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Mustaches and Masculine Codes in Early Twentieth-Century America

Emilie Spencer Deer was an accomplished woman from an accomplished family. She was born in 1893 in Oakland, where her father was professor of Greek at California College. Later, her father accepted a professorship of philosophy at Denison College in Ohio, eventually serving as dean and acting president. Emilie's sister was the first woman to earn a doctorate in library science. Emilie's husband, Roy Burton Deer, was successively a pastor and executive at the state and national levels of the American Baptist Churches, USA. Emilie herself was for three years a music student at the Conservatory of Music at Denison College, but started her family before graduating. The Spencers and Deers, like many in the professional class, were committed Republicans. In 1948, however, Emilie Deer let her family know that she would vote for President Truman instead of Thomas E. Dewey because she did not like Dewey's mustache.¹

At first blush, this appears to be an absurd reason for an educated Republican to favor the Democratic president over his Republican challenger. Taken in context, however, and considering the role that mustaches played in the social symbolism of her time, Mrs. Deer's decision is understandable. There is, moreover, plenty of evidence that she was not alone in her thinking. She was reading the masculine code: a clean-shaven man was sociable and reliable. A mustached man, by contrast, demonstrated a willful independence that did not engender confidence in Emilie Deer's mind.

The purpose of this article is not to rewrite the history of the razor-close election of 1948. Instead, it is to deepen our understanding of twentieth-century masculinity by considering the performative function of facial hair. Gender theorists, whether they focus on gender as an organizing principle of social power or as a component of individual subjectivity, agree that gender concepts are historically constructed, and that they find expression in both social discourse and physical presentation. Indeed, for the theorist Judith Butler, these verbal and physical presentations are inseparable from gender identity itself, which, she argues, "is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be

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its results.”² In consideration of the physical performance of masculinity, it is curious that one of the most visible and effective practices—the styling of facial hair—is also one of the least understood. This is the case in spite of the fact that people in Western societies have long acknowledged that facial hair is evidently a sort of performance. It has been recognized as a choice, a display, and even a mask intended either to disguise flaws or assert a character type. Joseph Schusser, for example, who was the manager of a chain of New York City barber shops, observed in a 1923 interview that “the most interesting fact about beards and even mustaches” is that “they help to provide a mask, behind which a man can take shelter.”³ In retrospect, it is apparent that the management of facial hair has always been a medium of gendered body language, and as such has elicited a nearly continuous private and public conversation about manliness. Few men have groomed themselves in complete ignorance of its social implications.

Because facial hair has created its own conversation, it is not necessary for the historian to devise an elaborate theoretical construct to ferret out hidden, subconscious meanings. It is both more straightforward and more complicated than that. Understanding the conventions of facial hair requires careful attention to the conversation, and an effort to map both consistencies and variations within the broader historical frame. Such an approach reveals the deeper logic of Mrs. Deer's thinking, and also the fundamental dialectic of masculinity that lies behind it. This is not to argue, of course, that the conversation on facial hair has been rational, analytic or lucid. On the contrary, references to facial hair in the periodical and literary press are sporadic, impressionistic, and sometimes silly. A great number of writers have found the whole matter humorous, and in some respects it certainly is. Like all performances, facial hair involves pretensions and foibles. Charlie Chaplin's little, wiggly mustache was a trademark of the twentieth century's most famous clown, but its humor rested ultimately on a mustache's more serious pretensions. In the final analysis, if mustaches had not become a significant part of the playacting of manliness, there would be no awkwardness and no presumption to ridicule. Chaplin's mustache worked so well for his clownish tramp precisely because it was also the trademark of an assertive manliness suited to Europe's most fearsome tyrants, an irony that Chaplin thoroughly exploited in his classic film, *The Great Dictator*.

