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The ‘Despised Trade’ in Textiles: H. G. Wells, William Paine, Charles Cavers and the Male Draper’s Life, 1870–1914

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*This paper examines the situation of the male draper in terms of his relationships to textiles and female customers between the 1870s and the outbreak of the First World War. Drawing on accounts of shop work produced by men employed as drapers and drapers’ assistants, the essay highlights the ridicule levelled against men who sold textiles, their work with fabrics and clothing, as well as the service they provided for an almost exclusively female clientele, being widely derided as unsuitable labour for a man. Analysing three first-hand accounts of the draper’s lot — H. G. Wells’s discussion of his years as a draper’s apprentice in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934); William Paine’s *Shop Slavery and Emancipation* (1912), based on the injustices experienced by drapers’ assistants; and the diary of a Bond Street draper, Charles Cavers, posthumously published as *Hades! The Ladies! Being Extracts from the Diary of a Draper* (1933) — the essay shows how social constructions of masculinity framed the draper’s work, particularly the handling of fabrics.*

‘THE DRAPER IS NOT A ROMANTIC FIGURE’¹

Men working as drapers or drapers’ assistants appeared as figures of fun in nineteenth-century cultural representations ranging from literature and cartoons to popular theatre and comic songs.² In his *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Charles Dickens mocked what he perceived as the feminised culture of the linen-draper’s shop where ‘elegant young men [stand] behind the counter, each in a clean collar and white neck-cloth, like the lover in a farce’.³ He also ridiculed the draper’s social pretensions in the figure of Horatio Sparkins, whose deceptions about his gentlemanly status are exposed when he is discovered working behind the counter in a draper’s shop (Fig. 1).⁴ A dandyish concern with fine clothes, effeminate behaviour and social pretensions were qualities which continued to be associated with the draper as the century advanced, when increasing numbers of men were employed in the drapery trade. As the *Cosmopolitan Financier* reported in 1909, Oxford Street had become ‘one continuous drapers shop’,⁵ and Kathryn Morrison has shown that many drapery stores were established ‘to sell the products of the Lancashire cotton mills’ as well as other textiles manufactured in Britain.⁶ Compared to other shop-workers of the period, drapers were particularly stigmatised because their relationship to female customers was considered unseemly. John Tosh argues that a prejudice existed

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against men whose work restricted them to female company because of a 'traditional fear that too much time spent in the company of women would encourage effeminacy'.⁷ Moreover, drapers inhabited a no-man's land in the employment market, their work handling fabrics and selling women's clothing and babywear was seen as neither manual labour nor white-collar work, a form of labour attractive only to idle and effeminate men.

The shopworker has been identified by recent historians as a representative member of the lower middle class, a social group which has tended to be dismissed as dull: 'the sheer lack of heroism of this section of society', Geoffrey Crossick claims, is that '[t]hey fail to do anything very striking, it seems. They are not active on the historical stage'.⁸ The public image of drapers was particularly unheroic; for example, the successful



FIG. 1. George Cruikshank, 'Horatio Sparkins', in Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867).

Victorian draper Owen Owen's record of his life resembles the popular stereotype. Establishing a discount drapery store in Liverpool, Owen formulated his 'rules' for success including, 'Rise very early, and live very well and very cheaply', and 'Do not frequent theatres, music halls, or anything to neglect the business', a thrifty sobriety which did not conform to *fin-de-siècle* masculine ideals.⁹ One proprietor of a Bond Street draper's shop, Charles Cavers, compared himself to Shylock, working 'in a despised trade' and subject to 'clearly-expressed public odium', much of which was based on perceptions of the draper as a man ensconced in a woman's world.¹⁰

