

Introduction

Man's earthly interests are all hooked and buttoned together, and held up, by Clothes.

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy: for the apparel oft proclaims the man.

—*Hamlet* (This quotation hung in the new hat and tailoring department of Sydney W. Knight's of London, 1910)

Why, in the choice of the pattern of a man's trousers you may see something of the "internal quality of his soul!" It is for this reason that our novelists always insist so strongly on the *dress* of their heroes and heroines; they feel that the mind influences the apparel; that a lady's temper betrays itself in her bonnet, and a man's disposition in the cut of his coat.

—*The Glass of Fashion*

IN MAY 1904, THE LONDON MEN'S MONTHLY *Fashion* REPRINTED in full a letter written to the *Irish Independent* by a frustrated tailor and closet reader of popular fiction. "I wonder what it is that the writers of fiction pay so little attention to the costuming of their male characters," the letter began; "Of course, nobody expects a man's clothes to be as interesting as a woman's, but they certainly deserve more space than they get in novels, particularly the novels of women." The tailor cautiously admitted that he had lately begun to read a great deal of fiction, "not because I like it, but because I was anxious to find out how real heroes dressed. I didn't learn much. Judging by the scant courtesy accorded the apparel of mankind in literature, they don't do much dressing." The tailor noted that Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dinah Mulock Craik, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Edith Wharton, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Lucas Malet "seldom, except in cases of character study, . . . go into details of dress" regarding their male protagonists and villains and most often "discreetly leave their tailoring to our imagination." "It isn't fair to us tailors," he concluded; "Dressmakers get a good write-up on almost every page of the popular novels, but the tailor is cut down to about six lines in the whole book" ("Men's Fashions," 23).

At first glance, the tailor's comments appear to be the trivial complaints of a rather eccentric reader whose appreciation of literature is amusingly dependent

on how closely it relates to his calling. Yet the tailor stumbles upon a curious oversight in Victorian texts. While nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentary on women's fashion is abundant, men's sartorial habits seem hardly to have been noticed. Victorian British fiction reflects an implicit disregard for men's dress, and novelists and their male protagonists regularly insist on an ignorance of, and a conscious distancing from, any deep understanding of fashion. The costume and physical appearance of male characters of the middle and upper classes are rarely described in any detail, and many authors consistently rely on vague—albeit loaded—adjectives such as *neat*, *clean*, *simple*, *understated*, *subtle*, and *effortless* to characterize “proper” male dress. For example, in *The Way We Live Now* (1875), Anthony Trollope tells us that the young aristocratic cad Sir Felix Carbury “had been clever enough to dress himself always with simplicity and to avoid the appearance of thought about his outward man” (18). Trollope himself is reluctant to appear too knowledgeable about clothing, admitting only that Mrs. Hurtle's dress is made of “a fabric which the milliners I think call grenadine” (258–59). One might presume that Trollope would know what his own characters were wearing, yet overt self-awareness, conscious self-display, conspicuous consumption, or a manifestation of any deep knowledge of fashion by male characters (or by their creators) was immediately stigmatized and constantly repressed within Victorian literature. Thus, men's roles as consumers and as class performers through fashion and appearance seemingly exist only as an absent presence in nineteenth-century fiction.

This lack of interest—feigned or real—is curious considering England's emerging dominance over the world of men's fashion at that time. By the second half of the nineteenth century, English dressmakers—and particularly tailors—had usurped their French counterparts as the leaders in high fashion, a process that had begun with the “Anglomania” of the 1770s in France and had gained strength after Wellington's victory over Napoleon in 1815 (Chenoune, 31). “The Parisians do not lead the field in men's fashions,” declared the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1889; “All the ideas come from England for men's fashions” (“Round,” 7). The conduct manual *Best Dressed Man* (1892) maintained that while Englishwomen still “slavishly follow[ed]” “*la mode Parisienne*,” Englishmen preferred homegrown styles (26–27). Certainly after the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, France had permanently lost its sartorial preeminence, as English society in ever-greater numbers opted to patronize London's tailors and dressmakers rather than make the once-customary annual trip to Paris. In 1896, the trade publication *Tailor and Cut-*

ter asserted, “At the present time the eyes of the world are fixed on the fashions of London. . . . Much beautiful work is turned out in Paris but their day as leaders of [male] fashions, is past” (quoted in Cunnington and Cunnington, 310). By the close of the century, London had defined for the Western world the masculine ideal of the “gentleman,” an image that symbolized English aristocratic refinement and imperial might. The *fin de siècle* essayist and dandy Max Beerbohm concluded that the English costume and overall style of presentation (of simplicity and sobriety), first promoted by Regency-era dandy Beau Brummell, had reemerged to gain global acceptance (22–23).

