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## **The Gent-rification of English masculinities:**

### **class, race and nation in contemporary consumption**

**ABSTRACT:** The figure of the English gentleman is regaining traction in British society. This retrograde celebration of a type of masculinity articulating various intersections in class, racial and national identity provides not just a reliable identity-complex for contemporary British males but also imaginative solutions to the current cultural predicaments – notably, how to be English/British in the era of globalisation? This article will unpack this reformation of the gentleman and its paradoxical appearance and position at present through two consumer objects: clothing and cars. By first conceptually outlining the national, class and racialised background of the ‘gentleman’ for the British cultural imagination, the article will proceed to analyse Jack Wills clothing aesthetic and the recent Jaguar F-Type coupe, ‘Good to be Bad’, adverts. The article draws upon Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Jameson (1973) to conceptualise this paradoxical, mythical resurgence of gentry/gentlemanliness. By focusing on how two artefacts utilise an Americanised mythical narrative of Britishness, I claim the contemporary landscape sees the oxymoronic return of an archaic character-type refigured in a manner appropriate for an increasingly plural, multi-cultural global landscape.

**KEY WORDS:** Gentleman \* Englishness \* Masculinity \* Lévi-Strauss \* Whiteness \* Americanisation

## Introduction

The figure of the English gentleman is regaining cultural traction in British society. When we look at the landscape of consumer culture, certain elements of British society sees the 'gentleman' as a viable and appropriate subject position for the white, (upper-)middle class male. From *The Guardian* gift ideas for Father's Day suggesting items such as a 'laptop sleeve' for the "country gent to, um, tote around his notebook" (Carter, 2014). Or how *Doctor Who* has made the 'Sloane look' trendy (Mount, 2010) as well as the recent fashion for red corduroy trousers from outlets such as Hackett or Jack Wills (Hayes, 2012): the gentrification of English masculinities is evident in popular and consumer culture.

While this may initially appear as a fad of contemporary fashion, the cultural baggage that the gentleman has in British society is not to be underestimated. In recent years the British public has ambivalently reacted to a series of inherently 'gentry' related publicity: 'Plebgate', the interruption to the 2012 Oxbridge Boat Race to protest elitism, the rise of Nigel Farage and UKIP, David Mellor's class-based abuse to a London taxi-driver, and more. The ambivalence toward the gentry twist in British politics may be read as indicative of certain cultural developments. The figure of the gentleman is not merely refusing to go away but rather open to re-imagination time and again. Additionally, in the wake of economic crisis and political pessimism, this resurgence of veneration toward archaic, yet familiar, notions of masculinity provides not just a reliable identity for contemporary British males. It also provides imaginative solutions to current cultural predicaments: How can an English/British male be English/British in the age of global culture and the contemporary political climate? For the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish national identity may take the reactionary form of defining themselves against the English, both politically and culturally. But as many popular commentators point out, this leaves the English with a problem: how will they be defined given that their cultural and political culture is what is being reacted against? (e.g. Fox, 2004)

Furthermore, in an age where people are encouraged to engage with their racial and ethnic roots, the trend towards cultural specificity over difference, as Pitcher (2014:54-57) argues, leads to an appeal to 'ethnically appropriate' forms of consumption. That is, engagement with culture which will allow cultural difference(s) to exist while also not 'causing offence' to others. Given the political gaffes mentioned and reactionary nationalisms, the 'English gentleman' is surely the exact opposite of a form of ethnically appropriate mode of cultural and consumer identity. It is a figure which has origins in ascribed status structures, was institutionalised firmly in the building of Empire and whose racialization became the figure of rational, self-control and innate superiority over the non-white 'other'. Yet the gent may be still be one of the most reliable modes of masculinity available to a white, (upper-)middle class British male. With this class-racial and national intersection of privilege and political backwardness, the obvious question becomes how is the 'English gent' being remade for the present?

Given this seeming paradox of in British popular culture, this article will unpack this reformation of the gentleman and its appearance at present through two consumer objects: clothing and cars. The English – or, indeed, British (see Colley, 1992) – masculinity documented in these consumer goods is bound up with three core dimensions of identity. As I will demonstrate, the consumption items and their fantasies relies upon an upper(-middle) class position of privilege as well as being reliant upon historically inherited remnants of British patrician positions of power and colonial imaginaries, notably in aesthetics and character qualities depicted. That is, there is a metonymic link between commodity and personality, object and subject. And finally, the consumption materials articulate a predominantly white identity not merely as they display white-subjects but rather for the histories which the commodities play into. The consumption items that I will focus upon are the attire of the well-know and successful up-market clothing brand, Jack Wills (Smith,

2014b) and the 'Good to be bad' and 'Art of Villainy' adverts for the motorcar company Jaguar.

