

Female Beauty Systems

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*Beauty as Social Capital
in Western Europe
and the United States,
Middle Ages to the Present*

Edited by

Christine Adams and Tracy Adams

Cambridge
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*For Elborg,
with affection and admiration.*

“Geist haben bedeutet zu wissen, worin sich unterschiedliche Dinge
gleichen und gleiche Dinge unterscheiden.”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection began as a workshop called “Female Beauty Systems Throughout the Centuries” at The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in November, 2013. Attending the workshop were the American historians and literature scholars whose essays appear here and a group of Dutch colleagues representing different disciplines: sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, art history, and history. In the tradition of NIAS workshops, ours sought communication across national boundaries and disciplines. Although the individual papers examining historical female beauty systems formed the point of departure, the heart of the workshop was the interdisciplinary exchange, with the commenters suggesting approaches from their own fields that might further illuminate the examples presented in the papers. The commenters were as essential to the success of the colloquium as the presenters.

Some of the results of the workshop can be seen in the essays collected here. Female beauty systems, like death and burial rituals, family structures, marriage, and any number of other systems, exist at the intersection of nature and culture. We therefore bookended the discussions by asking to what extent beauty systems should be understood as (1) social constructions, gender and class based, and circulated, like knowledge, to create and maintain castes, or (2) evolved phenomena that show striking similarities across time and space. Within this general framework, a number of more specific discussions arose, two of which we represent in this collection. First was the problem of ambivalence: the relationship between the ideal of beauty and real experience. This problem led to the second: how real human beings managed the conflicting demands placed on them by their culture’s female beauty systems. In this collection we have narrowed our original focus to create coherence, but we would like to recognize the wonderful crucible of discussion in which the collection began.

We gratefully acknowledge The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies for support in hosting the colloquium. The staff’s friendliness and efficiency, the fabulous cuisine, and the bucolic setting created an unforgettable atmosphere for scholarly exchange. Special thanks to NIAS Rector Paul Emmelkamp for welcoming us to the Wassenaar campus. Thanks too to former rector Aafke Hulk and director of research planning

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We thank Cambridge Scholars Press for helping us to realize this project. Despite the enthusiasm with which interdisciplinary studies are embraced on university campuses throughout the world, it remains difficult to publish any but the most tightly circumscribed volumes of essays. In particular, a volume spanning several centuries has little chance of seeing the light of day. Historical sweep today seems to be regarded as incoherence. But we believe that readers' interests range beyond the confines of the disciplines and periods in which they specialize and hope through this volume to show that historical depth can be an advantage. Our target audience is the Renaissance person! Warmest thanks to Gail Savage for her editing assistance. The translations, unless otherwise specified, are always the author's. We follow the historian's convention of not supplying the original foreign language text in the essays written by historians; essays written by literature specialists include the original, in accordance with their convention.

Finally, we thank Elborg Forster for giving birth to this project many years ago during a discussion of *Liselotte von der Pfalz*. We dedicate this volume to Elborg, whose wide knowledge of history and genius for languages continue to inspire us.

INTRODUCTION

“No force resists a lovely face, Both fire and sword to Beauty yield.”¹

“The feminine beauty system ... is the main feature of the cultural terrain between the categories “male” and “female” in our society. There is no other cultural complex in modern society which touches upon individual behavior that is as rigorously conceived and executed, total and minutely policed by collective observation and moral authority”²

Subjective responses to female beauty seem strikingly similar across time and space. Accounts of a man’s feeling riveted in the presence of a lovely woman appear in literature of the most distant cultures. Propertius (ca. 50-15 BCE) evokes an experience in his opening elegy that seems familiar even today:

Cynthia was the first, to my cost, to trap me with her eyes: I was untouched by love before then. Amor it was who lowered my gaze of endless disdain, and, feet planted, bowed my head, till he taught me, recklessly, to scorn pure girls and live without sense, and this madness has not left me for one whole year now, though I do attract divine hostility.³

Two English translations of the elegies have appeared since 2002 alone, adding to an already substantial number and attesting to the continued emotional relevance of Propertius’s story of intense desire for a woman in whom the “beauty of Helen returns a second time to Earth.”⁴

Modern readers are of course free to project their own desires onto ancient literature. In fact, this is one of the principal joys of reading. There is nothing wrong with imagining links between ourselves and our ancestors! However, if we want to understand Propertius’s desire for Cynthia and infer her reactions to it we need to know something about the Roman culture within which the poet wrote. Modern western female beauty systems, heirs to the tradition of courtly love, developed around the image of the madly-desiring poet or knight supplicating his aloof lady for her favor. The image embodies a norm of man as pursuer, woman as pursued, a norm that has engendered pleasure, emotional and physical, but also disappointment, oppression, and violence in real lives throughout its long history. Although modern western female beauty systems are

routinely demystified and contested today, the purveyors of culture that support them—institutional, intellectual, artistic, commercial, popular—continue to construe women as objects of male desire. So far, Propertius's lyrics to Cynthia seem to be part of the same broader tradition that gave us courtly love. And yet, there is a significant difference. Despite recent progress, heirs to the courtly love tradition construe women as the only legitimate objects of male desire. In contrast, for Propertius's society, men were expected to desire both men and women. It was a society in which "married men could enjoy sexual relations with their male slaves without fear of criticism from their peers; in which adultery generally aroused more concern than pederasty; in which men notorious for their womanizing might be called effeminate, while a man whose masculinity had been impugned could cite as proof of his manhood that he had engaged in sexual relations with his accuser's sons; in which men who sought to be penetrated by other men were subjected to teasing and ridicule, but were also thought quite capable of being adulterers."⁵ The female beauty system that structured Propertius's reaction to Cynthia assumed the status (freeborn or slave) of the sexual partner to be more significant than the gender. In fact, Propertius's Roman readers might have interpreted his narrator's excessive desire as effeminate and received his lyrics—instinctively—as poignant but daring explorations of identity carried out through role reversal. However, they almost certainly would not have interpreted his response to Cynthia's beauty as a sign of his masculinity, as many modern readers embedded in heteronormative cultures would tend to do.