Britain’s sartorial dominance was one reflection of its overall economic prosperity during the Victorian age. The booming capitalist economy and relative peace enjoyed by Britons in the mid- to late nineteenth century paved the way for the dawn of modern consumer culture. Dramatic developments in industrial production, the importing of new goods and raw materials from Britain’s vast empire, the rise of the modern metropolis, and the continued growth of the middle classes created a vigorous economy of consumption. The population of England and Wales surged during the nineteenth century, rising from 17.9 million in 1851 to 32.5 million by 1901 (Cook, 111). Much of the population was concentrated in the cities, as nearly 77 percent lived in urban areas of ten thousand or more inhabitants by the turn of the century, with over five million in London alone (Fraser, 7). Britain’s populace was an increasingly affluent one as well, as real wages increased and white-collar professionals grew steadily in numbers. All this meant more people with more purchasing power who were more willing to spend rather than save as they had previously. Enterprising retailers zealously chased after these new consumers by abandoning conservative early-Victorian sales practices and adopting increasingly aggressive and sophisticated techniques of advertising, display, and promotion. Beginning in the 1860s, the small haberdashery shops gave way to large-scale urban department stores, with fixed, clearly marked prices; a greater diversity of products; and high turnover that increased sales volume. By the 1890s, British department stores—including Whiteley’s, Swan and Edgar, D. H. Evans, Derry and Toms, Barker’s, Harrods, and Liberty’s—had developed not only in Britain’s major cities but also in provincial towns to an extent not equaled in France and the United States.¹ The evolution of the department store, the development of mass-produced clothing and ready-made items, and innovations in product promotion and display all increased the sheer number of products that consumers could buy and, for the first time, made these goods available

and affordable for many among the working and middle classes. With much greater ease than ever before, working-class and bourgeois consumers could affect the fashions, pursuits, and luxuries of the wealthy, and many consumers aspired to buy their way into the upper classes, as the age-old qualifications of lineage and land were eclipsed by money, conduct, and outward appearance.

The enormous changes rendered by what Peter Mathias calls the “Retailing Revolution” on the economic, cultural, and psychological lives of Britain’s consumers cannot be underestimated, yet their effects on male consumption and the social construction of masculinity have yet to be examined thoroughly (Winstanley, 34). Having been effectively hidden—even pathologized—by most Victorian popular and professional literature, men’s gender and class performance via men’s fashion, grooming, and consumer habits have been largely overlooked or ignored by historians and cultural critics (Paoletti, 121). Overshadowed by an abundance of readily available and visually arresting primary texts documenting the popular cultural history of women’s fashion and shopping, men’s fashionable consumption has been further obscured by long-held, though overly reductive, historical and theoretical apparatuses that construct clothing, display, and shopping as exclusively feminine pursuits (thereby removing men completely from the act of consumption) and that dismiss men’s fashion as plain, utilitarian, and static. Contemporary historians’ and critics’ overreliance on notions of a “separate spheres” ideology that imagines men as producers and women as consumers and of a “Great Masculine Renunciation,” in which nineteenth-century middle-class Englishmen adopted sober, unadorned business-oriented dress in an attempt to gain sociopolitical legitimacy, have prevented us from discerning men’s significant interest in dress and consumption during the Victorian age.

Moreover, fashion and consumption have been consistently gendered as the exclusive domains of women. Western society has long accepted the axiom that women are interested in shopping and clothes, and that men are not. The iconography of shopping—including its spaces (grand department stores, tony urban boutiques, supermarkets) and its goods (dresses, cosmetics, groceries)—as well as the act of shopping are consistently encoded as feminine. Consumption is readily linked to adornment and beautification of the body and therefore has historically been associated with the feminine and female vanity (Nixon, “Have,” 151).² “Women are supposed to care very much about fashion, ‘vanity,’ looking good, and may be seen as unfeminine, man-hating, or lesbian if they don’t,” Susan Bordo asserts. “The reverse goes for men. The man who cares about his looks the way a

woman does, self-esteem on the line, ready to be shattered at the slightest insult or weight gain, is unmanly, sexually suspect” (200). Responding to the familiar axiom “clothes make the man,” fashion theorist Antony Shugaar writes, “Men aren’t even supposed to know what makes the man. They are supposed to be men and deeply unaware of it. Men are supposed to be ignorant of clothing, even if they somehow dress well. The only true male elegance, then, would be an unconscious understanding of clothing, an instinctive selection of one look rather than another” (64). Men are believed to exhibit little interest in decoration or style, dressing instead for comfort and utility. If a man’s costume is acknowledged to perform a further symbolic purpose, it is that it enables him to “dress for success”—that is, to enhance his professional career. Menswear—epitomized by the development and the endurance of the men’s three-piece business suit—has long been regarded by fashion historians as both uniform and *a* uniform, reflecting men’s desire to adopt a standardized, fixed, and practical costume that affords little room for ornamental flair or personal expression.³ For these reasons, Victorian and turn-of-the-century fashion and shopping have conventionally been read only in terms of their effects on female consumers; recent historical and critical studies, including Lori Anne Loeb’s *Consuming Angels*, Elizabeth Langland’s *Nobody’s Angels*, and Erika Diane Rappaport’s *Shopping for Pleasure* have explored the influence of consumer culture on femininity and the ways in which commerce and consumerism were culturally gendered as feminine during the nineteenth century.⁴

