

the newly empowered "destroyer of men," who can inspire sexual fear in her colleagues, and the man destroyed by the war, anguished by his own emasculation. "I have sacrificed the woman that I was," she says to herself, "I have sacrificed the balance and joy of my life to an obscure impulse that I called my duty."⁹⁴ Rejected in love, she blames it on the hideous scars that the war has left and decides to commit suicide. "I can no longer endure the suffering from my wound and the operation I underwent," she writes in her suicide note, "I have acted like a courageous man; and because I am not a man, I am punished for my courage."⁹⁵ For Camille as well as Monique, then, the war's gift of freedom becomes a mixed blessing, "the sacrifice of the woman that she was." But unlike Monique, Camille fails to reconstruct a more conventional female identity, and this very failure leads to her suicide.

Camille's inability to return to a traditional model of femininity can also explain why *Les Don Juanes*, published the same year as *La Garçonne* and containing much of the same sexually explicit subject matter, never became as well-known or as widely read as Margueritte's novel. Even though *La Garçonne* was considered scandalous and outrageous, its ending had a pacifying effect. The novel worked simultaneously on two levels to soothe and to dispel postwar cultural anxiety. First, it normalized dramatic wartime changes in women's lives, and second, it reconstructed a rational future out of the nightmare of the war. In Margueritte's novel, Blanchet's war-devastated masculinity is able to recover thanks to the restoration of Monique's femininity. By ultimately embracing domestic femininity, Monique appeases the cultural/gender anxieties raised throughout the novel and covers over the ruptures of the war experience. Such a recovery does not take place in *Les Don Juanes*: here Camille, like Colette's Chéri, cannot reconcile herself to the past. Margueritte's figuration of postwar cultural crisis through the character of a promiscuous *femme moderne* accounts, in no small part, for the controversy surrounding *La Garçonne*. Likewise, by ultimately reconstructing a stabilized universe from the ruins of a civilization, the novel ensured its own popularity and its tenacity as a central cultural myth of the era.

3

"WOMEN ARE CUTTING THEIR HAIR AS A SIGN OF STERILITY"

FASHION WAS A HIGHLY-CHARGED ISSUE during the twenties. In 1925, an article in *L'Oeuvre* jocularly described how the fashion of short hair 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 quickly became "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 un-Christian, "the most impudent young ladies of the parish pointed insolently at the statue of the liberator."¹ 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*, at once patriotic, fervently Christian, and sexually ambiguous.

The fashion among young women for short, bobbed hair could inspire enormous tension within the 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 same reason.² A father in Dijon sought legal action against a hairdresser in 1925 for cutting the hair of his daughter without his permission.³ "At present, the question

of short hair is dividing families," argued Antoine, one of the hairdressers who pioneered the bobbed cut.⁴ "The result," according to Paul Reboux, the editor-in-chief of *Paris-soir*, "was that during family meals, nothing is heard except the clicking of the forks on the porcelain."⁵ 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.⁶ René Rambaud, another prominent hairdresser in the twenties, 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.⁷

Why was bobbed hair such an emotional issue in the French family after the war? The outcry concerning the bob was only part of a heated debate on fashion that began during the later war years and peaked between 1924 and 1926.⁸ The debate concerned fashions for women that emerged during the war—low-cut dresses, short skirts, pyjamas, the abandonment of the corset. The controversy surrounding fashion during these years 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 1900.⁹ 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* during 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.¹⁰ In the early twenties, the designer Coco Chanel created a sporty, casual style by further simplifying Poiret's fashions. Mass-produced and meticulously imitated throughout France, the Chanel look reached its peak of popularity by 1925 and held sway there until 1927 or 1928.¹¹

The craze for short hair typified this chronology of change in the fashion world. At the turn of the century, excessive baroque hairstyles had dominated, and in the prewar years, only a few actresses, such as Caryathis and Eve Lavallière, cut their hair short.¹² Precisely who was

responsible for popularizing the bob is a matter of dispute. 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 (fig. 7).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 shockwaves throughout France.¹⁴ Particularly important to the popularity of the bob was the 1922 publication of Victor Margueritte's *La Garçonne*. According to René Rambaud, the novel inspired young women throughout France to cut their hair and otherwise follow the new style "*à l'allure garçonnière*."¹⁵ After 1922, the new styles were associated with the young, sexy, independent modern woman.

