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Taking the Pencil out of God's Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England

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NUMEROUS SCHOLARS in the history of ideas have identified nature and art as the categories organizing many discussions of education, gardening, cosmetics, poetry, and rhetoric in Renaissance England. In its various manifestations, the contest over the relation between these categories concerns itself with divine and social order and with the bounds of human creativity. Two discourses, one about poetry and the other about women's face painting, can be seen to constitute, oddly enough, a single debate that constructs complexly gendered limits on creativity. A comparison of the two shows that the values assigned to nature and art continually change. Sometimes art is lauded for transcending nature, which is disparaged as needing improvement. At other times nature is praised, while art is presented as false, trivial, and superficial. In a third approach, the two are assessed equally, so that the distinction between them begins to blur.

As their rankings shift in the poetry and face-painting discourses, nature and art are gendered in ways that underscore their complex interrelations. The feminine is linked both with the improvement or transcendence of nature through art (ornament) and with the indomitability of nature or, more specifically, of the body, which cannot be transformed, surpassed, or escaped. While either category can be described positively as feminine, that association often accompanies an insistence on constraint and impairment. Although the two discourses sometimes recommend the improvement of nature, they also render poetry and face painting suspect as analogous effeminate enterprises.¹

When these texts—whether they privilege art or nature—cast doubt on human creativity, they do so by allying it with female agency, which, while granted a role, is construed negatively. Both

elite defenses of poetry and popular discussions of women's personal conduct concede the threatening power women exert both as objects of desire and as desiring subjects: by provoking desire, women invade and undermine the male subject-spectators; by asserting themselves as creators and subjects, they disrupt social and cosmic order as well as gender hierarchy. For all their diversity and contradiction, these texts invariably represent female agency as destructive.²

I

In the elite discourses concerning nature and art, the gender and the value variously assigned these categories are complexly related. Texts that view art as rising above nature regard the nature to be overcome as feminine. For instance, when Sir Philip Sidney undertakes his *Apology for Poetry* (1581–83?), he defends art precisely as a means by which man can transcend nature and the constraints “she” (nature) imposes on human possibility. While most arts are “compassed within” nature,

[o]nly the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature . . . ; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. (14)

Liberated from nature's narrow warrant, the poet creates a world that surpasses nature and bypasses the female role in reproduction.³ As Sidney remarks in some of the most famous lines in the *Apology*:

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. (15)

Like Sidney, George Puttenham (in *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1585) praises the instances in which art is an “ayde and coadiutor” to nature, “a meane to supply her wants, by renforcing the causes wherein shee is impotent and defective.” Art can also be an “alterer” of nature, “and in some sort a surmounter of her skill” (303). For both Sidney and Puttenham, in these passages, nature is feminine, and the poet who both collaborates with and outdoes her is masculine. This relation seems to fulfill the expectation that “nature is to culture as female is to male.”⁴

The poet rules over the artificial, man-made world of art as its creator, cultivator, and connoisseur. Through art, man distinguishes himself as a second order of maker, made in the likeness of God (“the heavenly Maker”). Thus creativity does not blaspheme or thanklessly challenge the place allotted to man in God's design. Instead, it enables man to fulfill his part in the divine order and proves that he deserves his privileged position.⁵ Sidney, in particular, reveres art as unconstrained and powerful, as simultaneously allied with the masculine and the divine.

Other defenders of poetry praise invention and ornament but still present them as circumscribed within limits set by nature. The opposed categories, art and nature, thus blur into each other, and in the process both are gendered as feminine. While the brazen natural world remains feminine, awaiting its transformation into gold at the poet's touch, the poet's means of effecting this transformation are presented both as less sweeping than those Sidney depicts and as feminine. Puttenham, for instance, repeatedly praises art only insofar as it corresponds to, rather than overreaches, nature. When he turns to poetic ornamentation, he likens it to women's covering and embellishing of their bodies through fashion. The “great Madames of honour” will not show themselves without “their courtly habillements. . . . Even so cannot our vulgar Poesie shew it selfe either gallant or gorgious, if any lymme be left naked and bare [of poetic ornament] and not clad in his kindly clothes and coulours” (137). Poetic propriety, modeling itself on a gender- and class-inflected bodily propriety, depends on concealment to distinguish the vulgar from the great, the ver-

nacular from poetry. By gendering both the body and its ornaments as feminine, Puttenham draws nature and art together.

Further conflating the feminized categories of nature and art, Puttenham refers to poetic ornaments as “colors”—a traditional term for rhetorical tropes—and compares the judicious use of such colors to women’s application of cosmetics:

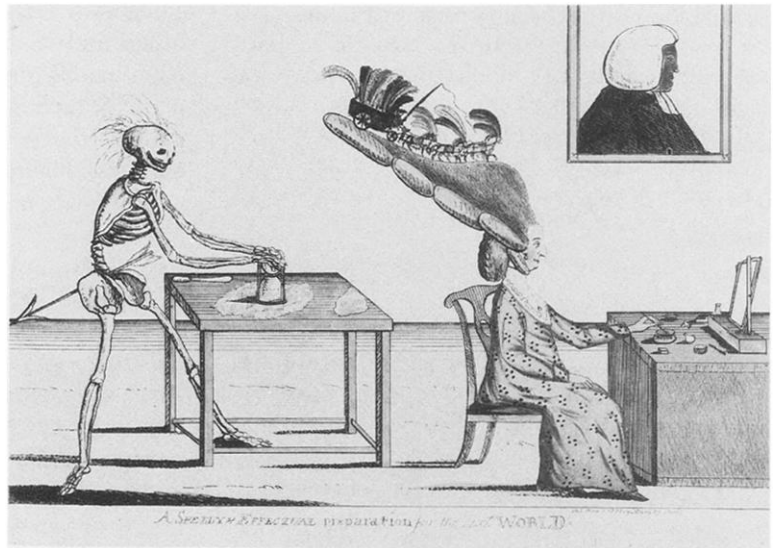
[I]f the . . . colours in our arte of Poesie . . . be not well tempered, or not well layd, or be used in excesse, or never so litle disordered or misplaced, they not onely give it no maner of grace at all, but rather do disfigure the stuffe and spill the whole workmanship taking away all bewtie and good liking from it, no lesse then if the crimson tainte, which should be laid upon a Ladies lips, or right in the center of her cheekes should by some oversight or mishap be applied to her forehead or chinne, it would make . . . but a very ridiculous bewtie.

