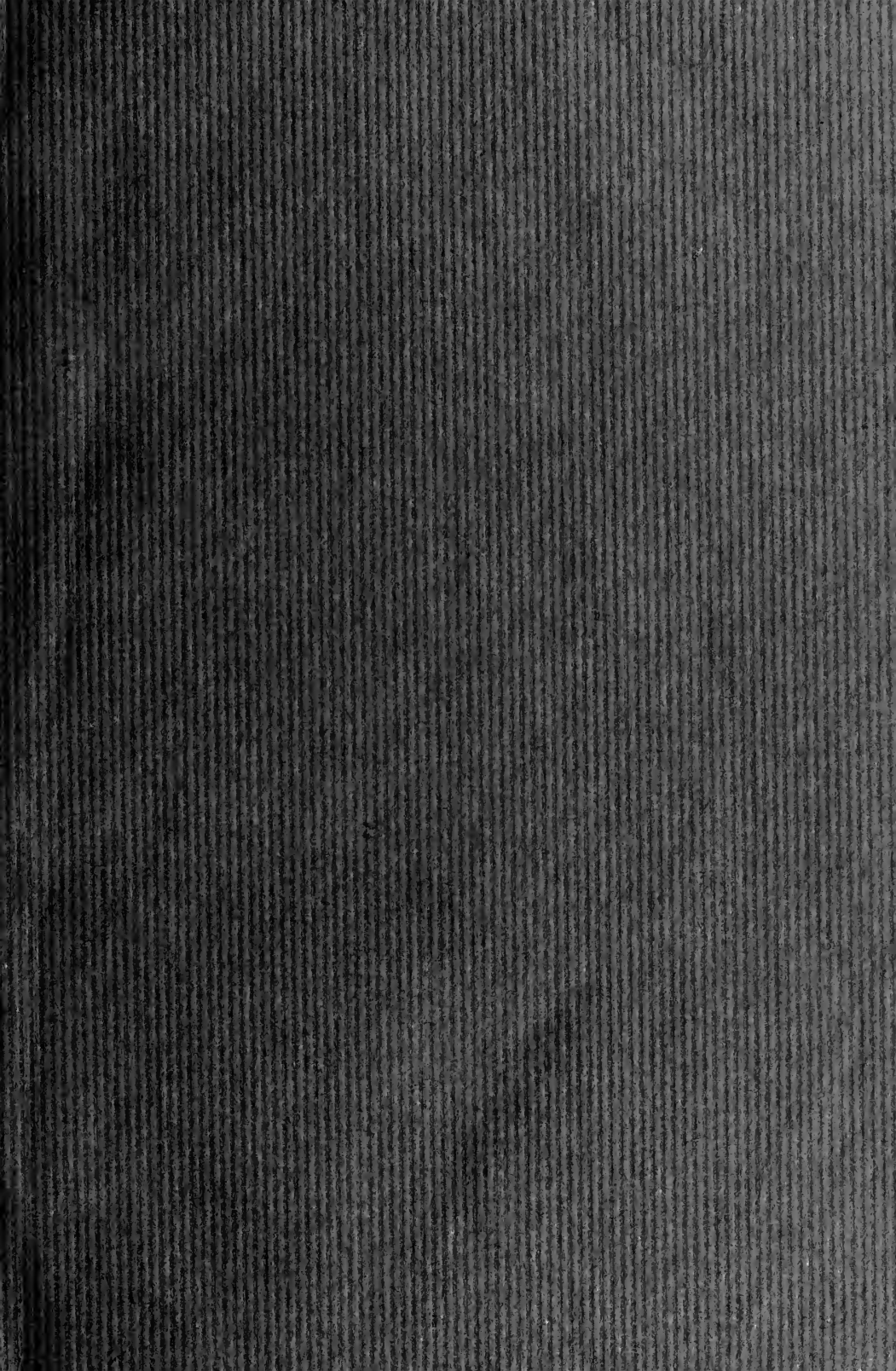


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LECTURE ON FASHION:

DELIVERED BEFORE THE NEW YORK LYCEUM,

BY N. P. WILLIS.

I HAD thought—as is thought, perhaps, by many who are now before me—that the subject of fashion was one susceptible only of very light handling—to be treated with humor, anecdote, satire, and possibly some moralizing upon its whims and follies. I commenced the preparation of my lecture with scarce more design than this.

It was suggested, very sensibly, I thought, by one of the gentlemen who waited on me with the invitation to lecture, that the subjects were usually too dry;—that it would be worth while to start a new range of popular addresses—if not upon trifling topics, at least upon such, as, conveying information, would still bear embroidering with trifles.

The subject of fashion was instanced and approved. I thought I might easily entertain an audience with a history of the follies of fashion in different countries and times, and that in the hearer's keener appreciation of the absurdity of fashionable extremes, from seeing them in the ludicrous light of disuse and distance, might lie the utility of such a lecture. Those who are familiar with the literature of the sixteenth century will remember that the fashions were, at that day, the great target of pulpit eloquence—that, with a vein half humorous, though with violent denunciation, the clergy detailed the follies of fashion, and dwelt upon their sinfulness; and that more particularly in New England, in the Puritan days of Cotton Mather, this great Divine, and others,

held forth on this subject with the very extremity of wrathful fervor.

A reference to the serious books and to the sermons of that period would sufficiently show, that, had I followed out my original intention, and taken the fashions themselves for the text and burthen of my lecture, I should not have lacked for grave precedent, nor for material and inference, worth the while of both speaker and hearer. The fashions are not my theme, however. FASHION *is*—and between *fashion* and *the fashions* you will at once comprehend the distinction. Of the importance of the subject, in the light in which I view it, you will be the judges when you have heard me to the end—but I may say, by way of bespeaking your favorable attention, that I am inclined to believe few topics—short of religion and constitutional law—to be, at this period of our country's history, of greater importance to us. Before entering upon this generalizing view, however, let me say a few words on the fashions, as to the degree with which they affect the standard of true taste—in this same degree, giving weight and color to fashion, in which taste and elegance are of course prominent features.

The origin of fashion would probably start even with the history of taste. The first hour of a community's existence—if created full grown, like the family of Deucalion and Pyrrha—would betray differences in the demeanor of men; and the most graceful and showy would probably be “the

fashion," by acclamation. Taste is instinctive, and homage is paid irresistibly, by all human beings, to supremacy in elegance. The rise and progress of fashion up to its present condition, however, is not uniformly a history of taste. What are more contradictory than the caprices of fashion? There are certain standards of beauty, decided upon by the common instinct—standards which artists irresistibly follow, and which the eye invariably acknowledges true, and these standards are as often violated as adhered to, by the votaries of fashion. The ladies very well know, that, be their faces long or short—be their forms queenly or fairy-like,—there is but one inexorable size and shape for a fashionable bonnet; and, of course, if one style of beauty is favored, all others are unbecomingly marred. The male figure, it has been decided by centuries of progressive art, has its laws of beauty,—but in the fashions, of what age of civilized Europe have not these laws been violated.