Taken by themselves, jokes or impressionistic comments about mustaches reveal little, but considered collectively and in context, they illuminate a distinct and consistent pattern of thought in early twentieth-century America. The preeminent form of facial hair—mustaches was not primarily seen as a means to distinguish men from women, or older men from younger, but rather to distinguish between two elemental masculine types: sociable and autonomous. A man was neither wholly one nor the other, but the presence and size of a mustache—or its absence—served to move a man one way or the other along the continuum that stretched between the extremes. According to the twentieth-century gender code, a clean-shaven man's virtue was his commitment to his male peers and to local, national or corporate institutions. The mustached man, by contrast, was much more his own man: a patriarch, authority figure or free agent who was able to play by his own rules. These were stereotypes, of course, but like most stereotypes, they carried real social power. This interpretive frame generally held firm for performer and audience alike, offering mustached men both social risks

and rewards. Governor Dewey encountered one of those risks when Mrs. Deer judged him insufficiently sociable to be president.

In early twentieth-century America, there was one arena besides politics in which the social role of mustaches was especially important, and that was Hollywood, the American cultural stage *par excellence*. In this landscape of the imagination, an idealized masculinity was enacted in fantasies of power and wish-fulfillment that provided a satisfying escape from ordinary life. In Hollywood, the transgressive was possible, particularly the rugged and rakish individualism of larger-than-life heroes. It is no wonder, then, that one found a much greater proportion of Hollywood leading men with atypical facial hair. In the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s, mustaches became the hallmark of swashbuckling romantic heroes such as Clark Gable, Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks, father and son. On the other extreme, it was also the hallmark of Charlie Chaplin, whose small toothbrush mustache indicated the comic-pathetic opposite of the leading man. The symbolic import of mustaches was underscored by the minute attention paid to them in the Hollywood press. Every appearance, disappearance or alteration of the stars' mustaches generated extensive commentary. In both cinematic and political image-making, the mustache played a remarkably similar role in defining contrasting masculine virtues.

I. The End of the Mustache Era

Before either of these discourses can be deciphered, however, it is necessary first to consider the longer historical context, and explain why, after two generations of popularity, facial hair lost favor in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was at this point that the "clean-shaven" face gained precedence, and mustaches became a sign of unconventional individualism.

The year 1903 may be taken as the tipping point. An enterprising reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* illustrated this fact by careful count. Standing on a busy street corner in downtown Chicago, he counted in one hour 3,000 men, of whom 1,236 wore mustaches and 108 some kind of beard. The rest (1,656) were clean-shaven.⁴ There was a rough balance, but the reporter was aware that the trend was moving strongly towards shaving. This was also the view of a contributor to *Harper's Weekly* in 1903, whose article "The Passing of Beards" was partly a eulogy for the beard and partly a reluctant recognition of the virtues of a shaved face. The writer contended that both the clean-shaven and full-bearded face had a certain logic and dignity. The beard, he wrote, "really cannot be kept clean; but it was natural, and it was dignified." As for shaving, "there is gain for honesty if not beauty."⁵

The dignity of beards to which the writer referred was the fading ideal of the late nineteenth century, when full beards had become quite respectable in Europe and America. In a time of rapid economic and social change, men grew beards or mustaches to underscore the natural virtues, and supposedly imprescriptible rights, of men. Mustaches, as opposed to beards, were strongly associated with military fierceness and discipline because most European armies required them for officers, and in some cases, enlisted men as well. According to research conducted by the British military in 1913, the origins of the military mustache were to be found in the style of the Croatian hussars of the Austrian imperial forces, who, in the words of the study, "evidently

considered that a fierce moustache would assist in terrifying their enemies, much in the same way as Chinese soldiers adopted awe-inspiring masks as part of their uniform."⁶ Such impressive fierceness and dash were emulated by Napoleon's cavalymen, which helped to establish this military style for the remainder of the century. When mustaches became widely adopted by young civilian men in the 1880s and 90s, these men inevitably acquired for themselves something of a "dashing" martial air.

The author of the *Harper's Weekly* article could not explain why shaving had taken hold in his day; he could only say that it made for an "honest" face. It would seem that the timing of this shift had something to do with the introduction of the safety razor and disposable blades by King C. Gillette in the 1890s. He and his competitors certainly stood to make a handsome profit from the popularity of shaving. The historical record indicates, however, that technical innovation and the burgeoning shaving industry in the United States were a response to social demand rather than its origin. For one thing, the full beard had already lost favor with the younger generation in the 1880s—at least a decade before Gillette's famous invention. For another, a mustached face required almost as much shaving as a clean-shaven face, and the convenience of shaving was not likely to have made an important difference in the choice to wear a mustache.

