Once Delilah emasculated Samson by cutting his hair. Today, she believes she can make herself virile by cutting hers.


**IN FRANCE DURING THE 1920s, FASHION WAS A HIGHLY CHARGED ISSUE.** In 1925, an article in *L'oeuvre* jocularly described how the fashion of short hair had completely overturned life in a small French village. After the first woman in the village cut her hair, accompanied by “tears and grinding of teeth” on the part of her family, the fashion had quickly become “epidemic: from house to house, it took its victims.” A gardener swore he would lock up his daughter until her hair grew back; a husband believed that his wife had dishonored him. A scandalized curé decided to preach a sermon about it, but “unfortunately he had chosen the wrong day, since it was the feast of Jeanne d'Arc.” As he began to condemn bobbed hair as indecent and unchristian, “the most impudent young ladies of the parish pointed insolently at the statue of the liberator.” By claiming the bobbed-cut Joan of Arc as their mascot, these young women grounded their quest for “liberation” in the rich, tangled mainstream of French history. They appealed to the ambivalent yet strongly traditional image of *Jeanne la pucelle* (Joan the Virgin), at once patriotic, fervently Christian, and sexually ambiguous.

The fashion among young women for short, bobbed hair created enormous tensions within the French family. Throughout the decade, newspapers recorded lurid tales, including one husband in the provinces who sequestered his wife for bobbing her hair and another father who reportedly killed his daughter for the

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same reason. A father in Dijon sought legal action against a hairdresser in 1925 for cutting the hair of his daughter without his authority. "At present, the question of short hair is dividing families," argued Antoine, one of the hairdressers who pioneered the bobbed cut. "The result," according to journalist Paul Reboux, "was that during family meals, nothing is heard except the clicking of the forks on the porcelain." One working-class woman, who was in her twenties during the era, remembered that her mother-in-law did not talk to her sister-in-law Simone for almost a year after the latter bobbed her hair. René Rambaud, another hairdresser who helped to popularize the cut, recalled the story of a newly married woman who cut her hair, believing that she had the right to do so without consulting her parents. Her mother and father in turn accused her husband and his parents of the monstrous crime, leading to a rift so severe that the two families did not reconcile for twenty years.

The outcry concerning the fashion of bobbed hair can be explained in part by its novelty and unfamiliarity. Short hair exemplified the dramatic, provocative changes sweeping the world of French fashion. Notions of female fashion had undergone a profound transformation since the beginning of the century. According to the journalist René Bizet, for example, every aspect of female dress had not only changed but become the mirror opposite of what it had been in 1900. Both before and during the war, as the ideal of the voluptuous, curvaceous woman gave way to a sinuous, smooth, "modernist" one, the compressed structural lines and highly ornamental fashions of the previous century were radically simplified. Paul Poiret pioneered the new minimalist style within the elite world of haute couture in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Working-class and middle-class women began to adopt the more efficient approach to fashion during the war.

3 See Rambaud, Les fugitives, 240; and Gaëtan Sanvosin, "La jeune fille et les plaideurs," Le Gaulois, November 6, 1925, Dossier 391 Coiffure, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (hereafter cited as BMD). A good example of just how seriously fashion was taken in this era is the size of and evidently careful research in Marguerite Durand's dossiers on fashion and hairstyles. Durand was a prominent feminist and a collector of a major archive on women, consultable today at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. Her dossiers, which consist of a plethora of articles carefully gleaned from the daily press and other periodicals, form a substantial part of the research of this article. Where possible, I have tried to verify the dates of articles and the accuracy of the quotations in the original publications. Besides using the dossiers on fashion at the BMD, my method has been to systematically research fashion, women's, and mainstream periodicals during the years 1918 to 1927, as well as to read all pamphlets and books on the subject published during these years.
4 A. Décaux, Histoire des françaises, 2 vols. (Paris, 1972), 2: 1007. See also Rambaud, Les fugitives, 205, where he refers to "la tempête d'imprécations et de violence contre ce mode." See also 216, 231, and 240, where he refers to "cette lutte épique" within families over short hair.
7 Rambaud, Les fugitives, 240.
8 Bizet, La mode (Paris, 1925).
9 Bizet, La mode. See also Vogue, March 1, 1923, and September 1, 1924; and "L'histoire de la mode féminine de 1900 à 1924: Huit des vingt-cinq poupées de Mmes Lafitte-Désirat," L'illustration, June 21, 1924, Dossier Mode, BMD.
10 Historian Valerie Steele argues that the Poiret avant-garde style was being diffused in the years.

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sporty, casual mode by further simplifying Poiret's style. Mass-produced and meticulously imitated throughout France, the Chanel style reached its peak of popularity by 1925 and held sway until 1927 or 1928.\textsuperscript{11} The craze for short hair typified this chronology of change in the fashion world.

At the fin-de-siècle, excessive, baroque hairstyles had dominated, and, in the pre-war years, only a few actresses, such as Caryathis and Eve Lavallière, cut their hair short.\textsuperscript{12} Precisely who was responsible for popularizing the bob is a matter of dispute. Coco Chanel, who cut her hair in 1916, is often credited with the revolution in hairstyles, as are two hairdressers, Antoine Cierplikowski and René Rambaud, who pioneered the style in professional circles during the early 1920s (see Figure 1).\textsuperscript{13} In any case, between 1918 and 1925, short, bobbed hair “à la Jeanne d’Arc” or “aux enfants d’Edouard,” grew in popularity and by mid-decade was sending shock waves throughout France.\textsuperscript{14} Important to the popularity of the bob was the 1922 publication of Victor Margueritte’s novel \textit{La garçonnière}, about a young “modern woman” who rejects her bourgeois family, cuts her hair, adopts male dress, and leads a hedonistic and “liberated” life in Paris. According to René Rambaud, the novel, which became an overnight best seller, inspired young women throughout France to cut their hair and to follow the new style “à l’allure garçonnière.”\textsuperscript{15} After 1922, the new styles were associated particularly with the young, sexy, independent “garçonnière” or “femme moderne.”

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just prior to the war as well, but she does not detail how or why except to say that it was promoted in avant-garde art. See her excellent \textit{Paris Fashion: A Cultural History} (New York, 1988).


\textsuperscript{12} It was the hairdresser Antoine who claimed to have cut off Eve Lavallière’s hair. In his autobiography, Antoine Cierplikowski, \textit{J’ai coiffé le monde entier!} Présentation et propos recueillis par Jean Durtal (Paris, 1963), 104–07, Antoine told the story of how he “discovered” the bob in trying to make this forty-year-old actress look young enough to play the part of an eighteen-year-old. Just as he was pondering what to do, he saw a young girl with very short hair bearing a letter for the actress. As legend has it, the actress Caryathis cut off her hair in 1913, as a response to a man whom she had failed to arouse. She tied a ribbon around her shorn locks and left them hanging from a nail in his home. See Edmonde Charles-Roux, \textit{Chanel: Her Life, Her World, and the Woman behind the Legend She Herself Created}, Nancy Amphoux, trans. (London, 1975), 164, where the author credits Caryathis for inspiring Chanel to cut off her own hair. Historians Catherine Lebas and Annie Jacques view the writer Colette as one of the pre-war pioneers of short hair, both because she cut her own and because she gave her fictional character Claudine short hair. See their \textit{La coiffure en France du moyen âge à nos jours} (Paris, 1979), 269–74, for a detailed history of the bob.

\textsuperscript{13} In her diary on May 30, 1917, Misia Sert, the famous Russian musician, attributed the trend to Coco Chanel. See Edmonde Charles-Roux, \textit{Chanel and Her World} (London, 1981), 79. See also “La coiffure,” \textit{Vogue}, December 1, 1924, where Chanel is credited with starting the fashion of short hair. According to Lebas and Jacques in \textit{La coiffure en France}, Antoine published the first short hairstyles in the professional press on March 1, 1919.