The fashion styles that emerged in the 1920s dramatically differed from those of the turn of the century. However, since the new look emerged gradually, the fashion controversy cannot be explained solely in terms of its novelty. In looking back on the decade, memoirists 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.¹⁶ The "epoch" of short hair began immediately after the war, when the new bobbed cut first became an object of widespread controversy.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 cuttingly observed, occupies "a good third of their daily remarks." Short hair, she argued, "holds a certain interest for men that has gone undetected by us, because they deign to devote to it the precious emanations of their brains."¹⁸ Although Sauret was obviously exaggerating, her remarks raise an interesting question. What "undetected interest" did short hair hold that it became 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 about the new style gave so much offense? How did postwar observers—journalists, clergy, pamphleteers, designers, feminists—explain its dramatic and explosive power? Why was postwar fashion so central to the cultural mythology of the postwar period?

The controversy surrounding fashion can be explained by the fact

that postwar observers "read" or interpreted it as a visual language for the war's social upheaval. As a result of changes in the world of fashion, a sizable debate concerning what women wore arose in the postwar period among journalists, novelists, sociologists, and social observers. A closer look at this debate can shed light on what precisely was so scandalous about the new style, or, in Sauret's words, what "undetected interest" it held to inspire so much attention. During the postwar period, fashion bore the symbolic weight of a whole set of social anxieties concerning the war's perceived effects on gender relations: the blurring or reversal of gender roles and the crisis of domesticity. Once again, it was the modern woman's role as symbol of the war's disruptive effects—her figuration of postwar gender/cultural anxieties—that lay at the heart of the controversy. In addition, postwar fashion figured in a larger struggle for social and political power. Feminists, designers (both male and female), and the women who put on the new fashions interpreted them as affording physical mobility and freedom. Because the new fashions were seen in this way—as a visual language of liberation—they also became invested with political meaning.

Nothing More Than a Rigid Straight Line

Before turning to the postwar debate on fashion, 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. In postwar France, more than anywhere else in Europe, fashion played a central role in the economy and as a form of cultural expression. The fashion industry itself had been ruled by the *haute couture* designers since the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁹ 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 industry. A proliferation of fashion journals and the rise of the department 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, but other factors, such as commercial promotion, methods of production, and consumer demand also affected changes in fashion.²⁰

The fashion industry enjoyed a period of prosperity after the war.

Because of 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.²¹ Many new houses opened, including that of Coco Chanel, the first nationally and internationally known female couturier.²² The influence of the *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, the pioneer of the bobbed hairstyle, explained: "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."²³ The ongoing transformation in the clothing industry toward mass marketing, as well as the development of the 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 as a man in the 1840s, she was likely to remain an isolated phenomenon; when Coco Chanel did the same in the 1920s, she was imitated throughout France and the world.

Within this social and economic context, a dramatically new style of women's dress arose during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a style most frequently associated with the designer Paul Poiret.²⁴ "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."²⁵ Poiret here likened himself to a revolutionary storming the Bastille of Victorian fashion, thereby restoring to women their innate right to freedom of movement.²⁶ 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 than with conveying its "modern spirit" through a flat, highly decorative and abstract style. His illustrations were "cubist" inasmuch as 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 styles apart from how they actually looked on women.

Despite Poiret's revolutionary achievements in the prewar world of *haute couture*, the new, more fluid style was above all—like the modern woman herself—a creation of the war. Although the new look

emerged within the elite world of Paris *couture* long before 1914, working-class and middle-class women did not embrace it until after the war broke out.²⁷ In the somber spirit of the war years, the old ornamental frou-frous 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 *crinolines de guerre*, or war crinolines.²⁸ Even after the war, large jewelry or ornaments of any kind that drew attention to itself remained out of fashion.²⁹ The taste for a more convenient, minimalist, pared-down look persisted, even as French women returned from the war hospitals and factories. By the end of the war, the visual appearance of the modern woman had begun to take shape.

In the early twenties, Coco Chanel, the youngest and most daring of the Parisian *couturières* after the war, further developed the new style.³⁰ Besides opening the world of *haute couture* to women, Chanel tried to create a look for the modern woman that was comfortable, practical, and compatible with an "active" life. "Chanel expresses the heart and soul of the modern woman," declared the title of a 1923 article in *Vogue*.³¹ She used beige jersey to assure a loose, easy line as well as a sort of "poor" look for her designs.³² Poiret jested about his postwar rival: "What did Chanel invent? *Pauvreté de luxe*." 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 (fig. 8). Chanel also adopted male fashions—short hair, ties, collars, long tailor-cut jackets, pyjamas—to create a boyish look.³³ 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 like Jean Patou and Elsa Schiaparelli began to reassert the waist and the bust.