What needs to be recovered is the substantial evidence that ornament, ostentation, and overt forms of sartorial flamboyance did not vanish from the male figure, nor did mid- to late-Victorian men renounce their desire for personal expression or self-display through their clothing choices. Even a cursory look at the fashion record of the nineteenth century reveals countless popular trends and ever-changing modes that contradict the idea of a near-total disavowal of men’s interest in sartorial display and of a slow, virtually unchanging progression of men’s attire. Indeed, at the very same time that the Great Masculine Renunciation was purportedly shifting into full gear, England experienced a “rage for fashion,” and one French fashion magazine noted that “as women become more straightforward in their dress, young men are becoming more clothes-conscious” (Chenoune, 31, 35). The 1830s and ’40s neckcloth, the immediate forerunner of the necktie, was worn so high and starched that wearers supposedly could not move their heads (fig. i.1). Stiff, soaring collars were so popular then, and again in the 1890s and 1900s, that stories (apocryphal or no) widely circulated of men cutting their ears

on the corners of their shirt collars and of burning their chins in an attempt to iron the bows of their neckcloths after these were tied (Cole, 80).⁵

Contrary to the familiar images of grave-looking Victorian gentlemen dressed in a drab palette of blacks and grays, color did not disappear from the male wardrobe. The popularity of men's colored silk neckties during the 1840s reflected the decade's general air of flamboyance and vibrant hues accenting ordinary dress (Byrde, 118). The *Gazette of Fashion and Cutting-Room Companion's* 1853 issues herald

the “resumption of coloured cloths for light overcoats and morning-coats” and remark that “coloured and medley cloths have now become to a certain extent established” (June 1853, 10; August 1853, 23). Stripes, checks, and other broad and striking patterns appeared with great regularity in men’s fashion plates from the 1850s onward. Bright blues and purples were also acceptable colors for menswear, particularly for celebratory occasions. The introduction of aniline dyes in 1859 had an enormous impact on men’s sartorial choices, making available a vibrant spectrum of often crude and garish hues and color combinations that were particularly in vogue in the 1860s and early ’70s (Adburgham, *Shops*, 179). Men’s leg-wear also proved to be a constantly changing medium for fashionable expression. The popularity of striped and checkered pants began in the 1840s and gained force in the ’50s, as a rage for Scottish culture, fueled in part by Sir Walter Scott’s novels, inspired tartan trousers. That same decade saw military stripes and piping down trouser seams. Fashion plates in the May 1853 issue of *Gazette of Fashion* depict several unexpected patterns on trousers, including stripes, plaids, and alternating stripes and plaids at the waist and leg cuffs (figs. 1.2 and 1.3); the journal notes in July of that same year that “transversal stripes” are “one of the leading novelties of the present season” (17). Peg-top trousers—cut very full at the top and tapering sharply at the ankle—were popular in the late 1850s to mid-’60s and again in the 1890s (Walkley and Foster, 129). Moreover, many among Britain’s male populace were indeed concerned with the display of the body throughout the nineteenth century. The Beau Brummell—era dandies were not the only ones who occupied themselves with cutting a physically attractive figure, for Victorian men in large numbers wore corsets and other body-shaping undergarments, widely advertised in newspapers and periodicals.

Such evidence of men indulging in fashionable display in the nineteenth century is admittedly anecdotal and in some cases represents perhaps only extremes in fashion adopted by a small minority. However, it nevertheless demonstrates that the full variety of middle-class men’s engagement with fashion—as well as the fabric, style, and color options available to them—cannot be accurately characterized by the reductive image of the grim-faced Victorian patriarch clad in dark frock coat and thick boots. As in all facets of Victorian social history, it is important to make careful distinctions between the cultural ideals promoted in popular discourse and real-life practice. Fashion historian Christopher Breward notes, “Restrictive modes of social and sexual organisation should be viewed as models fit for negotiation, rather than immovable edicts” (*Hidden*, 7).