Strange to say, and worth speculating on, if we had time for a digression, it is only in the semi-barbarous nations—in modern Greece and Turkey, and among the indolent and unthinking tribes of the Asiatics, that costume, once regulated by art, remains in unchangeable good taste—comfortable and convenient, as well as picturesque and becoming. But look at the fashions of Europe. Positively the most incredible true books with which I am acquainted are the amusing records of the fashions of the last two hundred years in England. White periwigs of enormous bulk, were, for instance, the fashion for ladies in the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is an accredited fact, that there died in London in 1756, a white-headed old woman of great age, whose hoary hair, cut off after her death, sold for fifty pounds to a ladies' perwig maker. Black patches on the faces of court beauties were the fashion in the same age, and hoops and high heels—utter destruction to grace of form and movement—were worn by all ladies with any pretension to quality. It is a rule of art that, in

the male figure, the shoulders should be broad, for beauty, and the hips narrow, and it has been said in support of this standard that it is an aristocratic formation—as those whose ancestors had carried burthens would naturally have large hips, while those whose forefathers had been of warlike habits and taken exercise principally in the saddle, would be more developed in the chest and shoulders. In the teeth of the arts, however, and of these aristocratic objections, padded hips were the fashion in King James's time, while the collarless coat, with seams converging to the throat, narrowed the chest and shoulders and gave to the male figure the outline of the female.

Ridiculous as most fashions, when not based upon legitimate principles of art, seem at a distance, however, it is astonishing how unaware the excesses creep upon us, and how easily and unsuspectingly men of sense pass, from ridiculing a new fashion, to approving and adopting it. It would puzzle any one present, except perhaps an artist, to tell, in a moment, what are the absurdities of the present fashions. Yet absurdities there are, that will be laughed at fifty years hence, and you can easily detect them, by applying to the present modes the severe test of their utility as heighteners of natural beauty. And here let me, in passing, throw a pebble into the scale of art—hinting at the importance of keeping in view the principles of art and true elegance in adopting the changes of the fashions. If the portraits of men of mark and women of great beauty, in our age, are to be painted for posterity, let it be within the painter's power to make an artistic disposition of drapery, without painting his sitters in the unfitting costume of a classic age, floating them in clouds, or disguising them with cloaks and mantles. We have all laughed at the portraits that have descended to us from the days of periwigs and red-heeled shoes. There have been celebrated painters, who have followed the fashions of the time even in historical pictures—gravely representing the apostles and

martyrs in bag-wigs, and the Virgin Mary in hoop and farthingale. There is no knowing how far the habituation of monstrosities in common wear may corrupt the taste even of artists. I am not sure, by the way, that the national style of dress may not have something to do with the heroic in national character. There was pride of country in a Roman toga, that hardly appertains to a hat and frock coat; and Cesar's death might not have descended so dramatically to posterity, if, instead of wrapping his head majestically in his mantle, he had fallen at the base of Pompey's statue—with his overcoat pulled over him!

Leaving the fashions with thus much of notice, I come now to the subject of FASHION—a term of most elusive and changeable import, and expressive of a condition of life, which it is next to impossible to analyze or define. Fashion is a position in society—attained by different avenues in different countries—but, however arrived at, giving its possessor consequence in common report, value in private life, authority in all matters of taste, and influence in every thing. Rightly to appreciate what fashion is, or rather what it is likely to be hereafter in our own country, let us, without defining it further, look a little into what it is abroad. Let us see what fashion is in France, and what it is in England—for it is from these two countries, only, that we borrow any thing in the way of social distinctions—and by contrast with our future models, we can the more easily make out what fashion is in the great metropolis of our own country, if not as to which way it is tending.

There is wonderful activity of amusement in all the grades of society in Paris, and no one class, or grade, wastes much time in thinking about the other—differing in this respect, (I may say in passing), from England, where all classes that pretend to society at all, occupy themselves to any uncomfortable degree with gazing enviously at the highest. Of necessity, in a monarchical country, rank has its weight, and the ancient nobility of France can scarcely be said to be out of fashion, though the verbal ho-

mage and high consideration with which persons of noble family are invariably named, is merely nominal and ceremonious, and the old families, unless fashionable from intrinsic causes, are practically shelved and forgotten in the celebrated Faubourg where they reside. Wealth, too, as in all countries, has its weight, and the rich man in Paris may soar, on wings of lavish expense, to the acquaintance of fashionable people; though, like Icarus with his wings of wax, he drops like a clod when his wings are melted. The court-circle—those who are officially or amicably in habits of intercourse with the family of the king, are not necessarily, the fashion. But beyond the control of either of these three powerful grades of society,—rank, wealth and court favor—there exists in Paris a sphere of fashion; and whatever else may purchase admission to it by outlay of splendor, or come into temporary contact with it by caprice or accident, there is but one homogeneous and predominating principle in it—but one invariable “open sesame,” and that is, INTELLECT! Personal beauty goes far in France, but it must be accompanied by the tact of being agreeable, or, if it were Venus herself, the beauty would soon be ridiculed and neglected. Celebrity, of every description, is a passport to fashion. Celebrated players and singers, travellers, soldiers, artists, scholars, statesmen and diplomatists, range freely through the penetralia of Parisian fashion. Nothing is excluded that is eminent—that is distinguished, that can amuse. All manner of mental superiority is unhesitatingly acknowledged. And, intellect being the constituency of this legislature of fashion, who are its leaders. The manifest controllers of the tide of thought and of the great interests of the present hour—the living authors, the editors of newspapers, active politicians, resident diplomatists, and talented clergy—these are the influential leaders of fashionable society in Paris, and the indispensable guests at all fashionable entertainments. With all the French passion for dress and elegance, they exact nothing ornamental in the persons of their

intellectual favorites—in their admired poets, and artists. They appreciate eminence in dress and personal accomplishment, for it is a shape of talent, and the consummate dandy has commonly a passport in his tact and wit—but the lions of Paris are as often ill-dressed and awkward as the contrary, and the mere exteriors of men have little to do with making them permanently fashionable. A sphere of society so constituted is teeming with power, for, besides standing at the very fountain of respect, which is intellect, it is contributed to by all the different levels of life in that great metropolis—taking to itself the ambitious core and spirit of every class, rank and condition. Its power, too, goes farther than mere opinion. The most conspicuous members of the present government of France, were first the idols of its fashionable society—as editors of newspapers, poets and men of science. Intellect like theirs, however manifested, is the road to fashion, and, driven onward by fashionable influence and eclat, it is the easy and flowery road to every thing desirable in position and power. Without digressing to look for the causes of this in the political and moral revolutions of France, let me say simply of the present hour, that if there be in the world an indisputable *republic of intellect*, it is the fashionable society of witty and giddy Paris!