The new style came to be known for its modernist spirit and its almost "Taylorist" efficiency of line.³⁴ In 1926, Maurice Prax, an editor of *Le Petit parisien*, argued that "[t]he weaker sex is completely destroying its charm, in order to be, from whatever angle one considers it, nothing more than a rigid straight line."³⁵ Whereas the encased, exaggerated female form of 1900 emphasized "womanliness"—a woman's breasts and hips—the new style relativized these as neither more nor less important than any other part of the female body. This body became a set of shifting, interchangeable planes and surfaces. According to a fashion writer for *Vogue* in 1923, the new style was also "the sign of an extreme modernism," because of its flat, cubist tenden-

cies.³⁶ The well-known journalist and novelist Clément Vautel wagered in 1924 that a young modern woman "would no doubt consent, if fashion demanded it, to being nothing more than the intersection of two planes, like a geometric line."³⁷ In 1925, Colette described the new image as "short, flat, geometric and quadrangular."³⁸

Although the new style followed a fashion cycle of growth and decline in the decade 1918 to 1928, its basic aesthetic and lines remained unaltered. Hence the period represents an internally consistent stage in fashion design, and the fashion commentary and debate from these years can be grouped together as a coherent body of evidence.³⁹ At the same time that Chanel's styles were popularized after the war, they became inscribed in a debate concerning the war and its perceived effect on gender relations. Because it was relatively consistent in content over the decade following 1918, this debate on fashion can be best explored thematically rather than chronologically, by analyzing the way in which the new fashion was interpreted first, by its critics, and, second, by its defenders.

Disguising Themselves as Men

The most vociferous critics of the new fashions included traditional conservatives, such as Catholics and natalists, as well as 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. Most of these critics were men, but because many of fashion's most ardent supporters were also male, namely fashion designers and hairdressers, no simple historical analysis by gender is possible. The critics of fashion found two aspects of the new styles particularly offensive: first, their ability to blur the boundaries of sexual difference, causing women not only to look but also to act like men, and, second, their apparent lack of modesty.⁴⁰

As early as 1918, Clément Vautel used a cartoon to express the first of these two critiques of fashion—its tendency to turn women into men (fig. 9). Vautel was a prominent novelist and journalist, well known for his natalist and antifeminist views.⁴¹ His cartoon features a *midinette* being arrested "for the crime of wearing attire said to be feminine, including a skirt." The female police officers 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 fear that women could no longer be "women" even if this were their wish, and that they were becoming indistinguishable from men, in their appearance as well as in their possession of traditionally male powers. The cartoon neatly illustrates the political stakes in the debate on fashion.

Above all, Vautel meant his cartoon to be funny. The lament that fashion erased gender boundaries often became the subject of innocent humor and sarcastic commentary. A 1921 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 slugged her in the jaw.⁴² In 1922, Roger Boutet de Monvel, a fashion commentator for both *Vogue* and the highbrow *Gazette du bon ton*, used the example of Chanel's pyjamas to proclaim that women were "disguising themselves as men." "What gracious attention in our regard," he added sarcastically, "what kinder flattery than this, to so imitate us in all things?"⁴³ An article in the radical-socialist *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?"⁴⁴

Elsewhere, however, the tendency of women to "disguise" themselves as men was not met with humor but with serious observation and invective.⁴⁵ "Smoking, wearing short hair, dressed in pyjamas or sportswear," complained the writer Francis de Miomandre, "women increasingly resemble their companions."⁴⁶ 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: No!"⁴⁷ 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 [*uranisme*]," the literary critic Pierre Lièvre argued in 1927, "No more hips, no more breasts, no more hair."⁴⁸ Evolutionary theory linked fashion trends to an ominous biological future. Fashion commentators predicted "the advent of the third sex" or the creation of a single one.⁴⁹ "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."⁵⁰