This paper considers the situation of the male draper and his relationship to textiles, fashion and female customers between the 1870s and the outbreak of the First World War, a period when, as Christopher Hosgood has shown, 'the representation of the shopman in popular literature as a self-important and pathetic "counter-jumper" lacking true masculinity remained remarkably constant'.¹¹ Drapers were rendered an easy target at a time when 'satirising lower-middle-class effeminacy' was, as Tosh suggests, 'a means of displacing anxiety' about women's social and financial gains.¹² Although they benefited from women's increased power as consumers in the aftermath of the 1870 and 1882 Married Women's Property Acts, drapers remained vulnerable to ridicule because selling textiles to female customers was viewed as inappropriate work.¹³ This negative view, however, is not apparent in recent television depictions of the late Victorian and Edwardian draper; both the BBC's *The Paradise* and ITV's *Mr Selfridge* represent drapers as assertive businessmen rather than feminised figures trapped within a woman's world.¹⁴ Yet throughout the Victorian period drapers were almost invariably represented as ludicrous, despite the frequently harsh working conditions they experienced. The report of the 1892 Select Committee on Shop Hours Bill stated: 'Perhaps it is because he is fairly well dressed and puts on a smile to greet his customers that the public conclude that he must be pretty well situated and comfortable. There never was a greater mistake'.¹⁵ Working long hours for little pay and rarely able to earn enough to support a family, drapers' assistants' neat and stylish dress masked the social and economic oppression they often experienced. In order to understand the actual situation of such drapers and why they were almost universally derided in the culture of the period, it is helpful to examine autobiographical accounts by men who worked in the trade, for these reveal a more complicated picture of life behind the counter.

The published autobiographical writings of H. G. Wells, William Paine and Charles Cavers demonstrate some of the strategies adopted by drapers in the context of conventional models of manliness. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells outlined his apprenticeship in the early 1880s in a draper's store in Windsor and, later, in a drapery emporium in Southsea, painting a bleak picture of his sense of drudgery and entrapment. His account perpetuates the stereotype of the draper, but also emphasises his sense of being overwhelmed by the textiles themselves; considerable strength was needed to work long hours shifting bulky fabrics from the storeroom to the counter. Some of the most well-known fictional representations of drapers appear in Wells's comic romances such as *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910); although he gently mocks his draper protagonists, Wells' early training as a draper made him knowledgeable about textiles. As Simon James has shown, 'his narrative eye always carefully discriminates in matters of clothing and cloth'.¹⁶ An

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account of the draper's life in the Edwardian period is presented in the socialist William Paine's *Shop Slavery and Emancipation: A Revolutionary Appeal to the Educated Young Men of the Middle Classes* (1912). Like Wells, he exposed the sufferings and humiliations endured by shopworkers. Employed as a draper's assistant in a London store, Paine suggested in his book that drapers could escape their feelings of inferiority by finding strength and political awareness in friendship with educated young men, such as homosocial bonds offering a way of counteracting the feminising effects of the shop. By contrast, Charles Cavers, in his eccentric diary published posthumously in 1933 under the title *Hades! The Ladies! Being Extracts from the Diary of a Draper*, attempted to elevate the draper's role to one of social importance. His diary charts a sixty-year career in the drapery business, from his origins as a draper's assistant in 1870s London to his eventual ownership of a Bond Street fashion emporium. His exuberant picture of the draper's life emphasises the pleasures of working with textiles and serving a female clientele, as well as conveying his fascination for well-cut clothes. This positive view of the trade was rarely expressed in the writings of the period. What emerges from these autobiographical texts, despite their differences, is that their authors were aware of themselves as anomalies in relation to prevalent models of masculinity.

This paper places the draper in the context of the oppressive ideologies of the *fin de siècle* and draws on the work of historians who have analysed the period's shifting constructions of gender and the rise of gendered consumer behaviour. Hosgood, in his discussion of historians' neglect of the lower middle classes, examines the situation of the male shop assistant in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, identifying drapers' assistants as 'arguably the most pitiable of the lower middle class' because they were infantilised by the living-in system, forced to inhabit same-sex dormitories and eat in communal dining rooms in or near the shop.¹⁷ The shop owners acted *in loco parentis* even to adult shop assistants. Added to these humiliations was the imposition of fines for the slightest infringement of the rules, such as lateness or untidiness. Referring to Wells's *The Wheels of Chance* as a reflection of the typical draper's lot, Hosgood claims:

