

To See and To Be Seen: Beauty in the Early Modern London Street

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Abstract

This article discusses physical beauty and its presence in early modern London streets. Based mainly on the evidence of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century printed literature, it concentrates on how good looks, visibility, and gender were thought to interact in encounters between gazers and the gazed at. Treating the street as both physical space and a metaphor for visibility, it suggests three perspectives through which the relationship between beauty and gender could be approached: firstly, men looking at beauty and reacting to it; secondly, women as spectacle; and thirdly, women's active participation in these exchanges in the streets. Beauty narratives informed the early modern gaze when it confronted the urban scene, assigned affective content to these visual encounters, and inscribed both the seer and the seen with cultural meaning. Viewed as an active process of communication and interpretation, beauty becomes a fundamental category for understanding the cultural history of the street.

Keywords

Beauty, street, gender, gaze, body

Introduction

“Preserue me, O Lord,” wrote the Englishman Thomas Bentley in his sixteenth-century collection of prayers for women “—from pranking, pricking, pointing, painting, frisling, & decking of my self to appeare piked, feate, gorgious, & gaie in the eies of men: from taking too much libertie to gad abroad to see and to be seene, or to prance in pride arrogantlie.”¹ Bentley's advice introduces us to many themes about women on early modern streets. First of all, at least in the imagination, there were enough women gadding on London and English streets to warrant warnings

¹ Thomas Bentley, *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie* (London, 1582), 3.

against it. Secondly, beauty and beautifying were central to how visible women were conceptualized in early modern England. Thirdly, women going out were thought of as a spectacle staged mostly to profit male eyes, but they were also believed to take pleasure in their visibility. In this essay, I will take a look at beauties in the streets, and think about how good looks, visibility, and gender interacted.

My claim is that the heavily gendered concept of bodily beauty was an essential discursive tool for envisioning femininity and masculinity, and indeed women's visibility, in the early modern urban landscape. Culturally speaking, beauty discourses worked towards configuring the experience of the street. Beauty narratives informed the gaze when it confronted the urban scene, assigned affective content to these visual encounters, and inscribed both the seer and the seen with cultural meaning. Viewed as an active process of communication and interpretation, beauty becomes a fundamental category for understanding the cultural history of the street.

My window towards the street is framed first and foremost by sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century printed literature—by no means the 'whole truth' then, but nevertheless, I think, an important source of ideas and scripts that shaped, and were shaped by, the early modern imaginary that people also carried to the physical site of the street.² When possible, I will use the evidence of diaries and memoirs to show that the same conceptual frame also informed a more personal understanding of beauty's powers and its gender structure.

As a conceptual tool, beauty fashioned what people saw, and how they looked at others, in the street. Beauty functioned, I argue here, as a means of 'knowing' and 'doing' gender, in the streets and elsewhere. To say that early modern people thought about beauty constantly is to understate the issue; on another conceptual level beauty was useful for *how* one thought about gender and *how* one conceptualized one's gaze. This is why beauty was an essential ingredient of street culture. Early modern knowledge of beauty assigned subject and object positions that made women and men what they were, positioning women as the looked-at sex and men as the

² Beauty is everywhere in early modern literature. In this article, I have restricted myself to texts that more or less explicitly engage with the problematics of the street, but it is in fact difficult to find a text that does not take part in the masculinist beauty discourses in some way. I have written on early modern beauty more generally in *Silmän ilot. Kauneuden kulttuurihistoriaa uuden ajan alussa*. (Jyväskylä, 2005) [Pleasures of the eye. A cultural history of early modern beauty].

primary, but not the only, gazers on good looks in the streets. Men and women thought and acted with respect to beauty whether they conformed to or opposed current norms and practices. In the conceptual negotiations of looks and visibility that touched gendered street behavior, both women and men could use beauty to read actions, be they male or female. To lift a helpful distinction from Alex Cowan's article elsewhere in this issue: beauty was a practice, both observatory and participatory, in which both the beautiful object and the gazing subject had their own powers, and roles both wider and more ambiguous than just to see and to be seen.

Treating the street not only as a physical space but also as a metaphor for visibility, I will venture three different perspectives through which we can think about the relationship between beauty and gender. Firstly, both writers and readers of most early modern texts were assumed to be men. Thus the primary way that beauty figured in these texts is in the relationship between a male viewer and a beautiful female object. What happened when men looked at pretty women in the streets?

But, secondly, women were not mere objects. They had minds of their own, and even writing men knew that. In fact, it seemed to men that women deliberately put themselves on men's way, forcing men to look at, admire and desire them. So women were not innocent, but what did that mean for the women? When appearing to the gaze, what kind of agents were they? It is a paradox of the early modern rationale of beauty that the object was deemed to possess all power, while the looking subject was reduced to a passive receiver of the emotions and desires that the object provoked.

Thirdly, women in the streets also had eyes of their own. They could look at other women's beauty. Even more importantly, they could look at men and engage them in an exchange which made their beauty shine even more brightly and forced men to acknowledge them as living beings and not just passive sights. In a moment, I will consider what happened when women raised their eyes and 'talked' back—for two gazes meeting, in early modern opinion, made for a conversation.

But let us start by looking at the party that we must now consider the more active in the exchanges of beauty. And that is not women—despite our continuing but nonsensical belief that women are the beautiful sex, and that beauty is thus a women's matter. Gendering and indeed understanding beauty must begin with the gesture of looking, not the seen object. The primary gazer, in early modern opinion, was the man. What was the role of men in constructing the image of the woman in the street?

Men Looking at Women

Early modern city life was marked by the street's sights, sounds, and smells, agreeable or not. The throng, variety and noise of busy life constituted the experience of the city walk. While railing against the follies of his age in *Skialetheia* (1598), the grumpy satirist Edward Guilpin described what a "troublesome and tedious" undertaking it was to go out on London streets, forsaking the pleasurable quiet of one's study:

Witnes that hotch-potch of so many noyses,
 Black-saunts of so many seuerall voyces,
 That Chaons [sic] of rude sounds, that harmony,
 And *Dyapason* of harsh *Barbary*,
 Compos'd of seuerall mouthes, and seuerall cries,
 Which to mens eares turne both their tongs & eies.

To Guilpin's satirical eye, the crowds in the street were made up of disreputable porters, sergeants, and ale-knights, "rotten-throated slaues" and "coney-catching knaues," and the only women in the streets were old bawds and their young whores, all filthily chanting "Kemps Iigge."³ But the city was also a "map of vanities," a "marte of fools" and a "magazine of gulls." People walked about to show off their fashionable clothes and painted faces, making outlandish fads that aroused the connoisseur's delight and the satirist's scorn a distinctive feature of city life.⁴ Looking at the various kinds of people who appeared in the streets was central to how London was experienced. Men interpreted open streets as a male-dominated space, where women emerged as a service industry. The street was essential to how early modern masculinity was imagined. An important ingredient to this identity, shared alike by such established figures as Samuel Pepys and young men's counter-culture of fashion and bravado, was the way in which women were objectified as a useable commodity, to be wooed, picked up, drooled over or insulted, according to situation and the desirability of the woman.⁵

³ The allusion here is to William Kemp, the famous dancing fool actor, whose trademark jig from London to Norwich took nine days and gathered crowds all along the way. See William Kemp, *Kemps Nine Daies Wonder* (London, 1600).

