

Edith Snook. *Women, Beauty and Power in Early Modern England: A Feminist Literary History*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. x + 230 pp. \$80. ISBN: 978-0-230-28285-8.

This valuable book explores the significance of female beauty in early modern England by examining a rich archive of cultural texts produced by women of the middle and upper social ranks. As Snook rightly observes, “[f]emale beauty occupies a central place in the literary culture of early modern England,” and the commonplace features of the Petrarchan beloved appear with relentless repetition in poetry by men such as Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Shakespeare, Daniel, Marlowe, Herrick, Marvell, and Milton (1). Although Snook refers to male authors throughout her convincing study, she prioritizes analyzing cultural texts, in manuscript and print, produced or authored by women — including Mary Wroth, Margaret Spencer, Elizabeth Jocelin, Brilliana Harley, Henrietta Maria, Anne Clifford, Margaret Cavendish, and Aphra Behn — in genres such as poetry, drama, romance, maternal advice, letters, accounts, and recipes. She admirably insists upon bringing women’s perspectives to bear upon our understanding of beauty and power in the period. She calls attention to key differences in how men and women approach the topic of female beauty and also highlights how female authors develop concepts of and attitudes toward ideal beauty by distinguishing among women according to race, rank, life-stage, and age. Finally, she uses her archive to investigate women’s everyday historical material practices in relation to beauty and how these practices impacted their writing.

Snook’s book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses upon an aspect of early modern material culture strongly associated with female beauty and power: cosmetics, clothes, and hair. Each part includes two chapters. Chapter 1, which reevaluates the cultural meanings of cosmetics, is especially strong. Through a fascinating analysis of women’s recipe-books and their instructions for “beautifying physic” alongside male-authored medical treatises, Snook exposes how efforts to define scholarly medicine as a masculine arena contributed to the notion that female-manufactured cosmetics containing mercury and lead were unhealthy, while, by contrast, the use of mercury and lead in medicines created under male authority were — rather alarmingly from today’s perspective — wholesome (10). Chapter 2 pursues a nuanced analysis of “fair (that is, white and unblemished) skin”

in relation to differences of race and rank. Chapters 3 and 4 build upon previous studies' attention to cross-dressing and the cultural significance of clothes to investigate "how women inhabited female dress" (10), including how women's clothing related to subjectivity and household governance; Snook's analysis of the control mothers asserted over children — including sons at college — through their clothing is particularly interesting. Part three analyzes how romances by Wroth and Cavendish "treat soft, thick and slightly curled natural hair as a physiological sign of an elite European identity" and examines the strategic changes in hairdressing — related to life-stage and personal status — that Anne Clifford underwent as maid and widow (12).

The only oversight worth mentioning in this excellent study is its relative neglect of recent theoretical work on early sexualities. Snook refers repeatedly and without qualification to a regime of "heterosexual" desire (e.g., 6, 131, 132, 138, 139, 160) and overlooks opportunities to examine instances of homoeroticism or same-sex desire — especially in relation to Behn's *The Wandering Beauty* on 57, Wroth's *Urania* on 132–33, and Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* on 142–43. Given the multiple, layered, shifting forms of eroticism in Cavendish's romance, the elision of homoeroticism, both male and female, generated by the attractive young protagonist's cross-dressing and Cavendish's fluctuating use of gendered pronouns in reference to this protagonist is particularly striking. Snook leaves ample room for others to revisit her archive with an eye toward how women's beauty practices and writings about beauty might illuminate or reveal forms of homoeroticism or same-sex desire, especially among women.

Ultimately, Snook argues persuasively against trivializing women's beauty practices, which, she states, "were a form of knowledge that allowed women to participate in scholarly culture, to raise politically knowing sons, to exert control within a household and community, to be creative and ethical with their own appearance and to encourage the same in others" (7). This excellent book is a must-read for scholars of early modern literature, history, and material culture, women's literary history, and feminist history.

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