Advertising also suggests that product innovations like the safety razor responded to, rather than caused the shaving trend. Rather than promote the virtues of shaving, early twentieth century advertisements for razors and creams assumed that a man desired to shave; it was simply a matter of how. From the beginning, Gillette advertising focused exclusively on practical matters, particularly how its shavers and blades made shaving faster, cheaper and more comfortable. The social benefits of shaving were never discussed. Even in venues like the 1930s *Fortune Magazine*, Gillette placed full-page color ads, among others for champagne, Packards and Cadillacs, boasting of a new Gillette shaver available for only 98 cents that permitted a man to change the blade in just three seconds.⁷ Other shaver and blade manufacturers took a similar approach, though some emphasized the smoother shave produced by their implements. Practicality and convenience were also the bywords for shaving creams. Palmolive, Colgate, Williams, Mennen, Ingram's, Barbasol and Burma-Shave bombarded readers with various pseudo-scientific claims that purported to explain why their creams or soaps provided a faster and more comfortable shave. A typical case was a Mennen advertisement in 1924 that discussed "dermutation, the Mennen-discovered process of beard softening" that "makes shaving supremely comfortable" and "introduces new speed in every detail of beard-removal."⁸

The razor and shaving cream industry, with estimated annual sales of \$80 million in 1937, was a significant and competitive business that made men rather less reliant on barbers than before, but it was the beneficiary rather than cause of the shift towards clean shaving. More fundamental social forces were at work in this great change. One key factor was a growing concern about disease and hygiene. A second, and more profound cause was a shift in the cultural formation of masculinity itself, involving a move away from an individualist/patriarchal model of manhood toward a corporate/professional ideal. Twentieth-century society placed greater emphasis on youth, energy, discipline and teamwork, and these qualities were associated with the shaved face. Indeed, the common phrase

“clean-shaven” combined both these notions of hygiene and sociability. A clean-shaven man was clean in a literal sense; that is, more hygienic, and he was also clean in a figurative sense, namely straightforward, cooperative and reliable. This is the quality that the *Harper's Weekly* contributor referred to as the “honesty” of the shaved face.

On the matter of hygiene, there was certainly a dramatic about-face in the twentieth century with respect to facial hair. In the 19th century, physicians routinely argued that beards helped protect skin and nerves from the sun and weather, while mustaches were hailed as filters of dust and bad air. Pasteur's discoveries changed all that, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, doctors increasingly denounced facial hair as a haven for microbes. As the century turned, newspapers, magazines and medical journals were filled with increasingly alarming reports. A French scientist caused a sensation in 1907 when he recounted an experiment showing that the lips of a woman kissed by a mustached man were polluted with tuberculosis and diphtheria bacteria as well as food particles and a hair from a spider's leg.⁹ In 1909, the British medical journal *Lancet*, completely turned the tables on nineteenth-century science by finding that clean-shaven men, not mustached men, were less likely to suffer from colds. Their supposition was that removing facial hair removed a nursery of dangerous organisms, and allowed for the more effective use of soap.¹⁰ The microbe fear was powerful, but not unchallenged. Many doctors continued to wear mustaches, and some persisted in arguing for the health benefits of facial hair, assuming that it was kept clean.¹¹ Even so, cleanliness remained for a long time a very common rationale for shaving.

In league with the new thinking on cleanliness was a fundamental turn-of-the-century reformation of manliness that also strongly favored the new clean-shaven style. Historians of masculinity have described this reconfiguration in different ways. The clearest changes relate to the emerging ethos of corporate business culture, and the rise of what some have called “white-collar manhood.”¹² It was not just the management and professional classes that were affected, however. At all levels of the economic scale, fewer and fewer men were independent or self-employed as the twentieth century began. Increasingly, American men entered professions, industrial or corporate employment in which the prevailing virtues were teamwork, energy, cooperation and good manners.¹³ The expectation for these men was to appear clean-shaven. To some critics on the left, this was yet another sign of the oppression of working men, because men now had to look youthful and strong or risk being cast aside by heartless employers. This was a theme in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and it was echoed by the progressive pastor Walter Rauschenbusch, who contended in 1908 that “men shave clean to conceal gray hairs. They are no longer a crown of honor, but an industrial handicap.”¹⁴

