

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

## Issue 19.2 (Summer 2023)

---

Smith, Michelle J. *Consuming Female Beauty: British Literature and Periodicals, 1840-1914*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 202 pp.

Reviewed by Katy Birch, Aberystwyth University

<1>In *Consuming Female Beauty: British Literature and Periodicals, 1840-1914*, Michelle J. Smith traces changing attitudes to female beauty through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. She demonstrates a shift from a common perception of beauty as innate and God-given in the mid nineteenth century to the idea that it is a quality that can be developed through a woman's own efforts and adherence to a beauty regimen by the early twentieth century. Alongside this shift came an increasing acceptance of the use of some cosmetics and commercial beauty products. Smith shows how print culture and the growth of advertising helped to shape these changing beauty ideals and to put pressure on women to view attention to their appearance as a duty.

<2>The book takes its evidence and examples from a range of different texts, including fiction, beauty manuals, periodical articles, and advertisements. The six body chapters are organised into pairs that explore related themes, with a broadly chronological arrangement from the beginning to the end of the book. The first four chapters follow a similar format, beginning with analysis of the advice offered to women in beauty manuals and periodicals followed by examples of similar themes appearing in fiction. The final two chapters are more specifically focused on periodicals and do not discuss any fictional works.

<3>The first pair of chapters focuses on natural beauty versus artifice, and the dangers inherent in both. Chapter One, 'The Impossible Ideal', uses the beauty manuals *Personal Beauty* (1870), by D. G. Brinton and George Napheys, and *Toilet Hints* (c. 1883), by Madame Bayard, alongside Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) to explore the contradictory narratives around natural beauty in nineteenth-century advice manuals and fiction. Smith highlights the 'ultimate impossibility of models of female beauty in advice texts' (52), in which caring for her appearance is presented as a woman's duty but

being seen to be overly concerned with her appearance or doing anything discernible to change it is frowned upon. The novels Smith discusses towards the end of the chapter present further contradictions, suggesting that natural beauty is prized, but naturally beautiful women in fiction are often punished with tragic fates, particularly if they are too aware of their own beauty.

<4>Chapter Two, 'The Dark Side of Beauty', continues the discussion of natural beauty versus artifice in its focus on the dangers of cosmetic use, and of beauty itself. The main sources that Smith analyses in this chapter are beauty manuals, articles in two women's magazines with quite different readerships – *Woman* and the *Queen* – and the fictional texts L. T. Meade's *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1902), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1862), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Most of the chapter focuses on warnings about the use of cosmetics, either because many contain ingredients that are harmful to health or because they are associated with artifice and deception. The final section overlaps a little with the later sections of the previous chapter in its discussion of the tragic fates that befall naturally beautiful women in Wood's and Wilde's novels. Although the focus on natural beauty departs from the discussion of cosmetics in the rest of the chapter, Smith connects this section to the overall concerns of the chapter by arguing that '[w]omen's sexuality, and its manifestation through their physical attraction, was a danger whether youthful and "natural" or aged and "artificial"' (79). Despite Smith's argument that the non-fiction texts generally show increasing acceptance of beauty regimens and the use of beauty products over the course of the nineteenth century, she does not trace a similar progression in the fiction, with the later texts still depicting beauty and beauty practices as dangerous. This demonstrates that such attitudes did not entirely disappear by the end of the century.

<5>The second pair of chapters explores the differing messages about beauty that were aimed at women at particular stages of their lives. Chapter Three, 'Beauty and Girlhood', demonstrates that girls' magazines and girls' fiction yoked beauty to good health and good character and used narratives around beauty to induct girls into ideals of healthy, selfless, and useful femininity to prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers. The earlier sections of the chapter give examples of these narratives in *The Girl's Own Paper* and *The Girl's Own Book of Health and Beauty* (c. 1891). The final section traces similar ideas about health, beauty, and character in two novels: Juliana Horatia Ewing's *Six to Sixteen* (1875) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911). Smith argues that girls and young women were seen as particularly vulnerable, both because their youthful beauty put them at risk from the evils of vanity and sexuality and because the choices about health and cosmetic use that they made in their youth would affect their bodies, their

appearances, and their reputations as adults. Consequently, literature for girls was even more careful than the texts aimed at adult women to promote ideals of natural beauty and healthy living and to warn against the use of cosmetics.

