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## Hairy history

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Hairy history

**Of beards and men: the revealing history of facial hair**, by Christopher Oldstone-Moore, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2015, 338 pp., \$30 (hardcover), \$18 (e-book), ISBN 9780226284002

To shave or not to shave: that is the question that Christopher Oldstone-Moore analyzes in his monograph *Of beards and men: The revealing history of facial hair*. Oldstone-Moore illuminates the historical and cultural contingencies associated with men's facial hair, through a dizzying array of primary sources including: newspaper clippings, scientific treatises, theological texts, illuminations, engravings, sculptures, pottery paintings, mosaics, portraits, fine art, cartoons, advertisements, plays, novels, and poems. Throughout this textured investigation, Oldstone-Moore demonstrates that facial hair trends reflect the prevailing gender ideology in that place and time, and that these gender ideologies do indeed shift.

Oldstone-Moore begins his endeavor by rejecting previous efforts to theorize the meaning of men's facial hair, since the meanings change depending upon the historical era and cultural context. In his quest to convince the reader that such a singular 'hairology' would be impossible, Oldstone-Moore invites the reader to follow 'the twists and turns of the unfolding story of beards, shaving, and manliness' (p. 18). This journey begins in antiquity, with the artificial beards of Egyptian pharaohs and the ceremonial beards in the Ancient Near East; in these contexts, facial hair functioned as a marker of class and tribal difference without explicitly gendered meanings. Similarly, in Ancient Greece the hairlessness ideal emerged as a gender-neutral indicator of youth.

In fact, Greece valued youthfulness so much that even the gods were imagined as young and hairless. Within this context, Alexander the Great's clean-shaven visage sent a powerful message about his divine appointment; Emperor Hadrian's full beard conveyed that he earned his authority, and did not passively receive it from the gods. As Oldstone-Moore summarizes, 'The fall, rise, then fall again of beards in classical civilization reflected a cultural struggle over the true source of masculine virtue: was it natural reason or divine genius?' (p. 61). Within this same ideological context, the iconography of Christ accrues additional meaning: Jesus's youthful hairlessness on earth signified his divinity while his beard in heaven signified his humanity. In emulation of this earthly Jesus, early Christians remained beardless; by the late Middle Ages, this clean-shaven look had become mainstream.

Beards did not return to popularity until the Renaissance when the hairy look gained favor among 'the rock stars of Italian art and letters' (p. 108). Within this context, beards signified a man's desire to live his life to the fullest, an inclination that proved deeply threatening to the ascetic social order in nineteenth century Europe and America. Originally modeled by the artistic elite, this bearded look eventually spread to Kings, clergy, and eventually the European masses. This positive symbolic association between facial hair and autonomy persisted throughout the twentieth century, signifying a new masculinity; in contrast, clean-shaven contemporaries such as Lawrence of Arabia asserted a traditional masculinity that was relatively 'sociable.'

The symbolic significance of the autonomous bearded man was highly contextual throughout the twentieth century. Some used facial hair to signify a return to nature, such as Walt Whitman; others to imply a roguish character, such as Clark Gable; and others used it to

set themselves apart from the masses for nefarious reasons, such as Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler: 'Both knew that an extraordinary and forceful face was essential for a man who ruled through adulation and fear' (p. 226). However, the pendulum continued to swing: from the clean-shaven conformists of the 1950s to the shaggy hippies of the 1960s/1970s, and back again towards the clean-shaven businessmen of the 1980s.

Since the 1980s hairlessness has remained hegemonic in the United States; in fact, American employers can legally enforce clean-shavenness among their male employees through official 'grooming policies.' Within this neoliberal context, the employer's right to present a particular company image takes precedent over the employee's right to facial hair. However, despite this regulation and a few outlandish exceptions, facial hair no longer signifies the threatening and autonomous masculinity that it once did. In fact, Oldstone-Moore argues that contemporary urban men (dubbed 'metrosexuals') have 'redefined the beard as a sign of a sensitive sophisticate rather than a stolid patriarch, bending normative masculinity into territory previously delimited as feminine' (p. 268). These urban men enter feminized terrain by conspicuously cultivating a particular 'look,' though the same practice used to be a hallmark of masculinity. The meaning of men's facial hair depends on the cultural context and the historical era.

*Of beards and men* is a thoroughly enjoyable read and accomplishes what it set out to do: problematize the notion that men's facial hair can ever have just one meaning. Oldstone-Moore demonstrates that facial hair's meaning is as diverse and contextual as masculinity itself. Unfortunately, this history is limited in scope due to its selective focus on white wealthy case studies; this oversight seriously problematizes the history's generalizability. Future efforts to document the meanings of men's facial hair must address whether trends vary within the same historical period based on basic differences such as race, socio-economic status, or regionality.

That being said, *Of beards and men* is a valuable addition to the regrettably small academic corpus on the social significance of hair. Read in tandem with Rebecca Herzig's (2014) monograph on women's hair removal *Plucked*, these two monographs would provide a comprehensive history of how shifting gender ideologies have affected white men and women's hair trends within the Western world. Additionally, *Of beards and men* contributes to gender studies more broadly by providing a concrete example of the social construction of gender; the same facial hair that signified rugged masculinity in one era can become feminized in another. This book is a worthy read for gender scholars across the sub-disciplines, whether they focus on the body, masculinity, or symbolic interactionism more generally.

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**The man problem: destructive masculinity in Western culture**, by Ross Honeywill, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 217 pp., £60.00 (hbk); £47.99 (e-book), ISBN: 9781137551689.

Scholarly interests in men and masculinities have mushroomed in the last two decades in fields as diverse as technology, psychology, conversation analysis, politics, and art. Some