

“Patronized merely because he ought not to be”: Reverberations of Satirical Men-Milliners and Nineteenth-Century Perceptions of Charles Frederick Worth

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Abstract

The nineteenth-century British and American press wielded “Man-milliner” as an insult against Charles Fredrick Worth to highlight his overt transgression of gendered roles and heterosocial norms. Scholarship on Charles Fredrick Worth, just like contemporary press, perennially recycles this term “man-milliner” with little acknowledgement of its historical associations. Though the existence of fashion tradesmen was common and predates the term “man-milliner,” its early printed uses in the eighteenth century were typically comedic references to effeminate, possibly homosexual, men. Exploring the origins of “man-milliner” exposes the complexities of historically informed gender stereotypes during the mid-nineteenth century. Unquestioned until Worth, the seemingly inherent opposition of maleness and fashion was continually satirized in offensive depictions of men-milliners. Male proximity to upper-class female bodies went against all social customs. Worth normalized intimate, but nonsexual, proximity with haute couture clients, easing the anxiety that had previously coloured depictions of man-milliners. While there were parallels between Worth and eighteenth-century stereotypes, I will argue how publishers who described Worth with this term did so inaccurately but intentionally to align him with a persona of effeminacy and deviancy. Worth’s authoritative relationships with his clients and enduring legacy further indicate the disruption of heterosocial norms. Relying on primary sources and the work of Abigail Joseph, this essay is a case study on the history of one term that reveals fashion’s complex relationship with gender in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

Man-milliner, *n.* Now *historical*.

A male milliner. Hence *derogatory*: a vain, trifling, or effeminate man (*rare in later use*).¹

Citing quotations from 1787 to 1901, the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "man-milliner" foregrounds implied derogatory meanings in addition to the literal meaning "A male milliner." The offensive nature of this term is thus inherent in its usage. The very compounding of the two words, "man" and "milliner," suggests they do not naturally align. The creation of *Les Maitresses Couturieres* in 1675, gave French women "the right to dress their own sex."² This initiated more than a century of a female monopoly over women's dress production and trade in the newly established fashion capitol: France. Even after the abolishment of such guilds as a result of the French Revolution, the notion of women's predisposition to sewing and ornamenting skills perpetuated in the popular imagination of France and beyond. Though men were never absent from the fashion trade, their legal capacity to create feminine garments in France increased significantly with the abolition of guilds in 1791. By the mid-nineteenth century, the question was asked of male couturiers by thinkers like Pierre Larousse: "Are they really men?"³

¹ "man-milliner, n." OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113562?redirectedFrom=man+milliner> (accessed April 28, 2021).

² Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 1: Englishwomen's Dresses & Their Construction, 1660-1860*, New ed. (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977) 5.

³ Larousse, Pierre. *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle, français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique, littéraire, artistique, scientifique, etc.* (Paris: Administration du grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866-90): 417. [sont-ce bien des hommes?]

In Paris, the 1860s saw the rise of “the Great Man-Milliner,” Charles Frederick Worth.⁴ Though he shared the label “man-milliner” with his eighteenth-century counterparts, testimonials from clients and British and American publications reveal that in reality, Worth’s business initiated a new category of men in fashion trades that would set a standard for the rest of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Scholarship on Worth, just like contemporary press, perennially recycles this term with little acknowledgement of its historical associations.⁵ Some scholars, like Desmond Seward, maintain that “man-milliner” was first coined by Charles Dickens in his weekly periodical *All the Year Round*.⁶ Although such claims are false, they imply that the term originated specifically as a descriptor for and synonymous with Worth.

Focusing on the term itself, I aim to highlight a long history of the “man-milliner” that Worth participates in, but ultimately disrupts. Worth marks a shift in general opinions about the propriety of men in the fashion field.

In order to explore Worth’s role in shifting perceptions of men-milliners, I will trace the early developments of the term. A perennial critique of male fashion tradesmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was their suspicious proximity to upper-class female bodies. Worth normalized intimate, but nonsexual, proximity with haute couture clients, easing the anxiety that had previously coloured depictions of man-milliners. While there were some valid parallels between Worth and eighteenth-century stereotypes, I will argue how nineteenth-century publishers who described Worth with this term did so inaccurately but intentionally to align him with a persona of effeminacy and deviancy. Worth’s authoritative relationships with his clients and enduring legacy further indicate the disruption of heterosocial norms.

⁴ Harper’s Bazaar, “The Great ‘Man Milliner,’” *The Christian Recorder* (July 11, 1889) 6.

⁵ Elizabeth Ann Coleman, “Worth, Charles Frederick,” *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010) Accessed August 8, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474264716.0016229>.

⁶ Desmond Seward, *Eugénie: The Empress and Her Empire* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004) 103.