Let us glance now at fashion in England—differing from that of France in some very essential particulars. Rank, is more highly prized in England. A man who is noble-born is already three fourths fashionable—the remaining fourth depending not at all on his fortune, but wholly on his appearance and manners. A clownish young lord, or a girl who is Right Honorably plain and awkward, though presentable at court, and invited for form's sake to the sweeping entertainments which embrace the giver's entire acquaintance, can never be fashionable, and is pointedly overlooked in the invitations to parties more select, and very soon discouraged and mortified out of society. Wealth has much less influence than in France, in making its possessor fashiona-

ble. A person who is merely wealthy—not ornamental to society in his own person, is hopelessly shut out from the sphere of the exclusives. A certain competency, it is true, is necessary to fashion. A stylish man in London must spend three times as much as would serve his purpose in France, in having about him the appointments of a gentleman, including an equipage. But, beyond what is necessary for his own personal elegance, and convenience, he requires no riches to pass freely through all the favoritism of fashion. The immense number of wealthy people in England has neutralized the distinction of wealth; and money, nowhere in the world, I think, goes so little way as in that country, beyond providing for personal luxury and comfort.

Rank and wealth, then, not being inviolable passports to fashion in London, we come next to the third social estate—that of intellect. Your mind immediately passes in review the politicians, the men of science, the authors, dramatists, artists—whose names—written at the height they have attained to, are legible at the distance at which we read them—the breadth of the Atlantic! You ask—has the genius that makes these men immortal, made them the favorites of the hour they illuminate—the *fashion* in the country on which they shed lustre! When they are down from the height of inspiration in which their wings were visible to the universe, do the choicest of fair women and noble men, contend, as in France, to do them honor and give them pleasure? No! The exclusive sphere in England has no such class in its confidence, as men of genius. A man whose star has culminated—who has forced the world to hear of him by some undeniable burst of intellect—finds his way open, it is true, into the houses of the nobility, and into the more common resorts of the fashionables. He is the “lion of the season”—and what the position is, of the merely intellectual lion in the fashionable circle of England, English writers have honestly enough put down! It is a hell of invisible humiliations! Not to offend any

living author by sketching his position, suppose Keats, the apothecary's boy, to have returned from Italy, where he died; and, having outlived the sneer of the high-born critic who counselled him to "return to his gallipots," to have become a lion in London society. He had nothing in birth, or personal appearance, to give him value—nothing but incomparable genius—that which, in all theories and essays on the distinctions of life, is put down as the noblest aristocracy. He would have been invited every where! He would have dined and supped and danced, if he liked, in every nobleman's house in London, and would have been, for a season or two, constantly in the presence of the exclusives, male and female. But the entrance to the nobleman's house, and the nobleman's condescension at dinner, and the attentive listening of the entire company to his eloquent conversation, would never have broken down the wall of glass between him and the ladies of his host's family and circle! The belles of Almack's would never have known Mr. Keats. The beauties familiar with the dandies of St. James street, would as soon have thought of feeling a tenderness for a Chinese juggler who had amused them, as for the literary lion they had listened to at dinner. There is an invariable manner of uninterested and polite suffering, cultivated for the express use of a non-conductor between the exclusives and the unprivileged who may have access to their resorts. This has been felt by every self-made celebrated man in England, and as most of them have been content with one or two seasons of such life, men of genius, unless newly risen, are seldom to be found in vogue among the exclusives.

But the sphere exists—powerful, splendid, and dazzling to all eyes,—the sphere of high fashion in England,—and what is the key to it, and for whom are its intoxicating triumphs?

In civilization, as in many other things, extremes meet. The highest possible cultivation approaches nearest to the simplicity of nature, and England, which, at this

moment, probably, is at a higher point of civilization than was ever before attained, shows, in its most accomplished circle, the nearest approach to nature. The passport to fashion in England is that which would be a passport to pre-eminence in an Indian tribe—*beauty of person combined with assurance and a natural air of superiority*. With a mien of graceful boldness, and such a face and form as would suit a sculptor, or grace a chief, the son of a country curate in England may pluck fashion from an earl. And the same with the other sex. With no pretension to parentage or position, above respectability, a girl of remarkable beauty, let it be only such beauty as would sit gracefully upon title, and bear itself proudly among the proud, is marked from her childhood for high connection. She attracts the regard of her titled neighbors, is taken up as a guest to London, and made the belle of the season, and, if an attachment spring up between her and a man of rank, the passion is fanned and favored by generous acclamation. The exclusives rejoice in an addition of beauty to their set, and the coronet is more graced from being worn even by plebeian blood, more gracefully.

I am not sure that this is not a commendable aristocracy—at least not sure that the acknowledging and adopting of nature's stamp of superiority is not the best secret for the securing of power and influence to the most elevated class. The finest race in the eastern hemisphere—the most gallant and manly in its men, and the most beautiful and high-born looking in its women—is the fashionable aristocracy of England. The requisite loftiness of bearing which accompanies the beauty admired by this class, is not attained without superiority in the natural character, and the successful fashionables of England are the best stuff, I believe—the men for action, and the women for the maternity of nature's noblemen. I am inclined to think, I repeat, that nature's mark of superiority is well and wisely acknowledged. The balance of the physical and intellectual endowments—the power

of bold action on a level with other men, and with a superiority that all men can appreciate—may be, to the eye of nature, superior to what we call genius—superior to the concentration of the whole force upon particular qualities of the brain. There are, doubtless, many men, wholly undistinguished, who yet, in the harmonious proportion of their persons and character—in their sufficiency of brain for all the exigences of action, and of spirit and dignity to carry out all the desirable purposes of the brain, are superior to *geniuses*, born for nothing but to write books of fancy, or made immortal by a disproportioned development of one faculty only. Upon such men,—upon poets and novelists, artists and musicians—nature has rarely put her legible stamp of “first quality.” It has been the complaint of genius, through all ages, that its superiority has not been acknowledged; and it seems to be an invariable instinct in human nature *not* to acknowledge it, where the writer and his personal qualities are known. May it not be natural therefore, to revolt against *disproportion in endowment*—and may not our great admiration for authors at a distance, and our diminished homage when we know them, lie in the disappointment we feel that they are not as remarkable in other respects as in power of fancy—an instinctive feeling that the excess of this quality is at the expense of others as desirable?

