

Baltimore Evening Sun
June 2, 1910

An Eternal Mystery

There will be whiskers in the world, said Alcidas of Elea, that sapient Greek, so long as there are winds to set them rippling and necks to give them root. True enough!—but whiskers change, as all things vegetable must. The years condition them and modify them; they are moulded anew, over and over again, by fashion's whims, the progress of civilization, the fluctuations of a fluid environment; they change esoterically as well as exoterically, in significance as well as in form. Once the mutton-chop was the brand of the baker, the captain of industry, the stern father; today it is continued to Chauncey M. Depew and the cartoons of F. Opper. Once the Galway stood for metaphysics, and Herbert Spencer's barber was its Worth, but then came Nietzsche's Niagara of a moustache, setting a new mode for philosophers, and now the Galway's soft, aeolian note is heard in the dialectic grooves no more. And finally, there was that honored handmaiden of homiletics, the straight front, or ambush—gone, alas, perhaps forever! Today we have preachers with siders, toothbrushes, soup-traps, double perfectos, chinnners and imperials—preachers with all the unearthly *araliaceae* of the tonsorial pharmacopoeia. Who, indeed, can now distinguish between a theologian and a chauffeur, a sheep and a goat?

I make no apology for introducing the subject of whiskers again, so soon after devoting a tedious column of type to it. It is a subject worthy of scores and scores of columns, even of scores and scores of whole volumes, for it is inordinately complex, interminably various, abysmally recondite, exasperatingly mysterious. It baffled Pythagorous, it puzzled Duns Scotus, it drove Nietzsche crazy. The professors of psychology steer clear of it; it is too much for them. Even the psychotherapeutists, to whom all philosophical and biological riddles are as crystal, avoid it as the pestilence.

In Shakespeare's time, as in the days of the Old Testament prophets, the possession of a beard was the hallmark of a man. It was impossible to gain preferment in politics, in the army or in the church save one could show whiskers of virile and graceful aspect. The deadliest of all insults was to pluck out the tender shoots of an enemy's beard; the worst of all injuries was to destroy that beard entirely by fire, acid or edged weapons.

Admirers of "King Lear" will recall that extraordinarily tragic scene in Act III, wherein the villainous Cornwall and Regan, before blinding poor Gloucester, torture him by mutilating his beard. First they tie him to a chair and then they proceed to their devilish work.

"By the kind gods," cries Gloucester, "'tis most ignobly done, to pluck me by the beard!"

Regan, as if staggered by the awfulness of her own act and seeking to justify it in her conscience, accuses Gloucester of unspeakable treacheries.

“Naughty lady,” cries Gloucester, in denial. “These hairs which thou dost ravish from my chin will quicken and accuse thee!”

Things have gone so far that it is now impossible to turn back, and so Regan has her bravos hold poor Gloucester while she stamps out his eyes.

The commentators are of the unanimous opinion that the whole scene is altogether too horrible for presentation on the stage. Scenes in which characters are blinded are common in the early drama, but this combination of blinding and dewhisckerization is unparalleled.

“I will not disguise my conviction,” says Coleridge, “that in this one point the tragic in this play has been urged beyond the outermost ark and ne plus ultra of the dramatic.” Tieck says that the scene is “manifestly too horrible”; W. W. Lloyd that its “painfulness and horror are utterly unsupportable.” Even in Shakespeare’s own day, the barbarous audiences of the Bankside shrank from the double tragedy, and so it was usual to play the scene on the inner stage and with poor Gloucester’s back to the spectators, so that the plucking out of his beard might not cause the audience to faint.

In “Hamlet,” when the melancholy prince desires to shock the pestiferous Polonius into silence, he threatens to have the latter’s beard cut off. It is in the second scene of Act II, just after the entrance of the players. One of them, at Hamlet’s request, has begun to recite “Aeneas’ Tale to Dido,” to the Prince’s delight, but to the disgust of Polonius, who finds it wearisome.

“This is too long!” interrupts the impatient ancient.

“It shall to the barber’s,” snaps Hamlet, and then adds, maliciously, “with your beard!”

This threat, containing, as it does, an atrocious insult, silences the chattering Polonius, at least for the moment, and the recitation proceeds.

No need to pile up further examples. Every student of the Shakespearean plays knows where they are to be found. The sacredness of the beard, indeed, is one of the dominant ideas in the bard’s works; as much so as the idea of the vanity of human endeavor. And it appears, too, in the writing of every other sage of that time Lord Bacon devoted one of his essays to the inviolability of the beard, under the common law, and later on Coke returned to the subject. Even that chronic scoffer, Greene, always spoke of whiskers with respect; and Marlowe, as we all know, came to his death in a duel with a drunken rowdy who had presume to make game of his academic chinners.

The present decline of barbaculture, as a scientific recreation, is viewed with alarm by all astute sociologists, for if history is to be believed, that race which runs to smooth faces is a race marked for the ax. When the Romans began to shave daily they started down the primrose path, and before long the hirsutic Goths, bearded like Gargantua, had overrun and exterminated them. So, too, with the ancient Angles, the pre-Manchu Mongols, the Hamoxobil of Sarmatia, the Incas of Peru, the Cappadocians and the Sioux. Against bejungled foemen these barefaced breeds could make no stand.

By the same token, a period of striking advancement, in any nation, is always marked by the assiduous cultivation of whiskers, and, as a rule, by the invention of many new genera. During the last year of Elizabeth’s reign in England (as Walter Pater informs us) there were no less than 265 cuts in common vogue, including many now entirely extinct. To return to Shakespeare, we find that he devoted his entire leisure to his beard. It is even maintained by Dr.

Signey Lee and other authorities that he retired to Stratford, in 1611, because the miasmas of Southwark sapped its resiliency, and he desired to try the effects upon it of the purer country air. That country air, as we know, revived the drooping tendrils and gave them all their old bounce and beauty; but by the same token, the crude victuals of Stratford disagreed with the bard himself, who had become accustomed to the more refined eating of London, and in 1616 he died. Thus the greatest of all poets sacrificed his life that his exquisite Van Dyke might bloom.

Today such ardor is rare in the world, but it would be going too far to say that it is entirely extinct. Every now and then one encounters a man, such as Governor Hughes or Jerry Simpson, for example, who makes the culture of whiskers an almost religious cult. In New York the other day a devotee of truly medieval fervor was encountered. His name was Edward Barry and he wore an ambush of astonishing lushness and beauty. Faring down Broadway, he was knocked down by an automobile and suffered a fearful gash in the cheek, from which blood poured in a great stream. The ambulance surgeon who quickly arrived produced a pair of shears and proposed to cut off the victim's beard, that the wound beneath might be sewed up. But Barry protested vigorously.

“Hands off my beard!” he cried.

“But you will bleed to death!” urged the surgeon.

“Hands off my beard!” cried the brave and determined Barry.

And it was only by the use of force that the surgeon managed to clear off his prodigious flora and get at the gaping wound beneath. What a man!

(Source: Parks Media Center, Iowa State University, microfilm collection)