The argument has three-components to it. First I shall outline 'gentrification' conceptually, identifying it as a species of British national character and the intersections of race, class and nationality which it is bound up within. Second I make the case for analysing the two consumer materials from the perspective of myths to resolve social contradictions within the 'gentleman' and 'gentry' figure, drawing upon Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Jameson (1973; 1981). Third and finally I conclude by stressing the salience of enduring cultural icons of masculinity, especially the 'gentleman', in the re-imagining of archaic status structures through popular forms. In this regard, I am endorsing Pitcher's claim that consumer materials involve "profoundly imaginative investments, immersed in fantasy and desire" and, therefore, implies "there is ...no reason why we should have to be thinking like this." (Pitcher, 2014:72)

### **Gentrification as consuming class-race-nation**

The 'gentrification' of English masculinity manifest in popular and consumer culture is not adequately covered by the blanket assumption that certain consumer durables or apparel are simply being marketed or re-branded as more up-market (i.e. not 'gentrification' per se). As with Pitcher's central claim in *Consuming Race* (2014), 'race' is something people 'do' and 'gentrification' refers to the imaginative potential surrounding certain items which calls to mind the figure of the English gentleman or the class position 'gentry'. This may be conceptualised by Varul's (2008:660-664; cf. Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988) term 'romantic commodification': the use of one's imagination to manipulate and manage the meanings of certain commodities. Through this one achieves an extension of oneself in a fantasy world while, nevertheless, retaining certain elements of the everyday alongside the fantasy. For instance, a Jaguar F-Type coupe and its association of power and prestige from

its use on the road (see below). What distinguishes ‘romantic commodification’ from the romantic day-dreams discussed by Campbell (1987), however, is that the history of the product is necessary to the imaginative investments made by consumers (Varul, 2008:661). The consumer products I am discussing have a material and social history that rests upon and actively asks the consumer to engage in fantasies reminiscent of the English ‘gent’ or ‘gentry’.

The figure of the gentleman may be said to be readily applicable to the modern English male if only because of the imaginative identification(s) they may have with ‘him’. Rather than taking ‘Englishness’ as an essentialised facet of some purported ‘national character’ which may be distilled in racialised terms of a ‘white race’, e.g. Pearson’s *National Life and Character* as discussed by Bonnett (2008), the ‘gentleman’ was/is an invention manifest through internal, normative pressures of conduct, comportment and demeanour – e.g. the social-political value of ‘politeness’ and ‘taste’ in the eighteenth century (Langford, 1999; Vickery, 2008) – which in turn became generalised amongst a population. So, too, is national ‘character’ a product resulting from foreign perceptions, recordings and stereotypes (Langford, 2000). Crucially one must not forget the history of these performative dispositions’: originating in court-society and travel documents from elites and becoming a matter of constant requirement of conservation (Langford, 2000; Mandler, 2006).

Gent-rification is bound up in a political-mythology, as with all forms of bodily *hexis* (Bourdieu, 1977:93-95), of national (classed and racial) masculinity precisely because ‘national character’ is “a transitory expression of territorial units.” (Langford, 2000:7) In the era of globalisation, when national borders seem increasingly irrelevant and certain national traits are heralded to be in decline (e.g. Paxman, 1999 or Aslet, 1997), the reformation of the English ‘gent’ and ‘gentry’ may be read as a reassertion of an autochthonous ‘Englishness’ for the modern British male. Furthermore it is reasserting a historically hegemonic ‘British’

identity as an elite project (Colley, 1993), one which has lost cultural permissibility in the break-up of Britain (see Clarke & Garner, 2010; Perryman, 2008). Indeed, that this manifests itself in commodified materials is indicative of where national identity stands in the era of global, consumer capitalism. Peter Mandler (2006:237) concludes his *The English National Character* by stating “[i]t is today very difficult to project any vision of ‘national identity’ that can satisfy even a simple majority of the country, and virtually impossible to project an idea of ‘national character’ – a psychological profile – that even a small minority recognises in itself.” As such, the time has come now when national subjects are recognising themselves (or not recognising themselves) more in terms of brand-images and tropes, Mandler continues (2006:238), rather than an overarching essence of national identity. The ‘English’ gent may be one such marginal and selective figure for a certain percentage of the population to identify with in the face of greater identity pluralism. From this, the anachronistic class term gentry is used here not to refer to a series of landed families in Britain (although they still remain present today). Instead what ‘gentry’ (and ‘gentleman’) encapsulate is performance of self.

Gentleman is not easy to define. Just as there are many uses of the term, there are just as many types of gentleman: from the euphemistic use of the term in Britain to indicate the male lavatory in public spaces, to the technical definition found in heraldry guides which states only those granted coats of arms may be referred to as a ‘gentleman’ (Fox-Davies, 1969), what one means by ‘gentleman’ is context specific. Yet the selected sources in this article carve out a recognisable, albeit not definitive, notion of the ‘gentleman’ and ‘gentry’. I will only focus on two areas of social activity which are indicative of gentlemanliness/gentry; first is clothing, where the ‘apparel oft proclaim the man’ and, second, a character which is stereotypical or archetypical of gentlemanliness. I detail these two qualities in this article, the first with Jack Wills, the second with Jaguar.