Heartless or not, employers were clearly pressing men to shave in the name of hygiene and professional discipline. The Burlington Railroad, for example, banned facial hair on its conductors in 1907, at the same time introducing white linen collars, ties and vests. The Burlington management announced that these changes would give its employees a uniform appearance and make them less likely to spread germs and contagion.¹⁵ A few years earlier, the Police Department in Evanston, Illinois, ordered its officers to shave their mustaches as part of a new insistence on drill and professionalism. The official notice declared

that "the inspector will see that each patrolman has clean shoes, clean gloves, a neat uniform, and that he is clean shaven. Slovenly or untidy dress at inspection will be considered a neglect of duty and will be entered against the officer."¹⁶ Other police departments were doing the same. In 1915, the Los Angeles Police Department stopped promoting any patrolman or detective who chose to wear a mustache, because, in the words of the superintendent, it gave "an untidy and irregular appearance to his men."¹⁷

Employers were not the only ones to insist that men discipline themselves and their faces. In some respects, mustaches had become part of the battle between the sexes. Alma Whitaker, in a column of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1920, complained about men who had returned from the war with "tricky little mustaches" which she suspected "helps a fellow feel dashing and debonair, no matter how we happen to think he looks in it." In a half-serious tone, she urged her fellow women to put a stop this trend, warning that "these ostensibly meager little hairy assertions on the male upper lip may become patriarchal whiskers before we know what has happened to us."¹⁸ A few years later, a woman on a Chicago street echoed this anti-patriarchal attitude when asked whether she liked mustaches. Absolutely not, she replied, "I want a modern husband, not one reared in Noah's ark."¹⁹ As this comment suggests, changes at home as well as the workplace inclined men to adopt a more sociable shaved face. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were discouraging any inclination of men to become a Victorian domestic patriarch, replete with his Noah-like beard.

To some extent the ideal of sociable masculinity was imposed on men by larger social forces, but to some extent men positively embraced it. There were a number of reasons for men to eschew domestic patriarchy and its hairy visage. John Tosh, writing about English professional men in the late nineteenth century, concluded that "domesticity was increasingly associated with ennui, routine and feminine constraint."²⁰ In reaction, men aspired to a more adventurous, youthful ideal, remaining single longer, joining sporting clubs and seeking male camaraderie rather than domestic dominion. Michael Kimmel made a similar observation about American men, who, he said, compensated for the loss of manly independence in the urban and corporate work environment by fashioning a new sort of heroism in competitive sports and adventure fantasy.²¹ In all these developments, older models of patriarchy and self-sufficiency were abandoned in favor of new ones built around masculine collectives like companies, unions, clubs and sports teams. Early twentieth-century attitudes towards facial hair reflected this shift. The youthfulness, energy and uniformity of the shaven face commended itself as the sign of modern masculinity much more than the stolid individuality of a hairy face.

The turn-of-the-century idealization of youthful energy rather than patriarchal wisdom was most strongly manifest in the rise of sporting culture. For many young men, the growing emphasis on athletics and the muscled body diminished the importance of facial hair in the performance of manliness. This was particularly true for those influenced by the "physical culture" movement, where hair interfered with the display of both Grecian youthfulness and well-defined muscles. Americans were quicker than Europeans to adopt the new clean-shaven look, and many observers thought this reflected their particular enthusiasm for both youthfulness and sports. In Germany, the decline of mustaches in the 1920s was ascribed to the popularity of the "American sporting face."²² This

idea was not without foundation, for it was a common observation that Americans in particular valued youthfulness. When a *Chicago Tribune* reporter asked questions about mustaches in 1925, one man in the street opined that mustaches were not good for men because “right now everybody wants to look young and keep looking young, and we all like to have everybody else looking young and feel young. And that’s a good sign.”²³ Joseph Schusser, the manager of America’s largest barbershop chain believed the same thing, and surmised that in America, youthfulness was associated with strength. “Every American man,” he argued, “wants to have ‘a strong face;’ square jaws, with a clean-cut, firm mouth. This is our ideal, we try to present that kind of face to the world.”²⁴

