

# Dandy

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THE dandy has been a central figure in constructions of masculinity and social class since the early nineteenth century. The figure is associated above all with a fastidious attention to dress, which seems designed both to solicit attention and to affront an imagined vulgarity. The dandy has forerunners in earlier figures of sartorial extravagance—the fop of Restoration drama, the “macaroni” of the late eighteenth century—but the dandy emerges as a distinct type during the Regency, above all in the figure of George “Beau” Brummell. Brummell stands apart from earlier figures in associating male fashion with a form of paradoxically austere discipline, coupled with a cool social detachment that shades into disdain for those who fail to emulate his rigorous elegance. In Baudelaire’s account, the dandy incarnates a discipline “strict as any monastic rule.”<sup>1</sup> Brummell’s career also initiates an ongoing debate about the very concept of dandyism. On one hand, Brummell’s fabled detachment stimulated the construction of the dandy as an intellectual ideal, a standing critique of bourgeois society and thought. This is especially prominent in French appropriations of dandyism, from Barbey d’Aurevilly (*On Dandyism and Beau Brummell*) and Baudelaire (“The Painter of Modern Life”) through Camus (*The Rebel*). More recently, however, historians of fashion, taking up Brummell’s attention to nuances of dress, have stressed the sustained influence of dandyism as a material practice, which is thoroughly enmeshed in the social orders it might seem to resist, notably the rise of commodity culture.

The figure of the dandy looms large throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, in part because the dandy so obviously unsettles traditional notions of masculinity. The dandy cultivates what seems a fundamentally ornamental existence, devoting his energies not to action but to outward appearance. He thus occupies a conventionally feminine posture, which in turn encourages a frequent association of the dandy with unorthodox sexuality. This association culminates in the late-century

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efflorescence of so-called “decadent” dandyism, above all in the figure of Oscar Wilde. Like Brummell, Wilde was often the butt of comedy and satire, but those responses were called out by a dandyism that seemed more dangerous than the Regency variety because more obviously associated with a newly visible homosexuality. Ongoing controversy about the place of Wilde in subsequent constructions of homosexual identity is in this light largely a debate about the persistence of dandyism.

Reception of the dandy, from Brummell through Wilde, also foregrounded perplexities surrounding social class. Was the figure a rear-guard defense of a waning aristocratic order, a barbed parody of that milieu, a substantive attack on bourgeois society, or merely a parvenu’s fantasy? These questions first played out in responses to so-called “silver-fork” fiction, which was the earliest literary vehicle of dandyism. Although the genre enjoyed a relatively brief vogue, from the late 1820s until the early 1840s, it incited a fierce middle-class backlash that had a surprising impact in crystallizing what came to seem a distinctly Victorian ethos.

The very name “silver-fork” derives from William Hazlitt’s slashing 1827 account of what he called the “dandy school,” in which he mocked a novel by Theodore Hook that seemed oblivious to all of social life save the spectacle of elite luxury, as if Hook were mesmerized by discovering that “the quality eat their fish with a silver fork.”<sup>2</sup> In the early 1830s, the newly founded *Fraser’s Magazine*, responding most immediately to Thomas Moore’s *Life of Byron* (1830), launched a sustained attack on what it took to be aristocratic contempt for middle-class life and values, which quickly expanded to take in the dandy and fashionable novels. The most enduring impact came with Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), where “The Dandiacal Body” takes aim at Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham* (1828) as a foil to Carlyle’s celebration of duty, labor, and moral earnestness. Largely as a result, *Pelham* became the most prominent specimen of the dandy novel.

By midcentury, the dandy had become central to middle-class reconfigurations of the gentleman, in two broad respects. Most obviously, the dandy vividly embodies the indolence and moral enervation that were widely associated with aristocratic hegemony, whose persistent social authority mid-Victorian writers, developing Carlyle’s early attack, sought to undermine. One glimpses this polemical edge in, for example, Thackeray’s Regency novel, *Vanity Fair* (1846–48), particularly in the pendant of Dobbin and George Osborne. Far more influential, however, was the example of Dickens, whose novels are less equivocal in their

celebration of manly earnestness and their corresponding denigration of the dandy. *Bleak House* (1853) savagely mocks the Regency dandy in the figure of old Turveydrop, and more provocatively sums up the world of the Dedlocks as “Dandyism of a more mischievous sort,” which seeks “to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities.”<sup>3</sup> More subtly, the threat of dandyism is variously incarnated in all of Dickens’s later images of idle, parasitic young men of privilege adrift in a world of earnest striving, what Ellen Moers calls his “grey men”: from Steerforth in *David Copperfield* (1850) through Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).<sup>4</sup>

The sheer proliferation of those same characters, however, also hints at the difficulty of casting out the persistent allure of the dandy, which is registered in what George Orwell called the “dream of complete idleness” that pervades Dickens’s fiction. More subtly, and more fundamentally, those figures point to a second threat incarnated in the dandy’s persistence, which is that of theatricality. Victorian constructions of the gentleman, hearkening back to the Carlylean hero, strenuously associate personal integrity with a resistance to self-consciousness, which threatened to dissipate an ideal of integral selfhood in responsiveness to an imagined gaze. But the ideal is self-baffling, particularly in light of the anxieties besetting the manifold ambitions of social mobility and self-fashioning, which invariably solicit forms of social regard. Hence, as Camus would put it, echoing Carlyle’s satire, the dandy “can only be sure of his own existence by finding it in the expression of others’ faces.”<sup>5</sup> The dandy in this light haunts constructions of the gentleman as a more radical questioning of the very possibility of stable, coherent personal identity. The figure gestures toward an understanding of selfhood as an ongoing performance, which has been variously developed by Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, among others, as well as the more foundational interrogations of identity posed by varieties of psychoanalysis.

These dynamics remain largely implicit in representations of the dandy before the end of the century. But they are energized by the rise of aestheticism, with its celebration of a refined spectatorship, and they become a flashpoint in the audacity of Wilde, who so insistently presents the artist-critic as a spectacle that rivals, and at times displaces, the conventional artwork. That view of the artist as spectacle has further resonated throughout the burgeoning of modern celebrity culture and consumerism, forces that have made the dandy an enduring icon today, even for those who have never heard of Beau Brummell.

NOTES

1. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1862), in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated by Jonathan Mayne (New York: DaCapo, 1985), 38.
2. William Hazlitt, "The Dandy School," *Examiner*, November 18, 1827, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1934), 20:146.
3. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1851–52; London: Penguin, 1996), 189.
4. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 232.
5. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1956), 51.