(138)

Although female creativity is here confined to the adornment and display of the body, Puttenham does acknowledge these practices as parallel to poesy in ways that explain and legitimate it. Puttenham’s dismissal of the ridiculous beauty that would result from the misapplication of cosmetics also reinforces a restricting link between artificial embellishment and the nature on which it elaborates: a woman cannot create a whole new face or repaint her face on different principles or in accord with new or original standards of beauty; she can only heighten the color that is already in her lips and cheeks. Her self-enhancement thus provides a model of art that is always and inextricably tied to the body (nature) beneath. Sidney’s boldest statements, in contrast, celebrate the poet’s

free invention of “forms such as never were in nature” (14).

Fusing nature and art, and consequently associating poetry with the feminine and limited, Puttenham insists that artifice should be as natural as possible. Like the woman whose art is best exercised when least evident, the poet or maker should “when he is most artificiall, so . . . disguise and cloake it as it may not appeare, nor seeme to proceede from him by any studie or trade of rules, but to be his naturall” (302).⁶ Similarly, in poetry of the period, men praise an unstudied, apparently natural artifice in the women they would love. They teach these women how to display “sweet neglect” rather than “adulteries of art” (Jonson, “Still to be neat”), “wild civility” rather than art “too precise in every part” (Herrick, “Delight in Disorder”). Given the context of masculine instruction and the desire to desire, how unstudied and “natural” are the preferred categories? Having been pointedly taught how to quell masculine fears and revulsion, how to sustain men’s desire, can the women addressed be described as “natural”? Like Puttenham, Jonson’s and Herrick’s speakers advise the creators of allure how to



Most images of women looking in mirrors or using cosmetics are satirical or censorious. This 1777 engraving by M. Darly links a woman’s self-ornamentation to mortality and the grotesque. Note that her looking glass is blank. (British Museum.)

disguise the self-conscious manipulations the poems encourage. As the artificial disappears into the natural, this strand of the debate circumscribes the potential for creativity and self-fashioning while ironically complicating the concept of the “natural.”

By blurring the distinctions between nature and art, between women’s bodies and poetry, these texts introduce the possibility of desire between the poet (gendered masculine) and his creation (gendered feminine). Through this eroticized interaction, the texts shift some of the poet’s power to his poem. Unable to maintain complete control over his golden world, the poet in Sidney’s *Apology*, for instance, becomes vulnerable to the very spectacle he has shaped. “Poetry ever setteth virtue so out in her best colors, making fortune her well-waiting handmaid, that one must needs be enamored of her” (34). Submitting herself to the improving attentions of poetry, which enable her to function more successfully than she could on her own, virtue, like a cosmetically beautified woman, achieves “enticement” by means of “the masking raiment of poesy” (40). Even in Sidney’s aggrandizement of masculine creativity, then, femininity and artifice are associated with each other, valued, and granted seductive power. Although Sidney defends poetry for its ability to assist virtue, to improve men, he also grants virtue (specifically represented as feminine) a potentially disturbing power over the male spectator, who is vulnerable to ravishment as well as to edification.

In perceiving an erotic threat in poetry, Sidney participates in a tradition that characterizes discussions of rhetoric and painting from classical times to seventeenth-century France. In Jacqueline Lichtenstein’s formulation, this tradition constructs the display or spectacle as feminine and the spectator as masculine, associating pleasure and desire with the feminine and rendering them suspect.⁷ While these conceptualizations immobilize the feminine, which, as the static object of the gaze, corresponds to the creation rather than to the creator, they also invest it with its own power—a power that the desiring spectator-subject experiences as unsettling and invasive.

In the conjunction of poetry and femininity, poetry, as a masculine pursuit, suffers by the association. It becomes “wanton,” artificial, and trivial. Condemning female erudition, curiosity, and self-embellishment as excessive and irrelevant, Montaigne argues that poetry is the most appropriate reading matter for women, if they insist on reading: “Poesie is a study fit for their purpose: being a wanton, amusing, subtil, disguised, and prattling Arte; all in delight, all in shew, like to themselves” (3: 43; see also 3: 42). Although Montaigne, Sidney, and Puttenham value poetry differently, each presents the limits and dangers of creativity by linking it with the feminine. In allying the feminine with limitation but simultaneously with pleasure, deception, desire, and display, all three use gendered and eroticized constructions of poetry to convey the vulnerability and impairment of the masculine poet (see Bloch 13, 20).

As opposed to the ambivalent defenses of poetry, which sometimes portray art as transcending nature and sometimes as improving rather than surpassing “her,” other texts in the debate idealize nature and condemn art and artifice outright. While these treatises emphatically distinguish between idealized nature and denigrated artifice, they consider both feminine, as do the texts that fuse the two. In *The Winter’s Tale* (1611), for instance, when Perdita refuses to plant “streak’d gillyvors, / Which some call nature’s bastards,” she rejects the conflation of nature and art proposed by Puttenham, and espoused in the play by Polixenes, and insists on redrawing a distinction between the two categories:

I’ll not put
The dibble in earth to set one slip of them;
No more than, were I painted, I would wish
This youth should say ’twere well, and only
therefore
Desire to breed by me. (4.4.99–103)

Perdita will not regard nature—or, by extension, herself—as “impotent and defective,” as in need of improvement. In her view, the art that produces the gillyflower does not embellish nature but competes with and effaces it; in the

“piedness” of the gillyflower, “there is an art which . . . shares / With great creating nature” (87–88). Aligning great creating nature with her own ability to breed, Perdita disdains those who prefer the gillyflower and the painted face, denouncing their taste as corrupt and insulting to nature, here symbolized by the body of a woman who asserts that she will not be improved on.