ORIGINS OF THE TERM

In the eighteenth century, “milliner” was an English synonym for the French “*marchande de mode*,” or “fashion merchant.” Far from the twenty and twenty-first century definitions of “hat maker,” eighteenth-century milliners could make and sell hats, but also cosmetics, perfume, accessories, and most importantly, trimmings. The culmination of the rococo style from the 1740s through the 1780s made feathers, lace, ribbons, tassels, and other ornamental pieces essential elements that gave clothes distinction. This situated the sellers of such ornaments in a critical sphere of economic and cultural influence. Like the famous Rose Bertin, *marchande de mode* to Marie Antoinette, milliners were often women of humble birth with intimate access to the aristocracy.⁷ Although Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell cites “the decline of the *marchande de mode*” as corresponding “with the rise of the so-called ‘man-milliner,’” men had been present in female realms of the fashion trade since the mid-eighteenth century.⁸ Chrisman-Campbell cites a deed from 1722 where John Gainsborough, a shroud maker and father to the more famous Thomas, is described as a “milliner.”⁹ In the 1747 play, *Miss in Her Teens* by David Garrick, Fribble is a suiter rejected by Miss Bidy for being more effeminate than herself. Bidy describes Fribble: “[he] speaks like a lady, [...] tells me what ribbons become my complexion, where to stick my patches, who is the best milliner, and where they sell the best tea.” Fribble describes his own activities at “a Club of us, all young Batchelors,” where among other things they “invent Fashions for the Ladies, make Models of’em, and cut out Patterns in Paper.”¹⁰ While Fribble is not a man-milliner, he is well-versed in feminine taste. Fashion historian Peter McNeil suggests that the referenced “Club” is one of the infamous Molly Houses.¹¹ Homosexual readings of the effeminately sexualized man-milliners abounded. However, compared to archetypal female *marchandes de modes*, the presence of men concerned with adorning female bodies was nothing new by “the rise of the so-called ‘man-milliner.’”¹²

⁷ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, “The Face of Fashion: Milliners in Eighteenth-Century Visual Culture,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25, no. 2 (September 2002): 157-171.

⁸ Ibid 167. Throughout the Eighteenth Century, men worked in the fashion trade as tailors, producing men’s suits.

⁹ Ibid 159.

¹⁰ Quoted in Peter McNeil, *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-Century Fashion World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). 190.

¹¹ Ibid. Molly-house was a term used in 18th- and 19th-century Britain for a meeting place for homosexual men.

¹² Chrisman-Campbell, 2002.

Though the existence of fashion tradesmen predates the term, “man-milliner” was not part of English vernacular until about 1760. One of the earliest printed examples comes from the June 1763 issue of *London magazine*.¹³ In a likely fictional letter to the editor, John Oakley narrated fears of his wife’s vulnerable chastity while observing a series of men attending her unsupervised. Upon barging into Mrs. Oakley’s toilette, Mr. Oakley finds his wife trying on new stays from Monsieur Tag, a “man-milliner.” The exchange between the men is as follows:

No harm [in trying on new stays], says I, perhaps, but much indelicacy, by any man but your husband.

Lord, sir, says monsieur Tag, with a sneering smile, I lace and unlace ladies stays of the first fashion, every day of my life; and unmarried ladies too.¹⁴

Mr. Oakley concedes and allows M. Tag to continue the fitting as he poses no threat to his wife’s chastity. M. Tag could be read as a homosexual, or more accurately that his virility has been compromised by his profession. The constant proximity to the female body has diminished its charms. The man-milliner, M. Tag, is the fourth fashion tradesman recommended to Mrs. Oakley by a “lady Midnight.” In an order of increasing intimacy, the first is a hairdresser, the second a shoemaker, and the third a mantua maker. The man-milliner, also referred to in the text as the “staymaker,” is thus the most intimate of the fashion tradesmen.¹⁵ Intimacy with a female body might be one clue to why “man-milliner” is the term that sticks with fashion tradesmen throughout the nineteenth century, and not “man-mantua maker” or “man-dressmaker.” The detail of the “sneering smile” and the hire of these men on the recommendation from a “lady Midnight” indicate a dubious, possibly perverse, scheme.

¹³ John Oakley “Distress of a Husband from Male Attendants on His Lady.” *London Magazine: Or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* (June 1763): 312–14.

¹⁴ Ibid 314.

¹⁵ Staymakers were often men assisted by women until the end of the eighteenth century when women also made stays. It is unclear the extent to which they engaged in the selling of goods.

