by French playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais, as well as popular operatic adaptations by Mozart and Gioachino Rossini.\(^{19}\) But during the decades surrounding the American Revolution, barbering underwent a number of transformations with important long-term implications for both the composition of its practitioners and those who used their services. These transformations helped inaugurate a

\(^{18}\) Race was not, of course, simply a system of representation or systemization. It was also, perhaps most importantly, a system of allocation – of determining who would be allocated to what kind of work, with what kind of rights and legal status, at what kind of pay or compensation. On the intersection of race’s representational and allocating modalities, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History* 87 (Jun. 2000), 13-38; Ariela J. Gross, *What Blood Won’t Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

distinct chapter in the history of men’s grooming, give rise to a black tonsorial elite, and create the institution of the nineteenth-century barber shop.

Perhaps the most important of these changes in barbering was broadly demographic. The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries witnessed a population boom in North America with growing numbers of people pouring into coastal cities. These swelling urban centers created a potential customer base for would-be barbers who, up until this point, had primarily worked as valets and body servants, maintaining formal ties to elite American households and only occasionally serving a broader public. While barbers and hairdressers continued to work as household servants well into the nineteenth-century, the growth of American cities helped precipitate a shift toward independent proprietorship.20

The Revolution and its aftermath had an even more marked effect upon the composition of the barbering trade. Hair and other body work had long been linked to people of African descent, as large slaveholders were among the few North Americans with resources substantial enough to afford body service. But the Revolution further strengthened this link. With its emphasis on personal independence as a basis for political participation, republican ideology rendered body service increasingly distasteful among would-be white male citizens, thus causing many Euro-American barbers to abandon the trade altogether.21 This, combined with the Revolution’s countervailing pressures on the institution of slavery – which helped precipitate gradual emancipation schemes in the northern United States and waves of manumission in the South – contributed to the creation of a free-black community with close ties to the barbering trade. Experienced in body work, well-versed in the ways of elite white men, and excluded from

other profitable lines of work, barbering offered free men of color a rare opportunity for success in business.22

Thus was born the venerable tradition of black barbering, which, by the late antebellum period, was sufficiently well-established to allow Cyprian Clamorgan, a St. Louis barber of color, to boast that “a mulatto takes to razor and soap as naturally as a young duck to a pool of water, or a strapped Frenchman to dancing; they certainly make the best barbers in the world, and were doubtless intended by nature for the art.”23 Representing a majority of practitioners in all regions of the United States save for New England, barbers of color dominated their profession – and most especially its upper reaches – from the turn of the nineteenth century until the decade before Fort Sumter.24

Black barbers’ professional domination did not come easily. Barbering was expert and difficult work. High-end tonsors worked long and irregular hours and were expected to master a wide variety of skills. In addition to cutting and styling hair – both in the shop and at the hotel rooms and private residences of their customers – many also engaged in small-scale mercantile and manufacturing activities: procuring, making, and selling an assortment of goods, ranging from razors and perfumery to hair dye, tonics, and bear’s grease (a decidedly unappealing styling and restorative product made from rendered bear fat).25 Henry and Louis Clamorgan of St. Louis, for instance,

24 In 1840, for instance, men of color represented only one-third of Boston’s barbers. See *Stimpson’s Boston Directory* (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1840).
25 William T. Johnson and Family Papers, O:24, Box 1, Vols. 8 and 9 (Cash Books, Oct. 1830-Oct. 1837; Nov. 1844-Jul. 1858); U:161, Box 1, Vol. 11, Folders 29-31 (Daybook, May 1830-Apr. 1835), Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA. See also advertisements for the Boston hair dressing room of
operated a successful ‘Depot of Elegant French and English Perfumeries, Toilet and Fancy Articles, Combs, Brushes, Razors, &c.’ Their work also typically involved making and repairing wigs – a skill that did not so much diminish in importance as move underground, following the decline of the powdered periwig in the late eighteenth century. Decades later, hairdressers continued to do a healthy business in toupees and perukes – as well as false whiskers, beards, and moustaches – although they now fitted and applied these items in discreet side rooms, allowing customers to maintain the fiction that their hair was natural. Barbers were even occasionally hired to groom the dead.

Benjamin F. Reeves and A. A. Creech. The former lists a wide array of tonics, restoratives, and dyes for sale; the latter a variety of razors and soaps. See *The Boston Daily Herald* (Boston, MA), Feb. 19, 1847; *The Boston Daily Atlas* (Boston, MA), May 26, 1849.


An 1833 advertisement for L. & A. Gilbert’s Gentleman’s Hair Cutting and Dressing Room noted that the proprietors had recently “added to their establishment a Private Room, for the accommodation of Gentlemen desirous of getting Wigs, Top pieces, Whiskers, Moustaches.” See *Boston Daily Atlas* (Boston, MA), May 6, 1833. See also Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1857).

But by far the most important part of barbers’ business centered on shaving – at least until the 1840s and 1850s. If the business records of Natchez, Mississippi barber William Johnson are any indication, shaving accounted for perhaps eighty percent of all services, and a similar percentage of revenues (see Fig. 4).\(^{29}\) Despite the fact that a shave typically cost only half the price of a haircut and a small fraction of the price of barbers’ wig-making services and mercantile offerings, men paid for a shave far more frequently than they did for anything else. As early as the late 1830s, as suggested above, a small percentage of William Johnson’s patrons were being shaved daily, and his overall clientele averaged between three and four shaves per week.\(^{30}\) Thus, shaving actually gained in economic importance during this period – even as an increasing number of men chose to apply the razor at home.

But the significance of shaving went well beyond barbers’ bottom lines. Delicate work, requiring a light touch and disarming manner, shaving defined the working lives of these ‘Knights of the Razor.’ Little wonder that it often served as a synecdoche for the tonsorial arts – for in shaving, as in much of their work, barbers were asked to make the uncomfortable comfortable: to “take white men by the nose,” Cyprian Clamorgan noted, “without giving offense, and without causing an effusion of blood.”\(^{31}\) And in large measure they succeeded in this impossible task. St. Louis barber Byertere Hickman, for instance, “tweaks a man’s nose with

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\(^{29}\) William T. Johnson and Family Papers, O:24, Box 1, Vol. 13 (Daybook, Oct. 1830-Oct. 1844); Vols, 33-34 (Ledger, 1833-1837; Aug. 1835-Nov. 1839); U:161, Box 1, Folder 39 (Vol. 26, Ledger, Feb. 1837-Oct. 1841, and cash book entries, Jan. 1866-Nov. 1867). These figures are derived from William Johnson’s detailed credit / ledger accounts, in which he lists the date, types, and price of various services purchased by his customers. The analysis is based on over 1,200 entries for 79 customers over more than a decade.

\(^{30}\) See note 14 above.

\(^{31}\) Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, 52.
a dainty finger, as though he regretted being compelled to take hold of the human face by the natural handle, and peels off the beard like a dairy-maid skimming cream.”  

Barbers managed to shave customers without causing offense, moreover, in spite of the lofty positions of their clientele and the considerable difficulties posed by their rough and rugged physiques. Nashville barber James Thomas, for instance, described the men who sat under his razor as some of the most powerful (and irascible) men in the city. Among his patrons, Thomas noted in his autobiography, were merchants, professionals, planters, politics, and even “a few Gamblers of the Gentlemen class whose families moved in the best circles.” These men, moreover, “seemed to have been built for service.”

They had length of frame, feet and arms, as a rule had heavy beards. Many had to be shaved low on the neck. It seemed the hair on the chest didn’t know where to stop. They had a plenty nose showing good wind, a tuft of hair in each nostril, which [had to] be cut, in either ear there was hair. In fact, the ear was hairy all over, which his barber would trim off. Their Eye brows were long and shaggy. I have heard people say, some of the older ones, [members] of their family had to wear a bandage to keep their Eyebrows up out of their eyes. There was hair on top of the nose.

Negotiating these densely hairy bodies thus speaks to what was perhaps barbers’ greatest skill: their mastery of cultural forms and social arts. Expert conversationalists, barbers were celebrated as engaging wits, cultivating an air of sociability and conviviality in their shops. Writing about his barber, an appreciative Massachusetts customer described him as “the essence of good-nature. His conversation, for the most part, consists of what Wordsworth calls ‘personal talk.’ He deals with men, not principles. Every flying bit of news, every anecdote, and in fact,

32 Ibid., 53.
34 Ibid., 74.
every good thing said by the leading wits of the day, seems to come right through his shop window, and to stick to him, like burs to a boy’s jacket.”35 Not all of this talk was necessarily believable. Barber Frank Robinson, according to Cyprian Clamorgan, could “rattle out more nonsense in ten minutes than any sensible man would believe in a week.”36 But it was almost always clever and entertaining.

The barber’s banter, however, was not the shop’s only attraction. Shop proprietors also helped curate a lively social scene – providing customers with liquor, musical instruments, and newspapers – the latter of which helped make the shop a favored site of (often heated) political exchange.37 “Mr. Clay, Mr. Webster, and Mr. Calhoun were much talked of as statesmen,” James Thomas recalled. “Greely of New York was often mentioned but the language in his direction was anything but complimentary.”38 When one customer had an opportunity to meet the influential editor of the New York Tribune, he gleefully reported to his friends that he “didn’t like him much,” as Greeley had “a repulsive habit of picking his nose.”39

During less cordial moments, men might squabble over possession of a particular newspaper40, grow belligerent when “full of drink and insolence,”41 mock each other’s appearance,42 light other customers’ hair on fire,43 or share scandalous stories about friends and

35 “Meditations in a Barber’s Shop,” Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Nov. 6, 1832.
36 Clamorgan, The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, 59.
37 William T. Johnson and Family Papers, O:24, Box 1, Vols. 8 and 9 (Cash Books, Oct. 1830-Oct. 1837; Nov. 1844-Jul. 1858); U:161, Box 1, Vol. 11, Folders 29-31 (Daybook, May 1830-Apr. 1835). Johnson’s carefully catalogued business and personal expenses include $4 for an annual subscription to the fashionable New York Mirror, $1.62 for a complete volume of Shakespeare’s works, $3 for the Cincinnati Magazine, $6 for the Mississippi Journal, and $3 for the New York Enquirer. Johnson’s accounts also include money for the purchase and repair of musical instruments, as well as for liquor and other libations.
38 Thomas, From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur, 4, 85.
39 Ibid., 77.
40 Procter, The Barber’s Shop, 73.
41 Ibid., 73.
neighbors. William Johnson, for instance, frequently reported stories of infidelity, divorce, vicious beatings, and transgressive sexuality in his diary. These included a queer encounter between two of Natchez’s male citizens in 1836, in which one man “attempted to suck” another’s “El panio [sic?]…. [T]he people were about to Lynch him,” Johnson concluded in a telling comment on frontier vigilantism, prompting him “to sell Out and Leave the place amediately [sic].” A more light-hearted entry, meanwhile, recorded an incident involving a hard-drinking townsman. “Sterns got Drunk,” Johnson noted, and “Made water in his pantaloons[.] That,” he wrote with satisfaction, “is a little a head [sic] of anything that I have herd of Lately.”

 Appearing with frequency in Johnson’s diary, stories like these must have figured prominently in barber shop conversation.

 Managing these spaces – which typically catered to a whites-only clientele – proved enormously challenging to their black proprietors. Contemporary codes of white supremacy effectively precluded men of color from giving orders to Euro-American customers, physically restraining them, or otherwise checking the worst excesses of their behavior. Just how quickly and aggressively white patrons countered perceived efforts at restraint by their African-American barbers can be inferred from an incident in James Thomas’s autobiography, in which he asks a customer to explain the details of the Wilmot Proviso, about which the customer and several other whites had been chatting. “The set back I got from him,” the barber recalled, “for asking such a question caused me to be careful as to who I plied questions to with regard to politics. Among other things, he told me I had no right to listen to gentlemen’s conversations.” If Thomas – a wealthy, mixed-race professional with personal ties to the cousin of President James

45 Johnson, William Johnson’s Natchez, 120.
46 Ibid., 83-84.
Polk – could be treated in this manner, one can only imagine how white customers might respond to aggressive attempts on their tonsors’ part to restrain roughhousing ribaldry.

And yet the available evidence suggests that barbers were at least moderately successful in preventing their shops from descending into the kinds of masculine excess for which other sites of antebellum male sociability were notorious.\(^{47}\) How did they do so? Since more direct avenues of restraint were unavailable, they did so primarily by appealing to their customers’ social aspirations.\(^{48}\) These appeals took many forms, the most obvious of which involved barbers’ interventions in the bodies of their customers. Keeping abreast of a transatlantic market in style, they carved this gentility onto the faces and bodies of their clientele. Barbers thus served as some of the most important agents of gentility in early America. Their labor and knowledge allowed aspiring whites to manifest it on their persons.

But perhaps barbers’ most important appeal to patrons’ aspirations involved the physical space of the black-owned barber shop itself, which, as numerous commentators agreed, was without parallel in the Euro-American world. Again and again, observers described everyday pleasure palaces that, given the limited resources at barbers’ disposal, nevertheless seemed to rival the splendor of European palaces. Common appointments included polished marble floors of black-and-white tile, great framed mirrors lining the walls, and capacious armchairs for both the customers being served and those awaiting service. Others described razors and scissors of gleamingly-polished steel, snowy white porcelain basins in which barbers washed patrons’ hair, lustrous brass kettles that hung, heating water, above immaculately maintained stoves, colorful


glass bottles that held bear’s grease, pomatum, eau de cologne, and rosewater, as well as dozens of identical, gold-stamped lather mugs that hung like a frieze along the upper rim of the carved wooden mirror frames.⁴⁹ Such was the space in which American men – most especially elite white American men – were tended by their barbers. Genteelly appointed, they lent a restraining air of dignity and gravitas to men’s grooming.

And yet the overall effect of the space was not so much one of restraint as of pleasure. This pleasure was not merely aesthetic or cultural; it transcended the beautiful décor and the opportunities for edifying reading and conversation. These were no doubt important components of the experience, but much of the pleasure of the shop was simply and unabashedly sensory.

“No one enters” a barber shop, wrote one New Englander, “without having a mellow glow of satisfaction steal over his soul. In summer it is cooler, and in winter warmer than the street, so that the first sensation is a highly pleasurable one.”⁵⁰ Nor did the pleasures end there. The barber’s services, when performed with skill, could be as enjoyable as the space itself. Indeed, for a New York journalist, a good, professional shave was a veritable catalog of sensory pleasures: “the water just hot enough but not scalding – the delicately perfumed soap – the sufficient lathering – the keen weapon – the light hand – the snowy, soft towel – in a word,” he continued, “the luxury of the whole operation” made shaving a pure delight.⁵¹ The barber shop thus catered to sight, smell, sound, and most importantly, touch. As such, it transformed the social obligation of grooming into an opportunity for pleasure, sociability, and fun.

But perhaps most importantly – and most insidiously – patrons seem to have delighted in the sense of racial mastery at the very core of the barber shop experience. James Thomas, for

⁴⁹ Bristol, Knights of the Razor, 59-61; Procter, The Barber’s Shop, 129-130.
⁵⁰ “Meditations in a Barber’s Shop,” Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Nov. 6, 1832.
instance, noted the litany of demands he regularly received from customers. Many, he recalled, “were very particular and would lecture the attendant on the slightest occasion. When the customer would come, he would like enough say ‘Wash your hands’. Just washed e’em Judge. Wash e’em again. Then he would notice the linen about to be used on him. He raised a small row if the barbers [sic] breath smelt of Onions or his hands smelt of a common cigar.”52 These demands, moreover, were not limited to the Southern elites that Thomas typically served. As historians Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr. and Quincy T. Mills note, the shop offered even the poorest and most degraded white customer an opportunity to enact racial mastery.53 Regardless of the economic and social transformations that were occurring outside of the space; regardless of men’s loss of patriarchal authority within the family circle, or the decline of artisanal independence in the workplace; regardless, even, of many Northern men’s increasingly mixed feelings about legal mastery and the institution of slavery; regardless of all this, the barber shop gave men the ability to live out the ultimate fantasies of American manhood, white supremacy, and republican independence: to subordinate another, to command his labor, to master him.54 For six cents per shave, white men could live out the dreams and aspirations – however briefly – of men ranging from Thomas Jefferson to William Cooper.55

Who could resist?

52 Ibid., 74.
53 Bristol, Knights of the Razor, 52; Mills, Cutting Along the Color Line, 5-6.
II. The Rise of a Black Tonsorial Aristocracy and the Decline of the American Shop

Many customers, apparently, could resist the allure of mastery, for between 1800 and 1860, shaving underwent a dramatic transformation, moving out of the shop and into the home. This transformation was, in many respects, over-determined. A wide variety of factors contributed to public shaving’s ongoing decline over the first half of the nineteenth-century. Perhaps the most obvious was the widespread availability of razors and other high-quality grooming tools, which, as chapter two will suggest, appeared on the market in great numbers after 1815. While ultimately damaging to barbers’ business, it was a transformation in which tonsors took an active part. Selling razors, strops, shaving cases, brushes, and soaps – as well as honing and otherwise managing razors – became lucrative side businesses for a number of American barbers. For some, like Boston’s James G. Barbadoes, selling razor strops and dyes proved so lucrative that they gave up on barbering altogether, embarking instead on new careers as fancy goods merchants and patent hair product producers. But in selling these goods, they nevertheless helped participate in the movement of shaving from the shop to the home – transforming razors and other grooming tools from the rare, expensive, and closely-guarded productive capital of the tonsorial class to the everyday accoutrements of the middle-class chamber.

In the short run, however, the sale of these items was just one of a growing-number of side streams of revenue for America’s artists in hair. Expanding their operations from shaving,

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56 According to the Boston city directories for 1820 and 1830, Barbadoes had already worked as a barber for more than a decade when he relocated from 56 to 26 Brattle Street in 1833. His relocation notice, however, says nothing of his past life as a barber, instead emphasizing the wide array of clothing, perfumery, and grooming tools that he has on hand for sale. When he again appeared in the 1840 directory, it was as a clothing and fancy good merchant. See Boston Daily Atlas (Boston, MA), May 6, 1833 for notice of relocation. See also The Boston City Directory (Boston: John H. A. Frost and Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1820); The Boston Directory (Boston: Charles Stimpson, 1830); Stimpson's Boston Directory (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1840).
hair cutting, and wig-making, barbers increasingly invested in mercantile and manufacturing operations, as well as bath houses and showers. Henry and Louis Clamorgan, for instance, installed not only baths and showers in their upscale St. Louis shop, but a bowling alley and bar as well. There, the brothers’ clients, according to historian Julie Winch, could be “bathed and shaved, drink a glass or two of whiskey, play a game of bowls, and probably, if they were new to the city, get discreet directions to the most select brothels in St. Louis.”57 Others, meanwhile, continued to pursue the barber’s traditional lines of work but did so on a vastly enlarged scale. Antonio Gilbert of Boston, for example, began placing advertisements in the city’s newspapers in the 1830s for his newly-conceived mail-order wig-making business. Customers needed only to measure their heads along several axes and send the barber a clipping of their hair, and Gilbert would do the rest.58

The net result was a peculiar and paradoxical development. As the number of African-American barbers continued to shrink relative to the population of prospective customers, the wealth and prominence of many of those in the profession increased dramatically. In Boston, Nashville, St. Louis, and a number of other cities, African-American barbers ranked among the richest and most powerful members of the free-black community. James Thomas possessed an estate of more than $400,000 by the time of the American Civil War, with considerable investments in real estate throughout the city and its surrounding areas. Not only was he the richest African American in the state of Missouri (to which he had moved in the late 1850s); he controlled more than five percent of all property in the state owned by people of color.59 Even acknowledging that much of Thomas’s wealth came from his marriage to Antoinette Rutgers,

57 Clamorgan, The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, 28.
58 Boston Daily Herald (Boston, MA), Dec. 24, 1836.
59 Loren Schweninger, introduction to Thomas, From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur, 12.
daughter of the Mound City’s richest woman of color, his life as a bachelor in antebellum Nashville was hardly one of penury. Earning more than $100 a month – close to half the average annual income for a contemporary white male wage earner – Thomas was able to purchase a $3,000 home before turning 30.\(^{60}\)

Other barbers were not nearly as wealthy as Thomas, but still constituted a considerable portion of what Cyprian Clamorgan termed the ‘colored aristocracy’ of his native St. Louis and other American cities. Cyprian’s older brother Henry, for example, was said to be worth $40,000,\(^{61}\) while Albert White, the man who assumed ownership of Henry and Louis’s bar, shop, and bowling alley after their early retirement, possessed more than $15,000 in savings.\(^{62}\) In present-day terms, these fortunes, according to a relatively conservative estimate, would be worth between five and twenty million dollars. Even William Johnson, whose wealth paled in comparison with that of Thomas and Clamorgan, nevertheless had a considerable estate, with large holdings in land and a handful of human chattel to his name.\(^{63}\)

The growing wealth of men like Thomas, the Clamorgans, and Johnson did not just signify their entrepreneurship or enterprise, however; it also signified a threat – or, at very least, an inversion of the established social order – in the eyes of white customers. In a nation permeated by white supremacy, the extraordinary wealth of men like the barbers above was unlikely to have been seen otherwise. Neither should we lose sight of the place these figures likely occupied in the white imagination, particularly in the North. As scholars have noted, African-Americans constituted a mere 1.2 percent of the Northern population and the urban

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 51-52.
landscape of the North prior to the Civil War was, in important respects, far more segregated than that of the South; it is therefore likely that, for many Northerners, their barber was among the handful of African-Americans with whom they had an even remotely meaningful relationship.64

This is not to suggest that every white person north of the Mason-Dixon line was shaved by a man worth $400,000. Far from it. Even though James Thomas continued to shave customers and cut hair long after he had accumulated enough wealth to allow him to retire from his initial line of work,65 the vast majority of black barbers were nowhere near as wealthy as he was. A significant number of these non-elite barbers, however, nevertheless worked in the shops of their wealthier counterparts. Thus, while the majority of black barbers remained poor – or at very least not rich – a growing number were employed in shops owned by men who were rich. This shift is reflected in the contemporary records: whereas nearly all urban barber shops were one-man operations prior to 1820, after 1840 roughly 1-in-3 barbers either owned or worked in a shop with more than one employee.66 Most of these were small enterprises, but others were considerably larger. By the time of the Civil War, James Thomas was operating a shop with over twelve seats, and F. & W. Robersons’ St. Louis ‘shaving saloon’ employed “five first class barbers.”67 By any contemporary standard, America’s leading black barbers were substantial men of business.

65 Schweninger, introduction to Thomas, From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur, 11-12.
66 Statistical analysis based on figures derived from my survey of early urban city directories. See note 7 above.
67 Thomas, From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur, 14; Clamorgan, The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, 40.
Barbers’ increasing wealth had two major consequences: first, it meant that a growing number of white men were groomed in spaces controlled by the wealthiest master barbers – even if the majority of these men were not actually shaved by the master barber himself. While they might avoid the humiliation of being personally attended by a man who made more in a month then they did in a year, they could not, ultimately, avoid his pervasive presence – apparent in everything from the name on the shop to its appointments to the way in which the journeymen barbers attended their clientele.

Second, barbers’ growing wealth had the effect of reinforcing a number of perceived humiliations about which many white men were already quite touchy. Consider, for example, that master barbers did not become wealthy simply by dint of hard work. They also did so by pursuing strategies similar to their colleagues in other economic sectors: namely, by creatively and ruthlessly reorganizing labor. For master barbers, this process looked very much like it did for other master artisans: they used a variety of mechanisms to transform journeymen barbers into permanent wage laborers and did their best to ensure that none but a few would go on to independent proprietorship. This meant that white customers who had previously sought solace in the shop – who saw it as an opportunity, however brief, to enact and experience the mastery and independence increasingly denied them in their working lives – now found in the barber’s premises a situation that echoed that of their own workplaces. For white customers whose hopes of ever seeing their name over the door of an independent business grew dimmer every year, the experience of regularly contributing to the fortune of a black tonsorial entrepreneur must have been especially galling.

But the ways in which black master barbers blurred racial boundaries were not limited to their wealth or their command of labor. Increasingly, wealthy tonsors of color refused to perform
the subordination that was expected of them or to disguise their growing power and influence – including their power and influence over whites. Cyprian Clamorgan, for instance, boasted that while members of the ‘colored aristocracy,’ as he designated the African-descended elites of his city, were barred from the formal political process, they had other means at their disposal for convincing whites to do their bidding. As large landholders and people of wealth, many of these ‘aristocrats’ owned houses that they rented to whites. They also traded in large volumes with white men of commerce. It was therefore an “easy matter for them to say to their tenants, ‘Mr. Blair and Mr. Brown are our friends – vote this ticket or seek another place of abode’” or “to tell the merchant that, unless he votes for certain men, he will lose a large custom; and no one acquainted with human nature will deny that such requests are usually complied with.”

Indeed, Clamorgan went so far as to boast that the rise of the Republican party in Missouri was “the result of the unwearied and combined action of the wealthy free colored men of St. Louis, who know that the abolition of slavery in Missouri would remove a stigma from their race, and elevate them in the scale of society.” Such, according to this well-informed tonsor, was the influence of his community.

Nor was such influence confined to men of Clamorgan’s level of wealth. Even less prosperous barbers and hairdressers seemed to have access to forms of social and cultural power that white patrons found troubling. William Johnson, for instance, was once asked by one of his customers to hold his tongue about an upcoming election “for a greate many,” as Johnson recorded in his diary, “would think that what I would say would have a great Effect.” Years later, Cincinnati women’s hairdresser Eliza Potter claimed in the introduction to her

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69 Ibid, 47.
autobiography that her job brought her into contact with “as many elements of misery as the world can produce.” 71 Possessing a long memory and a keen wit, Potter used her experience of ‘high life’ as fodder for a caustic exposé on the vanity and hypocrisy of the people she served. Indeed, in one of her more memorable anecdotes, Potter tells readers of how she cleverly helped cover up a husband’s affair after his wife had become suspicious. But while the hairdresser was eager to spare her client from heartache and embarrassment, she refused to accept the philandering husband’s gift of thanks. Instead, she gave him “such a talking to, I am sure he remembered some of my words to his dying day.” 72 Wealthy, independent, and educated, Potter had the power, position, and self-confidence to broadcast her employers’ foibles and ensure that they would find an audience.

Not surprisingly, barbers’ growing wealth, their control over labor, and their social and political authority came to be perceived by American whites as a threat to established racial, class, and even gender hierarchies. Many customers therefore began to wonder who was commanding whom. Did not the barber hold the knife to the white man’s throat? Did he not mark the white customer’s body in a way that the customer could not mark his own? Troubled by the implications of these questions, many whites began to reflect on the way in which barbers disrupted the boundaries of blackness itself – as well as its connotations of powerlessness, ignorance, and subordination. Consider, for instance, Baynard Rush Hall’s portrait of the fictional barber Frank Freeman in his 1852 ‘anti-Tom’ novel Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop. Freeman’s talents, Hall notes, “were of a high order”

72 Potter, A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life, 98.
and because of his very favorable opportunities, Frank, and not merely in contrast with negroes around, was a good English scholar; that is, he could read well, pronounce well, write a very legible hand, and cypher well in the ordinary and simple rules. Besides, being always employed as a steward and overseer, and meeting and doing business with gentlemen of fine education, his style of conversation was good; in fact, saving his color, he was on a par with the whites, generally, and in spite of certain philosopher and ethnologists Frank – Negro Frank – was better in all respects than some white men.73

But no doubt this sense of racial ambiguity was most apparent in the discourse surrounding New York women’s hairdresser Pierre Toussaint who, despite his fastidious observance of racial boundaries (Toussaint, for instance, refused to share a table with white guests at a dinner party that he himself hosted), was consistently described in ways that blurred the distinction between blackness and whiteness.74 One acquaintance, for instance, noted that “I never met with any other of his race who made me forget his color.” And another wrote in a letter to Toussaint, that, while speaking to his correspondent at night, he had forgotten “that you were not white. The next morning when I saw you, I said to myself, Is [sic] this the black man I heard talk last night?”75

At least part of this ambiguity no doubt stemmed from the fact that many barbers were of mixed descent and therefore literally blurred racial boundaries in the eyes of their contemporaries. Cyprian Clamorgan made this point quite explicitly. “We,” he noted, “who know the history of all the old families of St. Louis, might readily point to the scions of some of our ‘first families,’ and trace their genealogy back to the swarthy tribes of Congo or Guinea.”76 Indeed, Clamorgan knew well that of which he wrote. The barber was a grandson of white St. Louis grandee Jacques Clamorgan, and in the years ahead both Cyprian and several of his

74 Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, Born a Slave in St. Domingo (Boston: Crosby Nichols, and Company, 1854), 99-100.
75 Ibid., 84, 96-97.
76 Clamorgan, The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, 10, 46.
relatives would cross the color line, passing as whites in elite American social circles.\textsuperscript{77} Of course, few barbers, even of mixed descent, would dream of going as far as Clamorgan did. Then again, few would be so bold as to refer to Virginia as “the mother of Presidents and mullatos [sic].”\textsuperscript{78} But while their life trajectories may have differed from Clamorgan’s, the origins of James Thomas, William Johnson, and countless other barbers and hairdressers were quite similar to their St. Louis counterpart. Born of black or mixed-race mothers and elite white fathers, men like these were physical embodiments of the messy middle ground between the imperfectly policed camps of whiteness and freedom, on the one hand, and blackness and slavery on the other.

