



# ‘FAIRING THE FOUL WITH ART'S FALSE BORROWED FACE’: REVISITING THE CULTURE OF BEAUTY AND MAQUILLAGE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted culture of beauty and maquillage during the Early Modern period in England, offering a fresh perspective on the societal norms, practices, and perceptions of beauty during this transformative era. By examining a wide range of primary sources, including literary works, personal accounts, and visual representations, this study uncovers the intricate relationship between beauty ideals, cosmetics, and the construction of identity in early modern society. The research explores the significant role played by various factors such as social status, gender, and cultural influences in shaping beauty standards and practices. Furthermore, it investigates the intricate craftsmanship of cosmetic products, their ingredients, and their impact on the individuals who employed them.

The paper contextualizes the early modern beauty culture within the broader historical and cultural framework, highlighting its connections to contemporary discourses on morality, power dynamics, and the emerging consumer culture. By engaging with diverse sources, the study sheds light on the ways in which beauty practices were entwined with concepts of social hierarchy, religious beliefs, and notions of propriety. Additionally, it examines the social and economic implications of the beauty industry, including the emergence of professional beauty practitioners, the circulation of beauty advice manuals.

Moreover, this research challenges existing assumptions about beauty practices in early modern England, presenting a nuanced understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the culture of beauty during this period. By acknowledging the agency and motivations of individuals in their pursuit of beauty, the study transcends simplistic narratives of oppression or conformity, highlighting the potential for personal expression and self-fashioning within the constraints of societal expectations.

This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the culture of beauty and maquillage in Early Modern England, shedding light on the interconnectedness of beauty ideals, societal norms, and personal agency. By examining the multifaceted aspects of beauty practices and their wider implications, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between appearance, identity, and social structures in this transformative period of English history.

**Introduction:**

Throughout the annals of history, beauty has consistently been regarded as the paramount asset for women, conferring upon them acceptance for marital union, sexual dominance, fame, enhanced social mobility, and myriad other advantages. The face, with its undeniable physical, psychological, and social prominence, assumes a pivotal role in self-perception and social interactions, its significance transcending mere estimation. In practical terms, the allure of beauty aligns intrinsically with physiognomy, given that beauty is primarily believed to reside within facial features. These intertwined convictions can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, persisting through the Christian era and culminating in the Renaissance, with their influence persisting into the contemporary era. Notably, within Renaissance England, the topic of embellishment held a significant position in social, domestic, literary, and theatrical discourses. This scholarly work endeavours to shed light on the cultural preoccupation with maquillage, exploring the employment of cosmetic metaphors in various early modern texts, including plays, sonnets, homilies, and tracts, which contributed to the formation of a distinct English identity. Moreover, it seeks to underscore the long overdue recognition of the early modern culture surrounding maquillage, extending its impact beyond the realms of social customs and vanity into the domains of artistry and literature, and its enduring implications in the era of post-humanism.

For generations, cosmetics have offered the promise of perfection. It is an artistic tool with the help of which women of all ages have recreated their self. This allowed them to achieve a sort of creative autonomy; perhaps it was pleasing to attempt to create beauty, to paint, since women were excluded from the sphere of artistic production that was predominantly male (Cooper 142). Yet, man has always interpreted cosmetics as somewhat secondary, as trivial as an accessory, even outright deceptive. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, discourses on cosmetic practices of women in diverse literary texts exposed maquillage as an unreliable, yet, often desirable, symbol of beauty, social hierarchy and moral truth. The term 'cosmetic' was rarely used before 1650; the first use of the word "cosmetic" in English is attributed to Francis Bacon in 1605. A variation the word—"cosmetical"—is mentioned in Peter Morwen's translation of Konrad Gesner's *The Treasure of Euonymus* as early as 1559, just one year after Elizabeth I ascended the throne (Poitevin 61). Yet, frequent references to 'paint' and 'painting' in early modern texts point towards a 'culture of cosmetics', which existed since the time of Roman occupation. 'Fucus' was a general term that referred to Roman makeup. Early references of a highly toxic lead-based makeup paste called 'Biacca' was made by the Romans. The first record of the cosmetic skin-whitener, called the Venetian Ceruse, was found in 1519 in William Horman's *Vulgaria Puerorum*, the word comes from late Middle English, via Old French from the Latin word 'cerussa', which perhaps is derived from Greek *kēros*, meaning 'wax'. It also went by the name 'Spirits of Saturn', and was in great demand and considered the most accessible cosmetic at the time. Venice, the fashion capitol of the Renaissance, specialized in the sale of Venetian ceruse, a product which seems to be a derivation of a Roman recipe, and contained a pigment composed of white lead which, was understood to cause lead poisoning that would eventually damage the complexion and structure of the skin of the user, making it appear "grey and shrivelled" (qtd. in Leed).