It might be fairly argued that a real life Mr Hoopdriver [the draper protagonist] was not so much a parodic representation of his middle-class customers as he was an example of a man who was unimaginative, fearful of authority, and wary of change – ... an adolescent whose working experience proved a barrier to adulthood and the enjoyment of familial relations.¹⁸

The draper's assistant thus figured as a timid adolescent, whatever his age. Indeed, the shop itself was represented as a problematic place for men, whether they served behind the counter or entered to buy goods. Brent Shannon observes that 'Victorian critics of men's consumption reserved their harshest criticism for those men who ... actually seemed to enjoy shopping'.¹⁹ Such views gradually changed when men were 'permitted to have a visual, physical, erotic self to be appraised by the public' which, Shannon suggests, 'marks significant shifts in both socio-economics and constructions of masculinity'.²⁰

Erika Rappaport's work on shopping and gender during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods also usefully complicates stereotypical views of the female consumer and male shopworker. She demonstrates that even the courts expressed contempt for men who sold women's fashion items, for most cases of husbands being prosecuted for their wives' debts involved drapers.²¹ As Rappaport has argued, the passing of the Married

Women's Property Acts left the issue of wives' debts unclear and many shopkeepers erroneously presumed that, if wives did not settle their bills, their husbands were then liable for the costs. The late nineteenth century saw widespread fears about an 'expanding consumer culture unleash[ing] female desires' that were in danger of destabilising domestic life.²² This was the view adopted by the courts, for the law almost always supported husbands who refused to pay their wives' clothing bills. Drapers were condemned for stimulating women's desires for fashionable clothes by luring them into extravagance with their advertising and making credit too easily available. The law responded by presuming that husbands needed protection from drapers' so-called underhand practices.²³ One judge in 1880, Lord Bramwell, stated that: 'It would be very mischievous if the law enabled a foolish woman and any tradesman eager for profit to combine together to impose serious liabilities on the husband contrary to his orders, without his knowledge and against his will'.²⁴ Such judgements placed the drapery trade in a particularly vulnerable position. The ridicule and hostility levelled against late Victorian and Edwardian drapers were evident, and the narratives provided by Wells, Paine and Cavers of their experiences help to explain the difficulties that drapers faced in attempting to live within the constraints of a stereotype. These accounts also offer fascinating insights into the history of textiles, for the handling of fabrics in the context of the feminised space of the shop is presented as both a problem and a pleasure for the male shopworker.

H. G. WELLS AND 'ALIEN AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE' TEXTILES

Despite his association with physical weakness and an interest in textiles and fine clothing seeming 'unmanly', the draper's assistant, according to H. G. Wells, had a physically taxing job. In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, he described the exhausting tasks he was set to do as a fourteen-year-old draper's apprentice:

I had to straighten all [the] stock and pack it up after it had been shown and put it back into the proper fixtures; I had to measure and refold it when the manufacturers delivered it, to block it or to roll it in rolls. This blocking, rolling and folding was skilled work that needed a watchful effort I gave grudgingly, and I never learned to do it swiftly and neatly. You cannot imagine how maliciously a folded piece of sateen can get askew, how difficult it is to roll huckaback, how unruly a fat blanket is to pack up and how heavy unwieldy pieces of cretonne can be when you have to carry a score or so of them up narrow folding steps and adjust them neatly on a rising pile. My department also included lace curtains. These had to be unfolded and held up by the junior apprentice while the salesman discoursed to the customer. As the heap of tumbled curtains grew and the customer still wanted to see something a little different, storms of hatred and revolutionary fervour went on behind the apathetic mask of the junior apprentice, doomed before closing time to refold them all and put them away.²⁵

Yet, despite the physical demands of the work and the extraordinarily long hours, the draper's assistant continued to be represented as weak and foppish, his smart clothes, a prerequisite for the job, read by most people as signs of class pretension and effeminacy. His tendency to wear a polite mask before female customers was frequently derided. Indeed, Wells's early training in deference appeared unshakeable; according to George Bernard Shaw, Wells 'looked as though he was bowing over a counter' when delivering