Perceptions of barbers were further complicated by their increasing involvement in everything from the politics of racial uplift to abolitionism – which, thanks to the work of Quincy Mills, we now know was far more extensive than previously thought.\textsuperscript{79} Tonsors and hairdressers, for example, constituted thirteen of forty-five delegates to the African-American state convention of Ohio in 1852 – a gathering of prominent community leaders from throughout the state dedicated to projects of communal and racial uplift.\textsuperscript{80} Pittsburgh barber John Vashon distributed abolitionist literature in his shop.\textsuperscript{81} Boston tonsor John Smith rubbed shoulders with Massachusetts’ beloved antislavery Senator Charles Sumner.\textsuperscript{82} And a few barbers even

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 12.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 58.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Mills, \textit{Cutting Along the Color Line}, 44-46.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ann Clymer Bigelow, “Antebellum Ohio’s Black Barbers in the Political Vanguard,” \textit{Ohio Valley History} 11 (Summer 2011), 26.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Paul Gilje, \textit{Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1783-1834} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 166.
\item \textsuperscript{82} James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, \textit{Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North} (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 142.
\end{itemize}
undertook efforts to desegregate their workplaces, while others excluded whites and instead catered to an all-black clientele.\textsuperscript{83}

Even deeply conservative barbers, however, were not unalloyed allies of the slavery regime. While William Johnson seemed to harbor almost no reservations about the morality of slavery and enjoyed relatively cordial relations with Natchez’s whites, he nevertheless used his position to “help particular slaves and apprenticed free blacks advance ever closer to freedom and independence.”\textsuperscript{84} This included teaching slaves and apprentices how to read and write.\textsuperscript{85} Similarly conservative, Pierre Toussaint’s Northern setting allowed him to pursue a slightly more aggressive program of liberation and uplift. Though rigorously observant of racial boundaries and reticent to speak openly of the ethics of slavery, the New York hairdresser nevertheless worked quietly but assiduously to redeem friends and family members from captivity, and donated to a number of free black philanthropic institutions.\textsuperscript{86}

Given these examples, many white customers must have wondered what sentiments lurked behind their hairdressers’ smiles.\textsuperscript{87} Though serving whites by day, perhaps they were plotting slave insurrection, black suffrage, or ‘racial amalgamation’ by night. Indeed, barbers’ political activities likely confirmed whites’ worst suspicions, especially in the South: that prominent American free people of color were using their access to elite white circles of sociability to plot against their racial ‘superiors,’ conveying the contents of shop gossip to would-be slave rebels. Such a suspicion, in fact, is at the heart of Hall’s \textit{Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop}, in which the title character – who begins the novel as his master’s valet – is wrongly

\textsuperscript{83} Bristol, \textit{Knights of the Razor}, 74.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., xi-xii.
\textsuperscript{86} Lee, \textit{Memoir of Pierre Toussaint}, 32, 52, 53.
\textsuperscript{87} It should be noted that fears of black dissimulation were by no means limited to barbers. See pages 58-59 below.
accused of having aided a clandestine white abolitionist intent on organizing an insurrection in the South. And yet, despite his ultimate innocence, Freeman is shown to have sympathy with both black and white slave rebels. Having escaped to the North, Freeman proclaims to an audience of abolitionists that the would-be white insurrectionist “showed us our rights from the Bible; and he told some it would be right for black men to fight for freedom. Perhaps,” he concluded dangerously, “he was politically right.”\textsuperscript{88} Even more tellingly, Freeman paints the abolitionist’s ill-fated black co-conspirator in markedly heroic terms and says that, as he watched him stand on the gallows, he wished to “utter the same triumphant cry” – ‘Welcome, death! I die for my countrymen!’ – “and die with him.”\textsuperscript{89}

Nor were these associations between barbers and racial transgression limited to proslavery thinkers like Hall. The link between barbering, rebellion, and violence was on prominent display in Herman Melville’s \textit{Benito Cereno}. And it even appeared in Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s aforementioned speech to the American Anti-Slavery Society. Beginning with a relatively conventional reflection on the potential of violence inherent in the tonsorial act, Higginson’s speech concludes with the remarkable statement that “[w]e forget the heroes of San Domingo.”\textsuperscript{90} So strong, in fact, were the cultural links between barbering and rebellion that the Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee apparently felt the need to actively distance the subject of her biography, the deeply conservative Pierre Toussaint, from his namesake revolutionary counterpart. “We can hardly forebear touching upon the history of Toussaint L’Ouverture,” she notes rather desperately, “though bearing no other connection with the subject

\textsuperscript{88} Hall, \textit{Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop}, 65.
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Ibid.}, 68.
\textsuperscript{90} Mills, \textit{Cutting Along the Color Line}, 17.
of our memoir than accidentally arises from similarity of name, color, country, and being both
born in slavery, and on the same river.”

Taken collectively, these fears of transgression help explain the rise of the trope of the
murderous barber. This trope was not, as noted previously, native to the United States. The basic
contours of the Sweeney Todd story – of a murderous barber who disposes of his victims’ bodies
in the baked goods of a collaborator – had been circulating, in various forms, throughout Europe
for centuries. Reemerging with particular urgency in the 1830s and 1840s, the tale, which
coalesced, first, in the story of Jodrel the Barber (1844), and subsequently in the penny blood
The String of Pearls (1846-7), spoke to a number of contemporary anxieties. Prominent among
these were fears associated with the migration of rural peoples to the period’s burgeoning cities.
Indeed, the leading student of the Sweeney Todd myth has argued that the tale “is arguably not
so much an ‘urban legend’ – as that term is generally understood – as a rural legend”: a warning
of the terrible fate that awaits unsuspecting country folk in the lawless anonymity of a sprawling,
dangerous city. But Todd also seems to speak to anxieties about economic change. Not only is
there something factory-like about Todd’s trap door barber chair and the various “mechanical
contrivances” that Mrs. Lovett’s succession of cooks use to transforming the flesh of Todd’s
victims into meat pies for a ravenous city; the barber himself also seems to exemplify the worst
possibilities of the entrepreneurial spirit sweeping much of the Anglo-Atlantic world. Literary
scholar Gregory Dart, for instance, notes that “one of the scariest things about Sweeney, aside
from the famous squint, is his efficiency: the fact that he managed to turn murder and the

91 Lee, Memoir of Pierre Toussaint, 6-7.
93 Ibid., 165.
94 Robert L. Mack, introduction to Sweeney Todd, xxi.
95 Sweeney Todd, 94, 96.
recycling of human flesh into a highly efficient cottage industry.” Arguing along similar lines, Robert L. Mack claims that “Sweeney Todd is the perfect epitome of the thrusting individualism and aggressive self-determination of the new capitalism.” The worst fears of working-class Britain thus found expression in this peculiar story.

But while all of the anxieties that coalesced around the ‘Demon Barber of Fleet Street’ were, to varying degrees, also present in the United States, the racist (or, at least, racialized) character of the story’s American adaptation are impossible to miss. Indeed, extensive research has thus far been unable to uncover a single fictional murderous barber of American origin who was not a man of color. Troubled by close contact with wealthy and powerful African-descended elites – by ‘servants’ who challenged their would-be masters’ sense of racial and economic dominance – white Americans found their worst fears confirmed in the image of the homicidal hairdresser. This trope, of course, was by no means limited to the stories of “A Narrow Escape” or “Benito Cereno,” noted above. Another popular variant, based on an old European story about a soldier, relates the story of a barber named Brister. It begins when a belligerent old patron with a carbuncled face named Dr. Jones enters Brister’s shop, demands a shave, and pulling his pistol from his holster, threatens to shoot the tonsor if he draws blood. Unperturbed, the barber bravely steps forward, lathers Dr. Jones’s face, and proceeds to shave him without incident. When asked by a subsequent customer how he had shaved Dr. Jones with such aplomb when faced with dire consequences, Brister replies that he “had made his mind up to save his own life by cutting the throat of Dr. Jones, if it became necessary.”

97 Ibid., 194.
98 Bristol, Knights of the Razor, 1. For an English version of this tale, see Procter, The Barber’s Shop, 102-103.
The image of the murderous barber, in fact, proved so pervasive that elements of the trope even crept into the writings of African-American barbers themselves. Consider, for instance, the specter of menace that pervades Cyprian Clamorgan’s reflections on barbers’ conversational skills. “[T]hey are dumb as mutes,” he notes glibly,

until they get a man’s head thrown back on a level with his breast, his face, and especially his mouth, besmeared with a thick coating of lather, and the glittering steel flourishing in terrorem over his throat, and then they shower upon him a perfect Niagara of words. Like a prisoner chained to the stake, he is compelled to listen to the ‘sentiments’ of his tormenter; for if he dares to open his mouth to give utterance to a dry ‘yes,’ or a surly ‘no,’ down his throat rushes a torrent of

Fig. 5: Anthony Imbert, wrapper illustration, Life in Philadelphia (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA [Bd 912 Iml 83], 1828).
lather, that entirely stifled his speech, and chokes him off as effectually as a party nomination gags a small beer politician.99

Though ultimately a humorous reflection, its imagery of violence is unmistakable. Thus, by the final years of the antebellum period, the figure of the murderous barber had pervaded even the discourse of those with the greatest interest in rebutting it. Once exemplified by the character of Figaro, barbers, in the public imagination, were now embodied in the image of a black Sweeney Todd.

99 Clamorgan, The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, 52.
But if the potential for racial transgression was the core of men’s growing objections to the shop, it was by no means the whole of those objections. As the European examples of the murderous barber trope seem to suggest, the tonsorial profession was at the heart of larger concerns and conversations about bodily boundaries. The idea of being touched – or having intimate contact – with a stranger (and most especially a subordinate stranger) became newly problematic throughout the nineteenth-century Euro-American world. Some barbers attempted to negotiate these concerns by allowing their customers to rent ‘shaving boxes.’ Boston barber S. W. Creech, for example, provided customers with the option of renting “a nice little mug and brush,” both of them individually numbered, as well as a “razor and hair-brush, neither of which is allowed to touch any person’s skin but the owner’s.” Patrons could choose to shave themselves or to have Creech shave them – either way, they could rest assured that the tools used to shave them had not been in contact with other customers’ bodily detritus.100

Indeed, bodily boundaries were just one of several additional reasons why whites began to turn against the shop. The rise of the temperance movement and the associated decline of violent, drunken, and boisterous male sociability also helped make the rowdy atmosphere of the shop look newly dangerous. Widespread concerns about the time and expense of shaving likewise helped move the operation from the confines of the shop. When hard times hit, as they did in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, many shavers seem to have taken advantage of the availability of cheap tools and assumed responsibility for shaving themselves.101

But no doubt the most important of the ancillary explanations for Americans’ growing hostility to the barber and his shop involved fears of dissimulation and of fashion as a cultural

100 “A New Hair Cutting Saloon,” The Boston Daily Atlas (Boston, MA), May 8, 1847.
101 For evidence of this, see William Johnson’s precipitous drop in revenues following the Panic of 1837. While those revenues recovered slightly after an all-time low in 1842, they “never approached the boom days of 1835 and 1836.” See Hogan and Davis, introduction to Johnson, William Johnson’s Natchez, 27.
contagion (discussed at greater length in chapters three and four to follow). While free black barbers were particularly prone to ridicule on the grounds of dandyism – see, for example, the image from the *Life in Philadelphia* series above (see Fig. 5) – this trope, unlike that of the murderous black barber, seems to have crossed the color line more easily. Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, for example, dwells at some length on the role of a white barber in facilitating deceit and dissimulation. Encouraged by the novel’s protagonist – a mysterious, elusive confidence man – to remove a sign bearing the words ‘No Trust’ (meaning no credit) from his shop, the barber demurs, telling his strange customer that, having fitted wigs for so many balding heads and applied cosmetics to so many crumbling faces, he is now incapable of trusting men’s decency and pure-heartedness. Both untrusting himself, and a party to others’ deception, the barber is thus portrayed as doubly dangerous.\(^{102}\) Similar sentiments, meanwhile, find expression in the short poem that accompanies the image of a foppish barber in the comic valentine above (see Fig. 6):

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Conceited, chattering, shallow brain,
Whose life's all cut and come again,
Whose razor's keen, whose wit is dull,
Half-breed between an ape and fool:
Such a driveling [sic] fop should ne'er
Get up my front, or part my hair;
And as for love, I never can
Consent to have a BARBER-IOUS man.\(^{103}\)
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Concerned with appearance over substance and preoccupied with the effeminate foolishness of fashion, the barber was thus conceived as a threat to republican virtue and manly dignity.

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\(^{102}\) *Melville, The Confidence-Man.*

\(^{103}\) *The Barber* (comic valentine), H. De Marsan, n.d. Library Company of Philadelphia; McAllister Collection of Civil War Era Printed Ephemera, Graphics and Manuscripts; Comic Valentine Collection, 1.32.
Such views, ironically, found an enthusiastic audience not only among white elites, eager to justify their departure from the shop, but among black elites as well. Frederick Douglass, for example, wondered aloud whether the work of the barber was “noble” or “manly” or if “it improve[s] and elevate[s] us?” Indeed, by the late antebellum period, other prominent black leaders – including David Walker and Martin Delany – had joined the chorus, deriding their fellow elites as servants who lacked in manly independence. Taken collectively, these figures helped make opposition to barbering one of the key fixtures of racial uplift politics in the final decades before the Civil War.

The results of this shift in the preoccupations of racial uplift advocates were profound. Not only did it lend credence to white patrons’ complaints against their barbers; it also convinced many men of color to abandon the profession. This may at first sound implausible – that men of color, offered so few avenues of opportunity, should voluntarily abandon the line of work in which they had found so much success. But so they did. In Philadelphia and Baltimore, for instance, the percentage of black barbers fell dramatically between 1850 and 1860. Whereas men of color had constituted roughly eighty percent of all barbers in both cities in 1850, by the following decade they accounted for just under fifty percent. Faced with a torrent of abuse from their fellow elites, older barbers advised their sons in the profession to find new lines of work. John Rapier, Sr., for instance, a prominent barber in Florence, Alabama, confessed to his son in 1856 that “I hate the name of a barber.” Farming, he continued – reflecting Douglass’s

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104 “Make Your Sons Mechanics and Farmers – Not Waiters, Porters, and Barbers,” Frederick Douglass’s Paper (Rochester, NY), Mar. 18, 1853.
105 Mills, Cutting Along the Color Line, 50-58.
106 Bristol, Knights of the Razor, 104.
insistence on the moral superiority of agricultural to ‘servile’ labor – “I look on as a Superior occupation [sic] to a Barber.”

Still, by far the most important factor in moving shaving from the shop to the home was the fraught encounter between the power of a rising black tonsorial elite and its white customers’ aspirations for mastery. It was a reality made all too clear by the comments of a man of color who stopped Eliza Potter in the street to tell her that she ‘dressed too fine.’ “Your patrons,” he elaborated, “will treat you as mine did me.

One gentleman I had been in the habit of furnishing goods to came to me and told me I lived in a finer house, dressed better, and drove a finer carriage than he did, and he was going to take his custom from me and give it to some person that was not so well off. I told him he might, and be blessed. So, Iangy, if you are not careful, your patrons will treat you in the same way.

And so they did. But the question remained: what would happen once white men moved the operation of grooming into the privacy of their homes, shaving by their own hand instead?

*** III. A World of Pain: Home Shaving and the Rise of the Beard ***

In the long run, white men would respond to the abandonment of barber shop shaving by growing facial hair. The adoption of this new style was caused by a variety of factors, but one was more important than all others: shaving became more painful. This was due, in no small part, to the materially inadequate conditions in which home shavers found themselves undertaking their task. Instead of warm and well-lit shops, home shavers groomed themselves by

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107 John H. Rapier, Sr. to John H. Rapier, Jr., Dec. 13, 1856, Florence, AL. Rapier Family Papers, Howard University, Moorland-Spingard Research Center (Washington, DC), 84-1, 30.

candle or lamplight, often using small or cloudy mirrors. If they had access to warm water, it was probably not in the abundance available at the barber shop. In proof of these statements, consider the following comments, dating from 1850, by a writer for the *Gloucester Telegraph*. “If any man’s temper has never been thoroughly tried and proved,” the author wrote,

> let him be under the necessity of going out in the seven o’clock rain on a dark and gloomy December morning. He has but half an hour to dress, wash and shave, in a cold room, with cold water, holding a light in one hand and a razor in the other. If he can stand all this and preserve his equanimity, he’ll do.”

A contemporary lithograph by an unknown artist (see Fig. 7) also amply demonstrates the material difficulties of shaving. Grimacing into a small mirror in a poorly-lit little room, the man in the image scrapes at his stubble. Such poor conditions bear little resemblance to the scenes of sensory pleasure described above.

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109 *Gloucester Telegraph* (Gloucester, MA), Jan. 23, 1850.
By far the most important impediment to comfortable shaving, however, was home-shavers’ lack of skills. Inclined to think of shaving as a menial, unskilled task, home-shavers soon found it to be just the opposite. Not only did they have to learn how to navigate their faces with dangerous cutthroat razors – they also had to learn how to maintain these delicate tools. This meant mastering the fine arts of honing, cleaning, and stropping their razors without blunting their edges – no easy task, given the delicacy of the steel used to make these fine tools – as well as the recondite science of culling lather from a recalcitrant piece of soap. Last but not least, they had to learn which tools were the best, selecting quality razors, hones, strops, brushes, soaps, and aftershave balms from amidst a market flooded with counterfeits and shoddy imitations. Even with the help of barbers, who might serve as both retailers of grooming tools and advisors on what to purchase, the task remained a difficult one.

There were, of course, a number of guides of varying size and quality that emerged to aid the hapless home-shaver. Originally published in Great Britain (where home-shaving took root well in advance of the United States), a 1786 *Treatise on the Use and Management of a Razor* went through dozens of editions and appears in a number of archives throughout the United States, suggesting a wide American circulation. Written by London razor-maker J. H. Savigny, the pamphlet seems to have inspired a number of imitators, including small merchants, peddlers, and barbers, who sold these items along with their wares. Masquerading as scientific or instructive tracts, they were more often thinly-veiled homages to the virtues of the vendors’

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More helpful, perhaps, were the terse but instructive tips on shaving that would have been familiar to readers of American newspapers and periodicals throughout the period.\textsuperscript{112}

These valiant efforts notwithstanding, home shaving continued to be a source of pain to American men. Not that shaving – whether in the shop or at home – had previously been a beloved experience among all its participants. An early nineteenth-century barber’s patron, for instance, wondered

\begin{quote}
Must every passing Sunday-morn, 
As duly as the week is born, 
See me sit down to shave? 
And not a ray of hope appear. 
From week to week – from year to year, 
Of rest, but in the grave!\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{111} See, for ex., William Bogle, \textit{The Anatomy and Physiology of the Skin and Hair} (Boston: 1848).


\textsuperscript{113}
The eighteenth-century German scholar Johann Gottfried Seume, moreover, was reputed to have eagerly anticipated the day when, following the ritual defenestration of his wig powder, he could do the same with his hated razor.\textsuperscript{114}

As the nineteenth century drew on, however, complaints like these became more plentiful – while enthusiastic odes to the barber shop became more scarce (see Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{115} One unusual street peddler – known to posterity as the ‘Razor Strop Man’ – even managed to build his career (to say nothing of a small fortune) around the currency of painful shaving jokes, as well as consumers’ desire for an easy remedy. In one of his strange poems, for example, the Razor-Strop Man described a city of shavers, going tremulously about their morning routine, “lest the razor, of which they forever complain, / Should sever their windpipe, or open a vein.” In another instance, he sang the following ditty:

\begin{verbatim}
Oh! life’s but a vanishing bubble,
And we spend too much labor and trouble,
To scrape from our faces the stubble,
While the tears from our eyes we draw ; –
D-R-A-W – draw:
And our chins all bleeding and raw.\textsuperscript{116}
\end{verbatim}

Nor were such complaints confined to the gregarious Razor Strop Man. A Boston journalist, for example, described shaving as “the vile and villainous operation of a murderous piece of steel” opposed “to health and comfort,” while the humorously named Tender Skinne,

\textsuperscript{113} “Shaving: A Freneaucic Ode,” \textit{Newburyport Herald} (Newburyport, MA), Sept. 25, 1801.
\textsuperscript{115} The chart above reflects the number of articles expressing complaints of painful shaving (admittedly, a subjective category) from among a sample of article on men’s grooming. The sample was derived by using the search terms ‘razor’ ‘shave’ and ‘barber’ to cull the database of \textit{Readex: America’s Historical Newspaper Database} (including Early American Newspaper Series 1-7 and African American Newspapers, 1827-1998).
\textsuperscript{116} John F. Coles, ed., \textit{The Life and Adventure of Henry Smith, the Celebrated Razor Strop Man} (Boston: White & Potter, 1848), 61.
Esq., imagined a utopian future in which men, having abandoned the razor, might reflect with wonder that, “in times not long past”

Men stood every morning well armed at a mirror,
Assaulting their faces, nor looking aghast,
To think of the wound that might follow an error.117

Statements like these were frequently, though by no means always, hyperbolic. Not every home shaver dreaded the regular (if not daily) operation of shaving, nor did every stroke of the razor draw blood from the cheek, or tears from the eyes. But there were important instances in which these apparently bizarre statements reflected a troubling reality. At least one prominent home shaver – the brother of essayist and naturalist Henry David Thoreau – did indeed perish from shaving-related wounds, contracting tetanus after cutting himself with a rusty blade.118 More often, however, statements like these spoke to an equally consequential, if far less deadly, state of affairs: that a growing number of white American men regarded shaving as a painful, dangerous, and unnecessary nuisance.

Given the swelling number of tonsorial discontents, it should come as little surprise that many American men soon abandoned the razor altogether. The reasons for this shift, as chapter four makes clear, were incredibly diverse. Men came to link beards and whiskers to a variety of masculine virtues, while impugning the clean-shaved face as a mark of degeneracy, dependence, immorality, and effeminacy. And then there was the all-important matter of European precedence in taste and fashion. Britons, as historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore has written,

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had already embarked on their own ‘Beard Movement’ by the 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{119} As was typical in nearly all matters of style, Americans were quick to imitate the fashions of Britain and the Continent.

But at the heart of this transformation – both in the United States and in Europe too – was the changing experience of shaving: the result of capitalist modes of mass production which put a growing number of razors into the hands of inept shavers, who, because of simultaneous shifts in expectations of comfort, were wholly unequipped to cope with the discomfort of shaving. Or to put it in simpler terms: shaving became more painful – men couldn’t hack it – and they therefore grew beards. A Baltimore journalist put it plainly when he wrote that, “by the pain ever attending” the removal of beard, Nature “makes constant out-cry, and by that out-cry enters her solemn, perpetual protest against the procedure.”\textsuperscript{120} Whether experienced as simple discomfort or Natural Law made manifest, pain was the ultimate reason why white men abandoned the razor.

But this experience of pain, and the subsequent rise of beard-wearing, were ultimately inseparable from the racial politics that had precipitated men’s departure from the shop – innately linked to the racist fears of black violence and black power that had given rise to the image of the murderous barber. Racial anxieties thus marked elite white men’s bodies. Men wore these anxieties on their faces, making the beard a subtle but enduring emblem of the history of American racism. But it was more than that. The beards that adorned the faces of five US presidents and hundreds of thousands of white American men throughout the late nineteenth century also testify to the singular power and authority of the black tonsorial class, as well as the


\textsuperscript{120} “The Razor,” *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 31, 1844.
persistent mark they left on the bodies of the white male American elite. Even when these men departed the shop, they never quite escaped the reach of the early republic’s African-American barbers.
CHAPTER TWO:
REQUIEM FOR THE RAZOR
Sheffield Cutlers and the Fate of Shaving

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, British public figures were fond of enumerating the range of everyday tasks that required the productions of England’s manufactories. The city of Sheffield – the seat of Britain’s cutlery, edgetool, and steel industries – figured prominently in these boasts. So, too, did Britain’s erstwhile North American subjects, whom, in the eyes of many Britons, had merely exchanged their former political domination for a far more pernicious economic dependence. The radical journalist William Cobbett, for instance, argued that as long as Americans “continued to cut their victuals, from Sheffield they must have their things to cut it [sic] with.”¹ James Dawson Burn, a noted authority on British working-class life, observed that “if a Yankee enjoys the luxury of whittling a piece of wood, you may make yourself sure that the operation is performed with a Sheffield blade.”² And, at the opposite extreme of the political spectrum, Tory MP Sir Charles Mordaunt told the House of Commons that Americans “could neither shave themselves [n]or catch their mice, without applying to England.”³

Cobbett, Burn, and Mordaunt were not misinformed. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans were, in fact, almost wholly dependent on Sheffield – and, to a lesser extent, on other foreign cutlery and steel manufacturing centers – not just to catch mice,

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² J. D. Burn, Commercial Enterprise and Social Progress, quoted in Geoffrey Tweedale, Tweedale’s Directory of Sheffield Cutlery Manufacturers, 1740-2010 (G. Tweedale, 2010), 9. Despite the fact that this volume is neither peer reviewed nor published through an academic press (indeed, the volume was published by the author himself), I nevertheless feel strongly that it can be used as a reliable scholarly text. Not only is it rigorously annotated and written by an academically-trained scholar; it also shares a number of important source and conclusions with Tweedale’s earlier Sheffield Steel and America, published by Cambridge University Press.
whittle, and shave, but for an incredible range of bladed steel instruments. As one might expect, this proved an incredibly fraught relationship for Americans. On the one hand, the 'steel city' of South Yorkshire supplied the people of the republic with some of their most vital necessities and desirable luxuries – delivering higher quality goods at lower prices as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth. On the other hand, few economic relationships seemed better calculated to deflate Americans’ sense of destiny. The United States at least had a response to Manchester’s textile mills, however feeble it may have been; but, in the all-important realms of steel and cutlery manufacture, Americans had nothing of the sort until the late 1820s and 1830s. Indeed, as late as the early 1840s, Americans still sent nearly five of every seven dollars that they spent on cutlery to the good people of Sheffield.4

What follows is an examination of this fraught relationship between the end of the American Revolution and the outbreak of the American Civil War. This relationship, the chapter argues, had two main consequences that were of particular relevance to the history of men’s grooming in the United States.

First, the increased availability of grooming tools contributed to a dramatic increase in standards of personal fastidiousness, as well as the rate of home shaving between 1815 and 1840.4 The exact volume of Sheffield’s exports to the United States during this period is difficult to determine. Record-keeping by government and businesses alike was spotty and export figures were themselves in a dramatic state. Still we can venture a reasonable estimate. A correspondent for the Berkshire County Whig, for instance, suggests that Sheffield exported wares worth £1.3 million to the U.S. in 1841. G. I. H. Lloyd, on the other hand – a leading authority on the Sheffield cutlery industry – claims that the city sent £3.2 million pounds of products abroad, of which one-quarter, according to the Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics, went to the United States. According to these figures, then, Sheffield’s exports to the U.S. were closer to £800,000. For the purposes of the present calculation, I have chosen to split the difference, estimating Sheffield’s exports to the U.S. at £1 million, which, at an exchange rate of $5 to £1, means that Americans spent roughly $5 million on Sheffield cutlery. Compare this to the $1.3 million that, again according to Lloyd, they spent on domestic cutlery. Finally, according to the New York Tribune, about 10 percent of the trade was constituted by German wares. See Berkshire County Whig (Pittsfield, MA), Jul. 29, 1841; “More of the Black Tariff,” Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics (Portsmouth, NH), Oct. 21, 1843; G. I. H. Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades: An Historical Essay in the Economics of Small-Scale Production (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1986; orig. 1913), 342-3; “American File Manufacture,” New-York Daily Tribune (New York, NY), Dec. 2, 1856. For historical exchange rates, see measuringworth.com.
In the late eighteenth century, razors had been extraordinarily expensive items – unaffordable for all but barbers and the wealthiest American men. As a result, most men, as the previous chapter suggests, left shaving to their barbers and neglected their facial hair between visits to the tonsor. Beginning in the decades following the War of 1812, however, razors increasingly fell within the financial reach of a growing swath of American men. Maintaining a relatively constant wholesale price over the course of twenty-five years, Sheffield razors reached American consumers at consistently shrinking prices, thanks to dramatic reductions in shipping and transaction costs. Consequently, a number of men took up home shaving as a supplement to – and ultimately substitute for – professional grooming. Nevertheless, cheapness was not the only virtue of Sheffield razors. Thanks to advances in steel-making and production methods, they were also significantly superior in quality to the items that would have been available to previous generations of American men. Taken together, then, these developments in the cost and quality of razors would, along with the factors discussed in the previous chapter, contribute to the decline of the American barber shop and the rise of home shaving.

Second, America’s dependence on British industrial output would help prompt a cultural and legislative backlash, with vital consequences for the subsequent history of men’s grooming. Echoing larger conversations about the need for America’s industrial independence from Britain – and Europe more broadly – a number of Americans embarked on a bold campaign to secure a powerful tariff regulating the admission of Sheffield wares. The result was the so-called ‘Black Tariff’ of 1842, which raised the price of imported goods – including Sheffield manufactures – by more than 40 percent. This piece of legislation, which remained in operation until 1846, would have the effect of increasing the price and decreasing the quality of razors and other edged grooming tools, as Sheffield suppliers cut corners to remain competitive with their upstart
American counterparts. The Black Tariff, then, helped make shaving more painful and expensive in the 1840s than it had been in previous decades. As such, it would contribute dramatically to the growing popularity of facial hair among American men.