LINGERING TROPES

Both male and female milliners were vessels through which they could advertise their creations; as such, their bodies shifted from pedestals for display to products themselves. Licentiousness was an assumed characteristic of female milliners. Speaking specifically of female milliners in 1781, Louis-Sebastien Mercier said, "Purchases are only a pretext: one looks at the seller and not the merchandise."¹⁶ During the eighteenth century, tradeswomen of all sorts were accused of seducing their customers into buying their wares. In *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, art historian Hollis Clayson claims that although milliners were some of the best dressed women in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s, their pay was so little that some turned to prostitution.¹⁷ Rooted in the truth of underpaid women, the milliner-cum-prostitute trope began in the eighteenth century and spread later through prints and vaudeville plays, even entering the work of artists like Degas and Tissot.¹⁸ With its parades of beautiful models and clientele of mistresses and courtesans, the prestigious House of Worth was likened to a brothel, making "the Great Man-Milliner" Worth its orchestrating pimp.¹⁹

However, the initial worries of sexual transgressions between the couturier and client faded into an even greater scandal: the lack thereof. From its inception, and continued with Worth, the man-milliner persona was depicted as enthralled by silk, feathers, and lace that ornament a woman but immune to sexual allure of the female body underneath.

¹⁶ Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau De Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1781).

¹⁷ Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003).

¹⁸ Françoise Tétart-Vittu, "The Milliners of Paris, 1870-1910," in *Degas, Impressionism and the Paris Millinery Trade* (New York, NY: Delmonico Books, 2017) 71 and 120.

¹⁹ Diana de Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1990): 100.



FIGURE 1 ISAAC CRUIKSHANK, "THE MAN MILLINER." (LONDON: ROBT. SAYER & CO., 1793) 1 PRINT ON LAID PAPER: ETCHING & ENGRAVING WITH STIPPLE ENGRAVING. COURTESY OF THE LEWIS WALPOLE LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY.

Parallel to the image of a hyper-sexualized milliner was the impotent man-milliner. A 1793 print by Isaac Cruikshank makes fun of a man-milliner's lack of virility (Figure 1). Inspecting the length of a decorative ribbon, a female client says "Indeed, Mr. Fribble, I am not to be done in this manner, your Yard is to [sic] short by an Inch."²⁰ Standardized in the mid-1700s, a short yardstick would have indicated a deficient deviance from common principles. Cruikshank's print seems to imply: if a man ignores measurement regulations, what is to stop him from moral deviation or corruption? The man-milliner holding his yardstick erect to align with his groin exposes this print to be making a joke about the man's small penis and suggests a lack of virility. With his tall coat collar and enormous ruffled cravat, he has been seduced by fashion rather than the women in his shop.

²⁰ Isaac Cruikshank, "The Man Milliner." (London: Robt. Sayer & Co., 1793). Notice the name "Fribble" is repeated from the Garrick play of 1747. Peter McNeil discusses other examples of fribbles in *Pretty Gentlemen*, 252.

An 1860 musical parody from *Vanity Fair* reveals the longevity of the effeminate, impotent man-milliner stereotype. Here, a group of men-milliners sing:

Here's a pretty set of us, nice Men Milliners;/... Smiles the ladies get of us, in return make pets of us,/ Nice Men Milliners./... Gorgeous trowsers we all sport, we Men Milliners;/... Attention of the girls to court,/ whilst before them we disport,/ As Men Milliners./... But we are a foppish set, we Men Milliners;/... Every dollar we can get,/ Spent by us on clothes is, yet/ We're but Men Milliners./ They say we are a useless set, we Men Milliners;/... And our employers soon might get/ Girls to do our work and let/ Slide Men Milliners./ Very little brains we've got, we Men Milliners;/... Nor of manliness one jot,/ So we're contented with our lot,/ As Men Milliners.²¹

In their "lovely whiskers" and "gorgeous trowsers," these "dumb" men-milliners were not made lovers by the ladies they serve, but "pets." They were "useless" and foolish, easily replaced by "girls" to do their work.

Where the *Vanity Fair* parody is a poetic critique of men-milliners, concern for the livelihood of women in the fashion trade was simultaneously expressed. Writing under the pseudonym "A Friend of the Fair Sex" for *American Mechanics Magazine*, one man considered the sale of fashionable goods as "the business of women [...]; for the very expression, *man-milliner*, implies a sort of nondescript animal, and is a reproach to *man*."²² While they did not think women suitable for all work, namely mechanics, this "Friend of the Fair Sex" believed in a natural order of gendered propensities and occupations. This "Friend" argued that some men had disobeyed "natural" laws, making fools of themselves and sufferers of women. A similar argument was made in the 1853 tale of "The Men Milliner's Victim" published in a New York publication called *The Lantern*. This is the story of a twenty-year-old girl who supports her mother and little brother by working in a "fancy goods store in Broadway." She loses her job to "those young men who, in our opera houses and theatres, are dressed so fantastically" (Figure 2).²³ The girl's story, accompanied by a grotesque anthropomorphic man-milliner illustration, is likely fictional but based on real concerns of "thousands of women... thrown out of employment."²⁴ Such concerns prompted at least one anonymous man-milliner from Boston to defend himself in the press: "They stigmatize us

²¹ "Nice Men Milliners." *Vanity Fair* (New York, NY) 1, no. 11 (March 10, 1860): 167.

