

The Poetics and Aesthetics of Fashion: Exploring the literary status of Stéphane Mallarmé's fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*

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Abstract: During the latter half of 1874 the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé turned his attention to the world of fashion, taking on the authorship and editorship of a fortnightly fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*, [*The Last/Latest Fashion*]. The fashion magazine ran for just eight issues, covering a variety of topics from clothes to cookery, from interior design to theatre. This article will examine the literary and artistic value of the magazine, highlighting the periodical's revolutionary status at a crossroads between literature and the mass-media. The article begins with a brief introduction to this little-known periodical, situating the magazine within the context of Mallarmé's poetic project. It will then go on to consider Mallarmé's engagement with journalism from a literary perspective. The third and final

section will consider the use of symbolism in *La Dernière Mode*, characterizing the magazine as an important stage in the development of Mallarmé's literary aesthetic.

Born in 1842, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé is one of the key figures in French symbolism. Mallarmé is well-known for both his verse and his prose writings which have shaped the landscape of modern French poetry; the influence of Mallarmé can also be seen in the literature of other European languages including English. Roughly contemporary with Charles Baudelaire, whose famous collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* was published in 1857, Mallarmé's oeuvre heralded a new trajectory in French poetry. While, like Baudelaire, he produced a great deal of prose poetry as well as tightly structured sonnets, Mallarmé tested the boundaries of poetry in unique and pioneering ways, often breaking with conventions of form, meter and genre. Both in prose and verse, Mallarmé's poetry is notoriously complex, with an abundance of internal rhyme and wordplay which both astounds and confounds its readers. As well as verse and prose poetry, Mallarmé's vast and diverse oeuvre also includes journalistic

writings, translations and several pedagogical works on language and mythology. Major works by Mallarmé include the 1887 verse collection, *Poésies*, and *Divagations*, a collected volume of articles and prose poetry spanning his entire writing career.

Mallarmé devoted his life and career as a poet to the pursuit of "le Livre" [The Book]. "Le Livre" would be the work of art *par excellence*, combining elements of fiction, music, drama and the visual arts. Mallarmé's prose writings give some insight into the nature of this supreme literary work and he makes frequent references to the project of the "le Livre" in his personal correspondence. In the so-called "Autobiographical Letter" to Paul Verlaine, written in 1885, Mallarmé described this ideal book as "the Orphic explanation of the earth, which is the poet's sole duty and the

literary game *par excellence*.”¹ Unsurprisingly, Mallarmé never reached this lofty goal, though his published notes, including calculations for the dimensions, structure and circulation of the work, suggest a borderline obsession with the aesthetic project of “le Livre.”

Mallarmé’s influence crosses the boundaries of genre and has served as a fertile source of inspiration for subsequent artists working in a variety of media. Mallarmé will be known to many as the author of *L’Après-midi d’un faune* [*The Afternoon of a Faun*] which inspired Debussy’s composition of the same name. Perhaps less famous in the Anglophone world, but no less important within the scope of French studies, is his experimental poem *Un Coup de dés* [*A Throw of the Dice*], first published in 1897, the year preceding the poet’s death. This poem dispenses almost entirely with form and syntactical coherence and can be read in a variety of different configurations; some scholars have deemed *Un Coup de dés* to be the closest Mallarmé ever came to reaching the ideal “Livre.”

The Last / Latest Fashion

While Mallarmé’s poetry is relatively famous within the landscape of French literature, it is a little-known fact that in 1874 the poet distanced himself from the pursuit of “le Livre” and turned his attention to the popular press, producing a fortnightly magazine entitled *La Dernière Mode*. The title can be translated into English as either “the last fashion” or “the latest fashion”, no doubt a deliberate ambiguity which reveals Mallarmé’s passion for wordplay and demonstrates his continual desire to exploit the multifaceted nature of language. Bearing the subtitle, “gazette du monde et de la

famille,” [gazette of high society and of the family] the magazine covers an impressive variety of subjects pertaining to fashion, social engagements and domestic matters. Regular features included two columns on fashion, a review of literature and drama, and advice on educating children. The magazine also included guest contributions such as menus and recipes, how-to guides on DIY and interior décor, and recommended home remedies for common ailments such as chilblains.