Efforts to raise the tariff, it must be noted, were not explicitly aimed at razors. The latter were merely one part of much larger foreign steel and cutlery industries, the power and reach of which American economic boosters hoped to curtail. Nor do I want to suggest that the availability of razors was the sole material factor determining American men’s shaving practices. Access to cheap, high-quality strops, hones, mirrors, soaps, creams, brushes, oils, perfumes, hot water, and towels was also significant. Nevertheless, razors were ultimately the *sine qua non* of shaving. Home tonsors could, in a pinch, dispense with all of the other accoutrements and still achieve their desired goal. No quantity of mirrors, soaps, and creams, however, could overcome the absence of a razor.

What follows, then, is a discussion of the ways in which fluctuations in global cutlery production influenced – and, to a limited degree, determined – the shape of men’s grooming practices in the United States. While cutlery production was by no means limited to the city of Sheffield, this city will nevertheless constitute the present chapter’s focus. Until the late nineteenth century, Sheffield was responsible for the overwhelming majority of cutlery consumed in the United States. As a result, the city was practically synonymous with its products: “as completely the metropolis of steel,” wrote one contemporary, “as Manchester is of cotton or Leeds of woolens.”

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As for the word ‘cutlery,’ I use it here in its technical, rather than colloquial, sense to refer, not just to tableware (some of which is more appropriately termed flatware), but to a much wider range of knives and edgetools, including razors, scissors, pocket knives, chisels, awls, saws, axes, and adzes. Manufactured in similar ways using a common variety of steel, cutlery constituted a category of goods based on the way in which it was produced, rather than the way in which it was consumed. Though peculiar to modern eyes, this way of organizing the marketplace was, in fact, quite common in the nineteenth century.

The following chapter is organized into four broad sections. The first section examines the dramatic shift in the price and quality of razors that occurred between roughly 1775 and 1825, linking this shift to increases in home shaving and standards of personal fastidiousness among American men. The second explains how this transformation was achieved, devoting particular attention to Sheffield’s labor and industrial history during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The third explores Americans’ growing discomfort with their dependence on Sheffield cutlery, the country’s early efforts to redress that dependence, and the culmination of these efforts in the Black Tariff of 1842. The fourth and final section, meanwhile, details the role the latter legislation played in making shaving a more expensive and painful proposition – thus leading, at least in part, to the adoption of facial hair by a growing cross-section of American men. What emerges from the chapter, then, is a portrait of how the forces of nineteenth-century global capitalism and protectionist American economic policy combined to twice remake men’s body practices in the course of a mere sixty years.

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I. Lower Price, Higher Quality: Origins of the Daily Shave

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, razors were incredibly expensive tools. While figures regarding either the wholesale or retail price of razors during this period are extraordinarily difficult to find, fragmentary evidence suggests that these items might cost as much as $10. A widely-published 1801 advertisement, for instance, listed the price of a popular razor at the incredibly specific price of $11.76. For comparison’s sake, it would take an unskilled worker 294 hours of toil (at an average rate of 4¢ per hour) to earn enough money to purchase a razor at that price. As such, these items were well beyond the reach of all but professional barbers and a handful of extraordinarily wealthy men.

Turn-of-the-century razors, moreover, were of rather indifferent quality. The best straight razors were distinguished by paper-thin, ‘hollow-ground’ blades, requiring expert manufacture and steel of a unique strength and hardness. Variations of a mere two or three tenths of a percent in the carbon composition of the material, as well as the consistency with which that carbon was distributed throughout the steel, could make the difference between an effective shaving tool and a blunt scraper. Unfortunately, late eighteenth century razors could count on neither specialized production nor consistent materials. Indeed, in the decades following the American Revolution, a specialized razor trade was still in the final stages of differentiating itself from the broader knife-making trade. And advances in steel-making methods that would provide Sheffield cutlers with

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7 For one of the many appearances of this advertisement, see The Daily Advertiser (New York, NY), Jul. 20, 1801. This razor was constructed so that “persons may shave themselves on horseback without halting – or at sea in squally weather.”
9 Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades, 174, 31-32. Lloyd, cited extensively throughout, remains in my opinion the best history of the cutlery industry and most authoritative scholar on the technical dimension of steel and cutlery production.
10 Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades, 176.
a material of the appropriate strength and regularity was only beginning to gain universal acceptance among the city’s steel manufacturers.\textsuperscript{11}

Issues of price and quality therefore insured that the use of razors was practically limited to barbers and the wealthiest Americans’ trained body servants. This reality gives new resonance to the comments of the elderly correspondent for the \textit{Gentleman’s Magazine}, quoted in the previous chapter, who noted that, in the final decade of the eighteenth century, “the operation of shaving … was almost exclusively performed by the \textit{barbers} and “gentlemen shavers were unknown.”\textsuperscript{12} Expensive and temperamental, razors were largely reserved for those who required them as a piece of productive capital and who were extraordinarily well-versed in their use.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Gentleman’s Magazine} quoted in “Dealings with the Dead. No. CXLVII,” \textit{Daily Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), Sep. 13, 1851.}
Within a few short decades, however, all of this would change, as a growing number of American men took up home shaving. This was due, in no small measure, to a dramatic decline in the price of razors and a marked improvement in the quality. The former transformation was especially impressive. Indeed, between 1817 and 1819, the storied Sheffield cutlery firm of Joseph Rodgers & Sons was selling its razors wholesale for as little as 5 shillings per dozen. At just over one dollar in U.S. currency, that was less than a tenth of the price of the widely-advertised razor from two decades previous. Admittedly, this figure was well below the average of 11 shillings ($2.48) per dozen for the period. It was also a far cry from the price at which these items would reach consumers.\(^\text{13}\) At the late date of 1857, Republican Senator Justin Morrill

\(^\text{13}\) For the wholesale price of Rodgers & Sons razors in the late 1810s, see Orders and letters of the firm of Joseph Rodgers and Sons, cutlers, of Sheffield, Sheffield Archives (Sheffield, South Yorkshire, UK), M.D. 6205-1-6, 13-14, 16, 19; M.D. 6206-1; M.D. 6207-41-42; M.D. 6208-3, 18, 22, 49, 85; M.D. 6209-6-8, 10, 21-22, 26. Remarkably, one source suggests that these prices had been 15 to 20 percent lower just two years earlier. See “Extract of a Letter from Sheffield Dated December 5, 1817,” New-York Gazette & General Advertiser (New York, NY), Jan. 23, 1818. See also The Alexandria Herald (Alexandria, VA), Jan. 26, 1818; American and Commercial Daily Advertiser (Baltimore, MD), Jan. 26, 1818; Boston Patriot and Daily Chronicle (Boston, MA), Jan. 26, 1818;
Fig. 11: A typical nineteenth-century razor. Note the word ‘Sheffield’ engraved on the blade’s tang. From John Wilson’s Illustrated List (Sheffield Archives, Sheffield, UK [CLS 108056 683.82 SST], n.d. [ca. 1862]).

 Pegged the price of shipping cutlery across the Atlantic at roughly 20 percent of an item’s wholesale price.\(^{14}\) No doubt that figure was significantly higher prior to the early nineteenth century’s oft-discussed ‘transportation revolution.’ In addition, merchants’ cut of the profits would have added to the final retail price, as the product repeatedly changed hands in its voyage across the Atlantic.\(^{15}\) But, even assuming a one-hundred percent markup on Rodgers & Sons’ average wholesale price, a single razor could likely be had for $0.40 – a figure supported by fragmentary evidence from the period which places the retail price of razors between $0.25 and $1.50.\(^{16}\) Just as importantly, the average wholesale price of razors remained relatively stable over

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\(^{16}\) For American retail prices see William T. Johnson and Family Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, LA), U:161, Box 1, Vols. 9-11. These prices roughly correspond with the retail prices of 1 to 3 shillings listed in a British advertisement from 1858. See The Economist 780 (Aug. 7, 1858), 27.
the next forty years (see Fig. 9), while transport and transaction costs declined, and the average American wage increased. In 1819, a forty-cent razor was equal to the value of eight hours of unskilled labor. By 1842, the last year for which we have reliable wholesale pricing data from Joseph Rodgers & Sons, that figure had fallen below seven hours. Long gone, in other words, were the days in which a razor represented close to three hundred hours of a man’s labor. While these tools remained a not-inconsiderable investment, they had nevertheless fallen dramatically in price.

Quantitative analysis based on Orders and letters of the firm of Joseph Rodgers and Sons, cutlers, of Sheffield, Sheffield Archives (Sheffield, South Yorkshire, UK), M.D. 6205-1-6, 13-14, 16, 19; M.D. 6206-1; M.D. 6207-41-42; M.D. 6208-3, 18, 22, 49, 85; M.D. 6209-6-8, 10, 21-22, 26. Readers should note that I have weighted the sample to reflect the quantity of orders for a particular item. Thus, orders for 42 dozen of a particular razor appear in the dataset 42 times, while orders for 2 dozen razors appear only twice. This has the effect of reducing the median price of razors for each of the four decades in question (as Rodgers & Sons tended to receive more order for cheaper razors than more expensive models) – but it also more accurately reflecting the state of the market in razors.

Razors had also increased markedly in quality. By 1825, the Sheffield cutlery industry was entering what many would consider its golden age. Departed were the homely creations of the eighteenth century (see Fig. 10). In their place, consumers found expertly-crafted items made from the highest-quality, mass-produced steel available in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. So remarkable was Sheffield steel, in fact, that, as scholar Geoffrey Tweedale notes, it remained the material of choice for makers of precision tools and parts long after South Yorkshire had been surpassed by western Pennsylvania as the world’s leading steel producer.19 Just as importantly, these were extraordinarily beautiful items. Applying the same decorative skills to everyday wares that they had to showpieces like the famed Norfolk Knife (see Fig. 12), Sheffield’s artisans helped transform razors into some of antebellum America’s most exquisite everyday items.20 Both strong and beautiful, nineteenth-century razors possessed an ease of use and mass appeal that their eighteenth-century predecessors had lacked.

The consequences of this dramatic shift in the cost and quality of razors were marked. Whereas turn-of-the-century Americans had almost exclusively been shaved by barbers, their counterparts in the 1840s were far more likely to shave themselves. For some, this meant abandoning the barber shop altogether. A self-appointed authority on grooming, for instance, claimed that by the mid-1850s, only one-in-six men continued to visit a barber.21 Even those who did so, however, were far more likely to supplement their tonsor’s services with home shaving. Natchez barber William Johnson, for example, enjoyed a sizeable business in setting (i.e. sharpening) the personal razors of men who, in addition, regularly paid him for a professional service.

19 Tweedale, Sheffield Steel and America, xii, 27.
21 “The Beard, No. VI,” Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Aug. 27, 1856.
shave.\textsuperscript{22} Though visiting his shop four-to-six times per week, many customers were clearly shaving themselves at home (or being shaved by an enslaved domestic) on the days when they did not see Johnson.

In other words, razors’ price-and-quality revolution seems to have been linked, not only to an increase in home shaving, but to a related leap in personal fastidiousness. While members of the Constitutional convention, as noted in the previous chapter, had shaved no more than twice weekly, men of far lesser importance, in far less cosmopolitan settings, were shaving as often as six or seven times weekly in the 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{23} These shifts in grooming practice were not, of course, wholly reducible to the price and quality of Sheffield razors. Both preceding and succeeding chapters should make that point more than clear. But the availability and excellence of these wares was nevertheless an important – perhaps even critical – factor in this shift.

\textit{II. A Labor History of the Razor}

What caused such a dramatic change in the price and quality of Sheffield razors? To answer this question, we must first consider the history of the city of Sheffield and the ways in which its most famous products were manufactured.

As is often the case, Sheffield’s economic wealth was rooted in its mineral wealth – its business history linked to its natural history. In fact, much of the city’s success was contingent upon a fortuitous alignment of environmental forces and geological characteristics that predated

\textsuperscript{22} Johnson Family Papers, O:24, Vol. 13 (Daybook, October 1830 – October 1844); Vol. 33 (Ledger, 1833-1837).
the development of the cutlery industry by thousands, if not millions of years. The Sheffield region, for instance, sits amidst a series of high moorland hills, shaped by the advance and retreat of glaciers during the last ice age, some 10,000 years ago or more. Down these hillsides, runoff collects in a series of fast-moving streams – the Rivers Sheaf (from which Sheffield takes its name) and Don prominent among them. Along the banks of these rivers, early Yorkshire craftsmen erected water-powered mills, where the movement of the current powered grinding wheels and forge hammers.  

But perhaps the most consequential geological feature of the Sheffield region was the South Yorkshire Coal Measures, lying a short distance to the west of Sheffield. Formed during the Carboniferous period, some 300 million years ago, the Coal Measures contained prodigious quantities not only of coal, but of ironstone and sandstone. While the former fuel would prove immensely important to the Sheffield cutlery and steel industries by the nineteenth century, it was the latter minerals that, in the industry’s formative years, were far more important. The high quality sandstone, for instance, was ideally suited to the production of grindstones. And although iron smelted from South Yorkshire ore would later be deemed inadequate for the manufacture of high-quality cutlery, it nevertheless provided an abundant and easily-accessible supply of raw material in the industry’s early centuries.

As a result of its auspicious natural environs, a cutlery industry emerged early in Sheffield. Archaeological evidence from the region (known, historically, as Hallamshire) suggests that steel and iron edge tools were being produced in the area as early as the twelfth century.  

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25 Jones, “Early Industrial Development,” 146-147. See also Lloyd, 65.
century. More concrete evidence appears in the form of a Sheffield tax return dating from 1297. On it, the term ‘Coteler’ appears for the first time in the history of that city. By the fourteenth century, the Hallamshire wares were apparently important enough to warrant mention in *The Canterbury Tales*. In “The Reeve’s Tale,” for instance, Chaucer describes the eponymous character as bearing a “Sheffield thwitel [a bladed tool or knife] … in his hose.” And by 1624, the city’s cutlery guild – known to posterity as the Company of Cutlers – was influential enough to seek, and receive, a royal charter.

Despite Sheffield’s early emergence as a cutlery center, however, its growth was hindered throughout much of the late medieval and early modern period by poor transportation. While Hallamshire’s many fast moving rivers were well adapted to turning mill wheels, they were singularly poor as transportation arteries. As late as the sixteenth century, therefore, Sheffield could claim a mere thirty-nine cutlers, and lagged far behind many other cities in cutlery production. These included not only its primary continental rivals – Thiers in France and Solingen in Germany – but London as well. All of these cities outstripped Sheffield in both their output of finished cutlery and their reputation for quality.

This situation would change in the eighteenth century, as a series of infrastructure and transportation improvements aided Sheffield manufacturers in their struggle for industrial primacy. By 1750, for instance, the River Don had been made navigable to within three miles

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26 Himsworth, *The Story of Cutlery*, 49.
27 Ibid., 47.
30 Ibid., 89, 93-94.
31 These infrastructure projects were like the result of a preliminary expansion of the Sheffield cutlery trades that was already underway in the seventeenth century. But even if the city’s growth was already in progress at the turn of the eighteenth century, it seems certain that these infrastructure projects likely accelerated that growth. See Lloyd, *The Cutlery Trades*, 97.
of Sheffield, allowing the city’s manufacturers to easily transmit goods to the port city of Hull.\textsuperscript{32} And the years 1710 and 1790 witnessed the inauguration of stage connections with London and Newcastle, respectively.\textsuperscript{33} While canal and rail links with Manchester, Liverpool, and London would not arrive until the first half of the nineteenth century – providing a major boon to the city’s nascent Bessemer heavy steel industries – these early improvements were more than sufficient to convey the light-weight wares of Sheffield’s cutlers to market.\textsuperscript{34}

These transformations in the city’s transportation infrastructure could not have arrived at a more propitious moment. They not only put cutlers in contact with abundant supplies of high quality Swedish, Russian, and Spanish iron – a key factor in the city’s improving reputation for quality.\textsuperscript{35} They also put manufacturers in contact with the British Empire’s booming colonial markets – including eager consumers in colonial North America. The latter proved especially important to the city. The North American settler, according to Alfred Gatty, author of a popular nineteenth-century history of Sheffield, “needed his axe to fell the primeval forest, his spade to break the hitherto untilled ground, his saw, and chisel, and file, and scythe, and shears for constant use in building and agriculture, as well as the necessary domestic utensils in setting up a new home. These and the like were the very things which Sheffield could at once supply, and it did so to a very large extent.”\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, the North American market proved so critical to Sheffield’s success that by the turn of the nineteenth century, a full third of the city’s 18,000 cutlery workers were employed in the American trade.\textsuperscript{37} Beyond supplying the city’s workers with jobs, however, American demand also attracted new workers to the industry. “Nothing,”

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Lloyd, \textit{The Cutlery Trades}, 336.
\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, 334-335.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Tweedale, \textit{Sheffield Steel and America}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Lloyd, \textit{The Cutlery Trades}, 69-73.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Alfred Gatty, \textit{Sheffield: Past and Present} (Sheffield: Thomas Rodgers, 1873), 197.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Tweedale, \textit{Tweeddale’s Directory}, 4.
\end{itemize}
noted Alfred Gatty in 1873, “can account for the sustained prosperity of Sheffield, and the very large increase of its population … except the American demand.”

Possessed of a mere 10,000 inhabitants in 1763, Sheffield entered the nineteenth century with over 60,000 residents – a 500 percent increase in only thirty-seven years.

Sheffield’s population boom was essential to the precipitous drop in the price of razors over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This decline in prices was the result of both extensive and intensive growth in the cutlery industry’s output. Not only were more people engaged in razor making; those involved in the trade radically increased their per capita output. This was achieved, moreover, without through any dramatic shift in the technology of production. While the invention of crucible steel in the mid-eighteenth century (discussed below) had a marked impact on the quality of Sheffield wares, it mattered little to productivity rates. And though the late eighteenth century witnessed the introduction of steam-powered grinding mills in the city, these merely complemented, rather than supplanted, the city’s historic water-powered mills.

Instead, Sheffield’s productivity gains stemmed primarily from an increasingly minute division of labor – or what historian Geoffrey Tweedale has called “mass-production by traditional methods.” This division of labor proceeded both vertically and horizontally. The former species of differentiation already had a long history in the cutlery industry. Since the earliest days of cutlery manufacture in Sheffield, cutlers had been carving the process into three broad trades: forging, grinding, and hafting. In the first process, forgers hammered a block of steel into the rough shape of a blade. In the second, grinders sharpened the rough blade on a

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39 Tweedale, *Sheffield Steel and America*, 2.
grindstone. And in the third, hafters attached ornamental handles to the blade, and brought the finished product to a fine polish. Though well-established by the eighteenth century, this vertical division of labor became a nearly universal feature of the industry by the turn of the nineteenth.

Equally important to the industry’s productivity gains, however, was its horizontal division of labor, as cutlers increasingly specialized in only one variety of wares. The razor-making trades, for instance – including razor forging, razor grinding, and razor hafting – did not become distinct from the larger knife-making trades until the eighteenth century. Focusing their considerable skill and talent on a single productive process and a single class of goods, Sheffield’s cutlers were responsible for a series of dramatic gains in productivity – with important implications for the price of finished wares.

While this division of labor was widespread in Sheffield at large, it was particularly advanced in the city’s leading firms: manufacturers like Joseph Rodgers & Sons and George Wostenholm & Sons that dominated the American market. Employing dozens – and later hundreds – of in-house employees and independent subcontractors, the larger houses could afford a far more extensive subdivision of production than smaller houses that might employ a mere three or four craftsmen. The cost savings of this division of labor were therefore especially apparent in the price of goods sold in the United States.

This was not, however, the only way in which large houses contributed to the long-term decline in the price of razors. While the formidable strength of trade societies in Sheffield (described in more detail below), generally prevented large houses from dramatically cutting wages and piece rates (the established price paid to craftsmen per unit of output), they could at

least leverage considerable economies of scale and use their size and output to ensure favorable trading terms with merchants and buyers. Large firms, then, played a twofold role in slashing American razor prices. And they did so without significantly impairing the interests of their employees.44

Large manufacturers like Rodgers and Wostenholm also played an important role in the period’s improvements in quality. Their reputation for high wages and full piece-rate payments helped them attract the city’s best workers. And their minute division of labor meant that only focused specialists were engaged in the production of their wares. Both of these factors were incredibly important in the razor trades. Razor grinding, in particular, was widely regarded as one of the most challenging and dangerous branches of cutlery manufacture. As such, razor grinders commanded some of the highest wages and piece rates in the city. At roughly twenty shillings per week, late eighteenth-century razor grinders averaged nearly double the income of Sheffield’s typical craftsman.45 Highly-specialized and well-compensated, turn-of-the-century razor makers helped inaugurate a new era in quality cutlery.

But no doubt the most important gain in quality for the city’s manufacturers was the widespread adoption of crucible steel. Though typically attributed to a Doncaster clockmaker named Benjamin Huntsman – who was said to have invented the process for making crucible steel in 1742 – recent scholarship has instead located the origins of the process in both consumer

44 Rodgers & Sons, for instance, were widely reputed to offer the best wages in Sheffield, and to consistently pay established piece rates in full. See, for ex., “Cutlery Trade of Sheffield,” New-Hampshire Gazette (Portsmouth, NH), Apr. 12, 1836. For a slight variation on the final paragraph of the previous article, see also The Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser (Baltimore, MD), Apr. 23, 1836; Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, VA), May 26, 1836; Public Ledger (Philadelphia, PA), Jun. 2, 1836; St. Louis Commercial Bulletin and Missouri Literary Register (St. Louis, MO), Jun. 8, 1836.

demand and a broader ‘enlightenment in steel.’ Regardless of its origins, however, crucible steel represented a quantum leap in the quality and consistency of the material. Made by melting iron rods impregnated with carbon in a coal-fired, ceramic crucible, steel of this variety is characterized by a remarkably regular distribution of carbon and iron. Both stronger and more predictable than the varieties of steel favored by previous generations of cutlers, crucible steel could be ground extremely aggressively and made to hold a remarkably sharp edge.

These developments in the price and quality of razors did not occur all at once. The division of labor in the cutlery industry was well underway in the eighteenth century, but remained remarkably incomplete throughout much of the nineteenth. While sectional trade societies (or early craft unions) proliferated throughout the earlier period – representing a bewildering variety of forgers, grinders, and hafters in the flatware, cutlery, and hardware trades – the so-called ‘Little Mester’ remained a formidable presence in Sheffield well into the twentieth century. Uniting various branches of the trade in a single person, these small artisans kept early modern modes of production alive long after the dawn of industrial modernity. The largest manufacturers, meanwhile, were only beginning to dominate the export trade at the end of the eighteenth century. Most, moreover, were little more than merchant capitalists with an artisanal pedigree – subcontracting work from specialized cutlers and stamping it with their own trademark. It was not until the 1810s and 1820s, for instance, that many of the city’s leading export firms began erecting their massive works and bringing these subcontractors under their

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47 On the production of crucible steel, see Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades, 33-35.
direct supervision – albeit as independent tenants rather than waged employees.⁵⁰ Last but not least, the adoption of crucible steel, as noted previously, was slow and uneven. Close to forty years after the invention of Huntsman’s process, Sheffield cutlers were still importing lower-grade German steel. It was only in the half century between 1775 and 1825 that the city finally severed its dependence on foreign steel makers once and for all.⁵¹

By the end of the War of 1812, however, the effects of all these changes were beginning to coalesce in a meaningful way. In some cases, the disruptions wrought by the war, as well as the preceding embargo, actually had the effect of exaggerating the period’s trends in the price and quality of razors. This was particularly marked in the case of price. Before the War of 1812 had even commenced, Sheffield cutlers were already sitting on 400,000 pounds of unsold cutlery. When hostilities finally concluded, many manufacturers were so desperate for business that they were willing to sell at virtually any price.⁵² And so they did, dumping quality goods on American consumers at a moment when the dollar was stronger relative to the war-weakened pound than at any moment since the founding of the republic. The cheap goods and favorable rate of exchange fueled a frenzy of trade, an explosion of consumer spending throughout the U.S., and a wave of what would prove to be fragile prosperity. “[T]he cornu copiae,” noted Alfred Gatty, “was freely poured into the lap of the ready customer, and then came a glut, dismay, and disaster.”⁵³ But while a short, sharp recession, beginning in 1819, would follow on the heels of this postwar boom, the price standard for the next two decades had been set. Between the late 1810s and early 1840s, the median price of wholesale razors would hold relatively stable at around 15 shillings per dozen.

This is not to neglect some sizeable volatility in the price of razors. From a post-war low of six shillings per dozen, the median price of razors advanced to around fourteen shillings in the 1820s and 1830s, before returning to under ten shillings in the aftermath of the Black Tariff. The former increase was likely due to the successful efforts of Sheffield’s trade societies to enforce, and in some cases increase, piece rates; the latter decrease likely due to the cost-cutting measures many manufacturers pursued in the wake of the Black Tariff (discussed below). But while the increase of the 1820s and 1830s was far from inconsequential, its impact was likely minimized by a concomitant drop in transportation and transaction costs, as well as a parallel increase in American wages and income. More to the point, a difference of a few cents in the final retail price of a razor between 1815 and 1842 positively paled in comparison with the far more dramatic drop in price between 1801 and the end of the War of 1812. And, as the quality of Sheffield wares continued to improve, many consumers were likely willing to chalk up the loss (if, indeed, there was one) as a fair price for superior products.

In other words: it was not these relatively mild fluctuations in the price of razors that would prove so nettlesome to American consumers. That distinction, by contrast, would be reserved for the position of the larger cutlery industry in the American economy and consciousness.

III. (In)Dependence

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, it became difficult for Americans to think about shaving without also thinking about Sheffield. When Ishmael, for instance, caught a

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54 On the strength of Sheffield’s trade unions in the early nineteenth century, see Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield*, ch. 1.
glimpse of Queequeg shaving with a harpoon in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the language he used implicitly called to mind the South Yorkshire steel capital: “Thinks I, Queequeq,” Ishmael quipped, “this is using Rogers’ [sic] best cutlery with a vengeance.”55 For a cosmopolitan like Melville – or Ishmael, for that matter – this likely posed no great problem. But, for a larger contingent of Americans, it was a profoundly distasteful arrangement.

Why did this close association between Sheffield and shaving prove so vexing? Because it offered a particularly intimate and ubiquitous reminder of Americans’ dependence on British manufacturers. Standing at their morning toilet, American men might glance down to find an image of the queen acid-etched on the side of their razor. Or perhaps their attention should be arrested by the royal regalia that figured prominently in many cutlers’ trademarks: the rose, thistles, lions, and crowns punched on the tang, cheek-by-jowl with the single, menacing word ‘SHEFFIELD’ (see Fig. 11).56

Americans’ dependence on Sheffield cutlery was noxious for reasons both obvious and obscure. Touchy about their recent – and all-too-precarious – political independence from Great Britain, Americans chafed at nearly any area of national existence, from literature to industrial development, in which they lagged behind the former ‘Mother Country.’ This was particularly acute in the case of iron and steel manufactures, not just because the United States’ underdevelopment in these areas was frequently linked to the country’s poor showing in the War of 1812, but because it ensured that the very tools of national expansion – from plows, saws, and

hammers to steam engines, cannons, and print type – had to be imported from abroad. Americans’ fears of dependence, however, were not wholly, or even primarily, practical and material in nature. They were also moral, even spiritual. And they were most certainly rooted in prevailing ideas about race, class, and gender. After all, dependence, in the eyes of many elites, was a status reserved for women, children, and racial ‘inferiors’ – as well as those men who lacked the age, experience, or self-mastery that distinguished their loftier counterparts. Thus, to find one’s country in a state of dependence was to find oneself, by association, stripped of many of the characteristics that constituted white American manhood. Summarizing the nation’s predicament, an American traveler by the name of Dr. Humphrey noted that, “[h]owever proud and independent we may feel in regard to the sharpening of our own wits, we should soon find ourselves in an awkward plight, if [Sheffield] did not send us needles, and grind our scissors, and edge our razors.”

Americans attempted to negotiate, and ultimately overcome this state of dependence by means of two unique strategies. The first involved promoting domestic cutlery manufacture as an explicitly nationalistic enterprise. The second involved reframing American consumers – and, by extension, the United States more broadly – as the dominant partner in the country’s economic relationship with the Sheffield cutlery industry.

Not surprisingly, Americans first began promoting cutlery manufactories as an explicitly nationalistic enterprise in the midst of the patriotic fervor surrounding the outbreak of the War of

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57 For the awkward realization that even anti-British print rhetoric required British-made print type, see “The Manufactures of England,” *Boston Courier* (Boston, MA), Jun. 21, 1832; “Description of Sheffield,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Sept. 19, 1833.