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public lectures.²⁶ It is possible that Wells's fear of the 'draper within' prompted him to represent as comic the draper-heroes of his novels. As Paine complained, Wells 'elevates [the draper] into fiction, [but] finds such funny names for him as Kipps and Buggins'.²⁷ The creation of protagonists in the form of 'Punch-style caricatures', however, offered little sense of the draper's interior life; yet interestingly Wells presents a more nuanced view of the shopworker's life in his autobiography.²⁸

Wells was particularly galled by the fact that his mother forced him to become a draper's apprentice, despite his expressions of abhorrence towards a career in a shop. He recorded of his mother: '[a]lmost as unquestioning in her belief in Our Father and Our Saviour was her belief in drapers ... she certainly thought that to wear a black coat and tie behind a counter was the best of all possible lots attainable by man'.²⁹ Reflecting in the 1930s on his apprenticeship years of the 1880s, Wells paints a bleak picture of shop life. His first day at work is remembered as the beginning of a period of incarceration: 'I can still feel the unhappiness and dismay of that moment. Retail trade, I thought, had captured me for good'.³⁰ Condemned to learn 'the difficult role of a draper', Wells feared that his would be 'a dreary and hopeless life'.³¹ Yet his need to rebel against his mother's ideal of the draper and his 'genteel' trade stemmed not only from the lack of solitude imposed by the living-in system, where he slept in 'wretched dormitories' with his fellow assistants and ate 'insufficient "economised" food', but also from the tasks he was set to do.³² Wells identifies the textiles themselves, the commodities he sold, as 'alien and incomprehensible', feeling as though within the environment of the shop he had been plunged into an unfamiliar world where fabrics were:

labelled incomprehensively Hard Book or Turkey Twill ... silesia, flannels with a variety of names, a perplexing range of longcloths and calicoes, endless packages of diaper tablecloths, serviettes, and so forth, and rolls of crash, house cloth, ticking and the like. All that stuff had no origin and purpose for me, except that it seemed to have been created to make my life burthensome.³³

Working with textiles, tape-measures and pins, and each day finding '[t]here were a hundred small fussy things to do, straightening up, putting away, fetching and carrying', seemed 'incredibly tedious'.³⁴ Although Wells does not explicitly state it, his rebellion against the drapery trade was also a rebellion against his mother and her desire for him to rise above the role of labourer to adopt a lower-middle-class gentility. According to his biographers Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, Wells 'threatened suicide if she [his mother] would not agree to the cancellation of his indentures'.³⁵ Eventually, after serving only two years of his four-year apprenticeship, Wells left the drapery trade to become an assistant schoolmaster.

Wells's rebellion against his mother and the draper's trade was expressed in an extraordinary short story that he wrote at the turn of the nineteenth century called 'The Beautiful Suit'. It depicts a 'little man' — we are not told whether he is a child or fully grown — who is given a beautiful, elaborately made suit by his mother: 'She told him he must take great care of his suit, for never would he have another nearly so fine ... It was his wedding-suit, she said'.³⁶ His mother protects the suit from dirt and decay by 'tack[ing] little guards over the cuffs and elbows and wherever the suit was most likely to come to harm' and, while he 'hated and resisted these things', the little man feels helpless.³⁷ He fantasises about wearing his suit without its protective wrappings until

this becomes his 'wild desire'.³⁸ One night he tears off the tissue paper and guards and, wearing the suit, leaves 'his mother's house' to wander into the countryside in a journey which resembles in miniature the 'masculine' activities of the explorer and the pioneer; in the process he tears and soils the suit, 'rejoicing' in his freedom.³⁹ Although he is found mysteriously dead the next day, he has 'a happy face', as though it is preferable to be dead than a 'little man' subject to female control.⁴⁰ This anxious story of a mother's domination of her son's life through clothing is perhaps an attempt on Wells's part to translate, even expiate, the feeling of emasculation he experienced when he was forced to work with textiles.