In reading fashion as a visual erasure of sexual difference, postwar critics referred to the new female body and even "womanhood" itself as lacking clear definition or intelligibility. We have already heard the question of a Parisian law student in 1925: "Can one define *la jeune fille moderne*? No, no more than the waist on the dresses she wears. Young girls of today are difficult to locate precisely." This observer described the modern woman as a "being . . . without breasts, without hips."⁵¹ The same year, the novelist Christiane Fournier called the young modern woman "a monster," explaining that "I only mean 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."⁵² Both these observers emphasize the inability of the modern woman to be "located precisely" within the "natural laws" or traditions of French society. For both, the modern woman's rejection of the well-defined female form symbolized her lack of cultural intelligibility. Also in 1925, René Bizet noted how after the war, some designers had tried to bring back the old styles, "in vain, wanting to safeguard the charms of yesteryear and re-establish the frontiers, so to speak." According to him, the war, which had "overturned everything," made this impossible.⁵³ For Bizet, the loss of the old, well-defined female form became a visual sign of the war's disruptive effects—its wreaking havoc with the traditional "frontiers" or boundaries of sexual difference. The silhouette of *la femme moderne*—as a being without breasts, without a waist, without hips—visually expressed the erosion of traditional cultural categories.

In addition to the "masculine" nature of the new fashions, the critics found their apparent lack of modesty particularly offensive. In 1924, the illustrator George Barbier remarked dryly that in the park at Versailles, passers-by have the "good fortune of seeing for nothing what is so costly for a music-hall audience."⁵⁴ In a 1925 article entitled "Where will they stop?" one fashion commentator warned that "the divorce between fashion and modesty is very close to being pronounced."⁵⁵ "If your dress finishes too high," asked the civil engineer Gérard Lavergne, "doesn't it also start a little low? Aren't you afraid of getting a cold?"⁵⁶ The editor Maurice Prax warned in 1926 that "dresses are, in effect, getting so short that the time is coming when they can no longer be shortened—after all, nothingness does not get

shorter."⁵⁷ Complaining of "flimsy dresses, too short, sometimes too open, clinging to the body," Cécile Jeglot, the Catholic spokeswoman for *Action populaire*, condemned modern women in this way: "With the recklessness and the intransigence of their twenty years, they . . . shave hair that is already cut short and shorten dresses that are already abbreviated both from the top and from the bottom."⁵⁸ In 1927, still another fashion observer dubbed the postwar years "*notre époque si déshabillée*" and condemned the "greedy couturier who unknowingly cuts away the last entrenchments of our virtue."⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, Catholics and church officials led the crusade against the perceived lack of modesty in dress. At mid-decade, Catholics called modern women the "*déshabillées*," or "the undressed ones," and expressed the fear that given current trends, "total nudity" would soon result.⁶⁰ In 1924, one Catholic spokesman quoted from the Bible Saint Paul's description of hair as a "natural veil, an expression or symbolic protection of feminine modesty."⁶¹ By 1926, some priests and archbishops were refusing Holy Communion to young women who, in Father Vuillermet's words, came to church "more immodestly dressed than the pagans in their frenzied Saturnalia."⁶² During that year, warnings were posted on church doors that women would not be served the sacraments unless they appeared in a specified style and length of dress.⁶³ One pamphlet published by the Catholic organization *Action populaire* went so far as to describe the new fashions as a free masonry plot to corrupt women and therefore the church.⁶⁴ Even the pope became involved, declaring postwar fashions "a veritable shame, from a human as well as a Christian point of view."⁶⁵

Critics of the new styles also frequently inscribed their popularity within a socioeconomic context of *la crise du foyer*, women's so-called rejection of the traditional maternal, domestic role. Medical attention focused on the dire physiological effects of the new body image. In 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 dressed left the female body vulnerable to winds and drafts, so that women were bound to harm their reproductive organs. Postwar fashions, by transforming women into sexless eu-

nuchs, non-mothers, and non-women, were the reason behind the falling birthrate.⁶⁶

Such complaints continued throughout the decade. In 1920, the natalist Catholic pamphlet *La Mode est coupable* ("Fashion Is Guilty") 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 how to preserve what our soldiers have defended."⁶⁷ Conservatives such as Roger Boutet de Monvel and Marius Boisson also condemned the new styles on these terms. According to Boutet de Monvel in 1922, the new styles caused a woman to ignore her family and home as well as encouraged a decline in *mœurs*.⁶⁸ "There is a repudiation of the womb, since she no longer wants to be a mother," wrote the novelist Boisson in 1925, as well as "a repudiation of breasts of any size . . . since if, by chance, she is a mother, she no longer wants to nourish her flesh."⁶⁹ Two other Catholic critics of fashion also 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."⁷⁰

These critics voiced profound anxiety concerning de-sexed women and the erosion of traditional notions of femininity. Fashion preoccupied a disproportionate amount of attention throughout the twenties because critics interpreted it as a visual language that reproduced perceived changes in gender relations associated with the First World War: namely, the blurring of gender boundaries and *la crise du foyer*. The critics' interpretation of fashion as a symbol of alarming new postwar behaviors on the part of women—their so-called virilization and rejection of motherhood—explains the certain interest that fashion held in order to become the focus of so much emotion and anger. If we are to believe the critics of fashion, the new styles challenged traditional notions of gender difference as well as conventional modes of dress.