59 “Dr. Humphrey’s Tour,” *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, MA), Jun. 7, 1837. See also *The Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Feb. 24, 1838; *Boston Recorder* (Boston, MA), Jun. 16, 1837.
1812. In August of 1812, for instance – only months after the United States’ declaration of war against Britain – a New York newspaper sang the praises of a newly-founded Boston razor manufactory. The people of Boston, the *Shamrock* declared, “have declared hostilities against the people of Sheffield, in England, by establishing a cutlery manufactory on an exclusive scale. This is not the first time,” the paper continued, “[that] this celebrated city raised the standard of revolt against the parent country, and we apprehend this second circumstance will be as fatal to [the] razor-makers as the first has been to the British Empire.” Unfortunately, the *Shamrock*’s bravado seems to have been misplaced. No evidence of a Boston-based razor-making firm appears in the historical record until years later. And the disruptions of the War of 1812 – which effectively halted the importation of Sheffield crucible steel, the only material fit for razor production – would have made such an undertaking, already enormously ambitious, virtually impossible.

The Boston firm, however, was not the last cutlery manufactory to benefit from ardently nationalistic rhetoric. By the end of the decade, the Washington, DC *Daily National Intelligencer* was promoting a Pittsfield manufactory making razors and other forms of cutlery. And over the next forty years, American readers would have occasion to learn of dozens of other firms, including a scissor-making firm at Newburyport, Massachusetts (1825), a razor, pen- and

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pocket-knife manufactory at Worcester, Massachusetts (1830), and a pocket-cutlery maker at Concord, New Hampshire (1839). These were, for the most part, modest establishments. Small in scale and few in number, they initially posed only a minimal threat to Sheffield’s dominance of the American market. Worcester’s Morse & Co., for instance, employed no more than twenty workers in 1830. But that did not prevent their backers from making bold predictions of national glory and industrial greatness. The *Daily National Intelligencer*, for instance, presciently pronounced that, thanks to cutlery manufactories like the one noted above, “Pittsburg [sic] … is to be the *Sheffield* of England” And the friends of the aforementioned Concord, New Hampshire cutler declared that “the friends of American genius and industry will prefer his cutlery, which they can obtain as good and as cheap as can be purchased from abroad.”

Unable to resign themselves to commercial and industrial dependence on Great Britain, American journalists proclaimed domestic productions “quite equal to those of corresponding quality from the workshops of Sheffield.” It was a rhetorical and imaginative feat with important consequences.

Promoting domestic cutlery manufactures as a nationalistic enterprise was not Americans’ only strategy for negotiating their dependence on Sheffield’s industrial output. They also struggled to recast American consumers as the dominant partners in the republic’s...
relationship with South Yorkshire. “America,” a journalist for the *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser* bluntly stated, “is much more necessary to England, than England is to America.”

We might hear that the white-cliffed island had sunk, and that the green sea rolled quietly over the tops of Snowdon, without caring, except as Christians, for the loss of so many jolly boasters; but, ruin, we are inclined to think, would involve many a proud town, and still prouder firm, were the same overwhelming flood to dash its spray on the highest peak of Mount Washington.69

Yet another writer made a similar, if more specific, point, suggesting that the great evil of the British factory system was not so much the state of dependence it forced on consumers, but rather the dependence of English factory operatives on American consumer demand. “So immensely numerous have the operatives become,” wrote Dr. Humphrey, “that a very slight diminution in the amount of [foreign] orders is sufficient to throw thousands out of work, and place them at once upon the pauper’s list.”70 American consumers, then, were bearing a burden – perhaps even providing a public service – that would otherwise have to be borne by the British state, or by philanthropic and religious institutions.

Dr. Humphrey and his apocalyptically-minded counterpart for the *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser* were not necessarily mistaken. While Americans relied on Sheffield, the city also depended upon the United States. Though new markets accounted for a growing portion of the British cutlery industry’s revenues over the course of the early nineteenth century, one-in-four Sheffieldders continued to be employed supplying the American trade in 1840.71 As Alfred Gatty himself freely conceded in the late nineteenth century, “the fortunes of the town rose and

69 *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD), Aug. 29, 1828.
70 “Dr. Humphrey’s Tour – No. 60,” *Boston Recorder* (Boston, MA), Jul. 7, 1837.
fell with the temperature of the American demand.” G. I. H. Lloyd made much the same point. Sheffield’s “dependence on a fluctuating American market,” he wrote, “continued until [the late nineteenth-century] to be one of the chief causes of the recurrent periods of acute depression though which the trade periodically passed.” But, for present purposes, the reality of this relationship is less important than Americans’ willingness to conceptualize it in the way they did. Reversing the polarity of dependence, American boosters proclaimed the United States dominant in its relationship with Sheffield.

Of course, not everyone agreed with this assessment. Some dared declare that whether U.S. consumers or Sheffield manufacturers held the balance of power in the countries’ commercial exchange was less significant than the fact that both of them profited from it. While “one-sixth of the people of England depend on the trade with this country for their livelihood,” noted a correspondent for Philadelphia’s *Public Ledger*, “quite as large a proportion of our own inhabitants owe their gains to the trade with England.” Predicting that such close trading partners would never again come to blows, the journalist declared the relationship a beneficial one and left it at that. Still others, meanwhile, frankly conceded that the United States was dependent on Sheffield for its industrial output, but insisted that such an arrangement was ultimately conducive to Americans’ wellbeing. Sheffield, many commentators insisted, was an environmental and moral wasteland. Visible from the surrounding moorlands as no more than a dense dome of smoke and fire – church spires pushing past the black canopy, like some desperate and decaying hand beyond a premature grave – the city impressed more than a few visitors as a particularly vivid image of Hell. And whatever happy and empowering circumstances mitigated the lives of

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the city’s cutlery workers, American observers were typically slow to see them. Indeed, they seemed particularly transfixed with the plight of the city’s grinders, who were widely reputed to live short, dangerous lives of debauched intemperance. If these, then, were the fruits of British industrial dominance, England could surely keep them – or so argued many Americans. Should the two nations go to war yet again, Americans’ superior intellect, health, and moral fiber should no doubt carry the day.

Americans’ negative assessments of Sheffield were, as one might expect, largely exaggerated. Cutlery-grinding was, indeed, a dangerous occupation. Grindstones were known, not infrequently, to explode when they overheated – mutilating grinders’ face, torso, and groin, all of which were typically in close proximity to the stone. And long-term exposure to the steel and sandstone dust that resulted from the process of grinding left more than 80 percent of grinders with respiratory ailments that claimed their lives before they turned forty.\(^\text{75}\) Indeed, “accumulations of stone dust taken from a grinder’s lungs at a \textit{post mortem},” according to historian J. B. Himsworth, “were sometimes as large as small pearl barley.”\(^\text{76}\) But, as workers themselves and social reformers alike repeatedly proclaimed, conditions in Sheffield were far preferable to those in other major industrial cities. While cutlery workers were, by their own admission, a heavy-drinking lot, they were also prosperous, well-educated, and well-organized.\(^\text{77}\) As late as 1913, only one-third of the persons employed in the cutlery trades were dependent wage workers, and many could reasonably expect to become master craftsmen and small manufacturers over the course of their lifetime.\(^\text{78}\) Regardless of these realities, however – as well

\(^{75}\) Lloyd, \textit{The Cutlery Trades}, 231-232.  
\(^{76}\) Himsworth, \textit{The Story of Cutlery}, 64.  
\(^{77}\) Pollard, \textit{A History of Labour in Sheffield}, 41.  
\(^{78}\) Lloyd, \textit{The Cutlery Trades}, 205; Pollard, \textit{A History of Labour in Sheffield}, 56.
as the fact that similarly dismal conditions prevailed in the Land of the Free – Americans repeatedly returned to hellish images of Sheffield as an argument against industrial development.

Over the course of the early nineteenth century, the fortunes of these arguments – both for and against industrial independence – would rise and fall with the political winds. But in the early 1840s, it was proponents of industrial independence who would carry the day, leveraging a pro-protectionist Whig majority in Congress to pass the 1842 Black Tariff. Although lower and less politically divisive than the 1828 ‘Tariff of Abominations’ that had precipitated the Nullification Crisis of 1832, the 1842 legislation nevertheless imposed an average duty of 40 percent on a variety of imported goods including, quite notably, Sheffield steel, cutlery, and edge tools – all of which had faced significantly lower duties under previous tariffs. This is not to suggest, of course, that Sheffield manufactures had been unimpaired by previous legislation. Writing shortly after the passage of the 1828 tariff, the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* noted that the “effects of the United States Tariff have been particularly felt by the manufacturers of woolen stuffs, and of cutlery in Sheffield.” But these repercussions, as the remainder of the chapter suggests, were not nearly as dire as those attendant upon the Black Tariff.

The writings of tariff advocates, leading up to and following its implementation, were as fiercely republican – as vociferously opposed to American dependence – as anything that had preceded it. “It will take more gold than all the rich manufacturers of Great Britain can

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command,” the Schenectady, New York *Cabinet* intoned, “to *bribe* American Freemen to sacrifice their national independence in matters of ‘clothing,’ iron, steel, nails, cutlery, crockery, and every other necessary, which they can produce or fabricate at *home*.” The New York *Spectator*, meanwhile, complained that Americans “pay foreigners vast sums of money, and always keep ourselves in debt to them, for a host of things that we ought to furnish for ourselves.” The United States could manufacture cutlery “as good … as is to be found in Sheffield.” And the Whig Party itself – the primary partisan backer of the 1842 legislation – scheduled its 1844 national convention to coincide with a major mechanics fair at which artisans and manufacturers displayed their wares – not a few of which had benefitted from the Black Tariff. Punctuating its report on the convention with a sardonic barb, a Vermont paper assured readers that the legislation’s Locofoco opponents (anti-tariff Democrats) would appreciate the items on display far more if they had been produced in Manchester or Sheffield. The implications of these statements were clear: that the nation’s political independence was intimately linked to its economic independence, and that opposition to the tariff was not so much a question of political economy as of political fealty.

**IV. Razor in Crisis**

Against the harsh, Anglophobic backdrop of the Black Tariff and its aftermath, Sheffield cutlers undertook extraordinary efforts to demonstrate that consumption of British goods was compatible with American patriotism. These efforts were both large and small. Many of the city’s largest manufactories, for instance – including the Baltimore Works, Boston Works,

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80 *Cabinet* (Schenectady, NY), Oct. 1, 1844.
Manhattan Works, America Works, Brooklyn Works, Columbia Works, and Washington Works – were named in honor of their most prominent foreign patrons. A prominent member of the Rodgers family (of Rodgers & Sons fame) ornamented his dining quarters with scenes of the American Revolution. And a Sheffield cutler decorated the blades of a showpiece knife – not unlike Rodgers & Sons’ Norfolk Knife (see Fig. 12) – with a number of patriotic etchings. Produced in the immediate wake of the Black Tariff, this widely-publicized showpiece item featured images of the American eagle, the President’s house (i.e. the White House), and the Capitol in Washington, D.C.; views of New York and Hartford, Connecticut; the tomb of Kosciusko; as well as “the Columbian Bridge over the Susquehannah [sic] [and] the viaduct of the Baltimore and Washington Railway.” Attempts by Sheffield’s cutlers to ingratiate themselves with American consumers, however, were not limited to showpiece productions. They also included more humble items, including the Bowie knives which several firms manufactured in great numbers for the American market. Featuring inscriptions that ran the gamut from “Death to Abolition” and “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave” to “I Can Dig Gold From Quartz” and “For Stags and Buffaloes,” these “labels, inscriptions and devices” were singularly calculated to “tickl[e] the vanity of even Brother Jonathan” in Americans’ many guises. Not all of the efforts by Sheffield cutlers to flatter American consumers were quite so transparent. A Boston paper, for instance, reported with both pride and indignation that a handful of Sheffield cutlers were in the habit of punching their wares with American cutlers’ trademarks. Rather than pinning their hopes on acid-etchings of American political figures and

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84 *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, SC), Oct. 5, 1848.
87 “Foreign Luxuries,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA), May 10, 1864.
‘internal improvements,’ a handful of cutlers simply passed their goods off as domestic productions.

In large measure, these efforts failed. According to Philadelphia’s *North American*, for instance, British exports of cutlery declined by a whopping 77 percent between 1836 and 1842: from £1,318,412 in the former year to £298,881 in the latter. The value of British iron and steel exports, meanwhile, dropped from an 1836 high of £913,387 to £394,854 in 1842.\(^\text{88}\) Now, a significant portion of this decline was likely explained by the Panic of 1837 and a subsequent recession that dragged on into the early 1840s. But the impact of the tariff was specific enough to attract the commentary of several persons associated with the Sheffield industry. The Rochester *Democrat*, for instance, quoted a Sheffield cutler who claimed that “the new American tariff made it impossible for him to compete with the makers of similar wares” in the United States.\(^\text{89}\) And G. I. H. Lloyd, reflecting some seventy-five years later, noted that, by 1842, the “lowest pitch of depression” had been reached in Sheffield, “accompanied by an intensity of misery and suffering which is fortunately without parallel in the century’s history.”\(^\text{90}\) So precarious was the situation of many workers, that one advised journeymen cutlers “to go to the U. States, where, if the tariff continued, the business must flourish.”\(^\text{91}\) A quick look at price data suggests why. An American importer of Sheffield cutlery, for instance, informed the Richmond *Whig* that “[k]nives and forks that cost 9s. 6d. sterling per groce [sic] last year, we are now selling at 17s. to 18s., per groce [sic], and all others [i.e. all other types of goods] in proportion.”\(^\text{92}\)

\(^{88}\) The *North American* (Philadelphia, PA), Aug. 4, 1843. See also *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Aug. 12, 1843.


\(^{90}\) Lloyd, *The Cutlery Trades*, 341.


\(^{92}\) “‘Hardware,’ &c.,” *Richmond Whig* (Richmond, VA), Oct. 17, 1844.
correspondent’s figures were indeed representative, then the tariff had effectively doubled the price of razors in the United States.

But the impact of the 1842 legislation on prices was not even necessarily its most important effect. In their frantic efforts to maintain market share and remain competitive with the price of American-made wares, Sheffield cutlers cut corners with respect to the quality of the materials they used. The first hints of this development appeared, once more, in the pages of the Richmond Whig in the final months of 1842, when a journalist noted that while “Rogers’ [sic] knives have had a great run … they have deteriorated immensely.”93 Admittedly, this comment was made in the pages of a pro-tariff paper, in the course of an article on the virtues of American-made cutlery. But it nevertheless proved an accurate premonition of revelations to come. Indeed, by 1853, no less a figure than the Master Cutler himself – the head of the venerable Company of Cutlers – was willing to concede the point. American cutlers, he admitted, “generally made their articles of the best materials, regardless of price, while many, though not all, the manufacturers in Sheffield did not.”94 The tariff, therefore, not only had the effect of increasing the prices of Sheffield’s razors, but of compromising the quality of those wares as well.95

These increases in the price and losses in the quality of razors might not have been a major problem had there been a more viable domestic cutlery industry in the U.S. But, of course, there was not. This is not to deny the significant boost the Black Tariff gave to the incipient

93 “American Cutlery,” Richmond Whig (Richmond, VA), Dec. 9, 1842.
94 “The Cutlery Trade of England and America,” Charleston Courier (Charleston, SC), Sept. 24, 1853. For more on the cost-cutting measures implemented by the Sheffield industries (particularly pin manufacturers) in response to the tariff, see “Who Pays the Duty – The Producer of the Consumer?,” Richmond Whig (Richmond, VA), Aug. 23, 1850; Cabinet (Schenectady, NY), Jul. 1, 1851.
95 An 1883 article suggests that, as time passed, this became a common response by Sheffield cutlers to the problem of foreign competition. Writing for the New York Times, a journalist contended that, due to new competitors in the cutlery trades, Rodgers & Sons “had been pushed into the production of cheaper goods.” Tweedale, Tweedale’s Directory, 355.
American cutlery industry. Not only did it protect extant domestic manufacturers from lower-priced Sheffield goods; it also convinced a number of talented young English craftsmen to heed the advice of the cutler quoted above and try their luck in the U.S. The Boston Courier, for example, quoted a British newspaper complaining of mass emigration from the cutlery districts of South Yorkshire, “by which the trade of Sheffield has been injured, by our own citizens teaching those who were formerly our competitors.” Indeed, in the years during which the Black Tariff was in effect, or immediately thereafter, American journalists took note of a number of important new U.S. firms that had been founded by Sheffield emigrants. These include the establishments of Henry Ibbotson, William Beaver (a former employee of Joseph Rodgers & Sons), and J. Barker & Sons. Along with existing U.S. firms like the Meriden Cutlery Company and the Waterville Manufacturing Company – which, by 1851, employed about half as many hands as Joseph Rodgers & Sons – companies founded by Sheffield émigrés soon posed a significant challenge to South Yorkshire’s dominance in several important areas of manufacture. In fact, by 1843, according to G. I. H. Lloyd, “American factories had acquired a virtual monopoly of their own home trade in axes, augers, saws, and other tools, including a substantial share of the valuable trade in scythes and light edge-tools.”

But even the best and most competitive firms could, by their own admission, only scarcely match the pre-tariff price of Sheffield wares. And of these, only a handful sold

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96 Boston Courier (Boston, MA), Nov. 23, 1843. For more on Sheffield’s emigrants to the U.S., see Pollard, A History of Labour in Sheffield, 8; Himsworth, The Story of Cutlery, 190-191.
98 “Newark Cutlery,” Centinel of Freedom (Newark, NJ), Aug. 29, 1843. See also Charleston Courier (Charleston, SC), Aug. 29, 1843.
99 Milwaukee Daily Sentinel and Gazette (Milwaukee, WI), Mar. 4, 1851. Sheffield émigrés were apparently found as far west as Utah. See “Very Late from Utah,” Evening Post (New York, NY), Oct. 31, 1855.
100 Daily National Intelligencer (Washington, DC), Oct. 9, 1851; Himsworth, The Story of Cutlery, 189.
101 Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades, 343-344.
A company history of the Torrey Razor Company, for instance—the United States’ first major razor manufacturer, founded in 1873—lists only three significant predecessors, one of which the author, son of the company’s founder, could not even identify by name. Not only were razors among the most delicate, labor intensive, and difficult of all cutlery wares to produce. They also required, with the exception of low-grade, nearly-unusable blades, the highest-quality cast steel—unavailable anywhere outside of Sheffield, and therefore subject to the same protective duties as finished cutlery. American razor makers thus found themselves in a peculiar bind: whatever competitive gains the tariff provided were largely sapped by its deleterious impact on the price of imported steel. Savvy businessmen grasped this predicament

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103 “American Cutlery,” Republican Farmer (Bridgeport, CT), Jul. 15, 1845. See also Auburn Journal and Advertiser (Auburn, NY), Jul. 30, 1845.
and abandoned razor manufacture in favor of wares that could be manufactured from lower-quality American steel. The result of all this was what we might term a crisis of the razor. Prices increased and quality suffered. American cutlers made poor-quality razors because they lacked both experience and access to low-cost, high-quality cast steel; and Sheffield cutlers made lower-quality razors because they couldn’t afford to maintain both sales and production quality. Combined with the gradual movement of shaving out of the barber shop and American men’s general ineptitude as shavers, the daily ritual became an increasingly tortuous one. Indeed, it should come as little surprise that published complaints of painful shaving increased more quickly in the 1840s than in any other decade of the antebellum period (see Figs. 8 and 13). Left with what many felt were few good alternatives, a growing number of American men instead opted for facial hair.

The rise of hirsute styles of grooming did not necessarily spell doom for the Sheffield cutlery industry – not, at least, in the short run. Razors were just one of many products on which South Yorkshire cutlers depended for their livelihood. And, increasingly, the United States was but one among a growing number of important export markets. Just as importantly, the Black Tariff proved an impermanent arrangement. Replaced after only four years, the 1842 legislation was superseded by the so-called ‘Compromise Tariff’ of 1846 which significantly reduced rates on both steel and finished cutlery, among many other items. The result was a dramatic resurgence in the American market for Sheffield’s wares in the late 1840s and 1850. A Mr. Tweedale, Sheffield Steel and America, 4. 8-9. Indeed, even by the late 1850s, American manufacturers were producing only a few hundred tons of crucible steel (and this, of rather indifferent quality). Compare this to the 22,000 tons imported to the U.S. in 1860 from Sheffield alone.

See ch. one, note 116 for sources and methodology.

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Denisen, for instance, speaking before an 1853 gathering of the Company of Cutlers in Sheffield, boasted that “America … is swallowing up our exports as fast as we can send them.” But while the city’s situation had improved dramatically since the early 1840s, its long-term prospects in the United States remained dim. The meeting at which Mr. Denisen boasted of Sheffield exports was the same one at which the Master Cutler admitted that inferior steel was being used in the manufacture of cutlery; and, over the course of the decade, the American cutlery industry continued to make astonishing gains – emerging as a global contender in its own right by the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861. Employing 4,300 workers and generating close to $4 million in revenues in 1850, the industry had taken on an additional 700 employees in the following ten years, while adding more than a million dollars to its total revenues. American manufacturers had achieved this, moreover, in the absence of a robust protective tariff and despite a sharp economic downturn in 1857.

These figures by no means signaled the end of Sheffield’s global importance. But they did mark the waning importance of the Sheffield steel and cutlery industries inside the United States. Slowly but surely, the city’s name appeared less-and-less frequently in the pages of American newspapers. Its wares, meanwhile, were held in diminishing esteem by American manufactures. In 1858, for example, a Columbus, Ohio plow manufacturer admitted that, while he previously used nothing but Sheffield steel to manufacture his plows, he had recently switched to Pittsburgh steel, which he was convinced was of higher quality. And by 1864, a

that “[f]or the little mester, the 1850s was a period of almost unlimited demand from Brother Jonathan.” See Tweedale, *Tweedale’s Directory*, 11. See also Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield*, 125.
110 “Columbus and its Manufactories. Franklin Foundry and Plow Manufactory,” *The Daily Ohio Statesman* (Columbus, OH), Aug. 15, 1858.
writer for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* could say, with some credibility, that “we hear very little of Sheffield now.”

It was both a difficult and an historic transition – born in no small part from Americans’ earnest if overwrought desire for economic independence and industrial self-determination. But neither the crisis of the Sheffield razor nor the decline of the American barber shop could fully explain the equally historic rise of the American beard. Instead, we must turn to the pages of American print media, where merchants and advertisers endowed men’s grooming with a new and pernicious set of associations.

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111 “Foreign Luxuries,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA), May 10, 1864. For more on the failure of Sheffield’s American trade in the 1860s, see Tweedale, *Tweedale’s Directory*, 20; Tweedale, *Sheffield Steel and America*, 9-10.
PART II:

The Rise of the Beard
 CHAPTER THREE:
DANDIES ALL!

Patent Hair Product Advertisers and the Feminization of Men’s Facial Hair

Not all men grew facial hair as a labor-saving intervention — as a way of sparing themselves the pain of shaving with a poorly-made razor or the discomfort of being attended by a barber of color. For an important subset of American groomers — including dandified young men of fashion — facial hair likely represented a net increase in the labor, expense, and time associated with tending one’s hair. Such was the case for Ned Heston, the fictional protagonist of a short story by Alexander J. Morton that appeared in an 1849 issue of *Godey’s Lady Book*. Entitled “The Travelled Monkey,” the story finds young Ned in the shop of his local barber every morning, where he pays to have his paltry crop of whiskers regularly trimmed, shaped, oiled, and waxed. Far from saving him time and money, Ned’s whiskers — and the “bear’s grease, Maccassar oil and ox marrow” with which he so generously coated them — made grooming more expensive and burdensome than it had ever been before.¹

But that is not all that Ned’s whiskers and hair products did. They also cued readers to his status as a foppish young dandy. Stepping gracefully from the carriage that bears him home after a ‘Grand Tour’ of Europe, it is Ned’s newly adopted whiskers, as well as the tonics, oils, and pomades with which he has adorned them, that, more than any other quality, signaled his transformation into what many nineteenth-century Americans designated an ‘exquisite.’ Indeed,

between the 1820s and 1850s, it became increasingly difficult for Americans to imagine the dandy without also imaging his well-oiled whiskers.²

This association between dandies, their elaborate grooming practices, and patent hair products is the subject of the present chapter. Situating this relationship within the context of advertising print culture, the chapter shows how a revolution in patent hair product advertisements threatened to make this category of goods – and, by association, the dandy – the most visible embodiments of the culture of men’s grooming. Representing a mere three percent of men’s grooming advertisements in the 1820s, patent hair product notices constituted a near-majority of grooming-related advertisements by the middle of the century (see Fig. 14).³

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² Ibid., 3-5.
³ This statistic, as well as the larger chart above, are based on a survey of early republic newspapers from Boston, Massachusetts; Cincinnati, Ohio; Richmond, Virginia; and New Orleans, Louisiana. The sampled papers included the following (with the dates of the issues I consulted in parentheses): Boston Daily Atlas (monthly, Feb. 1833 – Dec. 1833; monthly, Jan. 1843 – Dec. 1843; monthly, Jan. 1852 – Nov. 1852); The Boston Herald (monthly, May. 1836 – Dec. 1836; bimonthly, Feb. 1847 – Dec. 1847; bimonthly, Jan. 1856 – Nov. 1856); The Massachusetts / Columbian Centinel (bimonthly, Jan. 1790 – Dec. 1790; bimonthly, Jan. 1810 – Nov. 1810; bimonthly, Feb. 1820 –
As a result of this radical increase in the visibility of patent hair products, many Americans began to wonder if these accoutrements of dandyism were, in fact, merely confined to dandies. The facial hair of men who had not typically been associated with dandyism thus came to be seen as a species of affectation – a development with important implication for the gender identification of other hirsute men. It threatened, in short, to make fops of men who had – like the disgruntled ex-shavers described in the foregoing chapters, as well as their hirsute counterparts among soldiers, religious zealots, and social reformers – grown facial hair for altogether un- or anti-fashionable reasons.

In response, a large group of men would embark, in the 1840s and 1850s, on efforts to redefine facial hair in ways that were more conducive to their sense of themselves as men.
Fig. 15: “Mr. Lincoln Sets a Style,” Vanity Fair 3 (Mar. 16, 1861), 126. 
Note the mustachioed young dandy standing between the bust of Lincoln and the salesman.

chapter four – we must first understand the phenomenon to which they were reacting: the tendency of men’s grooming advertisements to make all facial hair look like the dandy’s facial hair.

In claiming that all facial hair increasingly looked like the dandy’s, I do not mean to suggest that the physical form of men’s grooming styles became more similar. If anything, the physical landscape of men’s facial hair actually grew more varied between 1830 and 1850. Instead, I argue that the contextual signifiers that had once helped preserve the distinction between the styles worn by the dandy, soldier, radical, and disgruntled ex-shaver increasingly lost their significance. As a result, by the late 1840s and early 1850s, many Americans looked at the grisly whiskers of someone like Abraham Lincoln and suspected they saw therein the telltale accoutrements of the exquisite (see Fig. 15).
Before proceeding, however, a few words of definition are in order. The first involves the category of ‘patent hair products.’ This is a term of my own invention, used to encapsulate everything from tonics, restoratives, pomatums, and dyes, to oils, greases, conditioners, and shampoos. Though few of these products were actually registered with the patent office, the term is nevertheless useful because it emphasizes their similarity to and, in some instances, kinship with the better-known category of patent medicines. Often made of similar ingredients, concocted by the same people, and advertised in the same fanciful, hyperbolic fashion, both patent hair products and medicines shared a reputation for quackery, believed by some to be useless and by others to be dangerous. Highlighting this connection is therefore the primary benefit of the term. But it also allows me to emphasize the overlapping purposes for which they were used. Unguents, dyes, and styling creams – to pick, at random, three categories of patent hair products – were not yet discrete classes of wares. Instead, nearly all patent hair products promised to achieve two or more of the following tasks: reversing balding, restoring color to graying hair, eliminating dandruff, cleaning the hair, and restoring shine. Grouping these products together, therefore, is the only way to avoid imposing on them a coherence of function that did not yet exist.4

The second term that demands explanation is the word ‘dandy’ – as well as the words ‘fop’ and ‘exquisite,’ all of which I have used interchangeably throughout. These are, admittedly, nettlesome and problematic words, as few nineteenth-century men would have self-consciously identified with a group tainted by such unsavory connotations. But, despite this, the word can nevertheless be used to describe youthful, fashionable men who, in the words of historian Michael Zakim, evinced an “undisguised interest in themselves as sartorial [and tonsorial]

subjects.”5 It can also be used to designate men who, as a result of their sartorial self-involvement, were derided as effete, failed, or feminine men. The word ‘dandy,’ therefore, is used to describe an identification rather than an identity; in all but rare instances, it was a social type that encapsulated someone else’s characteristics rather than an ideal to which one aspired.

The chapter that follows will be divided into three broad sections. The first describes the communities of men with whom facial hair was primarily associated in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to the disgruntled ex-shavers, described in the previous chapters, these groups of men included dandies, soldiers, religious extremists, and political and social reformers. The second section details how the cultural connotations of these men’s facial hair styles – once so distinct – started to blur in the final decades before the Civil War. Beginning by detailing the link between dandyism and the use of patent hair products, the second section goes on to show how a revolution in advertising increased the visibility of patent hair products, thus leading many Americans to see all facial hair as a species of dandyism. The third and final section, meanwhile, concludes by turning to the business of patent hair product manufacture and advertising, arguing that, while producers and advertisers had a marked impact on the culture of men’s grooming, their professional and personal interest in the realm was minimal.