We begin the volume with Propertius's elegies to make the point that the ways in which men and women respond to each other are both startlingly familiar and different across time and space. The essays of this volume examine the female beauty systems in a number of cultures or subcultures from the Middle Ages to the present with the aim of offering material for thinking about continuities and discontinuities. To guarantee a clear basis of comparison across a chronologically diverse set of essays, they all deal with systems that are heir to the courtly love tradition: in many ways these will seem more familiar to modern readers than the one within which Propertius wrote his verses. Jacques Lacan claims that courtly love, or "Minne," as it was known in German-speaking cultures, remains part of an unconscious tradition. Although "it has disappeared from the sociological sphere, courtly love has left traces in an unconscious that has no need to be called 'collective,' in a traditional unconscious that is sustained by a whole literature, a whole imagery, that we continue to inhabit as far as our relations with women are concerned."⁶ Nonetheless,

the systems examined here are also significantly different from one another, assigning diverse meanings to apparently similar gestures, emotions, and physical characteristics. Our point of departure is that female beauty acquires its meaning within a distinct field, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense.⁷ But no field, and thus no female beauty field, exists in isolation. Within a given culture the female beauty field overlaps with many others, meaning that any individual woman's bodily capital is always indexical, that is, its value to the individual woman varies according to the different fields within which she "circulates" it, and bodily capital is thus rewarded with widely varying amounts and sorts of prestige. The restrictions placed upon women in the form of unwritten codes to which they must conform to realize their assets also vary.⁸

Although the study of beauty systems is not typically recognized as a discrete area of inquiry, we propose that it should be, given the enormous impact, positive and negative, of such systems in everyday human life: that it is an interdisciplinary subject with a history and that a survey of the literature reveals a well-established set of approaches. We lay these out briefly here to help readers contextualize the essays. The courtly love legacy, we believe, foregrounds three questions in particular. The collection is organized in three parts, each part focused on one of these questions. Moving from the most general to the most particular, we suggest that, first, the apparent longevity of the courtly love tradition raises the question of whether the way in which it structures male desire in reaction to female beauty is part of a "universal" tendency. In recent years this question has been posed in terms of evolutionary psychology: whether the modern western female beauty system in its most general form is an evolutionary adaptation. Although the very expression "female beauty system" implies social construction, nothing says that social constructions cannot be erected on evolutionary adaptations. Second, as feminists have long underlined, the idealization of women goes hand in hand with the refusal to grant them equal status. This refusal itself issues from dichotomous thinking about women. The question then is in what ways female beauty represents a double-edged sword. This ambivalence towards beauty leads to the third question. Although the courtly love tradition generally ignores female subjectivity, recent feminist scholarship shines a light on how women have over the centuries "managed" the ambivalence they arouse to exercise power despite the restrictions imposed on them by their societies. How individual women "perform" beauty, that is, how they self-consciously manipulate their bodily capital to achieve particular goals, is the question explored in the final section.

Evolutionary psychology and female beauty

Although the essays consider principally the culturally-specific aspects of female beauty systems, in light of the recent explosion of interest in integrating science and the humanities exemplified by the roundtable entitled “History Meets Biology” in the December 2014 issue of the *American Historical Review*, it is necessary to consider the relevance of scientific perspectives to the domain. To date, explorations of the “ways in which human minds and bodies interact physically with their natural and social environments and are shaped and reshaped by them over time” tend to reflect on how science could potentially be used in historical studies rather than write a new kind of history.⁹ For many it is not clear what such an approach contributes to understandings of history or literature: “how much is added ... by the realization that Odysseus was doing his crafty plotting in his dorsolateral cortex?”¹⁰ Even Nancy Etcoff, who grounds her popular study *Survival of the Prettiest*, one of the most ambitious attempts to bring together the existing literature from evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology, and economics, is more interested in expounding evolutionary psychology than in showing what the theory contributes to cultural analysis. After outlining the theory for several chapters, she moves on to what is really a cultural study of beauty. “Our bodies,” she writes, “reflect not only Darwinian forces which impel us to reproduce, but cultural ones, and social ones”¹¹

Still, evolutionary psychology with its popular theory of sexual strategies seems particularly apt to illuminate the study of female beauty systems. This theory marks the males of our species (who are understood by evolutionary psychologists to have evolved a preference for mating with nubile women) as the pursuers, often despite themselves, of young beauties and the females of our species (who are understood by evolutionary psychologists to have evolved a preference for mating with high-status men, although they might indulge in short-terms affairs with men who are merely good-looking) as the pursued, seeking clues about their suitor’s wealth and prestige.¹² Although evolutionary psychology sheds no obvious light on ancient Greek and Roman cultures where status was a central consideration for men choosing a sexual partner, the theory does reiterate the most important premises of male-female attraction as they are laid out in the courtly love tradition.¹³ And yet, evolutionary psychology, like scientific scholarship more generally, has not yet been converted into approaches that can be integrated into literary or historical scholarship. However, this might still be coming, because an interesting precedent for such interdisciplinary conversion exists. Long before

