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The Mirror, Friend or Foe?

Sara Coleridge and the Ill Effects of Society's Judgment on Female Appearance

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SARA COLERIDGE claims in her essay “On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty” (1826) that “[o]f all natural endowments, those of person are perhaps the most generally & the most warmly desired, & great as the influence of Beauty has been at all periods of the world, from the days of Helen even to our own, never, I verily believe, had the Goddess more numerous or more ardent votaries than at the present time. For this is the Age of Taste if not of Reason” (187). I want to demonstrate why Coleridge’s generation of young women had to hear their mothers proclaim that “a pretty face was not half as much extolled nor a plain one criticized when they were young as is the case at present” (188). I argue that the differences Sara Coleridge registers can be found in cultural and philosophical shifts in the eighteenth century, traced in the print culture of the day, and also found thematized in Romantic literature, particularly literature by Romantic women writers.

Why would Sara Coleridge claim that beauty was more important for women in the Romantic Era than ever before? There are several reasons, but I will just mention one: Beauty gained more significance for young women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, because the marriage ideal shifted as a consequence of political and social changes in the eighteenth century, epitomized by the debate surrounding the Hardwicke Marriage Act,¹ a shift which especially influenced the upper and middle classes.² This act “produced one of the most heated debates of the century in the House of Commons” in its attempt to “close up loopholes in existing legislation on marriage that allowed minors to marry without parental (read, paternal) consent” (Harth 125). Marriages were previously based on rank, money, and parental control, but by the end of the century supposedly on romantic love and the companionate ideal. Now, why would I focus on the marriage market as such? Because, however we decide to look at it, the marriage market was a main indicator for a woman’s success in society.

The companionate ideal opted for an equal partnership, and it became more influential as individuality reigned among the Romantics. That ideal was based on the conception that marriage had something to do with personal

¹ The Marriage Act of 1753 was so highly controversial because romantic love, although it lost the day, was at the core of it. Both parties for and against the Marriage Act claimed to have romance on their side. The opposition insisted that marriages made by parents failed to consider their children’s love, beauty, or birth, thus becoming financial bargains, mere mercenary arrangements (Lemmings 339).

² The Marriage Act and the subsequent intellectual movements concerned with matrimony were mainly known and important to the upper and middle classes, since they could also afford playing with the idea of love in marriage—a luxury the working classes did not usually have.

happiness and should be founded on compatibility and love. Erica Harth claims that at the beginning of the nineteenth century “a significantly larger number of people than before expected to marry for love” (123).³ Mercenary marriages started to be condemned by society, while on the surface love and affection in matrimony were hailed by many. However, women still did not get to choose, but had to wait until chosen. Contracts were drawn up by lawyers and discussed by the father of the bride and her potential husband. Marriage was an agreement between men, a patriarchal transaction in which women were treated as passive commodities. In these new circumstances where parents’ wishes did not retain as much weight as before, the marital choice now lay predominantly with marriageable men.

Even though circumstances within the marriage market had changed, social conventions made it nearly impossible for men to get to know marriageable young women on an individual basis, preventing them from determining whether or not they would be compatible in a marriage. The companionate ideal, supposedly an equal partnership between husband and wife based on mutual affection and respect, was often a farce, since social conventions inhibited any attempt at real conversation and exchange of opinion between young marriageable couples by means of chaperones, talk of decorum, and severe social punishment for disregarding what was considered proper behaviour.⁴

A rather superficial appraisal is what Sara Coleridge experienced as well. In 1822, on her way to London, she met two of her cousins, John Taylor Coleridge and Henry Nelson Coleridge, who wanted to “appraise” (Mudge 29) the fair cousin, of whose beauty they had heard so much. Henry, her future fiancée and husband, wrote a letter to his sister, to tell her about his first meeting with Sara. Even though Sara had much to offer, as a scholar and a well-read young woman with personality and opinions, what we hear about from Henry is a tribute to her appearance.