Wells's comic draper novels are less overwrought than 'The Beautiful Suit' because their narratives function on a different register, as a platform for social commentary. The first of these novels was *The Wheels of Chance: A Holiday Romance* in which Mr Hoopdriver, the draper's assistant, is presented as a lower-middle-class nonentity: 'if you had noticed anything about him, it would have been chiefly to notice how little he was noticeable', his 'skimpy, immature moustache' signalling an inability to attain the ideal masculine appearance of the day, and the book's illustrator emphasises his diminutive stature and physical weakness (Fig. 2).⁴¹ When he is away from the shop on a cycling holiday Hoopdriver, ashamed of being a draper's assistant, draws on the idea of imperial adventure to pretend that he is a big-game hunter returned from Africa, thus bolstering his image in the eyes of Jessie, a young lady he meets and finds attractive. Fantasies of empire recur in the later novel *Kipps*, a more autobiographical account of Wells's experiences as an apprentice. Kipps compensates for being trapped behind the counter by imagining himself 'far away, fighting the enemies of the empire, or steering a dream-ship perilously into unknown seas'.⁴² Rebelling against the draper's role, Kipps plans 'to enlist, to run away to sea, to set fire to the warehouse, or drown himself', although his rebellion comes to nothing as 'morning after morning he rose up and hurried downstairs in fear of a sixpenny fine'.⁴³ For Wells, the man condemned to a life in the drapery trade, in an intimate relationship with textiles and daily associating with female customers, was living 'a meagre distressful life ... exceptionally devoid of hope'.⁴⁴ He was unable to imagine that some men could gain pleasure from their trade in textiles for he could not encompass a style of masculinity outside of conventional frameworks. That a man could take an interest in 'Hard Book or Turkey Twill ... silesia, [and] flannels with a variety of names' — and enjoy discussing their qualities with women — was beyond Wells's understanding. He was not alone: the narrow definition of gender-appropriate behaviour that characterised many contemporary commentators' views of drapers, was part of the general denigration of men who were involved in the retailing of textiles.⁴⁵

WILLIAM PAINE AND THE 'RECKLESS LOVE' OF THE DRAPER'S ASSISTANT

Although he wrote a short introduction to Paine's *Shop Slavery and Emancipation*, a denunciation of the conditions endured by shopworkers, Wells was cautious about endorsing the fervid and emotionally heightened tone of this political tract. Paine, like Wells, emphasised the long hours and poor conditions suffered by drapers' assistants who outwardly looked well dressed and in comfortable circumstances for their class position. He was also opposed to the living-in system which required shop assistants



FIG. 2. J. Ayton Synington, 'Mr Hoopdriver', in H. G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance: A Holiday Romance* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1896).

to live communally on or near their employers' premises. Paine described 'sleeping apartments, with their bare walls [which] are little better than prison cells in the majority of West End draper houses', where no baths were provided and the food was meagre and inadequate.⁴⁶ One colleague, a West End draper's assistant, informed Paine that, 'we are kept as prisoners'.⁴⁷ This accords with Wells's account of the shop as infantilising and prison-like, trapping men in a world of textiles and sapping them of their masculinity.

Paine considered the draper's assistant to be 'the poorest slave that creeps and crawls for daily dole and nightly rest. His salary is ridiculously inadequate ... and he is expected to dress as well as a man earning £300 or £400 a year'.⁴⁸ Added to these humiliations was that the draper's assistant was 'condemn[ed] ... to celibacy for the rest of his

life behind the counter'.⁴⁹ Paine advocated socialist solutions to the problems faced by shopworkers, promoting the establishment of boarding houses run by their tenants as a way of circumventing the live-in system, along with raising awareness among shop assistants of the economic imperatives underpinning their conditions of employment.⁵⁰ Addressing the draper's assistant directly, Paine referred to the 'New Industrial Order' of big store owners, whom he considers to be 'idle people':

These are their shops. This big drapery store is theirs. There it stands, the most considerable building in every town, thronged by day and thronged by night, the modern temple and Mecca of all middle-class women, sly, insinuating, incomparably seductive ... This is the draper's shop. If its front doors are flung wide open to vanity, from its back doors goes forth oppression.⁵¹