\textsuperscript{15} Rambaud, \textit{Les fugitives}, 248. See also Lebas and Jacques, \textit{La coiffure en France}, 273. For the phrase “à l’allure garçonnière,” see Magdaleine Chaumont, “Confidences,” \textit{Comoedia}, March 18, 1925, Dossier Mode, BMD.
The fashion styles that emerged in the 1920s differed dramatically from those at the turn of the century. Since the new look emerged gradually, however, the controversy it inspired cannot be explained solely in terms of its novelty. Memoirists, in looking back on the decade, invariably described the new styles as central to the spirit of the era, suggesting the broader cultural significance of fashion. "Short hair was not only a fashion, it was an epoch. It was a particular sign of a time," argued Rambaud in his memoir.\(^\text{16}\) The "epoch" of short hair began immediately after the war, when the new bobbed cut first became an object of widespread controversy.\(^\text{17}\) If we are to believe the radical feminist Henriette Sauret, the bob already preoccupied the French in 1919, when relatively few women were actually cutting their hair. During that year, Sauret made fun of male journalists who, faced with major stories such as the Paris Peace Conference, demobilization, and the Bolshevik "threat," still concerned themselves with women's hair. "This urgent question," Sauret sarcastically observed, occupies "a good third of their daily remarks." Short hair, she wrote, "holds a certain interest for men which has gone undetected by us, because they deign to devote to it the precious emanations of their brains."\(^\text{18}\) Although Sauret was obviously exaggerating, her remarks raise an interesting question. What "undetected interest" did short hair hold in order to become the focus of so much emotion and anger? If fashion was a sort of text, a complex visual language that postwar observers "read" in various ways, what was it about the new style that gave offense? How did

\(^{16}\) Rambaud, _Les fugitives_, 253. See also Smith, _Confessions of a Concierge_, 57.

\(^{17}\) The precise starting point of the bob controversy is difficult to ascertain. The earliest articles I was able to find concerning the controversy date from 1919. Paul Reboux, "Opinion: Cheveux coupés"; and "Longs ou courts?" _L'œuvre_, February 23, 1919; Pierre Chaine, "Autre opinion: Les cheveux coupés," _L'œuvre_, January 15, 1919.

\(^{18}\) Henriette Sauret, "Préoccupations masculines," _La voix des femmes_, January 30, 1919. This article was, in part, a response to the series of articles in _L'œuvre_ cited above. For another, later commentary on how everyone was talking about fashion, see Eugène Marsan, "D'une révolution du costume," _De la mode:_ Hier—aujourd'hui—demain (Les cahiers de la république des lettres des sciences et des arts), no. 7 (July 15, 1927): 49–50.
postwar observers—journalists, clergy, pamphleteers, designers, feminists—explain its dramatic and explosive power?

I will argue that postwar observers interpreted the new fashion in two ways: as a visual language for the war's social upheaval and as a visual fantasy of female liberation. The new styles emerged during the war and postwar periods—years of dramatic change in French gender relations as well as in fashion. In this context, a first set of postwar observers, especially natalists and Catholics, interpreted fashion as evidence of a refusal among women to pursue traditional gender roles. Fashion bore the symbolic weight of an entire set of social anxieties concerning the war's perceived effects on gender relations: the blurring or reversal of gender boundaries and the crisis of domesticity (la crise du foyer). The belief that women were becoming more like men and rejecting their traditional domestic role existed as early as the fin-de-siècle period but was greatly exacerbated by the war's disruption of the normal hierarchies of status between men and women. One of the most commented on of the war's effects was its blurring of sexual difference. Although the entry of women into higher education and traditionally male professions had begun in the 1890s, the war accelerated this process, as women took over male jobs and often had sole charge of the family. Even after the war, many bourgeois women continued to work outside the home, in great part because of the devastating economic effect the war had on their families.

In this age of social and cultural transformation, issues of gender roles and identity concerned, worried, and even traumatized French men and women. Such anxiety found expression in the increasing attention to female identity in the fictional, theoretical, and periodical literature of the years 1917 to 1927. A preoccupation with gender issues was also articulated in fears concerning the crisis of domesticity and the growth of the natalist movement during the same period. Natalist rhetoric warned of a widespread crise du devoir maternel, an unwillingness on the part of women to have children, despite the fact that little evidence exists to suggest that women were, in fact, scorning motherhood. The


20 For example, the number of middle-class women entering liberal professions such as law and medicine jumped dramatically during these years. See Edmée Charrier, L'évolution intellectuelle féminine (Paris, 1931), for a statistical analysis of some of these changes.

21 For the increase in attention to gender issues in postwar periodical and fictional literature, see Anne-Marie Sohn, "La Garçonne face à l'opinion publique: Type littéraire ou type social des années 20?" Le mouvement social, 80 (1972): 26. For a more detailed examination of the debate, see Roberts, Civilization without Sexes.

22 The birth rate for the years 1920–1925 was 19.7 per 100 inhabitants, a dramatic increase not only over the wartime decline but also over the pre-war figure of 18.2. Hence while the birth rate was low, it was in fact higher in comparison with pre-war figures. In addition, after this initial postwar revival, the birth rate again began gradually to fall, dropping to 14.8 by the five-year period just before World War II. The reasons for these demographic trends are complex and not reducible to women's assumed desire (or lack of it) to have children. But it is striking to note that the birth rate during the very period in which fears concerning a crise du devoir maternel seemed to peak was in fact the highest in the two-decade period surrounding it. See Colin L. Dyer, Population and Society in Twentieth Century France (New York, 1978), 50, 67–69.
mother as an image of female identity inspired a comprehensive array of social policies, such as legislation on abortion, military and financial privileges for large families, and the establishment of state-run maternity institutions. Natalist values were so pervasive in postwar France that only the most politically marginal figures, such as socialists and radical feminists, dared to denounce them openly. While historians usually associate the deep anguish connected to the crisis of domesticity with postwar natalist rhetoric, the same sentiments shaped the debates over fashion.

A second set of postwar observers, among them, fashion designers and feminists, interpreted the new look differently. For these people, fashion became the means by which women gained a necessary freedom of movement—and thereby were liberated. According to the feminist Henriette Sauret, the new fashions were not created by men to fulfill or further their ideal of female desirability; rather, they were created by women themselves “to respond to our personal aesthetic or our need for convenience.” Sauret described short hair as “a gesture of independence; a personal venture.” This second reading of fashion in turn raises questions concerning fashion, feminism, and politics worth examining in greater detail. What did it mean politically to argue that these new styles gave women some measure of independence? Did they, in fact, allow women more freedom of movement, and what connection, if any, did this physical emancipation have to more general feminist aims? What, in other words, were the politics of postwar fashion?

The political significance of fashion in postwar France has not been adequately explored by historians, perhaps because of theoretical assumptions concerning the relationship between fashion and social change. Many historians interpret the change in female fashions during these years as nothing more than a derivative expression of social changes already under way. They explain the trend among women toward short hair and a looser, more carefree style of clothing as a reflection of a new freedom of movement women enjoyed in both professional and social circles that was itself brought about by the war. Fashion is thus denied a historical dynamic of its own; it becomes a “marker” but not a “maker” of social change.


24 Sauret, “Préoccupations masculines.”


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When historians do interpret fashion as transformative, they tend to characterize it as a negative homogenizing force associated with mass consumer culture. Most often, feminist historians, for example, have presented twentieth-century fashion as an element of modern consumerism and an agent of social control, which objectified and manipulated women as sex objects. According to this argument, as fashion became an intense preoccupation of women during this period, it facilitated their assimilation into mainstream patterns of behavior, effacing specifically female forms of cultural expression and thereby defusing female political activism. Finally, French feminist historians have dismissed the young garçonne or modern woman with whom the new fashions were associated as entirely apolitical. Perceived in terms of an “individualistic” or “lifestyle” approach to emancipation, the modern woman’s quest for freedom is seen as frivolous and self-centered. As the historian Bonnie Smith has defined it, the modern notion of womanhood “included efficiency at home and work, energy in
The modern woman signified a preoccupation with sex, marriage, career, and shopping rather than politics. However, if postwar fashion was mere consumerist frivolity, what did Sauret mean when she described it as “a gesture of independence”? “Unlike Samson who lost his strength in losing his mane,” quipped Sauret, “we may gain total power in cutting our hair.” The myth of the biblical Samson, which is seen frequently in the debate concerning the bob, gains particular relevance in the immediate postwar context because it formed the basis of the meaning of poilu, the French sobriquet for the trench soldier. Originally meaning “covered with hair” or “hairy,” poilu eventually gained the connotative sense of “homme robuste” or simply “homme,” from the myth of a virile Samson. Another press name for the women’s short, bobbed cut was “coiffure au poilu de 2e classe,” and the cloche hats of the 1920s have been closely compared to those of the poilu during the war. The investment of the female bob with a kind of virile power doubly inverted the poilu-Samson myth: first, because less, not more, hair granted power and, second, because women themselves became “virilized” Samsons—rather than shearing Delilahs. These inversions of power and gender in the poilu-Samson myth suggest a link between the bob cut and social anxieties concerning the war’s perceived reversal of gender boundaries.