In his essay “Of the Cannibals,” long considered an influence on the gillyflower exchange in *The Winter's Tale*, Montaigne condemns the “savagery” of altering fruits “by our artificiall devises”; by such invention, nature’s works are “bastardized, [applied] to the pleasure of our corrupted taste.” For Montaigne, as for Perdita, the issue becomes the moral one of purity versus corruption:

[T]here is no reason, art should gaine the point of honour of our great and puissant mother Nature. We have so much by our inventions surcharged the beauties and riches of her workes, that we have altogether overchoaked her: yet where ever her puritie shineth, she makes our vaine and frivolous enterprises wonderfully ashamed. (1: 219)

Inverting the priorities in Sidney’s “golden world” passage, Montaigne represents nature (gendered feminine) as powerful and pure and denigrates man’s invention—art—as “vaine and frivolous,” terms often used to disparage women, especially painted ones. The creativity that counts takes place in the female dominion of great creating nature. In this argument, to improve on nature is to disparage and obscure her own beauties and riches, just as to prefer a “painted” woman is to find fault with a “plain” one.⁸ At the same time that this argument privileges “great and puissant mother Nature,” it contracts the scope of human creativity and agency, by finding men’s achievements, horticultural here, trivial and bastardized. Perdita’s and Montaigne’s celebrations of natural abundance associate women with Mother Nature and thereby grant them generative force and vitality, but not agency. The creativity with which they are endowed is not imagined as either chosen or self-directed.

While Perdita, like Montaigne, defends nature and disdains the spurious feminine artifice of cosmetics, the conclusion of *The Winter's Tale* offers a particularly complex portrayal of female artfulness. Paulina uses her art to preserve Hermione and to engineer a happy ending. Hermione also claims to have “preserved” herself in order to see the outcome (5.3.127–28). But for all its magic, Paulina’s art, like cosmetic art, cannot halt or transcend mortality: “Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing / So aged as this seems” (5.3.28–29). The argument directly contradicts Sidney at his most confident: here art cannot reverse suffering or restore lost time; its puissance is circumscribed. It is an art slavishly limited to operating *on* the life. Furthermore, although Paulina controls access to Hermione’s “statue”—repeatedly threatening to withhold it from Leontes by pulling the curtain around it—she is not its creator. Paulina credits a “rare Italian master,” Julio Romano, with the masterpiece, arguing that the vibrant flesh Leontes longs to touch is the result of “oily painting” so “newly fix’d” that his touch would smudge it (5.2.94–101; 5.3.47–48, 80–83). Romano has not just “ape[d]” nature; Hermione’s statue parodies the idea of a realistic or natural artfulness capable of obscuring the difference between art and nature. Hermione thus closes the play by conjoining both Perdita’s revered “great creating nature” and Paulina’s patient artifice. Mother and statue, she enables a comic resolution because she is not presented as an agent; the troublesome issue of female artistic agency is sidestepped through the interventions of Paulina and Romano. An aging woman whose sexuality and maternity imperil her and motivate her self-preserving transformation into her own image, Hermione embodies the conjunction of art and nature, the triumph of an art dependent on and limited to the mortal body. Her status in the last act reveals, on the one hand, the association of femininity, nature, and corporeality, and, on the other, the association of femininity, artifice (rather than art), and circumscribed creativity. Thus, the figure of Hermione holds in tension all the positions in the art-nature debate, refusing to resolve the controversy.

II

Why does *The Winter's Tale* insist on the body as the site of and limit on feminine creativity, whether natural and reproductive or artful and magical? Why, in presenting a more attenuated picture of male creativity than Sidney offers, does Puttenham make analogies to female creativity, associated exclusively with cosmetic self-embellishment? One can find an answer, I think, by juxtaposing the art-nature argument in defenses of poetry with the teeming and rancorous disputes over women's use of cosmetics in early modern England, in which art and nature remain the central categories. Both in elite defenses of poetry and in popular texts about women's personal conduct, particularly those focusing on bodily practices, these categories are understood through, and mobilized in support of, complicated constructions of gender and class hierarchies. Poetry and face painting are presented as comparable forms of creativity in complex and shifting ways that can, for instance, implicate poetry as effeminate and debased or elevate face painting as a potent means of self-transformation, of reshaping the self and the world through fictions. This analogy, in its various manifestations, also contributes to the circumscription of women's creativity within the discourse of cosmetics.

In the early modern period there was good reason for attacking the use of cosmetics: they were costly and imported (hence "foreign" and corrupting); they encouraged an emphasis on physical beauty at the expense of the soul, an objection constantly reiterated; and many were corrosive and thus actually damaging to women's beauty and health, as some contemporaries were aware. But concern for the spiritual and physical health of women does not motivate most of the critical moralists, who express more concern over the threats women pose to others than over the threats women pose to themselves. Although the discourse on cosmetics must surely have informed women's historical agency, it seems curiously divorced from their behavior. Instead of describing what women actually did, the tracts reveal how the culture perceived explicitly feminine self-transformations.⁹



This fifteenth-century woodcut by Albrecht Dürer is titled *The Vain Lady Sees the Devil's Posterior in Her Mirror*. (Reproduced, by permission of the publisher, from Walter L. Strauss, ed., *Albrecht Dürer: Woodcuts and Wood Blocks*, New York: Abaris, 1980, 55.)

In the attacks on cosmetics—whether they appear in texts devoted entirely to that subject, like Thomas Tuke's *Treatise against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women* (1616), or in works advising or abusing women—nature becomes the privileged category, and art and artifice are correspondingly reviled. While predictably censuring women as vain, wasteful, and deceptive, the moralists most forcefully and exhaustively chastise them as agents, as blasphemers and counterfeiters who challenge the cosmic and social order by redefining their own value. Although these writers acknowledge women's disturbing creative power, they repeatedly warn that women who attempt to remake and relocate themselves achieve only debasement. By associating female creativity exclusively with cosmetics, such arguments reinforce the perception of its self-absorption, transience, and decadence.¹⁰

Most anticosmetics treatises emphasize that a woman who paints herself refuses to submit to her passive role as a creature, a being with no legitimate capacity for self-transformation or

self-determination, and insists on herself as a creator: "And though shee bee the *creature* of God, as she is a *woman*, yet is she her owne *creatrice*, as a *picture*" (Tuke K). She "take[s] the pencill out of God's hand" (Donne 2: 343) to hold it in her own "impudent hand" (Brathwait, *Ar't asleep* Q8v): "What a contempt of God is this, to preferre the worke of thine owne finger to the worke of God?" (Tuke D2v).