<6>In contrast, Chapter Four, 'Beauty and Ageing', argues that, by the end of the century, some cosmetic use became acceptable for older women as visible ageing began to be viewed more negatively. However, these women had to strike a delicate balance by covering defects without making themselves grotesque or ridiculous by being obviously made up or by attempting to appear significantly younger. Smith uses the evidence of beauty manuals from the 1880s onwards and advertisements in periodicals to explore the narratives around older women and beauty. She demonstrates that, despite some positive comments about older women in beauty manuals, ageing was generally depicted as a problem that women were responsible for combatting and could be blamed for failing to address in the appropriate way. The final section of the chapter explores how the depictions of the marginal characters of Cleopatra Skewton in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and Mrs Transome in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866) show ageing women as either comic or tragic. Smith acknowledges that, due to the scarcity of ageing female characters in Victorian fiction, she has had to discuss novels from an earlier period than the non-fiction texts addressed in this chapter. However, she argues that there is continuity in the attitudes to ageing women 'as having the power to physically repulse others' (125) in literature from throughout the nineteenth century.

<7>The final pair of chapters focuses on the role of periodicals in shaping beauty ideals and promoting beauty products and regimens. As Chapter Five demonstrates, one exception to the general association of beauty with youth, as highlighted in the previous two chapters, was the admiration of celebrities, such as the actress Ellen Terry and the singer Adelina Patti, who were held up as beauty icons into middle age. This chapter explores articles and advertisements in the periodicals *The Sketch* and *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion* in the 1880s and 1890s to demonstrate the role of celebrities as 'idols of beauty culture and consumption' (157) who helped to reshape ideas of beauty. Through their own appearance and their paid endorsements of beauty products, celebrities and 'their association with glamour and spectacle contributed to the slowly won acceptance of cosmetics and challenged the impossible natural ideal' (135).

<8>Chapter Six, 'Embracing the Beauty Regimen in British and American Women's Magazines', highlights a shift in attitudes to beauty by the early twentieth century. Through an examination of editorial content and advertisements in two British

women's magazines – the *Queen* and *Woman* – and one American one – the *Delineator* – from the 1890s to the first decade of the twentieth century, Smith highlights the role played by print culture in increasing acceptance of the idea of a daily beauty regimen for women, including some use of commercially available beauty products. She argues that, in contrast to the mid-nineteenth-century idealisation of natural beauty, by the end of the century '[b]eauty was no longer a quality bestowed by God or nature, but something that the unattractive girl could work towards through following a series of regular actions and behaviours' (169).

<9>This is an enjoyable and informative book that will be of interest to scholars of nineteenth-century gender, literature, and periodicals. The book is underpinned by detailed engagement with the primary sources, and the diversity of different texts that Smith uses as evidence is one of the key strengths of the book. However, although the fictional texts contribute to a more rounded picture of representations of beauty during this period, they do not always fit as well with the overall argument about shifting attitudes, or with the arguments in individual chapters, as the non-fiction texts do. This is sometimes because they are from a different decade to the texts in the rest of the chapter or because they approach the concept of beauty differently from the non-fiction texts around which most of the arguments are based. There are points in the earlier chapters where the book could be strengthened by engaging more with existing work in periodical studies, particularly in the chapter on girlhood, which could have benefited from the inclusion of authors such as Sally Mitchell and Beth Rodgers. This is not true of the whole book: the last two chapters foreground the periodicals more, and they contain some interesting discussions of how intended readerships and the demands of advertisers helped to shape periodical content. As Smith argues in her conclusion, many of the central themes of this book, such as the conceptualisation of femininity in terms of appearance and consumption, the contradictory favouring of a natural appearance alongside beauty standards that are impossible to live up to naturally, particularly for older women, and the frequent privileging of whiteness in the beauty industry, are still relevant today.