Furthermore, one can scarcely ignore the political role that dress has played in French history. During the upheaval of 1789, for example, men and women signaled their allegiance to revolutionary change by demanding the elimination of aristocratic and religious distinctions of dress and by wearing sans-culottes, the bonnet rouge, or the cockade. A law for an official revolutionary costume, adopted in 1795, was given this rationale by Grégoire: “The language of signs has an eloquence of its own; distinctive costumes are part of this idiom for they arouse ideas and sentiments analogous to their object, especially when they take hold of the imagination with their vividness.” Revolutionary fashion was invested with political significance inasmuch as it acted as a language of signs capable of presenting a “vivid” (visual) image of the new republican citizen. By providing the

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30 Sauret, “Préoccupations masculines.” La voix des femmes was a socialist feminist paper that became increasingly communist after 1920.
33 For the Samson and Delilah myth, see also this description of the bobbed cut in Victor Margueritte’s La gargon (Paris, 1922), 161–62: “Today for a woman, it is the symbol of independence, if not power. Once Delilah emasculated Samson by cutting his hair. Today, she believes she can make herself virile by cutting hers.” In addition, see Antoine’s reference to the myth in his J’ai coiff le monde, 79. Here Antoine joked that when he created the bobbed cut, he revenged Samson by depriving Delilah of her hair and hence her power to charm men.
new political imaginary with a graphic representation of itself, revolutionary
costume could "arouse" allegiance to its analogue, republican ideals. Dress had an
"eloquence of its own." It was seen as a way to shape character, the maker as well
as the measure of the republican citizen.36

As clothing became commercialized into fashion, it became political in a more
subtle and less conscious way than in the revolutionary period.37 Nevertheless,
postwar fashion—the short hair and scandalously abbreviated dresses of the
modern woman—acted as a political language of signs in the same manner that
Grégoire had outlined in 1795. Feminists, designers (both male and female), and
the women who put on the new fashions interpreted them as affording physical
mobility and freedom, in short, as a visual analogue of female liberation. When
the new fashions were widely interpreted in this way, they became invested with
political meaning. To wear them was to challenge traditional notions of gender
difference and to arouse sympathy for freedom and autonomy for women. In
other words, fashion constituted a semi-autonomous political language that
served as a maker as well as a marker of the modern woman. Postwar fashion
figured in a larger struggle for social and political power.

THE OUTCRY CONCERNING SHORT, BOBBED HAIR was embedded in a larger debate
on the new fashions that began during the later war years and most likely peaked
in the years 1924–1926.38 Before turning to this wider debate, let us examine the
social and economic context in which it occurred, as well as its place in the general
history of French fashion. The centrality of fashion to a larger discourse
concerning identity and power makes particular sense for France, where Paris
had dominated the industry worldwide since the seventeenth century. Fashion
played a central role in the postwar economy and was also a form of cultural
expression. The fashion industry itself had been ruled by the haute couture
designers since the mid-nineteenth century.39 Although only a minute fraction of
French women could afford haute couture, it was widely imitated and disseminated
throughout France and the world by the fashion press and the ready-to-wear
fashion industry. A proliferation of fashion journals and the rise of the depart-
ment store also characterized the growth of the industry in the late nineteenth
century. Trends initiated by French designers were enormously influential in
deciding what the fashionable woman wore; yet other factors, such as commercial
promotion, methods of production, and consumer demand also affected changes
in fashion.40

36 Hunt, Politics, Culture, and Class, 82–83. The notion of clothing as a political sign extended even
further back to the ancien régime, in which the different orders, trades, and professions were
identified by their dress.
37 I am indebted to Edward G. Berenson of the University of California, Los Angeles, for this point.
38 My chronology here is based on the number of articles I was able to find that concerned the
wider social and behavioral implications of the new fashions and that appeared in both fashion
magazines and the wider bourgeois press from the late war years through the 1920s. As far as I can
tell, this type of article peaked in numbers during the years 1924–1926.
39 See Roselle, La mode, 50.
40 Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age
(New York, 1985), 17–18.
The industry enjoyed a period of prosperity after the war. Due to the diminution of European royal and aristocratic circles, Parisian designers found themselves catering to new customers, among them the nouveaux riches, writers and artists, and rich Americans. Many new houses opened, including that of Coco Chanel, the first nationally and internationally known female couturier. The influence of haute couture designers became greater than ever after the war. Although mass production of fashionable styles had begun many decades earlier, postwar fashion was democratized in an unprecedented manner. As René Rambaud, pioneer of the bobbed hairstyle, explained, “Up until this time, fashion remained the privilege of a certain part of society; at this point, it penetrated all social classes, from la plus grande aristocrate to the humblest village dweller.” The transformation in the clothing industry toward mass marketing, as well as the development of the popular press and a full-scale advertising industry after the war, made fashion increasingly a product for mass consumption. The broad social dimensions of the postwar fashion controversy need to be understood against this background of a burgeoning consumer culture. When George Sand dressed like a man in the 1840s, she was likely to remain an isolated phenomenon; when Coco Chanel did the same in the 1920s, she could be imitated throughout France and the world.

Within this social and economic context, a dramatically new style of women’s dress arose in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a style most frequently associated with the designer Paul Poiret. “It was the age of the corset,” Poiret later reminisced, “I waged war upon it. It was in the name of liberty that I brought about my first Revolution, by deliberately laying siege to the corset.” Poiret here likened himself to a revolutionary storming the Bastille of Victorian fashion, thereby restoring to women their innate right to freedom of movement. In addition, Poiret’s art-deco fashion plates, illustrated by Paul Iribe and then Georges LePape, revolutionized fashion illustration. Poiret was less concerned with transmitting information about the design involved and more intent on conveying a “modern spirit” through a flat, highly decorative, and abstract style. His illustrations were “cubist,” in that the construction and detail of the dress remained vague and subordinate to the overall design. Poiret’s idealized designs took on a life of their own, bringing fame to Poiret’s dresses apart from how they actually looked on women.

41 Deslandres and Müller, Histoire de la mode, 115–16.
42 For biographical information on Coco Chanel, see Charles-Roux, Chanel; and Chanel and Her World.
43 Rambaud, Les fugitives, 253. In the secondary literature, see Delbourg-Delphis, Le chic et le look, 100–01.
44 Steele, Paris Fashion, 219; Braun-Ronsdorf, Des merveilleuses, 201. In Fashion and Eroticism, however, 226, Steele also argues that Poiret’s personal influence on fashion has been exaggerated and that the new styles were pioneered between 1892 and 1908 in many of the big designer houses, such as Lanvin’s.
45 Quoted in Peter Woolen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body,” New Formations, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 5–33; see also Steele, Paris Fashion, 10; and Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity (London, 1985), 40. According to Wilson, Poiret claimed to have abolished the corset by 1908.
46 See Steele, Paris Fashion, 219–23. Poiret’s fame and fortune became a casualty of the war. He served in the army as a tailor, and, when he returned to Paris in 1918, he was not able to recover his business, his popularity, or his marriage. See Yvonne Deslandres with Dorothée Lalanne, Poiret: Paul Poiret, 1879–1944, Paula Clifford, trans. (New York, 1987), 57.
Although designers such as Poiret spearheaded the new image of beauty within the elite world of Paris couture long before 1914, working-class and middle-class women did not adopt it until after the war broke out. In the somber spirit of the war years, the old ornamental froufrous and decorative accessories were put away and neutral colors adopted. Women doing factory work, for example, began to dress in simple sheath-like frocks and short, full skirts called war crinolines (crinolines de guerre). Even after the war, large jewelry or ornament of any kind that drew attention to itself remained out of fashion. The taste for a more convenient, minimalist, pared-down look persisted, even as French women returned from the war hospitals and factories.