Taken collectively, the chapter contributes to a growing body of literature on the power of print culture – and especially advertisements – to shape cultural perceptions. Patent hair product advertisements, the chapter concludes, did not simply become more prevalent; they also succeeded in transforming the American public’s understanding of facial hair more broadly. This

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would be remarkable enough on its own; but it would not be out of step with scholarship on, say, Ivory Soap’s successful glamorization of the category of cleaning agents, or Gillette’s efforts to generate, \textit{ex nihilo}, demand for women’s razors.\footnote{See, for ex., James D. Norris, \textit{Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920} (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).} Instead, what sets this story apart is the fact that these agents – the barbers, chemists, merchants, and quacks who revolutionized men’s grooming advertising – did not set out to alter the cultural landscape of men’s body care. Taking inspiration from David Henkin’s study of print culture’s ‘accidental’ role in constituting the lived experience of the antebellum American city, the present study shows how patent hair product advertisers inadvertently and yet inexorably emasculated facial hair.\footnote{David Henkin, \textit{City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York} (Columbia University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 4.}

\section*{I. Facial Hair, Typical and Stereotypical}

Why did American men grow facial hair? Thus far, the present work has stressed what we might term ‘perverse necessity’ as the driving factor behind men’s decision to grow facial hair. Whiskers, in other words, followed necessarily – even materially – on the heels of several major antebellum cultural developments.\footnote{This emphasis on the ‘perverse necessity’ of facial hair styles flies in the face of much of the existing scholarship on the history of men’s grooming. Typically, scholars have been reluctant to link changes in men’s grooming patterns to anything even remotely smacking of necessity or materiality. Historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore, for instance, has argued that neither the technology of the razor nor the expense of shaving could explain the rise of facial hair wearing in Victorian Britain. And in his groundbreaking quantitative study of representations of men’s grooming styles in the \textit{Illustrated London News}, sociologist Dwight E. Robinson went so far as to say that the “wavelike fluctuations” of tonsorial fashion suggest “a large measure of independence from outside historical events,” including technological developments and war. See Christopher Oldstone-Moore, “The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 48 (Autumn, 2005), 9-10; Dwight E. Robinson, “Fashions in Shaving and Trimming of the Beard: The Men of the \textit{Illustrated London News}, 1842-1872,” \textit{The American Journal of Sociology}, 81 (Mar., 1975), 1,138.} The hardening of white supremacy, for instance, caused a number of men to abandon the untoward intimacy of the black-owned barber shop.\footnote{See chapter one above.}
And the fallout from nationalist, protectionist economic policy left many of these newly-minted home-shavers with tools that were higher in price and lower in quality than what they had used earlier in the century.\textsuperscript{10} The results, predictably, were disastrous. Poor tools only exacerbated men’s inadequacy as barbers. Consequently, as the century progressed, shaving became more painful and many men decided to give it up altogether.\textsuperscript{11}

‘Perverse necessity,’ however, was not the only reason men grew facial hair. A number of men adopted the style for far more self-conscious reasons – including reasons related to their love of fashion and finery, their martial identity, or their commitment to various schools of religious, political, and scientific thought. Nevertheless, the men who grew facial hair for self-conscious reasons were not particularly numerous. Even taken collectively, the communities to which they belonged constituted a distinct minority of American society. But this did not prevent them from constituting some of the most culturally-conspicuous exemplars of a trend that actually had its demographic locus elsewhere. Who were these conspicuous communities of hirsute men? This section will examine four, including dandies, soldiers, religious extremists, and political and social reformers.

The most visible of these was the community of dandies, fops, and exquisites, among whom elaborate facial hair first became popular in the late 1820s and early 1830s. This development has often been credited to the French aristocrat Alfred d’Orsay who, in the years surrounding 1830, first sprouted an impressive wreath of whiskers.\textsuperscript{12} Renowned as ‘king of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] See chapter two above.
\item[\textsuperscript{11}] For more on the painfulness of shaving, see chs. one and two above.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] See, for ex., Willard Connely, \textit{Count d’Orsay: The Dandy of Dandies} (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1952). While Connely’s biography of the Count is, at times, almost noxiously detailed, it does not address when, exactly, d’Orsay grew his famous whiskers. It is clear from visual evidence, however, that at some point around 1830, d’Orsay adopted his famous bewhiskered look. See, for ex., James Fraser’s famous portrait of d’Orsay from ca. 1830 (on which, incidentally, the \textit{New Yorker}’s mascot, Eustace Tilley, is based).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
dandies,’ d’Orsay’s bold grooming choices soon sparked a transatlantic craze, with thousands of fashionable young men from throughout the Euro-American world growing whiskers in imitation.\textsuperscript{13}

In the decades to come, this association between dandies and facial hair would only grow stronger. During this period, European and American fashion plates would increasingly come to feature images of men wearing facial hair of various configurations. Between 1841 and 1845, for instance – the only years in which \textit{Graham’s Magazine} featured male figures in their fashion plates – just under two-thirds of all the men pictured wore short wreaths, while a few others boasted moustaches (see Fig. 16).\textsuperscript{14} Over the next ten years, fashion plates printed by leading Philadelphia tailors F. Mahan and S. A. & A. F. Ward depicted bearded, whiskered, and mustachioed dandies in roughly the same proportion.\textsuperscript{15} And by the late 1850s and early 1860s, the men who appeared in \textit{Scott’s Report on Fashion} and \textit{The Elegant}, both prominent tailor’s trade publications, almost invariably wore some combination of a bushy wreath beard, waxed

\textsuperscript{13} On d’Orsay’s status as the ‘King of the Dandies,’ see Connelly, \textit{Count d’Orsay}, 26-8, 51, 63, 139, 162, 282, 414, 415. See also, \textit{The American Ladies and Gentleman’s Manual of Elegance, Fashion, and True Politeness} (Auburn: Alden, Beardsley & Co., Rochester: Wanzer, Beardsley & Co., 1854). This popular book of manner, though written by the Englishman Charles William Day, was widely attributed, in its American editions, to Alfred d’Orsay. Few attributions, I suspect, could speak more highly to d’Orsay’s status as a Euro-American icon of fashionable living.

\textsuperscript{14} See the fashion plates in \textit{Graham’s Magazine} for the following months: Aug. 1841, Sept. 1841, Oct. 1841, Nov. 1841, Dec. 1841, Feb. 1842, Mar. 1842, May 1842, Jun. 1842, Jul. 1842, Sept. 1842, Nov. 1842, Jan. 1843, Nov. 1843, Dec. 1843, Jan. 1844, Mar. 1844, May 1844 Jun. 1844, Jul. 1844, and Nov. 1844. By September of 1845, \textit{Graham’s}, in keeping with the majority of ante-bellum American fashion and cultural periodicals, was no longer publishing fashion plates featuring men. While most fashion plates were imported from Europe, the images features in \textit{Graham’s} were likely produced in the United States, as many of the plates contain images of the magazine itself (in a number of the plates, for instance, figures are shown reading a copy of \textit{Graham’s Magazine}).

moustache, or robust mutton chops (see Fig. 17). Though fashion plates were relatively rare in American periodicals (especially after the mid-1840s), they were easily found in the shop windows of urban tailors, where they helped inform contemporary perceptions of what a ‘man of fashion’ looked like. As such, fashion plates played a vital role in shaping widely-held perceptions of the dandy’s hirsute appearance.

The written word also played an important role in shaping – and reflecting – links between dandies and facial hair. As early as 1836, for instance, the Gentleman’s Vade Mecum, a popular men’s periodical, quipped that “the whole amount of shaving” required by New York’s

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16 See Scott’s Report on Fashion, Fall-Winter, 1859-1860; Fall-Winter, 1860-1861; Spring-Summer, 1861; Fall-Winter, 1861-1862; Summer & Spring, 1862; Fall-Winter, 1862-1863; The Elegant, Jan. 1, 1855; Feb. 1, 1855; Mar. 1, 1855; Apr. 1, 1855; May 1, 1855; Jun. 1, 1855; Jul. 1, 1855; Aug. 1, 1855; Sep. 1, 1855; Oct. 1, 1855; Nov. 1, 1855; Dec. 1, 1855; Jan. 1, 1856.

17 See, for ex., an image entitled “Unsophisticated Little Girl,” from vol. V of Charles A. Poulson Philadelphia Scrapbooks, 1822-1865, vol. V, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA [(5)2526]. The image shows a “Swell” (i.e. dandy or fashionable man) walking in front of a tailor’s shop with a fashion plate in the window. For examples of what these fashion plates might have looked like, see the items cited in note 15 above. Far too large to be included in periodicals and other print media, these images were almost certainly hung in tailors’ windows.
“exquisites” was “scarcely within the circumference of a quarter dollar.” In 1842, fiction writer Henry F. Harrington, writing for *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, remarked that “whiskers and imperial” [a facial hair style consisting of a short waxed mustache and a small thin goatee] were essential characteristics of “that worthless, despicable class in a populous community – the dandies.” And, in 1852, novelist George Foster commenced his chapter on “The Dandies” in *New York in Slices* by joking that “[s]ince the lamentable failure of the whisker-crop on the Boulevard des Italiens, New York is the only City and Broadway the only street in which any thing [sic] like a

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18 *Gentleman’s Vade Mecum* 2 (Apr. 30, 1836), 6.  
respectable assortment of live Dandies can be found.” In the world of letters too, then, whiskers, beards, and moustaches had become unmistakable markers of dandyism.

But while dandies were frequently lampooned as effete, failed, or ersatz men, they shared many of their favorite grooming styles with men who were typically regarded as more manly. The men in question were soldiers, with whom facial hair was also closely associated throughout the early nineteenth century. That association, as historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore contends, likely had its origins in both the bearded sappers and miners of Napoleon’s armies as well as the mustachioed members of Hussar cavalry units that became a mainstay of western European armies around the turn of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the garb and grooming habits of similarly-named Hungarian horse soldiers, Hussars grew moustaches that soon became a fad among military men more generally. Indeed, it was likely in imitation of these Hussar-inspired military styles that both Prince Albert and Napoleon III – two of the nineteenth-century’s great popularizers of facial hair – grew their distinctive configurations of whiskers.

Dandies and soldiers, however, were not the only communities of men associated with facial hair. Religious extremists were also closely linked with the style. The Prophet Matthias, for instance – discussing in the present project’s introduction – was primarily known for his outlandish religious teachings, his scandalous views on sex and the family, and his enormous beard. For Matthews, his beard spoke to both his perceived place in the prophetic line of succession – echoing the supposed grooming patterns of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the like – as well as his deep-seated interest in reinvigorating patriarchy. Lecturing his disciples on the duties and prerogatives of manhood, commanding their obedience and labor, and claiming the right to

reorganize their families as he saw fit, Matthias cloaked the masculinity he had imbibed in his rural, turn-of-the century childhood in the symbolic garb of prophesy. Prominent among the symbols through which he achieved this conjuring act was his beard. And though Matthews’s followers were few in number, the Prophet’s cultural impact was quite large. The subject of a widely-publicized murder trial, Matthews – as well as a handful of other would-be prophets – helped ingrain a close association between bushy facial hair and religious extremism. So durable was this association that, when John Brown assumed the mantle of abolitionist prophecy in the late-1850s, he grew a beard much like Matthias’s. And in 1856, ‘Helicon,’ a correspondent for Boston’s Daily Evening Transcript, noted that, since his youth, he had “only associated a long beard with a maniac, or some wild, fanatical enthusiast.”

Religious zealots, however, were not the only community of men linked to enormous, bushy facial hair. So, too, were political reformers. Many of the continental revolutionaries of 1848, for instance – as well as their Chartist and socialist counterparts in Britain – famously favored moustaches, whiskers, and beards. And when Lajos Kossuth, the bearded Hungarian nationalist, toured the United States, a handful of sympathetic admirers were reputed to have grown matching styles in admiration.

But, among Americans more generally, facial hair was more closely associated with social, rather than political reform. Joseph Palmer of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, for instance, was typical of the kind of American social reformers who favored facial hair. Robustly bearded,

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23 He also grew the beard to disguise himself from state and federal law enforcement authorities. But no doubt the religious connotations of the beard were never far from his mind. See Tony Horwitz, Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War (New York: Picador, 2012).
25 See Oldstone-Moore, Of Beards and Men, ch. 8.
Palmer was a dedicated supporter of Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands, a utopian vegetarian community, and, in the words of his son, “interested in all reformatory ideas.” Moreover, Palmer “was early in the field as an anti-slavery man and as a total abstinence [temperance] advocate,” and “was well acquainted with [Wendell] Phillips, [William Lloyd] Garrison, and other prominent Abolitionists.”27 Though Palmer never stated why he had chosen to grow a beard, a subsequent generation of bearded reformers would make the link between facial hair and their varied causes explicit. Several reform-minded members of the Hudson Valley School of painters, for instance, grew beards as emblems of devotion to phrenology, Grahamite dietary reform, and other allied popular sciences.28 Believed to preserve vital energy, promote respiratory health, and enhance intellectual functioning, facial hair became a key element in larger proposals for reformed body practices. Together with men like Joseph Palmer, bearded painters Asher Durand, Charles Loring Elliott, and William Sidney Mount would help engrain the stereotype of the hirsute reformer in Americans’ cultural consciousness.29

These, then, were the four communities of men with whom many Americans associated facial hair in the style’s early decades: dandies, soldiers, religious extremists, and political and social reformers. Though fewer in number than the disgruntled ex-shavers who grew their facial hair out of ‘perverse necessity,’ these communities were, until the final decades of the

28 For Charles Colbert’s “informal survey” of when, based on portraiture, a number of American artists grew their beards, see Charles Colbert, A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), note 50, pages 393-394.
29 Asher Durand – who, in addition to his commitments to phrenology and Grahamite dietary reform, also advocated vegetarianism and women’s dress reform – grew his beard in the late 1840s or early 1850s. And Charles Loring Elliott, who shared many of Durand’s social commitments, was so devoted to the trend that he refused to paint a portrait of fellow artist William Sidney Mount until Mount grew a beard. See Colbert, A Measure of Perfection, 133; Alfred Frankenstein, William Sidney Mount (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 30, quoted in Colbert, A Measure of Perfection, 135.
antebellum period, almost certainly more visible.\textsuperscript{30} And, while membership in these four communities was far from exclusive – Alfred d’Orsay, for instance, was simultaneously a dandy, ex-soldier, \textit{and} reform-minded artist – the stereotypes associated with each community’s facial hair styles seem to have remained independent for much of the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{31} While Robert Matthews and Joseph Palmer, for example, were both persecuted for their grooming habits – the former was forcibly shorn by a mob while the latter was attacked by men intent on doing the same – neither was accused of dandyism. And dandies, though roundly ridiculed in the press, were rarely confused with soldiers, religious extremists, or social reformers. By the late 1840s and early 1850s, however, all of that was beginning to change, as connotations of dandyism began to encroach on the semiotic territory of other men’s facial hair.

\textbf{II. An Empire of Dandies}

Evidence of dandyism’s encroachment upon the facial hair of men who typically would not have been identified as dandies began to appear in earnest in the decade before the American Civil War. In an 1855 issue of the \textit{Crayon}, for instance – a arts journal co-edited by Asher Durand’s son John – an author identified only as ‘Bumble-Bee’ noted that:

I have heard men of thought and genius say, that they would instantly discard … [the] razor … and wear flowing beard … were it not that they would be accused

\textsuperscript{30} This is not to suggest that these groups were uninfluential. Popular science and health reform movements had an extraordinary cultural reach in the decades before 1860 – both in the U.S. and in Europe. See, for ex., John D. Davies, \textit{Phrenology, Fad and Science} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Madeline B. Stern, \textit{Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972). And while a relatively small number of Americans and Europeans joined Kossuth and Garibaldi on the barricades of 1848, a greater number grew facial hair in their honor. See note 26 above. Still, any account of the mid-century facial hair fashion must take stock of the overwhelming majority of American and European men who had no affiliation with the fine arts, phrenology, health reform, religious and political radicalism, the military, or dandyism.

\textsuperscript{31} Connely, \textit{Count d’Orsay}.
of literary vanity, or a love of eccentricity. I have even heard grave clergymen assert that they would do the same, following the reasonable exterior of apostles, prophets, and the old reformers, were it not that they would be proscribed as dandified and heretical.\(^3\)

Admittedly, the Bumble-Bee’s comments speak more directly to the reticence of clean-shaved men to adopt the beard style. But they also attest to Americans’ growing tendency to confuse the facial hair of upstanding adult men with the vain and eccentric styles of young dandies. So, too, do the opening salvos of the ‘Great Beard Debate,’ discussed at length in chapter four below. A twenty-two part debate on the virtues and vices of beard wearing in Boston’s *Daily Evening Transcript*, the spectacle began when the heavily-bearded reformer Alonzo Lewis leapt to the

rhetorical defense of mustachioed clerks who had been lampooned by one Nori Leets (see Fig. 18). Though hailing from radically different cultural communities – and though sporting facial hair styles that, decades earlier, never would have been confused – Lewis nevertheless felt compelled to defend the dandified clerks whose whiskers and mustachios had been impugned. Lewis, in other words, clearly perceived that an attack on fashionable clerks’ facial hair now implied something about his own.  

This encroachment of dandyism cannot be explained by means of a growing physical similarity between the styles sported by various communities. While dandies’ and soldiers’ facial

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Hair styles were typically shorter and more restrained than those favored by would-be prophets, reformers, and disgruntled ex-shavers, there was, and long had been, considerable overlap among the styles. Alfred d’Orsay’s fashionable wreath of facial hair was scarcely shorter than Lajos Kossuth’s (see Figs. 19 and 20). And Confederate cavalryman J.E.B. Stuart’s impressive red beard – which he grew shortly after graduating from West Point in 1854 – was every bit a match for Joseph Palmer’s or Asher Durand’s (see Figs. 21, 22, and 23).

Instead, this growing association between dandies’ facial hair and that of other communities of men is better explained by developments in the advertising realm. As advertisements for tonics, restoratives, pomades, and dyes become more prevalent, it became increasingly difficult for many Americans to think of facial hair as anything other than ‘dandified and heretical,’ evincing a ‘literary vanity’ or ‘love of eccentricity.’ The facial hair of soldiers,
zealots, reformers, and disgruntled ex-shavers, in other words, had been symbolically colonized by that of dandies.

To understand why this was the case, we must first understand two sets of associations that intimately linked dandies to the kind of patent hair products that increasingly appeared in American advertisements between 1830 and 1860. The first of these associations involved dandies’ stereotypical use – or, rather, overuse – of tonics, restoratives, pomades, and dyes. The most famous comment on this subject was likely Walt Whitman’s description of dandified clerks with their “hair all soaked and ‘slickery’ with sickening oils.”34 But, in fact, comments linking dandies with patent hair products abounded. In Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” for instance, the story’s narrator describes a contingent of foppish young men, distinguished primarily by their “tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips.”35 Health writer Arnold J. Cooley, meanwhile, described the use of hair dyes, “like that of false moustachies and whiskers,” as being “chiefly confined to fashionable fops, and to the ‘swells’ and ‘gents’ of low life.”36 And a parody advertisement that appeared in the February 1860 issue of Vanity Fair, advised “Young Gentlemen of Luxurious Turn of Mind” – a clear euphemism for the dandy – on “How to Secure a Comfortable Independence Unimpaired by the Inconveniences of Labor.” Its proffered solution? “Use my Onguent! In six weeks it will force the most exuberant growth of whiskers and mustaches on the smoothest face, fully qualifying the wearer to assume an honorable and easy position behind any retail counter of Broadway.” Available by

36 Arnold J. Cooley, The Toilet and Cosmetic Arts in Ancient and Modern Times (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1866), 270.
mail order for a moderate price, the product “compels feminine admiration,” and – in a transparent jab at foppish clerks – “ensures prompt attention from heads of mercantile houses.” In comments like these and others, then, American writers reiterated and reinforced a longstanding association between dandified young men and the (over)use of patent hair products.

Not all links between dandies and patent hair products were quite so overt, however. Another important linkage between the two involved the conceptual overlap between the qualities associated with dandyism and those associated with patent hair products. What, exactly, were these qualities? The most obvious of these characteristics were dissimulation and an interest in appearance over substance. These, of course, were typically regarded as the defining features of the dandy: a young man whose “undisguised interest” in himself as a “sartorial subject” came at the expense of moral and intellectual self-improvement – whose flatteries and fripperies disguised a venal heart and corrupted body. But dissimulation and a preference for appearance over substance were also widely regarded as characteristics of patent hair products. At best, these items were seen as a species of deception in themselves. An unnamed writer for The Albion, for instance, argued that many of the ‘celebrated’ hair dyes available for sale were good for nothing, save turning one’s hair “green, or blue, or any other conspicuous colour.” And a correspondent for the American Phrenological Journal claimed that the “bear’s (hog’s) grease, Macassar oils, pomades, ox marrow, balm of flower, [and] hair creams” peddled by “unprincipled quacks” were, in fact, “utterly worthless.”

37 “How to Secure a Comfortable Independence Unimpaired by the Inconveniences of Labor,” Vanity Fair 1 (Feb. 18, 1860), 118.
38 Zakim, Ready-Made Democracy; Adams, Dandies and Desert Saints; Feldman, Gender on the Divide; Pine, The Dandy and the Herald.
Fig. 24: A typical notice for a nineteenth-century patent medicine. From the Daily Cincinnati Gazette (Cincinnati, OH), Jan. 4, 1854 (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA).

But even more damningly, patent hair products were often condemned as an accessory to deception. An article in Godey’s Lady’s Book, for instance, contended that the reasons for which men dyed their hair were “seldom innocuous.” Whether “endeavoring to conceal the ravages of time, of mental anguish, or … disease” – or perhaps simply trying to preserve their status as a ‘votary of fashion’ – these men were engaging in a species of dangerous dissimulation. And an 1863 article in a prominent American health reform journal concluded that, “of all the foolish things practiced by either sex, that of coloring the hair by artificial means is the most foolish. … [P]ray do not mar the image by such hypocritical devices, but rather be what you seem than seem

to be what you are not.” Dandies and patent hair products, therefore, were implicitly understood to participate in the same vices of deception and dissimulation.

These men of fashion and their chemical hair accoutrements, moreover, also shared an association with physical and moral corruption. Like the debauched and dissolute young men who cheered on Richard P. Robinson – accused of murdering New York prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836 – patent hair products seemed to embody some element of danger and decay. This stemmed, in large measure, from patent hair products’ close association with patent medicines – many of which were intended to cure “private diseases” and other afflictions of fashionable...

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living and sexual ‘excess.’ Produced, in many instances, by the same druggists and chemists, marketed in the same hyperbolic, overblown language, and advertised in lengthy, standardized, and eye-catching notices, patent hair products and patent medicines appeared to the public as a largely undifferentiated categories of goods (see Figs. 24 and 25).43

The supposed dangers of patent hair products, however, were not limited to their association with patent medicines. They were also believed to be dangerous – both morally and physically – in their own right. An 1831 short story in the *Ladies’ Magazine* suggests why. Entitled “Coloring the Hair,” the story describes the efforts of a young woman, not yet twenty-eight, to disguise the “visible approach of Time” – by which the author means the unsightly appearance of the protagonist’s first gray hairs. Purchasing “at a very high price” a bottle of ‘Imperial Hair Restorer,’ the young woman applies the product to her hair, confident in its claim to “give the hair a beautiful glossy appearance, and restore it to its pristine color, without failure or danger.” Like so many others, however, the young woman is deceived. Within two days’ time, she awakes to find her hair “changed to an equivocal hue, bearing a near resemblance to the dark changeable green of the peacock’s feathers. The only truth of the restorative,” the article claims, “was its glossy qualities. The hair of the unfortunate young lady was glossy enough, and stiff as bristles.”44 Typical of more widely-held views, “Coloring the Hair” expressed the belief that patent hair products encouraged both the moral corruption of vanity, as well as the physical corruption associated with the use of poisonous and toxic substances.

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43 In Philadelphia, for instance, both a remedy for cancer, scrofula, erysipelas, swellings, and dyspepsia, as well as a hair tonic were sold under the name of one Dr. Jayne. And in New York City, Comstock & Brother produced everything from Dr. Judson’s Chemical Extract of Cherry to Carlton’s Liniment for the Piles – from Azor’s Turkish Balm (“the only certain remedy for baldness and for preventing and stopping the falling out of the hair”) to Dr. Larzette’s Juno Cordial, or Procreative Elixir. See, for ex., *Daily Cincinnati Gazette* (Cincinnati, OH), Mar. 4, 1854; *Daily Cincinnati Gazette* (Cincinnati, OH). Jan. 4, 1854. See also Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*.

These assessments of patent hair products as both fraudulent and dangerous, it should be noted, were not necessarily misplaced. The claims made by patent hair products advertisers were both extraordinary and, quite literally, incredible. Barry’s Tricopherous, for instance – a popular quack remedy for both gray hair and baldness – also promised to treat “Bruises, Sprains, Erysipelas, Swellings, Ringworm, Scale Head, Inflamed Skin, Prickly Heat, Scrofula, Tetter, Pimples, Sore Throat, Tender Feet, Salt Rheum, Rough Hands, Headache, Chapped Skin, Chilblains, Internal Pains, [and] Rheumatism.”

Other products, meanwhile, made dubious claims to celebrity patronage. Patent hair product salesman O. J. Wood, for instance, claimed the patronage of ex-U.S. Senator Sidney Breese; his competitor William Bogle advertised that his ‘Hyperion Fluid’ enjoyed the custom of Queen Victoria; and Mrs. S. A. Allen, the New York proprietor of Allen’s Zylobalsamum, published statements of support from no fewer than fourteen men of the cloth and one lawyer.

As if these claims alone were not enough to invite skepticism, however, many advertisers devoted an almost compulsive attention to the fraudulence and danger of their rivals’ wares. Ads for Davies’ Liquid Hair Dye and the Balm of Columbia, for instance, advised customers to purchase only signed products. And Dr. Felix Gouraud alerted would-be buyers of his Grecian Hair Dye that “there are base and dangerous counterfeits sold in the city.” But, despite Gouraud’s protests, counterfeiters did not enjoy a monopoly on dangerous products. A quick perusal of a nineteenth-century barbers’ ‘recipe book,’ purporting to reproduce the recipes for many leading patent hair products, provides a sense of just how dangerous many of these items

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45 Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Mar. 3, 1855; The Boston Herald (Boston, MA), Sep. 1, 1856; Daily Cincinnati Commercial (Cincinnati, OH), Jun. 1, 1849.
46 The Boston Herald (Boston, MA), Sep. 1, 1856; Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Jan. 5, 1855; Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser (Richmond, VA), Dec. 1, 1857.
47 The Boston Herald (Boston, MA), Jan. 30, 1856; Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Sep. 3, 1845.
48 Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Sep. 3, 1845.
were. Among the most noxious of the recipes presented in N. Belcher’s compendium are those for hair dyes. Belcher’s favorite recipe, for instance, was made from cream of tartar, lard, sal ammoniac, and silver nitrate. While sal ammoniac, menacing name notwithstanding, is perfectly safe, silver nitrate is not. The latter will stain one’s hair. But it will also burn one’s skin, and, if absorbed in sufficient quantities, permanently dye one’s internal organs. Still another dye recipe calls for “proto-nitrate of mercury.” And perhaps the worst of Belcher’s recipes unites soft water and alcohol with spirits of turpentine, sulfur, and sugar of lead. Indeed, throughout the Recipe Book one finds an astonishing array of toxins: from cantharides – an abortifacient made from the crushed carcasses of Spanish Flies – to calomel (mercury chloride), concentrated ammonia, and arsenic – which Belcher used to remove unwanted hair (though he admits its effects could occasionally prove fatal).49

But, for present purposes, the most important fact about patent hair products was not the accuracy of consumers’ suspicions that they were dangerous, but rather the way in which these products’ connotations of fraud, deception, and danger reinforced an already-strong association with dandyism. Indeed, so close was this association, that when nineteenth-century Americans looked at patent hair product advertisements, what they likely saw was the dandy.