This is something of a digression—but before leaving the subject of English fashion, let me remark upon the prodigious influence of the fashionable class in England, and the likelihood that it works as an important weight in the balance of power in that country. It is time, I think, that like the addition in France, of the *Tiers Etat* to the political divisions of Church and State. Fashion, in England, should be named as a power, after King, Lords and Commons. It is a combination—a class—an order—formed exclusively from no other class—capable, as was shown in Brummel’s time, of giving a slight to the blood royal, and in the constant habit of putting down rank that does

not look like rank, and selecting nature’s favorites from the people. The Queen fears it—the nobility courts it—the people worship it. It makes and unmakes popular idols. It rules the stage. It puts down pretension. It is always elegant and lofty, even in its oppressions. It fosters taste. It maintains the beautiful against the costly,—and it has for its exclusive use, and with power to direct them alike against overbearing authority and vulgar wealth, the formidable weapons of contempt and ridicule. In all monarchies that ever existed before, the aristocracy have dwindled in mind and person by the exclusive intermarriage of noble blood. England is the first that has made tributary the nobility of nature, taking grafts from the strong and beautiful, wherever grew strength and beauty in the capricious garden of superiority. A revolution cannot put down such a class! There is a natural homage in the high and low-born alike, paid, without stint or scruple, to the stamp of God. The aristocracy of England, with all their pride and superciliousness towards those who crowd upon their skirts, is acknowledged and admired, by the mass of the people, as was never another aristocracy by its plebeian countrymen. The existence of such a class, I repeat, is important to the balance of power in England. The tides of opinion, that would meet, embattled in opposing floods—the arbitrary dictates of the court on the one hand, and the rebellious spirit of a people never consulted, on the other,—find, in this intermediate class, a *break-water*, that is a continual check to overflow and devastation.

The next step in my argument is to get, if possible, the same generalizing view of the great metropolis of this country—to see *what it is that gives fashion and consequence in New York*. Let me premise, however, that my remarks will apply to no other city in this country, nor would they have been true of New York forty years ago. In cities of a certain size—cities with the population of Boston, Philadelphia and Albany—the natural claims

to aristocracy have, at least, a hearing; and combined with wealth and personal worth, they take rank with little opposition. In a metropolis of four hundred thousand inhabitants, these same distinctions are lost in the number of claimants; and, in what I have to say of New York, I confine myself to the period since this state of things has existed—the last fifteen or twenty years, during which the old aristocracy of the Knickerbockers has been shoved aside, by the enormous increase of wealthy and pretentious population.

In the particular period at which we live, our country differs from all the nations of the earth in one remarkable feature—that of being in a state of *social transition* unexampled for extent and rapidity—passing, that is to say, by lightning leaps of ambitious imitation, from plain to sumptuous, from primitive to luxurious. Study the progress of innovations upon the manners of older countries. See with what reluctant advance, one by one, the few foreign usages that prevail in England and France have crept respectively upon those complacent countries. How little that is French there is in England—how little that is English in France! And with what an unnaturalized strangeness these few outlandish features are incorrigibly worn. Here, on the contrary, in the cities of America, customs that would be twenty years obtaining foothold in Europe, are adopted at sight—domesticated and made universal in a single season. Our commerce is on the alert, our merchants are novelty-seeking travellers, ready to freight ships with any thing they find that would be new at home, and we have not a single prejudice in our national character which shuts the door upon an innovation. Nothing appears abroad—in dress, equipage, usage of society, style of furniture or mode of amusement, that is not conjured over the water with aerial quickness, copied with marvellous fidelity in New York, and incorporated at once into national habituation. The drawing-rooms of our wealthy classes are types, neither

faint nor imperfect, of the sumptuous interiors of May Fair, and of the exclusive saloons of France. Our ladies are scarce thirty days behind the fashions of Paris. A change in men's dress in St. James street, is adopted in New York before it is detected east of Temple Bar. The stained glass of Bohemia, while still a curiosity in England, had grown common upon our dinner-tables. The toys of the age of Louis the Fourteenth, Egyptian couches, and the carved furniture of the age of Elizabeth, have been in turn the fashion abroad, and, of either style, there were profuse specimens in common wear among us, while the novelty was still fresh in the capitals of Europe. We copy every thing we can hear of—import and imitate instantly every new model of equipage—follow every whim of society, take the new dance, the new by-word, the new public amusement,—and enter heart and soul into every rage that is handed over to us, dramatic, operatic, sumptuary, and literary. This daguerreotype imitation is no less improving in its results, however, than it is miraculous for its facile rapidity. We have beaten England and France in progressive civilization and elevation, three centuries in one. At this rate, and with the increasing facilities of commerce, we shall soon have nothing to learn from Europe, but what transpires between the traverses of packets—and when that period arrives, we shall be, of all countries the most cosmopolite—comparing with other nations as the enlightened and liberal traveller compares with the home-keeping villager. I am anticipating, however. Before saying more of the future, let us take our proposed view of the present—as shown in the *fashion* of this great metropolis.

Though there is probably a greater market for the fashions in New-York than in any other capital in the world, (from the fact that all classes, above the lowest, dress as extravagantly here as only the first class does abroad) there is still very little of what can be fairly fixed upon as *fashion*. No one circle confessedly holds the power. Of rank, we can hardly name the value in

New York, for, coming to us from abroad, it has the exaggerated value of an exotic—much more worshipped here than where it comes from. It does not strike me, however, that we show any symptoms of relish for the *indigenous rank* that would naturally be now taking root in the families among us most honorably descended. It would require some research to discover, in New York, even the residences of those whose fathers' names are in the page of our history. Wherever they are, they get little position, consequence, or fashion, from the mere eminence of their forefathers—few of them it is certain, being even what the most conspicuous people would call “in society.” I think this will bear putting still more strongly, and that I may venture to say there is an instinctive hostility to the assumption of consequence by old families and somewhat, perhaps, from a feeling on the part of the undistinguished, that there is still a chance for competition with dignities of so recent date, but more from the application of that exacting standard, by which merit in the inheritor alone makes valid an inheritance of glory.

