

‘The Arts of Beauty’: Female Appearance in Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers

Dr Michelle J. Smith, Deakin University

Consuming Beauty

In the second half of the nineteenth century print culture became ubiquitous in Britain owing to improved rates of literacy, reduced production costs, and other economic and social changes. The mass circulation of the periodical press supported the growth of print advertising, while technological changes enabled magazines to include high-quality illustrations, fashion plates, and dress patterns. Girls and women began to be targeted as a discrete readership by magazines, and the subjects of fashion, health and beauty were frequent topics for articles, while ads, plates and photographs provided practical aids to emulating the latest looks. Simultaneously, changes in the fashion industry and retailing, such as the establishment of department stores, produced cyclical clothing trends and transformed shopping into a leisure pursuit for the middle class.

As they forged a relationship between beauty and consumption, the developing cosmetics and fashion industries prompted social anxieties about their effect on female morality. These transitions were integral to shifts in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to a modern society in which consumer goods became increasingly tied to perceptions of self.



Figure 1: Image from 'An Obstacle to Beauty', *The Shields Daily Gazette and Shipping Telegraph*, 12 May 1900, 8.

Part V: 1746-1950 of the British Library Newspapers database provides researchers with a nuanced picture of how critical issues of the period were understood through the inclusion of numerous regional and Scottish newspapers in particular. While nineteenth-century newspapers are a fruitful resource for contemporary perspectives on politics, crime, economics, industry, the British Empire and other male-centred aspects of life, they are also rich and surprising texts for considering aspects of women's cultural and social history. Beauty culture was popularised and standardised in nineteenth-century women's magazines that directed advertisements and advice columns toward women readers as consumers. Newspapers, however, take different approaches and consider different topics with respect to women's physical appearance. For instance, they discuss the relationship of beauty to national type, moral issues inherent in the sale of cosmetics, and the scandals surrounding early beauty pageants, as well as encoding male judgements of women's emerging cosmetics routines, all aspects in evidence in a range of articles sourced from the database.

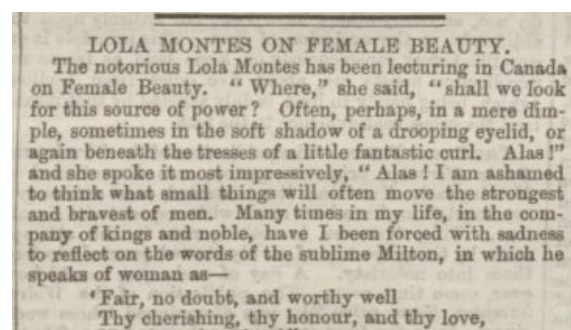
The rise of consumer culture in the final decades of the nineteenth century supported the invention of thousands of brand-name beauty products, from cosmetics and soaps, to hair dyes and treatments, wigs, and bizarre contraptions for beautifying the skin. At the core of the desires fostered by these products was that of retaining the markers of youth: for a full head of luxurious hair with no bald spots, for coloured rather than grey hair, for a full set of teeth, for a trim waist, and for a clear and smooth complexion. However, there was an overall distinction made between products that might "preserve" or "retain" youth, such as soaps, treatments and baths, and those that attempted to artificially conceal aged skin, such as enamelling procedures or the use of obvious coloured cosmetics. As Paula Black observes, the scepticism surrounding cosmetics fed into the selling of beauty routines as "a duty to women in order to preserve their own natural assets".¹

In 1857, *The Hereford Times* published an article about the "notorious" courtesan and dancer Lola Montez,² who published the advice manual *The Arts of Beauty* in the following year.³ Montez promoted a beauty regime in her public lectures (the article reports on her comments to an audience in Canada) and subsequent book.

Nevertheless, she spoke negatively of cosmetics, as is typical of the period. Montez recommends "temperance, exercise, and cleanliness, as preservatives of beauty", as well as baths and a tincture of benzoin and bran. Montez's attitudes toward the cultivation of beauty are lingering vestiges of the dominant view of the first half of the century that held that the inner character of a woman might be made manifest on the beautiful or unattractive face. Montez advocates the idea that character rather than cosmetics influences a woman's external beauty: "A well-cultivated mind was that which gave not only eloquence to the tongue, but lustre to the eye, vermilion to the cheek, and lighted up the whole person as though the whole body thought." Such thinking meant that the ugly woman only had herself to blame for her appearance.

Beautiful Forever?