What remains to be acknowledged and examined in detail is how modern consumer capitalism sought to radically transform Victorian men's clothing and consumption as well as constructions of masculinity and male class identity. The scarcity of surviving men's garments from the period,⁶ the relative lack of primary materials that openly acknowledge men's active interest in fashion,⁷ and the wholesale acceptance of a popular Victorian rhetoric that privileges female consumption have led to problematic scholarship that replicates rather than analyzes Victorian ideologies regarding men's fashion and consumption. Further, the attention paid to the well-documented lifestyle of upper-class gentlemen as well as to transgressive, borderline figures of male consumption such as the dandy has tended to obscure the facts, distract our attention, and prevent us from perceiving more common, more middle-class, more mainstream social and commercial discourses on nineteenth-century men's fashion and male consumption. Consequently, the Victorian middle-class man has become what Breward refers to as the "hidden consumer." Thorough, nuanced scholarship on male fashion, grooming, and buying habits within the burgeoning culture of city shops, department stores, and fashionable spaces barely exists as yet. Despite the importance of costume in communicating gender, very little research has focused on the link between clothing styles and sex roles. Studies specifically on dress and masculinity are scarcer still, and no proper theoretical framework has been established by which to apprehend the full breadth of men's consumption in the nineteenth century (Paolletti, 124).

In *The Cut of His Coat*, I examine the costume, grooming habits, and consumer practices of Britain's middle-class urban males in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, thereby reevaluating long-overlooked changes in male sartorial and consumer habits to discern why the Victorians seem heavily invested in denying men's relationship to consumption. I contend that the public discourse on men's engagement with fashion and consumption was far greater, far more dynamic, and far more complicated than has been generally acknowledged. Men's direct relationship with shopping was not as socially stigmatized as a cursory examination of popular Victorian texts suggests, nor were men's sartorial codes nearly as static, uniform, and unchanging as fashion historians have claimed. Men in fact were invited to participate vigorously in fashion and in the public display of their masculinity, sexuality, and class status through their clothing and other purchases throughout the nineteenth century. Rapid changes in styles and cuts of jackets, trousers, shirts, neckties, shoes, and hair—seldom recognized by historians—suggest that many

men were just as preoccupied with fashionable consumption as women were. Men's interest in fashionable display and their participation in consumption increased substantially in the late Victorian age, assisted by the development of the apparatuses of commodity culture, including advertising and the department store.

Rather than cultivating female markets exclusively, the public discourse of the burgeoning consumer culture industries actively sought to transform men into consumers and make the act of shopping safe and appealing to men during the second half of the nineteenth century. The emerging department stores and urban shopping centers did not take long to recognize men's consumer potential and to aggressively cultivate the once-dormant male market. I do not mean to suggest that Victorian men were merely passive dupes of the consumer industry's manipulations; rather, England's middle-class males used the new availability of products to assert class status and expand definitions of acceptable masculinity. Through the growth both in variety and in availability of goods, bourgeois male consumers reappropriated and transformed formerly "effeminate" or "deviant" male consumer practices and public display via clothing and accessories into normative masculine behavior. By the turn of the century, male self-display, conspicuous consumption, and the sexual objectification of men had indeed become more culturally accepted. And through pioneering the adoption of ready-made garments, the business lounge suit, and casual sports-inspired dress, young men of the middle classes—rather than their upper-class peers—had become innovators and leaders of fashion in Britain.

Finally, in this book I argue that the new accessibility and affordability of clothing and accessories once available only to the elite blurred class distinctions and reconfigured the markers of class belonging. As the middle classes acquired the goods that formerly distinguished elite status, the satirical figure of the dandy, formerly a caricature of upper-class male sartorial excess, gradually shifted downward in the form of the "masher" to become a negative stereotype of lower- and middle-class males' clumsy aping of aristocratic costume and pursuits. At the same time, however, many men among the middle classes abandoned social emulation to assert their own sartorial aesthetic, which reflected the modern lifestyle of the emerging bourgeoisie. By the end of the Victorian age, the socioeconomic transformations wrought by mass production and consumer culture had led to at least a partial reversal of the class- and gender-specific ideologies (namely, the "stove-pipe severity" of the middle-class male) that had begun the century and which inform most contemporary scholarship on the entire era.

A single, linear trajectory of male costume, characterized by the dominant fashions of the elite and the clumsy belated knock-offs of the middle and working classes, fails to account for the full spectrum of late-nineteenth-century male sartorial history. Multiple, even contradictory trends in menswear—influenced by class, competing masculinities, the department store—coexisted at the turn of the century. Ultimately, *The Cut of His Coat* is an examination of what new ideologies of manhood were constructed through new kinds of mass-produced clothes, through new kinds of sartorial markers, and through new kinds of consumer values. It serves to help decode the social semiotics of male dress in literature in terms of what they mean regarding the changing Victorian constructions of masculinity in the later half of the nineteenth century.