In contrast to Sidney's male poet, who proves his likeness to God by becoming a creator himself, the female "creatrice" is not identified with God but is instead presented as competing with and opposing her maker. Her faultfinding presumption invites divine wrath: "[Does she] think thus to adulterate the Lord his woorkmanship, and to be without offence? [Does she] not know that he is . . . a jelous God, and cannot abide any alteration of his woorkes, other wise then he hath commaunded?" (Stubbes 64). Portrayed as defying God rather than as ingeniously transcending the limits of nature, creative women risk damnation. Numerous moralists cleverly insist on the eternal consequences of face painting: "What shal God say to such in the last Judgement, when they shal appeare thus masked before him with these antifaçes: Friends, I know you not, neither do I hold you for my creatures: for these are not the faces that I formed" (Tuke B3v; see also Bulwer Nn2–Nn4; Stubbes 66). In so upping the ante of their condemnations, the moralists also extraordinarily exalt the importance of women's face painting. If the male poet can be described, however optimistically and provisionally, as creating a golden world, his female counterpart, the "creatrice," can be depicted as brazen, both counterfeit (brass rather than gold) and shameless, presumptuous, and bold (*OED*).

As these texts delimit the options for female agency, a woman can show creativity only by becoming a usurper and blasphemer; she can write only by rewriting herself. "Her own sweet face is the booke she most lookes upon; this she reads over duly every morning, specially if she be to shew her self abroad that day: & as her eie or cha[m]bermaid teaches her, sometimes she blots out pale, & writes *red*" (Tuke K2). The woman whom Tuke so describes refuses to be a

passive page imprinted by nature. She insists on being the author of herself, even where this requires her to erase God's impress and replace it with her own. This description of women as both authors and texts complicates the Renaissance tendency to figure texts as female bodies, which genders the pleasure of reading as that of male voyeurism, of male eavesdropping on female privacy (see Wall, esp. 48–49; Fleming, esp. 31). In attacks on face painting, the link between reading and voyeurism is particularly apt. Chastising women for displaying themselves, these writers display them as well, returning obsessively to female bodies.¹¹ But in the painting woman the voyeuristic reader finds a disturbing sight. Registering the authors' combined disgust and desire, the texts show women at their toilettes in the privacy of the bedroom preparing themselves for public display; self-absorbed and self-pleasing, they are nonetheless catering to an anticipated audience. Tuke, for instance, positions women simultaneously as passive objects of male censure and lust and as agents who inhabit and transform their bodies in order to pursue pleasure. Though he presents women as texts, he also presents them as authors and readers. In the polemics attacking cosmetics, as in those attacking theatricality, fear of women as agents coexists with fear for them (Howard, "Scripts," esp. 35–36).

This fear focuses particularly on women's sexuality. Moralists warn husbands to suspect the chastity of women so concerned with their own attractiveness—"I never yet saw bayted hooke, / But fisher then for game did looke" (Gosson 11; see also Camden 198)—and construct physical attractiveness as entrapping in itself; the woman who paints herself is "like the Spider which weaves a fine web to land the flie" (Swetnam E2v). Swetnam, perhaps the most infamous castigator of Renaissance women, advises the male reader that "thou shalt see the power of women, how it hath beene so great, and more prevailed in bewitching mens wits, and in overcoming their sences, then all other things whatsoever . . . therefore stay not alone in the company of a woman, trusting to thy owne chastity" (D3–D3v). Here again women are granted only a destructive power, and this nega-

tive apprehension of their agency justifies men's attempts to control them.

Although women's refusal to accept their "place" parallels the poet's refusal to be enclosed in the narrow warrant of nature's gifts, their insubordination, like other forms of self-transformation, is constructed as threatening rather than as exuberant. By insisting on authoring or re-creating themselves, women become morally and socially unknowable and unlocatable: "it commeth to passe that one can scarsly know who is a noble woman, who is an honorable or worshipfull Woman, from them of the meaner sorte" (Stubbes 75). Gentlewomen, for instance, should "leave these base arts to the commo[n] strumpets, of whom they are fittest to be used, that by that filthines they may be known and noted" (de Laguna, qtd. in Tuke B3v; see also Tuke E2 and G4v and Brathwait, *English* 10). While such attacks suggest that gentlewomen who wear makeup ape common women and prostitutes, they fail to note that such gentlewomen are also imitating the queen and court ladies. Cosmetics, like sumptuous clothing, provided a means of social mobility.¹² In associating them with prostitutes and servants, polemicists like Stubbes delicately refrain from censuring women at the top of the social scale, although those women—especially Queen Elizabeth—may have initiated the use of cosmetics and made it fashionable.

In the Renaissance, as numerous scholars have observed, fears about mutability, mobility, and identity—about self-transformation and its limits—are often displaced onto women and theatricality; this tendency is also evident in the tracts on cosmetics, which were read by both men and women.¹³ Since these texts, like the more widespread analogy between poetry and face painting on which they depend, contribute to interdependent cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, they conjoin attacks on women with anguished concern over manliness. The displacement of this anxiety conceals men's participation in behaviors denigrated as effeminate. Although attacks on face painting usually focus on women, men also used cosmetics. But those men who did so, like those who wore women's clothes, were summarily

dismissed as unspeakably and irredeemably monstrous (Howard, "Crossdressing" 424; Rose 58–61, 76). Castiglione, for instance, says that men who paint themselves "seeme to have a desire to appeare . . . to be" women, but since "nature . . . hath not made them women, [they] ought not to bee esteemed in place of good women, but like common Harlots to bee banished, not onely out of princes courtes, but also out of the company of gentlemen" (39).¹⁴ Like women, men are presented as maintaining their social standing only on certain conditions; those who embellish themselves forfeit their privileged places in the gender and class hierarchies determining identity and exclude themselves from courtly society.