Young women who used "paint and powder", hair dyes and artificial hair were condemned, as in Eliza Lynn Lynton's well-known 1868 *Saturday Review* article "The Girl of the Period". More generally, as Neville Williams suggests, the detectable use of cosmetics was not tolerated up to this time.⁴ For older women, being perceptibly made up became more acceptable as the century advanced, though the degree to which the cosmetics were made visible was still a point of contention. As Valerie Steele explains, more mature, married women might be excused to a greater degree in their use of cosmetics than girls and young women: first, because they needed more assistance, and second because of the association of cosmetics with sexuality.⁵



¹ Paula Black, *The Beauty Industry: Gender, Culture, Pleasure*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 29.

² Her actual name was Marie Dolores Eliza Rosanna Gilbert, Countess of Landsfeld.

³ "Lola Montes on Female Beauty," *The Hereford Times*, 29 August 1857: 6.

⁴ Neville Williams, *Powder and Paint: A History of the Englishwoman's Toilet*. (London: Longmans, 1957)

⁵ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128.

The services and treatments provided by the infamous cosmetician Madame Rachel, Sarah Rachel Levison, were implicated in several well publicised examples of older women who were deemed foolish and vain for seeking to counteract the march of time. The slogan of her Mayfair shop, “Beautiful forever”, became a catchphrase that stood for inflated claims in the period; the criticism implicit in its wider usage is that the quest for beauty into old age is obviously futile. As the *Western Daily Press* observes, there must have been “many a customer” for Madame Rachel’s treatments, otherwise her “mysterious trade” could not support so much advertising, nor would her business be “a recognised British institution”.⁶ Among the products provided at her salon, were ‘Circassian Beauty Wash’ at one pound, one shilling, ‘Magnetic Rock Dew Water of Sahara’ for removing wrinkles and ‘Youth and Beauty Cream’, both priced at two pounds and two shillings. In 1863, Rachel published a 24-page pamphlet, entitled “Beautiful For Ever!”, which explained her outlay of significant money to purchase the sole right to sell “the Magnetic Rock Dew Water of Sahara, which possesses the extraordinary property of increasing the vital energies – restores the colour of grey hair – gives the appearance of youth to persons far advanced in years, and removes wrinkle, defect, and blemishes, from whatever cause they may arise”.⁷ She also sold cosmetics, including powders, eye colours, lip stains, tooth whiteners, hair removers and dyes, and freckle remover.

The treatment for which Madame Rachel was most renowned, or indeed notorious, was “enamelling”. It involved the removal of facial hair, cleansing of the skin with alkaline washes, then filling wrinkles, pock marks, or uneven facial features with a thick white paste, sometimes containing lead, followed by the application of powder and rouge. Newspapers commonly criticised such extreme and artificial cosmetic measures. In 1867, the *Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser* made a typical gibe about the anxieties faced by men whose wives’ beauty or facial features might be wiped away: “Happy the man who woos a bride with a complexion that does not ‘come and go’—that is ‘come in the morning and go away at night’, as the wits in the School for Scandal phrase it”.⁸ In Madame Rachel’s pamphlet, she claims to avoid dangerous cosmetics in favour of the use of “the Arabian Bath, composed of pure extracts of the liquid of flowers, choice and rare herbs, and other preparations equally harmless and efficacious”.⁹ Rachel goes to great, fraudulent lengths to sell the naturalness of her process which

keeps “the pores of the skin from corrosive perspiration”, even likening the lack of understanding of the practice to the initial disbelief in Edward Jenner’s smallpox vaccine.

Despite the extensive lip service given to “natural” or character-based improvements in women’s appearance, there were other dubious beauty procedures in addition to enamelling that were cryptically alluded to or warned against in print. These references provide us with an indication of the kinds of cosmetic treatments that existed but which may not have been openly discussed. For instance, a story reproduced from a French newspaper in 1870 describes a new trend in Paris for women to consume arsenic in order to “plump out their cheeks and heighten their colour”.¹⁰ Belladonna cigarettes were another unusual beauty treatment, which when smoked dilated the pupils or, as explained in the article, “cause the eyes to sparkle, and give a temporary air of vivacity to the smoker”. An 1893 article warns about the “after-effects” of such temporary “pick-me-ups”.¹¹ Other procedures discussed in newspapers of the period include fat reduction and production, clamps and straps to alter the shape of the nose or chin, and the likely painful process of flattening protruding ears with the use of a steel spring.¹² Women were also advised about how to cultivate the ideal body shape, which differed from those body types that would later be promoted in the mid-twentieth century by screen sirens. For instance, in 1893 a woman with a large bust and hips was warned not to allow her waist to “taper to any great extent, because then she destroys her classical outline and makes herself look like an hourglass or a wasp”.¹³

The Invention of ‘Ideal’ Beauty

As beauty norms became clearly articulated in print and their shifting nature became evident, some writers began to speculate about how beauty might be regarded in the future. One unusual article on “X-Rays and Female Beauty” from *The Northern Daily Mail and South Durham Herald* in 1897 considers how the recently developed technology could potentially transform beauty standards.