The Cut of His Coat is an attempt to recover the roles of middle-class men as active participants in the birth of modern consumer culture from 1860 to the turn of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the conclusion that women exclusively were consumers or that male consumers appeared only in “deviant” forms such as the dandy is too reductive. Because commodity culture and gender identities were and are produced together, historians must seek evidence of the involvement of men in nineteenth-century consumerism in terms of their identity as males. Without a clear recognition of the relationship between male shoppers and the emerging machinery of nineteenth-century consumer capitalism, there is a danger that the historiography of the period will replicate the familiar gender dichotomies of the Victorian era. Without an investigation of the complexities and nuances of male consumption, we risk understanding consumerism in Victorian Britain as having been solely about women and femininity. The relatively recent growth in scholarship in consumer culture as well as the emergence of men’s studies afford us an opportunity to look at the socioeconomic changes brought about by the late-nineteenth-century development of mass production, ready-made clothing, and the department store from a more informed perspective.

Further, this book demonstrates that the kinds of transformations in the construction of masculinity wrought by consumer culture began at a much earlier date than has typically been assumed. Most recent critical work has identified the transformation of men’s fashionable consumption by consumer culture during the interwar years. For example, Laura Ugolini has examined fashion among male Oxford students in the 1930s, noting, “The emphasis in recent fashion histories has been on the relative ‘relaxation’ of men’s clothing after the First World War, with the abandonment of the stiff formality of the frock coat and of starched

collars, in favor of the adoption—at least outside ‘business hours’—of lighter materials and the more relaxed style of lounge suits, pullovers and soft collars” (429). Jill Greenfield, Sean O’Connell, and Chris Reid have explored how the advent of British men’s lifestyle magazines in the 1920s and ’30s, specifically *Men Only*, cultivated men’s gender fantasies and anxieties to generate male consumer desire. And Kathy Peiss’s fascinating work *Hope in a Jar*, while primarily about the social history of the American cosmetics industry, takes time to mention unsuccessful attempts to develop a men’s cosmetics market in the 1930s (158–66). Lengthier, more in-depth studies of men’s consumption have concentrated almost exclusively on the postwar years, as histories of consumerism have tended to focus on the feminization of consumer culture in the nineteenth century and recognize major male consumer trends only after World War II. Most fashion historians locate men’s open embrace of fashionable consumption among the emergence of youth movements, alternative subcultures, and the swinging Carnaby Street boutiques of the ’60s. Andrew Wernick’s *Promotional Culture*, for example, claims that the targeting of men as consumers began in the 1960s, and Jon Stratton’s *Desirable Body* (1996) acknowledges a “prehistory” of male consumption only as far back as Britain’s working-class “teddy boys” of the 1950s (179). Both sociologist Frank Mort’s *Cultures of Consumption* and Tim Edwards’s *Men in the Mirror* are groundbreaking studies of the effects of consumer culture on modern (English) masculinity, men’s consumption, and commercial representations of the male body, but their insights are confined to the 1980s and ’90s.⁸

In this book I trace the Victorian origins of many of the current trends in consumer culture and masculinity and examine the early era of the masculinization of commodities and the commodification of masculinities. In doing so, I elucidate the vital connection between cultural constructions of gender and commercial goods in an effort to retrieve and reevaluate the long-overlooked changes in male sartorial and consumer habits in late-nineteenth-century Britain—to examine, in Edwards’s words, “the reconstruction of masculinity through looking, through sexuality, and through consumption” during the nineteenth-century beginnings of modern consumer culture (53). I have chosen to concentrate on a roughly fifty-year period beginning in 1860 and ending with the advent of the First World War in 1914,⁹ an era many historians identify as “crucial to the development of a modern consumer society” (Breward, *Hidden*, 20). While there is no precise date that we can point to as the start of modern Western consumer culture, historians argue that many of the elements of a commercial capitalism and

a sophisticated consumer society—including social emulation of the wealthy by the lower and middle classes, the development of a market for fashionable rather than utilitarian goods, and a growing availability of store-bought (rather than homemade) goods—were in place by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ However, much of the machinery vital to the ascent of a modernized, mechanized capitalist culture of consumption—the large-scale urban department store, sophisticated advertising and marketing strategies, the mass production of affordable ready-made items—was not possible until the technological and commercial advances of the machine age and did not truly take off until the second half of the nineteenth century. These included developments in building materials such as iron, steel, plate glass, and reinforced concrete (which made possible the soaring, cathedral-like show palaces of the urban department stores) as well as the introduction of mail order (first introduced in department stores in the 1870s), the telephone (1876), electric lighting (1878), elevators and escalators (1898), three-dimensional mannequins (1890s), and illustrated advertisements that in various ways made goods more visible, more accessible, and more desirable (Pasdermadjian, 25–26; Ferry, 213; Lancaster, 51). By 1860 most of Britain's most influential department stores had been established (though many would not achieve the stature of full-fledged grand stores until the 1870s, '80s, and '90s)¹¹ and had begun to transform urban commercial geographies and to attract the attention of male consumers. The First World War serves as an obvious conclusion for this study not only because it arguably marks the “true” beginning of the twentieth century but also, and more importantly, because the decades immediately following the war have already been well documented by historians who incorrectly identify the interwar years as the first significant emergence of men's fashionable consumption, owing to the emergence of men's fashion magazines, men's stores, and the explosive popularity of the cinema.