⁴ Edward Guilpin, *Skialetheia, Or, A Shadowe of Truth* (London, 1598), sig. D5-D5^v. By 'black-saunts' Guilpin means 'black-sanctus', a term OED defines as 'rough music'—'saunt' was not an uncommon spelling of the word in the late sixteenth century.

⁵ On young men, Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority. Formative Experiences in England 1560-1640* (Oxford, 1996), 206-07; Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 246-49.

Beautiful London women seem to have been a sight that men could go to see expressly; indeed they were almost a “tourist attraction.” Mr. Gardiner of Thomas Heywood’s play *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607), for example, visits the Exchange and admires what a “beauteous gallant walke” it makes: “Me thinks the glorious virgins of this square / Give life to dead strucked youth; Oh heavens!” He then selects the girl he finds the most attractive in one of the stalls and starts flirting with her, making much of her looks.⁶ What went on at the Exchange could take place in any public London space. In the city were special places where people could walk both to display their own mastery of fashion and to take in the beauty of others—places such as Paul’s Walk, the middle aisle of St. Paul’s, that Roze Hentschell has playfully called “the early modern catwalk of the fashionable London.”⁷ Samuel Pepys, whose famous diary of the 1660s testifies to an expert eye, never tired of visiting the theatres, inns, parks, churches and streets where women’s beauty was to be enjoyed. Even the Devonshire yeoman Leonard Wheatcroft, recollecting his youthful days in the mid-seventeenth century, described how he visited London while looking for a wife and appreciatively scanned “the beauteous ladies in the balconies” of “that great and spacious city.”⁸ Beauty in public places authorized men to look at women, to desire them, and often also to seek out closer acquaintance.

In early modern culture, women lacked equal rights with men to use and appear in the streets. Even if the practical necessity of women’s presence was never in question, its meanings were endlessly debated. On a purely ideological level, the possibility of enclosing women in their houses haunts sixteenth-century discussion, even in England, despite its reputation as a “woman’s paradise.”⁹ The reasons for this wish, if such it indeed was, could be manifold, but the problem caused by women’s beauty was one of them.

⁶ Thomas Heywood, *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (London, 1607), sig. F1.

⁷ Roze Hentschell, “Treasonous Textiles: Foreign Cloth and the Construction of Englishness,” *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32 (2002), 544.

⁸ Pepys’s remarks on seeing beautiful women are too numerous to cite, but see, for example, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, eds. Robert Latham & William Matthews (London, 1970-1971), vol. II: 175, 192-93, vol. III: 24, 153, 167, vol. IV: 153, 185-86, 234, vol. V: 9, 130, 219; Leonard Wheatcroft, *The Courtship Narrative* (Reading, 1986), 40.

⁹ To name just one pertinent example, Geoffrey Fenton discussed a housewife’s duty to be “bound to the circuite of hir owne house,” and linked women’s desire to seek adventures in the streets to their desire for beauty. Geoffrey Fenton, *A Forme of Christian Pollicie* (London, 1574), 264-65. The proverb on England as a woman’s paradise comes from Thomas Platter, *Travels in England* (London, 1937), 182.

Let us proceed with an Italian analogy. In Count Lodovico's¹⁰ ironic commentary in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, unexpected exposure of women's hidden parts causes most pleasurable sensations to men:

Have ye not had an eye otherwhile, when either in the streetes going to Church, or in an other place, or in sporting, or by any other chaunce it happeneth that a woman lifteth up her clothes so high, that she sheweth her foote, and sometime a litle of her pretie legge unwittingly?¹¹

Castiglione's Count seems to delight in any exposed female part that is normally hidden; a chance glimpse into guarded femininity was more exciting than a woman in full view. This play of practical visibility and erotic half-concealment—in which women collaborated as well, by means of dress, gesture and comportment—also governed ideologies of female beauty. Women in general, when seen in public places in all their layers of clothing, seemingly modest or only fashionably and conventionally uncovered, appeared as eroticized objects that called for a double vision: underneath the dress was that extension of white teeth, gloveless hands and secretly glimpsed ankles, that thing of beauty and desire, the female form that evoked the glimmering vocabulary of Neoplatonic poetry as well as the everyday discourse of sexual surrender and conquest. The male gaze turned women into a sexual presence, and a sexual danger. At the same time, women had to be shielded from this interpretative gesture. According to patriarchal imperatives, men imagined chaste women inside their houses rather than in full view of others, possessed and controlled by their fathers and husbands, without active influence over the male space of the street. When women appeared in the street, with their erotic power to engage male attention, their presence was never without effect on the male psyche. Put together, patriarchal norms of gendered space and the discourse of beauty posited an eroticizing gaze that could inform, condition, guide and give meaning to male experience.

In fact, beauty and the dynamic of gazes in open city spaces is an interesting variation on how women's and men's roles were normally thought about in patriarchal culture, and also on how beauty seems to mean in our culture. In recent feminist writing, gendered aspects of beauty have been seen as problematic for women: the evaluating gaze that lingers on the

¹⁰ Or Count Lewis's, as he is called in Thomas Hoby's translation.

¹¹ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (London, 1561/1974), 67.

surface of the female body and claims the right to assess women by referring to their attractiveness seems to deny their subjectivity. Envisioning women in general as 'the beautiful sex' and assigning them the position of the object of the gaze, viewed primarily by the active male spectator, curbs women's agency. In this view the gaze towards beauty reduces women to objects, without subjective control of what happens, or even of their own visibility, when their looks are publicly evaluated. Whatever agency they might otherwise possess, the prevalence of a masculinist understanding of beauty diminishes women's subjective power.¹² Note that not all gazes work in this way; the gaze towards beauty is of a special kind, and has its own specific gender structure.

Of course, the early moderns thought differently, not least because those who wrote on beauty were mostly men. But there is more to it than that. In early modern culture, not only was the power structure between the ideal male gazer and the looked-at beautiful sex a patriarchal given, justified, for example, by referring to the procreative necessity of the otherwise weak and senseless women having at least something to attract men.¹³ The power of beauty constructed a wholly different intellectual and emotional context to the gazer and the gazed-at. In early modern opinion, the women looked at were the more active partner. They were the ones instigating the process of looking and evaluating; they in fact set themselves up to be seen. To the early modern mind, women were regarded as self-evidently aware of their own beauty (which they were often thought to possess in vast amounts) and its effect on men.¹⁴ To gain a position of control, then, women only had to appear in front of the curiously powerless and necessarily admiring male gaze.