By shaving themselves, men could present an image of youthful energy. They could, by the same token, affirm the manly virtue of sociability in terms of conformity with masculine peer groups. This can best be observed in heroic shavers who exemplified how shaving enhanced, rather than detracted from their manly identity. The fictional Tarzan, the creation of American writer Edgar Rice Burroughs, who made his first appearance in 1912, shaved himself every day before swinging in the trees. This Englishman of the jungle felt an overpowering need to shave in spite of its extreme inconvenience:

True, he had seen pictures in his books of men with great masses of hair upon lip and cheek and chin, but, nevertheless, Tarzan was afraid. Almost daily he whetted his keen knife and scraped and whittled at his young beard to eradicate this degrading emblem of apehood. And so he learned to shave—rudely and painfully, it is true—but, nevertheless, effectively.²⁵

A few years after Tarzan appeared in print, the British army officer who became famous as Lawrence of Arabia presented himself as another heroic shaver. He was remarkable for the adoption of Arab garb while leading Bedouin forces on the Arabian peninsula, but would never appear in public other than closely shaved, even when no water was available. Historian Graham Dawson has pointed out that “one of the most obviously contradictory signs of the ‘blond Bedouin’—the absence of a beard—is no accident, but a carefully contrived sign of Englishness, which helps to establish the combination of ‘mystery,’ purity and authority that distinguishes him from the Arabs.”²⁶ For Lawrence, the purpose of shaving was the same as it was for Tarzan, to cleanse himself of the pollution of his natural environment, and also to form a symbolic link to an endangered group identity, be it the English nation or mankind itself. Neither man could be fully a man on his own, even when he was alone. Instead, he must affirm his membership in a greater masculine collective.

T. E. Lawrence adopted shaving as a sign of English manliness at the time when the clean-shaven standard had won its final victory in Britain. Up to 1916, British soldiers were required to wear a mustache as a sign of military *esprit de corps*. In the years before the First World War, however, the English and American press was reporting an “agitation” within the British armed forces for the right to be clean-shaven.²⁷ In 1915, in the midst of war, King George was obliged to issue a statement affirming the regulation. The following year, however, after the draft had been imposed, the general staff repealed the requirement after realizing that it was not worth risking morale in midst of a desperate

war.²⁸ The American army did not experience a similar crisis because it had never adopted the mustache rule.²⁹ On the matter of mustaches, even the military was not the final arbiter. Far greater social forces were in play. Like the patriarchal beard, the chivalric mustache lost favor among men eager to adopt a hygienic, youthful and sociable masculine image.

II. Mustaches of the Imagination

The trend toward shaving indicated a decided shift in European and American manliness towards sociability. In the cultural imagination, however, mustaches continued to represent the masculine alternative of forceful individuality. So, as mustaches faded from the faces of military and civilian men, they found new life in Hollywood. The most famous Anglo-American mustache of the early twentieth century was, without a doubt, Charlie Chaplin's. Charles Chaplin, the actor, did not have a mustache, but the tramp, his alter-ego of 25 years, certainly did. Chaplin improvised this character one day in 1914 during a break in filming. On a lark, in order to amuse his fellow actors, he put on parts of their costumes: the baggy trousers of a much bigger man, the tight-fitting coat of a thinner actor, and another's derby hat. According to one of the actors present, Chaplin dashed to the makeup room for a piece of crepe hair, cutting himself a mustache and trimming the sides to a rectangle small enough to wiggle when he made a face.³⁰ He was a huge hit with the actors and stagehands. The tramp was born.

As critic John Kimber has noted, this character was a fool, complete with the fool's odd and ill-fitting costume. At a time when the mustache was falling from favor, the tramp's mustache added to this oddity. But Charlie's tramp was not simply odd, he was transgressive. He was a character of contradiction and confusion, which, in Kimber's analysis, is an essential feature of the fool.³¹ In his films, the Chaplin character manages to be at the same time shrewd and naïve, brave and cowardly, fastidious and vulgar, rich and poor. The storylines of Chaplin films revolve around his impostures: he routinely appears to be other than he is, which drives the comedy, and in some cases tragedy and pathos.