In the absence of rank, and particularly in a republic, you would naturally suppose that official power—the appointment by public honor to the highest dignities of the State—would give, to the family of the holder, a deference that would make them the fashion. Yet you all know the value of this claim to consequence! The Governor, Secretary, Treasurer of the State, the Senators and Representatives of the Sovereign People, come and go with no more eclat than other men, and their families are no more sought, imitated or caressed, for their official dignity. It neither makes a man nor his family particularly the fashion in New York, if he be Mayor of the city; though, in the administration of his office, he exercises a sway as powerful for the time being, as many a crowned head of feudal Europe. Instead of fashionable homage, paid to such dignity as we had a hand in making, we seem on the contrary to feel for it a fashionable indifference.

Is it here as in France, and does intellect give consequence in New York? Does wit in man, or conversational talent in woman, make the possessor an indispensable acquaintance to all givers of fashionable parties. Are the powerful controllers of public opinion, the gentlemen of the press—keepers as they are, or might be, of the key of each momentous to-morrow—are they, in a country where the press, far more than in France, is the citadel of power—are they, as in France, courted for their intellect, and for the influence they could give to the class they particularly belonged to. Are the gentlemen of the bar—the gladiators of intellect—who, in society, as in courts of justice, have on their armor of wit, and in the absence of any class possessing the leisure to be conversationists only, are the most amusing as well as the most improving members of society—are they sought for by the ambitious, and are their houses and resorts made fashionable by their intellect? Are men of science, distinguished artists, poets, authors, politicians and native celebrities generally—is this varied body of men, representing certainly the intellect of the day, sought out for fashionable entertainments, courted, and made friends and favorites of, by fashionable women? These questions are answered by the reasonableness of a doubt—whether one in ten of the most pretentious fashionables of New York, have any definite idea *who are* the intellectual masters and controllers of that grand vehicle of society to which they themselves are—the incomparable varnish!

Is it then as in England? Does fashionable society take pains to secure to itself Nature's mark of aristocracy? Are the rare accidents of mingled grace and beauty—the lovely and admirable women who do live sometimes in unfashionable neighborhoods, and do belong to families that are only respectable,—are such ornaments of their sex sought out for embellishment to fashionable parties, or would they find the way easy if they attempted to rise, by their own exertions, to spheres more suitably ornamental? Is masculine beauty—combined with a look

of spirit, and a mien of natural chivalry and superiority—are these attractions, in a youth of unknown family and of no fortune, sufficient to give him, in New York as in England, easy access to fashionable circles, and consequence and influence, the town over, in all matters of taste and elegance? These questions, too, are easily answered by a reasonable doubt—whether a well-bred stranger, thrown into a mixed assembly in New York, would not make blunders, (as he hardly could do in England), in an attempt to pick out the fashionables by their *look* of aristocracy.

Nature's stamp of nobility, then, not being a passport to fashion in New York—nor family name and descent—nor intellect—nor that official dignity, which in theory, you would say, should give rank in a republic—what is the predominating principle of fashion? What is it that gives consequence and enviable station?

There is a condition of life in that city, which without forming a definite and combined class, as in France and England, may still be called “the fashion”—a kind of quicksand of conspicuousness and consequence, stable hitherto for no footing, but crowded successively by exclusives, few of whom have ever kept their place long enough to be identified by public rumor. The uncertainty as to who the fashionables are, is somewhat increased, too, by their great number, as no recognizable circle ever comes twice together, and no twenty fashionables would agree as to the fashionableness of twenty more. The great secret of vogue in this upper sphere—the passport to its conspicuousness and consequence,—is not exactly money—not exactly the being rich—but *expense*, and the *dressings, driving and entertaining with lavish expensiveness*. Extravagance, here, takes the place that, in France, is given to intellect, and in England, to the nobility of nature. It is true, that even under this dynasty, it has not invariably been as difficult as now to tell who were the leading fashionables of New York. Fashion, from time to time, has made head and taken a

stand, and within my own memory of New York society, fifteen or twenty years, there have been eight or ten confident and established aristocracies. They have risen and fallen, duly, with “the stocks”—but never before, after the break up of a Board of Fashionable Directors, has there been so prolonged a state of anarchy as exists at this moment. The great convulsion in Wall street in '36, scattered the last definite combination of “people necessary to know;” and since that time there has never been a circle that was not rivalled by twenty others, nor have there been any leaders of fashion, nameable without a smile to two consecutive believers. Fashion there is—the fashion as I said before of *conspicuousness in expense*—but it is a commonwealth without government or centre—without limits or barriers. Any body belongs to it who spends up to the mark, and if there are any two who have combined to be exclusive, or make “a set”—it is by no means generally suspected!

This state of promiscuous pomp, however, cannot long exist. It would not have existed till now, if money alone could make, again, a potentate among fashionables. The ambition to be, as the French say, “the cream of the cream” is not wanting. It never sleeps. But money—mere money—is omnipotent no more! The setting up of an equipage, the adopting of crest and livery, and the giving of balls and dinners, can but make a man—now—one of five hundred. Not till this five hundred is decimated to fifty, by some other superiority, that, with the aid of money, can make itself paramount, and not till that fifty is decimated, still again, to five, who, by the consent of the fifty, shall be their leaders and rulers, will there be a fashion in New York, worth courting or fearing. Is this a consummation to be wished? I think I can show you that it is!

The very core and essence of that which constitutes a republic is the first principle in fashion—rebellion against unnatural authority. What would be the state of England at this enlightened day, with no coun-

terpoise to that nobility which is an accident of birth, and no asylum in society from the overbearing haughtiness of official and court privilege? There would be a tyranny of ill-endowed aristocrats—the more tyrannical in proportion as they were more brutal;—and a chasm between them and the people—between them and humble-born merit, which, if not crossed by the bridge of a revolution, would engulf them in the darkness of feudal barbarism. Now, there is a republic in the heart of monarchical England—*fashion*, ruled by the manifest stamp of superiority. There is a republic in the heart of monarchical France—*fashion*, ruled by wit and intellect. These are intermediate powers inseparable from a state of high civilization, let the government be what it will. Under the two hoary monarchies just named, they are a check to the tyranny of rank, the insolence of wealth and the pomposity of the court—to all of which intolerable evils the smile or frown of fashion is wholesomely and triumphantly paramount. But have we no work for Fashion to do in America? Are there no monsters to be put down by a combination of refinement and intellect? Have we no evils in our system of society, no oppressions, likely to get the upper hand of a republic, and for which we need therefore the well-tried countercheck of fashion?