The man looking at female beauty was envisioned as only reacting to her appearance and her actions—in fact, to her offering of herself to him, to be possessed by his gaze and often also, as the argument went, possessed by him sexually. When the woman was defined as the seat of human beauty and her body acquired a desired and venerated status through the complex

¹² This is the claim made in Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (London 1991), for example. See also Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination. Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York 1990), 27-29, 39-41; cf. Ellen Zetzel Lambert, *The Face of Love. Feminism and the Beauty Question* (Boston, 1995).

¹³ See Tommaso Buoni, *The Problemes of Beauty* (London, 1606), 4, 12, 19-20.

¹⁴ For different uses of this construction, see for example *A Discourse of the Married and Single Life* (London, 1621), 17-18.

understandings of beauty's properties, the problem here seems to be that men were not thought able to govern their yearnings, emotions and sensations when looking at female bodies.¹⁵ This is the problem with women in the streets.

According to early modern emotion theory, passions were automatic reactions to outward stimuli, each of which had its own peculiar effect on the body and mind. As in medieval love lore or indeed Plato and classical philosophy, the passion that beauty produced was love.¹⁶ In fact, love was the name for an effect of desiring something good and beautiful. There was no way around this: when you saw something beautiful, you loved it. This love might range from Neoplatonic adoration to very earthy reaches of lust.¹⁷ But when beauty was encountered on London streets, no echo of its elevating potential could be heard. Beauty produced a very bodily sensation, usually termed love but understood as what we might call desire. That early modern commentators concentrated here on sexual desire is not surprising: perhaps it is a faithful representation of what men felt, but it was also a safer choice from the perspective of emotions. Romantic love was a dangerous passion that weakened masculine control and could subvert social strategies, whereas sex testified to virility and strength in a way wholly compatible with early modern family and household ideology.¹⁸ What we find here is a rationalization for the fact, discussed by Laura Gowing, that city women were identified with sexual disorder and that the presence of women's bodies sexualized urban space.¹⁹ Desire was produced

¹⁵ All early modern beauty texts affirmed that human beauty resided overwhelmingly in women. See Korhonen, *Silmän ilot*, 17-18.

¹⁶ See, for example, Juan Luis Vives, *The Passions of the Soule. The Third Book of De Anima et Vita* (Lewiston, 1538/1990), 12-13; Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women* (1548/1992), 19; Thomas Rogers, *The Anatomie of the Minde* (London, 1576), fol. 18^r; Annibale Romei, *The Courtiers Academie* (London, 1589), 34-35, 51.

¹⁷ For similar attitudes related to Roman prostitutes, see Elizabeth Cohen, "Seen and Known: Prostitutes in the Cityscape of Late-Sixteenth-Century Rome," *Renaissance Studies* 12 (1998), 395.

¹⁸ Anthony Fletcher, "Manhood, the Male Body, Courtship and the Household in Early Modern England," *History* 84 (1999), 427; Elizabeth Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England* (London, 1999), 56, 139; Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 78-79; see also Jonas Liliequist, "Masculinity and Virility—Representations of Male Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Sweden," in *The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anu Korhonen and Kate Lowe (Helsinki, 2007).

¹⁹ Laura Gowing, "'The Freedom of the Streets': Women and Social Space, 1560-1640," in *Londinopolis*, eds. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester, 2000), 131-32.

by beauty, and women were the beautiful sex, so naturally, according to early modern writers, their presence forced a sexual response.

But note that the male gaze that performed the acts of evaluating beauty and sexualizing its presence was almost wholly left out of the rationalization. In this discussion, the male eye figured only in the belief that eyes in general tended to seek out the agreeable.²⁰ But even here the evaluating performance was understood as virtually involuntary; the operations of the eye and the emotional reactions that followed were not a question of choice. When beauty surfaced, eyes followed, naturally, unavoidably. And if women insisted on showing themselves, all a man could do to protect himself was to follow traditional Biblical advice and not look: "Turne away thine eye from a beautiful woman, and loke not vpon others beautie: for manie haue perished by the beautie of women: for thorow it loue is kindled as a fyre."²¹ The eroticized urban space was constructed not by the desiring gaze but by the mere presence of the desired object.

This view of beauty echoes in men's personal writing, although reflecting on one's emotions was not the favored topic of writers before Pepys. In the latter part of the sixteenth century, the musician and music teacher Thomas Whythorne collected in his autobiography his acquaintances' apt sayings about women (and recorded his delight in them), and came up with a standard misogynist rant where, while ostensibly blaming women for their pride and lechery, he was in fact troubled by what it did to men that women "deck and attire themselves so flaunting and gloriously like peacocks, together with their paintings and frowning of their hair." Citing Plutarch, Xenophon, Seneca and Ovid, Whythorne worried about beauty, and went on to compose a sonnet on how it "burns" unassuming men.²² Whythorne and his cronies were no Puritan divines or uptight moralists. The anxiety that female beauty awakened in men was a much wider phenomenon, even if we must take misogynist rhetoric with a pinch of salt.

²⁰ Women (and male writers posing as women) complained about the unfairness of these constructions already in the early modern period: Esther Sowernam, "Ester hath hang'd Haman," in *The Early Modern Englishwoman*, part 1, vol. 4, eds. Betty S. Travitsky and Patrick Cullen (Aldershot, 1617/1996), 36-38. On the gaze seeking beauty, see Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky, "Taming the Basilisk," in *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, eds. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York, 1997), 202-05.

²¹ Sir. 9:8, *Geneva Bible* 1560. This phrase is indeed one of the most often repeated beauty precepts in early modern literature.

²² Thomas Whythorne, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, ed. James M. Osborn (London, 1962), 15-18.

With only a slightest hint of hyperbole—as far as beauty was concerned, every man was a moralist.

What about practice then? Consider Samuel Pepys. Reading his diaries, it almost seems as though women were created for men's viewing pleasure. Their beauty was faithfully recorded among his daily routines and peregrinations around London. Time and time again, he notes his surprise, delight and fulfillment when seeing pretty women: virgins, wives and widows, maidservants, alehouse-keepers and the King's mistresses, in streets and doorways, in their shops and in the court of Charles II. He appreciated his wife's looks, and assessed the beauty of his male friends' wives. He complained when they were too ugly to please him. He found it impossible to be angry at pretty women. He dreamt of the most beautiful women of his time, and, having "glutted" himself "with looking on her" in real life, famously dallied all he desired with Lady Castlemaine in his sleep—his dream being "the best that ever was dreamed." Sometimes he had trouble resisting his urges brought on by beauty, and sometimes, in turn, felt dissatisfied with his lack of "boldness" when he did not try it on, for example with a pretty Dutch woman sleeping alone at an inn. Time and time again, the beauty of the women he encountered justified his sexual exploits, and his language recapitulated the tenets of emotion theory: beauty provoked love and desire, and he could do nothing to resist it. And as for moralism: Pepys too tended to be ashamed at his enjoyment of female beauty when it led to a sexual encounter. Countless times he promised himself never to do this again—but the next pretty woman reawakened his desire.²³ In this, he was totally a man of his world: even if Pepys's obsession with beauty may seem, at first glance, excessive and anomalous to us, it makes perfect sense when read in the context of current beauty discourse.