Thus the gender ideologies articulated and in part constructed by the analogy between poetry and face painting also affected many men whose work as poets and courtiers made them vulnerable to charges of effeminacy (see Hunter; Javitch; and Kegl). For this reason, as Frank Whigham points out, the attacks on women's use of cosmetics refuse to acknowledge that men, too, refashioned themselves. He argues that in Elizabethan culture most forms of *cosmesis* were defensively "(and strategically) posited in feminine terms" to distinguish them from the courtier's own practice, thus producing "a class of female whipping boys" to divert "attention from the equally frenetic male preoccupation with other evanescent modes of self-creation and repair" (116; see also 117). Similarly, anti-theatrical literature constructed women and actors "interchangeably" as figures who "erase boundaries . . . usurp privileges; [and] threaten the self-evidence of established categories of gender and rank" (Howard, "Renaissance" 169). Attacks on various forms of self-transformation, then, associate such practices with the feminine and thus participate in construing them as emasculating.

Although female face painting is presented as reconfiguring not only the practitioners but also social relations—as having wider-ranging and more threatening consequences for women and others than does men's creativity—it is treated as spurious, marginal, and illegitimate. A text that discusses women's face painting explicitly

in relation to men's painting of "works of art" provides useful clarification here. Richard Haydocke discusses cosmetics in commenting on his English translation of an Italian treatise on the arts, Giovanni Lomazzo's *Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Painting, Carvinge and Buildinge* (1598). By the very location of his discussion of face painting, Haydocke presents women's own painted faces as their only works of art. After book 3, "Of Colour," which addresses the painting of men (i.e., their manipulation of color in the visual arts), Haydocke interjects his own "censure" of Lomazzo's text; this includes a discussion "of the painting of women" (i.e., of their manipulation of color through cosmetics). Instead of painting from life, women paint "*upon the Life*; where a knowne Naturall shape is defaced, that an unknowne Artificiall hewe may be wrought thereon" (L14). Painted women are irreverent usurpers of the divine—as well as, in this text, the masculine—prerogative of creation. Those who paint "may seeme rather to be of the race of Prometheus, or some of Dedalus or Pigmaliions creatures, then otherwise" (L14v). Who here plays Daedalus or Pygmalion, artists famous for their encroachments on God's or nature's prerogatives, their daring assaults on human limitation? At the very moment that Haydocke presents painting women as similarly blasphemous creators, he insists that their painting reinforces rather than transcends their status as inventions, as Daedalus's or Pygmalion's creatures. Women "painters" and "Artizans" are presented as creative only in the decadent and evanescent realm of cosmetics (Tuke F2v; Bulwer Nn2v), their only access to the golden world, which becomes brazen at their touch.

Thus, the attacks on cosmetics end up emphasizing both the limited sphere within which transgressive female creativity takes place and the primacy and indomitability of nature, which asserts itself in this context as the ultimately untransformable, difficult-to-love mortal body. Discounting the role played by masculine desire and standards of beauty in motivating women to paint themselves, many polemicists assert that women's face painting reveals deep self-loathing: "For had they not disliked themselves, and desired something in themselves . . . [t]hey

would not have sought to have mended their faces with painting" (Peter Martyr in Tuke C4v, G3; Bulwer Nnv). Such claims combine with the moralists' own revulsion in detailed descriptions of what women are trying to hide—the flawed and decaying body—and reminders of the inevitability of death and the ultimate defeat of cosmetic art:

For the nature of things is not to be conquered by human art; and, oftentimes, by how much the more it is suppressed, by so much the more it lifteth and elevateth itself up in such sort, as that fine colours, and sweet perfumes, are not able to alter the native fedity of man's body, but either make it more conspicuous or mistrustful. (Hynd 42)

Nature, here manifested in the mortal, decaying body, inevitably triumphs over art, revealing it as ineffective and transitory. The project of the conservative moralists, then, is to uncover and insist on the mortal body that women attempt to transcend through their painting.¹⁵ Thus the writers either deny women any agency at all, emphasizing the futility of their efforts, or condemn their agency as undermining social and cosmic order.

III

Between the outright attacks on women's face painting and the defenses discussed in the next section are arguments that license the practice under certain circumstances. These limited endorsements stem from a recognition of the contradictory requirements that women face: they must meet certain standards of beauty but must appear to do so naturally and effortlessly; they must be sexually attractive without seeming ungovernable or overwhelming. In *Ar't Asleep Husband?* (1640), Richard Brathwait recognizes the dilemma that this presents, exclaiming, "Alas, poore Girles!" (V). In recompense, Brathwait quotes this opinion:

[I]n some cases Women might use their painting and poudring without sin: First, if it were to the intent to cover any blemish or deformity: Secondly, if the Husband commanded it, to the end his Wife

might seeme more comely in the presence of others [note the emphasis here on public display rather than on private pleasure] . . . to adde more beauty, were it by apparrelling or painting, yea though it were a meere work of Art, and colourably deluding, yet were it no mortall sin. (V-Vv)

Just as women should “labor to supply” their moral defects with a book like Brathwait’s, they might supply their physical defects with cosmetics. Suggesting that these two processes are parallel rather than mutually exclusive, Brathwait condones women’s self-beautification as long as it is conducted with an eye toward their husbands’ pleasure and thus in support of the sexual ideology that it is often censured for undermining.