⁶ “The Beauty Market.” *The Western Daily Press*, 15 June 1868: 2.

⁷ Madame Rachel, “*Beautiful For Ever!*” [pamphlet] (London, 1863)

⁸ “Female Beauty,” *The Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 5 January 1867: 3.

⁹ Madame Rachel, “*Beautiful For Ever!*”, 17

¹⁰ “A Dangerous Recipe for Beauty,” *The Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 25 June 1870: 2.

¹¹ “The Art of Beauty. Ministering to Human Vanity,” *The Northern Daily Mail and South Durham Herald*, 9 Sept. 1893

¹² “Beauty Guaranteed,” *The Northern Daily Mail and South Durham Herald*, 11 August 1894: 6.

¹³ “The Art of Beauty,” *The Northern Daily Mail and South Durham Herald*, 25 January 1893.

Reproducing findings from a paper in the *Revue Scientifique*, the author proposes that people might be discovered to have x-ray sight in the same manner as “cave animals” who can see in the dark: “To such persons, the scientist says, lovely women will appear as skeletons covered with a gelatinous sort of matter.” Female beauty for those with x-ray sight would therefore depend less on the shape of eyes or mouths, but “the bony frame, of the female form”.¹⁴

X-Rays and Female Beauty.

What effect will X-rays have in the future on the standard of female beauty which at present prevails? This is practically the question asked by M. Gaston Moch in an erudite and elaborate paper in the *Revue Scientifique*. He supposes a man specially gifted with the faculty of seeing countless vibrations of rays of light, and calls him a xylope. Such a person could have an existence as well as cave animals, who see through the deepest darkness. Indeed, M. Moch seems to think that the development of the X-ray system will lead to the discovery of many beings gifted with this peculiarly piercing sight. To such persons, the scientist says, lovely women will appear as skeletons covered with a gelatinous sort of matter. For them the test and standard of female loveliness will not be expressive eyes, rosebud mouths, dimpled chins, and other attractions that go hand-in-hand with these, but the rigid anatomy, the bony frame, of the female form. Novelists of the future, according to M. Moch, would always, in the event of this sort of test prevailing, have to change their descriptions of heroines intended to attract lovers. Ernestine, for instance, would have to be portrayed by the fictionist as possessing a pectoral frame of faultless symmetry, crowned by equally impeccable shoulder-blades set off by a graceful breast-bone, and elbow-joints neatly rounded amid the semi-transparency of the flesh. It is needless to say that M. Moch, in his humorous theory as to the development of X-ray power, expresses pity for the persons whom he calls xylopes.

The shaping of beauty ideals that could be standardised and reproduced through print not only influenced how individual women dressed or groomed their faces and bodies, but also contributed to the birth of the modern beauty pageant in which women's attractiveness could be compared and ranked. Several accounts of French beauty pageants in the late 1880s in British newspapers describe farcical scenes and allude to dubious motivations on the part of the male organisers. A beauty show at Nice in 1889, for instance, is described as a “complete fiasco”.

A theatrical manager travelled with half a dozen girls into the town to stimulate interest in the competition among local girls, presumably for financial gain.¹⁵ Viennese woman Mary Stevens participated in a beauty competition in Paris in which 25 girls were displayed in ball gowns every evening for a fortnight to spectators who paid five francs each to gaze at them. Stevens labelled the prize winners as “hideously ugly” (although she is named among them).

Most scandalously, the event degenerated into undignified fighting among the competitors upon the announcement of the winners:

“there were groan, and shrieks, and imprecations. When we (the winners) received our bouquets, the others rushed at us like wild beasts; snatched our nosegays out of our hands, and trampled on them. Somebody spat upon the dress of Mdlle. Soukarès—the Guadeloupe girl—who got the first prize, and Mdlle. Vilain, who obtained the last or fourth prize, whacked me with her fan and cut my arm. She had to be ejected from the place by the police, and Mdlle. Soukarieès and I had to fly literally for our lives.”¹⁶

Beauty shows also existed more specifically as a type of amusement rather than as a competition that invited all-comers to enter. One Parisian beauty show in 1889 was held in a circus and its orientation around different national types of female beauty suggest a forerunner to today's international beauty pageants such as Miss World and Miss Universe. Competitors in this pageant were “a Highland lassie, a Spanish girl, a Chinese beauty, a Napolitaine, a negress, and Parisienne”. Each woman was required to perform a national dance, in perhaps the same way as modern pageants might include a “talent” segment. The “Caledonian girl whisk[ed] off in a Highland fling”, while the Parisian woman's cancan drew “enthusiasm” that “knew no bounds” from the audience, perhaps because her hitched up petticoats displayed “her long feet and somewhat attenuated ankles.”¹⁷ Clearly the element of sexual display and titillation for the audience was as crucial as the beauty of the participating women.