La Dernière Mode is unique amongst nineteenth-century French fashion magazines, in that the multiplicity of voices in the periodical is an illusion. Mallarmé wrote almost all of the copy singlehandedly, under a variety of outlandish pseudonyms. The magazine purports to be a collaborative effort; Mallarmé, under the soubriquet of Marasquin, plays the role of editor with regular contributors Miss Satin and Madame de Ponty writing on fashion. The mysteriously named character Ix, one of the few male columnists amongst the magazine’s cast, provides a review of the fortnight’s theatrical and literary goings-on. Behind these many masks lurks the inimitable presence of the Master, Stéphane Mallarmé. Literary contributions such as poems and short stories which featured in every issue are the only part of the periodical not penned by Mallarmé himself. These were offered instead by a select band of authors who were well-known on the Parisian literary circuit, some of whom would later become “mardistes”, members of Mallarmé’s weekly Tuesday salon.

La Dernière Mode appealed to readers in terms of both form and content. An exquisite looking publication, the magazine bore a distinctive cover design,² painted by Edmond Morin. Morin was a well-known illustrator in the field of Parisian journalism,

¹ *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé* (ed. and trans. by Rosemary Lloyd), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 143

² See appendix.

having produced the artwork for a number of popular nineteenth-century fashion and society magazines. The magazine was owned and, for the most part, financed by Charles Wendelin, a neighbour of Mallarmé on the Rue du Moscou, and had been published the previous year, without text as a series of lithographs. The various forms in which *La Dernière Mode* appeared make it difficult to pin down exact details as to the circulation of the magazine, although Jean-Pierre Lecercle's 1989 book *Mallarmé et la Mode* [*Mallarmé and Fashion*] contains valuable information relating to the financial and commercial circumstances of the magazine. My research is principally concerned with the eight text editions of 1874, and analyses the language of *La Dernière Mode* in the context of Mallarmé's poetry and his *Divagations*. Focussing in particular on ideas of process in the magazine, my doctoral thesis seeks to establish the status of *La Dernière Mode* as a central part of Mallarmé's oeuvre, rather than as a mere distraction from the oppressive quest for the ideal "Livre." In this short article, I would like to introduce you to the Mallarmé of *La Dernière Mode*—not the distant figure of sonnets such as "Le Cygne" ["The Swan"] —but rather a poet actively engaged with everyday life and culture, an artist for whom even the most banal everyday objects could serve as a starting point for poetry. I shall begin by examining Mallarmé's involvement in the world of journalism, before going on to explore the ways in which he used the magazine format and the language of fashion to produce a vibrant publication which challenges the boundaries of form and genre.

Mallarmé and journalism

Mallarmé was no stranger to the world of journalism. In addition to his day job as an English teacher and his career as a poet, he started contributing to publications such as the *Revue indépendante* in his late

teens and was to continue writing for various major French newspapers and literary journals until his death in 1898.

Mallarmé had already been involved with journalism relating to the decorative arts for some years when he embarked upon the project of *La Dernière Mode*. In 1871-2 he was commissioned to review the French stand at the International Exhibition in London for *La Revue indépendante*. These articles were written under the pseudonym L.S. Price—a mildly humorous reference to English currency, showcasing the poet's penchant for wordplay and name games. Also in 1872 Mallarmé wrote a letter to the Parnasse poet José Maria de Hérédia in which he declared that "I am now collecting in the various corners of Paris the subscription required to begin a beautiful and luxurious review, which obsesses my mind: *L'Art décoratif, Gazette mensuelle* [*Decorative Art: a Monthly Journal*]"³ While this particular project never materialised, *La Dernière Mode* evidently went some way to satisfying Mallarmé's interest in the decorative arts. Given both his frequent struggles to make ends meet and his continual preoccupation with the ideal book, "le Livre", it is perhaps no surprise that Mallarmé sought refuge in the contemplation of everyday objects, indulging his passion for language through the creation of an extraordinary and exquisite fashion magazine.