She is Completely Uncovered

Fashion's power to shock derived from its ability to figure not only shifts in gender roles, but also cultural upheaval in general. Some critics interpreted fashion as a visual expression of a larger cultural malaise—Valéry's *crise de l'esprit*. For example, in his classic postwar treatise of education, *Nouvelles lettres à Françoise* (1922), Marcel Pré-

vost tried to comfort his niece, Françoise, who had two young daughters fast on their way to becoming *femmes modernes*. He acknowledged that

it doesn't please you that skirts are so short that they show the knee, that the thickness of stockings has been so reduced that they are as transparent as tracing paper, and that evening dresses have been bared to the waist, both in the back and on the sides.⁷¹

Prévost admitted that the postwar woman was suffering from a "crisis of modesty" that had resulted from the war. But he tried to convince his niece that such a crisis was only skin deep, by distinguishing between "*vertu féminine*," or female virtue, and "*pudeur*," which for him meant modesty, ignorance, or innocence. Female virtue had remained intact, he reassured his niece. It was only "*pudeur*" that was a casualty of the war, in particular, of the war hospitals:

For the first time, young French girls had to sacrifice the traditional modesty [*pudeur*] they had been taught in exchange for the tender pity that every woman feels for the young suffering man. In this place of physical misery, amid the suffering, the odor of blood and iodoform, a new communion of young women and men was established.⁷²

Through the war experience, Prévost concluded, young women gained in moral strength, but, to a great extent, had lost their innocence. Hence, what he called the "*pudeur visible*," or "visible modesty," that had characterized their prewar attire became, in this context, anachronistic, even though the "female virtue" of young girls remained untainted.⁷³

In this way, Prévost linked the abbreviated nature of postwar fashions, which was so upsetting to many French men and women, with the "young suffering man" of 1914 and the "physical misery" of the war hospitals. He read postwar fashion as a visual language of the emotional exposure women experienced during the war—their innocence "sacrificed." Such a reading of fashion suggests that, for many critics, the appearance of the modern woman could have been troubling on a still deeper level, where it evoked not only Prévost's *crise de pudeur* but also Valéry's *crise de l'esprit*. When a critic of short hair argued, "It's a pity to think, believe me, that a woman would be voluntarily led to dispose of her own poetry," how did this phrase reverberate in a society so recently disposed of its own poetry—its own values, ideals, and notions of beauty?⁷⁴ When Drieu la Rochelle proclaimed that "this

civilization no longer has clothes," was he referring to the *déshabillées*—the bobbed hair and short dresses of *la femme moderne*? Or was he thinking of a culture whose own innocence or illusions had been sacrificed?

Drieu la Rochelle provided a clue as to how he might answer this question in his portrait of the modern woman in "Le Pique-Nique" (1924). This short story, which concerns a disaffected war veteran named Ljessies, contains the following description of Gwen, Liessies's girlfriend and a *femme moderne*: "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."⁷⁵ The language Drieu la Rochelle uses to describe Gwen confuses her nakedness with other less tangible qualities—deprivation, barrenness, a lack of warmth and pleasure. As such, the language evokes a moral anguish that exceeds the boundaries of mere description. Like Monique's literal sterility in *La Garçonne*, Gwen's metaphoric sterility here represents the spiritual impotence felt by the veteran Liessies, with whom Gwen is involved. What Drieu la Rochelle finds of certain interest concerning the appearance of the modern woman is the way she evokes both 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 Pierre Lièvre condemns his neighbor for bobbing her hair because in doing so, she has 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."⁷⁶ For Lièvre, then, short hair signified a new frankness and exposure 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 parricidal scissors" and "the cruel fashions that reign today," Lièvre concluded with this lament: "their intimacy has lost its crowning glory. They no longer awaken near a tousled lover, but instead, a friend with disheveled hair."⁷⁷ Short hair, as Lièvre presented it, was "cruel" in that it effaced a woman's femininity and "parricidal" in that it destroyed the world of the fathers—a familiar, parental world of domestic security.