The gazing man, then, was objectified in emotion theory into a quivering body wholly at the mercy of women's beauty and his own reactions to it; while woman, in turn, was to guard herself against his gaze, but also to shield *him* from the dangers of having to confront her and her beauty. At the same time, however, women were charged with the task of appearing beautiful. One of the highest purposes of womanhood—as early modern writers never ceased to remind us—was to please men's eyes.

When women in the streets were talked about, these basic assumptions were seldom even stated. Still, they formed a steady backdrop against

²³ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. I: 150, 250, 283, vol. III: 13, 16, vol. IV: 186, 203-04, 368, 416-17, vol. V: 219, vol. VI: 191, and *passim*.

which beautiful women could appear, and they informed the ways in which men confronted women in public places. Moreover, in early modern writing, these tenets allowed women to be presented through a male perspective that stressed not the aesthetic value but the psychological efficacy of beauty. Women's motives for being in the streets were interpreted within this framework. Not that this view of male vulnerability was men's alone; women, too, might easily have shared it.

Women Being Looked at

In the early modern imagination, women's appearance and their liberty to move about were so inextricably linked that in popular literature women's desires could be wrapped into a neat proverbial package:

Women desire three things chiefly.
To bee gorgeously apparrelled.
To bee esteemed fayre.
To goe whither they list.²⁴

It was because the visual ran through all thought on women that these three things so readily converged. Even if the list claims to present women's yearnings, it in fact looks at them from the outside. Nevertheless, let us consider whether these desires were indeed important for women. Women, after all, were not exempt from characterizing the category of woman as beautiful and streetwise.

London women were reputedly very beautiful. In all England, and in London especially, women were also allegedly freer to move in the streets than elsewhere in Europe. As Elizabeth Cohen shows elsewhere in this issue, this at least was the perception of many foreign travelers who habitually contrasted Southern Europe with the less constricting English habits. "Now the women-folk of England, who have mostly blue-grey eyes and are fair and pretty, have far more liberty than in other lands, and know just how to make good use of it, for they often stroll out or drive by coach in very gorgeous clothes," wrote the German visitor Thomas Platter in 1599, linking together women walking the streets and their appealing outward appearance.²⁵

²⁴ S. R., *The Choise of Change* (London, 1598), sig. L4.

²⁵ Platter, *Travels*, 179, 181-182; Frederic Gerschow, *Diary of the Journey of Philip Julius, Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, through England in the Year 1602*, ed. Gottfried von Bülow,

However, most English comment condemned this state of affairs. Women in fact had too much freedom, and used it in dubious ways. They made too much of their looks. They put their modesty and chastity at risk by appearing in public, and seemed idle and gossipy when chatting with their neighbors. Most writers conceded that women, even young unmarried women, needed to go abroad every once in a while, but special caution was demanded on these occasions. For example, in his guidebook for Christian women the humanist Juan Luis Vives—not a native but writing in England for Queen Catherine of Aragon and her subjects—after extensive warnings of the perils of going forth anticipated women's insistence that they should not be treated like prisoners in their own homes. However, he snapped that such talk about imprisonment was only an exaggeration of "proud foles" who "desire to se and to be sene." A woman was to go out only when needed, and when she did, she should "prepare her mynde and stomacke" as if she was going to a fight.²⁶

Those who most insisted on being in the streets, according to moralist writers, were women who saw themselves as beautiful. Their beauty made them want to show themselves, and to prance around in fashionable clothes parading ornaments, jewelry and hairdos that could only reveal their proud hearts. Cosmetics were another danger, as their sole purpose was to deceive onlookers and make women seem more beautiful than they were. Gadding—a female way of spending time in the streets, talking to each other and showing themselves to passers-by—was, it seems, a major problem.²⁷ In fact, men did much the same, but escaped the censure. Indeed their activities in the street were encouraged and understood, even when they bragged and brawled. Men's use of the street was not called gadding, whatever its similarities to women's activities. But there is also an interesting gender division within the imagined activities of the gadding women: while they proffered words, one thought, mostly to fellow women, they offered their appearance mainly to the men. Hence also the tinge of opprobrium in every remark that women went out to see and to be seen.

TRHS new series VI (London, 1892), 29; Rathgeb, "A True and Faithfull Narrative," and van Meteren's extracts for "History of the Netherlands," in *England as Seen by Foreigners*, ed. William Brenchley Rye, (London, 1865), 7-8, 69-73; cf. Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary* (Amsterdam, 1617/1971), part III, 34. See also Gowing, "The Freedom of the Streets," 130.

²⁶ Juan Luis Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (London, 1541), fol. 38-38^r.

²⁷ Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet. Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 321.

In London, as in any major city, the margins of the street were coded with cultural and gendered meanings. The famed English freedom allowed women to use these spaces for their interaction with other people in the street. Windows eased exchanges between the street and interior spaces—and allowed women to draw attention to their beauty and beautifying. Doorways were normal places for women to engage in conversation with each other, indeed central loci for female sociability. Women also walked to the well, went shopping, and visited each others' homes, taking to streets every time they left their house.²⁸ Women envisioned moving along the streets in terms of destinations and practical actions, but, like men, they could also think of displaying themselves.

Different kinds of women were, however, by no means in the same position in relation to the street. Women from the highest social strata could be seen and appraised, from time to time and in certain London places, but attention to their beauty was no problem. Indeed, court ladies flunked their task if they did not tend their looks and show off their beauty.²⁹ The poor, on the other hand, could hardly appear beautiful by the early modern standards of fashion and presentation. The group the moralists criticized, then, were the urban middle classes and their servants and employees.

²⁸ For further meanings of windows in city life, see Elizabeth Cohen's and Alex Cowan's articles in this issue. For English women's street behaviour, see Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance* (Brighton, 1984), 171-72, 176; Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability* (Cambridge, 1991), 76-77; Lena Orlin, "Women on the Threshold," *Shakespeare Studies* 25 (1997); Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 330; Marjo Kaartinen, "Public and Private: Challenges in the Study of Early Modern Women's Lives," in *Time Frames. Negotiating Cultural History*, eds. Anu Korhonen and Kirsi Tuohela (Turku, 2002). However, women only tended to go out during the day: at night, being out was dangerous, both physically and to one's reputation. See Griffiths, *Youth*, 208-09; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford, 1998), 212.