Some writers would allow physical transformation only when undertaken to correct faults and carried out by a physician. In *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform’d* (1653), for in-



The popularity of beauty spots began in the late seventeenth century, when women affected “Mole[s] to setoff their beauty” or even “fill[ed] their Visages full of [patches], varied into all manner of shapes and figures,” according to the text accompanying this image, in John Bulwer’s *A View of the People of the Whole World*, London, 1654 (an edition of his *Anthropometamorphosis*), Mm4. Most English discourses on cosmetics use, whether for or against it, assume pallor as the standard of beauty. Bulwer acknowledges cultures that value darkness but dismisses their criteria as barbaric and ridiculous. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.)

stance, John Bulwer catalogs the transfigurations of the body practiced in a wide variety of cultures and defends only those alterations that are remedial. He enjoins physicians, whenever they encounter “unnaturall and monstrous In-croachments upon the Humane forme,” to attempt to return the body to its “Naturall State,” with the result that all bodies should be “unblemished” and as close as possible to their beauty in its “originall perfection” (Cv). The physician can operate on the diseased or deformed body, restoring it to its natural state, but the inhabitant of that body cannot attempt a self-transfiguration. Moreover, Bulwer describes standards of beauty that depart from “nature” as “ridiculous,” “foolish,” and “loathsome.” Cosmetic art can function, again, only within the realm defined by nature.

When Bulwer focuses particularly on the painting of the face, he reiterates Brathwait’s concern with what distinguishes women from men as self-transformers: they depend on their attractiveness as men do not. Certain kinds of correction are therefore “granted to women especially, . . . since they [are] somewhat inferiour to men in prudence, strength of Body and fortitude, and other things” (Nn4v). But Bulwer, himself a physician, warns that, while some face painting, “so it do not intend an evill end, . . . is a fiction and vanity somewhat excusable” (Oov), women cannot refashion themselves through such fictions and must submit themselves to professional scrutiny and emendation. Once again, even in this limited defense of corrective cosmetics, it is in taking the pencil into their own hands, in what Bulwer calls their “cosmetique usurpations,” that women are shown to err (Oo).¹⁶

IV

While Bulwer suggests that women should submit themselves to the ministrations of male professionals, those writers who defend cosmetics and provide instructions on how to use them seek to empower women to repair themselves. For Nicholas Culpeper, for instance, as for Bulwer, cosmetics are associated with drugs and medicines, with the contested terrain of medical

practice that male physicians were struggling to fence off and control. By writing vastly popular works that made recipes available for medicines and cosmetics, Culpeper challenges the right of physicians to maintain “exclusive control over recipes for medication that should be dispensed to the population generally” (Smith 111; see also Wall 54–55). Culpeper therefore provides a useful introduction to the defenses of women’s face painting. In these defenses, women’s use of cosmetics encroaches on the authority of male professionals and thus participates in a larger movement to disclose secrets and permit self-help in the later half of the seventeenth century. Yet, recipe and advice books telling women how to beautify themselves, like attacks on cosmetics, present feminine creativity as circumscribed and transitory.¹⁷

The contexts in which the defenses occur link face painting with social aspiration as well as with discovery and invention (Williams 26). Since these recipes appear in works directed at housewives, face painting was apparently not only an aristocratic or courtly practice but also a “domesticated” one. Consulting popular volumes that intermix recipes for cosmetics with those for delicacies and medicines, frugal women could make their own toiletries rather than purchase costly imports (see Partridge; Platt). Although early modern polemic associates face painting with prostitution, it largely targets upper-class women, as those bold enough to ignore censure and follow fashion as well as rich enough to afford such luxuries. In contrast, these cookbooks suggest that the “industrious sort” of women imitated more privileged ones. Unlike attacks on cosmetics, these texts encourage and enable social aspiration. Even these defenses, however, regard self-transformation with some ambivalence, which, as in the attacks on cosmetics, reveals itself in constructions of women’s agency.

Advice to women on how to paint their faces occurs in books presenting an undigested array of “receipts” and “secrets.” In John Wecker’s *Secrets of Art and Nature* (1660), for instance, one can learn how to drive a man mad, gauge fertility or virginity, cure diseases, and make

soap, as well as how to dye the hair or compose a face wash and “how to find whether a woman be painted” (chew saffron, cumin, or garlic, breathe into her face, and see whether she “waxes pale”). This text thus assists both women who wish to improve their appearance and men who want to know whether the women they admire achieve their beauty by nature or art. Refusing to choose a side in the debate over cosmetics, Wecker invites all his readers into the secrets and suggests the possibility of an easy, accessible how-to approach to the mysteries of material life.

Although works like Wecker’s limitlessly empower the reader, that empowerment is complexly gendered. Wecker, for instance, offers the reader the secrets by which nature herself enables us to beautify or improve her, those that “the most diligent Searchers into Natures Secrets, have delved out of her most hidden and concealed Bowels” (A3). As in many early modern scientific discourses, the pursuit of scientific knowledge is “figured rhetorically as the domination of the female body of nature” (Jacobus, Keller, and Shuttleworth 2). Insofar as the how-to books describe “the ferreting out of nature’s secrets, understood as the illumination of a female interior, or the tearing of nature’s veil,” a process that “roots the last vestiges of archaic, subterranean female power,” they position the female reader as self-defeating and fragmented (Keller, “Secrets” 178). In both Wecker’s *Book of Secrets* and Partridge’s *Treasurie of Hidden Secrets* (1600), the reader is encouraged to explore and conquer—even violate—nature. Endorsing a model of learning as penetration and domination, such texts offer women the possibility of mastering instead of being mastered, but not an alternative to gendered, hierarchical dualisms.¹⁸

While these works attempt to divorce “physick” from morals or religion, they hint at the emotional and social consequences of mortality: one becomes not only old but despised. Why should it be “irreligion” to reverse the effects of time or disease, “to cover those deformities by which the decay of Time renders a person not onely unhandsome, but despicable”



This seventeenth-century etching and engraving, *An Old Woman at the Toilet Table*, by Jeremias Falck, after Johann Liss, after Bernardo Strozzi, warns the female viewer of the inevitability of aging. Yet this woman, although aged, is sexual, in the company of other women, and able to see *herself* in her mirror. (Dr. and Mrs. Ronald R. Lubritz Fund; © 1992, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Holl. Neth. VI 156.)