evolutionary psychological theories arrived on the scene, psychoanalysis was adapted for such use and today boasts a long and enduring critical tradition among some scholars of literature, history, and film. Like evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis offered a hidden reason for behavior that its proponents observed in their societies.¹⁴ Like evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis was marginalized, even ridiculed, by many scientists within and without the fields to which it claimed to belong; like evolutionary psychology it was decried for being untestable.¹⁵ But most striking, evolutionary psychological and psychoanalytic theories of desire share the premises of courtly love. Psychoanalysis emerged just a few decades after courtly love theory, and the histories of the two are intertwined. In 1881-83, French literary scholar Gaston Paris uncovered (or, according to many, invented) “amour courtois,” courtly love, in his readings of some medieval love lyrics and the narrative romance of Lancelot and Guenevere.¹⁶ Paris’s descriptions of the lovesick Lancelot willing to do anything for the capricious Guenevere who demanded that he continually demonstrate both his prowess (status) and his obedience to her manifest the influence of scientific discourse on the exotic disease of hysteria circulating in medical circles in late nineteenth-century France. For example, Charles Richet, professor of physiology at the Collège de France and Nobel Prize winner in 1913 for his work on anaphylaxis, showed the erotic appeal of the malady in a long *Revue des Deux Mondes* article of 1880. The sexual allure of the upper-class hysteric haunts his minutely detailed descriptions of the condition: “But of all the hysterics whose stories have been recounted by novelists, the liveliest, the truest, the most passionate, is Madame Bovary In a few lines, Mr. Flaubert characterizes hysteria, and, in his seductive description ... ‘Emma became difficult, capricious’”¹⁷

Freud’s study of hysteria led him eventually to the creation of psychoanalysis. The creation of psychoanalysis had long-lasting effects not only on psychology but on literary theory. Psychoanalysts found evidence for their theories among the lovelorn of medieval poetry and used this literature to illuminate structures of the unconscious. Lacan appropriated the image of the troubadour endlessly yearning for his remote, never-satisfied lady to concretize his theories of the “real,” that is, that which subjects cannot realize through language and which loses its reality as soon they attempt to do so. For Lacan the relationship between the sexes inevitably takes place against a background of loss. More recently, Slavoj Žižek discusses what many theorists of courtly love had also suggested, that men derive pleasure from the pursuit of impossible relationships because they in fact control them. Courtly love is “a fictional

formula, with a social game of ‘as if,’ where a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady.”¹⁸ The man, supine before the woman, in fact controls her, in masochistic form: “It is the servant, therefore, who writes the screenplay—that is, who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman [dominatrix]: he stages his own servitude”¹⁹ Other recent scholars examining female beauty systems from a psychoanalytic perspective continue to identify the longing for a beautiful woman with the desire for unattainable unity with the mother, accounting in this way for its ambivalence and its unappeasable quality, but also for its pleasure. Describing her interest as “the psychical apparatus to which the beholder’s eye is attached,” Francette Pacteau argues that the “variety of formulations of what is recognized as beauty in a woman would correspond to a variety of (mainly) masculine symptoms” (symptoms in the psychoanalytic sense of a repressed past).²⁰

As a literary and cultural method, psychoanalytic theory continues to be productive. To return to evolutionary psychology, it remains to be seen to what extent its theories will develop into illuminating approaches to history and literature. The first two essays in this collection, Steven Zdatny’s “Hair, Hygiene, Science, and the History of Beauty Systems” and Tracy Adams’s “Anne Boleyn: Seductress or Scholar?” respond in different ways to the theory’s premises and possibilities, demonstrating, as a pair, some of the advantages and hazards of evolutionary psychology as a critical approach. Zdatny draws on his expertise in the history of fashion to argue that human beings possess an innate sensitivity to magnificent hair, clear skin, large, widely-spaced eyes, and well-formed secondary sexual characteristics, and, moreover, that all cultures enhance these already existing gifts of nature. Neither historical nor anthropological records have turned up evidence of cultures where hair, a clear sign of general health and therefore fertility, is not embellished in some way or another. Focusing on France, he observes that even women in regions far from social centers were interested in their hair, using it as an asset in the “market of social exchange.” The styles changed over the years, but the system endured. In twentieth-century France hair fashion was driven by consumer desires and the choices of women, especially the choices of young women, as they elected to have their hair cut *à la garçonne*, not to mention wash with Lux soap, or rub O-do-ro-no under their arms. To be sure, a great deal of money was at stake, which meant that plenty of people worked hard to influence these choices, and most of them undoubtedly were men. But the area of hair fashion seemed to belong to women. For this reason, Zdatny dismisses the central claim of Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (first published 1990 and republished many times thereafter)

that the modern beauty industry represents only the latest version of the traditional “double-standard:” that the demand for purity in the form of chastity has been transformed into an unattainable standard of beauty imposed by men. For Zdatny, however, beauty standards are, in the first instance, created by nature.

Adams’s essay, in contrast, is resolutely historical, arguing that Henry VIII’s pursuit of Anne Boleyn has been distorted by the easy application to it of what amount to popular evolutionary psychological theories of mating strategies. The notion of the wildly lusty older king pursuing the sultry but remote younger brunette bombshell makes no sense within the event’s historical context. First, modern-day visions of male versus female sexual strategies lose explanatory value in an era when women were firmly believed to possess a stronger sex drive than men. Second, considering Anne as part of the female beauty system in which she spent her adolescence and young adulthood, the French royal court where she served the cultured and reform-minded Queen Claude, reveals no seductress but a sober, pious, eloquent, and well-educated woman. Henry VIII was pressured by his peers to marry a fertile young woman of appropriate rank, Adams explains. However, he opted instead to marry the aging Anne Boleyn. Why? Adams hypothesizes that the king believed that he and Anne were divinely ordained to carry on the Tudor line. The motivation behind the relationship between the two is obscured rather than illuminated by recent attempts, popular and scholarly, to explain it as a case of a highly-sexed male chasing a young woman who was holding out for status and security.