A notable user of ceruse was Elizabeth I of England who played a major role in the formation of the cosmetic culture in early modern England. It is believed she began using it most heavily after a bout with smallpox in 1562, and her iconic, mask-like portrait she is known for today bears witness to the fact (Poitevin 61). Venetian ceruse had the effect of making women's skin look like ghastly white, as if the skin had been coated in plaster. Women who applied ceruse usually just kept applying the mixture, in light layers every now and then rather than wash the old layers off. Elizabeth herself was reported by the Jesuit priest Anthony Rivers at Christmas 1600 to have been painted 'in some places near half an inch thick' (Reihl 60). Thomas Tuke, a clergyman, in his *Treatise* stated that "The ceruse or white Lead, wherewith women use to paint themselves was, without doubt, brought in use by the divell, the capitall enemie of nature, therwith to transforme humane creatures, of fair, making them ugly, enormous and abominable... a man might easily cut off a curd or cheese-cake from either of their cheeks." The white lead rotted the wearer's teeth, resulting in terrible bad breath, caused severe skin discolouration, increased hairfall, swelling and inflammation of the eyes, causing them to water often in agony. The mouth and throat would become affected and the lead would gradually destroy the lungs. Extensive use over a period of time it could cause death. The damage caused by the white lead in ceruse in turn led to the 'fashionable' trend of fake 'beauty spots'—velvet patches to hide scars, which saw a gradual rise in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Venetian ceruse was still being sold as late as the nineteenth

century. Despite growing medical knowledge, dangerous cosmetics continued to be used into the Victorian era. Cosmetic Whiteners were still quite popular, and contained poisonous substances such as zinc oxide, mercury, lead, nitrate of silver, and acids; it is said that women even ate chalk or drank iodine to achieve whiteness.

The women who wore such fatal chemicals were not ignorant of the danger that their makeup posed. Physicians and the Church warned them of the dangers of donning face paint. Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* recognizes that ceruse is "a deadly poison" whose mineral form is used to paint boats. Lomazzo, in his *Tracte* states: "The Ceruse or white lead which women use to better their complexion, is made of lead and vinegar; which mixture is naturally a great drier; and is used by chirurgions to drie up moiste sores. So that those women who use it about their faces, doe quickly become withered and gray headed, because this dowth so mightly drie up the naturall moysture of their flesh" (130). Many of the cosmetics used were dangerous in themselves or because they were adulterate. After discussing the harmful effects of a number of ingredients, he concludes: "For it is certaine, that all Paintings and colourings made of minerals or hälfe minerals, as iron, brasse, lead, tinne, sublimate, cerusse, camphire, juice of lymons, plume- alume, salt-peeter, vitrioll, and all manner of saltes, and sortes of alumes . . . are very offensive to the complexion of the face" (249). Lomazzo's unique statement, arguing in the main interest of the women, is rather peculiar for his time, and as one might deem quite feminist in its essence.

Cultural assumptions about what constituted true beauty were undermined by the application of cosmetics. The Neo-Platonists idealized such traits as virtue and modesty, which would paint a natural beauty upon the visage. Tertullian in his *De Cultu Feminarum* wrote that women instead of spending time on appearances and vanity, should 'have their eyes painted with chastity, the Word of God inserted in their ears, Christ's yoke tied to their hair, and subject themselves to their husbands' (Downing 5). All women were expected to project this natural beauty that was achievable only through the possession of a virtuous mind. The pressure to be beautiful in a world in which beauty was one of the key agents through which love and/or marriage could be secured was severe. The racially privileging standard of beauty was set up by Renaissance artists and poets through their extravagant imagery included ivory skin, dark eyes, rosy cheeks, and coral lips, an unfamiliar portrait that rendered perfect beauty impossible to attain (Cooper 142). Those less fortunate were forced to invent an idealistic beauty with the help of cosmetics; the price one had to pay, besides suffering the wrath of gods, includes a quotidian exposure to poisonous chemicals like ceruse and vermilion, and moreover, risking damage to reputation and fortune through blackmail. The all-pervasive cult of feminine beauty shaped the Western perceptions and fantasies, which in turn depicted and imposed such impossible standards of beauty as normative during a time, which did not conform to the present standards of hygiene.