(Wecker, *Cosmetics* A3v), to assert control over one's appearance and social destiny? The defenses of cosmetics thus aim at a restoration not only of physical beauty but of self-determination, contentment, and social acceptability.¹⁹

In a work promoting cosmetics and addressed to women, *Artificial Embellishments; or, Arts Best Directions: How to Preserve Beauty or Procure It* (1665), Thomas Jeamson supports women's right to self-transformation but disparages their aspirations, as Haydocke does, and contains their dwarfed creativity within his own. Jeamson informs his readers that they want only to be beautiful and desirable. He both tempts them with the promise of fulfilling this fantasy and threatens them with the prospect of ugliness

and exclusion from all he glowingly praises, calling "deformity . . . a complicated misery" (A3). Jeamson picks up the image of women as texts and offers his audience the opportunity and tools to revise the first editions, lamenting that too often

those whose bodyes are dismist natures *presse* with some *errata's*, and have not the *royall stamp* of Beauty to make them *currant coyne* for humane society, make choice of obscurity; judging death lesse insufferable, then that ignominy which too often attends *deformity*. (A3v)

Jeamson presents plain women as unfinished and unauthorized books, as counterfeit coins, unworthy of the social circulation he assumes to be their only goal or purpose. By exaggerating the plight of unbeautiful women, Jeamson builds up his own authority as their savior: "Now to quit you Ladies from the loathsome embraces of this hideous Hagge . . . I have published these *Cosmeticks*" (A4). Such defenses of face painting are enabled because they leave creativity and power in the hands of men. In this respect, they are similar to the tracts attacking women's use of cosmetics. These two sides in the debate collaborate in keeping men in the role of women's re-formers; they simply define that role differently.

Using a combination of enticement and threat, Jeamson devotes his whole book to trying to make women share his view of them. The following passage exposes his strategy of defending women against the insults he himself offers them, tempting them with the promise of beauty and frightening them with the consequences of its lack:

Be not banisht company for want of Beauty, when Art affords an innocent supply; nor live a Martyr to that narrow conscience, which forbids *the use of oyle to make a cheerfull countenance*. Borrow our *ruddie vermilion*, and become *purple-plusht roses* to be gathered by the hand of some captivated *Hero*, least in the *green-sicknesse* livery of your own swarthy complexions, you be taken for thistles and crapt by *Asses*. (A6-A6v)

Jeamson here seduces his reader into a romanticized vision of courtship only to betray her for having succumbed to the fantasy. He imagines women only in relation to men, defined by men's desire and acceptance, powerful only to the extent that they inspire love and desire.

At the same time that Jeamson offers an escape from corporeality and mortality, he describes women as circumscribed by these conditions. For he admits some limits to his own power: he cannot "sublimate Nature beyond the reach of Sickness, to a lasting and aethereal Pulcritude, and by cosmetick Antidotes . . . fortifie it with an incapacity of being surpris'd by any feature-fretting malady" (B3v); he can only repair damage and make the body appear beautiful. Thus he can offer his readers only a contingent and self-abasing creativity that is dependent on him and his instruction, directed by male desire, and unable permanently to transcend time and disease. Such creativity reinforces rather than transcends the limits imposed on female self-determination. The female self-painter no longer paints "as her eie or chambermaid teaches her" (Tuke K2) but as a disapproving male gaze instructs her.

One particular passage in Jeamson reveals the contradictions inherent even in endorsements of female artistry. Jeamson argues that art, taking pity on souls imprisoned in ugly or misshapen bodies, so beautifies their physical features "with rich and lively Colours" that "Native Beauties seem but dull and dying shadows." As his title, *Artificiall Embellishments*, suggests, he forthrightly privileges art over nature. He then goes on to insist on the gender of the material art works on. Since not all bodies are as susceptible to art's impressions,

it usually employs its skill about the Female Sex; whose soft and pliant earth, Nature works with a more carefull hand, to make it a thriving soile for the tender plant of Beauty; so that it slights Men, and casts them by, as Canvace too course and rough to draw thereon the taking lineaments of a cleare and smooth-fac'd *Venus*. (B2)

Jeamson here conflates art and nature. Nature prepares women, who are both pliant earth and

canvasses, for the embellishment of art. Knocked out of agency in either realm, women are allied neither with "great creating nature" nor with transcendent artistry. They are no longer creators who take the pencil out of God's hand to defy their status as creatures. In Jeamson's text, women's self-painting is licensed because agency has been removed from them; they are no longer painters but blank canvasses.

The early modern debate over the relation between nature and art offers women triumph over the body and makes the body their only arena of creativity, the site of and limit on female art; it constructs them as Pygmalion and Galatea, as "creatrisses" and blank canvasses. Defenses of poetry associate the feminine with nature, which the masculine poet can imitate, improve, or surpass, and with the art by which he may do so, but not with positive or unconstrained agency. While the heterogeneous discourse about cosmetics sometimes acknowledges female power, it views that power negatively. The texts that grant women significance as authors of themselves attack their presumption. Other texts license cosmetic metamorphoses first by denigrating them as trivial and then by constructing them as operations on rather than by women, as confirming the limits on feminine creativity rather than expanding its scope.

The woman gazing into her mirror, absorbed in self-transformation, threatens the boundaries between creator and creation, desiring subject and object of desire, masculine and feminine, self and body, gentlewoman and prostitute—boundaries on which social order and sexual ideology depend. Yet this threatening figure, especially when seen in the context of defenses of poetry, remains curiously impaired, self-consumed, and mortal. Despite their considerable differences, defenses of poetry and popular texts about women's personal conduct join in circumscribing women's power, never imagining the possibility that women might indeed be not destructive forces but creative agents who shape materials other than their own bodies.²⁰

Notes

¹By comparing the analogous constructions of gendered creativity in two debates and examining numerous texts within each, I hope to avoid “the assumption of arbitrary connectedness” that Cohen argues leads many new historicists to misrepresent the “massive, heterogeneous discourse on gender during the Renaissance” as univocal (38). Pecora also questions recent scholarship that “tries to diminish, or in certain cases to eradicate, distinctions between the ‘aesthetic object’ per se and something called a ‘historical background,’ between one kind of ‘text’ and another, and within a hierarchy of genres and audiences” (243). In my attention to such distinctions and to the multiple voices that contribute to cultural discourses, and especially in my central focus on gendered subjectivities, I ally myself with materialist feminism (see Newton).