These two criteria are, ultimately, the most crucial as the figure of gentleman/gentry rests upon a claim to social pedigree, distinction and high station where appearances and demeanour establish key performative devices to 'prove' identity claims. This is because gentry/gentleman are linked together not merely through a performative aspect of English masculinity but also because a class habitus is being articulated within appeals to national identity: class is conflated with national identity to such a degree that social station is also a beacon of national values and historically entrenched ideals. It is this claim to national-class social standing that also influences the extent and degree of imaginative investments in the consumer materials below. As McCracken (2008) notes with regards to 'status transformations', existence in a status hierarchy encompasses the individual's self-definition and constrains their agency:

What to admire in someone and whom to admire in the world are not open to individual choice. All this encourages an impulse toward upward transformation. Individuals can see clearly how, and how much, their own lives would change if they were to rise even a notch or two. This imagining soon establishes a right of way of fantasy. (McCracken, 2008:59)

The English gentleman may be open to those who are able to imaginatively invest in it; while also being able to 'pass' through their performative qualities requires a selection of appropriate characteristics of their own social standing, character and disposition. E.g. consuming, say, Jack Wills clothing while also having a private education is very different to someone who doesn't have such-and-such a background buying the same product. Yet while such performative accomplishments are constrained by the position of the performer, this curtailment of 'performing gentry' is, in fact, crucial to defining gentry as a social station, disposition and ideal. Adam Nicolson, drawing up a series of etiquette guides, letters and



historical research to states the social station of gentry combined two opposed poles of role-taking – that of aspiration and ascription:

England was a place which could congratulate itself on allowing high social standing to anyone who qualified for it through his achievements or education, and through his qualities as a person, not what his ancestry said he was. [...] But there are paradoxes, arguments and irresolution's here because, despite all this talk of openness, it was also a class obsessed by blood, honour and lineage. ...So was gentrydom a question of blood or of qualities? (Nicolson, 2011:xvi, xviii – my parenthesis)

Ultimately it is an unresolved dialectical entanglement of both which defines gentry. As gentry and gentlemanliness relies upon an obligation of the ascribed to provide a model of imitation, and gentry may be claimed by education, achievements and character qualities, this helps explain why stereotypes are so salient to our enduring ideals of what 'gentleman' consists of. For instance, while the peerage directory and etiquette guide Debrett's has been in existence since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the 2008 *Debrett's Guide for the Modern Gentleman* seeks to re-establish the gentleman for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by drawing upon well-established stereotypes of gentlemanliness – tailoring, chivalry, motoring – to “rediscover the art of gentlemanly behaviour for our age.” (Howarth, 2008: npr) Stereotypes have a crucial role to play in 'rediscovery': stereotypes provide what Holquist (2002:172) calls “a poetics of the social.” On the one hand stereotypes provide a model for the formation of the individual self (gentleman as a guide or handbook) and, on the other, stereotypes are “a dynamic in the social and historical formation.” (Holquist, 2002:172) Indeed, as Mandler notes of 'national character', as much as stereotypes are generated from foreign observations and attributions from an 'Other', quite often the process may take place without reference to a second or third

party; rather 'auto-stereotypes' arise from within the group itself (Mandler, 2006:53f). As such, the stereotype of gentleman plays the role in guiding and defining a species of masculinity that goes beyond the here-and-now and defines epochs. As Simmel (1971:212-213) observes with 'nobility', this is a group which have specially resolved complete stereotyping with autonomy; a stereotype is not a hindrance to performance of self but rather its starting off point as persons gather the ability to perform the stereotype and make it their own. This reliance upon stereotypes helps underline gentry's endurance in our cultural imagination.

There is, however, a third element to the analysis of the consumption items which requires attention, that of its racial dimension. The gentry figure or English gentleman is a white subject and has a strong colonial heritage. The classed and national complex of the English gentleman is inseparable from its racial heritage in the British colonial project. But this vision of the English gentleman I am writing about in the present is, indeed, a post-colonial one. The colonial discourse – as many note – which sees “the production of unmarked, apparently autonomous white/Western self, in contrast with the marked, Other racial and cultural categories” (Frankenberg, 1993:17) is not foremost here in the racial representation of English gentry. Rather, to borrow an argument of Pitcher's, the materials of consumer culture discussed here are ones which speak to fantasies about gentlemanly Englishness in a way which resolves the problems of increased multi-culturalism through selecting products which are 'ethnically appropriate' (Pitcher, 2014: esp.54ff). Jack Wills and Jaguar analysed below offer a means for would-be or existing gentry males in British society to exist alongside racial and national 'others'. This position is directed toward what it means to be male, (upper-)middle class and white in British society today. To sum this up, Pitcher claims that

[i]n our multi-cultural present, this fantasy of nostalgic whiteness is not... best understood as a protest against racial difference and an assertion of white supremacy, but an attempt at solving the problem of white identity in a postcolonial context... the imaginative return or retreat into an historical whiteness is an attempt to occupy a subject position that does not symbolically depend on a relationship with non-whites. It is, in other words, an idea of racial autonomy that presupposes the co-existence of racial others. (Pitcher, 2014:62)

### **Mythemes of ‘gent-rification’**

The consumption materials analysed in this article will be treated as mythic devices which articulate and consummate a subject position of English gentry or gentlemanliness for the present. First and foremost these consumption materials are telling stories about who, what and why this species of English masculinity has and takes on a ‘gentlemanly’ character, disposition and world-view. To analyse consumption items as engaged in a storytelling akin to myths is to treat their marketing devices – advertising, product description, etc. – as made up of what Lévi-Strauss (1963) called ‘mythemes’: component parts of a larger story which have a function when applied to a subject, say the function of class privilege when linked to Jaguar cars (below). Elsewhere I have applied Lévi-Strauss’s use of mythological analysis to how persons construct a persona for their YouTube accounts (Smith, 2014a). Certain stereotypical aspects of nationality may be performatively adopted to dramatize a character for an online audience which, when reliant upon knowledge of mythic aspects of nationality, recognises and constitutes a subject position of established significance. Relying upon mythic aspects of identity – e.g. Englishness manifested in ‘cups of tea’ – gives people performative

space to consummate a sense of self which is both actively their own and situated in well-established, and successful, signifiers.