In the years immediately following the war, Coco Chanel, the youngest and most daring of the Parisian couturiers after the war, further popularized and developed the new style. Besides opening the world of haute couture to women, Chanel tried to create a style for "the modern woman," as she was called, that was comfortable, practical, and compatible with an "active" life. "Chanel expresses the heart and soul of la femme moderne," declared the title of a 1923 article in Vogue.

In part because jersey was so difficult to sew, Chanel simplified and abbreviated her designs to an extent that Poiret had never dared, creating a sporty, casual look. She removed the waistline altogether and radically shortened the skirt to well above the ankle (Figure 2). Chanel also adopted male fashions—short hair, ties, collars, long tailor-cut jackets, and pyjamas—to create a boyish look.

Chanel's style of dress peaked in popularity at mid-decade and maintained its dominance in the fashion world until 1927 or 1928, when designers such as Jean Patou and Elsa Schiaparelli began to reassert the waist and the bust. Although the new style followed a fashion cycle of growth and decline in the ten years from 1918 to 1928, its basic aesthetic and lines remained unaltered. Hence the period represents an internally consistent stage in fashion design, and it is also possible to group together fashion commentary and debate from these years as a coherent body of evidence. Chanel's styles became very popular in the postwar years, meticulously imitated by young girls throughout France. At the same time, they became inscribed in a debate concerning female identity and power as well as the...
perceived effect of the war on gender relations. Because of its relatively consistent character over the ten years following 1918, this debate on fashion is best explored thematically rather than chronologically, by analyzing the way in which the new fashion was read by, first, its critics and, second, its defenders.

The most vociferous critics of the new fashion included traditional conservatives, such as Catholics and natalists, in addition to a smattering of journalists, writers, and fashion commentators whose social and political positions remain difficult to fix. Their invective concerning fashion began in the immediate postwar period and seemed to peak during the years 1925 to 1927. The majority of these critics were men; but, since many of fashion's most ardent supporters were also male, namely fashion designers and hairdressers, no simple historical
analysis by gender is possible. What the critics of fashion found offensive about the new styles was their effect of reversing or blurring the boundaries of sexual difference, enabling women not only to look like but also to act like men.55 Clément Vautel articulated this view as early as 1918 in a cartoon that neatly illustrates the political stakes in the debate on fashion (Figure 3). Vautel was a prominent novelist and journalist, well known for his natalist and anti-feminist views.56 His cartoon features a female shop worker (midinette) being arrested “for the crime of wearing attire said to be feminine, including a skirt.” The female policemen wear male uniforms and harsh, authoritarian expressions. In Vautel’s fantasy of the future (the article is titled “Feminism in 1958”), women have seized political control from men. The cartoon relates the fears that women could no longer be “women” even if they wished to do so and that they were becoming

55 This fear of masculinized or “desexed” women has a long history in the Third Republic and is not unique to the postwar period. See, for example, Gay L. Gullickson, “La Pétoleuse: Representing Revolution,” Feminist Studies, 17 (Summer 1991): 241–65.

56 The cartoon is from Clément Vautel’s “Le féminisme en 1958,” Je sais tout, May 15, 1918, Dossier Anti-Féminisme, BMD. For Vautel’s natalism, see his article in Le journal, August 25, 1923, decrying depopulation in the village of Montélimar, and his novel Madame ne veut pas d’enfant (Paris, 1924). Vautel was also referred to as a formidable anti-suffragist in the feminist monthly Le droit des femmes, February 1919.
indistinguishable from men in their appearance as well as in their possession of traditionally male powers.

Above all, Vautel meant his cartoon to be funny, and certainly the lament that fashion was erasing the boundaries of sexual difference frequently became the subject of innocent humor. A column in the women’s magazine Fémina told the story of a woman who was driving dressed in a riding outfit that made her indistinguishable from a man. When she caused an accident with another car by her own recklessness, the other driver, a man, emerged from his ruined vehicle. Enraged enough to mistake her sex, he sluggèd her in the jaw. An article in the radical-socialist journal Le quotidien (1924) worried that women who bobbed their hair might eventually suffer from baldness, that once strictly male source of anguish. Because medical wisdom at the time held that the shortness of one’s hair caused baldness in some way, Le quotidien wondered “if it wouldn’t be necessary to pay dearly in a few years for this fantasy of young womanhood?”

Elsewhere, the new tendency of women to “disguise themselves as men” was not met with humor but with serious observation and invective. “Smoking, wearing short hair, dressed in pyjamas or sportswear,” complained the writer Francis de Miomandre, “women increasingly resemble their companions.” In 1925, an anonymous Catholic author declared, “Modern women shouldn’t try to ‘masculinize’ themselves, and thus to lose their sex.—A woman becoming a boy: Oh no!” Some critiques were grounded in fashionable scientific discourse, such as that on sexual perversion inspired by the translation of Havelock Ellis’s work into French. “The species feels itself endangered by a growing inversion,” the literary critic Pierre Lièvre argued in 1927, “No more hips, no more breasts, no more hair.” Evolutionary theory linked fashion trends to an ominous biological future. “I myself don’t know if Lamarck had foreseen this transformation of the species,” wrote the poet Jean Dars in a 1925 survey on the jeune fille. “It is not written in his History of Invertebrate Animals that young girls were supposed to take on the appearance of boys so soon.” In reading fashion as a visual erasure of sexual difference, postwar critics spoke of a certain absence or lack of definition, which characterized both the new female body and “womanhood” itself. They interpreted the fashions that the modern

57 “De petites choses,” Fémina, May 1921.
58 “La mode des cheveux courts rendra-t-elle les femmes chauves?” Le quotidien, September 3, 1924, Dossier 391 Coiffure, BMD. The article has a serious tone, despite its comic effect.
60 Francis de Miomandre, Notes et maximes: La mode (Paris, 1927), 40–41. He declares that the same thing happened in 1700 and quotes from a book called Le théophraste moderne, ou Nouveaux caractères sur les moeurs. Controversies about fashion can be traced back to the early eleventh century; see, for example, Henri Platelle, “Le probleme du scandale: Les nouvelles modes masculines au XI° et XII° siecles,” Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire, 58 (1975): 1071–96. Anon., Aux femmes chrétiennes: Le scandale de la mode (Besançon, 1925), 15. For still another example of the Catholic viewpoint, see Bruyère, Une mode féminine, 17, where the author argues that in cutting her hair, a woman “will appear to have abdicated a privilege, that she is less a woman.”
61 Pierre Lièvre, Reproches a une dame qui a coupé ses cheveux (Paris, 1927), 54–57. Havelock Ellis’s Études de psychologie sexuelle (19 volumes) were translated and published continuously in France during the period 1908–1935.
62 Jean Dars, “Enquête sur la condition et les aspirations des jeunes filles d’aujourd’hui,” La grande revue, October 1925, 637–38. See also “La mode masculine impose sa loi aux femmes,” Le figaro, April 1925, Dossier Mode, BMD.
woman wore as reproducing her inability to be defined within the boundaries of traditional concepts of womanhood. To them, the visual erasure of sexual difference symbolized the erosion of other kinds of cultural and social boundaries. In 1925, a young Parisian law student asked:

Can one define la jeune fille moderne? No, no more than the waist on the dresses she wears. Young women of today are difficult to locate precisely. If you want to stay within the French tradition, it would be a barbarism, in my opinion, to call our pretty parisiennes young women.

These beings—without breasts, without hips, without "underwear," who smoke, work, argue and fight exactly like boys . . . —these aren't young women!64

For this observer, the rejection of the highly structured female form in the modern woman's visual appearance symbolized the unrestrained social and cultural space she seemed to inhabit. In the same year, the novelist Christiane Fournier called the young modern woman "a monster," explaining that "I only want to say that she has been thrown by her time beyond the realm of natural law. We work [outside the home], and cause a great deal of trouble for ourselves . . . we aim for our ideal, which is to 'masculinize' ourselves. Our hair is short, we are independent in both word and deed."65 Both observers above emphasize the modern woman's inability to be "located precisely" within the "natural laws" and "traditions" of French society. The silhouette of la femme moderne—as a being without breasts, without waist, without hips—visually articulated this erosion of traditional cultural categories.