The press was an important vehicle for promoting literature in nineteenth-century France. Literary journals such as *La Revue fantaisiste*, launched by Catulle Mendès, had a profound impact on the landscape of literature and the arts, while

³ 7 April 1872 to José Maria de Heredia translated in the "Introduction" to *Mallarmé on Fashion: A Translation of the Fashion Magazine La Dernière Mode with Commentary* (ed. and trans. by P.N. Furbank and Alex Cain). (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 6.

magazines targeted at female audiences usually incorporated short stories, poems and serialised fiction and were instrumental in making the names of many literary figures. The front cover of *La Dernière Mode* promises regular subscribers literary submissions by major figures including well-known poets such as Théodore de Banville and Emmanuel Des Essarts, as well as contributions from the renowned novelist Emile Zola. However, none of the eight published issues of *La Dernière Mode* contains work by Zola, suggesting that the magazine fell into financial difficulty before this particular issue was published. In terms of form and content, the magazine is not dissimilar to other women's magazines of the period. French fashion magazines of the mid to late 1800s typically followed a similar format, with features on fashion, the arts and domestic life, as well as short stories to entertain the lady of leisure. What sets *La Dernière Mode* apart from its contemporary counterparts is, on the one hand, the cast of fictitious columnist characters and, on the other, Mallarmé's unique exploitation of the format and lexis of the fashion magazine, which blurs the boundaries between journalistic and literary language.

Name games

Mallarmé's choice of pseudonyms for his regular columnist characters is just one of the ways in which language is used to create puzzles for the readers *La Dernière Mode*. The name of Ix—a transcription of the French pronunciation of the letter "X"—is a typically Mallarméan pun which can be read in a variety of ways, and serves to link the work to other works in the Mallarméan corpus. On 3 May 1868, Mallarmé wrote a letter to his friend Henri Lefebure in which the poet revealed that he was working on the sonnet which begins "Ses purs ongles..." ["Her pure nails..."], often known as the "sonnet en -yx" on account of the recurrent

rhyming of the suffix "yx". The poem is described by Mallarmé scholar Wallace Fowlie as being "perhaps the first of his really difficult poems."⁴ In his letter to Lefebure, Mallarmé discusses the rhyme on "yx", and wonders if he dare use the invented word, "ptyx". The sound and its literary application was evidently still on the poet's mind some six years later, surfacing in the name of *La Dernière Mode*'s most mysterious character. Aside from the relation to Mallarmé's verse poetry, the significance of the name of Ix can be interpreted in a number of ways. The magazine is primarily concerned with novelty, wanting to offer readers up-to-the minute information on fashion, lifestyle and culture. As Roger Pearson points out, the name of Ix could be read in Roman numerals as the number nine—in French "neuf".⁵ Of course, the word "neuf" can also be translated as new, perhaps alluding to the novelty of both magazine's form and its content.

The use of pseudonyms, the playful prose and the eclectic range of topics covered in *La Dernière Mode* all combine to reveal a very different Mallarmé from the image of the serious creator of meticulously crafted sonnets, the "ivory tower poet" who dramatized the plight of the eponymous virgin heroine of *Hérodiade* in verse. Mallarmé evidently delighted in the creation of this sparkling magazine; in a famous letter of 1885, often referred to as the "Autobiographical letter", written to his much-admired contemporary Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé declares that *La Dernière Mode* provided him with a welcome distraction from the pursuit of "le Livre".

In moments of hardship [...] I've been obliged to write things of which the

⁴ Wallace Fowlie, *Mallarmé*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁵ Roger Pearson, "Mallarmé's Interior Designs, *Romance Studies*, 22 (2004), 6.