Paine's final chapter, called 'The Way Out', is the section which is most likely to have troubled Wells when he wrote his cautious introduction to the book, for here the solution to the trials and hardships of a draper's assistant's life is shown to lie in what Paine termed '*the reckless love of comrades*'.⁵² Carpenter-like socialism and intense homosocial bonds are presented as methods to alleviate the draper's sense of oppression.⁵³ This 'reckless love' concerns the emotional bond between 'two young men of equal age, who, in the first warm generous feelings of youth, are prepared to act with a fine disregard of consequences in standing loyally by each other'.⁵⁴ As a draper's assistant, Paine had found strength in such friendships, particularly cross-class relationships. He suggested that middle-class men and male shopworkers should work together to find a political and emotional common ground.⁵⁵ Male comradeship would also counteract the assistant's necessary absorption during working hours in the concerns of the shop's female clientele. Denied access to masculine role models, young drapers' assistants, according to Paine, needed male guidance. Having found an 'impressionable' young shopworker, the enlightened middle-class 'friend' should 'teach him to live dangerously, encourage him to take part in every sport that offers risk to life and limb'.⁵⁶ The mentor-friend should also 'live dangerously': 'Always you have to be prepared to lay down your life for him [i.e. the young shop assistant] at any moment, or for anyone else in his presence, so that your own example shall convince him'.⁵⁷ To avoid the emasculating effects of the draper's shop, Paine suggested that the shop assistant and his mentor-friend should become involved with the Scouts movement or working-class boys' clubs as a way of bringing together boys and men of all classes in an environment free from women. The comrades were expected to undergo a ceaseless 'crusade' to protect each other from the injustices of employers, and with recourse to the traditional imagery of masculine endeavour, Paine saw the mentor-friend as a '*knight errant*', while the shop assistant resembled his '*page*'.⁵⁸ Yet this friendship was not, Paine emphasised, of a sexual nature: 'We have nothing left but each other. We cannot marry'.⁵⁹ He added a warning against homosexuality and its associated risks of illegality when he stated that in such friendships there should be 'no room for the hazardous indulgences which too often result in perverted sexuality'.⁶⁰ He emphasised the forging of male-male bonds as the best way to experience an alternative to the female-dominated space of the draper's shop. Only by seeking an exclusively masculine environment could the draper's assistant redeem his manhood.

Wells and Paine depicted the male draper as a sorry, despised figure who needed to defend himself against the drapery store's 'soft' world of femininity and fabrics. Both proposed rebellion, whether through radical politics or physical escape, as the only way for the shop assistant to develop self-respect and assert his rights as a worker with an independent masculine identity. Charles Cavers, however, refused to accept society's negative view of the draper as a despised 'counter-jumper' and attempted to change public perceptions. A successful Bond Street store owner, he represented drapers as men worthy of respect, and his diary is a reflection on his long career from a draper's assistant employed in London in the 1870s to a stroke of good fortune when an unexpected inheritance enabled him to become the owner of a West End fashion emporium. Cavers was aware of how London's retail sector was segregated by gender and class, but for him the relationship of men to textiles, clothing and fashion was not intrinsically 'unmanly'. Indeed, his journal challenged the prevalent image of the draper as a man who had forfeited his masculine identity and situated him in a broader context than the shop. As a proprietor of a West End emporium, Cavers unsurprisingly adopted a different political stance from Wells and Paine; however, because he records his experiences as a young shop assistant in uncongenial situations as well as an employer, his journal is particularly useful. Cavers saw shop work as demanding and not always reliable, given the vagaries of the market, but he also depicted it as interesting, especially for men with a talent for design and the ability to appreciate fashionable clothing. For Wells and Paine these qualities were problematic because they indicated a femininity they wished to reject; Cavers, however, while aware that such traits represent a non-normative style of masculinity, refused to be made uncomfortable by his choice of a career in the drapery trade.