Ambivalence towards female beauty

Whatever the mix of biology and culture that has gone into the construction of Western female beauty systems over time, female beauty has always been imagined and experienced as thoroughly ambivalent, linked both to disorder and creative genius from antiquity. As for disorder, the *Iliad*, recounting the story of a war begun out of rivalry for the most beautiful woman on earth, opens nine years into that war with the capture of two lovely young women. The story begins with Agamemnon laying claim to the woman assigned to the already wrathful Achilles. As for female beauty as the inspiration for creative genius, Plato’s *Symposium* argues that contemplating beauty arouses the observer’s desire to replicate the beautiful thing. Beauty “prompts the begetting of children,” Elaine Scarry notes: “when the eye sees someone beautiful, the whole body wants to reproduce the person.” This productive quality of beauty is not limited

to the reproduction of human beings. As Diotima tells Socrates, it also “prompts the begetting of poems and laws, the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Lycurgus.”²¹ In a similar fashion, the sight of a beautiful face incites the artist to sketch it again and again, and those unable to draw prolong the experience by staring.²² This property links beauty to eternity, Scarry continues, “the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops”²³

The jealous desire for physical possession on the one hand, the transcendent desire for divine union on the other: this primordial ambivalence represents the point of departure for many recent feminist scholars interested in the social effects of desire on the women at whom it is directed. Perhaps the best-known of these scholars is Naomi Wolf, who has reiterated arguments that medievalists have long been making about the beautiful ladies of courtly romance: that men place women on a pedestal and laud their beauty all the better to contain their presumed tendency to arouse social disorder. “Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard,” Wolf asserts. “Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact.”²⁴ Women who wish to be loved must be beautiful; average and unattractive women are saddled with a lifelong sense of inferiority. In all cases, the female beauty system keeps women in their place. As for who runs the system, Wolf describes a cultural conspiracy originating in the beauty industry. All women, those working to maintain beauty and those wishing to acquire it, are vulnerable to advertising for beauty products that sell for prices exponentially higher than their cost of production.

Other studies across a wide range of disciplines that detail elements of modern Western beauty systems have appeared since Wolf’s seminal work.²⁵ Histories of fashion, art, and cosmetics have contributed to our knowledge of continuity and change in female beauty systems and of the commercialization of the beauty industry.²⁶ Aileen Ribeiro’s *Facing Beauty: Painted Women and Cosmetic Art* examines a multitude of attempts over the centuries to define beauty and the efforts of a multitude of women to achieve the elusive quality, sometimes through making themselves up with deadly cosmetics.²⁷ Ribeiro’s chronological study, covering Western societies from the Renaissance to the present, reveals men’s continued need to control women by writing about or painting female beauty along with women’s attempts to conform to the impossible standards laid out for them. More specifically in the history of cosmetics, Morag Martin has analyzed the “downfall of paint” to show how complicated this story is.²⁸ Denounced by moralists but adopted by the wealthy before the French Revolution, cosmetics underwent a significant

shift of perception in the nineteenth century when retailers began to market them to a wider public, advertising them as not only safe but “natural,” that adjective so favored by Enlightenment thinkers. Far from disappearing, cosmetics were re-envisioned for sale to all classes.

Some continue to argue even today, as did Wolf in 1990, that beauty systems represent a form of social control over women, identifying the impossible standards of thinness so common as only the most recent version of the “purity” stricture embodied in the past by “chaste” women. Such standards shape the everyday lives of women not only through the media but also through social norms that often pass unperceived. In this modern context, it seems reasonable to ask whether women who subject themselves to rigorous physical training, diets, and/or surgery are exercising power and control or, on the contrary, suffering a form of oppression. How do we interpret a woman’s compliance with the beauty system? Many researchers believe that beauty systems cause lingering psychological damage.²⁹ Homogenization, the attribution of beauty to a narrow set of facial and physical features, excludes entire groups from the benefits that may accrue from the possession of beauty.³⁰

Three essays in this volume deal explicitly with the standards and ambivalence that have undergirded modern Western beauty systems over time, both on the part of men who enforce their unwritten codes, and on the part of women who experience their effects and constraints. The first two essays, Max Siller’s “Conceptions of Female Beauty in Medieval and Early Modern German Literature,” and Kathleen Llewellyn’s “Beauty and Belief: Attitudes towards Female Beauty in Early Modern French Discourse,” lay out attitudes, idealizing, ambivalent, and negative, towards female beauty in literature. Literature is a useful record for fleshing out motivations hidden from view in other documents. The third essay, Gail Savage’s “The Poisoned Apple: Beauty and England’s First Feminist Generation: Caroline Norton, Barbara Bodichon, George Eliot,” traces how three roughly contemporaneous women navigated a real-life female beauty system constructed on nineteenth-century British manifestations of the attitudes dissected by Siller and Llewellyn.

A discussion of female beauty systems in Western culture must begin with an examination of the idealizing courtly tropes traditionally associated with lovely women that, for better or worse, mark conceptions of romantic love to this day. Although the tradition of courtly love seems rooted in southern France, its influence was quickly felt in the lands of the Holy Roman Empire. Siller traces the history of several of the female beauty topoi so popular in medieval love literature from its earliest years through the parodies to which it gave rise in the late fifteenth and early

sixteenth centuries. Medieval verse constructs beauty as an asset that men judged and sought to possess, describing beauty-competition-like events where the loveliest was crowned queen and placed on a throne. Indeed, the earliest written example of medieval Arthurian romance, the story of Erec and Enide, begins with a beauty contest: whoever catches the white stag is allowed to name and kiss the most beautiful woman at Arthur's court. Beauty is also an inciter of desire. But the still familiar tendency of female beauty systems to idealize is grounded here in a particular historical context, the gift-giving aristocratic society of the high Middle Ages. Because gifts were never freely given, circulating rather within an implicit and intricate system of obligations and reciprocation, the economy of gift-giving forced a beautiful woman into a double-bind: she was cruel if she denied her favors but she lost her greatest asset if she distributed them. Literature resolves this contradiction by making remoteness an attribute of beautiful women and focusing its attention on her unattainability. This "solution" recalls the logic of the modern beauty system as it has been outlined by Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell. They argue that women cannot win. The modern beauty system, they propose, exists to conceal the more general contradiction at the heart of relations between men and women: in other words, female beauty exists so that men can be masculine.³¹