Rank—we have none to contend against. Court favor, as dispensed at Washington, makes no man formidable. The influence of mere wealth, as I have already said, is evidently on the wane—though were it not so, the tyranny of a sordid aristocracy of money might indeed call for a well-armed antagonist. A monster there is, however, reigning over this country, strange to say, in the shape of its greatest blessing—a monster it would scarce be safe to name, without first unmasking and showing his deformity, and, for this monster, we require the check that can alone be given by the combination I speak of as fashion, for it is the only shape and mouth-piece he will not himself usurp and turn to his tyranni-

cal uses. Look a little into his anatomy. To how many men in a hundred, taken indiscriminately from the miscellaneous population of New York, would you entrust a decision upon any question that affected your personal position or happiness. Count among them the vicious, the wilful, the ignorant and short-sighted,—who are, and must necessarily be, in a great metropolis like this, the majority in numbers. In the capitals of other countries the ignorant and vicious classes have little or no moral power—no power at all, except in the hand to hand conflict of a revolution. In this country every one of them forms part of the constituency of a newspaper and has a voice as loud as your own on all questions that can come to the threshold of public notice. With such a population as America had in '76, this level suffrage of opinion was the heaven of liberty. Taking the country, now, from ocean to ocean, it is so still. But in our great cities—more especially in our greatest city—the proportion of evil in the population gives danger to its sovereign impulse. Free discussion and the vigilance of patriots, may control it on great questions, and if every so-called popular impulse were fairly dragged to light, and known by honest counting to be the wish of the majority, it would be still more effectually bridled. But no! The oracle of the people finds utterance when the people are asleep. The monster I have not yet named is enthroned within it, and it is he, and not the people, speaking oftenest in its voice of thunder. The laws are palsied by his threat—private character trembles in its sanctuary—the arts and all the interests of taste and elegance are benumbed and discouraged, and while the public is a “chartered libertine,” the individual is a slave, for no man dare do otherwise than as the mass approve, for fear of detraction and outcry. It is in this monster that envy and ill-will, and the natural hatred of the low and vicious for those above them, find a ready weapon for their malice. Desperate men who have seen better days, and ty-

rants without thrones, of whom there is never a lack in any community of the earth, are the ready trumpeters of the will of this many-eyed monster. And now shall I tell you his false name? Shall I tell you what lurks in the shadow of liberty, like oppression behind a throne of a monarch? You have anticipated it by my description. It is unexamined, unauthorized, uncontrolled PUBLIC OPINION—the monster whose false throat claims utterance for the people. The judge on the bench thinks of him in his verdict. The criminal at the bar trusts him more than his lawyer. He points his finger, and the representative of the people turns bully in the halls of legislation. He stands before the statesman—hiding from him the page of history and posterity's contempt. Women dreads him on her pillow—for detraction is his most appetizing food. Religion trembles at her altar—for, on the ashes of the house of God he avenges an insult to his myrmidons.

But it is not alone in shapes so palpable to view that this black shadow of freedom stalks through a republic. There is a tyranny of public opinion, in every grade and hiding-place of this country—worn so habitually as to be thought an inseparable evil of human society—worn like the hair shirt of penance till its irritation has become a habit of second nature. It takes twice as bold a man here as in Europe, to be economical—twice as bold a man to prefer paying a debt to putting his name to a subscription. We put ourselves to twice the inconvenience here, that people in Europe do, to seem what we are expected to be by our neighbors. The pain and mortification of reducing our style of living to suit a reduced prosperity in business, is twice, here, what it is abroad—thrice what it need be. And on the other hand, look at the invidious criticism and malice drawn upon men or women, by any step, however well it can be afforded, toward embellishing their condition of life. We do not live in liberty, here—we do not spend our money or enjoy our firesides in rational freedom. The country is free, the press is free, reli-

gion is free, and public opinion remarkably free—but the individual is a slave! The stab of Brutus was struck at nothing half so tyrannical in the bosom of Cesar as our despotism—despotism of the public of which we, who suffer, severally make one. Since government was first invented, the most dreaded evil has been tyranny in the sovereign power. In a monarchy the king holds the power, and the people and private life are to be protected against the king. In a republic the people are the sovereign, and the laws and private life are to be protected against the people. The President is but the subservient prime minister of the sovereign people. His many-headed master never loses him from his sight one hour: and while in a monarchy there is an appeal, from the oppression of the king to the vengeance of the people, in a republic there is no appeal from oppression but to God—for who can impeach the sovereign people!

You may think, if you have not given me your close attention that I have wandered from my subject. But no. It is in my subject—in the influence of a circle of acknowledged fashion—that I see a release from this invisible monster. As Leatherstocking said when the Prairie was burning, "fire shall fight fire." Opinion from a more authentic source, shall stem and countercheck opinion. We are awed, now, by what we vaguely suppose the public to think. Give us a class whose opinion is entitled to undeniable weight—a class whose judgment is made up from elevated standards—a class whose favor is alike valuable to the ambitious of both sexes—a class it is important to know and propitiate if possible, but at any rate to quote as unquestionable authority—and the evil is at once abated. The most radiant feature as well as the most salutary principle of modern civilization is the organizing in France and England of the classes I have described—umpires between tyranny and the people,—arbiters, that with right on their side are stronger than the despot. As I have endeavored to show, this umpire in

England is *fashion*, made potent by the upholding of nature's aristocracy. In France it is *fashion*, made all but sovereign in its influence, by the enlisting of intellect. In our country, as you all know, the class that is destined to protect us against *our* shape of the tyranny universal on earth, is still unorganized, and the *locum tenens*, the temporary key of fashionable superiority, is showy expensiveness. But this anarchy is not to last—nor, (I trust you are prepared to agree with me,) is it desirable that it should. I may venture, I think, to predict, by shadows cast before, that it is on the eve, now, of a new and lasting formation.

But, of what stuff is to be built our inner republic? Who, in our great metropolis, is to be eligible to that privileged class whose judgment shall rebuke the unweighed opinions of the mass, as well as the insolence of overbearing wealth and authority. The material lies about us in prodigal abundance. We have intellect, of God's purest kindling, burning before our eyes like stars before our closed windows in the last watch before morning. We have nature's nobility—men of such spirit and bearing, and women of such talent and beauty, as would draw homage alike from the Indian on the Prairie, or the exclusives at Almack's. We have master-spirits—men who possess the unaccountable, but lordly, power of control over popular masses—capable of swaying the most important flood-tides of the political sea, yet not capable of giving influence or fashion to their families, or the circles they live in. We have every degree, range, and quality, of material for fashion, in as great abundance as any country on earth. And now, of what stuff, I ask again, is to be moulded our fashionable republic—what class of superiority is to be set up for our umpire—counterpoise, to protect the subject individual against the sovereign people?