The little mustache helped Chaplin's tramp confuse reality and pretense. According to Chaplin himself, the defining characteristic of the tramp was his "shabby gentility."³² His baggy trousers, large shoes and tight coat revealed the incongruity of the tramp's identity as a dignified rogue. The mustache added to this quality by proclaiming an inappropriate dignity. In 1914, it must be recalled, a mustache was still the trademark of military officers as well as businessmen and professionals of an older generation who had not yet succumbed to the new shaven style. The tramp lacked the panache of an officer or the gravitas of an executive, but like them he was resourceful, resilient, and even violent, particularly in the early films. So, in its way, the mustache was fitting. He was weak but strong; poor but rich; powerless but forceful. Such was the contradiction and confusion of this mustachioed maniac.

In contrast to Chaplin's comic toothbrush, Hollywood's leading men began to experiment in the 1920s with a slim, "fine line affair that looks like a misplaced eyebrow."³³ In that decade a mustached man was more likely to be a villain than a hero, but notable exceptions were Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Ronald Colman, whose sleek mustache seemed to add a dash of sophistication.

In the 1930s, however, the exception became the rule when studios and actors alike determined that the Colman style was just the touch required for a romantic lead. Clark Gable and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. grew permanent mustaches in 1933. In 1934, the trend was gaining attention in the Hollywood press. By that time, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, half the leading men in Hollywood sported mustaches.³⁴ Even the mild-mannered Bing Crosby was urged by numerous fan letters to try one, which he did in 1935 for his part in the musical "Mississippi." The studios believed they were on to something, and they often ordered their stars to grow hair on their upper lip. By the end of the decade, the new style was firmly established. In 1939, a Hollywood reporter noted that "nearly every big-time, and small-time film star too, is wooing and winning the ladies with the aid of a bit of brush on his upper lip."³⁵ In the opinion of Hollywood make-up artists, the reason for this was that screen tests proved a mustache "makes a gent appear more impressive, more masculine."³⁶ When, in 1940, a director insisted that the young star Robert Taylor grow a mustache for his new film *Waterloo Bridge*, it was "to make him appear more mature, rugged, and virile instead of a 'well-scrubbed choir boy'."³⁷

Of all the stars of the 1930s, Clark Gable was certainly the most successful in deploying the romantic potential of mustached manliness. It is especially instructive to consider his film persona, and examine how his physical style enhanced this character. It was often noted at the time that Gable's attractiveness as a leading man was built largely on his almost violent forcefulness. The journalist Ruth Biery was one of the first to comment on Gable's emerging stardom. In 1932, she described Gable as "the epitome of the ruthless, handsome knock-'em-down, treat-'em-rough, virile, modern cave man."³⁸ Biery reported, in addition, that Hollywood actresses were crazy about Gable. So, apparently, were moviegoers. Metro Goldwyn Meyer executives discovered that Gable's toughness, resilience, virility, and actual or threatened violence helped to make him popular with men and alluring to women.³⁹ In 1933, the year after Biery's description of Gable as the "modern cave man," Gable grew a slim mustache, which he wore, with only a few exceptions, for the rest of his life. It became a distinguishing feature of "the King of Hollywood," and a virtual, if not literal trademark carefully guarded by studio executives. It was reported in 1936, for example, that MGM complained to Warner Brothers Studios, to which they had temporarily loaned Gable, that Warner's order to have him shave would interfere with Gable's image.⁴⁰

The most famous Gable character, of course, was Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*. For this important role, he took pains to determine just the right sort of mustache, finally deciding on "a dashing thin line with spiked waxed ends."⁴¹ This, Gable believed, was just the look for Butler, who like many other Gable characters, was a rogue, though ultimately a good one. Butler was a resourceful, self-centered murderer, gambler and smuggler who showed no willingness to sacrifice himself for the Southern cause in the Civil War. He was a man of few words, though honest and blunt. His aggressive manliness was epitomized in the ravishment scene when he forces himself on Scarlett O'Hara, the strong-willed, though wrong-headed heroine. This was the "modern cave man" in action. His counterpart and rival for Scarlett's affections was Ashley Wilkes, played by the blond and smooth-faced British actor, Leslie Howard. Wilkes was the more sociable, but weaker man. The dark, mustached and resilient Butler, not the blond,

clean-cut and vacillating Wilkes was the man who represented Scarlett's salvation, even if she stubbornly and foolishly failed to recognize it in time.