The modern woman signified a colder, more impersonal world. In 1924, the novelist Magdeleine Chaumont critiqued her in this way:

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 that all women wear upon their faces. Do we see one who is kind, dreamy, or satisfied? No, they all have features that 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 or that of the daughter or lover. There is the dried-out heart of *la femme moderne*, the universal heart has become a desert.⁷⁸

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 prewar life—at once familiar and far away—were believed to be the hard casualties of the war as well as the new fashions. Even the physiognomy of the modern woman became a way of talking about the loss of the "dreamy" prewar era and the trauma of rapid change.

Fashion thus operated as a "text" that conveyed the same *crise de l'esprit* that Drieu la Rochelle, Paul Valéry, Romain Rolland, and other prominent writers made famous after the war. The beauty of the untouched and unseen, the mysteries of youth and intimacy—these were losses associated with both the war and the new fashions. But one could also argue in the opposite way—that the new fashions championed youthful innocence rather than signaled its demise. The ideal body type was no longer the fully mature woman, but a child whose body was not yet marked by her sex. "Nowadays," remarked the journalist René Bizet, "an adolescent makes a better mannequin than the Venus de Milo."⁷⁹ One cartoon of the era features a young modern woman sticking her tongue out at the Venus de Milo and challenging the statue to dress like her.⁸⁰ Because short hair had traditionally been a hairstyle for very young girls, it created an air of childish naïveté in a woman's silhouette, even though modern women appeared less innocent than ever in other ways. A 1925 cartoon named "Proprieties" plays on this paradox (fig. 10). A teacher tells a little girl that she is "too young to wear her hair so short." Dressed in men's pyjamas and smoking a cigarette, the mother/modern woman in the cartoon has a sexy, naughty air that distinguishes her from the sexless spinster. But at the

same time, she is likened to the young girl through their similar hairstyles—a reassurance that, in fact, the modern woman knows much less than her appearance would lead one to believe. The new fashions also played with an image of female naïveté in an age of profound disillusion.⁸¹

Postwar observers "read" in fashion a visual language that reproduced some of the war's most commented-on effects: the blurring of gender boundaries and a loss of innocence among youth. Fashion operated as a "text" that conveyed the same cultural conflicts and tensions as Victor Margueritte's *La Garçonne*. But postwar fashion also operated in its own distinct, purely visual realm. As we shall see, the visual "beat" of fashion also communicated messages that could *not* be put into words, thus adding a depth and richness to the postwar debate on women that was all its own.

An Astonishing Ease Accompanied All of Her Movements

The critics' invective against the new styles suggests that they gained popularity in a socially conservative atmosphere. Given this social and cultural climate, how did those who liked the fashions—designers, merchandisers, young women, some journalists—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.⁸² A young woman justified wearing such clothes by arguing that the modern woman "does not like to be restricted; this is why she is rejecting attire that could hinder her movements."⁸³ 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 associated 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 confusion of the visual and the behavioral was key to the politics of fashion in the postwar era.

Supporters produced a notion of fashion as "emancipatory" by aligning 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 socioeco-

nomic developments well under way by 1914, but, again, intensely accelerated by the war.⁸⁴ Because fashion was by nature visual and dynamic, a constantly changing marketable mass of images, and because it represented the capitalist commodification of the body, it became integral to the new aesthetic of consumerism. As historian Bonnie Smith has argued, "fashion made women at once more desirable, more efficient, and in need of new goods."⁸⁵ The fashions of the modern woman were often linked with the new palladiums of pleasure in the postwar world—the tea dances and jazz clubs—as well as American consumer culture.⁸⁶

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 (fig. 11).⁸⁷ 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."⁸⁸ In 1927, the dramatist "Rip" described the modern woman in this way: "Athletic as well as capable of exercising most male trades, the modern woman, firmly installed behind the wheel of the *torpédo* that takes her to her office, store or factory, has understood the superiority that severity of dress confers upon a man."⁸⁹ 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."⁹⁰ "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."⁹¹ A year 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."⁹² "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!"⁹³ By fusing the spirit of the new fashions with this modern consumer ethos of freedom, supporters of fashion were able to present it as liberated and liberating. As the journalist Paul Reboux put it in 1919: "What grace these soft curls and liberated necks have. . . . What an easy, comfortable charm! This look is so much preferable to those unstable edifices of hair that make women eternally apprehensive."⁹⁴

Through fashion, the image of the modern woman became associated with the aesthetic of modern consumerism. Some historians have presented fashion as 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, erasing specifically female forms of cultural expression, and thereby defusing female political activism.⁹⁵ But, 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 adventuresome—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.

