By Fiona Ellis

Whether you call it lavender, lilac, mauve, orchid, violet, wine, eggplant, aubergine, plum, amethyst, heliotrope, magenta, mulberry, or periwinkle, purple, in all its many tints and tones, has a rich and colorful history.

Purple's reign as a favored hue has its origins in the expense and rarity of the dye first used to create it. The color's development is the stuff of legends and begins, as all the best tales do, with a hero. Heracles, arguably the most heroic of the Greek heroes, was (so the story goes) walking his dog along the beach in Tyre, a Mediterranean city in what is now modern-day Lebanon. The dog was making a game of chewing up the sea snails he discovered along the shoreline—an activity that stained his muzzle a striking shade of purple. Deducing that the color his canine companion had extracted from the mollusks could be used to dye cloth as well as dog fur, Heracles had a purple robe made and sent to the king of Phoenix. The king, much pleased with his gift, then decreed that all the rulers of Phoenicia should wear the shade as a symbol of royalty. (A second, more romantic, version of the legend holds that the nymph Tyrus accompanied Heracles on his beach romp and was so enamored by the purple tint on the dog's muzzle that she demanded a robe of the same shade. Heracles, stud that he was, promptly gathered the thousand or so shells necessary for the job and granted her wish.)

Whether made by Heracles or not, the discovery of the coloring powers contained in the secretions of the mollusk *Murex trunculus*, prompted growth of a prosperous dyeing industry in Tyre and the color produced— a dark reddish shade known as "Tyrian Purple"—became famous the world over. Tens of thousands of shells were required to extract mere grams of pure dye, making the color horrendously expensive and therefore much sought after by the rich and powerful. Purple quickly became the favored color for the togas worn by Roman emperors and was supposedly the color of the sails of the ship that delivered Cleopatra to her first meeting with Mark Antony. As Shakespeare describes it:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes.

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The Bard’s linking of purple to the extravagant display of Cleopatra’s wealth is not surprising. Roman sumptuary laws, which governed restrictions on clothing, food and luxury expenditures (in order to reinforce social hierarchies), limited the wearing of purple to those of the upper classes, a practice that the Elizabethans also embraced. The emperor was allowed purple clothing; senators and their sons were allowed a strip of the color worn along the hems of their togas. Fines, property loss and even death, were the consequences for failing to comply with the laws.

But with the decline of the Roman Empire came the decline of Tyrian purple; by 1453 it had all but vanished. The Middle Ages introduced the costly “Cardinal's purple,” which was extracted from the dried bodies of insects in *Kermes* genus; Spanish explorations of Central and South America led to the exports of dyes from Mexico and Peru. Less costly dyes were made from lichen and madder, but for centuries purple remained well beyond the reach of the lower classes.

All this changed in 1856 with a chance discovery made by Sir William Perkin, an eighteen-year-old London chemist. In pursuit of a synthetic equivalent to quinine (used to treat malaria) Perkin stumbled upon something that birthed a brand-new (and quite lucrative) industry: synthetic dye. Perkin was cleaning the sludgy results of a failed experiment with coal tar from a beaker and discovered that when treated with ethanol, the residue created a beautiful shade of mauve dye. He named his discovery “mauveine,” an amalgamation of the French name for the mallow plant whose flowers are of a similar color and the suffix "ine." Perkin patented his discovery and introduced aniline dye to the masses.