²⁹ The diarist Henry Machyn described in 1553 how he saw Queen Mary with her court ladies ride through London, and, some hundred years later, Samuel Pepys walked regularly to Hyde Park and around Westminster in order to see the women of the court. *The Diary of Henry Machyn, Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, from A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1563*, ed. John Gough Nichols (London, 1848), 38; *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, for example vol. III: 87-88, 92, 175; vol. 4: 120, 142, 229-30. See also Alice Friedman, "Inside/Out. Women, Domesticity, and the Pleasures of the City," in *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia, 2000), 238; Marjo Kaartinen, "Metropolin illat—kaupunki, maa-seutu ja uuden ajan alun naisten sfäärit," in *Kaupunkikuvia ajassa*, eds. Timo Joutsivuo and Markku Kekäläinen (Helsinki, 2005), 105 ["Nights of the metropolis—city, country and early modern women's spheres," in *Cityscapes in time.*]

These are the women who, one said, reveled in seeing and being seen. The insistence on the delight that women felt when appearing in public is interesting.³⁰ What was the nature of this emotion? We have of course no entry to 'real' emotions felt by past people just as we cannot 'know' the 'real' emotional experience of the person sitting across the coffee table at work. Understanding others' emotion is a discursive act. The same goes for history. What we can know of past emotion comes to us in discourse that let them deal with their reactions and communicate about emotions with others at the time. There was no 'pure' delight outside discourse and cultural interpretation, so the conceptions of the moralists may also shed light on how someone 'actually' feeling delight could have interpreted her or his mental state. The problem is, whatever women actually felt, we have no surviving writing, by women, about their pleasure in the streets. But let us proceed anyway, assuming that men surmised what women thought.

As street life was sociable, women's delight must have had much to do with having fun with friends and neighbors, and knowing about what occurred in the neighborhood. In men's writing, though, female sociability was often considered trivial. Moreover, the male imagination eagerly added men to the picture and envisioned women as performing for their benefit—and turned women in the street into a spectacle. The actresses of this city comedy then, arguably, took pleasure in their role. So, the notion of female delight linked readily to conceptions of beauty and to the idea of men's moral and emotional vulnerability in the face of female beauty. Note the cultural logic: When women were made the agents of men's seeing them in public, women's actual need to be in the streets—whether to move about, to work, to provide for their family, to perform good housewifery, or to meet friends—was conveniently obscured. Women could be treated as if they had no actual business except to appeal to others' eyes, which made their beauty, not their actions, appear as the prime signifier. By extension, women's own attention, too, was thought to be directed on their looks.

Beauty was the conceptual mode that enabled this perception. It was beauty that rendered the onlooker passive, not active. And beauty turned

³⁰ On delight, see for example George Whetstone, *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses* (London, 1582), sig. K2; Robert Greene, "A Disputation," in *Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene* vol. 10, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1592/1881-3), 240; Thomas Tuke, *A Treatise against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women* (London, 1616), sig. K2^v; T. G., *The Rich Cabinet* (London, 1616), 28.

the tables for both genders, offering early modern women a power, if still ambivalent. If women forced their looks on others, they controlled not only their own actions but also the sensations and emotions of others; they were active, had authority, and performed a cultural task.

However, it was difficult indeed to imagine the possibility that women went out only to see, not to be seen. Women were always expected to assume the conscious position of being observed—and we know they did. Their agency, here, remained partial and dependent; it always demanded a second person, man or woman, to witness their outward appearance. This weaving together of subject and object positions was a primary ingredient in women's visibility.

Moral responsibility and sexual agency also had much to do with visibility. A woman's good looks were no mere passive temptation; they enabled her to solicit men actively. Men told women they loved them for their beauty, and women could choose to accept this male claim. Perhaps it was possible for a woman, as men thought, to make herself "a poysoner and sword unto them that see" her, because, by appearing in public, she would entice men's eyes, "drawe the sight of yong men after" her, and "norish the lust of concupiscence" in those witnessing her beauty.³¹ She could further enhance the effect by dressing the part—even grave matrons and modest virgins sold their bodily wares to onlookers:

not only those who are harlots by profession, but euen such as would be reputed pure virgins and chaste wiues, shew these outward signes of their inward filthinesse, and vse these baits to catch the foolish in the nets of vncleannes, by painting their faces & setting forth themselues with adulterate beauty, and laying out their breasts after a whorish manner to be seene and touched: for is it likely, that those who lay them out to the shew wuld haue them only seen?³²

To moralists, the rationale was clear: if women consciously showed themselves, they were ready for any bodily exchange. Leslie Thomson discusses beauty as an exchange in her analysis of shop-girls in early modern drama: shopkeepers' wives and daughters were presented as alluring and inviting, selling themselves along their wares, or at least offering their beauty to the

³¹ Vives, *Instruction*, fol. 27-27^v. See also Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven, 1995), 21-22.

³² John Downname, *Lectures upon the Foure First Chapters of the Prophecie of Hosea* (London, 1608), 165-167.

desiring gaze in order to incite spectators to buy. Women's beauty thus sped the commercial exchanges in London streets.³³

But, of course, not all beauty was about how women presented themselves to men. When beauty entered the picture, a flavor of exchange also accompanied women's relationships with other women. All the craft that went into beauty allowed women to bond—whether by sharing knowledge of beauty practices, cosmetics and fashion, or competing over who was most up to date in applying it. Some texts warned mothers and educators not to bring up girls to heed female fashion in the street.³⁴

If women delighted in their beauty and visibility then it was about empowerment and knowledge. Beauty granted them an effect on others in the street. It let them be admired by other women, even to gain rank. As far as it concerned them, however, women writers in their letters and memoirs kept silent about this. Others, they thought, could make great play about the influence beauty brought them.³⁵

Even if early modern women did often mention other people's beauty, it is difficult to know what they felt about their own appearance—in their personal writing they commented on their looks only disparagingly, humorously, or in retrospect.³⁶ Appreciating one's beauty on paper would have testified to vanity and foolishness. In women's culture, then as now, voicing one's own beauty in any way was highly suspect, it seems to me. Even in women's fiction, all female characters who talk about or take their beauty seriously are stupid and comic—Mary Wroth's lampoons that sparked controversy at the time are a case in point.³⁷ Thus we have little to

³³ Leslie Thomson, "As Proper a Woman as Any in Cheap: Women in Shops on the Early Modern Stage," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 16 (2003), 146-48; Jean E. Howard, "The Evidence of Fiction: Women's Relationship to Goods in London City Drama," *Culture and Change: Attending to Early Modern Women*, eds. Margaret Mikesell & Adele Seeff (Newark 2003), 161-62.

³⁴ Thomas Salter, *A Mirrhor Mete for All Mothers* (London, 1579), sig. C5^v-C6.

³⁵ *Letters of Dorothy Osborne*, 63; Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women* (Brighton, 1987), 22-23.

³⁶ See Dorothy Osborne's letters to William Temple, *Letters of Dorothy Osborne*, 46, 49-50, 76; and Lucy Hutchinson remembering her childhood beauty, "The Life of Mrs. Lucy Hutchinson", in *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson, with the Fragment of an Autobiography of Mrs. Hutchinson*, ed. James Sutherland (London, 1973), 287-88.

³⁷ See, for example, Wroth's portrait of the "Queen of Bulgaria." Mary Wroth, "The Countess of Mountgomerie Urania," in *The Early Modern Englishwoman*, part 1, vol. 10, eds. Betty S. Travitsky and Patrick Cullen (Aldershot, 1621/1996), 346-48.

go on if we argue that women were complicit in flirtations consciously sparked by beauty, or that they actually saw beauty as flirtation's prime mover in their own personal case. But we can say for sure that they were well aware of this line of thinking and participated in disseminating it.³⁸ If they resisted interpreting what beauty meant for them personally, they were by no means outside the influence of the cultural category and the discursive framework around it.