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49 N. Belcher, The Barbers’ and Hair-Dressers’ Private Recipe Book (Boston: Rockwell & Rollins, 1868). For evidence that Belcher’s recipes include the ingredient lists for many of the leading commercial hair tonics, restoratives, and dyes, see his introduction (3-4). For Belcher’s favorite hair dye, see page 30. For recipes that use proto-nitrate of mercury, see page 30 as well. For depilatories, see 25-26. For the recipe featuring alcohol, turpentine, sulfur, and lead, see Liquid Hair Dye No. 5 (34). Cantharides appear in Pomade Contre L. Alopecie (6), Cazenave’s Remedy for Baldness (7-8), and in Hair Renewers No. 2 and 4 (24). For calomel, see Dupuytren’s Pomade, pages 5 to 6. For concentrated ammonia, see the recipes for instantaneous liquid hair dye No. 2 (31-32). For depilatories that contain orpiment (sulphuret of arsenic), see 27-28. Belcher offers the following warning: “The following depilatories contain orpiment (sulphuret of arsenic), a poisonous compound, and, if used as all, should be used with great care, as there is always danger of its being absorbed by the skin.” For additional evidence that cantharides regularly appeared in hair products, see an 1854 advertisement for the Cincinnati Hair Tonic which boasted that the product was “warranted not to contain Cantharides, or anything the least injurious to the Hair or Head.” See Daily Cincinnati Gazette (Cincinnati, OH), Mar. 4, 1854.
And the dandy – or, at least, his print incarnation in the form of patent hair product advertisements – was proliferating at a prodigious rate over the first six decades of the nineteenth century. As noted above, patent hair product advertisements went from being a mere fraction of all grooming-related advertisements in the 1820s to a near-majority of the same category in the 1850s (see Fig. 14). This shift, moreover, cannot be explained by a decline in the number of advertisements for other categories of wares. On the contrary, the average number of grooming ads in American newspapers increased by nearly 500 percent between the first and sixth decades of the century – allowing grooming-related ads to keep pace with the overall expansion of advertising and advertisements in American print media.\(^{50}\)

Nor was this relative increase in the number of patent hair product advertisements the only measure of their increased visibility. There were also more qualitative factors as well that helped make these notices into some of the most visible embodiments of men’s grooming culture in American print. The most obvious of these was the sheer size of many of these advertisements. While most contemporary advertisements were only a few lines long, patent hair product notices – like their kindred counterparts among patent medicines – regularly consumed entire columns of newspapers. And although the occasional dry goods or fancy goods advertisement might rival those for patent hair products in length – listing, quite literally, the full inventory of the merchant in question – they could not rival the color or creativity of the advertising copy for patent hair products. Indeed, as a number of scholars have noted, patent hair product advertisements – like those for patent medicines – were some of the most inventive advertisements of the century. Among the first products to cultivate nationwide brand

\(^{50}\) Based on the same sample of American newspapers described in note 3 above, my calculations indicate that the average number of grooming advertisements per newspaper issues increased from 0.53 in the first decade of the nineteenth century (1800s) to 2.68 in the sixth (1850s). Grooming-related advertisements as a percentage of the total number of newspaper advertisements remained relatively steady at around 1 percent for the first 60 years of the century (with a brief spike of 1.9 percent in the 1820s).
recognition and employ standardized messaging, patent hair products and their advertisements offered consumers nearly supernatural powers of personal transformation and acceptance when most other ads were barely offering adjectives. As a result of both a quantitative and qualitative transformation in advertising, therefore, patent hair product notices had emerged by the middle of the nineteenth century as the most visible embodiment of men’s grooming in American print culture.  

The increased visibility of patent hair products had dramatic consequences. Opening their morning papers to find an ever-increasing number of advertisements for these goods, many readers must have wondered how a small community of dandies could consume such an extraordinary expanse of wares. Turning their attention to the swelling ranks of hirsute American men, some must have wondered if the market for these goods was not, in fact, much broader than they had previously suspected. Perhaps it was not dandies alone who were using these items? Perhaps sturdy soldiers and stolid ex-shavers were themselves engaged in a species of dandyism? Perhaps the grooming practices of zealots and reformers were not so transparent and austere as they had once suspected? Perhaps the distinction between dandies and these other categories of men was more apparent than real?  

This all-too-characteristic antebellum American fear – that dangerous practices of dissimulation were not, after all, limited to outcast groups like dandies – had few more powerful expressions than in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade*.  


52 For more on antebellum fears of dissimulation, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
demands a world-weary barber in the novel’s closing pages, “and still believe that men are wholly what they look to be?”

What think you, sir, are a thoughtful barber's reflections, when, behind a careful curtain, he shaves the thin, dead stubble off a head, and then dismisses it to the world, radiant in curling auburn? To contrast the shamefaced air behind the curtain, the fearful looking forward to being possibly discovered there by a prying acquaintance, with the cheerful assurance and challenging pride with which the same man steps forth again, a gay deception, into the street, while some honest, shock-headed fellow humbly gives him the wall.53

Confirming what the proliferation of patent hair product advertisements had led many to suspect, Melville’s skeptical barber draws an implicit connection between the kind of men who commanded deference on the street and the dandy’s arts of deception. No longer confined to the young man of fashion, “macassar oil, hair dyes, [and] cosmetics” had emerged in the American public’s consciousness as accoutrements of men’s grooming more broadly. As a result, all facial hair seemed poised to be contaminated by the taint of dandyism.

Evidence of this emasculation of facial hair – this conceptual concatenation of dandyism with men’s grooming more generally – was simultaneously pervasive and subtle. Not only did it appear in the Bumble-Bee’s contribution to the Crayon, quoted above, and in Alonzo Lewis’s eager defense of Boston’s beleaguered mustache-wearing clerks. It also appeared in the pages of the Sheboygan, Wisconsin Democrat, when its editor lampooned his rival at Milwaukee’s Wisconsin Free Democrat for his recent decision to grow a beard. “We saw the Editor of the Free Democrat a few days since,” the Sheboygan journalist inveighed, “and he was so thoroughly covered with hair, that we concluded he had been fictitiously called a man.”

Trafficking in what, by 1850, would have been a well-worn stereotype regarding the effeminacy

and foppishness of facial hair, the editor of the Sheboygan Democrat implied that his rival had made a mincing dandy of himself by growing whiskers. Justifiably indignant, the Milwaukee editor responded by emphasizing the rationality of his tonsorial choices—suggesting that, in making his decision to grow facial hair, he had not consulted fashion, but rather the advice of his physician. “We have been assured by eminent medical men, at the East, that unless we could prevent these attacks [of bronchitis or quinsy], they would certainly terminate in incurable consumption; and have been frequently advised, by the best medical authority, to let our beard grow and dispense with shaving altogether.” Stressing his hirsute devotion to science rather than fancy, the editor of the Free Democrat struggled to convince readers that his manhood remained intact.

But perhaps the most telling piece of evidence regarding the emasculation of facial hair pertains to what popular historian Adam Goodheart has called “the most famous beard in the history of the world”: Abraham Lincoln’s whiskers. Though historians have typically assumed that Lincoln grew his facial hair in an effort to appear more patriarchal, manly, and authoritative, his decision, at least in some circles, seems to have had the opposite effect, instead making him look youthful, effeminate, and foppish. “Old Abe,” wrote a correspondent for the Lexington, Illinois Globe, “is commencing to raise a beautiful pair of whiskers, and looks younger than

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54 *Sheboygan Democrat* (Sheboygan, WI), quoted in *Wisconsin Free Democrat* (Milwaukee, WI), Jul. 10, 1850. Emphasis in original.
55 *Wisconsin Free Democrat* (Milwaukee, WI), Jul. 10, 1850.
usual.”\textsuperscript{58} The Democratic \textit{Albany Argus}, claimed that “[t]he country does not want wisdom or courage in its Executive, but beauty…. Lincoln knows it, and he is up to the crisis!” And the New York \textit{Herald’s} Henry Villard joked that “Abe is putting on [h]airs.”\textsuperscript{59} Admittedly, the last two comments originated with Lincoln’s political opponents—men with good reason to mock his appearance. But they nevertheless speak to how easily bewhiskered men could be charged with dandyism and effeminacy. Indeed, if even a gangly, badly-dressed, Illinois railsplitter was subject to the charge of dandyism, then surely the old distinctions between the many meanings of the beard had well and truly broken down.

\textit{III. An Accidental Revolution}

Just who were the men and women who had effected this dramatic shift in attitudes toward men’s grooming? A motley assembly of chemists, barbers, fancy goods salespeople, and charlatans, few, it would seem, set out to alter the cultural landscape of men’s body care. True, there were some producers, like Boston’s William Bogle, who had pledged their lives to the sacred causes of hair, grooming, and coiffure, even before they emerged as proprietors of products like Bogle’s Electric Hair Dye and Bogle’s Hyperion Fluid – a combination shampoo and unguent. Trained as an “artist in hair,” Bogle first took the public by storm as a wig-maker, before announcing the arrival, in an 1846 pamphlet entitled \textit{The Anatomy and Physiology of the Hair}, of his signature Hyperion Fluid.\textsuperscript{60} Devoting himself exclusively to the wig-making and

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Lexington Globe} (Lexington, IL), Nov. 22, 1860; \textit{Albany Argus} (Albany, NY), reprinted in \textit{Boston [MA] Post}, Feb. 7, 1861.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Daily Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), Jul. 1, 1845; William Bogle, \textit{The Anatomy and Physiology of the Hair, with Directions for Preventing Baldness, Removing Dandruff, and Preserving the Natural Beauty and Softness of the Hair} (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1846).
patent hair product businesses for the remainder of his career, Bogle was the rare manufacturer of tonics, restoratives, and dyes who seems to have had a personal investment in men’s grooming.\(^6^1\)

More commonly, the men and women who dominated the production and advertising of patent hair products were druggists and chemists who had simply stumbled into the trade. Boston’s J. Russell Spaulding was a case in point. An apothecary by training, Spaulding emerged, only gradually and accidentally, as the successful manufacturer and proprietor of Rosemary, an oleaginous application for moisturizing and strengthening the hair. It was not, in other words, a unique, professional commitment to hair and grooming that had led Spaulding into the patent hair product manufacture, but rather the profit-making possibilities of the trade.\(^6^2\)

If a halfhearted investment in hair and grooming was characteristic of Spaulding – whose revenues depended, almost exclusively, on Rosemary Hair Oil – the same was doubly true of diversified commercial chemists like New York’s Comstock & Brother.\(^6^3\) Indeed, the latter manufacturers, in addition to producing Azor’s Turkish Balm (“THE ONLY CERTAIN REMEDY FOR BALDNESS AND FOR PREVENTING AND STOPPING THE FALLING OUT OF THE HAIR”), also manufactured and sold Judson’s Chemical Extract of Cherry and Lungwort, Carlton’s Liniment for the Piles, Dr. Larzetie’s Juno Cordial, or Procreative Elixir, and several other popular patent

\(^{61}\) The Boston Herald (Boston, MA), Jan. 30, 1856. As late as 1860, Bogle continued to be listed the Boston city directory under the heading of “hairwork, etc.” By this point, he had been in business for more than fifteen years. See The Boston Directory (Boston: Adams, Sampson & Company, 1860).

\(^{62}\) Lowell Vox Populi (Lowell, MA) and Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), quoted in The Cabinet (Schenectady, NY), Feb. 22, 1853.

\(^{63}\) While Spaulding continues to traffic in a wider array of drugs – both his own and those of others – Rosemary seems to have been the core of his business. See “The Druggist Establishment of J. Russell Spalding,” Boston Recorder (Boston, MA), Jan. 14, 1858.
medicines. Knee-deep in a wider world of quackery, Comstock & Brother were invested in a range of activities that went well beyond the narrow confines of grooming and haircare.  

Something similar, meanwhile, might be said of patent hair products’ regional agents, many of whom also lacked a strong commitment to the cultural life of men’s hair. Indeed, the latter functioned merely as intermediaries, offering these distantly-manufactured goods for sale in their stores, and appending their names and addresses to standardized advertising copy written by the products’ far-flung producers. This relationship was exemplified in the career of Boston comb manufacturer, A. S. Jordan. Building on his success as an artisanal producer in the late 1830s, Jordan had emerged, by the mid-1840s, as one of the city’s leading fancy goods merchants. In conjunction with his business partner J. L. Bates, Jordan sold a range of goods, from combs, musical instruments, and ‘parasolettes’ to firearms, stationary, and patent medicines. Bates & Jordan also served as the designated agents for a range of patent hair products, including Dr. Gouroud’s Poudre Subtile (a depilatory), Bachelor’s Liquid Hair Dye, Clirehugh’s Tricopherous, as well as Harrison’s Hair Depilatory and Hair Restorer – all of which were made in New York, Philadelphia, or other cities outside of New England. Attaching their names to promotional materials that had likely been composed by the products’ producers – and which circulated, in standardized form, in a number of major American papers – Bates & Jordan simply mediated the patent hair product trade, rather than shaping its character directly. However profitable the sale of these items may have been, it was simply a side-stream in Bates & Jordan’s

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64 Daily Cincinnati Gazette (Cincinnati, OH), Jan. 4, 1854.
66 “New Stores,” Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Mar. 29, 1847.
67 The Norfolk Democrat (Dedham, MA), Feb. 14, 1845; “New Stores,” Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Mar. 29, 1847; “Backing Out From a Rescue,” The Norfolk Democrat (Dedham, MA), May 10, 1844.
68 The Boston Herald (Boston, MA), Jun. 9, 1847; Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Mar. 3, 1855; Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), Jul. 3, 1855.
larger revenues. They likely had no unique investment in the cultural content of men’s grooming and haircare.

All of this is to say that the effects of the patent hair product trade on the culture of men’s grooming were, at best, accidental. Producers, advertisers, and intermediaries set out merely to sell as much of their products as possible, and seem to have done so with only a modicum of cultural conviction or ideological investment in the question of who should use their products and why. True, cultivating an active clientele among the dandy set was likely more enticing to producers than securing the custom of religious and social reformers – let alone disgruntled ex-shavers. The former, after all, cultivated their whiskers, while the latter neglected them. Dandies, in other words, could be counted upon to experiment with tonics, restoratives, and dyes, while the less-fashionable members of the hirsute set seemed to be in wholesale retreat from the culture of men’s grooming more broadly.

The true source of patent hair product producers’ marketing approach, however, was more likely the promotional successes of famed showman P. T. Barnum than any desire to cultivate an association with dandies. Known for his strategy of actively casting doubt on the authenticity of his own acts, Barnum counted on throngs of visitors storming through the doors of his American museum to decide the veracity of his claims for themselves. Dubbed the ‘operational aesthetic’ by scholar Neil Harris, Barnum’s approach to advertising made his customers active agents in their entertainment – debating the merits and demerits of his acts, while watching others do the same. 69 This, then, combined with a lingering belief in the transformative possibilities of consumer goods, most likely dictated the strategies favored by

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these advertisers, rather than any self-conscious desire to associate their products with a particular ‘social type’ or ‘way of being.’

And yet, whatever their intent, patent hair product advertisers nevertheless succeeded in cementing this association between dandyism and their products. It would prove a consequential link. As patent hair product advertisements became one of the most visible embodiments of the culture of men’s grooming, many Americans began to question whether the use of these products was truly limited to dandies. The result was a growing tendency to collapse the distinctions between the facial hair of dandies and that of other men – to see any and all facial hair as an emblem of emasculation. Alarmed by the implications, a broad cross-section of American men – from soldiers and reformers to ordinary members of the middle class – embarked on an effort to vindicate a style which all of these groups had adopted.

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70 Lears, *Fables of Abundance.*
On July 9th of 1856, a man identified only as ‘Nori Leets’ engaged in what one might term ‘dandy baiting.’ Writing to Boston’s *Daily Evening Transcript*, the city’s leading cultural daily, Leets told the paper’s editor that, should “moments of melancholy ever interrupt the even tenor of your peaceful life,” he might consider running an advertisement for “*a clerk – without a moustache.*” Leets claimed that he had previously done so in New York, and, as a result, “received many most amusing documents, from all sorts of people.”\(^1\)

Trafficking in the widely held stereotype that all American clerks sported dandified moustaches, Leets assured the editor that an ad like this would cause fashionable young men to leap hilariously and desperately to their favored style’s defense.

But while Leets may have set out a line for dandies, what he instead caught was a middle-aged reformer: a poet, abolitionist, educator, and historian from Lynn, Massachusetts named Alonzo Lewis. Responding to Leets’s provocation on the 11th of July, Lewis, writing under his well-known pseudonym ‘Lynn Bard,’ proclaimed the beard a divine endowment, championed freedom of conscience in the matter of men’s appearance, and concluded by linking facial hair to natural liberty. Ignoring the fact that Leets had set out to lampoon clerks’ dandified moustaches, Lewis instead charged forward with a defense of his own rational, manly beard (see Fig. 18 in chapter three above).\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Nori Leets, “A Clerk without a Moustache,” *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston, MA), Jul. 9, 1856 (emphasis in original).

Why would Alonzo Lewis choose to defend his own beard when it was the moustaches of fashionable young clerks that were under assault? The answer to that question, as the previous chapter suggests, resides in the feminization of American men’s facial hair – in contemporaries’ growing tendency to read all men’s beards and whiskers through the lens of dandyism. Concerned that his own facial hair was implicated in Nori Leets’s assault on the mustaches of clerks, Lewis jumped into the fray, defending the whiskers of dandies as if they were his own.

What follows is analysis of Lewis’s defense of the beard. Lewis’s July 11th riposte was not, it should be noted, his only comment on the subject of facial hair. Over the remaining months of 1856, Lewis wrote six additional – and increasingly lengthy – defenses of beard-wearing, while fending off attacks from foes of facial hair. These seven installments, moreover, were only a fraction of the hundreds – perhaps thousands – of ‘pro-beard polemics’ that were published throughout the English-speaking Atlantic in the 1850s and 1860s. A veritable subgenre of men’s fashion writing in themselves, these pro-beard polemics represented some of the mid-nineteenth century’s most heated and voluminous commentary on men’s bodies and body care.

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The overwhelming concern of Lewis’s pro-beard statements, as well as others like them, was to distance facial hair from the taint of dandyism. Lewis and his allies sought to do this by intervening in the realm of ideas rather than things. He did not argue, for instance, that older, respectable men should alter their facial hair styles to distinguish themselves from younger, hirsute dandies. Instead, he sought to bathe all styles of facial hair in the manly and virtuous light of the beard.

What did the word ‘beard’ mean to Lewis and his contemporaries? As the present chapter argues, the word beard was in a state of definitional flux between 1850 and 1865. This was due, in large measure, to the efforts of pro-beard polemicists, who sought to reimagine not only what counted as a beard, but what it connoted as well. In 1850, the word ‘beard,’ for most Americans, likely called to mind the unsightly, unkempt appendages worn by Biblical patriarchs, Western gold prospectors, and Near Eastern infidels. Though the word, in a survey of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* for the years 1840 to 1860, was occasionally used to describe the facial hair of European aristocrats and young men of fashion, it was quite literally the only term used to describe the wizened hair of age, the grizzled hair of the wilderness, or the august hair of Mediterranean antiquity. Beyond the pages of *Godey’s*, it connoted the religious radicals and wild-eyed reformers described in the previous chapter. Worn by the likes of Matthias and Joseph Palmer, the beard continued to betoken manliness and virility – even at a moment when all facial hair styles were increasingly perceived as feminized. Unfortunately for polemicists, these same associations made it culturally suspect: emblematic of the uncivilized, uncouth, and unhinged. Indeed, few sources make the fraught dichotomy of the beard more plain than a 1840 letter from

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5 Using the Accessible Archives online database, I surveyed the full text of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* between 1840 and 1860 using the keyword search term “beard” to narrow results. Analyzing this trove of sources, I discovered 213 uses of the word beard. The results are difficult to quantify in a meaningful of faithful fashion, but one can nevertheless offer a few broad assessments like the one above.
Kentucky slave trader Hector Green to his wife. Summarizing a difficult journey from Tar Springs to Louisville, Kentucky with a coffle of slaves in tow, Green detailed his appearance upon arrival in the latter city. Wearing a “dirty shirt & long beard!!,” Hector felt himself “a genuine backwoodsman of Kentucky.” But, “after delivering my charge to (^the) safe Keeping of the Pen,” Hector “brushed [his] coat, hair & whiskers & strutted about the perfect exquisite [sic].” Transforming his rustic beard into urbane whiskers, Green went from being a backwoodsman to a dandy in a matter of minutes. In doing so, he highlighted the virtues and vices of the beard: emblematic of rugged manliness, it was incompatible with the civilized life of the city.6

Thanks to the efforts of its proponents, however, the word ‘beard’ would soon come to encompass a much larger range of styles – including the restrained configurations favored by dandies, soldiers, and disgruntled ex-shavers – while losing much of its menace. Pro-beard polemicists, in other words, succeeded in having their cake and eating it too: in using the beard’s associations with manliness and virility to reverse the feminization of facial hair, while simultaneously shedding the word’s most troublesome connotations. By 1865, then, the word beard had come to connote both tamed and untamed styles, combining the manliness of the gold prospector with the civility of the parlor dweller and the frugality of the banker.

The era of the pro-beard polemic thus signaled the arrival of the beard as an idea – an emblem of gender identification – rather than the arrival of facial hair as a physical, embodied reality. Indeed, as the previous chapters suggest, facial hair already had a long and varied history

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6 Hector Green (Frankfort, KY) to Ellen Green (Henderson, KY), Apr. 4, 1840, Green Family Papers (Mss. A 796a), Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.
prior to the widespread emergence of the pro-beard polemic in the mid-1850s. As early as 1836, for instance, the Gentleman’s Vade Mecum, quoted in the previous chapter, quipped that “the whole amount of shaving” required on many men’s faces was “scarcely within the circumference of a quarter dollar.”

In 1853, roughly one-in-eight New Yorkers, according to Scientific American, was already wearing a beard. And by 1856, a contributor to Boston’s Daily Evening Transcript, identified only as C., could disapprovingly ask readers “whether three-fifths of the men, young men in particular, who are seen in the street, at the present day, do not look very much like goats upon their hind legs?”

Admittedly, the incidence of facial hair-wearing would increase rather dramatically in the years to come – thanks, in large measure, to the pro-beard polemicists’ efforts to authorize facial hair. Between 1855 and the outbreak of the American Civil War, for instance, roughly 45 percent of incoming Senators exhibited facial hair of one variety or another, with just under one-third

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7 Gentleman’s Vade Mecum 2 (Apr. 30, 1836), 6.
sporting what modern Americans would call a full beard.\textsuperscript{10} And during the latter conflict itself, a whopping 92 percent of general officers in the Union and Confederate armies would wear facial hair of some description (see Fig. 26).\textsuperscript{11} Regardless of these subsequent developments, however, it was clear that by the Summer of 1856, when Alonzo Lewis penned his first response to Nori Leets, an era of facial hair was already in evidence in the American republic.

The pro-beard polemic, therefore, was responsible, not for giving rise to the facial hair fashion, but rather for scrubbing it of its effeminate associations.\textsuperscript{12} Self-consciously endowing facial hair styles with the virtues of maturity, manliness, rationality, and health, pro-beard polemicists sought to distance facial hair from its increasingly problematic associations with youth, fashion, effeminacy, and extravagance.

This nascent ideology of the beard – though far from coherent – bore a resemblance, as historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore argues, to ideas about manhood and the body that were

\textsuperscript{10} The sample on which this analysis is based includes all senators whose terms of office began between January 1855 and April 1855. In the interest of consistency, I based all assessments of the senators’ facial hair styles on their Wikipedia portraits. The methodological problems with this survey are similar to the survey of Civil War generals described immediately below. See note 10.

\textsuperscript{11} My analysis is based on the website Generals and Brevets (http://generalsandbrevets.com/), the creators of which have assembled the names and portraits of all the men who served as generals or brevet generals in both the Union and Confederate armies during the American Civil War. The survey is by no means scientific. There is no way to guarantee that the portraits available on the website date from the years of the Civil War, and many men’s styles are difficult to determine (either because the styles themselves defy easy categorization or because poor photo quality makes it difficult to tell whether a particular style, for instance, is a goatee or a beard). That said, roughly 80 percent of the men on the website are shown in uniform (suggesting that the photos do, indeed, date from the war), while approximately 20 percent of the styles are ambiguous or otherwise difficult to determine. The results above, therefore, are indicative of general trends but by no means unproblematic.

\textsuperscript{12} Oldstone-Moore’s article on the “Beard Movement in Victorian Britain” is unclear on the question of causality. Why the author seems to imply throughout that the pro-beard polemics he describes were, in important respects, the cause of the British beard movement, he also acknowledges that “the trend was well underway before … 1854.” Unfortunately, only one-in-five of Oldstone-Moore’s sources date from before 1854, and fewer than one-in-ten date from before 1850, suggesting that the bulk of this discourse was aimed at justifying rather than inspiring the practice of beard-wearing. See Oldstone-Moore, “The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain,” 7.
circulating more broadly throughout the English-speaking Atlantic world.\textsuperscript{13} Set against a backdrop of waning patriarchy, as well as an insurgent woman’s rights movement, and the movement of middle-class men into ink-stained clerical jobs, the pro-beard polemic reflected, at least in part, larger efforts to relocate the foundation of manhood from character to the body – from personal restraint to violence, strength, and mastery. It likely even contributed to that movement.\textsuperscript{14}


But while the pro-beard polemic was associated with efforts to popularize this ideal of ‘natural manhood,’ the movements were far from identical. This is apparent for several reasons. First and foremost, the concerns advanced by advocates of ‘natural manhood’ occupied, at best, a secondary position among the arguments of pro-beard polemicists. Although discussions of nature, virility, and racial and imperial mastery, for instance, were present in a number of pro-beard polemics (appearing in 46, 44, and 8 percent of all sampled articles, respectively), more popular topics included the healthfulness, frugality, and religious piety connoted by the beard (appearing in 58, 51, and 28 percent of sampled polemics). While the former topics were closely associated with an ideal of ‘natural manhood,’ the latter were not (see Fig. 27).

Second, many of the persons and publications central to the pro-beard polemic were either indifferent or hostile to an ideal of ‘natural manhood.’ Alonzo Lewis, for instance, was deeply skeptical of both violent virility and racial and imperial mastery. So, too, were many of his reform-minded counterparts in the American Phrenological Journal and American Journal of Homeopathy, both of which published important pro-beard polemics, as well as the ‘restrained

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15 This analysis is based on a representative sample of thirty-nine pro-beard polemics spanning the years 1844 to 1863 (with the majority of materials dating from 1854 or later). Publications include the following: The Sun (Baltimore, MD); Vermont Phoenix (Brattleboro, VT); Broadway Journal (New York, NY); New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette (Concord, NH); Gloucester Telegraph (Gloucester, MA); Wisconsin Free Democrat (Milwaukee, WI); The American Citizen (Jackson, MI); The American Phrenological Journal (New York, NY); The Literary World (New York, NY [?]); Daily Evening Transcript (Boston, MA); Daily Commercial Register (Sandusky, OH); The American Journal of Homeopathy (New York, NY); The Spirit of the Times (place of publication unknown); Daily Placer Times and Transcript (San Francisco, CA); The Liberator (Boston, MA); Cayuga Chief (Auburn, NY); New York Tribune (New York, NY); The Daily Globe (Washington, DC); Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, VA); Christian Inquirer (place of publication unknown); The New York Ledger (New York, NY); The New-Orleans Times (New Orleans, LA); Salem Register (Salem, MA); The Albion (New York, NY [?]); Medical and Surgical Reporter (place of publication unknown); Saturday Evening Post (New York, NY); The Southern Literary Messenger (Richmond, VA); German Reformer Messenger (place of publication unknown); The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature (place of publication unknown).
men’ who patronized literary and professional publications. These venues included the Albion, Broadway Journal, and Literary World, Boston’s Daily Evening Transcript and New York’s Daily Tribune, as well as the Medical and Surgical Reporter – all of which proved important loci of pro-beard writing. Admittedly, not all of the outlets that published pro-beard writings advocated this ‘restrained’ or ‘middle-class manhood.’ Pro-beard publications like the Baltimore Sun and the Boston Post enjoyed a large readership among ‘toughs’ and ‘martial men.’ But, for the most part, the regionally-diverse papers and periodicals that published pro-beard polemics were more interested in reaching social and health reformers, as well as the more polite elements of America’s middle class, than their rough-and-tumble counterparts among the sporting set.

Indeed, a more compelling source for many of the arguments contained in the pro-beard polemics was not the growing body of discourse in favor of ‘natural manhood,’ but rather the works of women’s fashion writers and pantaloons dress reformers. In a number of instances, this overlapping of arguments was far from coincidental. Both Alonzo Lewis and artist Asher Durand, for instance, had close and well-documented ties to women’s dress reformers, and had advocated for the end of corset wearing for more than a decade before they participated in the pro-beard polemic. And in reformist journals like The American Phrenological Journal and the American Journal of Hydropathy, one might find paeans to the benefits of beard-wearing cheek-

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17 Though concentrated in Northern publications like the majority of those above, pro-beard polemics could also be found among the pages of the Southern Literary Messenger; Alexandria, Virginia Gazette; New Orleans, Louisiana Times; Milwaukee, Wisconsin Free Democrat; Jackson, Michigan American Citizen; and San Francisco, California Daily Placer Times and Transcript.

18 On Alonzo Lewis’s affiliation with fashion and dress reform, see note 89 below. On Asher Durand’s affiliation with the same movements, see Charles Colbert, A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 130. Colbert notes contemporary claims that Durand’s engraving of ‘Ariadne’ was motivated, at least in part, by his support for women’s dress reform.
by-jowl with reflections on the virtues of dress reform. In certain circles, then, formal links existed between the two movements. But, more commonly, the line of connection between women’s fashion discourse and the pro-beard polemic was a casual one. After decades of imbibing anti-fashion and reformist rhetoric in the pages of Godey’s, Graham’s, and other leading women’s fashion publications, respectable, middle-class male readers unconsciously repurposed these arguments for their own immediate purposes.

By highlighting this relationship between the content of the pro-beard polemic and women’s fashion discourse, the present chapter illuminates the diverse origins of arguments in favor of the beard. Emerging in response to the feminization of American men’s facial hair, the pro-beard polemic drew upon both masculinist and feminist discourses of the body. As such, the chapter contributes to the project’s larger insistence that (to misquote Joseph Schumpeter) the edifice of antebellum white American manhood rested, in large measure, on extra-masculine materials. Like the origins of the facial hair style itself – which was primarily the unintended consequence of white supremacy and American economic nationalism – the content of the pro-beard polemic was, in important respects, merely an adaptation of ideas that had their most recent locus in women’s fashion and dress reform.