The common practice of newspapers reproducing articles from other publications, including international newspapers, means that databases such as this also reveal how foreign attitudes toward British and Irish beauty were reported. The Scottish John O'Groat Journal in 1853 shared the thoughts of Felix Belly

¹⁴ “X-Rays and Female Beauty,” *The Northern Daily Mail and South Durham Herald*, 30 October 1897: 6.

¹⁵ “The Beauty Show at Nice,” *Northern Daily Mail*, 22 March 1889: 3.

¹⁶ “Amenities of the Beauty Show,” *The Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 13 October 1888: 3.

¹⁷ “A Beauty Show in Paris,” *The Gloucester Journal*, 19 January 1889: 2.

¹⁸ “Beauty of the Irish Females,” *John o' Groat Journal*, etc., 21 October 1853: 4.

of Paris newspaper the *Constitutionnel* on the beauty of Irish women.¹⁸ Belly is impressed by Irish women's pale skin regardless of "rags, misery, and manual labour", a feature he describes as rare in France: "The daughter of the poor man, as well as the fine lady, possesses an opal or milky tint, the arms of a statue, the foot and hand of a duchess, and the bearing of a Queen." Lola Montez is quoted as suggesting that the most beautiful women in the world were "English, Irish and Scotch"¹⁹, contributing to the overall sense that British publications were glad to champion the belief that the women of the British Isles were uniquely attractive.

BEAUTY OF THE IRISH FEMALES.

M. Felix Belly, of the *Constitutionnel*, Paris newspaper, who this summer visited Ireland, descants in the following terms upon the above interesting subject in the columns of the French paper:—

"But the most remarkable element, the richest and certainly the most full of life of this land so lifeless, is the population itself. No European race, that of the Caucasus excepted, can compete with it in beauty. The Irish blood is of purity and a distinction, especially among the females, which strikes all strangers with astonishment. The transparent whiteness of the skin, that absorbing attraction which in France is but the attribute of one woman in a thousand, is here the general type. The daughter of the poor man, as well as the fine lady, possesses an opal or milky tint, the arms of a statue, the foot and hand of a duchess, and the bearing of a Queen. In Ireland there are as many different physiognomies as individualities. Rags, misery, and manual labour have no effect upon those native endowments. Even beneath the thatched cabin of the poor peasant, in the midst of the potato field, which yields the sole nourishment, those traits at times develop themselves with unmistakable vividness. In the most wretched streets of the olden quarters of Dublin, the most ideal tints of the pencil would grow pale before the beauty of the children; and in the compact crowd which every day occupies the galleries of Merrion Square, there is certainly the most magnificent collection of human beings it is possible to meet. Blondes, with black eyes, and brunettes with blue, are by no means rare. The race is as strong as it is handsome, as vigorous as it is charming. The girls of Connemara, with their queenly shoulders and eyes of fire, would put to shame, at this day, those daughters of the East, from whom they are said to be descended. All those beautiful young girls, with eyes so pure, with foreheads of marble whiteness, of stature so commanding, know not even the name of evil. One can clearly see that the blood which flows in their veins has never been vitiated by the misdeeds of preceding generations. Add to this a temperate life, almost entirely vegetable in the country parts—and you will comprehend all the vigour and native purity possessed by a people in too many other respects poorly endowed."

The overwhelming weight of the opinions of male journalists and editors weighs heavily on how female beauty is discussed in nineteenth-century newspapers. That the subject was certainly not regarded as too frivolous to consume column inches is suggested by the sheer number of articles on the subject published from 1850-1900, to take just a sample of years.

While women's magazines demonstrate how women began to be inducted into a standardised beauty culture, newspapers of the period are largely untapped sources that show how these transformations in ideal femininity were understood and received. While on the one hand the woman who sought out cosmetic treatments might be understood as somewhat foolish and vain, the beauty of women as a point of national pride, exemplified by the emergence of beauty pageants, is indicative of the critical importance of beauty ideals in the lives of women in the late Victorian period. The British Library Newspapers databases hold the potential to develop our knowledge of gender politics as they relate not only to aesthetics, but also to race, nationality, science, and consumer culture.

Citation

Michelle J. Smith, 'The Arts of Beauty': Female Appearance in Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers', *British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd,

¹⁹ "Lola Montez on Female Beauty," *The Hereford Times*, 29 August 1857: 6.