In popular fiction, at least, pride became a special concern for Londoners, as Laura Gowing has found. In thronged London, there were men and women aplenty to notice or seek out female beauty. And Londoners were also much more exposed to fashion and novelty, and to luxury goods from overseas, more easily available than elsewhere; this was indeed one good reason to visit London. By the turn of the seventeenth century, sumptuary legislation was losing its grip and production of ready-made clothes was well on its way. London was a major market for second-hand clothing and even an important center for trade in stolen clothes. Possibilities for feeding one's pride by fashion were certainly emerging.³⁹ Indeed, London was a place of "Babylonian confusion," where "very Bankrouts, Players and Cutpurses, goe apparelled like Gentlemen," and women who look "rather sterne Monsters, then chaste Christian Matrones" carry around looking glasses, "the deuilles spectacles, to allure vs to pride, and consequently to destruction for euer."⁴⁰ In this environment, both beautification and attention to others' looks made sense. Bodily beauty could grow into a veritable urban concern, for viewer and viewed alike.

Whereas men linked female beauty to desire and sexuality, however, for women beauty figured more as a question of vanity and pride. Women

³⁸ Again, women's fiction also testifies to this. Elizabeth Cary and Aemilia Lanyer made use of the motif, as did Mary Wroth, even if they did not specifically problematize women's visibility, whether in London or any other early modern streets.

³⁹ Margaret Pelling, "Appearance and Reality: Barber-surgeons, the Body and Disease," in *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis*, eds. A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay (London, 1996), 92-93; Carlo Marco Belfanti & Fabio Giusberti, "Clothing and Social Inequality in Early Modern Europe," *Continuity and Change* 15 (2000), 360-62; Beverley Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1990); Derek Keene, "Material London in Time and Space," in *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia, 2000), 59; John Styles, "Product Innovation in Early Modern London," *Past & Present* 168 (2000), 129.

⁴⁰ Moryson, *An Itinerary* part III, 179; Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London 1583), fol. 33^v, 41^v-42.

focused on the body fabricated by clothes, cosmetics, and gestures, by their own actions, skills, and efforts. In male opinion, women enhanced and extended their natural beauty with props and behaviors, but for women, there was nothing 'external' about beauty aids: presentation of the body was in practice inseparable from the body itself.⁴¹ But for both genders, beauty was not just about how you looked, it was about what you did to and with your body. And according to the writing men, this was the more dangerous aspect of women's beauty; women's efforts to tend their good looks periled their souls:

Whence proceeded I pray these gadding feagaries of our English dames but from their decking with vnspeakeable pride: For being colloured wyth varietie of vanity, & therefore spotted with shamelesse immodesty then daintily treade they the stones of the streate, and display their Banners throughout their dwelling places...⁴²

William Rankins, a minor satirist and playwright best known for polemics on Englishmen's foreign fashions, here connects women's looks and their pride without actually having to say so: the dames gadding in the streets are "decked" and "colloured"—although with pride instead of fashionable accessories, and with vanity instead of cosmetics. They are also "dainty" when treading the streets—but, whether we take 'daintily' to mean 'proudly' or 'delicately,' one cannot step daintily except when fashionably attired.

The expression itself, 'being decked with pride,' was so common in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century criticism on women that anyone familiar with beauty discourses could immediately make the necessary connections: beauty, clothes, fashion, pride, and women all played together wherever the expression was used, in a complex and interesting way. What was intended was, first of all, that women were sinfully proud generally, and that their pride made them desire and wear gorgeous clothes, thus displaying their pride for all to see. But, secondly, women were also proud of their clothes, and they indeed dressed in and were covered by their pride when they showed themselves in all their glory in the streets, churches and other public places of London. Through pride, beauty emerges as a problem for women. But Rankins completed his sentence by stating that women:

⁴¹ See Jane Burns, "Speculum of the Courtly Lady: Women, Love, and Clothes," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999), 259; Korhonen, *Silmän ilot*, 98-100.

⁴² William Rankins, *The English Ape* (London, 1588), 22; Gowing, "The Freedom of the Streets," 130.

...so sommon the soules of men to the pearill of Hell.⁴³

In the end, a male writer could not envision women's beauty without its male spectators and their emotional involvement. Meanwhile, for women, clothes represented a possibility to 'fashion' themselves and set themselves on display; as Jane Burns has suggested, women's "acts of beautification are designed to take the lady out of an enclosed and controlled space."⁴⁴ Early modern women's beauty practices witness to their attempts to control the gaze directed at them in the streets.

In fact, for many, any attention to being seen straightforwardly revealed women's pride. Pride was the motive for women's insistence that they be allowed to move freely, much more than their domestic or professional responsibilities.⁴⁵ Even women writers, although not necessarily considering the intended audience of women's looks, believed that women were in graver danger than men of succumbing to both fashion and pride. Elizabeth Joceline advised her unborn child in *The Mother's Legacy*:

I desire thee for Gods sake shunne this vanitie, whether thou be sonne or daughter. If a daughter, I confesse thy taske is harder, because thou art weaker, and thy temptations to this vice greater, for thou shalt see those whom perhaps thou shalt thinke lesse able, exalted farre about thee in this kinde, and it may bee thou wilt desire to bee like them if not to out-goe them.⁴⁶

Other female writers went on in the same vein. Elizabeth Clinton, participating in a long-standing debate, argued in *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (1622) against proud and wanton women who thought breastfeeding damaged their looks and fashions.⁴⁷ Mary Rich, Countess of Warwick, born in 1625, condemned her girlhood enthusiasm for fashion as vanity and foolishness in her autobiography, and Dame Dorothy Ogle, in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Burns, "Speculum," 281.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Vives, *Instruction*, fol. 27-27^v; C. Pyrrye, *The Praise and Dispraise of Women* (London, 1569), sig. B3; Rankins, *The English Ape*, 22-23.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Joceline, *The Mother's Legacy to Her Unborn Child* (London, 1622/1894), 30-33; see also Christine de Pisan, *The Cytye of Ladyes* (London, 1521), sig. P6. Several texts noted the "apish toys" and "confused mingle mangle" of men's fashionable garments too. See, for example, Leonard Wright, *A Summons for Sleepers* (London, 1589), 31, where these phrases are taken from.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (Oxford, 1622), 13-14.

1625, interpreted her miserable old age as just punishment for her vanity and excessive spending on clothes when young, or so her neighbor Sir Simonds D'Ewes tells us in his autobiography.⁴⁸ It would of course be a grave error to think that women wanted to look beautiful only to men, despite early modern men's wishful thinking. The different manifestations of pride that could be displayed by one's outward appearance were ways of marking one's desired place in female social hierarchy. The tension between godly modesty and social success achieved by good looks was familiar to many women, and the choices between these two also denoted different social and religious goals, albeit sometimes both cherished as befitted time and place.