Gable, like many Hollywood stars, blurred the line between himself and his screen persona. He was rarely seen on or off screen without his trademark mustache. Other male stars, however, began to abandon what detractors referred to as "lip lettuce" by 1940. Even in its heyday during the late 1930s, there were indications of resistance to the Hollywood mustache. In 1937 it was reported that Errol Flynn was receiving fan mail both for and against his mustache, and Flynn was unsure of what he should do to please his female admirers.⁴² Some studios decided not to leave it to chance, and in Tyrone Power's case, put him through a series of screen tests in 1937 with different sorts of facial hair before a sample audience of women.⁴³ The result of this investigation can be seen in Power's clean-shaven appearance in his next film, *Old Chicago*. Perhaps the studio was persuaded by female stars who were on record disapproving of facial hair. An Associated Press article in 1937 declared that most leading ladies disliked mustaches, quoting Marsha Hunt, Marlene Dietrich, Doris Nolan, Martha Raye and Dorothy Lamour to that effect.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it appears that female stars were as divided as Errol Flynn's female fans. In 1940, for example, Rosalind Russell expressed approval, while Barbara Stanwyck opined that "worn properly, the mustache can lend character and dignity to a man's face."⁴⁵

The reason for this ambivalence was the appealing and unappealing features of both sociable and assertive manliness. An enterprising Los Angeles reporter named John Cornell found this out for himself in 1934 when he too tried a mustache. He concluded that it made him a more formidable personality, which among other advantages, helped him get dates with college women who "felt quite wicked," in going out with him. In the end, however, he never shook the feeling that he was putting on an act, and so shaved off his hairy mask. Cornell did admit enjoying the guilty pleasure "of imagining myself an intriguing, continental sort of a devil," and thought he might give it another try some day.⁴⁶ In this account, Cornell reiterated yet again the prevailing notion that a mustache was the costume of a man playing the role of a self-possessed, assertive, and even rakish man, the type of man about whom women had ambivalent feelings.

III. Political Realities

In the world of Hollywood make-believe, the masterful and rugged hero strutted across the imaginary landscape. Ordinary men of the world, even powerful ones, were more constrained. In 1939, while Gable was perfecting his devil-may-care Rhett Butler character, Thomas E. Dewey was a young Attorney General of New York, and a rising star in the Republican Party whose mustache attracted a tremendous amount of attention. Many speculated about why he grew it and what people would or should think about it. It was a question that never went away. Appearing at a televised forum in 1950 during a gubernatorial re-election campaign after having run for president twice, the first question from a woman voter was why he had a mustache. Dewey responded that as a young man he stopped shaving because it hurt his lip, and he kept it because Mrs. Dewey liked it.⁴⁷ Simple enough. But it was never a simple matter. Whether he wanted it to be or not, it had become his distinguishing feature. One admiring journalist, "j.p.h.," effused back in 1939 that "in this clean-shaven age ... it is

little short of epic. It is fulsome, luxuriant, raven black, compelling, and curved in a way to gladden an artist's eye."⁴⁸ Dewey was, in that writer's opinion, "a Clark Gable of candidates" with more charm, personality and political sex appeal than other Republicans.⁴⁹ The correspondent was sure that this would be a huge political asset for Dewey. In this assumption, however, he was wrong.