²² A Friend of the Fair Sex. "MAN-MILLINERS." *American Mechanics Magazine: Containing Useful Original Matter, on Subjects Connected with Manufactures, the Arts & Sciences; As Well As Selections from the Most Approved Domestic & Foreign Journals* 1, no. 9 (April 2, 1825): 144.

²³ "The Men Milliner's Victim." *Lantern* (New York, NY) 2, no. 52 (January 1853): 276.

²⁴ Annie R. Blount, "Occupations of Women." *Southern Field & Fireside* 2, no. 14 (August 25, 1860): 108–9.



FIGURE 2 "THE MEN MILLINER'S VICTIM." *LANTERN* (NEW YORK, NY) 2, NO. 52 (JANUARY 1853): 276. DIGITAL SCREENSHOT TAKEN FROM EBSCOHOST DIGITAL ARCHIVES VIEWER, COURTESY, AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

as a 'man milliner' because we give employment to between twenty and thirty intelligent ladies of unimpeachable character, at wages ranging from \$3 to \$20 per week, who faithfully fulfill their business duties and engagements."²⁵ He hoped to clarify that rather than taking jobs from women, a man-milliner could create them. Similarly, but at a much greater scale, the House of Worth began with twenty seamstresses in 1858, but by 1870, just twelve years later, employed 1,200.²⁶ It is true that Worth and other men-milliners provided employment for women, but the average pay was extremely low: two francs a day.²⁷ Seamstresses typically started an apprenticeship at age thirteen or fourteen, and worked the usual twelve-hour day. While many dressmaker's workshops provided places for seamstresses to sleep on the premises, the unprecedented scale of Worth prevented such accommodations. Only some workers slept on site and had to stay on-call for assisting clients at all hours.²⁸ The work of numerous women was necessary to build the reputation of a man-milliner.

²⁵ "A 'Ladies' Enterprise.'" *Olive Branch* (Boston, MA) 20, no. 7 (February 17, 1855): 2.

²⁶ de Marly, 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

Although criticized and satirized, men-milliners were also applauded by their clients for the quality of their products and their skills in creating stylish ensembles. An 1857 article in Boston's *Weekly Novelle* noted the common presence of men-milliners in Europe and "no hesitation" from an anonymous lady to be fitted in a man's atelier. This lady also claimed "that dresses made by men kept their place better and lasted longer than dresses made by women."²⁹ This flattering, but generalized statement might reference to the increasingly tight, body constricting silhouette championed by the man-milliners of the House of Worth, Maison Félix, and others.³⁰ An 1863 article that appeared in *All the Year Round* claimed that Worth was responsible for "the art of squeezing in a woman at the waist, with precision hitherto unknown."³¹ Indeed, no man-milliner was more celebrated for fit and style than the illustrious Charles Frederick Worth. After opening Worth et Bobergh in 1858, it took less than two years for Empress Eugénie to call on Worth for a dress. Yet, even the endorsement of the Empress did not protect this man-milliner from slander. In 1869, *Godey's Lady's Book* reported:

that the grandes dames of the present age scorn the needles and scissors of dressmakers, and only consider their toilettes correct when emanating from the ateliers (the expression is correct, however absurd,) of a man-milliner, whose well-known shop in the handsomest street in Paris was honored last week by the visit of the wife of an heir-apparent.

Indicating it is a woman's place to dress "grandes dames" and for a man to do so is "absurd," the man-milliner is again associated with the plight of female dressmakers. That "dressmakers" have been scorned in favor of "a man-milliner," suggests men inherently could not be dressmakers. The article also describes the elaborate residence of Worth and compares his lifestyle with that of royalty. His economic ascent and precarious proximity to aristocratic bodies caused anxiety in some, as documented in the press. Presumably, Worth's elite clients overcame such worries in pursuit of his artistry. For all the critique this Godey's author provides, they concede and "do not dispute the irreproachable taste displayed by this hero of shears."³³ One may be apprehensive of the man-milliner, but his expertise cannot be denied.

²⁹ "Men Milliners." *Weekly Novelle* 2, no. 8 (November 7, 1857): 126.

³⁰ Harper Franklin, "1860-1869," Fashion History Timeline, December 27, 2019, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1860-1869/>.

³¹ "Dress in Paris." *All the Year Round* (February 28, 1863): 7-12.