The entries in *Hades! The Ladies! Being Extracts from the Diary of a Draper* were mostly undated, being originally written on slips of paper and in notebooks, making it difficult for the editor, Sacheverell Smith, to present them in chronological order. Smith chose this title because Cavers frequently exclaimed, 'Hades! The ladies!', when his wealthy female customers were being difficult to please. However, despite the frustrating paucity of dates, some things are made clear from the internal evidence, such as references to world events, book publications on their first appearances, newly opened exhibitions and first-night theatre performances. A significant year for Cavers was 1882, when he inherited a fortune from an uncle who had emigrated to New Zealand to become a sheep farmer, and he used this money as a deposit for a mortgage on a Bond Street glove and lace shop which had been established in 1816. Just a few years before his retirement in 1930, Cavers finally paid off the mortgage, having expanded the shop into 'a complete emporium for ladies'.⁶¹ Cavers's career, so despised by his male acquaintances, depended on the profits from an enterprise of colonial expansion and he was aware of the irony that his uncle the frontiersman had 'made [him] the sole proprietor of a Bond Street Emporium of Fashion'.⁶²

Cavers appears to have found the writing of his journal an outlet for the many frustrations he experienced as a draper. Frequently hurt by the insulting comments of his male acquaintances, he complained that: 'There is a social prejudice, definite and antagonistic, against the draper and all his doings'. Describing being regularly snubbed by 'the hearty young men' at his club, on one occasion he overheard a colleague dismissed

as ‘only a damned draper ... a bloody baby-linen merchant’.⁶³ One way of resisting such dismissals was to link the draper to images of a traditional, idealised masculinity, and Cavers’s diary has many references to his chivalrous role as a ‘modern knight-errant’.⁶⁴ While Paine drew on similar images of masculine endeavour to protect his virility from what he saw as the degradation of working in the feminised space of the shop, Cavers insisted that the draper embodied the idea of chivalry: he ‘searches the world to find those things which may adorn her [i.e. Woman], and he sails the seas in order that she may properly set herself up as the queen of all living things’. However, Cavers later dismissed this as ‘romantic nonsense’, admitting that he was ‘merely sore and suffering from the much-talked-about inferiority complex’.⁶⁵ His journal was written to counteract this sense of inferiority which society, with its policing of gender norms, had imposed upon him.

Yet Cavers, who thought of himself ‘as an intellectual in my calling and a serious student of the science of clothes’, was aware of the wider ramifications of the drapery trade in economic and social terms.⁶⁶ He expressed scorn towards those who dismissed fashion as trivial, reflecting upon the importance of textile production and the fashion industry’s ability to generate a vast, global economy: ‘Wool, cotton, silk, and now this new artificial silk, what a mammoth industry it is, and how many millions draw their livelihoods from it!’.⁶⁷ While Wells and Paine emphasised the draper’s entrapment in his shop, immured in the local, the feminine, and the trivial, Cavers saw the draper as part of a vast global trading network when he exuberantly exclaimed: ‘Wool — Australia, farmers, wool-brokers, teamsters, railways, docks, cranes, porters and carriers, ships, engineering; Suez Canal, sailors and dock again’, while he referred to the work of ‘fullers, spinners, weavers, cloth salesmen, dyers, commercial travellers; London, Paris, tweeds, suitings, broadcloth’.⁶⁸ His shop thus represented for him the culmination of a considerable amount of labour and the international movement of textile commodities. Cavers proudly wrote: ‘It is a great business, of long lineage, of prime economic importance, of profound illimitable human interest’.⁶⁹ What he failed to mention, however, were the various levels of exploitation which existed between the frontline labourers who harvested the raw materials and manufactured the cloth in textile mills and the wealthy customers who bought the latest fashions in Bond Street. Wells and Paine, by contrast, as socialists were aware of such economic disparities and injustices, making their narratives important correctives to Cavers’s story of the well-to-do draper with capital.