The focus of this study is limited primarily to the examination of late-Victorian men's consumption of clothing and grooming items. To be sure, other forms of consumption enjoyed by men (particularly those related to leisure, such as theatergoing, sporting events, and activities centered on alcohol and tobacco) also increased between 1860 and 1914,¹² but because of limits of space and time, I have elected to confine this discussion to the consumption of commodifiable goods, such as clothing, regularly and familiarly purchased in shops and stores. Dress is the most publicly visible, most portable, and arguably most personal manifestation of one's relationship with consumer culture; clothing is the good

with which we are most physically intimate and which is most directly related to our self-expression. Carlyle believed that clothes were “unspeakably significant” because they were “emblematic” of our true selves (51). Likewise, I regard fashion neither as a superficial and frivolous concern nor as high art and haute couture, but rather as a sociocultural phenomenon that reflects the values of a specific time and place. “Clothes are social phenomena,” declares Anne Hollander in *Sex and Suits* (1994); “Changes in dress *are* social changes” (4). Examining seemingly superficial alterations in men’s appearance and purchasing habits allows us to identify much larger and significant transformations in social constructions of Victorian masculinity wrought by the development of a massive and sophisticated consumer culture machine—a force so powerful that it succeeded in luring men to take up formerly “effeminate” and “deviant” dress and consumer behaviors and to reassert them as appropriate and even attractive masculinity. Ultimately, zealous adherence to a long-held ideology regarding normative masculine behavior and dress was overturned by the even greater forces of capitalism. Thus, the serious study of men’s relation to fashion and clothing must be undertaken as a “microcosm of the macrocosm of men, masculinity and society” (Edwards, 3–4).

Further, because goods have cultural meaning, fashion—both as clothing and as a commodity—can be regarded as one of the fundamental signifiers in a complicated gender and cultural sign system.¹³ Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood argue that goods “are the visible part of culture”; they are “a means of making visible and stable the basic categories by which we classify people in society” (66). Goods serve as conveyors of social identity, and clothing acts as a symbolic visual code by which individuals communicate to others their membership in a particular social group. Therefore, fashion is the most integral component of both class and gender performance. If, as Judith Butler asserts, “gender is always a doing,” then it is done most visibly through our dress (25). What we have only begun to acknowledge is that masculinity is as much a performance, a spectacle, a deliberate self-fashioning as femininity is, and even normative masculinity requires the maintenance of a constant, uninterrupted performance to a real or imagined audience (Adams, 11).

The Cut of His Coat actively embraces a multidisciplinary historical-cultural studies reading of Victorian nonfiction popular and professional texts in tandem with canonical literary works. That men’s fashionable consumption was not widely discussed, was even hidden, is both the major premise and the major challenge of this work. Because *The Cut of His Coat* is looking at an “absent presence,” substan-

tial primary evidence from the nineteenth century is often difficult to find. Obviously, market research and demographic studies were unheard of in the Victorian age. Statistical information regarding the number of male customers who patronized department stores, what they bought, and how frequently they bought it would be invaluable to any thorough reconstruction of men's purchasing habits during the Victorian era, but such data either no longer exist or, in most cases, were simply never recorded in the first place.¹⁴ As a literary scholar, I naturally turn first to the novels of the period. The nineteenth century, declares John Harvey, was "the great century of the novel—of the novel as the record of social life. The novel recorded unceasingly manners and appearances, and endlessly 'read' the meaning of manners" (133). Fictional representations can reflect the social realities of a particular time; in *The Cut of His Coat*, therefore, I examine depictions of men's consumer and sartorial habits in traditional literary texts by George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, George Grossmith, Thomas Hughes, Wilkie Collins, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells. However, this investigation centers in large part on nineteenth-century discussions, descriptions, and prescriptions of men's consumption, fashion, grooming habits, and public appearance found in popular conduct literature, journals of the tailoring trade, advertising, cartoons, and fashion plates of the period 1860–1914. These visual and textual materials—what Breward calls the "ephemera, the visual and aural 'urban noise'" of the age—provide invaluable insight into the influences that affected the sartorial and consumer choices of the late-nineteenth-century middle-class Englishman (*Hidden*, 154).