Following this introduction, the remainder of the chapter will be devoted, first, to elucidating the content of the pro-beard polemic, and second, to highlighting polemicists’ intellectual debt to women’s fashion writers and dress reformers. A third and final section, meanwhile, will highlight the arguments offered by a continually-shrinking anti-beard minority.

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19 For articles from phrenological and health reform publications addressing fashion and dress reform, see section II below.
20 For an enthusiastic discussion of Godey’s Lady’s Book in a popular men’s magazine, see Gentleman’s Vade Mecum 2 (Jan. 9, 1836), 7; 2 (Feb. 13, 1836), 4.
21 See note 27 in the introduction above.
I. Dandies, Zealots, and the Origins of the Pro-Beard Polemic

Why did pro-beard polemics emerge as a cornerstone of men’s body discourse in the late 1840s and early 1850s? The simple answer involves the feminization of facial hair – the style’s growing association with dandyism and fashion – which seemed to pose a threat to the manhood of a growing cohort of hirsute men. Responding to this threat, a broad coalition of American men (and a few women) – including disgruntled, middle-class ex-shavers, social and health reformers, and even a handful of dandified young men – took aim at the practice of shaving, while enumerating in often excruciating and formulaic detail the many virtues of facial hair. The result was the genre of the pro-beard polemic.

Not surprisingly, pro-beard polemicists’ first and most important target was the concept of fashion itself. Eager to distance their own patterns of grooming from the charge of fashionable, effeminate dandyism, polemicists instead turned the tables on their critics – claiming that it was shaving, and not the wearing of facial hair, that truly constituted foppery. “Silly affectation,” wrote the Broadway Journal, “is imputable only to those who, by removing the beard, take the trouble so far to emasculate themselves and who think themselves beautiful by an unnatural imitation of the smoother face of women.”22 Ten years later, the American Phrenological Journal announced that “only sickly feminine taste – or rather want of taste – will require” the use of the razor.23 And the Medical and Surgical Report roundly rebuked “the foppish practice of shaving” as the last vestige of an ‘artificial’ era in men’s body care. Having

abandoned the wig, the powder box, and the corset, it was time that men abandoned their final species of “interference with the evident designs of nature” and adopt the beard.24

But linking shaving, rather than facial-hair wearing, with fashion and effeminacy was only the pro-beard polemicists’ first task. They also had to convince a wider audience of Americans that the rugged virtues previously associated with the word beard should now apply to a wider range of facial hair styles. This meant reimagining the kinds of physical styles that counted as beards. In some cases, polemicists made this leap quite bluntly. “Of [the] beard … or … its ‘formal cut,’” wrote the aforementioned correspondent for the Medical and Surgical Reporter, “we are unconcerned, and care not whether the moustache be in imperial loyalty turned up and twisted at its points, or, in the style of the radical, turned obstinately down.”25 Referring to the restrained styles favored by European aristocrats and revolutionaries (see Figs. 6 and 7 in chapter three above), the article implied that these styles, which once would have been called whiskers, now deserved the title of ‘beard.’

More often, however, polemists expanded what counted as a beard through crafty elisions. In 1845, for instance, a critic of Navy Secretary George Bancroft’s decision to ban moustaches among American sailors segued seamlessly from the subject of moustaches to that of beards.26 The two styles, in the author’s presentation, were apparently interchangeable. And, in his opening response to Nori Leets, Alonzo Lewis abruptly shifted the subject of debate from “a clerk – without a mustache” to “a clerk without a beard.” In the twenty articles written in response to Leets and Lewis’s exchange, not a single contributor objected to this transition as an inappropriate one – suggesting that, in some settings, the word “beard” could be used as a

24 “A Plea for Beard,” Medical and Surgical Reporter 5 (Dec. 1, 1860), 234.
25 “A Plea for Beard,” Medical and Surgical Reporter 5 (Dec. 1, 1860), 234.
synonym for “moustache.” Thus, by the mid-1850s, pro-beard polemicists had succeeded in linking the word ‘beard’ to a wider constellation of styles. No longer limited to the unkempt styles of mountain men and would-be prophets, the beard now encompassed more urbane arrangements as well.

Having made this connection between the word ‘beard’ and the restrained styles favored by reformers, fashionable young men, and disgruntled ex-shavers, they now set about superimposing the beard’s rugged virtues on the latter communities’ facial hair. Just what were these rugged virtues? The first and most obvious was moral and physical vigor. Worn by Biblical patriarchs and Western frontiersmen, beards, polemicists contended, were the very antithesis of dandyism and effeminacy. Indeed, as the story of Samson proved, the beard was a prophylactic against physical emasculation. Taking the tale at face value, many polemicists claimed that a new era of superhuman virility might dawn upon the republic, should men simply choose to grow their beards.

Other polemicists interpreted the beard’s benefits slightly differently, finding in the appendage an emblem of political and moral, rather than physical vigor. “[W]hen did men begin to shave?” Alonzo Lewis asked rhetorically. “When they began to be effeminate, or when they became slaves.” Pursuing this argument through several thousand years of history, Lewis frequently linked men’s moral and political strength to the status of their facial hair. “The Anglo-Saxons wore their beards before the conquest,” Lewis noted ominously, “and it is related as a

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wanton act of tyranny, that William the Conqueror compelled the people to shave.”

Still other commentators, meanwhile, located the beard’s significance in a more recent episode of history. Pointing to the succession of the French monarch, Henri IV, by his eight-year-old son, Louis XIII, a contributor to the *Southern Literary Messenger* claimed that clean-shavenness originated with French aristocrats’ mindless imitation of their new and beardless king. “[A] species of unmanly sycophancy, toward a beardless sovereign,” the writer concluded, “has generally been the occasion of the … habit of shaving.”

Blending arguments in favor of the physical, moral, and intellectual vigor betokened by the beard, a handful of polemicists went so far as to suggest that the beard indicated racial superiority and authorized imperial subjugation. An anonymous “Lady on Beards,” for instance – quoting Charles Hamilton Smith’s *Natural History of the Human Species* – pronounced that “the bearded races are the conquering races,” the progressive nations “a bearded and hairy race.”

Correspondents for Dickens’s *Household Words*, meanwhile, argued that “in the world’s history, the bearded races have at all times been the most important actors.” And in the *Albion*, the author of an article “Concerning Beards” conveyed the advice of a Pacific Ocean mariner to persons considering a voyage to China: “Let your beard grow,” the old salt counselled. “[O]therwise they [i.e. the Chinese] will think nothing of you.” Concluding with an editorial embellishment, the author added that “it cannot be denied that a certain superiority has always been conveyed by the presence of the beard.”

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A ‘certain superiority,’ however, was not the only masculine virtue that polemicists strove to superimpose on the faces of hirsute men more generally. They were also intent on invoking the beard’s association with nature and divine creation in their quest to rebut charges of effeminacy. In many respects, this claim closely echoed the polemicists’ notion that shaving, rather than beard-wearing, constituted the true dandyish affectation. Trafficking in the contemporary notion that fashion and nature were opposed categories, polemicists placed clean-shavenness in the former category and facial hair in the latter.

For others polemicists, however, the significance of the beard’s naturalness inhered, not in nature’s opposition to fashion, but rather in the supposed goodness and wisdom of divine creation. An anonymous author for the *Home Journal*, for instance, pronounced that “I cannot imagine why a beard is given to man, unless it is to try his patience, if he is to spend his time in daily cutting it off, as it daily asserts its right to a manifested existence.” Another made the point even more emphatically. “Nature placed the beard on man’s visage,” announced the penny-press Baltimore *Sun*, furnishing men “with no [natural] means of shaving it away. … Nature may have committed a grave fault in doing this,” the article continued, “but it is evident that she thinks otherwise. By the pain ever attending on its being erased she makes constant out-cry, and by that out-cry enters her solemn, perpetual protest against the procedure.”

Taken collectively, these arguments constituted a portrait of vigorous, natural manhood. Reminiscent of the beard’s older associations with Biblical patriarchs and frontiersmen, arguments about vigor and nature served well in the fight against the feminization of facial hair. But by importing the connotations of the beard into the realm of civilized body care, polemicists

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also brought with them a number of less savory connotations. Thus, while a considerable number of pro-beard polemics were devoted to harnessing the beard’s connotations of virile, natural manhood, an equally significant number were devoted to distancing the beard from its more problematic associations with the uncivilized, uncouth, and unhinged.

Consider, for instance, the polemicists’ obsession with health. Appearing in roughly half of all polemics, arguments in favor of the healthfulness of the beard were intended, not only to distance the style from dandyism, which was often associated with ill-health, but also from its connotations of fanaticism.\(^\text{36}\) By emphasizing health, in other words, polemicists were able to stress the rationality of the style – suggesting that hirsute men were neither dandies nor wild-eyed enthusiasts, unlikely either to drink too much and rest too little, or neglect their well-being while in religious reveries.\(^\text{37}\)

Admittedly, some of the polemicists’ arguments in favor of the healthfulness of facial hair pushed the boundaries of credulity. An article from the *American Phrenological Journal*, for instance, explained that “[l]ong beard and hair … promotes mental power and brilliancy.”\(^\text{38}\) Yet another would-be expert, citing men’s tendency to cry while shaving with a dull razor, explained that “[m]any cases of weak eye … may be traced to the removal of the beard.”\(^\text{39}\)

\(^{36}\) Dandies and men of fashion were widely believed to stay up too late, drink too much, engage in sexually licentious activities, consume unhealthful food, and wear clothing that was inappropriate for the season. See Mathew Carey, “Fashion,” *Ladies’ Magazine* VII (Apr. 1834), 148-151.

\(^{37}\) For Christopher Oldstone-Moore’s efforts to reconcile a discourse of health with a larger set of arguments about ‘natural manhood’ and the renovation of patriarch, see Oldstone-Moore, “The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain.”

\(^{38}\) “Wearing the Beard,” *American Phrenological Journal* 20 (Aug. 1854), 37. Hair, the anonymous author explained syllogistically, “is one of the very best ‘conductors’ of electricity that exists”; the “organ of mind,” he continued, “requires more electricity than any other part”: ergo, amputating one’s hair prevented the collection of as much ambient electricity as would leaving one’s hair “long and flowing.”

Not all arguments in favor of the beard’s health benefits, however, were so far-fetched. Alonzo Lewis defended the beard as “a protection to the face from those inclemencies, to which man … is exposed.” An anonymous contributor to the *Broadway Journal* insisted that “depriving the face and throat of their natural covering causes a great many of the neuralgic and thoracic diseases which enfeeble and destroy life among men.” And Henry Morely and William Henry Wills, in a widely-reprinted article from Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, repeated the commonly-held claim that beards functioned as a ‘natural respirator,’ by filtering the air of “smoke or dust of any kind” and preventing “the inhalation into the lungs of air that is too frosty.”

Arguments about the healthfulness of beard-wearing, however, were not the only claims intended to distance facial hair from both the dandy and the zealot. Arguments concerning the time and cost savings associated with beard-wearing served much the same purpose. Appearing in dozens of pro-beard polemics, these claims ran the gamut from the modest to the extreme. An example of the more modest claims, for instance, contended that a forty-year shaving career would consume no less than three months in total and cost its victim more than three-hundred-and-fifty dollars. An example of more extreme claims, on the other hand, proclaimed that a lifetime of barber shop shaving would cheat men of “two whole years” and devour nearly one-thousand dollars of their hard-earned wealth – enough, the author added, “to build an ornamental cottage, or pay [one’s] board for six years!” Emphasizing the decidedly rational, bourgeois

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benefits of beardedness, claims like these seemed to be intended to distance facial hair from both dandiacal extravagance and prophetic improvidence.

Perhaps the most obvious of the polemicists’ efforts to exorcise the dual threats of foppery and fanaticism, however, involved religion. Linking facial hair with a distinctly orthodox religious vision, pro-beard writers differentiated the style not only from the debauched and impious man of fashion, but also from heterodox extremists like Matthias. As such, commentators were quick to find justifications for the beard in the Bible – namely, in the proscription against “mar[ring] the corners of thy beard” in Leviticus 19:27. “What glaring incongruity,” wrote the Baltimore Sun, “in those who condemn the beard as a needless, damnable appendage, yet reverence, as the word of God, the Levitical [sic] law, which is quite as explicit in forbidding the shaving of the beard, except in cases of disease, as in the command to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Others, meanwhile, found justification for the practice in the writings of the Christian ‘Church Fathers.’ Quoting Tertullian, polemicist ‘F. W. E.’ proclaimed “[t]he practice of shaving the beard … a lie against our faces, and an impious attempt to improve the works of the Creator.” And, in a typical show of rhetorical extravagance, Alonzo Lewis blended both the Jewish and Christian traditions to justify the practice. “The Hebrew, the chosen people of God,” he began, “wore the beard, and regarded its want or its loss as a calamity. … The scriptures are particular to inform us that Aaron and David wore their beards; and Jesus Christ was a Nazarite, ‘on whose head no razor came.’” Concluding with a theological flourish, Lewis added that “if the Arians were right, he was the greatest man who ever lived; and if the Orthodox are correct, he was God.”

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45 “Wearing Beards,” The Sun (Baltimore, MD), Apr. 30, 1844.
himself, Lewis and others struggled to situate facial hair in the very mainstream of American culture – navigating a middle course between the twin perils of dandyism and zealotry.

Not all arguments in favor of the beard, however, were so narrowly situated within cultural conflicts over the beard itself. The preoccupation of a number of polemicists, for instance, with the beard’s ability to highlight the distinction between men and women likely speaks to the pro-beard polemic’s place in larger conversations about manhood and gender. One of these polemicists was the Scottish physician Alexander Walker, who celebrated the beard’s ability to demarcate gender in a widely-quoted passage from a health manual entitled *Beauty.* Echoing wider fears that patriarchy was in crisis and gender roles confused, Walker asserted that the “habit of wearing the beard is a manly and noble one. Nature made it distinctive of the male and female; and its abandonment has commonly been accompanied not only by a period of general effeminacy, but even by the decline and fall of States.”48 And at least one commentator drew a direct comparison between the beard as a marker of sex and contemporary struggles over women’s rights. “The beard,” wrote a contributor to the *Boston Post,* is “a distinguishing mark of manhood; and it had been hinted that the appropriate spheres of the sexes are plainly indicated by this matter of beard, to the utter confusion of all ‘strong-minded women,’ from Mary Wolstoncraft [sic] to Lucy Stone.”49

But while a larger history of gender was no doubt important in shaping the pro-beard polemics, it was not the decisive factor. Changes in social organization, in men’s work, and in women’s activism, might have lent urgency to some of the polemicists’ arguments. But they cannot explain why the beard, of all things, emerged as a fraught terrain of gender politics at the

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49 *Boston Post,* date unknown, quoted in “About Beards,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), May 13, 1858.
moment it did. Neither can these changes explain the full range of arguments offered by pro-beard writers. While roughly half of the content of these polemics was devoted to inscribing a vigorous, muscular, ‘natural’ conception of manhood on the body, the other half was devoted to the topics of health, frugality, piety, and restraint (see Fig. 27 above). Indeed, if the beard movement was intended, as Christopher Oldstone-Moore has argued, to “renovate patriarchy on the basis of nature rather than custom and tradition,” it did a poor job of achieving its aims. Instead of offering men an unambiguous path back to the manly wilderness of virility, patriarchy, and mastery, it instead offered the beard as a muscular auxiliary in the emerging world of business.

The prevailing portrait of the beard that emerged from the polemics, then, was a decidedly ambiguous one: simultaneously rugged and civilized, vigorous and restrained, the beard proved one of the great cultural Rorschachs of the nineteenth century. This stemmed, not just from the diversity of voices participating in the polemics. Indeed, in many cases, contradictory opinions appeared not only between, but within, polemics. Nor did it stem from the inherent messiness of gender ideology. Rather, it resulted from the specific cultural context in which the polemics occurred. These polemics, after all, were not motivated by a self-conscious desire to renovate patriarchy – though, in their length and visibility, they likely contributed to the strength of arguments that supported that goal. Instead, they were devoted to rescuing facial hair from the taint of dandyism and, to a lesser extent, fanaticism. Simultaneously enlarging the scope of what counted as a beard and tempering the style’s most unseemly and problematic associations, proponents of the beard mixed arguments prodigiously. They were not interested in remaking manhood. They were interested in redeeming a style.

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50 See note 15 above.
In many respects, pro-beard polemicists succeeded brilliantly in their goals. By 1856, for instance, New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley could celebrate his sparse neck ‘beard’ which, decades earlier, scarcely would have qualified as a dandy’s whiskers (see Fig. 28). And he could call on a vocabulary of arguments that blended divergent ideals of manhood in unified opposition to the feminization of facial hair. Summarizing the virtues of facial hair before an audience of clerks, Greeley advised the representatives of “young America in counting houses” to “never touch your beards with a razor.”

Despise the dictates of fashion, and let the hair of the face grow silken and soft, only trimmed by the scissors; your health will be sounder; your liability to colds and bronchial and lung affections will be sensibly diminished; your convenience will be daily consulted; your manly beauty – no despicable thing, as it is type of what ought to be the dower of every man – will be indefinitely increased and the true poetical contract to feminine loveliness [sic] be once more secured, which is impossible under [the] starved, scraped, wiry caricatures which shavelings now present.  

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52 “Horace on the Beard,” The American Citizen (Jackson, MI), Jan. 17, 1856.
Widely regarded as one of the most disheveled men in America, Greeley’s endorsement marked the final transformation of facial hair into an anti-fashion.\(^{53}\) In just over twenty-five years, then, Alfred d’Orsay’s elegant wreath of whiskers had been reincarnated as Greeley’s human neck-warmer. Not all men, of course, would emulate the finer points of the editor’s questionable grooming practices. Some – perhaps most – hirsute men would choose far more elegant, even fashionable, ways to style their facial hair. But should American men ever find themselves on the receiving end of accusations of dandyism, they could now take refuge in the coarse homespun of Greeley’s rhetoric. No longer an emblem of style, the beard emerged anew as a badge of ruggedness and reason.

II. Women’s Fashion and the Making of Men’s Bodies

Where did the arguments contained in the pro-beard polemics originate? Some, no doubt, were drawn from cultural conversations surrounding Manifest Destiny and urban sporting culture. Sites of enormous cultural creativity, these realms generated immense commentaries on the nature and meaning of American manhood.\(^{54}\) As such, the pro-beard polemicists’ more masculinist arguments likely bear evidence of their influence. But a far larger portion of their arguments seem to have been drawn – or, rather, adapted – from women’s fashion writing: from both mainstream and radical publications that, over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, sustained a varied and vibrant critique of women’s fashion and dress. These critiques

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\(^{53}\) On Greeley’s appearance, see Henry Lunettes, *The American Gentleman’s Guides to Politeness* (New York: Derby & Jacobson, 1857), 27-28. “One does not envy Porson,” Lunettes writes, “the greatest of modern Greek scholars, his habitually dirty and shabby dress, because it is forever associated with his learned celebrity! Neither is Greeley a better, or more influential editor, that he is believed to be invisible to mortal eyes except when encased in a long drab-colored overcoat. He, however, seems to have adopted an axiom laid down in a now almost-forgotten novel much admired in my youth – *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, I think – ‘Acquire the character of an oddity, and you seat yourself in an easy-chair for life.’”

ranged from comments on the aristocratic, anti-republican character of women’s fashion to reflections on the expense and impracticality of women’s dress; from statements about the unhealthfulness of corsets to articles on the immodesty of evening gowns. Encompassing those who sought merely to ameliorate fashion’s excesses, as well as those who wished to fundamentally transform women’s dress – replacing both corset and dress, for example, with non-binding, bifurcated raiment – the community of women’s fashion writers was visible, prolific, and influential.

In light of this, the pro-beard polemicists’ intellectual debt to women’s fashion writers is an unsurprising one. Indeed, the latter group dominated mainstream public discourse on fashion and adornment by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century and maintained that position more-or-less unchallenged until the emergence of pro-beard writing in the late 1840s. Their dominance was due to several factors. First, between 1800 and 1825, American men practically surrendered responsibility for their appearance to tailors. As a result, men’s fashion largely fell out of public discourse – with the few conversations that persisted confined primarily to clothiers’ trade publications.55 Women, by contrast, remained deeply involved in the selection, design, and production of their clothing during this period, lending an urgency to mainstream discussions of women’s dress that was altogether absent in the realm of men’s fashion.56

Second, men’s fashion during this period was primarily organized around an ethos of republican uniformity – or, what historian Michael Zakim calls ‘ready-made democracy.’ Consequently, middle-class men adopted a stance of studied inconspicuousness, striving to

embody Dr. Johnson’s prescription that “the best dressed persons are those in whose attire nothing in particular attracts attention.”57 This was essential, not only to their sense of manliness, as excessive attention to the ‘feminized’ realm of fashion was widely considered a suspect activity for men.58 It was also essential to their sense of cultural citizenship. Men’s elegant embrace of style’s “virtuous middle,” Zakim writes – one situated between the extremes of feminine fastidiousness and beastly slovenliness – “presented a unique opportunity to create a common ground” in the chaotic cultural landscape of the early republic. Scrubbed of ornament and visual distinction, men’s drab but well-made, custom-tailored suits constituted a democratic ideal: individuated in conformity, austere in luxury.59 Unfortunately, this ideal also had a rather stultifying impact on men’s fashion discourse. After all, one quickly exhausts one’s imagination in search of new ways to discuss subtle variations in the width of men’s lapels. Women’s clothing, on the other hand, remained colorful, varied, and well-ornamented throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, while commentators struggled to find words to describe men’s clothing, women’s fashion remained the subject of a lively and creative discourse.

The third reason for women’s fashion writers’ dominance of antebellum discourses of appearance and the body involves the explosion of women’s authorship and readership during the period. Between 1825 and 1850, in fact, magazines with numerous female subscribers and contributors like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and *Graham’s Magazine* assumed the front ranks in

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America’s periodical trade. Thanks to powerful editors like *Godey’s* Sarah Josepha Hale, topics of interest to women writers and readers, including, but by no means limited to, women’s fashion and appearance, assumed an importance and vitality in American letters that had previously been lacking. Nor were these conversations limited to fashionable, literary publications like *Godey’s* or *Graham’s*. More radical reflections on dress and adornment – including radical demands for pantaloons reform dress – appeared at the margins of an American print culture marketplace that, more than ever before, embraced women as both producers and consumers of the written word.

As a result of all these factors, then – including men’s renunciation of responsibility for their appearance, the growing drabness and uniformity of men’s clothing, and the explosion of women’s print culture – women’s fashion writers came to dominate early-to-mid-nineteenth century discourse on fashion and the body. Thus, when pro-beard writers began to resume interest in the subjects of men’s adornment and appearance in the late-1840s and early 1850s, women’s fashion writing constituted the most voluminous and readily available body of ideas on these subjects. Adapting these ideas for their own purposes, pro-beard polemicists transformed women’s fashion writing into the foundation for their arguments in favor of the beard.

This is not to suggest, of course, that all of the ideas expressed in pro-beard polemics were wholesale appropriations of women’s fashion writings. Nor is it meant to suggest that all of these ideas originated with women. Much of the content of women’s fashion writing hearkened back to republican political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and reached

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62 Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power*. 
maturity with the homespun movement which preceded and, by some scholars’ reckoning, outlived the American Revolution. Even during the period in question, moreover – roughly 1825 to 1865 – a number of men continued to participate in this discourse, ranging from the aging editor and journalist Mathew Carey to the popular hack writer, Timothy Shay Arthur. But, despite these men’s contributions, fashion was, by 1825, a largely feminized realm in both conception and fact. More to the point, women constituted the majority of readers and even contributors to many of the period’s leading fashion-related periodicals. While consumed by a large number of men, magazines like Godey’s Lady’s Book and its competitors were primarily directed at women and their concerns. As such, women deserve the bulk of the credit for sustaining, creating, and disseminating many of the ideas that found expression – albeit in heavily modified form – in subsequent pro-beard polemics.

What follows, then, is an elaboration of some of the main themes of antebellum women’s fashion discourse – with a particular focus on those ideas that anticipate or echo elements of pro-beard rhetoric. The majority of these examples are taken from fashion and literary periodicals like Godey’s Lady’s Book and Graham’s Magazine, which, despite their investment in a culture of fashionable gentility, also sustained a robust critique of fashion and its excesses. Other examples are taken from the speeches, correspondence, and publications of pantaloons dress reformers, including well-known feminist activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Jenks Bloomer, as well as lesser-known members of the short-lived and highly inefficacious


65 On men’s consumption of Godey’s, see note 20 above.

66 On the difficulties and ironies of this relationship, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), ch. 3; Fischer, Pantaloons and Power, ch. 1; Entrikin, Sarah Josepha Hale and Godey’s Lady’s Book, 21-37.
National Dress Reform Association. These two strands of fashion discourse, as historian Gayle V. Fischer convincingly argues, were in fact closely related. The Bloomer- and American Costume, she contends, were not departures from long traditions of fashionable critique, but rather radicalizations of that discourse.  

As for the question of causal relation: many, if not most of these statements pre-date even the earliest pro-beard polemics; others are roughly contemporaneous with it. And while the direction of influence, from women reformers to male reactionaries, should, on the whole, be clear, it is also intriguing to entertain the possibility that both anti-fashion and pro-beard discourses were, by the 1850s, cross-pollinating. As is often the case, radically different cultural movements seem to have been trafficking in broadly commensurate languages.

Among the most striking similarities between the two discourses was their relationship to style. Like the beard movement that followed, much of antebellum women’s fashion writing was deeply invested in identifying and promoting a rational and moral mode of adornment. Leaving ‘artifice’ and ‘arbitrariness’ to the young, foolish, and foreign, American women’s fashion writers instead advocated a conception of style that promoted sincerity, health, piety, independence, and frugality. In some cases, this entailed mere modifications to European models – the omission of ornament, or the slight loosening of corsetry. In other instances, as in the case of pantaloons dress reformers, it involved a radical rethinking of women’s costume. In still other events – anticipating the strategy of pro-beard polemicists – it simply meant imbuing identical styles with a different ideological imprint. But regardless of its material consequences, women’s fashion discourse shared with the pro-beard polemics two central concerns: distancing American women’s style from what many viewed as the worst abuses of continental fashion; and placing

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67 See Fischer, Pantaloons and Power, esp. ch. 1.
American women’s costume on a rational foundation. In pursuing both of these goals, fashion writers emphasized a number of themes that would later become central to the beard movement.

The first of these shared concerns was health. Time and again, critics of women’s fashion reiterated the common sentiment that, as dress reformer E. Oakes Smith succinctly put it, “[t]he present costume of our sex is at war with health.”\textsuperscript{68} Arguments in favor of this proposition, however, varied widely. Many fashion writers, unsurprisingly, devoted particular attention to the subject of the corset, dwelling at length, as Gayle V. Fischer documents, on the threat this garment posed to women’s reproduction and fertility.\textsuperscript{69} Still others criticized the corset as an insult to God’s creation. “We do not dress to [God’s] glory,” wrote Mary I. Torrey in a book entitled \textit{Ornament, or the Christian Rule of Dress}, “when we follow those fashions which are decidedly injurious to the health.” Such, she contended, was the corset: a “genteel machinery” by which “those organs which are necessary to life” were compressed, thus “destroying that life which God” had imparted.\textsuperscript{70}

For critics like Mathew Carey and an anonymous writer for the \textit{Ladies’ Magazine}, however, the primary danger posed by fashion was the encouragement it lent to dressing inappropriately for the season. Chiding stylish young women for going “forth in the habits of sylphs and fairies, shivering and half torpid,” these authors insisted it was no wonder that “catarrhs and consumptions were prevalent” and that “lovely women, of from eighteen to twentyfour [sic], who were admirably adapted to make good wives and mothers, were hurried to a premature grave. In vain,” Carey concluded, “humanity and prudence united their voices

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] Mary I. Torrey, \textit{Ornament, or the Christian Rule of Dress} (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1838), 48-49.
\end{footnotes}
against this suicidal practice.”71 Others, meanwhile, worried about the kinds of detritus that women’s floor-length dresses accumulated in the course of an outing. In a poem entitled “Fashionable Street Sweepers,” for example, the anonymous author documents in excruciating detail the kind of debris women collected in their petticoats during a single day, ranging from mud and manure to straw and cigar stumps.72 For Elizabeth Cady Stanton, on the other hand, the foremost evil of women’s fashion was the impediment it posed to healthful living. Defending her pantaloons reform dress – which she adopted between 1851 and 1853 – against vicious criticism, she insisted that, thanks to her “bifurcated raiment,” she “was always ready for a brisk walk through sleet and snow and rain, to climb a mountain, jump over a fence, [and] work in the garden.”73 The anonymous wife of a Michigan clergyman made the same point even more explicitly in a poem for the American Phrenological Journal. “We lighten our labor in shortening our skirts,” she wrote, “[a]nd we lengthen our days in loosing our girts.”