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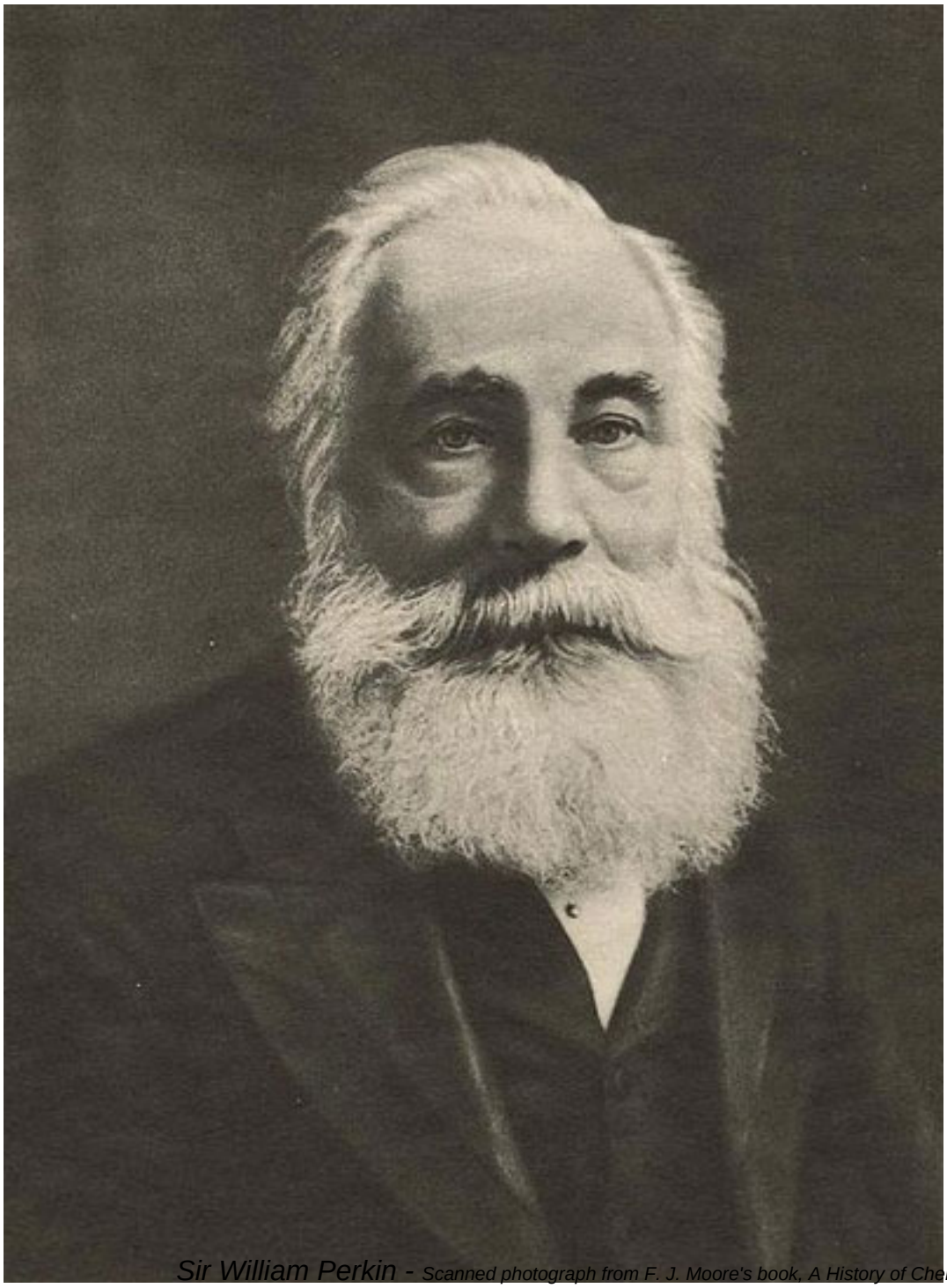

Sir William Perkin - Scanned photograph from F. J. Moore's book, A History of Chemistry (1918)

Mauveine made its public debut at the London International Exhibition in 1862. Held at the height of the industrial revolution, the event featured 28,000 exhibitors from industry and the arts showcasing the newest technological developments. With this exposure, Perkin's discovery attained both notice and patronage from two of the era's leading ladies: Queen Victoria and

Empress Eugénie, the fashionable wife of Napoleon III. The former helped skyrocket mauveine's popularity by choosing the shade for the dress worn to the wedding of her daughter, Princess Royal, to Prince Fredrick William in 1858. As the London Illustrated News described: "the train and body of her Majesty's dress was composed of a rich mauve velvet." Eugénie, the Princess Diana of her day, was much emulated and her fondness for mauve (she deemed it the perfect shade to match her eyes) made the color a runaway success. The color's popularity (and the dye that created it) spread so rapidly that the satirical magazine *Punch* took to calling it the "mauve measles." The crinoline skirt was at the apex of its popularity (and at its largest size) when mauveine was introduced, and as it took many yards of silk and pounds of dye to make these gowns, the production of the dye proved most lucrative, making Perkin a very wealthy man.

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A photograph of the letter from Perkin's son, with a sample of dyed silk. - *Henry Rzepa*

Thanks to factory production, the shade once reserved for only the very wealthy was now in the hands (and clothing) of the masses. But with the introduction of more aniline dyes (fuchsine, safranine and induline, to name just a few), mauve eventually fell out of fashion favor. Mauve began to be associated with death—thanks to both to the poisonous nature of the aniline dyes used to create it and Queen Victoria's decision to wear the color during the half-mourning for her

beloved Prince Albert.

1882 Mauve Stamp of Queen Victoria

Superstitions about purple have continued into the modern day. In Italy, opera singers avoid wearing purple on stage because doing so is viewed as a slight to the church. (In days gone by the use and wearing of purple was reserved for the Pope.) Singers avoid wearing the color for auditions, believing it to be an unconscious signal that they are out of work. Look closely in TV and film, and you'll note that characters wear purple shortly before they meet their demise.

Purple still captures the fashion imagination. Each new guise imbues it with new associations: victorious, precious, mourning, rich, funky, opulent, fun, sophisticated, sensual, and regal. Long may it reign.

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