In this article I will, however, rely upon Frederic Jameson's (1973:69-76) reinterpretation of Lévi-Strauss's mythological analysis. Jameson reformulates Lévi-Strauss' model with regard to the 'functions' of mythemes. Jameson deploys the category of functions to give the illusion, or at least pay attention to, historical shifts or 'transformations'. This requires 'characters'. When analysing historical change through the lens of mythical devices, the use of mythemes – functions linked to subjects (privilege and fast cars, say) – requires 'characters' to act as mediators of historical shifts. Jameson argues that while functions give the analyst a conceptual device to work with, Lévi-Strauss's original argument left out the appearance of 'characters' (either individuals, groups or social movements, say) whose role is that of embodying and mediating historical transformations. Here the characters employed in this article are those persons who act as personifications of a gentlemanly English masculinity, brand-names and Hollywood actors. These act as imaginative figures for the contemporary white British (upper-)middle class male. By employing characters, the mythemes function to demonstrate a discursive narrative whereby old notions are being re-imagined and re-presented in the present. Their personification of contemporary 'gentry' is bound up with wider social-cultural shifts; as characters they embody shifts in the contemporary landscape of English masculinity and their mythic character qualities serve to resolve them into an identity which is adequately recognisable as 'gentry' yet congenial to wider British society at present.

The narrative element is crucial to an interpretation of these consumption items. As Pitcher observes with the contemporary vogue for Nordic fashions amongst the white, British middle classes

symbolic returns to white roots, or to a purer, more elemental whiteness, are made in the context of economic crisis and political pessimism. They are not future-orientated transformations of the self, but forms of retreat where one's object is to become more like oneself. ...respect for difference has now become a premise for disengagement from it. (Pitcher, 2014:71)

It is in this cultural shift from respect of difference by the white-British middle classes to seeking out forms of identity appropriate to their own white-British middle class position that I am situating the current of 'gent-rification'. There has been a socio-cultural shift which underlines how and why the appearances of 'gentrification' may be interpreted. This is how I want to understand the mythemes found in each consumption item.

#### *Case 1 – Jack Wills and the paradox of “preppy” British clothing*

The success of Jack Wills in the last fifteen years since its inception on the Salcombe (Devon) coast in 1999 is evident. Crucially, Jack Wills' aesthetic is inherently nostalgic and couched in gentry terms, with its slogan *Outfitters to the Gentry*, found in its Handbooks and emblazoned on its stores. As CEO Peter Williams says of the product, it is “grounded in traditions of British aristocracy – riding coats, tweeds, tuxedos and tailcoats” (2011) and its patroned events indicate a requirement for this attire: e.g. the Oxbridge Varsity polo (c.2007-present) (riding coats and tweed), the Keble Ball at Oxford (2011) (tuxedos and tailcoats). As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the colours, name and logos of the Jack Wills brand are aesthetic imitations of British heraldry designs (Smith, 2014b).

Situated in a gentry lifestyle space, Jack Wills nevertheless represents a paradoxical reimagining of gentry attire and aesthetics. For Peter Williams, his product and corporate ethos

“plays off tensions – old versus new, heritage versus contemporary, formal versus casual.” (Williams, 2011) More than a straddling of past and present, seeking to re-imagine gentry today, Jack Wills is often described as a ‘preppy’ brand, a distinctly Ivy League American ‘look’ as it placed alongside other American brand names: Abercrombie & Fitch, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, Hollister, J. Crew (Goodman, 2009; Williams, 2011; Vernon, 2010). It is an irony, at first glance, that Jack Wills would label itself *Outfitters for the Gentry* and *Fabulously British* when it’s aesthetic appeal to ‘preppy’ refers to a society which has no gentry class and a markedly different national culture. Indeed, Williams protests against claims of similarity with regard to these brands, especially Abercrombie & Fitch: “There is some overlap in product mix”, admits Williams, but ultimately he states that Abercrombie & Fitch are “fundamentally ...a mass market, mall-based US brand built on Americana. We are explicitly an upmarket, niche British heritage brand.” (Goodman, 2009)

The interpretation I want to apply in the case of Jack Wills’ aesthetic is that their appeal to preppy functions as a mytheme to reimagine the subject of gentry heritage attire and aesthetics in contemporary Britain. In keeping with Jameson’s reformulation of Lévi-Strauss’s mythemes, the transformation of gentry from nostalgic, heraldry inspired aesthetics to Americanised preppy attire mediates a historical transition so as to make ‘gentry’ appropriate for the here and how (or, as Jameson says of myths, they are “a story about origins, to resolve some underlying and apparently irreconcilable contradiction.” (1973:87; cf. Jameson, 1981), here ‘preppy gentry clothing’).