Thus nature set free by proportionate dress,  
Our health is returning our efforts to bless;  
Then so easy our burdens, our housework so light,  
We scarcely get weary at the coming of night.74

Though offering a different set of prescriptions than those subsequently proffered by pro-beard polemicists, women’s fashion writers nevertheless insisted that a series of simple, rational adjustments in dress and appearance could make all the difference between health and illness. It was a lesson that pro-beard polemicists would take to heart.

Health, however, was not the only theme that women’s fashion and the pro-beard discourses had in common. They also shared a concern with nature. Indeed, facial hair proponents’ insistence that the ‘natural’ beard was a boon to “manly beauty,” as Horace Greeley claimed, was, in many respects, a direct adaptation of what historian Karen Halttunen has described as the sentimental conception of beauty: the notion that true elegance was simply an outer manifestation of inner goodness. Admittedly, this was a more spiritual – or, perhaps more accurately, moral – conception of beauty than that propounded by beard advocates. But it ultimately resulted in the same rhetorical preoccupation with the unadorned, ‘natural’ body. Eschewing cosmetics and jewelry, and favoring clothing that was simple in line and “harmonious in hue,” adherents of sentimental ideals of beauty lived by the notion that “the charm of Nature is simplicity.” Writing for Godey’s Lady’s Book, an anonymous contributor asked “[w]hy do we not fashion our own tastes by this standard of nature, and prefer simplicity to pomp?” A writer for the Ladies’ Magazine, meanwhile, echoed this sentiment, proclaiming that “[t]here always will be a chosen few … who will respect the unrivalled skill of nature displayed in the human form divine.” And yet a third advised “[t]he young and lovely … to recollect that simplicity has a charm beyond the ‘reach of art.’ The sentiment that beauty is ‘when unadorned adorned the most,’ is so eternally quoted that were it not both true and pleasing it would disgust. Yet it never does.”

For many women’s fashion writers, an interest in identifying a healthful and natural mode of dress was closely linked to an interest in identifying a pious and godly mode of dress – yet another concern that they shared with advocates of the beard. An anonymous writer for Amelia

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75 Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 71.
76 Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 79; Godey’s Lady’s Book 30 (May 1845), 238, quoted in Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 81-82.
Bloomer’s *Lily*, for instance, made the case for piety of dress quite explicitly. Reflecting on the wonderful fact that women, as well as men, had been created in God’s image, she asked readers “how shall we, with presuming and impious hand, mar his beautiful handiwork, for the human being … is *always beautiful*, whatever may be the form or features.” Concluding with a potshot at the unreformed “Miss Funnel-form,” she pronounced that not a single living person had been “created with a tapering waist; and if you have such a one, and admire it, it is at once proof positive that you have bad blood, bad health, and bad taste. We all know, or should know, that every particle compressed, is an outrage on nature.” A woman identified only as Irene made a similar point. “Whatever God has formed is beautiful,” she noted. “We see from the works of his own hand that God loves the excellent and the beautiful, and if we remain as He formed us, in His own likeness, He will impart the same sentiment, in a degree, to us. Possessing this sense of true beauty, then why do we not use it?” Her answer: “we have another god than the One God of nature to worship and imitate. The tyrant goddess *Fashion* has sway over us and her teachings are antagonistic to the pure teachings of nature.” Closely anticipating pro-beard writers’ claim that the ‘natural beard’ was “an element of manly beauty,” fashion writers insisted that what was natural was divine – and what divine, was beautiful.

Not all of women’s fashion writers’ concerns were so lofty, however. Like their counterparts among pro-beard polemicists, fashion critics and dress reformers were deeply concerned with the time and expense consumed by keeping up with fashion. Indeed, stories in which women’s millinery bills (along with their husbands’ gambling debts or speculative investments) flung their families into bankruptcy became something of a mainstay in the early

nineteenth century. So, too, did jokes about the cost to husbands of maintaining a spouse in style. “It is as if there were a conspiracy between Ladies and Milliners,” wrote E. Oakes Smith, “for the express purpose of tormenting the masculines, in the way of heavy drafts for laces and silks and muslins.” The elusive L. E., on the other hand, found nothing to laugh about when it came to the expense of fashion. Pondering why poverty and hard times persisted in a county “so favorable to the advancement … of its inhabitants in wealth and comfort,” she found the answer, not in a despotic government or an “oppressive system of taxation” but in “a cause more remote than these” – an evil “which assumes so many and such varied forms, which here meets us under the name of fashion, there of gentility, and again, under the more humble, but not less injurious one, of regard to appearances, doing as others do, maintaining one’s station in society!”

Fashion, then, portended to return to American shores many of the social ills that the revolution had ostensibly cured.

This was not the only threat that fashion posed to the republic, however. Like the smooth cheeks that, according to pro-beard polemists, betokened effeminacy and intellectual ‘enslavement,’ extreme fashion also threatened the mental and spiritual independence of American women, by leading virtuous republican citizens to venerate the degenerate customs of European aristocrats. “Why,” asked E. Oakes Smith,

should we care what is the style prevailing in profligate courts, or what is the mode in the corrupt circles of Paris? We should lead, not be led; and we, the daughters of a republic, should spurn this ape-like subserviency, this subordinate bowing down to foreign usages; and with a spirit akin to our institutions, reject

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83 Smith, Hints on Dress and Beauty, 75.
what is transatlantic and useless to us, and step forth in the more than regal pride of democratic simplicity.  

A writer for the *Ladies’ Magazine*, meanwhile, deplored the ‘deities’ of the elite London social club Almacks and their influence on American society. Raising the specter of idolatry, the author asked why these divines must “be worshipped by republicans?”  

Offering an alternative, Sarah Josepha Hale, the famed editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, informed readers that she had taken pains to ‘Americanize’ the fashion plates she received from Europe – “to reform the foreign fashion, so far as health and delicacy require … in accordance with that system of improvement … which our own ‘Book’ is pledged to sustain.”  

A similar set of ideals and concerns, in fact, inspired the ‘American costume’ (a pantaloons reform dress that succeeded the Bloomer or ‘Freedom Dress’). Promoted not only as a healthful alternative to decadent women’s fashion, the American costume severed republican women’s ties to courtly and aristocratic styles, and offered nationalists an inspiring new mode of dress to celebrate as authentically and uniquely American.  

Such, then, were the themes that permeated antebellum women’s fashion writing. Emphasizing health, fidelity to nature, religious piety, frugality, and moral and political independence, writings in this broad genre provided an important inspiration and forerunner for the themes contained in the pro-beard polemics. How can we be sure that pro-beard polemicists were aware of women’s fashion writings? First and most obviously, writings on women’s fashion would have been hard to miss in the antebellum United States. The critique of fashion described above was a veritable fixture of many of the period’s most popular magazines –

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87 *Godey’s Lady’s Book* XXXVII (Jul. 1848), 59; *Godey’s Lady’s Book* XXVI (Jan. 1843), 58, quoted in Entrikin, *Sarah Josepha Hale and Godey’s Lady’s Book*, 77, 94-95.  
including *Godey’s*, *Graham’s*, and the *Columbian*. Widely consumed in antebellum America, these magazines were standard reading for both fashionable young men with genteel aspirations and sturdy older men of the middle class. Both of these constituencies, as indicated above, were central to the mid-century beard movement.

Second, many of the persons or publications that publically advocated the beard also had ties to women’s dress reform – which, as noted above, represented a particularly radical form of the antebellum critique of fashion. The *American Phrenological Journal*, for instance, was not only a leading organ for pro-beard polemics; it was also a prominent venue for dress-reform literature. Its editors, moreover – Samuel Wells and the brothers Lorenzo and Orson Fowler – were responsible for the publication of E. Oakes Smith’s reformist critique of fashion, *Hints on Dress and Beauty*, as well as a number of other entries in the dress-reform genre. Last but not least, Alonzo Lewis, as a prominent New England abolitionist, had an institutional – if not more intimate – connection to abolitionist women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Bloomer whose advocacy of reform dress was well known (and incredibly controversial) within the relatively small circuit of American radicalism. Perhaps more importantly, he maintained a long and close friendship with free love advocate and feminist dress reformer Mary Gove Nichols.89 It stands to reason, therefore, that Lewis, and people like him, were acquainted with the basic tenets of women’s fashion writings, in both its moderate and radical forms.

But regardless of whether this influence was conscious or unconscious, it seems clear that the content and rhetoric of women’s fashion and dress reform discourse decisively inflected the content of the pro-beard polemic. Emphasizing the same themes of health, fidelity to nature,

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religion, piety, frugality, and moral and political independence that animated a number of pro-beard polemics, women’s commentary on clothing and dress provided an important inspiration for the latter body of writing on men’s appearance. Moreover, the influence of women’s fashion writings helps explain the mixed character of the arguments contained in the pro-beard polemics. A notable source of many of the more ‘restrained’ arguments at play in the polemic – including those in favor of the healthfulness, frugality, and piety of beard-wearing – antebellum American women’s fashion writers are emblematic of the role of extra-masculine materials in the making of American men’s bodies.

III. The Beard and its Discontents

Regardless of the sources of the pro-beard polemicists’ arguments, however, they proved largely successful by the late 1850s and early 1860s. Facial hair of all sorts was more popular and more acceptable than it had been in centuries. The threat of feminized facial hair had largely been put to rest. And the beard’s erstwhile unsavory connotations were now, at most, marginal concerns for the majority of American men. Though the incidence of facial hair wearing would, according to at least one latter-day authority, continue to climb for another two or three decades, by the early 1860s a new era of facial hair was manifestly in evidence.90

But this new era brought with it new discontents. Few of them were more vocal and articulate than a correspondent named Helicon, who, in the latter months of 1856, became

Alonzo Lewis’s fiercest critic in the pages of Boston’s *Daily Evening Transcript*. Writing seven acerbic responses to Lewis’s seven pro-beard polemics, Helicon refused to believe that the beard was either natural, frugal, manly, healthful, or antithetical to the world of fashion. “Is shaving,” he asked pointedly, “any more a departure from Nature, than shearing, combing, wearing clothing, hats, caps, bonnets, boots, shoes, building houses, or ‘cottages,’ shops, railroads, steamers, using the locomotive, cooking food, using pen and ink, making books, cutting finger nails, agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, &c., &c.? ... [H]apply for man,” Helicon continued, “nature does not require him to eschew art, but to employ it in every possible way that shall contribute to his highest improvement and advancement in enlightened Christian civilization.” Turning the tables, the author concluded by saying that while both beard-wearing and shaving were, in point of fact, a matter of taste and fashion, the former was the more absurd of the two. While shaving was sanctioned by the ages, beard-wearing was an upstart practice. Dodging the fact of their own ‘slavery’ to fashion, beard-wearers tried to justify the practice by means of the most absurd and hypocritical leaps of reasoning. “[E]veryone seeks for a better cause for these changes than the real one, but in vain. Fashion bears tyrannical sway, though its devotees are unwilling to acknowledge it.”

The majority of men, it seems, clearly disagreed with Helicon. Despite his heroic efforts, he failed to stay the tide of the insurgent beard movement. But, as the present project’s conclusion suggests, he was closer to the truth of that movement than many contemporaries would concede. Admittedly, it may not have been fashion’s “tyrannical sway” that dictated the

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91 Helicon’s identity is difficult to place. Perhaps the best candidate is Donald McKay, a clean-shaven Massachusetts shipwright who had designed and built a barque named *Helicon* that frequently made port in Boston harbor. Evincing an apparent disdain for the beard, McKay shared an interest in science, technology, and historical progress with the *Transcript*’s anti-beard polemicist. See Richard C. McKay, *Some Famous Sailing Ships and Their Builder, Donald McKay* (Riverside, CT: 7 C’s Press, Inc., 1969; orig. 1928), 267.


beard movement. White supremacy, economic nationalism, and the patriarchal push to combat the feminization of facial hair played a far more important role in the origins of the trend than mere fancy. But Helicon was correct in suggesting that the pro-beard polemics were more fury than substance. Digging beneath the rhetoric we find that this emblem of natural manhood and virile independence had little to do with either. Far from severing their ties to the work of the body, beards and facial hair had simply increased that demand.

The problem of the razor, it turned out, had never been with the item itself, but rather the people who made and used it. Similarly, the problem of patent hair products resided, not in their existence, but in their tawdry visibility. The latter history of the ‘beard movement,’ therefore, was one of reengagement, rather than disengagement, from the labor and material culture of men’s grooming. Indeed, between 1850 and the end of the nineteenth century, thousands of men returned to the barber shop, re-embraced the razor, and re-engaged the consumer marketplace of patent hair products – all while maintaining facial hair styles that were ostensibly antithetical to all three. But they would now do so on their own terms by remaking the men’s grooming marketplace in their own image – complete with white barbers, American razors, and increasingly subdued patent hair product advertisements.
How closely did the ideology of the beard correspond to the social relations that made it possible? Not closely at all, the evidence suggests. Between 1850 and the turn of the twentieth century, American men’s reliance on body work and grooming-related labor increased rather than decreased. Demand for barbers once again surged. The American cutlery industry boomed. And sales of patent hair products grew unimpaired. This assessment is at odds with the findings of previous historians of the nineteenth-century facial hair style. Deceived by the immensity of men’s growths during these years – as well as the ferocity of pro-beard writers’ rhetoric – latter-day scholars have too-often assumed that these styles did, in fact, represent the end point in a long-standing relationship with various communities of body workers. But, as anyone who has worn both short and long hair can attest, the latter does not necessarily require less work. On the contrary, it often requires more.

Men’s increased reliance on body work in the era of the beard, therefore, should not come as a great surprise. While the kinds of facial hair styles favored in the 1830s and early 1840s – including clean-shavenness and short wreaths of whiskers – would have been easily manageable for the average home shaver, the more sophisticated styles of the 1850s, 1860s, and beyond required professional care and attention. This is not to suggest, of course, that home-shaving in the previous decades had been a pleasant experience. Although wreaths of whiskers would have been ideally suited to the domestic tonsor – requiring the shaver to deal only with the comparatively flat surfaces of the cheek, upper lip, and throat – total clean-shavenness entailed shaving around the hard, curved surfaces of the jaw. A challenge even for experienced barbers, these areas of the face likely posed the greatest difficulty – and the most important source of
painful shaving – to domestic tonsors. But, regardless of these difficulties, clean-shavenness and wreaths of whiskers were at least within the realm of possibility for most of the men who had abandoned the black-owned barber shop. Beards like Ambrose Burnside’s, on the other hand, would have been virtually impossible to style for anyone but a professional barber (see Fig. 29). Requiring ornate shaving, delicate trimming, careful combing, and elaborate waxing and styling, many of the rococo styles worn in the 1850s and afterwards reflected more, not less, labor and expense.

So much, then, for bearded men’s claims to the naturalness, frugality, and independence evidenced by their favored style. If anything, the facial hair styles they wore were more often indicative of artifice, extravagance, and dependence. This reality was reflected in a number of important contemporary developments. Perhaps the most significant of these was the revived demand for barbers’ services. Indeed, between 1850 and 1860, the number of barbers relative to the populations they served expanded for the first time in a half century (see Fig. 30). In
Fig. 30: Photograph of Ambrose E. Burnside by Matthew Brady, taken between 1861 and 1865 (Wikimedia Commons).

Boston and Cincinnati, for instance, where this recovery was most dramatic, demand increased from its low point by 45 percent and 25 percent respectively. Responding to this growing demand for body work, barbers re-entered the market in pursuit of newly-bearded men’s money.

1 Analysis based on the following sources: The Boston Directory (Boston: Charles Stimpson, 1830); Stimpson’s Boston Directory (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1840); The Directory of the City of Boston (Boston: George Adams, 1850); The Boston Directory (Boston: Adams, Sampson & Company, 1860); The Cincinnati Directory, for the Year 1829 (Cincinnati: Robinson and Fairbank, 1829); David Henry Shaffer, The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840 (Cincinnati: David Henry Shaffer, 1839); The Cincinnati Directory and Business Advertiser, for 1850-51 (Cincinnati: C. S. Williams, 1850); Williams' Cincinnati Directory, City Guide and Business Mirror for 1860 (Cincinnati: C. S. Williams, 1860); The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser, for 1832, annexed to the City Directory (New Orleans: Stephen E. Percy & Co., 1832); New-Orleans Directory, for 1841 (New Orleans: Michel & Co., 1840); Cohen's New Orleans and Lafayette Directory, including Carrollton, City of Jefferson, Algiers, Gretna and M'Donogh, for 1851 (New Orleans: H. & A. Cohen, 1850); Gardner's New Orleans Directory, for 1859 (New Orleans: Charles Gardner, 1858).

2 To be fair, it was not just renewed demand among elites that was driving this transformation. The well-documented intensification of body care requirements among the working and lower classes over the late nineteenth century also helped drive renewed demand for barbers services – as members of these groups struggled to maintain standards of fastidiousness that would have been considered altogether unnecessary earlier in the century. Still, the change in demand is significant enough to assume that departed elite were at least largely, if not wholly, responsible for this transformation. See, for ex., Kathleen M. Brown, Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America (New Haven: Yale
It was not just barbers, however, who were affected by this resurgence in demand for the labor of grooming. Cutlers and patent hair product producers were also impacted dramatically. While evidence regarding the extent of resurgent demand in both of these realms is harder to find than in the world of barbering, it is nevertheless plain that the latter half of the nineteenth century was, on the whole, a successful period for the cutlery and patent hair product trades. During this period, demand for razors remained high, as eager American consumers helped the United States finally succeed in establishing a viable domestic razor industry. And even a cursory glance through American newspapers throughout the post-bellum period suggests that demand for patent hair products remained strong as well. Indeed, no other explanation could possibly justify the extraordinary outlays of advertising expenditures that characterized the post-bellum print landscape of patent hair product advertising.

The barbering, cutlery, and patent hair product trades that re-emerged in conjunction with the pro-beard polemic, however, were markedly different from the trades that had existed before its advent. What marked them as different, though, was not the extent of the work being performed but rather the identity of the people doing it. Indeed, in each of these realms, the human or social face of the work was transformed in such a way as to make it more palatable to elite white male consumers.

This phenomenon was most pronounced in the world of barbering. In the early part of the century, for instance, African-American barbers had practically dominated the upper echelons of the tonsorial industry. Though their foothold was weakest in the cities of New England, black barbers nevertheless constituted as much as a third of the total barbering population in Boston in

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1840.  And in Cincinnati, and as well as much of the mid-Atlantic, South, and West, black barbers might constitute as much as three-fourths of a city’s total barbering population. Barbering and blackness, therefore, were practically synonymous in many urban American landscapes prior to the 1840s and 1850s.

By the outbreak of the American Civil War, however, much of that had changed. In Philadelphia, for instance, the percentage of black barbers as a total of the whole dropped from 79 percent in 1850 to 47 percent in 1860. In Baltimore, on the other hand, tonsors of color declined from 81 percent of all barbers to 49 percent during the same period. Replaced at an alarming rate by immigrant barbers – and most notably by Germans – many African-American tonsors would have agreed with John Rapier, Sr., quoted in chapter one, when he said that “I hate the name of a barber.” Following Rapier’s advice to beat their razors into plowshares, many black barbers followed him out of the trade and into more ‘independent’ occupations like business, the ministry, or farming. Thus, by 1880, black men constituted a mere 3 percent of barbers in New York, 13 percent in Chicago, and 21 percent in Philadelphia. Though these figures remained much higher in the South, statistics nevertheless portended doom for black barbers in much of the North. Indeed, in large parts of the latter region, barbering had become, to the relief of many a disgruntled ex-shaver, a white man’s occupation. For many hirsute ex-shavers, this re-assertion of white supremacy may have enabled a return to the shop.

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3 Stimpson’s Boston Directory (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1840).
4 David Henry Shaffer, The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840 (Cincinnati: David Henry Shaffer, 1839).
6 John H. Rapier, Sr. to John H. Rapier, Jr., Dec. 13, 1856, Florence, AL. Rapier Family Papers, Howard University, Moorland-Spingard Research Center (Washington, DC), 84-1, 30.
In the world of cutlery, meanwhile, American producers were quickly gaining ground on their counterparts in Sheffield and other European cities. Generating roughly $1.3 million in annual revenues in 1843, the American cutlery industry’s output leapt to $3.8 million in 1850 and $5.6 million in 1870. Admittedly, much of this growth was confined to the hardware and tableware trades which were the first areas in which American cutlers achieved industrial dominance. Nor did the growth of American production necessarily portend the immediate downfall of America’s dependence on Sheffield wares. Following the repeal of the ‘Black Tariff’ in 1846, a number of Sheffield firms rebounded impressively. As a result, the 1850s and 1860s proved propitious decades for British producers – leading a number of English boosters to laugh in the face of their American competition. Indeed, as late as 1870, the Sheffield firm of Joseph Rodgers & Sons was still sending as much as two tons of cutlery to the United States every week – accounting for no less than one-seventh of Sheffield’s entire trade with America.

Nevertheless, by the republic’s centennial, it was becoming increasingly clear that, within the United States itself, American wares would soon supplant imports. As early as 1869, for instance, the Sheffield Independent was reporting on an “unprecedented ‘collapse’ in the town’s cutlery trade with America.” And, by 1884, Sheffield’s exports to the U.S. had dropped by nearly a third since their previous high in 1851. Unfortunately for the ‘Little Mester,’ even more

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9 Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades, 343-344.
10 An ‘artisan reporter’ for the Sheffield trade publication The Ironmonger, for instance, asked: “How was it that with the great facilities of machinery in America none of her sons could meet the Sheffield firms, and show scissors, razors or table cutlery, while the Sheffield firms of Rodgers & Sons, Wostenholm & Son, and John Wilson & Sons can keep agents in the United States and pay heavy import duties? … I shall firmly believe that in good and cheap cutlery Sheffield will take some ‘whipping.’” The Ironmonger, ca. 1878, quoted in Geoffrey Tweedale, Tweedale’s Directory of Sheffield Cutlery Manufacturers, 1740-2010 (G. Tweedale, 2010), 19.
11 Tweedale, Tweedale’s Directory, 354
dire losses were to come in the next thirty years.\textsuperscript{13} Even in the delicate realm of razor manufactures, moreover, Sheffield producers were losing considerable ground to their American rivals. In 1873, for instance, the Torrey Razor Company of Worcester, MA, soon to be one of the United States’ largest producers, opened its doors, with other industry power houses to follow suit.\textsuperscript{14} And even before that date, Sheffield houses had accelerated their efforts to ‘tickle the vanity’ of ‘Brother Jonathan’ by means of ‘labels, inscriptions and devices.’\textsuperscript{15} As a result, the United States was inundated throughout the latter half of the century by razors and other items of cutlery inscribed with patriotic and political slogans – particularly during the divisive years of the Civil War. Thus, in both appearance and fact, razors had effectively been Americanized between 1850 and 1900. Stripped of their previous connotations with British economic and imperial hegemony, razors now reflected American economic nationalism. Indeed, shavers were now as likely to encounter the name ‘Toledo’ on their razors as they were to find the name

\textsuperscript{13} Importing British cutlery worth $1.4 million in 1851, the U.S. would import a mere $356,000 of cutlery in 1912. See Lloyd, \textit{The Cutlery Trades}, 345.

‘Sheffield’ (see Fig. 31). And the grimly etched visage of Abraham Lincoln was as likely to look up at them from the blade as was the queen. The result was a category of products that was far more palatable to the white male consumer – as well as the era’s ethos of economic nationalism.

In the realm of patent medicine advertisements, meanwhile, the situation was both similar to and markedly different from that of the barbering and cutlery trades. On the one hand, the former area underwent similar changes, as advertisers attempted to alleviate consumers’ anxieties. Indeed, just as the barbering trade had undergone a process of whitening and the cutlery trade had undergone a process of Americanization, the patent hair product industry seems to have undergone what we might call ‘respectabilization.’ Distancing themselves from some of the industry’s most unsavory and disreputable connotations, patent hair product producers
emerged from the era of the pro-beard polemic more sensitive to the tastes and concerns of a middle-class white public. They did so, not only by moderating some of their more extreme claims, but also by shifting the nexus of their appeal from individuals to groups. Building on a strategy that had been pioneered during the Civil War, many advertisers traded a strategy of self-aggrandizement for one of communal advancement: replacing suspect claims of enhanced personal beauty, health, or wealth, for instance, with statements of concern for troops in the field during the American Civil War (see Fig. 32).  

And yet, in important respects, the transformation undergone by the patent hair product industry was far less fundamental than those faced by the other trades in question. Though producers made noteworthy advances in the quality and safety of their products and began producing advertisement that were far more sober in tone than their forebears, much of the trade

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remained thoroughly unreconstructed. Thus, for every even-keeled advertisement like the one for the Smith Brothers’ “Natural” Brown Hair Dye – pictured in Fig. 33 – readers could also find advertisements like the one that appeared in a March 1861 issue of the New York Herald, shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s inauguration:

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PRESIDENT LINCOLN
PRESIDENT LINCOLN
PRESIDENT LINCOLN
DID YOU SEE HIM?
DID YOU SEE HIM?
DID YOU SEE HIM?
DID YOU SEE HIM?
DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?
DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?
DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?
RAISED IN SIX WEEKS BY THE USE OF
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
BELLINGHAM’S ONGUENT
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While the former notice took its cues from an earlier, more sedate era in the history of advertising – content to list the qualities of the Smith Brothers’ wares and even announce the artificiality of their product – the latter advertisement made the extraordinary claim that Bellingham’s Onguent had helped call forth Abraham Lincoln’s famous whiskers. Both, it must be noted, were representative of large numbers of advertisements in the half century after 1850.

But, even if the transformation in patent hair product advertisements was far from total, it was nevertheless significant that the makers of these goods had set aside a portion of their

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17 New York Herald (New York, NY), ca. March 1861, quoted in Young, The Toadstool Millionaires, 93.
advertisements with an eye, at least implicitly, to the tastes and concerns of ‘respectable’ elite consumers.

Of course, not all of these transformations occurred as a result of self-conscious efforts to (re-)capture the business of white elites. The barbering profession was whitened, for instance, not just as a result of elites’ white supremacist demand, but because German immigrants entered the trade in large numbers. Eager for work, well-acquainted (in many instances) with barbering, and unencumbered by reservations concerning ‘servile’ labor, German immigrants provided a ready pool of potential white barbers that had previously been lacking among native-born whites. The domestic cutlery industry, meanwhile, rose to prominence, not simply as a result of elites’ economic nationalism, but because the United States’ abundant supplies of fossil fuels and iron, as well as the British cutlery industries’ increasing resistance to innovation, made cutlery manufacture ripe for entrepreneurial profit. And the patent hair product industry was transformed as much by growing fears about the possibility of regulation and trade restriction as it was by concerns about appeasing elite customers’ concerns about connotations of dandyism and dissimulation.18

And yet, looming behind all of these transformations in barbering, cutlery manufacture, and patent hair product production and sales, was the vast economic and cultural power of American elites: their desire to patronize white barbers, to consume American-made cutlery, and to live in a world of print media characterized by more sedate, ‘respectable’ advertisements for patent hair products. Thus, to the ‘accidental’ elements involved in this transformation, we might, with justice, add others that were far more intentional. The end point of this story, in other

18 For many patent hair product salesmen, the 4 percent federal tax on patent medicine sales and the growing set of restriction on outdoor advertising must have made clear the dangers of continuing in their old ways. See Young, The Toadstool Millionaires, 107-108, 123.
words, is not merely a series of events that allowed elites to resume their former relationship with the work of the body. The end point, by contrast, involved the domestication of men’s grooming: the active reconfiguration of body work in ways that suited elites’ sense of themselves as white American men.

What does this story suggest? First and most importantly, it suggests that the ideological content of the ‘beard movement’ was, in many respects, only skin deep. An implicitly instrumental discourse, the pro-beard polemic was designed to rebut the feminization of fashion rather than indicate a more fundamental revision in the relationship between elites and the work of the body. While the exigencies of white supremacy and economic nationalism had convinced some to undertake the burdens of body care for themselves – typically unsuccessfully – this would not be a long term arrangement. Arguments about nature, frugality, and independence notwithstanding, elites were determined to resume the old regime of body care – only this time, the face of that labor would be more amenable to their sense of themselves.

This is not to suggest, of course, that participants in the pro-beard polemic were self-consciously disingenuous in their claims. Many no doubt earnestly believed their beards to be emblems of nature, frugality, and independence, even as a barber applied costly unguents to their carefully-trimmed beard. Then as now, the power of self-deception is vast. Rather, the point is that the ideological content of the pro-beard polemic and the social relations it helped inaugurate were fundamentally at odds. Under the cover of the former, elites reorganized the latter. And they did so, not on the basis of the substance of the polemics, but rather in accordance with the values and concerns that had given rise to the facial hair fashion in the first place. Thus, the main consequence of the pro-beard polemic was not the emergence of a new ideal of ‘hirsute manhood,’ but rather the strengthening of white supremacy in the barber shop; the elaboration of
economic nationalism in the realm of cutlery production; and the reassertion of male dominance vis-à-vis the feminization of facial hair. This, far more than the flimsy, fatuous arguments leveled in defense of the beard, constituted the real substance of the American ‘beard movement.’

The *real* meaning of the American beard, in other words, was not the set of ideals that elites claimed it embodied, but rather the social relations that made it possible. It resided, not in the pages of polemics, but in the dispossession of black barbers and British cutlers – in the seizure of meaning from patent hair product producers and the silent appropriation of women’s fashion writers. This was the true history of the American beard.
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