

A New Look at an Old Fallacy

*His name is a synonym for sartorial splendor Splendor
he had, but not in loud adornment, not in gaudy tones
The real Beau was a clothes-horse of another color*

ACT ONE: Youth, High Life, Success.

Here's a young buck named George Bryan Brummell, comes up to London after Eton and Oxford with the notion of breaking into high society. By the time he's twenty, against odds no gambler would take, he's the roaring lion of London. Duchesses grovel for his favors, for a kind word. The Prince Regent hurries to his rooms to watch him dress. He can make a man's social reputation by walking arm in arm with him down St. James. Lord Byron says the three most important men of the century are (in this order) Brummell, Napoleon, Lord Byron.

ACT TWO: Degeneration.

The incredible fellow gambles away an inheritance of £30,000, which would be half a million dollars by modern reckoning. He borrows. He gambles. He borrows. When he is 38, at the peak of his fame, he leaves England because he can't pay his debts. He flies to France. For 24 years he drifts, from small town to smaller town, from small hotel to smaller.

ACT THREE:

His mind sinks with him. He sits alone in dark little rooms, giving imaginary dinner parties for royalty. At 62 he dies, insolvent, insane, in a French convent.

It is not so much a life as a too-well-made melodrama.

Now in the first act his friends gave him the name "Beau." They meant it as a tribute—as a literal translation from the French, wherein *Beau* means fine, means handsome. But "Beau" is a word whose

connotation changed overnight. The Regency moved out, the Victorians moved in. A Beau was suddenly a fop, and a fop is a fool. That is the way the Victorians regarded Byron's demi-God. A fop, a fool. It is the portrait the Victorians handed on to us.

Brummell would not have minded being called a fool. He was too intelligent to take umbrage at *that*. He always enjoyed being the cynosure of all eyes. What the Beau would have minded, and that terribly, was the word *fop*. A fop he was not. He was the sworn enemy of foppery. It is time to realize, after a hundred years of character assassination, that Brummell was probably the quietest, the simplest, the solemnest clothes-horse of his day and age.

The testimony of the eye-witnesses first.

Here's the word of the Reverend G. Crabbe, who knew him well:

"... (Brummell) certainly did not, either in manners or appearance, exhibit that compound of coxcombry in dress, and vulgar assiduity of address, which marks the 'Beau' (that is the dandy); I remember being struck with the misapplication of this title when I saw him one day at the Belvoir Hunt. He was dressed as plain as any man in the field, and the manly, even dignified, expression of his countenance ill accorded with the implication the sobriquet conveyed."

Or turn for the moment to the fount of most of our wisdom about Brummell, that Captain Jesse who wrote the first definitive life of Brummell:

"His chief aim was to avoid anything marked; one of his aphorisms being that the severest mortification a gentleman could incur, was to attract observation in the street by his outward appearance. He exercised the most correct taste in the selection of each article of apparel, of a form and color harmonious with all the rest, for the purpose of producing a perfectly elegant general effect; and he spent more time and pains in the attainment of this object."

The word to mark here is "harmonious." For Brummell the key color in a gentleman's dress was

black, and the best harmonies for black were, he always insisted, the quiet colors. It is significant to note that in a day when a gentleman's facade was gorgeously embellished, his vest a garden of embroideries, fobs and laces, Brummell never wore anything more *outré* than a plain vest of buff color.

Now let's move on to more recent critics of Brummell. Here is Max Beerbohm on the subject of Brummell's appearance:

"... as in all known images of the Beau, we are struck by the utter simplicity of his attire... in certain congruities of dark cloth, in the rigid perfection of his linen, in the symmetry of his glove with his hand, lay the secret of Mr. Brummell's miracles. He was ever most economical, most scrupulous of means. Treatment was everything with him."

T. H. White, the English novelist and essayist, agrees, to the hilt: "He aimed," says White, "at the most difficult effect... simplicity. His boots were said to be polished with champagne, but they were restrained in pattern. The beauty of the cloth lay in the cut."

He dressed simply, without ornamentation, without ostentation. What was it then that set him apart so ostentatiously from the crowd? What made him the best dressed man of the century? The answer lies not, as history has decided, in his clothes. It lay entirely in the way he wore them.

He was of medium height, but proportioned like one of those quasi-Greeks his contemporaries so dearly loved to draw on their cups and saucers. Imagine him, at his tailor's, insisting on fittings worthy of that figure! "The beauty of the cloth lay in the cut," but until he attained the cut he must have sent battalions of tailors screaming into Bedlam. Merely putting on his hat was a ceremony; once it was on it stayed on. He, whose manners were as fastidious as his fashions, would not tip the hat to the

ladies for fear of ruining its angle. "He spent much time and pains," says Jesse. That is an overwhelming understatement. Brummell never took less than three hours at his dressing, and he often dressed three times a day.

Fastidiousness. Harmoniousness. "Much time and pains."

And cleanliness. To Brummell that element came somewhere above Godliness in the scale. "No perfumes," was his advice to a disciple, "but very fine linen, plenty of it, and country washing." His concept of country washing was to spend two hours every morning in his tub scrubbing himself with a hair glove. To him the skin was the first layer of clothing. Over the impeccably scrubbed neck came his cravat. He would stretch out flat, pushing his chin back as far as possible. His valet would wind the freshly starched collar around the neck. Brummell would bring his chin down, slowly, agonizingly, coaxing the cravat into perfect folds. It did not always work on the first try. His valet stood on the stair one day holding an armful of limp cravats. "These," he moaned to Brummell's guests, "are our failures."

If all this sounds foolish, sounds (perish the word!) foppish, it is only because we fail to understand one vital fact about the man. Beerbohm recognized it, and cried it good and loud in "Dandies and Dandyism," which is the great defense of Brummell.

He was, said the cautious, incomparable Max, "an artist . . . in the utmost sense of the word . . . no poet nor cook nor sculptor ever bore that title more worthily than he."

John Barrymore was the first to portray Brummell in the movies. He was the perfect choice, for his was also that blend of arrogance and wit, churlishness and charm so characteristic of Brummell. Beau would have approved of these skin-tight britches, the nice fall of the cape, the angle of the hat. But he would have sniffed at Barrymore's cravat. Sloppy, the Beau would have said. Very sloppy



OldMagazineArticles