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*Book Review*

**Edith Snook, *Women, Beauty and Power in Early Modern England: A Feminist Literary History*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 208 pp. $77.73.**

Although there have been a number of important critical works on early modern clothing and cosmetics in recent years, such as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass's *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (2000) and Farah Karim-Cooper's *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (2006), Edith Snook's feminist literary history of women, beauty, and power in early modern England brings into view a significantly new, expanded picture of the subject by turning to writing produced by women themselves. Snook begins by rehearsing the centrality of female beauty to the literary culture of early modern England, particularly evident in the poetic tradition of the blazon, observing that in this context, "beauty is codified and aestheticized in ways that connect poets more to other men than to women's literary or social history", with such writing revealing "more about the male writers than it does about women" (6). By instating an archive of female-authored texts, Snook is able to explore how early modern

women thought about beauty and how they negotiated its cultural construction, testing both its limitations and the possibilities it afforded.

Snook's shift in focus to women's writing also entails a move away from polemical tracts and drama, forms that have tended to dominate scholarly discussion of the topic, to a diverse range of sources that all necessitate attention to women's actual beauty practices rather than aesthetic theory or homiletic prescriptions in isolation. As Snook points out, beauty is "a practice of everyday life" (6) as well as a nexus of idealized constructions, social meaning, and intellectual debate. To this end, the book is structured in three parts, which focus on cosmetics, clothing, and hair respectively. Each part contains two chapters, offering analysis of recipes, prose narratives, masques, account books, maternal advice, letters, and life-writing over the course of the book. Snook states that she aims to make "women's intellectual life visible within their beauty practices, activities often decried as merely foolish" (7). The juxtaposition of fiction and non-fiction writing allows women's reflections on the preparation of beauty products, purchase of clothing, and treatment of hair to be read in relation to the important cultural meanings of beauty in early modern England, where it was taken for granted that "appearance could not be disentangled from identity" (9) and where beauty was powerfully associated with goodness and elite status.

In some respects, a less negative and censorious picture of women's beauty practices emerges from the enquiry. In the section on cosmetics, in particular, Snook successfully uncovers the continuum between health and beauty in her discussion of what she terms "beautifying physic." Looking beyond the anti-face painting discourse found in satirical drama and didactic tracts, she attends instead to domestic recipe collections. These manuscripts reveal that beauty treatments are most frequently presented as part of promoting hygiene (with cleanliness and whiteness conflated) and preserving health, and

can be situated within the arena of medical knowledge. The fascinating discussion of the word "pomatum" (23-28), for instance, shows that its use variously suggests a face wash, a paint, or a medical treatment. Where complaints arise about women using mercury or lead in their preparations, then, they relate not to the intrinsic wrongheadedness of employing such materials, but to anxieties about women infringing on a medical domain that was becoming increasingly masculinized and professionalized.

Snook's analysis throughout the book relies on the writing of elite women. She notes that they generally pursue "much the same beauty ideal as male writers" and it is the central finding of the book that "their construction of beauty is most often deeply invested in distinctions based in class and race" (7). In this way, they strengthen connections between whiteness, social privilege, and the traditional construction of beauty, which involves natural, unblemished, fair skin and natural, long, thick, soft, and lightly waving hair. Women writers make use of these norms to construct a privileged female identity. In relation to *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) by Mary Wroth and "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" by Mary Cavendish, Snook thus argues that "their representations of hair reinforce hierarchies of class and race to challenge women's subordinate position within patriarchal culture" (116). Similarly, Anne Clifford's dressing of her hair as a young woman marks out her social right to consume luxury goods, while as an older woman her shaved head communicates her discipline and self-governance.

Throughout the book's discussions of texts, there is a tension between natural and artificial beauty on the one hand, and between ideals of beauty and the real praxis of women on the other hand. Beauty is supposed to be an absolute external signifier of virtue, class, and race, converging on an ideology of fairness; clothing and appearance place both men and women alike within the social order. However, these physical signs are also

open to manipulation, potentially disrupting beauty's symbolic power. Moreover, the construction of what is natural and what is artificial is inevitably incoherent, evident in the example of men being supposed "naturally" to have short hair and women long hair. In fact, Snook argues that these women's employment of beauty practices, their careful attention to their clothing and that of their children, and their communication of identity through hair all provide them with opportunities to act creatively, to engage in purposeful self-fashioning, and to demonstrate knowledge and competence. However, in forging this elite female subjectivity, early modern women equally rely on social constructions of natural beauty that subordinate women of other classes and races.

Snook's careful and lucid account of early modern women and their beauty practices, and how they variously intersect with hierarchies of power, will be of interest to scholars of early modern women's writing, material culture, and the history of beauty, and it is to be commended for its timely re-orienting of the subject towards texts produced by women. In terms of extended analysis, it necessarily treats a fairly restricted set of texts, with Snook acknowledging that the book "cannot be the final word on early modern women's thinking about beauty" (8). However, it opens the way for future work to further explore the rich archive of women's writing, both fictional and documentary, and to test how such an archive challenges our assumptions and forces us to revise existing scholarly narratives.

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