While the main emphasis of this book is social constructions of gender, such constructions blur in inseparable ways with issues of class. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that "gender and class always operate together" (13). The construction of sexual difference always affects class formation. Since *The Cut of His Coat* looks at men's costume and consumption as markers of both class and gender performance, I follow contemporary gender theorist Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender, as well as the approach of social historians Davidoff and Hall (and others), who assert that gender identity is central to the formation of class consciousness and that sexual difference always influences class belonging. I do this in part to challenge the popular notion that as the social function of dress shifted from distinguishing the classes in the eighteenth century to distinguishing the sexes in the nineteenth (a change discussed in chapter 1), men rapidly distanced themselves from the fashionable display now exclusively associated with females and retreated into social and sartorial conservatism

(Steele, 53). For years scholars have been at work dismantling the long-held myth of a buttoned-up and sexually repressed Victorian age, and certainly this myth has been served by the image of the conservatively dressed middle-class Victorian man. This study offers a revised portrait of a middle-class manhood that was not nearly so conservative, reserved, obsessed with rules, and preoccupied with appearing upper class as it has been painted previously. The shift to a gender-based sartorial matrix meant that men's costume became increasingly important in defining and reflecting their masculine identity. Recent scholarship has eschewed outmoded approaches that regard men as the *unmarked* sex, acknowledging men as gendered subjects. Careful men's histories closely examine the social construction of masculinity and the socioeconomic forces that keep idealized notions of manhood in constant flux. Dress serves, in Jo Barraclough Paoletti's words, as "an artificial secondary sex characteristic," revealing how a given culture or time imagines femininity and masculinity (123–24).

I therefore align this project with recent theorists who have offered more nuanced and complex takes on masculinity. In the past ten to fifteen years, a number of historians and critics have begun challenging reductive Victorian class and gender notions such as "separate spheres" ideology as accurate descriptions of behavior, presenting these notions instead as ideological wishful thinking.¹⁵ However, much of the geography of masculine experience once obscured by these outmoded approaches still remains unexplored. Social geographer Peter Jackson notes, "The experience of men *as men* has scarcely yet been addressed" (209). Christopher Breward's work in particular has reevaluated old readings of the Great Masculine Renunciation and introduced closer historical examinations of working- and middle-class men's engagement with consumer culture in the nineteenth century. My scholarship is also informed by modern gender theorists including John Tosh, Anthony Rotundo, Michael Kimmel, and Susan Bordo, whose work has offered more balanced reevaluations of formerly reductive, monolithic understandings of masculinity, patriarchy, and separate sexual spheres ideology. These critical approaches stress the recognition of multiple masculinities and push for "a different set of languages to speak about masculinity—languages which grasp masculinity as process rather than as static and unchanging" (Mort, "Boy's," 196).

Rather than overturning everything historians and critics have contended before, *The Cut of His Coat* is intended to redraw the markers of middle-classness and masculinity for mainstream male bourgeoisie in the late Victorian era. Social historians and cultural critics must attend closely to exactly how women and men are

characterized by given commentators at given times, and to what purpose. The book serves as an examination of the sartorial codes outlined by popular literature, conduct books, and fashion periodicals and the ideological function they perform. Determining what men “really” wore during this period is perhaps an impossible task. Instead, the primary goal is to uncover and explore what was invested in the various and often competing discursive codes regarding male clothing and consumption. This study is thus a sketch of what kinds of dress, consumption, and class performance were privileged as “proper” and what were pathologized as “deviant.” It aims to complicate, problematize, and thereby enhance our understanding of Victorian masculinity through a closer examination of the complex and sometimes contradictory trends in men’s fashion at turn of the century. Although the department store’s ready-made items enabled many middle-class men to ape the affectations and clothing of the rich (to a certain extent), many rejected aristocratic tastes to create their own class “uniform.” It is true that the dark business suit (with jacket, trousers, and vest all made of the same fabric) was universally adopted, but at the same time, men’s fashion options and accessories became more elaborate and expressive. While Englishmen may have had more “freedom” of self-display, this freedom faced new forms of containment.

The Cut of His Coat is divided into five chapters that explore the middle-class male’s relationship to dress and consumption in late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century Britain. Chapter 1 reviews how and why men’s consumption and sartorial habits were “hidden” in Victorian culture. Men’s interest in fashion and consumption did not decline during the Victorian age, despite popular notions of a “Great Masculine Renunciation” that presumed a nonexistent male consumer and a “separate spheres” ideology that assigned women the task of shopping and served to obscure men’s consumption and fashion. Men continued to purchase goods and care about their appearance, but their relationship with fashion was often complicated by increasingly byzantine social and sartorial rules, and they often enacted their own consumer desires through female or servant surrogates. Chapter 2 reveals how the new apparatuses of the emerging commodity culture courted male buyers and whetted their interest in fashionable consumption. Through an examination of advertising and department store architecture, this study shows how male shopping grew more socially acceptable and the male body became a decorated and eroticized medium of the public display of masculinity. Chapter 3 examines *Fashion*, a London monthly that appeared between 1898 and 1905, which I believe to be the first fashion journal for a general male audience,