³² "Paris Items." *Godey's Lady's Book & Magazine* 78, no. 465 (March 1869): 289.

³³ Ibid.

IT DOESN'T FIT

Although Charles Frederick Worth came to be known as “the Great Man-Milliner” by *Harper's Bazaar* and other periodicals, such a descriptor is misleading.³⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, millinery was related but distinctly separate from dressmaking. Publications, like *The Lady's Handbook of Millinery, Dressmaking and Tatting* published in 1843, explicitly state a difference between the two professions.

The table of contents lists caps, bonnets, lappets, capotes, collars, and capes under “Millinery” and dresses, frocks, mantelets, cloaks, piping, plaits, tucks, and capes under “Dress-Making.”³⁵ Capes, described “as a finish to the dress” that sit neat upon the neck and shoulders, are the only articles covered in both sections.³⁶ *The Lady's Handbook* and similar manuals reveal a general understanding of millinery and dressmaking as fields that require separate skills. The House of Worth was known at the time for dressmaking, not millinery. Thus, to call Worth a milliner is not only misleading, but inaccurate.

While millinery and dressmaking were technically different, they also occupied discrete, if adjacent, spaces along the fashionable streets of urban centers and offered their clients different shopping experiences. All clients, other than Empress Eugénie, were required to visit the atelier at No. 7 rue de la Paix, Paris for an appointment with Worth. Though Worth's enterprise occupied most of No. 7, clients could also visit one of the empress's preferred milliners, Madame Hofele, who made and sold hats on the mezzanine level until about 1875.³⁷

³⁴ “PERSONAL.” *Harper's Bazaar* (1867) 2, no. 40 (October 2, 1869): 627.

³⁵ *The Lady's Hand-Book of Millinery, Dress-Making, and Tatting* (London: H. G. Clarke and Co., 1843) iii.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 21.

³⁷ Françoise Tétart-Vittu, “The Milliners of Paris, 1870-1910,” in *Degas, Impressionism and the Paris Millinery Trade* (New York, NY: Delmonico Books, 2017): 61.

Proximity did not necessarily equate collaboration, but it was common for Hofele to create matching hats to be worn with Worth gowns. Although Worth and Hofele shared a physical space on the Rue de la Paix, in 1902 art critic Arsène Alexandre described the spaces between Parisian couturiers and milliners as an “abyss”:

Between the seamstresses and us, say the milliners, between us and the milliners, say the seamstresses, there is an abyss.

These are two different worlds that always rub shoulders without ever mixing. [...] The couture salons are visited by the Parisian generally on the first days of the week. The millinery salons are noticeably busier during the last few days.³⁸

Hats did not require the numerous and prolonged fittings customary in couture houses. Therefore, milliners could create relaxed, even joyful, shopping atmospheres. The relative harmony experienced in a millinery shop was especially absent in the house of Worth. In 1880, journalist George Sala wrote of a 55-year-old Worth: “before him princesses discrown themselves, duchesses tremble, countesses bow their aristocratic heads in mute acquiescence.”³⁹ Caring little for neither class nor reputation, Worth molded the bodies of his clients with artistic authority, so long as they were able to pay his astronomical prices. Where Worth was the dictator of his fitting room, millinery saleswomen could act as models for hats while *le travail* (women from the millinery workshop) might occasionally circulate amongst clients.⁴⁰ Walking into Madame Hofele’s must have been a welcome relief just steps from the discerning gaze of Worth.

³⁸ Arsène Alexandre, “Modistes-Modestes,” in *Les Reines De L’aiguille: Modistes Et Couturières (Étude Parisienne)*(Paris: Théophile Belin, 1902): 129-137. (Author translation) *Entre les couturières et nous, dissent les modistes, entre nous et les modistes, dient d’ailleurs les couturières, il y a un abîme. Ce sont deux mondes différents qui se côtoient toujours sans jamais se mêler. [...] Les salons de couture sont visités par la Parisienne surtout dans les premiers jours de la semaine. Les salons des modistes sont sensiblement plus animés pendant les derniers jours.*

³⁹ George Sala, “In the Rue De La Paix,” in *Paris Herself Again in 1878-9*, 4th ed., vol. 2 (London: Remington and Company, 1880): 329.

⁴⁰ Kelly, 57.

THE EXCEPTIONS THAT PROVE THE RULE

Leading to a decrease in press usage of “man-milliner” a generation of designers later, Worth’s precedence changed cultural perceptions of male dressmakers. Although Worth had successful male contemporaries, like Emile Pignat, none achieved the same level of international acclaim and press attention, and few were identified as “man-milliners.” Despite being Worth’s “chief competitor” and known for its millinery department, the male-led fashion house Maison Félix was rarely, if ever, reported in association with the term “man-milliner.”⁴¹ The inclination to equate Worth with the term and not others — who might fit the term’s technical definition more accurately — indicates a shift in perception of male dressmakers following Worth’s example.

