

‘Of Beards and Men’ review: The hairy truth about shaving through the ages

By **Daniel Akst** December 17, 2015

When [House Speaker Paul D. Ryan](#) came back from the Thanksgiving break with a beard, the rest of Washington played Freud, analyzing the move for every whisker of meaning. No wonder: The last speaker with a beard served in 1925.

Of course, a beard has never been just a bunch of facial hair. In Ryan’s case, it may well be a way to separate himself from the rest of the GOP establishment. But men grow beards for all kinds of reasons, including a weak chin, high testosterone or bad skin — not to mention the desire to look older or younger, more respectable or more radical, more worldly or more godly. It can imply courage — the verb form, *to beard*, means to challenge a formidable opponent — but also reticence. A beard can be a disguise, after all, not just for the wearer’s face, but (when it walks and talks) for his or her sexual orientation.

In “Of Beards and Men,” the historian Christopher Oldstone-Moore plumbs the many meanings of facial hair in Western history. Since Alexander the Great, he tells us, “shaving has been the default mode of masculine style, punctuated by four great beard movements”: in second century Rome, part of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the second half of the 19th century. Otherwise, having a beard was usually a way to make a statement by departing from the norm.

The author writes well, and his erudition is impressive, enabling readers to learn all kinds of interesting things from this zigzag chronicle, which is basically a history of Western civilization as written on the faces of its leading men. Who knew, for example, that in 1968 Fidel Castro’s regime barred facial hair for students at Havana University?

A chapter titled “How Jesus Got His Beard” notes that we really have no idea what Jesus looked like. For centuries after his death, he was more often depicted clean-shaven “because this image best suited Roman sensibilities.” Starting in the Middle Ages, Oldstone-Moore argues, he was portrayed bearded to humanize him while distinguishing the savior from those shown around him.

But the author’s obsessive exegesis leads him out onto some fragile limbs. Many of his explanations for why beards cropped up in one particular time and place seem like after-the-fact rationalizations, akin to those offered

by analysts to explain daily movements of the stock market. Tarzan was clean-shaven, he implies, because Edgar Rice Burroughs understood that “men of the twentieth century were afraid of the ape within and worried about maintaining self-discipline.” Yet surely Victorian men, as Jekyll and Hyde so powerfully remind us, worried about this as much or more, and they were sumptuously bearded.

Similarly, was Alexander trying to channel Achilles and Heracles by shaving, as Oldstone-Moore suggests, or was he merely embarrassed that his youth made a bushy beard impossible? The author finds cultural significance in every whisker (or absence thereof), yet he tells us little about how men actually shaved, or whether the rise of individualism, mass media or indoor plumbing might have influenced fashions in facial hair. (He dismisses Gillette’s safety-razor, patented in 1904, as “the beneficiary rather than the cause of the beard’s demise.”)

The average Joe is largely missing from this account, at least until the past century or so, when he’s mostly bare-faced. Although youthful precincts of Brooklyn resemble staging areas for a convention of Smith Brothers impersonators, in the rest of the nation, beards are not as popular — even though gender roles have sharply converged, and by the author’s logic, this should motivate men to lay down their razors. Stubble, on the other hand, is in, and there’s evidence that women like it. Evidently, they still want men to be masculine, but not too much so.

Or at least that’s today’s story.

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OF BEARDS AND MEN

The Revealing History of Facial Hair

By Christopher Oldstone-Moore

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