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). Paul Reboux 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."⁹⁶ 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."⁹⁷ He continued to praise the bob as "the clearest symbol of female emancipation."⁹⁸

Prominent designers also inscribed the new fashions within a socioeconomic context of change. In 1927, the designer 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 for good the restraints placed upon her."⁹⁹ In hindsight, the hairdresser René Rambaud explained the popularity of the new fashions 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.¹⁰⁰

To Rambaud, bobbed hair was bound up inextricably 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 "cheap talk," 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 felt called upon to make 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 they hoped to project through wearing them. Fashion acted as a presentation of self, in part, grounded in fantasy and wish fulfillment. What these designers felt they had to (and could) sell were images of fashion as change, liberation, and freedom from constraint.¹⁰¹

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. The radical feminist Henriette Sauret described short hair in 1919 as "a gesture of independence; a personal venture." According to 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 conve-

nience."¹⁰² In 1921, Augusta Moll-Weiss, a well-known feminist and founder of the household rationalization movement, insisted that because women of all classes were now working, they demanded fashions "that one can put on easily, rapidly." Complicated fashions were no longer popular, she argued, because women "no longer tolerate impeding their freedom of movement for the benefit of laws whose omnipotence they no longer recognize."¹⁰³ In 1922, Jane Misme, editor of *La Française*, praised the new, more abbreviated swimsuits worn by young women for giving them ease and freedom of movement in the water: "anything that stands in the way of the harmonious and necessary development of the body can only be a false kind of grace and modesty."¹⁰⁴ By describing the old swimsuits as "false," Misme implied that the new ones more faithfully expressed a woman's "natural" self. Maria Vérone, 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 that are not constricting, and we want to have a profession, in order to be independent."¹⁰⁵ Vérone believed that fashion played a fundamental role in shaping a woman's behavior. Fake hair encouraged duplicity in one's life as well as one's appearance, leading inevitably to "false sentiments" and loveless marriage. Likewise, the "nonconstricting" clothes of the modern woman created a visual analogue of liberation, encouraging an "independent" life-style.

The Illusion of Being Free

Historians have accepted uncritically the perception of postwar fashion as a sign of "the refusal of any constraint," the "emancipation of women," and "the affirmation of liberty."¹⁰⁶ 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 brought about by the war.¹⁰⁷ But feminists like Vérone 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 we say that fashion authorized feminist emancipation? Were the new fashions, in fact, physically liberating? Were they able to facilitate physical mobility and, therefore, a more independent life-style?

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 period, however, casts doubt on the idea that such styles could afford women mobility, even if they were, by comparison to prewar fashions, easier to put on and more comfortable.¹⁰⁶ Although the designers, hairdressers, and *femme modernes* of the era interpreted fashion as honest, liberating, and carefree, in fact, achieving this idealized look required enormous time and effort. Writing on fashion in 1924, Jacqueline de Monbrison first proclaimed that "contemporary fashion is essentially comfortable, and that modern women will never accept a restrictive fashion." But 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 an 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?"¹⁰⁹ 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?"¹¹⁰

The new style was no more carefree than it was liberating. According 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 makeup and invest greater amounts of time and money in beauty products for their face, skin, and hair.¹¹¹ An article in *Vogue* (1923) commented on how much time 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.'" ¹¹² Several such *instituts de beauté* were established during the 1920s, especially in the later years of the decade.¹¹³ Although women claimed that the new bob cut was "practical" and so easy to care for, in fact, as one commentator asked in 1924: "Can anyone argue that a few minutes every day devoted to the maintenance of long hair in the intimacy of the home, can compare with

interminable periods spent waiting at the hairdresser's?"¹¹⁴ In 1927 the political writer François de Bondy agreed that women spent their lives at their hairdressers, 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."¹¹⁵