The discussion about Dewey began in earnest during his first presidential campaign in 1944. Women writers were the most critical. The syndicated columnist, Dorothy Kilgallen supported Dewey, though she admitted that mustaches did nothing for her.⁵⁰ Others were even less tolerant. After attending the Chicago Republican Convention in July, a syndicated political columnist, Helen Essary, declared herself impressed by Dewey's intelligence and courage, but also hopeful that the Republican candidate would get himself to a barber and shave off his mustache, because it remained his biggest handicap. "I have heard dozens of women make the same criticism of the gentleman from New York," Essary wrote. "It takes from the seriousness and strength of his face. Moreover it will not help with the women vote ... You see only the mustache. You remember only the mustache. Without it, Governor Dewey would look a million per cent more real as the proper man for the White House job he is after."⁵¹ Edith Efron, writing in the pages of *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in August, 1944, also concluded that Dewey "may be elected to office, but it will be in spite of his 'manly attributes'—not because of them."⁵² For Efron, it seemed clear that for whatever reasons men wore them, a mustache had a profound, often negative effect. "It plays many roles today," she wrote, "it is Chaplin-pathetic, Hitler psychopathic, Gable-debonnair, Lou Lehr-wacky. It perplexes. It fascinates. It amuses. And it repels."⁵³ The following month, the *New York Times Magazine* published a letter from a well-known model named Cornelia Von Hessert who amplified Efron's thesis that mustaches indicated the assertion of undesirable character traits. "The man who decides to sport lip adornment," Hessert wrote, "asserts his masculinity and desire to tyrannize over the home. No matter how prettily he waxes it, droops it, shingles it, at heart he's the Man's Man and ruler of his own roost."⁵⁴ Men in Britain and America were generally clean shaven, she reasoned, because women insist on claiming their own authority.

In contrast to the tendency of women writers, it was common to find men rising to the defense of mustaches, and of Governor Dewey's in particular. Even in their disagreement with female writers, however, they were often willing to affirm that mustaches marked a strong, assertive type of man. One defender who contributed two articles on the matter was a syndicated columnist "ELM," who wrote in October that he felt himself "called upon to protect the fair name of gentlemen who wear mustaches, whether they're rather scraggly affairs like mine or strong, virile ones like Mr. Dewey's."⁵⁵

When he won the presidential nomination a second time in 1948, Dewey's small mustache again loomed large in perceptions of him as a candidate. As before, articles appeared that spring and summer musing on the fact that he would be the first President with facial hair since Taft left office in 1913, and speculating on whether he would start a new national trend in men's fashions. For his part, ELM contributed two new articles in Dewey's defense, assuring his readers that Dewey was not affecting "a trick trim ... like some movie actors have. The Dewey mustache is merely a part of him."⁵⁶ When an Alabama

businessman made a public appeal to Dewey to shave for the sake of Southern votes,⁵⁷ another male columnist encouraged Dewey to stand firm, assuring him that he [the columnist] also had a mustache, and that he had managed some years earlier to win the hand in marriage of a Southern voter.⁵⁸

When the votes were counted in 1948, Dewey was narrowly defeated, and the tally was particularly close in the Midwestern states of Iowa, Illinois and Ohio, Emilie Deer's state. Simple though Dewey's grooming choice may have seemed to him, he faced a strong counter-current of gender discourse. To be the "Clark Gable of candidates" was not a good thing because, though Gable's make-believe "modern cave man" was alluring as a fantasy hero, he was much less suitable as a political leader. The reasons for this are not hard to discern. Gable's film persona, like Chaplin's tramp, was distinguished in large part by his mustache. Both Gable and the Tramp were nonconformists who defied social conventions. Both were capable of great good, but they were also forceful, disruptive and even dangerous personalities known for violence as well as resilience. It was these associations that explain the wariness of both men and women towards men with mustaches, and why people were so curious about Dewey's choice to wear one. Men who were clean-shaven signaled acceptable qualities of discipline and reliability, and were much more likely to be the "proper man" for the presidency, as Helen Essary had put it.

Facial hair in the early twentieth century was not merely a matter of oscillating style. The clear pattern of politics and masculine play-acting demonstrates how mustaches served in the social performance of manliness. Men employed mustaches or shaving to situate themselves on a continuum between the ideals of autonomy and sociability, and while neither option could be entirely abandoned, real or imaginary men could change their face to signal a shift in one direction or the other. These choices about facial hair entailed both rewards and risks, as Hollywood actors and Washington politicians eventually discovered. For their part, politicians have taken Dewey's lesson to heart, and since 1948 no serious presidential candidate has ventured facial hair. It is quite apparent that the social rewards and risks of facial hair derived to a large extent from the opinion of women. They were to some extent the intended audience of this gender performance, and they certainly had a significant stake in what type of masculinity the men in their lives claimed to act upon. Sometimes they even got to vote on it.

Endnotes

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