In the late 1990s, the appeal to gentlemanly or aristocratically inspired attire would have been inappropriate to the national cultural climate. The 1990s, epitomised by the New Labour ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign, saw an appeal to the ‘modern’, the new and the progressive which incorporated the political ideals of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Britain (Rojek, 2007:23-24). This progressive political project implicitly witnessed an attack on

“poshness” in the cultural landscape. Writing retrospectively, Clare Heal states: “Cast your minds back to the mid Nineties. ... For a while, especially towards the end of John Major's Tory government, it seemed that if you couldn't produce some working class roots, you had no artistic credibility at all. Admitting to having gone to public school was social death and the ground was simply littered with aitches dropped by self-conscious middle-class teenagers attempting to appear “street”.” (Heal, 2011) The 1990s was, culturally speaking, largely defined by a veneration of working class culture (see Beckett, 2009). The populism of ‘Cool Britannia’ embraced that which made Britain a ‘global’ icon in a positive sense. This meant counter-culture 60s “cool”, itself a working-class inspired scene: Britain in the 1990s was forward looking and the retrospective veneration of the 60s was a way of aesthetically fashioning politics to make it ‘consumable’ – to give it a credible image in the present (Rojek, 2007). Against this backdrop, Jack Wills’ gentry veneration in and of itself would have had not one iota of plausibility. Gentry is ‘too British’ and ‘too Establishment’. To found a brand on ‘gentry’ alone would have been tantamount to the political epoch regressing culturally.<sup>1</sup>

Jack Wills’ origins arise in reaction to a culture steeply opposed to archaic gentry. What Jack Wills took up, instead, was a more global perspective where, I want to argue, ‘preppy’ became an aesthetic agent to mediate the contradiction of gentry in the late 20<sup>th</sup>, early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Crucially, the falling away of gentry as appropriate to British culture in the 1990s had as its oppositional, reactionary impetus the perceived ‘Americanisation’ of Britain – as found in popular and academic literature (e.g. Billig, 1995; Aslet, 1997; Paxman, 1999; Fox, 2004:13-15). Jack Wills embraced Americanisation yet with a gentry twist. As the

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<sup>1</sup> To make the same point by way of exception, take the British boxer Chris Eubank: in the 1990s, his tweedy, eccentric character and modelling for up-market brands such as Versace and Vivienne Westwood appealed to various gentry characteristics but did so in a cultural climate against ‘poshness’. Interestingly from a former working class, black sportsman. Also Eubank’s status as a child of the British Empire, living in Jamaica during his childhood before returning to South London, embodies many aspects of post-colonial ambivalence and mimicry.

marketing director of Mulberry – *the* middle England brand based upon gentry heritage – put it, the notion of British poshness “might have been great in the 1850s but this is, you know, the year 2000.” (in Goodrum, 2005:80) The progressive hangover from the 1990s and perceived ‘Americanisation’ of the British high-street required a reconfiguration of gentry. As Goodrum argues, “...the spectre of Americanization was couched in distinctly class-related terms, with aristocratic good taste being threatened by a ‘levelling down process’ ...which it was feared, would erode fundamental British values to do with morality and standards, as well as the boundaries between social classes” (Goodrum, 2005:130). That being the case, the internal class hierarchies of the British could be re-imagined and salvaged if they embraced an *Americanised* version of their own social hierarchy or, more evocatively put, developed an ornamental strategy to salvage their internal class hierarchy by basing their aesthetic on those ‘equivalent’ social groups overseas. America may have represented vapid consumerism that would erode the British conservative ideals, but Jack Wills drew upon the white American preppies of the Ivy Leagues as an *ornamentally equivalent* social group for their own reformation (see Cannadine, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1990s the brands of gentry Britain were dubbed anachronistic and steeped in a romantic nostalgia of Empire: Burberry, Mulberry, Paul Smith, all sold antiquated popular Empire images to ‘foreigners’ (Goodrum, 2003; 2005). In America, the brands of the preppies (J. Crew, Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, etc.) sell much the same romanticised image minus the imperial overtones. Nevertheless there is a homology between the two sides of the Atlantic: the values of traditionalism inherent in J. Crew, for instance, could be matched by Burberry and the polo aesthetic of Ralph Lauren could be found in Hackett. The ex-colony and nation founded on commerce, America, provided the means for Jack Wills to

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this appeal to moneyed privileged in the American preppies is precisely the logic which makes the American cast of British reality show *Made In Chelsea* both culturally appropriate and possible, for not only have the American preppies retained the same moneyed distinction but the British have embraced a neo-liberal, commercial culture built around brands and fashion.



embrace the aesthetic of preppy so as to retrieve their plausibility in the contemporary era but, in doing so, had to make exceptions to this rule. Jack Wills had to reassert its British-ness in the face of a new style:

The cool British preppy kid puts his or her look together in a slightly more eclectic way than the slightly more polished American preppy kid. He or she mixes heritage with contemporary, tweed with high-tops, riding coats with graphic tee's and skinny jeans. It's all styled together to make a very cool, very hip, very authentic British look. (Williams, 2011)

Jack Wills, it seems, wants to reclaim their precedence for 'prep'. Just as Jack Wills was spoken of above as standing between two worlds – the old and new – this Janus-face is not only a temporal one but also a cultural one as the heritage aesthetic is mixed with contemporary preppy. Jack Wills looks forward to the America's as their aesthetic leader but backwards to Britain as the basis for its origins.

This is found in the cultural history of the "preppy" aesthetic. *The Official Preppy Handbook* (Birnbach, 1980) sees Anglophilia as one of the key identity markers of 'preppyness': "The British have a lot to answer for – Shetland sweaters, Harris tweeds, Burberrys, tartan, regimental ties ... primary colours and brilliant pastels are worn by men and women alike, in preposterous combinations. In some subcultures, hot pink might be considered a little peculiar; preppies take it for granted. (Birnbach, 1980:122) Indeed, the reason preppies take pink for granted is because it has a particular mythological history in a British gentry enclave, the public school. The public school is a model for 'preppy' and Jack Wills markets its product to and supplies patronage for these schools, notably Eton College.

