

## **Millennial Masculinities**

**Melanie Davies**

**University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion**

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### **What do we Know about Beau Brummell?**

Beau Brummell was an infamous figure in his day because of his close relationship with the Prince Regent - later to become George IV - and for what Virginia Woolf described as 'some curious combination of wit, of taste, of insolence, of independence'. (Woolf, 1925: np)

Brummell has since been the subject of many narrative accounts of his life, one of the most recent being a BBC Television Drama, *This Charming Man*, adapted from a popular biography by Ian Kelly.

Kelly's reading of Brummell, as a modern-day celebrity, is informed by the theoretical writing on contemporary celebrity culture. (Church-Gibson: 2011, Dyer: 2007, Turner: 2014) For fashion historians and fashion theorists, Beau Brummell is also a significant figure because he is accredited with the reinvention of menswear and thus a new version of hegemonic masculinity. While the implications of these readings of him are explored as part of a wider understanding of the cultural significance of fashion as popular culture, attitudes to fashion history, which have seen it described as 'hemline history' (Jarvis, 1998:3) ensure that Brummell is generally not considered in more 'serious' historical theorizing.

Brummell is therefore largely absent from historical writings on the significant period within which he lived and died (7 July 1778 – 30 March 1840). This saw revolutionary activity throughout Europe and the collapse of the Ancien Regime in France. Hereditary monarchy in Britain, by contrast, emerged from the period in a stronger position and strengthened by an ever-expanding empire. Part of this success was that it managed to negotiate an uneasy truce in relation to the complex class politics of the time and the relation between Beau Brummell and the Prince Regent can be seen as emblematic of one aspect of this.

This paper aims to begin an analysis of the discursive construction of Beau Brummel, using perspectives drawn from theoretical writing on fashion and celebrity culture. It considers the idea that the significance, both political and cultural, of the relationship between Beau

Brummell and the future George IV is obscured by current attitudes to popular culture like fashion and celebrity culture.

I use a cultural studies perspective which, as an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary field of enquiry (Barker, 2004: 42) draws eclectically from other disciplinary perspectives. My paper is informed, in particular, by Stuart Hall's 'detour through Gramsci' (Hall, 1988) in a reading of the relationship between Beau Brummell and the future George IV (as well as the observation of it) as 'historical conjuncture' and as 'a reversal of the revolutionary project'. (Hall, 1988:162) It poses the questions: What do we know about Beau Brummell? What can a transdisciplinary (Osborne 2015) approach add to this?

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