*most that can be said is that they are honest, and of which is not fitting to speak... But apart from that, I've not often yielded either to necessity or to pleasure. Except that at a certain moment, however, despairing of the despotic book abandoned by Myself, I have, after a few articles hawked about here and there, tried to write completely on my own, including advice on outfits, jewelry, furniture, even theater reviews and dinner menus, a journal entitled *La Dernière Mode*, the eight or ten numbers of which still serve, when I blow the dust off them, to make me dream at length.⁶*

This letter, written some 15 years after the publication of the final issue of the magazine, emphasises the poet's fondness for *La Dernière Mode*. While Mallarmé concedes that, like many of his other journalistic endeavours, producing the magazine was intended to provide a welcome injection of cash, this statement affirms the aesthetic value of the magazine which still manages to inspire lengthy "rêveries" with each new reading. Mallarmé's admission of the continued personal importance of the fashion magazine and the pleasure derived from reading it alludes to the poet's ability to use language to transform everyday objects into the stuff of dreams.

Poetry and the everyday

Although the quest for "le Livre" was a serious and often oppressive matter, Mallarmé saw language as both a game and a gift. No subject was deemed too banal to be transformed through poetry. The poet frequently used everyday objects as a means of playing with language, often sending gifts such as boxes of glacé fruits, teapots and

Easter eggs inscribed with short poems to his friends. Mallarmé exploited all possible resources for their poetic potential. His *Recréations postales* [*Postal Recreations*], short poems derived from the addresses of friends and correspondents, similarly, reveal a Mallarmé who delighted in language. These clever little verses provided a literary challenge for postal workers—but apparently reached their addressees without too much difficulty. Ix's exuberant prose and Madame de Ponty's indulgent flights of fantasy similarly showcase Mallarmé's passion for the nuances of the French language. Just as simple addresses could be given an aesthetic dimension when transformed into poetry, so Mallarmé's exploitation of the aesthetically fertile language of fashion serves to revolutionise the journalistic medium, revealing its aesthetic potentiality.

Perhaps Mallarmé's most famous fusion of poetry and decorative objects are the three poems written on fans, dedicated to his daughter, his wife, and his mistress. Images of fans crop up repeatedly in Mallarmé's verse poetry with many different connotations: sometimes they are presented as wings with which to take off towards an aesthetic ideal; in other instances fans represent the passage of the sun as they are opened out. Fans are also associated with dressing up and theatricality and are often vaunted by Madame de Ponty as a must-have accessory for the fashionable lady. In this world of masks and shifting identities, fans provide a convenient means of hiding one's face, and are reminiscent of the dramatic fan dances in Oriental and Latin American cultures. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, fans were frequently used for communication; the "language of the fan" was a kind of secret code which allowed ladies to display their feelings to potential suitors across the ballroom in a discreet yet coquettish manner. The fan is thus one of a

⁶ 6 November 1885 to Paul Verlaine, translated in *Selected Letters*, p. 144

number of overlapping themes which emphasise the close relationship between *La Dernière Mode* and Mallarmé's verse poetry.

Mallarmé described a poem as "a mystery for which the reader must find the key". Such mysteries are abundant in his poetry, and are also to be found in *La Dernière Mode*. Although it has, in the past, been dismissed as a frivolous undertaking, a mere game designed to bring in much-needed income, the magazine is a landmark work with significant implications for our understanding of Mallarmé's wider *oeuvre*. In the magazine, the shifting identities, the

References

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varied subject matter and the manipulation of the journalistic form combine to create a unique work which destabilises the boundaries between journalism and literature, art and life, fact and fiction. As such, the magazine offers an alternative perspective on Mallarmé's life and work, revealing a poet actively engaged with the mass media and with the world of objects. An amusing and eminently readable work, *La Dernière Mode* contains much to inspire the same long "rêveries" in contemporary readers as it provoked in its creator over 100 years ago.

Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé (ed. and trans. by Rosemary Lloyd), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)

Secondary Literature

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