Jack Wills re-appropriates preppy colours to provide an originary notion of prep founded on the British Isles.

Colour as indicative of national-racial, indeed colonial, crossover is crucial: unlike the monochromatic aesthetic of the Nordic white noir Pitcher (2014) discusses, the Jack Wills palette delves into a shared colonial history in elite colours which are vibrant and conspicuous. Jack Wills' colour schemes, stated to be effeminate to certain notions of masculinity, demonstrate a palette that is flamboyant but retains a masculine form of chromophilia (see Taussig's (2009) notion of chromophilia as an aspect of the colonial imaginations denigration of the 'primitive', non-white Other). Jack Wills' colours have a material history which is bound up with the mythology of the public school, a masculine space, and are central to both American preppy attire as well as Jack Wills' clothing (Smith, 2014b:99-103). Moreover, the colour and clothing is the material device to forge a gentlemanly character. In American prep schools, this is evident and there are many popular examples, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (2011):

...he had appeared; shy but inwardly glowing, in his first long trousers, set off by a purple accordion tie and a 'Belmont' collar with the edges unassailably meeting, purple socks, and a handkerchief with a purple border peeping through from his breast pocket. But more than that he had formulated his first philosophy, a code to live by, which, as near as it can be named, was a sort of aristocratic egoism (2011:54-55)

This 'aristocratic egoism', which may be named mutually compatible with British gentry, has a colonial history – one where clothing, colours and character merge.

James Brinsley-Richards' *Seven Years at Eton* (1883) tells the origin story of 'Eton blue' in 1860: "In that year, a parti-colour scarlet and Eton blue shirt with a pork-pie cap were adopted for the Field Eleven. In the following year, the pork-pie was suspended by a cap of the ordinary shape, and white flannel trousers with scarlet and light blue stripes were added to the costume. The Wall Eleven took a cap and shirt, dark blue and red bands." The white flannel and blue shirt, a kaleidoscope to the British colonial officer uniform, becomes in Jack Wills' colour schemes a way to re-imagine British masculinity. Furthermore, pink also has a mythic history which plays into Jack Wills' preppy aesthetic. In the house-colours of the Clarendon Nine, pink figures in the colours of Charterhouse (pink, blue and maroon) and Westminster (pink). Charterhouse had adopted pink to play cricket in since 1849 and their football elevens wore blue and maroon from 1861 (Webster, 1937:66) so no conflict existed in their playing Eton. But Westminster wore analogous dress to Eton:

Tradition has it that in those days [1800s] Westminster cricketers wore straw hats with light blue ribbons, flannel jackets and white trousers; but, apparently, Eton also favoured light blue and there is a persistent tradition that Westminster rowed Eton for the choice of colour and, upon losing the race, adopted pink. In support of this legend it may be pointed out that Westminster have taken pink for their colours ever since they first sported them in their race against Eton in 1837. ...Nine races, however, were rowed between 1829 and 1847, of which Eton won five and Westminster four. The most memorable was that of 1837. Westminster then finally adopted pink for their colours... (Webster, 1937:345, 356, my parenthesis).

Thus these 'preppy colours' reveal a resonant material history, owing to colours nomadic agency (Taussig, 2009). This forgetting of colour's colonial history – as Taussig (2008) discusses with blue jeans and indigo – is a part of colours 'polymorphous' nature as it becomes recast in commodity exchanges and engages in cultural crossovers (Taussig, 2008:12). By way of exploring and exploiting American preppy, built around a 'colonial palette' (Eaton,2012), the shared colour schemes of colonialists and colonized allows gentry to be reformed in a manner which preserves British gentry's precedential position yet retains an aesthetic appealing to the wider cultural landscape of contemporary globalisation.

As with Appadurai's (1996:74) observation that consumer items have a cultural genealogy that are "stubbornly embedded in local institutions and the history of the local habitus", both British gentry and American prep have a mutuality to them: both seek an aesthetic for elite social standing and employ this shared aesthetic to signal mutually compatible appeals to elitism. For the British it is for reforming an archaic identity; for the Americans it is an appeal to a shared, equal standing to their old colonial masters. Preppy thus mediates itself into the landscape of British gentry, thereby producing an aesthetic for the British Jack Wills consumer which is both adequately 'English' and congenial to the global present.

### *Case 2 – Jaguar and the gentlemanly villain*

From American preppy to American cinema, the second example of the 'gentrification' of English masculinities which I wish to bring attention to is the Jaguar adverts for the F-Type coupe. Originally aired in 2014 for commercial segment of the Super Bowl XLVIII, the first Jaguar advert saw three British actors (Sir Ben Kingsley, Mark Strong and Tom Hiddleston) make the observation that the villains in Hollywood films are consistently

‘Brits’. However this is not just ‘any’ Brit, rather it will become clear from my analysis that here ‘Brit’ is a gentry figure.