Critics of the new styles frequently inscribed their popularity within a socioeconomic context of the crisis of domesticity, women's so-called rejection of the traditional maternal, domestic role. As early as 1919, the natalist doctor François Fouveau de Courmelles claimed that the new styles had "reduced" women "to the state of eunuchs or sticks [bâtons], in which no supplementary being could find a place to live or be nourished." He dubbed postwar fashion "the fashion of non-nursing . . . the fashion of non-motherhood." For Courmelles, fashion itself besieged the set of norms, values, and social practices that had structured female identity in terms of a maternal, domestic role throughout the nineteenth century. Scanty dresses left the female body vulnerable to winds and drafts, and women were bound to harm their reproductive organs. Postwar fashions, by transforming women into sexless eunuchs, non-mothers, and non-women, were the reason behind the falling birth rate.66 Such complaints continued throughout the decade. In 1920, the natalist Catholic pamphlet La mode est coupable (Fashion Is Guilty) also described the new styles as physically dangerous and accused young women in this way: "Your children will suffer because of you, and the future generation, product of an age of pleasure, will not know to conserve what our soldiers have

64 M. Numa Sadoul, excerpted from "Une controverse: L'émancipation de la jeune fille moderne est-elle un progrès réel?" Progrès cinqe, June 13, 1925, Dossier Féminisme, XXème Siècle, BMD.
66 Dr. François Fouveau de Courmelles, "Modes féminines et dépopulation," La revue mondiale (November 1, 1919): 278–81.
defended.”\(^6^7\) Two other Catholic critics of fashion, Mademoiselle de Saint-Seine and Frère A. Vuillermet, argued in 1926 that modern women “do not want children because the short, new dresses no longer lend themselves to the disfigurements required by maternity”; consequently, “the most serious interests of the race are compromised.”\(^6^8\) Conservatives such as Roger Boutet de Monvel and Marius Boisson, also condemned the new styles for causing a woman to ignore her family and home. “There is a repudiation of the womb, since she no longer wants to be a mother,” wrote Boisson in 1925, and “a repudiation of breasts of any size . . . since if, by chance, she is a mother, she no longer wants to nourish her flesh.”\(^6^9\)

Fashion’s power to shock articulated the trauma of rapid change and upheaval, both in French gender roles and in French culture and society generally. Veteran, novelist, and future fascist collaborator Pierre Drieu la Rochelle critiqued the physical appearance of the modern woman in “Le pique-nique” (1924), a short story about a disaffected war veteran named Liessies and his girlfriend Gwen: “She is extremely thin, mere skin and bones . . . Women are cutting their hair as a sign of sterility. Sections of her hair are hidden under her handkerchief. She walks with empty hands; she wears no jewelry; she is completely uncovered.”\(^7^0\)

The language that Drieu la Rochelle used to describe Gwen confuses her nakedness with other less tangible qualities, such as deprivation, barrenness, a scarcity of warmth and pleasure. As such, the language evokes a moral anguish that exceeds the boundaries of mere description. In the story, Gwen’s metaphoric sterility described here represents the spiritual impotence and malaise felt by the veteran Liessies, with whom Gwen is involved. To Drieu la Rochelle, the modern woman evokes a sense of exposure and a fundamental loss of innocence.

The same preoccupation with the starkness and sterility of the new fashions marks a later book titled Reproches à une dame qui a coupé ses cheveux (1927). The author, literary critic Pierre Lievre, condemns his neighbor because, in bobbing her hair, she lost the ability to distinguish between those to whom her hair was always done up and those to whom she let it down in the intimacy of her home. “One well knows that she can no longer transform herself in the bedroom: one knows her exactly as she is.”\(^7^1\) For Lievre, short hair signified a new frankness in women’s behavior, as well as the loss of a virginal intimacy, a domestic, private pleasure. Speaking of those husbands and lovers who had suffered from “the cruel fashions which reign today,” Lievre concluded with this lament: “their


\(^6^9\) See Roger Boutet de Monvel, “De l’influence des modes sur les moeurs,” *Vogue*, April 1, 1922. Roger Boutet de Monvel was a fashion writer for both *Vogue* and the highbrow *Gazette du bon ton*. Marius Boisson, “Pour nos omnibages,” July 15, 1925, n.t., *Dossier Mode*, BMD. Boisson was a prolific novelist. See also “La femme moderne: Vénus androgyne,” *La rumeur*, 1928, *Dossier Mode*, BMD.


\(^7^1\) Lievre, *Reproches*, 16.
intimacy has lost its crowning glory. They no longer awaken near a tousled lover, but instead, a friend with disheveled hair.”72 Short hair, as Lièvre saw it, was cruel in the sense that it destroyed not only sexual difference but also a familiar, intimate, interior life.

The “modern woman” signified a colder, more impersonal world. In 1924, the novelist Magdeline Chaumont critiqued her sterility:

Warped by life or only by fashion, we distance ourselves from what could be called somewhat disdainfully: tender feelings . . . Observe in any public place the expression which all women wear upon their faces. Do we see one who is kind, dreamy or satisfied? No, they all have features which are shut, hard, spiteful . . . Put simply, women are becoming nasty, aggressive; one expects from them a cruel or disagreeable word. There is no longer either the heart of the mother nor that of the daughter or lover. There is the dried-out heart of la femme moderne, the universal heart has become a desert.73

As in the case of Drieu la Rochelle and Lièvre, what charges this description of the modern woman is once again the replacement of a “dreamy,” “tender” world of warmth and satisfaction with one that is colder, sterile, more exposed. “Warped by life or only by fashion”? The distinction was hard to draw, particularly as fashion itself took on the symbolic weight of anguish concerning the perceived loss of idealism and innocence. These components of a lamented pre-war life—at once very familiar and very far away—were believed to be the hard casualties of the war. Even the physiognomy of the modern woman became a way of talking about the loss of the “dreamy” pre-war era, the trauma of rapid change, and the arrival of a brave new world. Fashion thus operated as a text that conveyed the same cultural malaise or crise de l’esprit that Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Paul Valéry, Romain Rolland, and other prominent writers made famous after the war.74

The critics’ invective against the new styles suggests that they gained popularity in a socially conservative, natalist atmosphere. Given this social and cultural climate, it was necessary for those who liked the fashions—designers, merchandisers, young women, some journalists—actively to defend and foster their development. The supporters of fashion, whose defense of the new styles seemed to peak at mid-decade, chose to praise it as a means of giving women a necessary freedom of movement and thus emancipating them from old social as well as physical constraints.75 A young woman justified her wearing such clothes

72 Lièvre, Reproches, 9–10, 14, 16.
73 Chaumont, “Les élégances: Confidences.”
75 Critics of fashion also sometimes spoke of fashion as emancipatory as well. For example, C. Jeglot, otherwise a critic of postwar attire, could not help but praise the fact that “our short dresses
by arguing that the modern woman “does not like to be restricted; this is why she is rejecting attire which could hinder her movements.” Defenders of the new look created a vivid image of a new kind of woman who leads a mobile, athletic, and independent life. To do so, they adopted two discursive strategies. First, they aligned the new styles with the aesthetic of modern consumer culture, defined in terms of mobility and speed. Second, they conflated physical and psychological qualities in their logic of human behavior: how one dressed encouraged behaviors analogous to the visual image produced. This conflation of the visual and the behavioral was key to the politics of women’s fashion in the postwar era.

Supporters produced a notion of fashion as “emancipatory” by equating the new look with the aesthetic of modern consumer culture. The rise of mass culture, the adoption of new forms of transportation and communication, and the growth of consumerism were socioeconomic developments well under way by 1914 but were intensely accelerated by the war. Fashion was by nature visual and dynamic, a constantly changing marketable mass of images and a mark of the capitalist commodification of the body; thus it became integral to the new aesthetic of mass consumer culture. Bonnie Smith has argued that “fashion made women at once more desirable, more efficient, and in need of new goods.” The fashions of the modern woman were often associated with the new palladiums of pleasure in the postwar world—the tea dances (thé dansants) and jazz clubs—as well as American consumer culture.