Maison Félix, opened in 1846 by Joseph-Augustin Escalier, was taken over in 1857 by brother hairdressers, Auguste Jean Poussineau and Émile Martin Poussineau (nicknamed “Félix”). The house grew to produce dresses, hats, hairstyles, and other fashionable items. By the 1880s, Maison Félix had gained notoriety in the French press, making them a “happy rival” to Worth’s fashion empire.⁴² Originating from hairdressers, Maison Félix created hats that “became inseparable from high-fashion dresses. Houses such as Félix [...] came to be celebrated as much for their hats as for their dresses.”⁴³

Although Maison Félix was led by two men, the millinery department was directed by Madame Félix Poussineau.⁴⁴ This is likely Marie-Rose Berthé Renault Poussineau, who in 1875 married Émile Martin Poussineau. One of the few clues into the role of Madame Félix comes from Emma Bullet’s 1894 observation of a fashion show. Bullet documented and translated styling instructions given by Mme. Félix on how “with one dress you [can] make four toilettes.”⁴⁵ Additionally, each “transition” can, or should, be worn with a different hat. Though Marie-Rose Poussineau is depicted here as the herald of essential styling information, she assures her customers that “Félix” is the master inventor and “thinks [his transformation suit] one of his happiest and most ingenious creations.”⁴⁶ Marie-Rose Poussineau helped promote sales, but her depth of knowledge seems to indicate a

⁴¹ Amy De La Haye and Valerie D. Mendes, *The House of Worth: Portrait of An Archive* (V&A, 2013) 21.

⁴² Elizabeth L Block, “Maison Félix and the Body Types of Its Clients, 1875-1900,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, & Material Culture* 26, no. 1 (2019): 86.

⁴³ Françoise Tétart-Vittu, “The Milliners of Paris, 1870-1910,” in *Degas, Impressionism and the Paris Millinery Trade* (New York, NY: Delmonico Books, 2017) 63.

⁴⁴ Tétart-Vittu, 56.

⁴⁵ Emma Bullet, “Dress Show Exegesis: What Was Exhibited by Live Dummies in a Paris Salon,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, (January 7, 1894) 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

more involved role in production and design. If she was in fact the director of the millinery department, the labels inside extant pieces, carrying either "A. Félix" or "E. Félix," fail to credit her work.⁴⁷

Curiously, though they worked contemporaneously with Worth and their house was known for its hats, the Poussineau brothers were not frequently ascribed as men-milliners. In fact, in 1900 an author under the pseudonym "Intime" called Félix "a prince of dress."⁴⁸ Perhaps Mme. Félix's presence as an intermediate between clients and the brothers shirked allegations of inappropriate intimacy with female bodies. Additionally, the brothers were perhaps not as flamboyant or tyrannical as Worth, garnering less frequent accusations of effeminacy. Though popular in Paris, Maison Félix never captured the level of attention from British and American press that was directed at Worth. To assert respect from clients and publicity, Worth deliberately created an outsized persona, and thus garnered critical media attention. I contend that by the time Maison Félix was established as a rival to Worth in the 1880s and 1890s, the concept of a male dressmaker was no longer a reproachable novelty and instead a desirable trend. Whereas Worth's transgression of heterosocial norms was once shocking — eliciting the derogatory "man-milliner" description — subsequent male dressmakers became more fashionable because of their gender.

Worth set a precedent of style that came to be associated with masculine authority rather than deviant effeminacy.

THE ARTIST-GENIUS

An air of pretension was necessary for Worth to gain authority over shaping and decorating the bodies of his prestigious female clients. Not long after opening his atelier, Worth adopted a historicizing, romantic style of dress decidedly different from the fashionable clean lines and trim cuts of 1860s gentlemen's tailoring. He is most famously depicted in an 1895 photo by Nadar in a flowing fur trimmed coat, a velvet beret, and a silk scarf where collar and cravat should be, all supposedly "modelled after Rembrandt" (Figure 3).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, "Flowered and Ribbioned Hats," in *Degas, Impressionism and the Paris Millinery Trade* (New York, NY: Delmonico Books, 2017) 234.

⁴⁸ Intime, "A Parisian Prince of Dress," in *The Lady's Realm: an illustrated monthly magazine* (London: Hutchinson and co., November 1900) 22.

⁴⁹ de Marly, 110.