antedating other men's fashion and lifestyle magazines by at least twenty years. Through a close analysis of the magazine's layout, features, and rhetoric, this chapter explores how *Fashion* legitimated men's interest in costume and self-display, not by aggressively asserting that such behaviors were masculine, but rather by insisting that men had as much right and responsibility as women to care for their appearance. Chapter 4 turns to issues of class to examine how the negative characteristics of the Regency-era "dandy"—his love of clothing and narcissistic self-display—were ultimately absorbed through the expanding consumer practices of normative mainstream middle-class males. At the same time, the "masher" emerged as a satirical figure of working- and middle-class masculinity, a flashily dressed poseur who unsuccessfully emulated the fashions and lifestyle of upper-class gentlemen. The final chapter continues to focus on intersections of late-Victorian class and gender identities to reveal that many of the new fashions adopted by the middle-class male were not rooted in social emulation of the elite at all. While the upper classes developed increasingly complex fashion rules and occasion-specific clothing to distinguish themselves from the rising bourgeoisie, the middle classes sought not (solely) to emulate the elite, but rather to develop (also) their own class-distinctive style and uniform through the business suit, which emerged as *the* popular image of the British male.

The Cut of His Coat deals exclusively with British masculinity and fashionable consumption between 1860 and 1914. However, the book's discoveries provide a striking parallel to the dramatic rise in the sexualization and commercialization of masculinity and men's bodies that began in the final decades of the twentieth century on both sides of the Atlantic and has only recently been recognized by scholars. Since World War II, unprecedented economic prosperity and relative peace in the West, alongside a gradual relaxation of the sexual division of labor, have enabled men's active engagement with commodities to grow rapidly (Bocock, 96). Mort argues that beginning slowly in the 1950s, men's interest in individual expression and narcissistic self-display through body posture, hairstyle, clothing, and other consumer goods has increased. By the 1980s, advertisers and marketers had begun to respond to this change, promoting a sexualization of the male body through men's fashion lines, boutiques, and print and television ads. The modern young man has come to exist in a highly visual culture of glances, poses, and immediate impressions—a culture celebrated by the flood of successful men's lifestyle magazines that emerged in the 1990s. And the aggressively macho lifestyle idealized by these publications—one of "sex, sports, beer, gad-

gets, and fitness,” to quote the advertising slogan of one such magazine—is underwritten to a great extent by the expanding market of high-fashion menswear and men’s grooming products, including aftershaves and colognes, hair gels and hair coloring, body lotions and foundation creams (Sharkey, 177).

Admittedly, the scale of male consumption between 1860 and 1914 cannot compare to the massive consumer machinery that has emerged since World War II. Moreover, the number of men affected by and participating in the changes I am discussing—that is, single, middle-class males between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four residing in London (roughly fifty thousand in 1901)¹⁶—represents a decidedly small minority of the 32.5 million living in England and Wales at that time (Cook, 111). This book deals with the small beginnings of consumer behaviors and sexual display, which did not explode into full bloom until much later. What I describe is the production of an environment and a shift in cultural attitudes that would make male fashionable consumption more attractive, normative, socially acceptable. There is little that is genuinely new about the current recognition and marketing of masculine narcissism—epitomized by the media celebrity of the “metrosexual”—at the turn of the twenty-first century. To be sure, the tools of today’s manufacture, advertising, and display are far more sophisticated, efficient, and effective, but they were already in place by the concluding decades of the nineteenth century. Writing of male Londoners in the 1980s and ’90s, Mort declares, “Young men are being sold images which rupture traditional icons of masculinity. They are stimulated to look at themselves—and other men—as objects of consumer desire. They are getting pleasures previously branded taboo and feminine. A new bricollage of masculinity is the noise coming from the fashion house, the marketplace and the street,” but the same could be said about male Londoners in the 1880s and ’90s as well (“Boys,” 194).

In our own time, when social theorists and cultural critics increasingly turn their focus on the potential dangers and consequences of our highly commercial, media-saturated, image-conscious, beauty-obsessed mall culture, it is especially useful to look back at the origins of consumer culture and the ways it shaped the social, sexual, and class identities of the Victorians. The dramatic shifts of Victorian constructions of masculinity wrought by the emergence of commodity culture that this study traces are not dissimilar to the trends that Frank Mort, Sean Nixon, and Tim Edwards identify as taking place in the London of the 1980s and ’90s. Further, the recent “discovery” and commodification of the male body within popular culture (as explored by Susan Bordo and again Nixon) and

the sudden proliferation of men's plastic surgery, "body-sculpting" underwear, hair products, cosmetics, and men's vitamins points to heightened recognition of men as consumers and objects of consumption by the fashion and beauty industries and the rapid acceleration of gender, social, and economic phenomena begun over a century earlier. The changes begun in the late nineteenth century in men's sartorial display, in consumer habits, and in men's construction of their identity as males attributable to the emergence of mass production and consumer culture served to shape the socioeconomic phenomena that drove twentieth-century—and continue to drive twenty-first-century—understandings of class, gender, and consumption. They therefore invite, even demand, a careful second look.