The champions of the 'anti-cosmetic' discourse primarily grounded their arguments on the writings of the early church fathers. Like Tertullian, who damned women as 'the doorway to the devil', they looked upon women, especially beautiful women, with suspicion, for they feared that such women were capable of inciting lustfulness or falling into the sinful state of vanity. The primary objection being the altering the face, the most sacred creation of God, thereby appropriating God's absolute right to creation was deemed a sacrilege. Again, Roger Edgeworth's sermon on the 'adulteration' of painting preached during Henry VIII's reign, warns against the arrogance of both man and woman in using cosmetics to alter God's divine creation—the human body. He states that

This adulteration and changing of God's handiwork by painting women's hair to make it seem fair and yellow, or of their cheeks to make them look ruddy, or of their forehead to hide the wrinkles and to make them look smooth, is of the devil's invention and never of Gods teaching. Therefore, I must exhort all women to beware of counterfeiting, adulterating, or changing the fashion and form of God's work, either by yellow colour, black or red powder, or by any other medicine corrupting or changing the natural lineaments of favour of man or woman. (Cooper 141)

The misogynistic emphasis of anti-cosmetic literature is simply overwhelming. Tuke's *Treatise* points a finger at the painted and therefore negligent woman as the source of pride and ambition, responsible for committing adultery, murder, poisoning and practising witchcraft. According to him,

But a painted face is a false face, a true falshood, not a true face...That picture, (or painting) is of corruption, and not comely, that painting is deceitfull, and not of simplicitie, that painting lasteth but a while, it is wiped off either with raine or sweat: that painting deceiveth and beguileth, that it can neither please him, whom thou desirest



to please, who perceiveth this pleasing beauty to be none of thine, but borrowed: and thou doest also displease thy maker, who seeth his worke to be defaced. (Tuke)

Painted ladies were associated with witches, as they were imagined in their chambers with pots of ingredients concocting dangerous mixtures that would give them power to transmute their bodies to entice men and lure them to adultery and similar sin. The explicit association of women's painting with witchcraft occurs more boldly in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, when Bosola accosts the character of the Old Lady whom he suspects for face-painting and prostitution. He rails thus, "One would suspect it for a shop of witch-craft, to finde in it the fat of Serpents; spawne of Snakes, Jewes spittle, and their yong children['s] ordures - and all these for the face: I would sooner eate a dead pidgeon, taken from the soles of the feete of one sicke of the plague, then kisse one of you fasting (Garner 127).

During the seventeenth century, however, cosmeticized ladies were stigmatized. Commonplaces among the critics of face-painting were that women by painting themselves resembled the notorious users of makeup: courtesans and prostitutes. This theme related to paintedness that Shakespeare has been known to draw upon repeatedly is obvious in In Act 3, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, when Claudius has a pang of conscience which he expresses in imagery that underscores this association: "The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art, / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word". One reason that Shakespeare has *Hamlet* fixated on painting, rather than on other forms of bodily painting, is that painting is a peculiarly feminine practice. *Hamlet's* upbraiding of Ophelia in Act Act 3, Sc 1, "I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face and you make yourselves another", confirms both the use of cosmetics as a feminine ploy women use to ensnare men, as well as the censure of clerics and moralists who continually claim that to alter God's creations is to go against His design. *Hamlet's* preoccupation with face-painting is evident in Act 5 Sc 1, when he addresses Yorick's skull, "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come...," as he repeatedly connects the image of a woman's painted body with fallen sexuality, betrayal, the art of the courtesan (Garner 125-126).