Women Looking Back

According to male writers, a particular problem of the early modern streets was women who, when they came across other people, would not avert or lower their gaze. They dared look even strangers in the eye. This clearly violated the prescribed feminine way of behaving in public: as Barbara Hanawalt has explained, medieval conduct books advised women to look down and thus preserve their private space when appearing in public, whereas men were encouraged to look up and meet other people's eyes.⁴⁹ Eye contact made the difference: women who looked up, in the Middle Ages or the early modern period, engaged self-consciously and actively with their surroundings. Now why would a woman abandon the prescribed modest gesture? Male writers averred that women refused to make themselves invisible by dodging others' eyes because they believed themselves beautiful. Their looks justified their boldness.

So the sinful Daughters of Syon "walked with their neckes stretched foorth to be seene, twinckling their eyes as they passe by," communicating by their raised eyes a will to be acknowledged, and inviting onlookers to engage in a silent conversation where both parties felt beauty's allure.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Mary Rich, *Autobiography of Mary Countess of Warwick*, ed. T. Crofton Croker (London, 1848), 4-5; Simonds D'Ewes, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, vol. 1, ed. James Orchard Halliwell (London, 1845), 283-84.

⁴⁹ Barbara A. Hanawalt, *'Of Good and Ill Repute': Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (New York, 1998), 74-75.

⁵⁰ Echoing the often quoted Isa. 3:16-24, Innocent III, *The Mirrour of Mans Lyfe* (London, 1580), sig. H2-H2"; see also "An Homily Against Excess of Apparel," in John Jewel,

Sometimes, early modern commentators said, pretty women had too much faith in their looks and imagined everyone who gave them a glance to be in love with them. Answering with liberal gazes and “thinking their beauty increased by their often beholding,” these women only betrayed want of wit and made men weary of their vanity.⁵¹ Others had more luck—although no more sense:

women through want of wisdom are growne to such wantonnesse, that vppon no occasion they will crosse the streete, to haue a glaunce of some Gallant, deeming that men by one looke of them, shoulde be in loue with them, and will not stick to make an errant ouer the way, to purchase a Paramour to helpe at a pinche, who vnder her husbands, the hoddy-peekes nose, must haue all the destilling dew of this delicate Rose, leauing him onely a sweet sent, good inough for such a sencelesse sottie.⁵²

No text by a woman ever admitted to this, but it would hardly be a wonder if women, in the midst of unrelenting beauty demands, would have liked a little validation. More importantly though, these women were never just looked *at*; according to the prevalent view, their own gazes invited responses, almost forced passers-by to look them in the eye. In beauty discourse, one look could be the beginning of an affair, and women were ready to make ‘hoddy-peeks’ or cuckolds of their husbands at the slightest instigation of a glancing gallant. Beauty forged a form of communication; it was defined as an exchange, and thus it depended on the woman’s active partnership in opening her eyes and her body to the gaze.⁵³

Nor was this view only a moralist’s dream. Many women took these precepts to heart: the Tudor medical practitioner and memoirist Lady Grace Mildmay, for example, taught herself, according to her father’s wishes, to keep her eyes from “tossing about in every place”.⁵⁴ While modest women may have tended to avert their gaze from passing men, they were

The Seconde Tome of Homilies (London, 1563), fol. 115^v; Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631), 8-9.

⁵¹ Alberti, *Hecatonphila*, fol. 13v.

⁵² Thomas Nashe, “The Anatomie of Absurditie,” in *The Works of Thomas Nashe* vol. 1, ed. Ronald E. McKerrow (Oxford, 1598/1958), 17; see also Vives, *Instruction*, fol. 4-40^v.

⁵³ On mutual gazing in settled relationships, see Robert Baldwin, “Gates Pure and Shining and Serene: Mutual Gazing as an Amatory Motif in Western Literature and Art,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 10 (1986), 23, 27-30.

⁵⁴ Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic. The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman Lady Grace Mildmay, 1552-1620* (New York, 1995), 27.

probably more open with other women; at least in early modern opinion that was expected. Control of gestures was essential to good behavior, and although breaking the rules of shamefastness was entirely possible, few would have acted against moral advice without knowing they were breaking the rules. Indeed modesty in the streets may have been less complicated than we think: it was not necessarily easy to look people in the eye when negotiating the dirty and uneven surfaces of the street and the jostling crowds that sometimes gathered there!⁵⁵

Whether street behavior had anything to do with women's sense of beauty is another matter. Still, even when hiding their own gaze, women could not refuse to be assessed or found beautiful when someone chose to look at them. This is why the moral discourse about beauty, whether women subscribed to it or not, and whether it was the full picture of what went on or not, could never be irrelevant to their practical actions.

Early modern literature, in any case, is filled with proud and wanton women who knowingly flaunt their gaze. Some of them may have been inspired by Friedrich Dedekind's popular instructions for "Grobianas," disgracefully unruly maidens, translated into English in *The Schoole of Slovenrie* in 1605:

When through a publike cittie streetes to wander you desire,
(For my part, I am not enforc't to looke to your attire.)
Permit your wandring gadding eyes in every place to bee,
So that before, behinde, on everie side, you all may see.
The minde which nere committed any trespasse may be bold,
Each man, each thing in every corner, freely to behold.
And with a brazen fore-head, looke the prowdest in the face,
Let those looke downe which for offence have suffred some disgrace.⁵⁶

Not only women themselves but their eyes too could gad; Grobian's eyes wandered everywhere. By looking at every man and each thing the woman also allowed herself to be looked at. In the same way, the 'Shee-Connycatcher' of the romance writer Robert Greene's cony-catching pam-

⁵⁵ On some of the problems of street maintenance, see Riitta Laitinen's and Dag Lindström's essay in this issue.

⁵⁶ Dedekind, *The Schoole of Slovenrie*, 126. The German humanist's popular satire had been published in original Latin in 1549 and in German in 1551, both of which went through several editions of varying length and continued to spread until the eighteenth century. The English translation of 1605 is by a certain R.F.

phlet so “delighted in being looked on” that she frequented all feasts, weddings and merry meetings where being admired was possible. She also saw a clear connection between being looked at and looking: she “spared no glaunces to suruiew all with a curious eye-fauour.” She went to “see and be seen,” taking a dangerously active position.⁵⁷ This girl was also described as a courtesan, a title attached to few on English soil, although Englishmen were certainly familiar with such characters from the travel accounts of Italy that presses churned out. Even in England, allowing oneself to be gazed at could equate a woman with prostitutes, the paragons of painted beauty in the streets.⁵⁸

Women of course disputed this view. Jane Anger, usually taken to be an actual female writer and not a male pseudonym, took part in the raging debate on women initiated by Joseph Swetnam’s well-known diatribe and believed that beauty was just an excuse for men to take liberties with women:

If we cloath our selues in sackcloth, and trusse vp our haire in dishclouts, *Venerians* wil neuertheles pursue their pastime. If we hide our breastes, it must be with leather, for no cloath can keep their long nailes out of our bosomes. We haue rowling eies, and they railing tongues: our eies cause them to look lasciuiously, & why? because they are geuen to lecherie.⁵⁹

As one might expect, women’s objections to blaming women’s beauty for men’s sexual desire centered on who actually was the agent of these exchanges, and then blamed men instead. ‘Venerians,’ lustful and libertine men, claimed Anger, pursued women for their own fun, not because women enticed them, dressed provocatively or used their eyes to lure men to lechery. Men were the active party, in women’s equally pointed opinion. And what Anger suggests is not that women hide their eyes and stop looking, but that men would do well to stop pretending their vices were women’s fault.