FIGURE 3 GASPARD-FÉLIX TOURNACHON (NADAR), PHOTOGRAPH OF THE COUTURIER CHARLES FREDERICK WORTH *L'ILLUSTRATION* (MARCH 1895), WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

In his 1875 *Notes on Paris*, critic Hippolyte Taine described a fictionalized dressmaker based almost exclusively on Worth. The character, dressed “in his loose velvet coat, proudly stretched out on his divan, a cigar in his mouth,” proclaimed: “I am a great artist; I have Delacroix’s feeling for color, and I *compose*. A toilette is worth a picture any day. [...] Art is divine; the bourgeois are made to take our orders.”⁵⁰ Though hyperbolic, this account reveals that Worth’s self-fashioned artist-genius persona caught the attention of writers outside of the fashion press. His self-identification as an artist rather than a dressmaker allowed aristocratic women, who might otherwise take offense to a dressmaker’s critiques and orders, to bend to his will — given the promise of fashionable superiority. Commands like “never let me see you in gloves of that color again” may sound demeaning to “a very grand lady,” but they were willingly and rigorously followed.⁵¹ Indeed Worth’s authoritative voice was part of the appeal for Comtesse de Mercy-Argenteau who recalled in her 1916 memoir: “his vogue came quite as much from his personality as from his talent as a dressmaker [...]. He was a tyrant, but we all adored him.”⁵² Beyond “artist,” Worth also came to be called “king dressmaker” and frequently “genius.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on Paris* (trans. John Austin Stevens, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1875), 150.

⁵¹ Quoted in Glenda Bailey, *Harper’s Bazaar 150 Years: The Greatest Moments* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2017) 10.

⁵² Joseph, 268.

⁵³ “The Man Milliner.” *Illustrated Waverley Magazine & Literary Repository: Devoted to Original Tales, Poetry, Music & Choice Miscellaneous Reading* 51, no. 4 (July 24, 1875) 56. & “Dress in Paris.” *All the Year Round* (February 28, 1863): 7-12. Although “Dress in Paris” refers to Worth as possessing “the genius of sloping out,” it is not without critique and satirical tone.

The persona of a monolithic genius is at odds with the foolish, weak, and effeminate stereotype of the man-milliner. Though “man-milliner” was a derogatory designation, Worth’s maleness combined with what was perceived as his artistic talent, gave him a margin of power inaccessible to female contemporaries. Scholar Abigail Joseph has explored the ways in which Worth transgressed nineteenth-century expectations of heterosocial interactions. Worth “mimics phallic authority, but declines its erotic prerogative, displaying instead an obsession with that which *hides* women’s bodies.”⁵⁴ Joseph argues that while there are intimations of effeminacy and homoeroticism in contemporaneous readings of Worth’s gender performance, he exemplifies “a category of queer ascription located in a cross-gender sociality that is nonsexual but nonetheless charged with bodily intimacy, material fascination, power struggle, and aesthetic rapture.”⁵⁵ His “queerness” is located in a disruption of heteronormative relationships and not in a disruption of gender. Where the man-milliner was seen as hardly a man, Worth’s persona and success were rooted in manliness. That the British and American press christened him a “man-milliner” had little to do with how Worth ran his business and more to do with a lingering eighteenth-century image of flippant men involved in the sale of female goods.

Though Worth would not have self-identified with “man-milliner,” he was absolutely inspired by the eighteenth century, and may have enjoyed being associated with female *marchandes de modes*. An amateur art historian, Worth studied the eighteenth-century fashions depicted in paintings by Watteau, Lancret, and Pater. Indeed, there were “innumerable Marie Antoinettes” produced by Worth for masquerades.⁵⁶ Some were replicas of the queen’s portraits while others more fanciful interpretations. The adapted eighteenth-century style gown that Eugénie de Montijo wears in her portrait by Winterhalter is very likely a Worth creation (Figure 4). Empress Eugénie’s alignment of herself with Marie Antoinette made Worth, as her couturier, aligned with Rose Bertin, the queen’s *marchande de mode*. Bertin, the most famous style-maker of her time, was a much more precise comparison to Worth than that of the man-milliner.

⁵⁴ Joseph, 262.

⁵⁵ Joseph, 253.

⁵⁶ de Marly, 70.