The fashionably dressed modern woman was also linked to the new consumer plaything of the decade: the automobile. At mid-decade, advertisers, novelists, and social observers pictured women (much more than men, it seems) behind the wheel of the car, creating a visual image of female mobility and power (Figure 4). In L’aventure sur la route (1925), a popular novel about a modern woman who tours France in her new car, the heroine is described as a beautiful, sleek animal who moves effortlessly in the clothes she wears: “An astonishing ease accompanied all of her movements. It seemed as if her clothes imposed no servitude upon her; she moved with the glorious animal independence of gymnasts in their tights.” In 1927, the dramatist “Rip” described the new position of the modern woman as liberating from dust, from mud, . . . they are adapted to our active, hurried and industrious lives”; La jeune fille et la mode (Paris, 1928), 11.

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78 Smith, Changing Lives, 416.

79 See Deslandres and Müller, Histoire de la mode, 116.

80 In 1920, there was 1 automobile per 165 French inhabitants; in 1930, the figure was 1 per 28 inhabitants. See Singer, “Technology and Social Change,” 321. In order to determine when female images begin to predominate in car advertising, I looked at approximately ten French fashion and popular magazines from the years 1918 to 1927. For the link between the modern woman and the automobile, see also Delbourg-Delphis, Le chic et le look, 121.

81 Raymond Rienzi, L’aventure sur la route (Paris, 1925), 14.
Because I chose a CONDUITE INTÉRIEURE CITROEN?...

Mais, cher ami, regardez-la et dites si l'y a pas quelque chose de féminin dans son élégance.
Coquette et docile, nerveuse et souple, croyez-moi, c'est la voiture des femmes modernes.

Figure 4: “Why have I chosen a CONDUITE INTÉRIEURE CITROEN? . . . But, cher ami, look at it and say there isn't something feminine in its elegance. Coquettish and docile, responsive and agile, believe me, it's the car of femmes modernes.” Advertisement for Citroen, Fémina, January 1921.

woman: “Athletic as well as capable of exercising most male trades, la femme moderne, firmly installed behind the wheel of the torpedo which takes her to her office, store, or factory, has understood the superiority that severity of dress confers upon a man.”82 These advertisers and writers created the image of a woman who leads a busy, fast-paced, and independent life, and who is empowered by the “mannish” fashions she wears.

Like the automobile itself, these fashions created an ethos of mobility and speed in tune with the “freedoms” of modern life. According to an article in the fashion magazine Fémina (1924), modern women “dress in such a way so as not to be hindered in their gestures; they are adapting themselves to an era in which one must act quickly, walk with a hurried step, jump into a car, and proceed, in the least amount of time possible, from one occupation to another.”83 “Nothing stops her, nothing fills her with fear,” wrote a female columnist for Le figaro in 1925. “Intrepid, she drives her own car while waiting to pilot her airplane.”84 A year

84 Camille Duguet, “Critique de la mode,” Le figaro, March 11, 1925, Dossier Mode, BMD. As for the designers, she argued that “ils situent mieux la mode dans le décor de la vie moderne, trépidante et mouvant à l’excès.” See also the letter by Lucien Lelong to Duguet, probably in response to this
later, the designer Lucien Lelong shared the “secret” of the modern woman’s fashions: “to be dressed in such a way so as to live for the speed—I would even say the electricity—of every passing moment ... Tout est vitesse prodigieuse and we appear in a dazzling film.”85 “Women want to walk, run, do sports,” wrote the prominent aristocrat André de Fouquières in 1927. “Nothing can prevent them from doing so, nature is regaining its rights ... Suddenly, the noise of a motor! C’est la réalité présente! life! movement! vertigo!”86 By fusing the spirit of the new fashions with this modern consumer ethos of freedom, suppporters of fashion were able to present it as liberated and liberating.

In making their emancipatory argument, supporters of the new styles further relied on the unexamined assumption that what one wore affected how one behaved (and vice versa). As early as 1919, Paul Reboux, a journalist for the bourgeois daily L’oeuvre, drew on such logic to defend the new bob. He began by reminding his readers of the political and symbolic importance of fashion in French history: “After the Empire, the struggle between advocates of the wig and those of emancipated hair offers a marvelous image of the Restoration.” In the same way, Reboux argued, the short, bobbed cut signaled political and social changes in the postwar era. Speaking of the war, he claimed that “in these four years, women were emancipated ... They have virile occupations. They are going to vote. It is quite natural that their hairstyle be adapted to this new condition.”87 Eight years later, in 1927, Reboux made the same defense of fashion, this time stating his argument more explicitly: “Free movement of the human body must accompany an age in which the individual is emancipated.”88 And he continued to praise the bob as “the clearest symbol of female emancipation.”89

Prominent designers also inscribed the new fashions within a socioeconomic context of the war’s disruption of female identity, describing fashions as markers of change. In 1927, Jacques Worth wrote: “The war changed women’s lives, forcing them into an active life, and, in many cases, paid work ... As the years pass by, women feel enamored by more freedom, hence the easier style of dresses.” Another designer, “Premet,” agreed: “The woman of today has given up

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86 Fouquières, “Les tendances de la mode,” De la mode, 45. See also Roubaix Prouvost, La mode en 1927 (Paris, 1927), who makes a reference to how women’s fashions fit “dans le cadre de son existence nouvelle.” He argues that there were three inspirations of contemporary fashion, ‘jeunesse, mouvement, sport,” and refers to the life of a young woman as “une vie pleine de mouvement.” See also Marsan, “D’une révolution du costume,” 70.

87 Reboux, “Opinion: Cheveux coupés.” See also the response to Reboux’s first article, “Autre opinion,” L’oeuvre, January 15, 1919, by Pierre Chaine. Chaine reminded Reboux that cutting women’s hair has traditionally been a public humiliation for those women who have been “too friendly with the Boches” and who are therefore considered guilty of treason.

88 Paul Reboux, “Grandeurs, variations et décadences de la mode,” De la mode, 17. See also Marsan, “D’une révolution du costume,” 47. In his article, “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper,” American Quarterly, 21 (Spring 1969): 45-63, Kenneth Yellis argued that the American flapper’s abandonment of traditional female dress paralleled her rejection of a passive sexual, social, and economic role from which such dress gained its meaning.

89 Reboux, “Grandeurs, variations,” 16.
for good the restraints placed upon her."90 In hindsight, hairdresser René Rambaud explained the popularity of the new style in this way:

The woman who took an active place in industrial, commercial, artistic, social life during what is called “The Great War” has in part conserved it . . . Rapidly and not undeservedly, women are winning their right to freedom. And to equality perhaps . . . in a bold and impressive jump, this generation is surmounting the high barriers of tradition, prejudice and established morality concerning hair: she is having her hair cut.91

To Rambaud, bobbed hair was associated with a broader fight for freedom, equality, and the attempt “to surmount the high barriers of tradition.” One could argue that for designers and merchandisers, this emphasis on freedom and mobility was merely an effort to sell women on the new styles rather than a genuine promotion of freedom for women. Despite the possibility of such mercenary motives, the fact that these promoters made this kind of argument for the new styles becomes significant, inasmuch as it reveals their intuitive sense of what would attract women about the new styles—what image of themselves and of their lives women hoped to project through wearing them. Fashion acted as a presentation of self, in part grounded in fantasy and wish fulfillment. What these designers believed they offered were images of fashion as change, liberation, and freedom from constraint.92

Although the origins of such images are impossible to determine, feminists were using them to describe fashion in the early 1920s, several years before they were adopted by the designers quoted above. As we have seen, the radical feminist Henriette Sauret described short hair in 1919 as “a gesture of independence; a personal venture.” According to Augusta Moll-Weiss, a well-known feminist and founder of the household rationalization movement, when women of all classes were working, they demanded fashions “which one can put on easily, rapidly.” Complicated fashions were no longer popular, she argued in 1921, because women “no longer tolerate impeding their freedom of movement for the benefit of laws whose omnipotence they no longer recognize.”93 In 1922, feminist journalist Jane Misme, editor of La franfaise, praised the new, more abbreviated swimsuits worn by young women for giving them ease and freedom of movement in the water: “anything which stands in the way of the harmonious and necessary development of the body can only be a false kind of grace and modesty.”94 By describing the old swimsuits as “false,” Misme implied that the new ones more