What was so dangerous about women’s being able, or being allowed to, look and see the world for themselves? Western discourses of beauty have

⁵⁷ Greene, “A Disputation,” 240.

⁵⁸ Although prostitutes had a reputation for beauty and were known as users of cosmetics, not everybody was pleased. Samuel Pepys, for example, felt his stomach turn when he saw them in Fleet Alley. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. IV: 301.

⁵⁹ Jane Anger, “Jane Anger her Protection for Women,” in *The Early Modern Englishwoman*, part 1, vol. 4, eds. Betty S. Travitsky and Patrick Cullen (Aldershot, 1589/1996), sig. C1. See also Sowernam, “Ester,” 25-26, 35-37.

insisted that women's bodies are to be seen, interpreted and governed by the masculinist gaze; woman has been the represented, not the representing body. As Margaret Miles has shown in her already classic book, women's bodies "have not represented women's subjectivity or sexuality but have, rather, been seen as a blank page on which multiple social meanings could be projected."⁶⁰ The danger about women looking is in their adopting an agentic position which makes the passive power of their beauty even more threatening. It does not of course follow that women who raised their eyes would have seen themselves differently from how men conceived them; quite the contrary. From men's point of view, the danger was that women might adopt the selfsame discourse on beauty that men had propounded in countless texts: women could empower themselves with their beauty. Even if we should now recognize this as a complex and, arguably, destructive fiction (and I realize not all of us do), we would do well to consider that it may have made sense to women in early modern streets.

Beauty allowed women room to manoeuvre even in the most important decisions of their lives, as when, soon after 1600, Jane Martindale moved to London. As her brother Adam described it, her choice was influenced by her concern for her looks: she did not take to the limitations of country fashions, and "having her father's spirit, and her mother's beauty," decided to go to London, trying to earn a living in the service of some lady, perhaps making use of "being ingenious at her needle." Adam suggested that, in the countryside, anyone who dressed fashionably would have been counted a fool. To look her best, Jane had better try her luck in London. All did not go well, at least in the beginning, and Jane's looks led her to contemplate a distressing way of raising money: she almost had to "sell her haire, which was very lovely both for length and colour." Luckily, a suitor intervened, married her and saved her crowning glory. In the end, she became an inn-keeper, a staple figure of London street life.⁶¹ Judging from all we know about the utility of good looks in city trades, Jane probably benefited from her beauty when working the inn with her husband.

⁶⁰ Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing. Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Tunbridge Wells, 1992), 169.

⁶¹ Adam did not approve of Jane and her views on beauty, and tells a rather gruesome tale of her dying of smallpox: because of her pride, says Adam, she "became extremely ugly before she died, her face being sadly discoloured, and so swelled that scarce any forme of a visage was discernible." Adam Martindale, *The Life of Adam Martindale*, ed. Richard Parkinson (Manchester, 1845), 6-8, 18.

Streets of Beauty?

Despite the common opinion that beauty was a women's issue, those worrying about it in early modern culture were mostly men. Although women's presence in public spaces in early modern London was primarily seen as disorderly, even disordering the space itself, seeing beauty in all its potentially troubling aspects was a crucial part of city life: men reported delight, enjoyment, and titillating occasions for play as products of women's beauty, they counted women's beauty as an integral part of what London looked like, and, of course, they also valued the aesthetic pleasure of beauty itself. Despite the dangers of beauty's emotional effects, and despite the patriarchal imperatives that tried to keep women out of sight to reserve power to men, women's presence made city life worthwhile to men.

Women, too, were clearly aware of beauty and its powers. Even if women wrote less about beauty than men, we know that it worked as a signifier of status and as a shared field of expertise in female relationships. For both genders, beauty, especially female beauty, was an undeniable fact of bodily life. Thus it was not to be just set aside for moral, religious or social reasons. That is precisely why it needed good rule, preferably by ordinary people acting responsibly. That is also why it was such a discussed topic—a theme that keeps cropping up, as a foundational given, in most surprising contexts in all genres of early modern literature, only a fraction of which I have cited here.

So what are we to make of beauty in the streets? All this attention to looks should alert us to the workings of the masculinist gaze, shared by both women and men, that insistently essentialized something essentially cultural. Beauty is not an unchanging fact about being human, and its gender structure and street meanings are not ahistorical. In early modern culture, it had very practical consequences, although some of its power is so much alive today that we still find it hard to think and problematize beauty in any other way.

Even if men too could be found handsome—and no writer ever denied that men's beauty could have effects on women and other men—men were beautiful as exceptional individuals, whereas women were expected to be beautiful in kind. All women could be judged on beauty's criteria, although not all women were beautiful. Conceptualizations of beauty as a particularly female property, and assigning at least some power of beauty to most (young) women, placed women in a curious double bind. Beauty was central to their social worth, in both male and female eyes. It paid to be as

beautiful as possible. However, by sexualizing beauty, early modern men—and sometimes women too—could engage the disciplining power of the masculist gaze and mark women's bodies as transgressive and threatening both to men and to women themselves. Beauty, with all its cultural ramifications, could undermine women's ability to function in public. Any man catching a glimpse of a woman's beauty, according to the early modern mindset, could feel forced to try and possess that beauty in any way he wanted. Beautiful women in the streets needed to learn special survival tactics to keep men's reactions in check—men, after all, could not rein in their reactions in the face of beauty.

Furthermore, beauty was a threat to the gender dynamic of early modern culture in general, and masculinity more specifically. While defining female beauty as wholly irresistible, men gave up a central tenet of patriarchy, namely their ability to govern both themselves and their womenfolk—the former being perhaps the more important. The ideologies of feminine beauty (and sometimes male beauty as well) were crucial for the negotiation of masculine emotions, desires and actions and shaped the ways in which maleness could dominate streets. It would of course be naïve to believe that extolling women's beauty would actually have given women a cultural upper hand, but men's insistence on their powerlessness in the face of beauty could shape their interpretations of their own behavior in surprising ways.

In the end, early modern beauty was a question of gendered power. This may help us see why beauty is not in fact a 'feminine' as much as a 'feminist' concern: 'female beauty' as we know it still cannot exist without the idea of a corresponding male response and the 'heteronormative' agenda that I have been describing, no matter how much we may want to stress the functions that beauty has in women's exchanges with other women. Branding beauty feminine may have made it seem less weighty. But beauty is never just about the object. There is no beauty without a 'seeing as,' without the gazer and his or her cultural knowledge. And the discursive frames where beauty is gendered reveal a formidable, if also ephemeral and shifting, power structure.