The list of British actors as villains in major cinema releases is evident and all three actors in the Jaguar advert have portrayed a villain in one or more Hollywood film (Kingsley as Don Logan in *Sexy Beast* (2000); Strong as Lord Henry Blackwood in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009); Hiddleston as Loki in the *Marvel Avengers* franchise (2012, 2013)). But while gentlemanly Brits have a track record of playing villains, this isn’t always the case as ‘the Russians’ have an equally strong claim to the villain role in popular American storytelling. In the Jaguar advert what marks out the Brits as a villain is how they portray the Anglo-‘other’ in the context of blockbuster Hollywood films. That is, there is a strong ideological element to the placing of the gentry Brit as the villain. And the gentlemanly character that is indicative of the villain is able to act as a mytheme to reimagine the gentry character through the global cultural industry of cinema in late capitalism. As Jameson (2009:443) remarks, “alongside the free market as an ideology, the consumption of Hollywood film form is the apprenticeship to a particular culture”, that is American late-capitalist culture. The Brit plays the villain or anti-hero within the context of a Hollywood blockbuster, films where the hero is the white-American male, usually a capitalist (*Batman*), or a soldier (*Captain America*), or a technocrat/scientist (*The Hulk*) (or all three: *Iron Man*). As found in Jameson’s (1992) reading of *Jaws*, the triad of capital, military power and technocratic know-how is the alliance which make up the ideological pillars of the postmodern consumer society. Hollywood cinema provides narratives whose ultimate ideological, and utopian, message is the mythic triumph of multinational capital over ‘old monsters’ (‘classes’, ‘races’, ‘communism’, etc.) to provide a space for a consumerist haven of individualised, ecstatic enjoyment (Jameson, 1992:38-39). That is, viewers enjoy the characterisations but “without understanding that he or she is excluded from it.” (Jameson, 1992:39)

Jameson's perspective is perfect for an analysis of the Jaguar advert as the car is the icon of American consumerist freedom in an age where the car becomes a beacon of subcultural identities (Gartman, 2004). Here the generic device of 'villain' is able to act as a function to reimagine the subject, gentleman, in the ideological form of the Hollywood movie. That is, an enjoyable character of libidinal, ecstatic pleasure – letting us forget the histories behind 'him'. 'Villain' acts as a mytheme which reinvigorates the character of gentry for the Hollywood cinematic form. Simply put, the characteristics of villain are being used to reimagine tropes of Englishness historically identified by foreign observers, such as: 'industry', 'gravity', 'order', 'plainness' (all found in Langford, 2000). The perfidious Villain is, in short, the generic device to channel perfidious Albion.

As the opening lines of Tom Hiddleston's 'The Art of Villainy' advert for Jaguar asks: "They say Brits play the best villains. But what makes a great villain?" The answer will establish villain in terms borrowed from a repository of gentry qualities and characteristics. These qualities however involve moving from the generic features of the 'villain' as an archetype of Hollywood cinema (e.g. "obsessed by power!") to the qualities of British gentlemanly authority (e.g. "maybe we just sound right") in a fluid, overlapping manner. The villain archetype is here a means to rework the social poetics of the gentlemanly stereotype. Hiddleston's 'Art of Villainy' advert is a clearer example of this. For while the sixty-second advert with all three actors' sums up ostensibly gentlemanly qualities under the guise of villainy, the mythemes largely act to establish a succinct yet sufficient metonymic link between 'British elites' and 'British cars' (cf. Pitcher, 2014:51-53). Hiddleston's 'Art of Villainy' has a more poetic – and ideologically significant – quality to it while remaining ostensibly close to the metonymic link between character and car, subject and object. Opening with a voice-over of John Of Gaunt's famous speech from Shakespeare's Richard II, Hiddleston remarks:

“They say Brits play the best villains. But what makes a great villain?”

Firstly, you need to sound distinct. Speak with an eloquence that let’s everyone know who’s in charge.

Gentleman, excellent.

Now a villain should always have style. The suit should always be bespoke, razor sharp like your wit.

It’s important that the villain has the means to stay one step ahead. World domination starts with attention to detail, take this tiny switch for example, it changes everything. Now brace yourselves.

‘This happy breed of men, this little world, this precious stone set in the silver sea against the envy of less happy lands, this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.’

It’s all mine.”

Beyond the metonymic link of character and car, the mutuality of villain and gentleman is more pronounced: the character descriptions of ‘eloquent’ authoritative speech, ‘razor sharp wit’, ‘bespoke’ suit, ‘attention to detail’, and the quoting of jingoistic Shakespearean verse, could all sit easily in an English etiquette manual (real or parody) for the English gentleman. The character profile outlined here becomes a paternalistic worldview, a ‘how to’ guide for the aspiring gentleman *qua* villain set to dominate ‘this England’ as it is spoken in the language of possession (“it’s all mine.”)

But how does villain-gentleman gain such force? Jaguar have reimagined gentleman etiquette by way of Hollywood character archetypes; yet the archetype of the 'villain' is here transformed in the Jaguar adverts from a 'good versus evil' notion of villainy that characterises the plots of Hollywood films. Rather the villain becomes someone actively and positively identified with: the villain is a character for libidinal identification by male audiences. The villain becomes a sexual-romantic figure which signals the desires wished for by the viewer/reader of the adverts.