²The two essays by Drew-Bear, which identify most of the tracts in the face-painting debate, laid the foundation for subsequent scholarship. Finke examines the female character in Renaissance drama who is reduced to “the status of an objet d’art—a painted woman” (358). I focus here on conceptions of women not only as objects of desire but as agents and artists.

³Exploring the conditions under which women “experience their bodies as the only available medium for their art,” Gubar argues that cultural myths identifying the creator as masculine and the creation as feminine enable men to evade the humiliating recognition that they are created out of the female body (78). See also Montrose.

⁴See Ortner. Paster also discusses the conventional Renaissance association of women with nature and men with culture. See also Maclean 2–4.

⁵In the light of Sidney’s socially and politically precarious position, his assertions about autonomy and creative puissance can be seen as ironic and desperate (Ferguson 160, 233n61; see also Howard, “Renaissance” 170–71, and Kegl). Obviously, writers such as Sidney did not experience unfettered creativity, but when they imagined it, however tentatively, they often gendered it as masculine.

⁶Identifying such disguised artifice as cosmetic *sprezzatura*, Whigham observes that the concealment or repair of defects was considered “legitimate when invisible” (117). See Lichtenstein on the abuse of ornament. See also Attridge.

⁷Ferguson contends that “Sidney . . . sees the threat that poetry poses as an erotic one” (146); see also Bloch 11–15, 19–20.

⁸Truewit’s misogynist defense of women’s face painting in Jonson’s *Epicoene* corresponds to the claims of this argument: to praise cosmetics is to find fault with women as they are. Rose argues that Truewit, in satirically praising cosmetics, “articulates a vivid disgust with the female body, a conviction that women should . . . repair what is by nature vicious and ugly” (59). See also Barish.

⁹Among those condemning cosmetics as dangerous to health and morals, Tuke objects to the use of mercury sublimate because, like original sin (and like venereal disease), it infects the transgressor’s children (B4v, H2). Simi-

larly, Haydocke, a physician, warns that women may disfigure rather than beautify themselves with corrosive substances and that this bodily harm has moral consequences (L15–Mm; see also Bulwer Nn2). See Smith on how the medical slides into the moral in tracts on gynecology and obstetrics.

The best sources on the actual use of cosmetics in the Renaissance remain Camden and Williams. Both argue that sales of these preparations had dramatically increased at the turn of the century, in part because of increased trade with Italy and the example set by Elizabeth I. For the negative association of cosmetics with the foreign, see Brathwait, *English*, “To the Gentlewoman Reader,” 10, 23–25.

¹⁰On the long Western tradition of associating and condemning the feminine, makeup, and “all that appeared unstable, fugitive, and transitory, and . . . the pleasure they aroused,” see Lichtenstein, esp. 81–82, and Bloch, esp. 11–15.

¹¹Most descriptions of women’s cosmetic practices catalog the equipment used at excessive length. Fleming analyzes the obsession with domestic articles, which become “the fetishized attributes of female sexuality” (19). On the fragmentation of the female beloved into her parts, which enables the male spectator-lover to assert control over her, see Vickers. On the use of the series to describe and commodify women in *Epicoene*, and thus to associate them with “lack,” see Newman. Parker, in chapter 7, shows how the blazon and other “rhetorics of property . . . all participate in an imagery of opening and controlling something gendered as female before spectators and possessors gendered as male” (154).

¹²Legal and social regulations regard sumptuous apparel as a tool of self-transformation across gender and class lines, parallel to cosmetics yet available to and commonly used by men. On the condemnation of excessive apparel, see Howard, “Crossdressing”; Rose, ch. 2; and Whigham.

¹³On the anxieties of self-fashioning for men, see Greenblatt. On the displacement of these anxieties onto women, see Bloch 19–20; Howard, “Crossdressing” 421 and, especially, “Renaissance” 165–72; Jardine, ch. 6; Levine; Rose, ch. 2; Singh; and Stallybrass 128–29.

¹⁴Bulwer is equally vehement about men who paint their faces (Nn–Nnv); see also Stubbes. Although Tuke claims to address the use of cosmetics by both men and women, he focuses almost exclusively on women. Garner observes that “painting is a peculiarly feminine practice in the Renaissance” (126).

¹⁵On “the isolation of the natural functions from public life” (139) and the way this contributed to the shamefulness of the body, see Elias. On the displacement of shame and anxiety about disease, sexuality, and aging onto the female body, see Paster. Laqueur discusses “the construction of the female in relation to the male, . . . expressed in terms of the body’s concrete realities [but] more deeply grounded in assumptions about the nature of politics and society” (16); for a related discussion see Maclean, ch. 3. On a crisis of anxiety over bodily health and appearance in early modern London and the link between this anxiety and social acceptance and mobility, see Pelling. Garner comments on the

connections among women's face painting, sinful sexuality, and the ever-decaying body in Hamlet's and Bosola's outbursts.

¹⁶Whigham demonstrates that Castiglione, Puttenham, and Della Casa all legitimate cosmetic repair (117; see also Howard, "Renaissance" 172). According to Pelling, barber-surgeons offered their clients such ministrations as washing, grooming, and "the removal and mitigation of marks and blemishes," especially on the face and hands, the only bodily parts consistently exposed to view (94). Yet, since the barber-surgeon's shop was "primarily a male preserve" (95), Pelling's research into early modern hygiene does not tell us where women could go for such restorative services.

¹⁷Culpeper's *Arts Masterpiece* and Wecker's *Cosmeticks* are the same. Both volumes describe Culpeper as responsible for "extracting" the contents from Wecker's works.

¹⁸On the persistent, but complex, gendering of the scientist as masculine and the object of knowledge as feminine in scientific discourse, see Keller's *Reflections*.

¹⁹Pelling suggests that deformity and disease could, indeed, have serious social consequences.

²⁰I would like to thank David Bevington, Mary Jean Corbett, Margaret Ferguson, Brit Harwood, Ronald Levao, Marianne Novy, Mary Beth Rose, Scott Shershow, and Wendy Wall for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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