Llewellyn reminds us in another way of the ambivalence at the heart of beauty: because of the male desire that it attracts, it is a lure, but it is also a sign of goodness. By examining discourses on beauty across a number of sixteenth-century genres, she demonstrates that priests, the social category least involved with the actual business of female beauty, seemed to accord the quality more importance than courtly genres. Religious discourse viewed female beauty, on the one hand, as a dangerous thing. Women were vain, proud, and envious creatures who sought to enhance their beauty through makeup and attractive or revealing clothes. Artificial or "enhanced" beauty is particularly sinful, inspiring lust and criticizing God's creation. In sermons of the era, women's clothing also comes under fire: it seems that women's dressing up distracted churchgoers from their prayers. Early modern preachers also express concern about more worldly problems caused by all that primping and preening, which causes women to become conceited, to gossip about their neighbors, to become impatient with their servants. Furthermore, it makes them spend money, to the detriment of the family budget. And yet, surprisingly, on the other hand, female beauty is sometimes profoundly valorized by early modern preachers. Biblical heroines are often lauded for their beauty. Some see the lovely woman as the object of God's love, for He can only love that which

is beautiful. When we consider the treatment of female beauty in other forms of early modern French literature, we discover that authors of fiction did not always show beauty to be powerful or treacherous. True, in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, a collection of novellas, female beauty is at times enticing and even overwhelming, and at other times it is associated with goodness. However, quite often in the *Heptaméron* female beauty proves to be utterly irrelevant. In Bonaventure Des Périers's collection of stories, *Les Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis*, beauty does not seem to be particularly associated with goodness, but neither is it necessarily associated with wicked or wanton women. Writers of fiction, Llewellyn suggests, reflected a changing attitude toward beauty: it was becoming less dangerous. Lay writers had less difficulty than moral authorities of the era in negotiating descriptions of female beauty.

Savage tracks how beauty or the lack of it shaped the experiences of three prominent early feminists and considers the Janus-faced nature of beauty and erotic capital in their lives. From Mary Wollstonecraft to Naomi Wolf, Savage writes, feminists have protested the duty ascribed to women that they beautify themselves to attract men who, in turn, exercised the authority to recognize and reward that beauty. A consideration of the lives and work of three women who came to maturity in the 1850s, Caroline Norton (1808-77), Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-91), and George Eliot (1819-80), offers an occasion to assess English feminist resistance to the notion of personal beauty as a measure of a woman's worth at the moment when the movement began to organize itself politically. The first two women studied were renowned for their physical beauty. Norton, an acclaimed society beauty, political hostess, and author, discovered that her physical appearance served as a pretext to discredit her political accomplishments, although these were significant: she successfully campaigned for legislation that recognized the rights of mothers to custody of their young children (1839 Custody Act) and later took the lead in working for legislation that would allow civil divorce and recognize the legal status of separated and divorced women as independent of their husbands. Bodichon pursued a public career and worked to form the first feminist political action group to petition Parliament for legislation to recognize the right of married women to their own wages and property. Although famed for her looks, like Norton, Bodichon, a pre-Raphaelite beauty, was able to avoid the trap of personal appearance as primary identity. This was, in part, because Bodichon's method of political activism, unlike Norton's, eschewed the private lobbying that relied on the personal connections that aristocratic women traditionally employed. Eliot clearly suffered from some stigma because of her perceived homeliness,

even as many lionized her intellectual prowess. She avoided photographers and was rejected as a potential romantic partner by Herbert Spencer, who in his written work equated physical with moral beauty. Still, Eliot's own personal experience suggests that intelligence could outshine physical beauty.

Performing female beauty

This ambivalence also represents the point of departure for recent scholarship on female beauty focused on the nature of desire itself as well as that which is interested in the social effects of desire on the women who are its object. In the social sciences, much of the research on beauty has attempted to label, measure, and quantify the phenomenon, both its dimensions and its impact. Some of the liveliest debates over female beauty systems in recent years have centered on the extent to which women are able to use beauty as social capital within different cultures. Catherine Hakim, who coined the term "erotic capital," argues that the role of beauty has been unfairly ignored by economists and sociologists, despite the fundamental role it plays for both men and women, and despite the fact that its skillful deployment or performance provides both men and women with tangible benefits in the workplace and in relationships. Hakim builds on the work of Bourdieu, positing "erotic capital" as a fourth personal asset (the others, according to Bourdieu, are economic, cultural, and social capital). She offers evidence to support what instinctively seems true, that unemployment among physically attractive women is lower than among their less attractive sisters.³² Hakim's sociological treatment is, ultimately, an exhortation to women to make use of this asset to advance professionally and personally.³³ Research conducted in the U.S. also finds that attractive individuals earn more than "average" looking individuals and significantly more than unattractive individuals. Good-looking employees (including college professors) receive better evaluations than their unattractive counterparts. Consumers prefer to receive services or purchase goods from beautiful salespeople.

