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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Female beauty

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Mots-clés

Aesthetics
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Résumé

This entry explores the conceptualisation of female beauty in Britain in the long eighteenth century. The period, particularly around the mid-century, saw a surge of discourses on beauty, establishing aesthetic, moral, and social trends. Through these commentaries and women's increasing social interaction, beauty's idealised physical features - symmetry, fair skin and rosy cheeks - came to represent feminine virtues, such as delicacy, morality and sensibility. In terms of sociability, beauty became an aesthetic and behavioural expectation, used to advocate and challenge established moral virtues, cultural beliefs and women's self-creation.

'Female beauty', wrote Oliver Goldsmith in *An History of the Earth* (1776), 'is always seen to improve about the age of puberty; but, if we should attempt to define in what this beauty consists or what constitutes its perfection, we should find nothing more difficult to determine'.1 The eighteenth century saw new attitudes to beauty. Beginning to challenge Neo-Platonic ideas about the beautiful body as a manifestation of a beautiful soul. There was a significant rise in the production of materials considering the subjective nature and qualities of beauty. Such literature infiltrated the market across multiple platforms, from philosophical treatises and moral conduct manuals, to art, poetry, and critical satires. Women were often the focus of these commentaries, but the various attempts to explain beauty and its effect evidenced a widespread concern with its social significance, and particularly, its influence and role in the conceptualisation of femininity, morality, and sociability.

Identifying the features of a beautiful physical appearance was somewhat simpler than explaining the moral values associated with a person's inner beauty. The preferred type of beauty in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain was often depicted with long curling hair of brown or blonde colour, dark eyes, arched black eyebrows, and a racially fuelled preference for white, pale skin tinged with pink. These most commonly praised features, as Ruth Kelso has explained, belong to a convention 'that reaches back to the Greeks'.2 One of the eighteenth-century's most celebrated beauties embodied this physical description: Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. Exhibiting all the typical qualities of the period's ideal beauty, she was often depicted with pale clear skin, rosy cheeks, red lips, dark eyes and brown, curling hair.

However, many of the period's commentators became preoccupied with understanding the impact of beauty, and, most importantly, what it could reveal about the individual. Could a person be beautiful without being beautiful on the inside? When issues of virtue, morality, sensibility, and manners were considered in terms of their relationship with physical attractiveness, beauty was still being understood as a quality affected by a person's inner state, but not entirely dependent upon it. But while many commentators assumed there was a collective agreement on what makes a person's outside beautiful, explaining why, and what influence their inner beauty - or a certain *je ne sais quoi* - had on the way a person's beauty was seen, was much more complex.

In *The Anatomy of Humane Bodies Epitomized* (1703), Dr Thomas Gibson equated beauty to a pseudo-medical interpretation of physiognomy, aligning the face with the expression of the mind:

> […] both the beauty of the Face, and its admirable consent with the Mind doth epitomise as it were the comeliness and dignity of all the other parts, and exhibits their affections as in a Glass. For from it are not only taken signs of health, diseases, and imminent death; but also most clear tokens of the very disposition, manners and affections of the Mind.3

Gibson medicalised the interpretation of facial beauty as a sign of a person's 'manners'. For the period's prominent aesthetic philosophers, discussions of the perception of beauty not only incorporated similar thoughts on physiognomy, or the effect of character on the appearance, but also debated how the perception of a person's character was processed by the viewer: how did one interpret inner beauty?

By the mid-century, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke suggested that 'the manners give a certain determination to the countenance, which being observed to correspond pretty regularly with them, is capable of joining the effect of certain agreeable qualities of the mind to those of the body'.4 While the entwinement of physical beauty with those 'agreeable qualities' saw new aesthetic and pseudo-medical rationalisations in the eighteenth century, these were underpinned by long-established sociocultural beliefs about the relationship between body and soul.