FIGURE 4 FRANZ XAVIER WINTERHALTER, "THE EMPRESS EUGÉNIE (EUGÉNIE DE MONTIJO, 1826–1920, CONDESA DE TEBA)," 1854. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. NEW YORK, NY, PURCHASE, MR. AND MRS. CLAUD VON BÜLOW GIFT, 1978

Contemporaneous articles in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Godey's Lady's Book* help to illuminate the ways "man-milliner" came to be used in association with Worth. *Harper's* admitted to the success of Worth, but never failed to qualify its praise with insult. A *Harper's* article from 1869 jests: "That great creature, Worth, the famous man-milliner, or 'dress-critic' as he styles himself, of Paris, is said to hold in his port-folio any amount of

IOU's of the most prominent women of that capital."⁵⁷ However "great," Worth is described as a "creature," a word that recalls the earlier quandaries of men-milliners who may not be men at all. The portfolio of IOU's is just one example of *Harper's* most repeated critique of Worth: his prices. Notably, *Harper's* does not seem to have used "man-milliner" to describe any other couturiers. Godey's use of "man-milliner" was similarly negative in connotation. In *Godey's*, even when Worth was at the height of his fame, "man-milliner" was used more frequently with other male dressmakers. An example from *Godey's* in 1870 reads, "A MAN MILLINER — They have one in New York, and, of course, he will be patronized merely because he ought not to be."⁵⁸ In something of a defeated attitude, this Godey's writer disapproves of a male working in a female industry and hopes their readers will avoid New York's man-milliner. They ultimately realize, following Worth's example, the indecency is too appealing to ignore.

⁵⁷ "PERSONAL," *Harper's Bazaar* (March 27, 1869): 195.

⁵⁸ "A MAN MILLINER," *Godey's Lady's Book*, (October 1870): 380.

CONCLUSION

Worth's precedent extended far beyond his lifetime. Known as the Father of Haute Couture, Worth's example of how a singular, celebrated man could run an atelier became the standard of couture houses throughout the twentieth century.

The symbiotic relationship of designer and client, where the visibility of one bolsters the status of the other, was only possible given Worth's masculine authority and innovative, eye-catching designs.

His rapport with dedicated clients and his own fame that matched or exceeded theirs would come to be seen in figures like Cristóbal Balenciaga, Christian Dior, and even Halston.⁵⁹ More specifically, Worth's ability to hone his craft in what was perceived as dangerously close proximity to female bodies and not risk loss of virtue established a pattern for the stereotype of the gay male fashion designer. There is no evidence to support claims that Charles Frederick Worth was a homosexual or bisexual. During his lifetime, the very conception of "sexual-orientation" as a facet of identity was only just beginning to gain traction. Worth was married with two sons, but, as the example of Oscar Wilde indicates, that did not exclude the possibility of queer identity.⁶⁰ Worth signals a turning point in the perception of men working in fashion. The satirized man-milliner that preceded him was transformed into the lauded gay male fashion designer after him. Thanks to Worth's success, issues of heterosocial propriety slowly faded.⁶¹

To highlight his overt transgression of gendered roles and heterosocial norms, the British and American press wielded "Man-milliner" as an insult against Worth. The seemingly inherent opposition of maleness and fashion went unquestioned until Worth. Man-milliners' impotence and disregard for decorum seen in early depictions of these aberrant fashion creators materialized in Worth's disinterest in the female body, engaging only that which transformed it. What was once satire became all-too-real with Worth, initiating a cultural shift in the perceptions of men working in the fashion industry. The pleasure of crafting

⁵⁹ Joseph, 269.

⁶⁰ Valerie Steele, "A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk," in *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013): 34.

⁶¹ Ibid.

unrestrained opulence from silk flowers and tulle on a woman's body necessitated authoritative control over the person. This "masculine" control is Worth's key departure from the feminine man-milliner trope. Individual relationships formed out of desire for style and trust in Worth allowed him to instruct his elite clients with authority.⁶²

Male fashion workers have always worked alongside their female counterparts and clients. This fact was often forgotten in the press in favor of a singular masculine storyline, despite Worth's inversion of gender roles. A woman's right and ability to work was questioned and often validated when considering the man-milliner: better *her* than *him* to work so closely with ribbons, tassels, and stays. Worth's male presenting enterprise depended on the work of thousands of seamstresses and, perhaps equally, the visibility of his high-profile clientele. Even with his great success, disruption of class and gender boundaries always qualified discussions of Worth in the press. Perhaps, the degrading "man-milliner" came to be associated with Worth more than his male contemporaries, like the Poussineau brothers, precisely because of his international success. The extreme prices of his creations were criticized, but even with the occasional complaint his clients gladly paid. Not even Worth's harshest critics would deny his artistic genius, however frivolous and overpriced it might be. Worth is linked to the man-milliner even though he does not meet its stereotypical criteria. Exploring the origins of "man-milliner" exposes the complexities of historically informed gender stereotypes during the mid-nineteenth century. The "Father of Haute Couture" is a fitting title for Worth, but he was also a catalyst for changing notions of gendered occupations in the highly gendered fashion industry.

⁶²Joseph contends "that these dynamics are not pathologically motivated by misogyny, as one strain of popular opinion about gay male designers continues to assert today, but rather as elements of intimacy that interweave with adoration and creativity in a queer affective structure." 270.

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