The sparkle of these new machines and the glamour attached to fashion tend to obscure the way cultural practices really changed lives. Yet it is critical to remember that one person’s hairstyle was another’s business and still another’s labor, and that the advance of ladies’ hairdressing was also a social revolution that transformed life in the salons. In order to measure the impact of new tastes and new technologies on an old trade, it is useful to take stock of life in the hairdressing profession in the period before *coiffure pour dames* began to turn it upside down.

“Perhaps in no city in the world is there such a vast and variegated category of tonsorial establishments,” wrote the Paris correspondent of the *Barbers’ Journal* in 1902.¹ The huge majority of these were barbershops, where men served men in tiny establishments. Of the 47,640 hairdressers found in the 1896 census, 90 percent were male and almost all of them worked either alone or with one or two assistants. In the entire country, only fifty-three hairdressing salons had more than five *ouvriers*. Two alone engaged more than twenty *garçons coiffeurs*, both of them in Paris.²

Data on the age structure and marriage status of hairdressers in 1896 help to paint a more detailed picture, dividing the profession into two distinct elements: patrons and *ouvriers*. Almost 90 percent of *chefs d’établissements* were married, divorced, or widowed, and under 5 percent were younger than twenty-five. *Garçons coiffeurs* made up a completely different slice of the population. Sixty-eight percent were younger than twenty-five; almost 30 percent had not yet reached their eighteenth birthday. Considerably younger than their employers, *ouviers coiffeurs* were also notably more footloose. Seventy-eight percent of these boys and 56 percent of the girls were *célibataires*.

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It took time to acquire the skill, clientele, and financial wherewithal to open one’s own shop, modest as it might be. A young coiffeur of any energy or ambition either found a way to climb into the petit patronat or left the trade entirely. The alternative was a lifetime of near-poverty and semidependency.

That ouvriers coiffeurs tended to be young and unattached also accounted for their combustible mixture of feeble union membership and spirited readiness for action. Conversely, it suggests why patronal syndicalism inclined toward more organization and less volatility. It was not only that the working class in the hairdressing trade was desperately underpaid and overworked, it was also that garçons coiffeurs were eighteen-years old and single, while their patrons, who were in many cases similarly poor and exhausted, were thirty-five and pères de familles.

This large population of coiffeurs worked under a great diversity of conditions, from the wretched to the sumptuous. In the villages, café chairs and tables could be easily enough adapted to clipping and shaving, while grocers and ironmongers also fit the bill as the village barber. Even in Paris, the correspondent for the Barber’s Journal found Old Jules, who worked “at the foot of a stone stairway leading from the Quai de Conti down to [the edge of the river Seine], nearly under the arches of Pont Neuf,” shaving customers en masse with river water and an old straight razor.

At the other end of the profession were the deluxe salons, where “hairdressers, in uniform, elegant and reserved, gladly serve[d] as confidants and advisors in a refined, urbane setting.” In 1906, the Paris daily Le Journal estimated that the city contained four or five hundred of them, situated in the better-off western districts and along the grands boulevards, serving “une clientele riche.” The rest of the city’s 2,500 barbershops, tucked into those parts of the center-ville that still belonged to the working classes or—more and more—in the outlying arrondissements, catered to a less pampered “clientèle ouvriere.”

A considerable part of business in all salons derived from mustaches and beards. These remained the measure of manliness into the twentieth century, when opponents of facial hair began to argue that a clean chin was not just more comely, but more sanitary as well. In one "experiment,"

. . . a group of men decided to conduct a scientific test of the danger of beards to young ladies who were kissed. One man who was bearded and one who was not bearded were walked through the crowded