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Hairology: The Paradigm Shifts and Shaves of Men's Facial Hair

Since the dawn of human history facial hair and the grooming thereof has always been an evolving subject. There has never been a period of static ideal when it comes to what is adorning a man's face; further, many a civilization has found power or failure through beards. The current culture of manscaping and ironic mustaches is part of the new wave of men's grooming, because men's hair is no longer a symbol of class subjugation but one of personal freedom.

Facial hair, until very recently, has always deemed some sort of class distinction or status symbol. Usually a king or leader would either grow it out or shear it off and those of court would follow suit, and the lesser classes would be forced to adhere to the previous style. The ancient Egyptians considered body hair as base, and were religious in its removal, yet they still donned beards (kings and queens) for important ceremonies. Their facial hair constructs were works of art; they were dyed, styled, threaded through with red plaiting, and dusted with gold shavings. The more elaborate the additions, the greater the affluence. Queen Hatshepsut (circa 1480 BC) had her own stylized beard/mask that left no doubt to her station (Peterkin pg.17). Today elaborate mustaches and beards are not seen as a sign of power, in fact if a man, let alone a woman, is walking down the street with a bejeweled goatee like he owns the place he is either going to get a) catcalls, or b) rotten tomatoes thrown at him. There isn't a meaning behind gilded beards anymore. They are either a Halloween accessory, an accessory for a queen trying to look pretty in the daylight, or an early 20s to mid 30s male adult trying to shock passerby by how 'on

the fringe' his facial hardware is. Females could hardly have an easier time of sticking on a braided, pomaded, and lacquered tuft of facial hair ever since the ancient Egyptians but now in the 21st century, thanks to Lady Gaga revealing her 'other self' a woman can just say she is exploring herself and continue about the day with little to no backtalk. Certain styles, such as a ladystache, can still be ridiculed but the fact that you will not get thrown into enslavement for adorning oneself like a pharaoh is something close to a celebratory thing.

Hair-ocracy has always been mercurial, and throughout the years it flip-flopped in accordance to who was in power and what their whims were. Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) initiated clean-shaven faces for his soldiers because he was afraid their beards could be used against them in hand to hand combat. [Though a lasting fad even after his reign, for some reason ancient Greeks are today remembered for the long, flowing beards of their Gods and philosophers.] The beard did not have a comeback until Hadrian (117-138 AD) who used his growth to hide scars or possible deformities (Sherrow). Once again, the nobility caught the trend and the slaves were forced to shave. The middle ages were a throwback to the Egyptians because the Gaul aristocracy and the Anglo-Saxons both were meticulous about body hair and dyed their mustaches red or blue and green respectively (Peterkin pg.24). Again, the styles of olde worn today will not acquire you with adoring crowds and a wealth of influence, but that is probably the point for this insurgence of obscure hair care. Dying ones hair in non-natural colors identifies an individual today as punk or emo, not as an axe-slinging anglo-saxon. At the end of the 12th century, beards fell out of fashion in France and the rest of the world followed suit. It actually seems that every century or so the current style would arbitrarily change back to a semblance of its predecessor, with only subtle differences to distinguish the past from the 'new' hot look. The 13th century had an influx of beards, 14th century downsized the bushiness, and the 15th century

had an upsurge in luscious facial locks thanks to the Duke of Burgundy wearing a waist length fake one to his foe's funeral. Now in present day people only don fake beards for a costumed soiree or to appear nonconformist; if Obama had put on a long number when Bin Laden died, I am sure it would have been more of a controversy than of a fashion trend.

Speaking of political unrest, wars have been fought over, won, and defeated by facial hair. One of the first "beard wars" consisted of the Persians fighting back at the Tartars because they did not like the religious beard style being implemented. Another early hairy situation was the biblical war of King Hanum and King David started after Hebrew ambassadors to Hanum's court had half their beards shorn by the king. A fight in which facial hair or lack thereof was a deterrent was the battle of Hastings, where William king of Normandy invaded England to go against Harold king of Hastings. The Saxons were brutally defeated because they thought the clean shaven French to be priests and did not see them for the enemy they were (Peterkin pg.32). Mustaches in the military are still sign of strength, if not for having a meaning behind them, then to at least look distinguished. There are still a lot of reason countries and peoples go to war but it is safe to say that facial hair is no longer a contributing factor. The most recent battle upon hair would be the Oxygen network show "Hair Battle Spectacular" which even then has only friendly camaraderie in the fight to see who can "deliver the biggest and best in fantasy hair design" (Eva Marcille). Facial hair has lost the authority to instigate an actual war, but by its own power it has morphed into something that has tournaments and competitions to see who can create the most elaborate design. The longest beard is even an entry in the Guinness Book of world records, with the most current title holder being Hans Langseth whose beard at death in 1927 was 17 feet and 6 inches long (D. Langseth). It can now be seen displayed at the Smithsonian institute. Beards are not just something to cultivate during the winter months to keep your face warm, they are now a

form of art for expressions sake. Today's hair mastery is not to satisfy a king anymore, it is to satisfy oneself.

Since the 19th century there has been a rapid shift in how facial hair is viewed. Men today still groom, still experiment with style, but it no longer holds meaning like it once did. In ancient Greece a boy's first shave was his entrance into manhood, celebrated by offering the shorn locks to the gods, now they just get washed down the drain. Depending on the time period, Mourners alternatively cut their locks in deference to the dead or let their hair become unruly to demonstrate grief. Hair had significance; when viewing a man of the 15th century, it could be seen whether he was in mourning, his position in society, and his nationality all through his cut and style. With the end of monarchies and dynasties comes the end of facial hair being more than just an embellishment upon a man's face. Men's facial hair may have drastically lost its significance, but the ritual is still in place. Shaving is still seen as a new stage in life, viewed as part of the world of man, and that thought has been passed down from father to son since the beginning. It might no longer be that petting a king's mane brings good luck, but the ritual is still in place even if only it is a drunken girl at a party asking if she can stroke that mustache. Beards and mustaches no longer import station; it is the first time in history that the majorities of facial hair growers just do it on a whim and not command or allegiance. The freedom of choosing how one's own hair is styled is a heady, giddy thing, demonstrated by the World Beard and Mustache Championships which "its history is shrouded in controversy" (Beardcastle). It does not matter whether it originated from the First Hoefener Beard Club, the Swabian Beard and Mustache Club, or the Handlebar Club (to name a few); all that matters is the spirit in which the participants get. A note-worthy entry of the beard design would be that of a full, head-encompassing birdcage with working door hinge (1991 competition). It seems nowadays that

mustaches are a kitschy joke and beards an iconoclastic rebellion, but they are now a part of expressing oneself and no longer a representation of societal conformities. There is no longer a common theme among styles and positions in life, there is an equal amount of smooth faces and mustachioed men vying for careers or travelling less-worn paths.

Modern facial hair no longer holds the same amount of depth as attributed to certain styles as it once has. No longer does the style and length of beard dictate who you are and what class ranking you hold. Over the past centuries it has been seen again and again as a badge of honor, it connected persons to peers and held them above the lower classes. A beard was more than an accessory, it held significance. Fifty years from now it might be that everyone is sporting a Nordic-reminiscent beard but that is not a paradigm shift. The true paradigm shift, bigger than all the rises and falls of hair care, is that the styling of hair is no longer a matter of jurisdiction or mark of caste as it has been for the past millennia; 20th century hair is a new style all on its own.

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