In this question the whole country has a voice. With the rapid and facile intercourse between our cities, and with our singularly gregarious habits—the distinguished of all the cities of the union, com-

ing frequently together—every society in the country can influence the character of aristocracy in the metropolis. That metropolis is the great throbbing heart in whose pulsations the distant hand and foot have sympathy and influence. It was time—high time—that attention was called to the quality of the blood at this heart of our country. We have kept our vigils on all other subjects—we have slept at our watch over this! The first beat of this chronic pulse may be regulated, easily and irresistibly, by public volition. The fear is that the wrong elements may creep insensibly uppermost, and ossify into power without moulding or controlling! It was time, I say, that it should become a question of lively agitation,—in the metropolis and in every city in the Union—*of what stuff is to be formed the coming American aristocracy?* Discussion, enquiry, active ridicule of false pretension, and generous approbation of that which is truly admirable, are means—ample means—in our hands, to make it what we will. Let us beware, however—for, choose what we will—do homage to what we may, as worthy of privilege and distinction—whatever we *do* choose—whatever becomes the fashion, with the consequence that fashion is destined to have,—accumulates power from the moment of taking the lead, and is elevated in character, as well as hedged about with protection and aggrandizement! It is for the general vigilance—for you, on your part—to say, whether high morality shall be indispensable to fashion. It is for you to say, (and these are important questions) whether political rectitude shall give consequence to a man in the highest circle, or whether men who value consequence and position, shall dare to meddle with politics at all. In short, whether the “almighty dollar”—whether intellect, as shown in wit or conversation, or as shown in the arts, the press and the professions—whether official rank, or manifest superiority, as stamped by nature on strength and beauty—whether one, or any combination of these, is to be the confessed

title to American aristocracy, is yet to be decided.

I have discoursed more gravely of fashion than was perhaps anticipated—less amusingly and more gravely than I might have done, it is certain. Fashion is a trifling word, and there are those to whom words never change meaning or value. Important as it may become, too, in the aggregate, fashion is known, and contributed to, by what the wise call trifles. Trifles they are—and so are the foam-bubbles on the advancing wave! But that glittering crest is no more certain to be the rider upon a tide, fetterless and resistless, than are the trifles of fashion the precursors of a powerful element, surging in, at this hour, upon the yet incomplete character of our country. Shall we be indifferent to the beauty or the deformity, the viciousness or the healthfulness of this impending aristocracy? Is it not worth while—momentously worth while—to arrest its presuming avatar, outside the citadel of power, and challenge its authority from God and reason! I may give it you as my opinion, that aristocracy in a republic must needs be more powerful than those of monarchies, limited or despotic—for it must fight the whole battle of superiority, unaided by rank, prejudice or long usage. Its formation were inevitable at this stage of our progress, even were we alone in the world—for there is no high civilization without it—but we are borrowing, as I said before, the social usages, as

well as the fashions and luxuries, of the countries over the water—borrowing forms and laws of aristocracy faster than fashions or luxuries. And is not this a matter of interest to the public? “Where lies power?” “Where are the combinations that hold power?” are questions for the patriot and statesman—questions answered, wide of the mark, by the hackneyed divisions of political economy. “Church and state,” “rich and poor,” “King, Lords and Commons,” give no clue to the power paramount in England—the well-organized mastery of fashion! Let no man think it impossible that a class designated by so trifling a word as *fashion*, may soon crowd mammon from our altars, and become the antagonists of ill-begotten, public opinion, and the oracle of all that affects the individual. This, I repeat again, is the coming epoch in our social history. Thus far—to this level of preparation for an aristocracy—America has built her pyramid of civilization—overtaking astonished Europe, centuries in a day. To top this pyramid—to complete our broad-based and towering republic, we have a class to create—a summit-stone to lay—to which we can point without shame or hesitation, when it is lifted to the scrutiny of the world. Thank God, we have yet the time and opportunity to decide, from what quarry it shall be hewn, and to what mortar of public sentiment it shall owe its stability!

NOTE.

It may amuse the reader to quote a chapter from one of the serious works on the fashions referred to in the beginning of the Lecture. “THE SIMPLE COBBLER OF AGAWAM,” the work from which it was taken, was a classic of the sixteenth century, written by a New England emigrant clergyman, Rev. Nathaniel Ward. He thus discourses of the lady-fashions of New-England of that day:—

“Should I not keepe promise in speaking a little to Womens fashions, they would take it unkindly: I was loath to pester better matter with such stuffe; I rather thought it meet to let them stand by themselves, like the *Quæ Genus* in the Grammar, being Deficients, or Redundants, not to be brought under any Rule: I shall therefore make bold for this once, to borrow a little of their loose tongued Liberty, and mispend a word or two upon their long-wasted, but short-skirted

patience : a little use of my stirrup will do no harme.

Ridentem dicere verum, quid prohibet ?

Gray Gravity it selfe can well beteam,
That Language be adapted to the Theme.
He that to Parrots speaks, must parrotize :
He that instructs a foole, may act th' unwise.

It is known more then enough that I am neither Nigard, nor Cinick, to the due bravery of the true Gentry : if any man mislikes a bully mong drossock more then I, let him take her for his labour : I honour the woman that can honour her selfe with her attire ; a good Text alwayes deserves a fair Margent : I am not much offended if I see a trimme, far trimmer than she that wears it : in a word, whatever Christianity or Civility will allow, I can afford with *London* measure : but when I heare a nugiperous Gentle-dame inquire what dresse the Queen is in this week : what the nudinstertian fashion of the Court is ; I meane the very newest : with egge to be in it in all haste, what ever it be ; I look at her as the very gizzard of a trifle, the product of a quarter of a cypher, the epitome of nothing, fitter to be kickt, if shee were of a kickable substance, than either honour'd or humour'd.

To speak moderately, I truly confesse, it is beyond the ken of my understanding to conceive, how those women should have any true grace, or valuable vertue, that have so little wit, as to disfigure themselves with such exotick garbes, as not only dismantles their native lovely lustre, but transclouts them into gant bar-geese, ill-shapen-shottenshell-fish, Egyptian Hyeroglyphicks, or at the best into French flirts of the pastery, which a proper English woman should scorne with her heels : it is no marvell they weare drailes on the hinder part of their heads, having nothing as it seems in the fore-part, but a few Squirrils brains to help them frisk from one ill-favour'd fashion to another.

These whimm' Crown'd shees, these fashion-fancying wits,
Are empty thin brain'd shells, and fiddling Kits.

The very troublers and impoverishers of mankind, I can hardly forbear to commend to the world a saying of a Lady living some-

time with the Queen of *Bohemia*, I know not where shee found it, but it is pittie it should be lost.

The World is full of care, much like unto a bubble ;
Women and care, and care and women, and women and care and trouble.