In addition, after 1920, the style of dress required excessive thinness, which could be achieved only by continuous, strict dieting.¹¹⁶ 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's "Mexican tea," *L'Ovidine-Lutier*, which promised a "marvelous result, without diet or danger"; Gigartina seaweed marine *dragées* 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."¹¹⁷ 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."¹¹⁸ Although traditional types of corsets were abolished, most women still wore constraining undergarments of some kind, such as the straight elastic girdle, the bust bodice, and the *ceinture réductrice*.¹¹⁹ Poirer himself admitted in *L'Illustration* (1921) that the new look demanded some kind of girdle.¹²⁰ As *Vogue* exclaimed in 1923: "how seductive the straight line of our winter dresses is, how revealing the *svelte* of the female silhouette! But how ungracious when the waist is not shaped [*moulée*] by a corset-girdle, the indispensable complement of contemporary fashion."¹²¹ Dr. Monteil's *ceinture-maillot*—cheerfully called "The Goddess"—was made entirely of rubber and cost a whopping 150 francs. There were also girdles for a woman's face, neck, and ankles, those for the latter advertised as "invisible even under the sheerest stockings" (figs. 12 and 13).

From this perspective, the new fashions look like an elaborate marketing ploy to feed the growth of a burgeoning beauty industry, including makeup and skin-care manufacturers, owners of *instituts de beauté*, hair salon owners, diet specialists, and the *haute couturiers*. In this sense, as feminist historians have claimed, postwar fashion represented a relatively new form of modern consumerism that exploited women in the pursuit of profit. 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" or "natural" 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.¹²² The fashion writer Jacqueline de Monbrison supported this notion in 1926 by referring to one Princess Irène, a woman who took no less than two hours with her maid to get ready for the evening. But, the desired result, according to Monbrison, completely disguised this effort: "The effect of extreme elegance that she produces would hardly lead someone to suspect that it took two hours to achieve, so much is it dependent on the triumphant appearance of simplicity."¹²³

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. Merchandisers sold the new styles by projecting an image of liberation from constraint because 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 Vêrone 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 as well as in fashion.

The paradox of 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 prewar 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 truly social fantasy of liberation. Fashion became a political language of signs used to herald the arrival of a new world; it formed a new, purely visual aesthetic of freedom.

French feminist historians have dismissed the young modern woman with whom the new fashions were associated as entirely apolitical. Perceived in terms of an "individualistic" or "life-style" approach to emancipation, the modern woman's quest for freedom has been seen as frivolous and self-centered.¹²⁴ Considering postwar fashion as a political gesture, then, raises two important 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.¹²⁵ But 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 so 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, we need to ask whether 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 clotheshorses and fashionmongers? Exactly why women wore what they did was a complex issue, ranging from personal aesthetics to the desire to conform. The motivation of these women in adopting the new styles 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?¹²⁶

The answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this study, 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 difference. The length of skirts, which gradually grew throughout the 1920s, stabilized at midcalf by 1930, and fashion generally grew more respectable and responsible. The notion of liberty and scandal in fashion disappeared.¹²⁷

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 imaginary. 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. Still, although sporting the new fashions did not get women the vote, it did help to maintain issues of female identity at the forefront of French life during a period of rapid social and cultural transformation. Speaking of the bob, René Rambaud asserted: "Never has any other [fashion] held such a place in the mind, in conversation, in events."¹²⁸ Through fashion, changes in female identity were debated, challenged, and embraced in multiple ways.

The "tyranny of liberty" in postwar fashion demonstrates the way in which the visual appearance of the modern woman figured in a political struggle for the redefinition of women's identity and power after the war. In *La Garçonne*, short hair "*à la Jeanne d'Arc*" is presented as a political strategy to assert female power. When the modern woman Monique Lerbier first reappears in Marguerite's *La Garçonne*, a friend has this to say about her hair: "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."¹²⁹ The myth of the biblical Samson crops up

frequently in the debate on the bob. "Unlike Samson, who lost his strength in losing his mane," quipped the feminist Henriette Sauret, "we may gain total power in shorning our hair."¹³⁰ The myth gained 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*" precisely because of the myth of a virile Samson.¹³¹ Another press name for the women's short bobbed cut was "*coiffure au poilu de 2^e classe*" and the cloche hats of the 1920s have been closely compared with those of the *poilus* during the war.¹³²

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! With the fashion of short, bobbed hair, *la femme moderne* became the new virile Samsonette or *poilue*, manipulating her visual appearance to reverse, once again, the hierarchies of gender. The inversions of power and gender in the *poilu*/Samson myth again reveal the link between the bob cut and social anxieties concerning the war's perceived reversal of gender boundaries. Fashion was not "politics" as we are used to conceiving 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 both provided a visual language for upheaval and change, and figured in the political struggle for the redefinition of female identity.