It is clear from the evidence, then, that possessing and, more important, performing beauty, can give women status and success today. It is important to note, though, that performing beauty is not a uniquely modern concept. The shift in mentality generally understood to separate the Middle Ages from the Renaissance has been theorized from many different perspectives: as a movement from subject defined by social relations to one defined by a sense of interiority; from a gift-giving to money culture; from ritual to theater; from what images mean to how they

mean; from flat to three-dimensional surfaces; from a God-centered to human-centered universe; from mystery to history; from transubstantiation to representation. But, following William Egginton, we might imagine that all of these approaches grapple with the same general phenomenon, a more basic shift in spatiality, from real presence to theatricality.³⁴

On the earlier side of this transformation, as we see in Siller's article, men are depicted experiencing beauty directly as immediately present—as a painfully pleasurable and physically overwhelming desire—and feeling compelled to seek sexual consummation. As for beautiful women, their appearance either reflects their character, in which case they are treated as ideals, or it does not, in which case they are treated as duplicitous or evil. Trapped in a paradox, they cannot both satisfy an admirer's desire and remain an ideal. However, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, being beautiful comes to be perceived as a role that a woman can enact, sometimes for material advantage. From the perspective of the observer, beautiful women become puzzles to be deciphered. As the successful diplomat disguises his Machiavellian deviousness behind a blandly inscrutable mask, beautiful women, from their own perspective, can control, in some situations, the effects that they work to their advantage. Although they are often treated as scheming, their agency is imagined as more complex than previously.

The French royal court may have served as the earliest stage on which women enacted beauty in early modern Europe. As the number of female attendants to the queen rose, beginning in the late fifteenth century, girls and young women were called upon to assume roles previously occupied by older women. With the king's "mignons," his favorites, his mistress, too, came to serve important political functions. Influence and considerable material wealth were possible rewards. The salon offered another such stage for performing one's beauty. Coming into existence in 1610 when the Marquise de Rambouillet retired from Henry IV's court, protesting that the level of wit and conversation there was unacceptably mediocre, the salon quickly became a fixture of French society. Although primarily a stage for intellectual prowess, this space also offered women ways of enacting their beauty for prestige. But the emphasis on women's "natural" gifts—taste, for example—extended to "natural" beauty, and, in letters and memoirs, reflections on the distinction between "nature" and "artifice" raise bizarre and fascinating paradoxes, suggesting that the "self" had come to be imagined as an actor and beauty a costume or disguise. The writings of such salon frequenters as Madame de Sévigné, Madame de La Fayette, Madame de Scudéry, the Duchesse de Longueville, the Duchesse de Montpensier, Guez de Balzac, Corneille, Voiture,

Chapelain, Vaugelas, and La Rochefoucauld provide an embarrassment of evidence that beauty and its utility were thought of in new and sometimes contradictory (and often acerbic) terms.

This section offers two essays on women from the heyday of the theatrical French royal court, Christine Adams's "Performing for the Court and Public: Female Beauty Systems from the Old Regime through the French Revolution" and Linda Kiernan's "Absolutely Beautiful? Madame de Pompadour and the Aesthetics of Power." Adams examines two women who successfully manipulated the beauty systems that had emerged with the Renaissance court and theater.³⁵ The stunning Madame de Montespan, aristocratic mistress of Louis XIV, held sway over court life and politics from approximately 1667-80. Madame Tallien, the sublimely lovely "Queen of the Directory," first saved numerous individuals from the guillotine as mistress of Jean-Lambert Tallien and then reigned over the world of the Directory as mistress of Director Paul-François-Jean-Nicolas de Barras in the late 1790s. The audiences for which these two women performed were different and signaled changes in society and politics that took place over the course of the Revolutionary eighteenth century. The artificiality of seventeenth-century court society, reflected in dress, ritual, cosmetics, and attention to etiquette, undergirded the female presence at the court of Louis XIV as women displayed their beauty and sought influence through proximity to the king—the only officially recognized political actor in an absolutist society. In contrast, the fetishization of the "natural" promoted by *philosophes* like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and embraced by the elite in Enlightenment France was buttressed by political changes under the Revolutionary governments of 1789-94 that rejected feminine beauty as dangerous and their participation in the polity as corrupt—women were better suited to a modest, domestic role. The period of the Directory, during which Madame Tallien shone, represented a brief return to a system in which women could once again bring their influence to bear through their control over the world of fashion and the careful deployment of beauty, this time for a much larger public than the one before which court ladies of the seventeenth century had performed.

Linda Kiernan observes that the means by which the royal mistresses of France established their reputations for beauty and aligned it with their capacity for political influence constitutes a striking facet of the role of the *maîtresse en titre* as it had developed by the eighteenth century. Serving as the king's official mistress was a challenging role to say the least; remaining in the king's good graces and navigating court factions necessitated that a successful royal mistress be more than just a pretty face. Kiernan explores the success of Madame de Pompadour, mistress of

Louis XV, and how she appropriated her image and the reputation of her beauty to sustain and enhance her position at the side of the monarch. Her physical relationship with the king came to an end within a few years. However, she remained by his side until her death in 1764. How did she continue to keep a firm grip on power until her death? Kiernan responds with reference to Enlightenment debates over beauty. The works of Shaftesbury, Crousaz, du Bos, Hutcheson, André, and Batteux all raised questions regarding the definition, purpose, and worth of beauty, linking aesthetic qualities to political, philosophical, and spiritual values. Discourse concerning Pompadour's influence at the court was inseparable from discussion of her beauty. Her face, figure, choices of adornment, dress, and make-up were noted by courtiers as indicative of the nature of her power: of her own position and the influence she held over the king. However, when her power declined, she was described as decrepit, a vile old woman who sought to cling to the king, thereby debasing the monarchy. If Pompadour's story demonstrates the limits of beauty as performance, it also suggests that once her assets dried up she was able to shift her strategies and remain in power.