The conceptualisation of beauty as a mixture of interior and exterior qualities meant that its role in eighteenth-century sociability was one of a complex nature. The end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century saw new definitions for women, physically, mentally, and socially, and these changes presented several concerns. When combined with thoughts on femininity, masculinity, social conduct, patriarchal hierarchy, and fears of female superiority, the traditional concepts of beauty as an embodiment of the soul, became confounded. Robert Jones has argued that the new thoughts on sociability and femininity were embodied by the 'spectacle of a virtuous woman'.5 Likewise, Morag Martin has suggested that 'the physical and moral nature of femininity' allowed women to 'function at the height of taste'.6

With the rise of the bourgeoisie and the growing emphasis on taste and manners, women were seen as the ideal templates of grace, beauty and social etiquette. However, they were also seen as physically and mentally opposite to men. Where men were bestowed with greater reason and physical strength, women were acknowledged to be in possession of a greater sensibility, delicacy and a feminine beauty. This left the tables somewhat turned in both the biological and socially-constructed definitions of the sexes. In terms of sociability, female beauty became a public symbol of moral superiority and sensibility, further unified by the prominent cosmetic trends in the eighteenth century. However, the men wishing to adopt these same sentiments were often accused of effeminacy.

In their alignment of beauty, virtue and femininity, commentators began to argue that there was an ideal beauty for each of the sexes, and it lay in their contrasting qualities. Those men adopting the aesthetic vision of women's superior morality, by applying the same white paint, rouge, and powdered wigs, were criticised by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury in his *Characteristicks* (1711):

> Even the *Fair Sex*, in whose Favour we pretend to make this Condescension, may with reason despise us for it, and laugh at us for aiming at their peculiar

> Softness. 'Tis no Compliment to them, to affect their Manners, and be *effeminate*. Our Sense, Language, and Style, as well as our Voice, and Person, shou'd have something of that Male-Feature, and natural Roughness, by which our Sex is distinguished.'7

By contrasting the 'Softness' of the '*Fair Sex*' with the 'natural Roughness' of the 'Male-Feature', the distinctions between masculine and feminine beauty can be seen as a process of opposition. Indeed, Edmund Burke stipulated that women's greater beauty was a result of their 'appearance of *delicacy*', and the submissive qualities aligned with femininity. Like Shaftesbury, Burke suggested that women's softer sentiments were more beautiful than those he associated with the masculine notions of the sublime, 'such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like' (Burke 92, 101). These theories associated feminine beauty with love and weakness, and the masculine with terror and strength, attributing contrasting physical and emotional signifiers to each sex.

However, as women became more socially active, with their bodies and behaviours more open to scrutiny, the belief that beauty and feminine delicacy went hand in hand became somewhat unstable. A beautiful appearance was expected for many socially visible young women, but it was not enough to ensure a viewer of their virtue. Such women would also require a delicacy of behaviour that suggested they were worthy of their beauty. Particularly within the middling and upper ranks, where women were able to present themselves in aesthetically pleasing ways, using cosmetics and fashion, their behavioural qualities became far more significant.

Beauty, despite its idealisation, remained a commodity; one that allowed women to ascend their rank, creating a hierarchical instability, and potentially posing a sexual threat, through the misuse of their physical attractiveness. As Hannah Greig suggests, physical beauty presented an element of 'risk and unpredictability into the world of the beau monde'.8 A prime example of the instability beauty could bring to the social hierarchy can be seen in the Gunning sisters, Maria (1732–1760) and Elizabeth (1733–1790). Originally born in England, but returning to Ireland ?as children, the sisters came back to London ?in 1750 with no money or rank, but were praised for their superior beauty, and, thanks to the favour of George II, both quickly secured profitable marriages (Greig 177).9 Maria married George William Coventry, sixth earl of Coventry (1722–1809) on 1 March 1752, and Elizabeth secretly married James Hamilton, sixth duke of Hamilton (1724–1758) on 14 February 1752.