90 Quoted in Marsan, “D’une revolution du costume,” 85–86.
91 Rambaud, Les fugitives, 237–39. See also Antoine Cierplikowski, J’ai coiffé le monde, 10: “la guerre de 14–18 avait obligé les femmes à travailler . . . Il en résultait pour elles, la guerre terminée, une grande liberté d’allure qui correspondait à une nouvelle liberté d’esprit. Cela n’allait pas sans causer quelque désarroi parmi les hommes. Ils avaient quitté des compagnes dévouées qui s’effartaient volontiers devant l’omnipotence masculine; ils retrouvaient des collaboratrices indépendantes décidées à jouir leur partie.”
faithfully expressed a woman’s “natural” self. Maria Véroné, a prominent postwar feminist leader and the editor of the bourgeois feminist monthly *Le droit des femmes*, agreed with Misme. “The women who have preceded us,” she maintained, “gave us the bad example of fake hair, false sentiments, marriage without love.” By contrast, she argued, “we wear short hair, dresses which are not constricting and we want to have a profession, in order to be independent.”^95^ Like Grégoire, Véroné believed that dress constituted a symbolic language that, through its vividness and ability to excite the imagination, “arouse[d] ideas and sentiments analogous to their object.” Fake hair encouraged duplicity in one’s life as well as one’s appearance, leading inevitably to “false sentiments” and loveless marriage. Likewise, the “non-constricting” clothes of the modern woman created a visual analogue of liberation, encouraging an “independent” life.

Feminists such as Sauret, Moll-Weiss, and Véroné presented fashion as a maker as well as a marker of change because it had the ability to encourage new behaviors analogous to the visual image produced. Can one say, then, that fashion authorized feminist emancipation? It is debatable whether the new fashions were, in fact, physically liberating, able to facilitate physical mobility and therefore a more independent life. Freedom of movement is a relative concept, and certainly the new styles were liberating in comparison to the crimped, corseted fashions of the fin-de-siècle. Even a cursory glance at the narrow tubular skirts and the high heels of the 1920s, however, casts doubt on the mobility that such styles could have afforded women. They were comfortable only by comparison to pre-war fashions.^^96^ Writing on fashion in 1924, Jacqueline de Monbrison first proclaimed that “contemporary fashion is essentially comfortable, and . . . *femmes modernes* will never accept a restrictive fashion.” Yet, some pages later, she admitted that the new styles of Jean Patou, for example, were “so narrow that ‘madame’ will not go very far, and would do well to have the car wait for her to return.” She also confessed that dressing and undressing in the new styles presented enormous difficulty: “By what miracle are we able to get into our dresses? . . . Mystery! and above all, yes above all, by what other miracle are we able to get out of them?”^97^ In *Reproches à une dame*, Pierre Lièvre disabused readers of the idea that comfort or freedom of movement had anything at all to do with fashion. Given modern conveniences, he argued, women had less need to move freely than ever before: “You are telling me that the woman who drives her little Citroën should not be restricted in her movements?”^98^ The new style was no more carefree than it was physically liberating.

^95^ Cited in Lebas and Jacques, *La coiffure en France*, 269. See also Camille Duguet, “Critique de la mode”: “la femme moderne, ou plus exactement, la femme d’aujourd’hui ne ressemble et ne veut surtout plus ressembler à la femme d’hier. Pratique, sportive, réaliste et positive, elle entend vivre sa vie à sa guise, en se libérant chaque jour d’une de ces préjugés opprimant jusqu’alors sa faiblesse.”

^96^ Heels remained high, despite the fact that in January 1918, doctors Quenu and Ménard presented a lecture at L’Académie de Médecine on, in Gabriel Perreux’s words, “les inconvénients du talon haut pour la santé des femmes.” See *La vie quotidienne des civils*, 267.

^97^ Monbrison, 96, 100–01.

^98^ Lièvre, *Reproches*, 34.
to the historian Marylène Delbourg-Delphis, a new concept of beauty arose in the 1920s, particularly after mid-decade. This concept was based on faith in the body’s malleability, its ability to be shaped and improved. As a result, she points out, women began to use more make-up and invest greater amounts of time and money in beauty products for face, skin, and hair.  

An article in Vogue during 1923 commented on how long women were spending in “instituts de beauté” and insisted that to achieve the look, the modern woman must “greet with a smile the incessant admonitions, the harsh instructions of the trainer, masseuse, professor: “Stand up straight, don’t slump your back, eat little, don’t drink, walk, get up, lean over... think of your health, of hygiene above all.” Several such instituts de beauté were begun during the 1920s, especially in the later years of the decade.

Although women claimed that the new bob cut was “practical” and easy to care for, one commentator asked in 1924, “who will be persuaded that a few minutes every day devoted to the maintenance of long hair in the intimacy of the home can be compared to the interminable periods of waiting at the hairdresser’s?” The political writer François de Bondy agreed in 1927 that women now spent their lives at their hairdresser and remarked that “to pretend the contrary would be a little like saying that it was more practical for us men to shave every morning than to grow a beard.”

In addition, after 1920, the style of dress required excessive thinness, which could only be achieved by continuous, strict dieting. A panoply of new products appeared on the market to help women shape their sometimes unwilling bodies into conformity with the new silhouette. These included such panaceas as Dr. Duchamp’s l’Iodhyrine, “approved and recommended by the French and international medical body,” Dr. Jawas’ “Mexican tea,” “L’ovidine-Lutier,” which promised a “marvellous result, without diet or danger,” the Gigartina seaweed sugar-coated pills (dragées) designed to thin the chin, thighs, and waist, “Galton pills,” also to rid women of double chins, and “Tanagra dragées,” containing thyroid to dehydrate women and produce “in no time an elegant and supple silhouette.”

With a tone of great pity, a 1924 Vogue article described the regime of “la malheureuse who has resolved to maintain an ideal weight”: “Hours passed in the gym, mornings devoted to the brutal hands of masseuses, thyroid pills taken despite the risk of permanently ruining one’s health, masks or rubber girdles to slim down waists or faces.”

Although traditional types of corsets were abol-

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99 Delbourg-Delphis, Le chic et le look, 118. Delbourg-Delphis makes no precise chronological analysis concerning this development of a new concept of the body. However, she seems to argue that it becomes particularly important after mid-decade. See also Steele, Fashion and Eroticism, 241–42; Marwick, Beauty in History, 298–99; for America, Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York, 1983).

100 “A la conquête d’une nouvelle jeunesse,” Vogue, April 1, 1923.

101 Delbourg-Delphis, Le chic et le look, 118.

102 Bruyère, Une mode féminine, 26.


104 See Delbourg-Delphis, Le chic et le look, 106.

105 See advertisements in La femme, 1920; and La mode pratique, October 1922. See also Miomandre, Notes et maximes, in which he makes a reference, p. 26, to the means “parfois terribles” by which women get thin.

106 “Traité de la silhouette féminine,” Vogue (November 1924): 48. See also Clément Vautel, “Etre mince ou ne pas être,” Art, goût, beauté, May 15, 1924, in which he excerpts the statement of a young femme moderne, Nicole: “Pauvres femmes que nous sommes... notre existence n’est faite que de sacrifices... Si vous saviez ce qu’il faut souffrir pour rester svelte!” In Fashion and Eroticism, 241,
ished, most women still wore constraining undergarments of some kind, such as the straight elastic girdle or bust bodice.  

Steele describes how the era marked the “internalization” of the corset, as a new emphasis was put on strict dieting.  


108 See “La mode qui vient,” L’illustration, June 11, 1921. Poiret banished the traditional corset but replaced it with a “cache-corset,” which eventually became the brassière. He called postwar women “telephone poles.” See Deslandres, Poiret, 99, 149.

109 “La ligne nouvelle,” Vogue, December 1923. This article recommends several different kinds of corsets and girdles, each for one occasion (such as tennis or evening wear). See also Lucie Neumeyer, “Le panégyrique du corset,” Art, goût, beauté, March 1925. Without the corset, Neumeyer argued, “la silhouette actuelle n’aurait point cette grâce élégante, cette ferme souplesse qui sont de grands charmes. S’en passer? Quelle erreur!” Finally, see Andrée Santeuil, “Dernières créations de la mode,” in the trade journal Les élegances parisiennes, no. 6, 1921.