Daniel Rechtschaffen and Tracy Adams's "The Uniquely Beautiful Anna May Wong" and Jennifer Cognard-Black's "Beautiful Monster: Plastic Surgery as Cultural Metaphor" examine more recent cases of female beauty as theatrical phenomenon. First, Rechtschaffen and Adams highlight the status of Wong, a minor Chinese-American star of Hollywood's golden era, as the double victim, but, more important, master, of two internally contradictory, and, in Wong's case, overlapping, systems: first, that of ethnicity, and, second, that of beauty. Hollywood publicly marketed ethnicity and beauty as things one could acquire through performance. However, the deeper assumption that both were in fact fixed genetic realities frequently emerges to challenge the burgeoning democratization of American cultural life. "White" actors were imagined as capable of assuming appealingly exotic ethnic identities, in contrast with their "non-white" colleagues, who were limited to a single identity. As for the Hollywood beauty system, on the one hand, it marketed beauty as available to any woman who subjected herself to prescribed regimes. On the other, it reserved star status for genetically-endowed beauties who possessed "good bones" (a mysterious attribute visible only under strong camera lights) coupled with the equally mysterious quality of charisma. Although the systems distributed prestige differently—the more privileged individuals within the regime of ethnicity being those who could assume ethnic markers at will and the privileged individuals within the beauty system being those whose beauty was genetically fixed—each created a

double bind for those slotted into the “fixed” category. Asian actors gained access to Hollywood on the basis of their identity but were then at the mercy of racist systems that precluded their full participation there because of that same identity. In Hollywood, the female beauty system was the principal (for all practical purposes single) field within which women could compete for prestige. Controlling access to the industry for women, the Hollywood beauty system also controlled the careers of the rare beauties to whom it granted the status of star.

In the final essay of the collection, Cognard-Black extends current work on what are often called “posthuman” bodies and engages with feminist critique of the surgical modifications of these bodies. The conversation on plastic surgery has been developing for some time among a number of gender theorists. Here Cognard-Black builds on these analyses by bringing them into the realms of the linguistic and the literary. How we speak about plastic surgery is as much a part of the phenomenon as its physical results, she explains as she investigates a variety of cultural discourses over time to show how plastic surgery has functioned as a highly specific site of identity construction and conscription. She examines early advertisements and current promotional websites on plastic surgery, focusing on the metaphoric content and possibility of these discourses: the structures of surgical allusion within modern and postmodern Anglo-American novels, including *Frankenstein*, *The Uglies*, and *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*; and, finally, the productions of two contemporary performance artists, Orlan and Lady Gaga, who are remaking the written and visual rhetorics of the surgical into a new vocabulary of beautiful monstrosity. Cognard-Black explains that she has now begun to think that it is at least possible that beautiful monstrosity—an aesthetic and an activism brought about, in part, by an embrace of plastic surgery—could be the basis of a new kind of feminist politics. Although she still believes in the importance of language and metaphor in creating gender ideology and identity and although she is still convinced that the body is often a site of oppression and limitation, particularly for women, she is now less certain about both the perniciousness and the potential of the surgically modified body. The current circulation of plastic surgery as both image and text in Anglo-American culture represents a new form of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Many popular histories of beautiful women exist. Scholarly work on female beauty is also abundant. Still, female beauty as a socially-produced

phenomenon, created and circulated within cultures, has received little attention. The essays of this collection take beauty seriously as the basis for historically-specific systems integrally intertwined with knowledge and market systems, examining how “beautiful women” are constituted by their system: how they “are hailed” and “must respond” to it, in the words of Virginia Blum, cited by Jennifer Cognard-Black in this volume.³⁶

This is not to deny that female beauty may be an evolutionary adaptation, as Zdatny’s essay argues. But if it is true that men, hardwired to propel their genes into future generations, chase women endowed with a set of morphological features that signal fertility, these signs of fertility, embodied by women of cultures as diverse as those of ancient Rome, eighteenth-century Bakongo cultures, and the modern international fashion industry, are realized and assigned meaning, that is, associated with desire and turned into a potential asset, only as features of a system, through discourse. As Myra Hird writes, “‘the body’ does not actually signify materiality in its own right, but in fact resignifies culture”³⁷ Archaic signs of fertility are not manifested directly but reappropriated by the body. In other words, if female beauty is indeed correlated with signs of fertility, the relationship is recognizable only within a given beauty system. Nor do scholars, who, following Foucault, demonstrate that knowledge is created and circulated, deny that the relatively massive human brain is an evolutionary adaptation. Nonetheless, whatever the cause of our ability to think, those with access to knowledge use it to discriminate against those with no access. This insight revolutionized the way that we understand the distribution of power in different societies.

This collection aims to draw attention to the status of female beauty as another important social production: to its conceptualization and performance. The collection seeks ways to bridge the gaps between scientific, sociological, historical, and literary research on female beauty, offering new ways to think about women of the past and the present. To return to the classical poetry with which we began this introduction, the reaction of men to female beauty seems to remain remarkably stable over time and space. As Etoff expresses it, although “the object of beauty is debated, the experience of beauty is not.”³⁸ Literary convention, to some extent, accounts for this stability with later poets building on the tropes of their predecessors. The imperiousness of the desire aroused by female beauty is generally agreed to be the effect of both nature and nurture. But the ways in which women in any given culture are able to control and employ their beauty depends upon the beauty system—and the constraints—under which they operate.

Notes

¹ Anacreon, Ode II, *Anacreon: With Thomas Stanley's Translation*, ed. Arthur Henry Bullen (London, 1983), 208.

² Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell, "The Beauty System," *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York, 1987), 208. We use "female" rather than "feminine" beauty system to designate the "enormous complex of cultural practices" related to women's acquisition and maintenance of beauty as well as the value that it is assigned. The essays are interested in how women, females, manage their images within their culture's beauty systems rather than in "feminine" beauty traits, which could be present in either women or men.

³ Propertius, *Elegies*, I.1.

http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/PropertiusBkOne.htm#_Toc201112140. Accessed 5-19-2015.

⁴ Propertius, *Elegies*, II.3,

<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/PropertiusBkTwo.htm>. Accessed 5-19-2015. The translations are Vincent Katz, *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius* (Princeton, 2004); David Slavitt, *Propertius in Love: The Elegies* (Berkeley, 2002).

⁵ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, forward Martha Nussbaum, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2010), 3.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. and notes Dennis Porter (New York, 1997), 112.

⁷ On the concept of "field," see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 29-144.

