

TASTE

Receding Hairlines

By Cameron Stracher

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Trees look taller, according to Gillette, when the underbrush has been cleared. Unruly growth can become neat and trim, promises Schick, “with just a flip of a handle, whatever your style.” The latest marketing efforts from these two personal-hygiene Goliaths make it appear as if they had turned their attention to the gardening business. But it’s manscaping, not landscaping, that Gillette is selling, while Schick is flogging the new Quattro TrimStyle for Women razor. You don’t need a Ph.D. in semiotics to understand the imagery. Body defoliation is the game, where barer is better and hair is a four-letter word.

Of course, men (and women) began removing their hair long before Mark Wahlberg displayed his glistening pecs on a Times Square billboard in the 1980s. Flint blades for shaving at least 30,000 years old have been unearthed at archaeological sites. Ancient Egyptians are reputed to have found body hair repulsive. Greeks regularly shaved their faces, following the example of Alexander the Great. Darwin was fascinated by the shaving of body hair in Middle Eastern and Eastern European cultures.



Companies such as Gillette are pushing hair removal into the mainstream. GETTY IMAGES

Yet never have so many removed so much from so little. Shaving and hair removal in the U.S. today are big business—estimated at \$1.8 billion last year—most of it painful. According to the American Association of Plastic Surgery, more than a million Americans have laser

hair removal every year. No longer a slightly embarrassing secret, hair removal has moved into the mainstream as the latest marketing salvos from Schick and Gillette demonstrate. Philips Norelco sells an electric Bodygroom for shaving “all body zones.” Braun sells the BodyCruzer for the same purpose. Gillette’s humorous instructional videos on how a man should shave himself, everywhere, have been a huge hit on the Internet. And Schick’s ads have been widely seen on network television.

But for men of a certain age, shaving anywhere but the face is confusing at best. We understand it is, in many respects, a random act—why the face but not the chest? Why the chest and not . . . Well, where does one stop? And if one can stop, where does one begin again? A YouTube video captures this conundrum perfectly as a man literally covered in shaving cream hogs the bathroom from his more hirsute roommate. “I’m shaving!” he explains through the foam, turning a bathroom ritual into an absurd act. If this is the latest fashion, we better stock up on razors (and Band-Aids). And perhaps that’s the point. The same people pushing hairlessness are the ones selling the products. In the best tradition of hucksterism, we must have what we don’t need.

Recently I went to see the play “Hair,” the ’60s musical about hair as a metaphor for rebellion, pride, power, sexuality and love. As the talented cast sang about the joys of their God-given hairiness, I realized that at least half the men in the cast had shaved their underarms. In a generation, hair had gone from plumage to be worn “long,

straight, curly, fuzzy, snaggy, shaggy, ratty, matty . . . bangled, tangled, spangled and spaghettied,” to being plucked, shorn, waxed, buzzed, razored, tasered, lasered and depilated. Perhaps it’s time for a new musical that captures the spirit of our sleek age. Call it “Bald.”

—*Mr. Stracher is publisher of the New York Law School Law Review.*

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