Placing the villain as the hero of a romance, rather than the anti-hero in a super-hero movie, in the Jaguar advert makes a huge difference. Romance is the desire for a utopian, longed for or lost world to be incorporated into the mundane, everyday world (Jameson, 1981:96-97; see Varul, 2008). Here this allows the villain to be transformed from his original purpose in Hollywood films as 'the initial foil to the hero doomed to failure' to that of a character with a positive function. So when the genre of romance is applied to the gentlemanly villain by Jaguar it gains supreme ideological significance, a significance which contains the lingering presence of a colonial/imperial white British patrician figure hidden in character virtues. The romantic fantasies articulated around the character virtues of gentlemanly villains seek to reimagine an appropriate place for the patrician gentleman. The villain, as a figure in our globally shared cinematic imagination, acts as viable space for the character 'gentry' to be reimaged. Yet such use of the 'villain' largely works as a 'vanishing mediator': the Brit villain is no more than "a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms" (Jameson, 1973:78), here 'villain' and 'gentleman'. There is nothing inherent in 'villain' which makes a gentry character the only necessarily appropriate or only logical choice; but by bringing the two terms together the Jaguar advert plays them off against each other and, once villain has



adequately summed up the gentry character of the 'Brit', "it has no further reason for being and disappears..." (Jameson, 1973:78)

That 'villain' is applied to white men is, of course, only in keeping with the dominant mode of signification at work in Hollywood cinema. As Richard Dyer notes, the use of 'bad whites' in the Western genre is only helping the case for white superiority: "To make non-whites the greatest threat would accord them qualities of will and skill, of exercising spirit, which would make them the equivalent of white people." (1997:35) And while 'villain' and 'gentleman' may not necessarily go hand-in-hand, there are strong historical figurations to their mutuality – for instance, colonial inferiority on the part of the Americans and their using of their old colonial masters, 'the British', as anti-heroes to whom the Captain Americas etc. invariably triumph over. As with how American prep provided Jack Wills with a shared colonial palette to redeploy gentry colours, here the Hollywood movie provides the post-colonial platform for the British gentleman to retain their characteristics of individualised, rational self-control, pugnaciousness and poise in an appropriate cultural space.

However, the interpretation I am proposing applies most to the actors themselves in this marketing campaign. All three actors (Kingsley, Strong and, especially, Hiddleston) rely upon the Hollywood-ization of their gentlemanly character. For two out of the three are of markedly non-patrician background; and for the other, Hiddleston, his markedly 'Establishment' background is in need of reformation. Sir Ben Kingsley CBE was born Krishna Pandit Bhanji, the son of an English actress and Indian doctor, who grew up in the North of England, Yorkshire, and attended not a public-school (in the business of making a 'gentleman') but a grammar school, Manchester Grammar School, only to go onto study at the former polytechnic, the University of Salford. While Mark Strong, whose legal name is Marco Giuseppe Salussolia, is of Austrian-Italian parentage and attended the only state-boarding school in Britain before going to abroad to study at the University of Munich. These

are not the backgrounds of patrician gentleman. Strong's and Kingsley's non-Anglo whiteness and difference in many ways allows to them 'play' gentry as their biographies place them ambivalently in-and-out of the gentlemanly archetype. On the other hand, Tom Hiddleston, born in Westminster and raised in Wimbledon, prepped at the Dragon School (Oxford), schooled at Eton and matured at Cambridge (where he gained a double first in classics), only to then attend RADA, has all the trappings and trimmings of an English gent. Playing 'the villain' in Hollywood films for these three actors grants them – and those male 'Brits' who identify with them in some degree – a cultural space, legitimately endorsed by one of the world's biggest cultural exports and commodities, the Hollywood action-movie (i.e. heroic narratives). It allows the white (upper-)middle class male to performatively situate first their Englishness and its masculinity, their class fantasy and its power differentials, and their style and manner in a fantasy space which because it is imaginary remains, ostensibly, innocuous. However, given the amount of imaginary indulgence this requires we must remember these fantasies need not be the be all and end all.

### **Conclusion – beyond gentrification?**

The lingering hangover of the gentleman's patrician and colonial role in consumer products is evident. Yet the issues of reformed gentry and gentlemanliness raised go beyond the two examples I have framed the discussion around. As stated, the gentleman is not merely entrenched in the British imagination but rather malleable to consumer culture's representations in global advertising imagery, especially an Americanised case as presented here. By appealing to Lévi-Strauss's and Jameson's analysis of myths, I have demonstrated the role gentry/gentleman has played as an ideologeme, "a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition." (1981:72-73) Through the discourse and history embedded and bound up in both Jack Wills' preppy aesthetic and Jaguar's art of villainy, we see how they're short-hand narratives which encapsulates a way

of life trumpeted by certain members of social classes as well as acting as poetic devices to 'sell' clothes and cars. This is the political unconscious to our consumer imaginings. However, because I have unpacked the mythical features of these consumer items does not mean they remain at the level of myth alone. Myths are stories of origins and while the narratives surrounding Jack Wills and Jaguar's use of gentry/gentlemanliness history supply an account, it is an account which is partial and leaves out wider structural features of contemporary society. The use of 'vanishing mediators' preppy and villain in this article demonstrates the partial realities these myths depict. The wider features of British society remain a resonant background, however, against which to 'read' popular narratives of gentrification. While consumer culture allows a multiplicity of subject positions to co-exist, the exclusionary device of myths, whose origin stories permits partial and limited engagement through the terms employed, means that getting 'beyond' gentrification is not a matter of reforming the gentry/gentleman to the demands of the present. Rather it is in realising that what has 'come before' is present in the 'new'. The implicit claims to power, authority and stature entrenched in our understanding of the white-British (upper-)middle class male remain, even if their days of precedential position have 'faded' into myth.

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