This objection to face-painting stemmed from a social unease regarding female mutability and sexuality, furthered by the increasing visibility of women in the public space. The pervasiveness of painted faces came to be recognised at court, in social circles and on stage with the evolution of the concept of beauty (Cooper 140). A small minority of women in power exercised absolute control over their public appearance and instructed painters to preserve their youthful looks in order to fabricate a face for the purpose of political self-fashioning and deception (Cooper 142). In a lively debate regarding Queen Elizabeth's face and references to her cosmetic practices, Anna Reihl writes that "the face emerges as a site of power and means of empowerment: epistemological, political and even divine" (6) She examines how various artists, diplomats and poets treated Elizabeth's face, which helped contribute to the 'Cult of Elizabeth'. One must understand that Elizabeth's reputation as a monarch was at stake when she contracted smallpox, the disease, which posed a political and personal threat, as it affected both her life and her appearance.

Since the Renaissance established the female form as the paradigm of beauty, unlike the Greeks who considered perfect beauty was in fact male, female beauty and its relationship to sexuality formed the core of many early modern literary representations. References to maquillage were widespread in sonnets and lyric poetry in Elizabethan England, which vilified 'painted faces' even as they idealized the fair and ruddy complexions that women who used cosmetics tried to imitate. The convention of eulogizing one's mistress as fair was well established, and may be found in Petrarch's sonnets to Laura. The colors, red and white, bear a special significance in a person's physiognomy. Lomazzo, in his suggests that "white, cause it is apt to receive all mixtures, signifieth simplicity, puritie, and of the minde" (230). Red cheeks were indicative of blushing, a symbol chastity, modesty, and shame, and recipes for blush were frequently alongside those for face whiteners, like one for "A water procuxing face a Rooselyke and colour" that promises, incredibly, that "this wyll continue a long time, for ii. or iii. Yeares" (Poetivin 69). The convention of eulogizing one's mistress as fair complexioned was entrenched in Petrarch's sonnets to Laura and early English sonneteers. Again, the counter-tradition, both in Italian and early English sonnetting, of castigating one's mistress as 'dark' and 'black' as opposed to 'fair' seems to have been well defined early on. Yet, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Shakespeare's *Dark Lady Sonnets*, specifically 127, 130 and 147, introduce a competing narrative which argues that whiteness or 'fairness' is not an exclusive visual stimulus to love or sexual desire. In Sonnet 6, which was in circulation in manuscript from 1581, Sidney states that Stella is black, dazzling and beautiful: "That whereas black seems beauty's contrary/ She, even in black, doth make all beauties flow." Shakespeare's Sonnet 127 introduces his mistress as 'black', but then digresses unexpectedly into a tirade against cosmetics and face painting, by holding

responsible the hands which “hath put on Nature's power” for “Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face, something which Shakespeare never found easy to tolerate, for he seems to equate it with a falseness in human relations. In line 10, ‘Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem’, is a possible pun on the word ‘sooted’ referring to practise of darkening the rims of the eyes with soot. Shakespeare’s intense dislike for the practice of maquillage is evident in the phrase ‘old age’ in line 1 as he takes a swipe here at an ageing Elizabeth I who heavily relied on cosmetics and wigs to hide her senescence. The fact that her hair is black is established in line 4 of Sonnet 130: “If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.” The praise of ‘fair’, and the denigration of its counterpart, the ‘dark’, is made easier by the looseness of meaning of the word ‘fair’ in English, since it can signify both light complexioned and beautiful, as well as having a range of moral applications. The opposite of the ideal state of ‘fairness’, described by words such as ‘dark’, and ‘black’, points towards the practice of harsh moral censure and denigration, as observed in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147: For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night. By the time Shakespeare's sonnet sequence was published in 1609, the fashion for sonnet writing was already passé, but the covert preoccupation for dark beautiful features in women still survived.

## Conclusion

The association between the naturally pale complexion of English individuals and the prevailing beauty standards was not unique to England; rather, it derived from a universal dichotomy of fair and dark, symbolizing the opposition between good and evil. The equation of beauty with goodness and the inverse association of darkness with evil and sinfulness served to justify the early modern fixation on the use of cosmetics and the perceived lack of virtue in those who adorned their faces (Cooper 141). While contemporary society has become accustomed to the widespread practice of cosmetics and acknowledges the artificiality inherent in enhancing one's appearance, thereby creating a somewhat deceptive yet desirable image, we remain largely unfamiliar with the Renaissance concept of the painted face as a reflective surface that mirrors an ideal internal state. Although we have advanced the practice of maquillage through the integration of technology for self-fashioning purposes, we have lost sight of how the Renaissance individual employed cosmetics as a means to uphold a semblance of moral rectitude.

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