110 Bizet, La mode, 17.

From this perspective, the new fashions look like an elaborate marketing ploy to feed the growth of a burgeoning beauty industry, including make-up and skin-care manufacturers, owners of instituts de beauté, hair salon owners, diet specialists, and the hauts couturiers. In this sense, postwar fashion can be understood as a sort of modern consumerism that exploited women in the pursuit of profit, as feminist historians have claimed. Far from enjoying freedom, women who bought into this quest for beauty found themselves locked into a relentless and time-consuming set of physical and financial constraints.

But if postwar fashion was not as “liberating” as it appeared, why did feminists and the women who wore the styles present them as affording enormous mobility and freedom? According to the journalist René Bizet, who wrote a treatise on fashion in 1925, it was the illusion of freedom, if not freedom itself, that was the objective of the new look. In Bizet’s words, “there was a tyranny of liberty in current fashion.” Women went to desperate lengths in order to produce “the illusion of being free” through their clothes.  

The fashion writer Jacqueline de Monbrison supported this notion in 1926 by referring to Princess Irène, a woman who took no less than two hours with her maid to prepare for the evening. But the desired effect, according to Monbrison, completely disguised this effort: “The effect of extreme elegance that she produces would hardly lead someone to
Figure 5: An advertisement for various beauty devices, from Fémina, 1924.

I suspect that it took two hours to achieve, so much is it dependent on the triumphant appearance of simplicity."111

Thinking about the new fashions as producing the illusion of freedom, rather than freedom itself, can help us to determine their political importance. By conceiving of fashion as a language of movement and change, even when it was not, designers like Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel created a visual fantasy of liberation.

111 Monbrison, 41; see also page 15, where she admits that women must diet, have massages, and wear corsets in order to achieve the line in fashion.
Merchandisers succeeded in selling the new styles by projecting an image of liberation from constraint; the women who wore them were attracted to this fantasy and wanted to express it as their own. In defining fashion in terms of personal emancipation, feminists such as Verone and Misme also helped to define its cultural interpretation. The fantasy of liberation then became a cultural reality in itself that was not without political importance. The image of la femme moderne adopted by French women—as intrepid, powerful, active, and athletic—created a visual analogue of the freedom that many women of all classes had supposedly enjoyed during the war, when they had assumed traditionally male professions and responsibilities. By wearing these clothes, women could project a fantasy of an ideal, liberated self, one that moved freely in an unconstrained social space. In Moll-Weiss's words, such an ideal self could put on and take off new identities unrestricted by old prejudices, hierarchies, or “laws whose omnipotence they no longer recognize.” Because the new look sharply contrasted with that of the turn of the century, it represented a visual declaration of sudden change in women’s lives.

The paradox of women’s fashion in postwar France consisted in the strange and contradictory manner in which it was political. Despite the exploitative and regressive reality of the new styles, at the level of fantasy, they represented a visual
image of personal freedom and emancipation. By mid-decade, the fantasy of fashion itself became invested with political meaning. To wear the new fashions was to embrace publicly the already established cultural meanings of fashion: as a visual erasure of sexual difference (the critics' view) and as a declaration of independence from pre-war social constraints (the defenders' view). To buy and wear the new styles—at the workplace, on the streets of Paris, wherever social exchange took place—was to participate in a social fantasy of liberation. Fashion became a language of signs used to herald the arrival of a new world.

Considering postwar fashion as a political gesture raises two important sets of questions. First, did women's participation in this visual fantasy of liberation produce any real political effects? Obviously, to look emancipated was not to be emancipated. Since the illusion of freedom could as much undermine as reinforce a liberated self-image, participation in this visual fantasy represented a political risk. Despite these important qualifications, evidence does exist that the new fashions had a strong political effect—their ability to scandalize and infuriate postwar French men and women. If the new look did not in some way profoundly threaten traditional notions of female identity, why were fathers, mothers-in-law, and conservatives up in arms about it? Why else did fashion divide families and destroy marriages if it did not touch some political nerve or challenge some prevailing signification of power?

Second, in considering fashion as a political gesture, one needs to ask whether or not participation in this visual fantasy of liberation was a conscious political choice. Did women deliberately wear the new styles in order to project an image of personal freedom? Or were they just fond of new clothes and the mode of the day? Exactly why women wore what they did is a complex issue, with the considerations ranging from personal aesthetics to the desire to conform. The motivation of these women is especially difficult to ascertain because only rarely did they articulate their reasons on paper; fashion was something to wear, not to write about. These considerations of motive point up the possible weaknesses of fashion as a political or feminist strategy. The women who wore the new fashions were certainly rebellious, but if this act of rebellion was not a conscious political choice, was it likely to last or blossom into other forms? Were these women destined for an eventual relapse into conventionality?

The answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this essay, but it is interesting to look at fashions during the 1930s with them in mind. After 1927 or 1928, rising stars of haute couture such as Elsa Schiaparelli began to reassert the waist and bust in dresses and to pioneer a gentler, more sculptured look. Typical of this new style were the coiffures that replaced the bob: framed by curls around the face, they had a softer, more "feminine" look. Fashion once again began to follow the contours of a woman's body and to delineate, even emphasize, sexual

112 I am indebted to Estelle Freedman of Stanford University for this point.
113 This question was raised by a reader for the American Historical Review. In fact, as George Fredrickson and Karen Sawislak have suggested to me, the paradoxical life cycle of a fashion would seem to make such a relapse into conventionality inevitable. A certain fashion becomes popular because it challenges convention in some way. For example, the short bob gained popularity in great part because it represented a challenge to the old female convention of long tresses and elaborate coiffures. Yet the very popularization of this fashion, in turn, made it conventional—in the sense that "everyone" was having her hair cut.
difference. The length of skirts, which gradually grew throughout the 1920s, stabilized at mid-calf by 1930, and fashion generally grew more "respectable" and "responsible." The notion of "liberty" and "scandal" in fashion disappeared.114

The period between 1918 and 1927 thus formed an exceptional time in twentieth-century French fashion, in which what women wore became invested with political meaning in a profound yet ephemeral way. The political significance of fashion did not inhere in the styles themselves; rather, fashion became political because of the way it was interpreted by contemporaries, how it was understood in the cultural imaginaire. Wearing the new styles was in no way a form of organized feminism, as we are used to thinking of this term. Nor can they be said to have authorized "feminist" emancipation. But even if unable to win women the vote, adherence to the new fashions did help to keep issues of female identity at the forefront of French life during a period of rapid social transformation. Speaking of the bob, René Rambaud asserted, "Never has any other [fashion] held such a place in the mind, in conversation, in events."115 Through fashion, changes in female identity were debated, challenged, and embraced in multiple ways.

Through fashion as well, the image of the modern woman became associated with an aesthetic of a modern consumerism. Far from serving as a homogenizing force, modern consumer culture became the means by which women expressed a more liberated self. The visual alignment of la femme moderne with an ethos of mobility (embodied in the automobile) created a cultural landscape in which a vivid new kind of woman—powerful, active, and adventurous—could be represented. The woman pictured behind the wheel of her torpédo was on the way to her office, store, or factory. In this sense, the impact of consumer culture on specifically female forms of cultural expression is both more paradoxical and complex than historians have believed. The modern woman's quest for freedom, spoken in the language of fashion and consumerism, deserves reconsideration as a form of collective political engagement.

For historians trying to understand socio-cultural changes during the period of World War I, the controversy surrounding postwar fashion is a rich source for exploration. The ways in which French observers read the text of fashion can tell us much about what preoccupied and worried them during this time of transition. Many of the French, such as fashion's critics, yearned for a more traditional and stable French society, symbolized by the domestic hearth. They expressed anxiety that change would usher in a colder, more impersonal world. Others, namely the supporters of fashion, welcomed change as a dismissal of pre-war social constraints. Fashion was not "politics" as we are used to conceiving of it, but the debates over its meaning in postwar France were profoundly political. The fashions of the modern woman became central to the cultural mythology of the era, instilling at once envy, admiration, frustration, and horror, because they provided both a visual language for upheaval and change and figured in a political struggle for the redefinition of female identity.


115 Rambaud, Les fugitives, 253. See also Smith, Confessions of a Concierge, 57.