The Verses are even enough for such odde pegma's. I can make my selfe sicke at any time, with comparing the dazling splendor wherewith our Gentlewomen were embelished in some former habits, with the gut-foundred goosdom, wherewith they are now surcingled and debauched. Wee have about five or six of them in our Colony : if I see any of them accidentally, I cannot cleanse my phansie of them for a moneth after. I have been a solitary widdower almost twelve yeares, purposed lately to make a step over to my Native Country for a yoke-fellow : but when I consider how women there have tripe-wifed themselves with their cladments, I have no heart to the voyage, least their nauseous shapes and the Sea, should work too sorely upon my stomach. I speak sadly ; me thinks it should breake the hearts of Englishmen to see so many goodly English-women imprisoned in French Cages, peering out of their hood-holes for some men of mercy to help them with a little wit, and no body relieves them.

It is a more common then convenient saying, that nine Taylors make a man : it were well if nineteene could make a woman to her minde : if Taylors were men indeed, well furnished but with meer morall principles, they would disdain to be led about like Apes, by such mymick Marmosets. It is a most unworthy thing, for men that have bones in them, to spend their lives in making fidle-cases for futillous womens phansies ; which are the very pettitoes of infirmity, the gyblets of perquisquilian toys. I am so charitable to think, that most of that mystery would worke the cheerfuller while they live, if they might bee well discharged of the tiring slavery of mis-tyring women : it is no little labour to be continually putting up English-women into Out-landish caskes : who if they be not shifted anew, once in a few moneths, grow too sowre for their Hus-

bands. What this Trade will answer for themselves when God shall take measure of Taylors consciences is beyond my skill to imagine. There was a time when

The joyning of the Red-Rose with the White,
Did set our State into a Damask plight.

But now our Roses are turned to *Flore de lices*, our Carnations to Tulips, our Gilliflowers to Dayzes, our City-Dames, to an indenominable Quæmalry of overturcas'd things. Hee that makes Coates for the Moone, had need take measure every noone; and he that makes for women, as often, to keepe them from Lunacy.

I have often heard divers Ladies vent loud feminine complaints of the wearisome varieties and chargable changes of fashions: I marvell themselves preferre not a Bill of redresse. I would *Essex* Ladies would lead the *Chore*, for the honour of their County and persons; or rather the thrice honourable Ladies of the Court, whom it best be-seemes: who may well presume of a *Le Roy le veult* from our sober King, a *Les Seigneurs ont Assentus* from our prudent Peers, and the like *Assentus* from our considerate, I dare not say wife-worne Commons: who I believe had much rather passe one such Bill, than pay so many Taylors Bills as they are forced to doe.

Most deare and unparallel'd Ladies, be pleased to attempt it: as you have the pre-celency of the women of the world for beauty and feature; so assume the honour to give, and not take Law from any, in matter of attire: if ye can transact so faire a motion among yourselves unanimously, I dare say, they that most renite, will least repent. What greater honour can your Honors desire, then to build a Promontory president to all foraigne Ladies, to deserve so eminently at the hands of all the English Gentry present and to come: and to confute the opinion of all the wise men in the world; who never thought it possible for women to doe so good a work?

If any man think I have spoken rather merrily than seriously he is much mistaken, I have written what I write with all the indignation I can, and no more than I ought.

I confesse I veer'd my tongue to this kinde of Language *de industria* though unwillingly, supposing those I speak to are incapable of grave and rationall arguments.

I desire all Ladies and Gentlewomen to understand that all this while I intend not such as through necessary modesty to avoyd morose singularity, follow fashions slowly, a flight shot or two off, shewing by their moderation, that they rather draw counter-mont with their hearts, then put-on by their examples.

I point my pen only against the light-heel'd beagles that lead the chase so fast, that they run all civility out of breath, against these Ape-headed pullets, which invent Antique foole-fangles, meerly for fashion and novelty sake.

In a word, if I begin once to declaime against fashions, let men and women look well about them, there is somewhat in the businesse; I confesse to the world, I never had grace enough to be strict in that kinde; and of late years, I have found syrope of pride very wholesome in a due *Dos*, which makes mee keep such a store of that drugge by me, that if any body comes to me for a question-full or two about fashions, they never complain of me for giving them hard measure, or under-weight.

But I addresse my selfe to those who can both hear and mend all if they please: I seriously feare, if the pious Parliament doe not find a time to state fashions, as ancient Parliaments have done in some part, God will hardly finde a time to state Religion or Peace: They are the surquedryes of pride, the wantonnesse of idlenesse, provoking sins, the certain prodormies of assured judgement, *Zeph. 1. 7, 8.*

It is beyond all account, how many Gentlemens and Citizens estates are deplumed by their feather-headed wives, what usefull supplies the pannage of *England* would afford other Countries, what rich returns to it selfe, if it were not slic'd out into male and female fripperies: and what a multitude of misemploy'd hands, might be better improv'd in some more manly Manufactures for the publike weale: it is not easily cre-

dible, what may be said of the preterpluralityes of Taylors in *London*: I have heard an honest man say, that not long since there were numbered between *Temple-barre* and *Charing-Crosse*, eight thousand of that Trade: let it be conjectured by that proportion how many there are in and about *London*, and in all *England*, they will appeare to be very numerous. If the Parliament would please to mend women, which their Husbands dare not doe, there need not so many men to make and mend as there are. I hope the present dolefull estate of the Realme, will perswade more strongly to some considerate course herein, than I now can.

Knew I how to bring it in, I would speak a word to long haire, whereof I will say no more but this: if God proves not such a Barbor to it as he threatens, unlesse it be amended, *Esa. 7. 20.* before the Peace of the State and Church be well settled, then let my prophesie be scorned, as a sound minde scornes the ryot of that sin, and more it needs not. If those who are termed Rat-

tle-heads and Impuritans, would take up a Resolution to begin in moderation of haire, to the just reproach of those that are called Puritans and Round-heads, I would honour their manlinesse, as much as the others godlinesse, so long as I knew what man or honour meant: if neither can find a Barbours shop, let them turne in, to *Psal. 68. 21. Jer. 7. 29. 1 Cor. 11. 14.* if it be thought no wisdome in men to distinguish themselves in the field by the Scissors, let it bee thought no injustice in God, not to distinguish them by the Sword. I had rather God should know me by my sobriety, than mine enemy not know me by my vanity. He is ill kept, that is kept by his owne sin. A short promise is a farre safer guard than a long lock: it is an ill distinction which God is loth to looke at, and his Angels cannot know his Saints by. Though it be not the mark of the Beast, yet it may be the mark of a beast prepared to slaughter. I am sure men use not to weare such manes; I am also sure Souldiers use to weare other marklets or notadoes in time of battell.

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