⁸ John Levi Martin and Matt George, "Theories of Sexual Stratification: Toward an Analytics of the Sexual Field and a Theory of Sexual Capital," *Sociological Theory* 24 (2006): 126.

⁹ Daniel Lord Smail and Philip Ethington, "AHR Roundtable: History Meets Biology," *American Historical Review* 119 (2014): 1492.

¹⁰ Michael Bérubé, "The Play's the Thing," review of Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

<http://www.americanscientist.org/bookshelf/pub/the-plays-the-thing>. Accessed 5-8-2015.

¹¹ Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York, 1999), 233.

¹² The theory's most public proponent is David Buss. See *The Evolution Of Desire: Strategies Of Human Mating* (New York, 1995); *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, with N. Malamud (Oxford, 1996); *Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is As Necessary As Love and Sex* (New York, 2000); *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Hoboken, NJ, 2005). For a refutation of Buss's premises see David Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (Boston, 2005), 208-57.

Buller is an evolutionary psychologist. His argument is with Buss's schema of male-female relations. For more specific evolutionary psychological arguments see also Devendra Singh, who was another of the theory's foremost proponents: "Adaptive Significance of Female Physical Attractiveness: Role of Waist-to-Hip Ratio," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59 (1993): 293-307, and, by the same author, "Female Health, Attractiveness and Desirability for Relationships: Role of Breast Asymmetry and Waist-to-Hip Ratio," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 16 (1995): 465-81. For an opposing view of the low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), generally considered the most "universal" of the morphological features associated with fertility and beauty, see Douglas W. Yu and Glenn H. Shepherd, whose work shows that a low WHR is not universally preferred. They explain that "WHR preferences of males in Yomybato differed strikingly from those of the US control population ... and from previous results. Female figures were ranked first by weight and then by WHR. 'Overweight' female[s] ... ranked highest under all three decision criteria: attractiveness, healthiness and preferred spouse. Within weight classes, high-WHR females always ranked significantly higher than low-WHR females" (321). The significance of their results is that "when culturally isolated populations are taken into account, some supposedly invariant standards may prove malleable. As a result, many 'cross-cultural' tests in evolutionary psychology may have only reflected the pervasiveness of western media" (322). "Is Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder?" *Nature* 396 (26 November 1998): 321-22. More generally, although very high attractiveness does not necessarily correlate with more children (those who want children might choose less attractive partners as likelier to be good parents) and despite the modern correlation between socio-economic status and attractiveness, which confounds the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" beauty, Markus Jokela has found that attractive people are more likely to reproduce than their unattractive counterparts. The women most highly rated for attractiveness had 6 percent more children than the lowest rated; but the second most highly rated had 16 percent more children than the unattractive. Jokela concludes that "physical attractiveness may be associated with reproductive success in humans living in industrialized settings." "Physical Attractiveness and Reproductive Success in Humans: Evidence from the Late 20th century United States," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30 (2009): 342. Jokela, however, makes no claims about evolutionary adaptations. Linda Gannon discusses the controversy surrounding evolutionary psychology in "A Critique of Evolutionary Psychology," *Psychology, Evolution and Gender* 4:2 (August 2002): 173-218, here 173. She writes that although "universal consensus may substitute for falsifiability, the assumptions underlying the evolutionary psychology paradigm are neither falsifiable nor do they command universal consensus." She explains that the "paradigm suffers from inherent contradictions," as well: "(a) the claim by evolutionary psychologists that knowledge of ultimate causes is necessary to accurately predict the consequences of proximate causes is contradicted when their hypotheses mimic those of learning theory; (b) when evolutionary psychologists conduct empirical research, results that contradict the paradigm are dismissed as invalid with the justification that current environments differ from

ancestral ones; (c) although stating that data from non-human species are irrelevant, evolutionary psychologists utilize these data when convenient; (d) evolutionary psychologists acknowledge the role of ideology and politics in the formation and support of scientific paradigms but deny this influence in their own paradigm.”

¹³ Although evolutionary psychologists have offered a number of explanations for the existence of homosexuality in general, we have not seen an explanation for why certain cultures institutionalize homosexuality and, more interesting, what the result would be if, instead of modern cultures, evolutionary psychologists took ancient cultures as their point of departure. For evolutionary psychological explanations of the existence of homosexuality see Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (Oxford, 1999), 182-85; Francis Mark Mondimore, *A Natural History of Homosexuality* (Baltimore, 1996); and Donald Symons, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (Oxford, 1979).

¹⁴ See William Egginton, *The Philosopher's Dream: Psychoanalysis, Interpretation, and Truth* (Stanford, 2007), 10.

¹⁵ See Ernest Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason*, ed. José Brunner (Oxford, 2003), especially Brunner's introduction, for the history.

¹⁶ See Gaston Paris, "II. Le conte de la Charette," *Romania* 12 (1883): 459-534. On the "invention" of courtly love see David Hult, "Gaston Paris and the Invention of Courtly Love," *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore, 1996), 192-224.

¹⁷ Charles Richet, "Les Démoniaques d'aujourd'hui," *Revue des deux mondes* 37, 3rd period (1880): 348.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays On Women and Causality* (London, 1994), 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁰ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (Cambridge, 1994), 15. See also Kaja Silverman, *The Subjects of Semiotics* (New York, 1983) and *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 3 (1975): 6-18.

²¹ Elaine Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Yale University March 25 and 26, 1998, 3. Available in PDF on-line; also in print form, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Duckworth, 2001).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York, 1991), 2.

²⁵ See Cheryl Brown Travis and Kayce L. Meginnis-Payne, "Beauty Politics and Patriarchy: The Impact on Women's Lives" and Linda Smolak and Ruth Striegel Moore, "Body Image Concerns," *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender*, ed. Judith Worell, 2 vols. (London, 2002), 1:189-200 and 200-10.