Nevertheless, Cavers’s journal is valuable because it is one of the few texts to present the draper’s career in favourable terms. Indeed, he had a pronounced sense of his vocation. The journal records his responses to books which relate to his calling, which he read voraciously, as well as others on his ‘favourite subject — clothes’, one of his most-read books being Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1834) which he termed ‘the classic of clothes’.⁷⁰ Cavers’s sympathies were usually with women, his customers who, like him, found aesthetic pleasure in fashionable, well-made clothes. He searched everywhere in literature and history for examples to justify and masculinise his passion for clothing, preferring to read those authors who at least understood the position of the shopkeeper or shop assistant, such as Zola in his novel *The Ladies’ Paradise* (1883), based on the workings of a Parisian department store, and Wells’s comic drapery novels set in provincial towns. Cavers recorded his sense of affinity with the latter’s

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draper protagonists, whom he called, 'these little fellows, these worms, these shrimps, these Mr Pollys, these Mr Kippses, these characters which H. G. Wells so understands, these are the ones who claim my interest and from whom I cannot withhold my affection. Perhaps they are too like myself for me to do otherwise'.⁷¹ However, he remained aware that the draper was viewed as an anomaly among men, despised for his association with a largely female world of fashion, admitting that his business was designed to 'benefit ... my patrons, the ladies of London and their daughters; and although I ejaculate from time to time "Hades! The Ladies!"', it is 'not in any irreverent spirit'.⁷²

Cavers's complaint against the low social value imposed upon the draper was by no means unfounded, for male drapers were thought to prey in an unchivalrous way upon 'weak' women, tempting them to get into debt to buy the latest fashions. Analysing the social hostility he encountered, Cavers concluded that drapers were unpopular because men's money was transferred to them via the spending habits of their wives and daughters; he also believed that men despised other men who were 'sober, prudent, well-doing ... polite'.⁷³ Convention dictated that men should not place themselves in subservient positions to women as this was presumed to overturn the 'natural' order of gender relations. Yet Cavers insisted that the draper's so-called subservience was actually his chivalrous behaviour towards women. He asserted men's rights to be interested in textiles, good design and fashion, although he often used a light-hearted tone to express this: 'We drapers, when we pass beyond the Golden Gate, will not be able to restrain ourselves from wondering from what fabric the robes of the blessed ones are made'.⁷⁴ Yet the occasional flippant comment does not detract from Cavers's serious interest in high-quality textiles and good design. For example, in a discussion of the work of a contemporary textile designer called Chipping Way, Cavers decided to buy from him 'a lovely piece of heavy brocade ... it is as beautiful as a picture'.⁷⁵

Cavers's position as the owner of a Bond Street fashion emporium allowed him scope to forge his career as a draper, giving him the freedom to develop high-level skills as a buyer of textiles and advisor to his designers, dressmakers and customers. No doubt this freedom was unusual, as the majority of drapers and their assistants worked in more mundane establishments in provincial towns and villages. Nevertheless, Cavers indicates in his journal that for some men a career in a draper's shop could be interesting and rewarding. As Dorothy Davis has demonstrated, drapers 'have always been in the forefront of innovations in retailing', and it is the draper's creative entrepreneurial flair, so evident in Cavers's career, which is emphasised in the television series *The Paradise* and *Mr Selfridge*.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

Not all men believed, as Wells did, that textiles were alien commodities; neither did all drapers feel degraded by close association with female customers, as Paine felt when he recommended that shop assistants seek male-only environments in their leisure time. Cavers pointed towards an alternative view of the draper's trade as a satisfying career. Drapers faced the same difficulties that all shopkeepers encountered within the fluctuations of a capitalist market; however, they also needed to keep pace with an ever-growing

range of textiles, including newly developed artificial fibres, be aware of the latest fashions, and expected to talk authoritatively about the qualities and care of fabrics to a discerning female clientele. British drapers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, as Morrison has shown, were required to develop sophisticated ‘persuasive skills’, for their female customers tended to be knowledgeable about fabrics and were inclined to interrogate them about the products available.⁷⁷ Culturally the skills associated with tact, politeness and persuasion, along with good taste in dress and an ability to listen, have been associated with women, rather than men. It is significant that from the 1920s onwards, male assistants were increasingly replaced in British drapery stores by female employees, and it is likely that the ‘social prejudice, definite and antagonistic, against the draper and all his doings’ played a part in narrowing the range of employment opportunities for men who sought careers in textile retailing.⁷⁸

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