Although beauty presented a means to identify the quality of a woman, it was increasingly considered as a secondary and, most significantly, separate concern to a good moral character. In this way, beauty was at once an advantageous and dangerous possession within eighteenth-century sociability. On the one hand it was viewed as a symbol of virtue and morality, and an asset to the female sex; on the other, a dangerous disguise for folly and want of manners, or a temptation into illicit sexual advances. To that end, many of the eighteenth century's moral discussions of beauty focussed on how one could identify a true, virtuous beauty, from those making improper use of their physical perfection. As Richard Steele claimed in *The Spectator*:

> […] no Woman can be handsome by the Force of Features alone, any more than she can be witty only by the Help of Speech. [...] How much nobler is the Contemplation of Beauty heightened by Virtue, and commanding our Esteem and Love, while it draws our Observation? How faint and Spiritless are the Charms of a Coquet, when compared with the real Loveliness of [...] Innocence, Piety, Good-humour, and Truth; Virtues which add a new Softness to her Sex, and even beautify Beauty.10

The difference between true beauty and those 'faint and Spiritless' charms are supposedly easily identified through observation and comparison. Steele, much like Joseph Addison, often commented on the nature of beauty and the effect of the manners on the countenance. Their recognition of beauty through the expression of virtue and 'real Loveliness' was one that continued throughout the century, becoming further defined and perpetuated by the social visibility of women.

In 1776, *The Morning Post* published the 'Scale of Bon Ton', listing the scores for beauty, figure, elegance, wit, sense, grace, expression, sensibility, and principles of twelve ladies, including the Duchess of Devonshire. Scored out of twenty, the Duchess received high marks for her beauty and figure, but scored only three for her 'Expression', the lowest of the board. 11 Although no author is listed, these qualities, which were claimed to be numerically measurable, demonstrate the period's social evaluation of women's appearance and characters, with emotional and behavioural qualities making up seven of the nine categories for assigning value to a woman. As the issue implied, no woman could gain top marks in every category. In this way, beauty in the eighteenth century became a term entwined with sociable interaction and questions of moral behaviour.

The conceptualisation and expectation of beauty for women was a significant part of eighteenth-century sociability. Female beauty, as both an interior and exterior quality, was a means of defining social expectations, re-enforcing gender stereotypes, informing behavioural codes, and ultimately defining feminine virtues as those in both physical and emotional opposition to the masculine. The conceptualisation of beauty in the eighteenth century therefore went beyond its physical definition and began to be defined as a behavioural quality as much as, if not more than, an aesthetic one. As Samuel Richardson expressed in his epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740), it is 'virtue and goodness only, that make the true beauty'.12 This definition of 'true' beauty not only informed the period's notions of taste and femininity, but also became a measurable quality - one that could even be scored out of twenty - marketed to women as a means of conduct, social classification and moral surveillance. In this way, beauty played a multifaceted role in the development of eighteenth-century sociability, in Britain and beyond.

1. Oliver Goldsmith, An History of the Earth, and Animated Nature (London: J. Nourse, 1774), vol. 2, p. 76.

2. Ruth Kelso, Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 192–93.

3. Thomas Gibson, M. D., The Anatomy of Humane Bodies Epitomized (London: T. W. and John Churchill, 1703), p. 438–439.

4. Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), p. 118.

5. Robert Jones, Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 115.

6. Morag Martin, Selling Beauty: Cosmetics, Commerce and French Society 1750–1830 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 74.

7. Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times (London: John Darby, 1711), vol. 2, p. 186.

8. Hannah Greig, The Beau Monde (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 176.

9. See also: Joan Lane, 'Coventry [née Gunning], Maria, countess of Coventry', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6481; and Rosalind K. Marshall, 'Cambell [née Gunning], Elizabeth, duchess of Argyll and suo jure Baroness Hamilton of Hameldon [other married name Elizabeth Hamilton, duchess of Hamilton and Brandon]', ODNB, 2005, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11744.

10. Richard Steele, 'no. 33, Saturday 7 April 1712', in The Spectator (London: S. Buckley and J. Tonson, 1712), vol. 1, p. 180–186.

11. The Morning Post, 2nd October 1776, issue 1229. See Sarah Murden, 'The Ladies of the Bon Ton – 'Scoring sheet'!', Blog, 5 February 2020. https://georgianera.wordpress.com/2020/02/05/the-ladies-of-the-bon-ton-scoring-sheet/

12. Samuel Richardson, 'Letter VIII', in Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (ed.), Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 20.

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