John swore he would kiss Sara, before he arrived, which I strenuously advised... I knew I should not have courage enough for it. But he quailed at the moment of trial, and though her lips are sufficiently tempting, yet he did not kiss her. I contented myself with a most affectionate, prolonged diminuendo and crescendo squeeze... She is a lovely creature, small, but not in the least diminutive or dwarfish; her figure perfectly proportioned, her hair like Mary's [John Taylor's wife] and her eyes like a dove's; fair with a nice carmine; little features. (Mudge 30)

³ While young men wanted to choose their bride without the interference of their fathers based on the companionate ideal, the same ideal also was the foundation for the myth that young girls always married for romantic and never for mercenary reasons (Zangen 75).

⁴ Numerous conduct books defined proper feminine behavior, signifying that “they constructed an ideal of femininity and then redefined female nature” according to that ideal as “the chaste maiden and obedient wife” (Bilger 21), an institution which laid the foundation for the Victorian ideal of the “angel in the house.”

In the very same letter, he also judges Sara's financial situation: "she has not a shilling to cross her [palm] with" (Mudge 30). The only way to distinguish between young potential brides was by means of their appearance, apart from social standing and financial means. Thus, when men were free to choose, beauty reigned.

Appearance became the major asset to attract young men in a ballroom or at other social gatherings which were main opportunities for sizing up future wives. Nineteenth-century society's obsession with beauty arose because beauty was connected to the marriageability of young women. According to Annette Federico, "feminine allure was implicitly tied to social power: a woman's destiny was often determined by marriage, and gaining a man's favorable glance was the first step to gaining a husband" (30). Hester Chapone writes to her niece in her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) "you will often see the woman who is most anxious to be thought handsome, most inclined to be dissatisfied with her looks" (39)—this is the case when a young woman hits the marriage market. And the very competition to marry makes all women "marriageable objects of male desire" (Burgess 141). As previously mentioned, Sara Coleridge states that mothers are concerned because of the general obsession with beauty. "The subject of personal appearance, they complain(,) is perpetually on the carpet, the bad tendency of which is to render beauty daily more & more the object of their daughter's aims and wishes, indeed the engrossing concern of their thoughts & lives" (Coleridge 188). Coleridge also claims that reading novels fosters this evil—"it is natural for the young female reader to long for the silken eyelashes & the Grecian features which generally constitute the chief charm of the heroine, and enable her to reign triumphantly in all hearts" (188).

This obsession with beauty is indeed echoed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century print culture. In the eighteenth century we find highly influential conduct books, books on physiognomy, as well as philosophical works treating the subject of beauty. The closer we get to the turn of the century, the more poignant the subject of beauty becomes, and it ends irrevocably tied to women.

Let us consider just a few examples. Right after the Hardwicke Marriage Act fiasco, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) is published. Burke treated human/female beauty as the object of love, and positions ugliness as the polar opposite of beauty, just as Plato did. And like Plato, he recognized that beauty is not a sign of perfection, nor a signifier of virtue.⁵ This perception unfortunately changed

⁵ Plato considered the good and the beautiful to be one. Plato was also responsible for linking "beauty with love: first, the love of the beautiful body" (Zeglin 2), and looking at beauty as "erotic" (Higgins 282), regarding it as the "object of love" (Synnott, "Part I" 611). Plato is the culprit who initiates a series of polar binaries such as beauty/ugliness, goodness/evil, love/hate, happiness/unhappiness (Synnott, "Part I" 612), which tend to exclude the plain portion of humanity from love or happiness. Synnott summarizes this notion in his statement that "beauty as physically attractive not only reflects Divine beauty, and inner moral beauty, but also inspires physical desire, i.e. is sexy" (Synnott, "Part I" 625)."

towards the end of the century, when in 1775, Johann Kaspar Lavater, a poet, pastor, and physiognomist from Switzerland, published his treatise *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, in short: *On Physiognomy*. According to its German title this treatise had the purpose of promoting the knowledge of human nature, human kindness, and philanthropy. Claiming to determine character according to facial features, this book was highly popular, running through many editions, especially in England. Lavater's thesis contributed to the general notion that appearance was enough to know character by, enforcing the importance of appearance as a reflection of virtue and personality. Ideas such as Lavater's physiognomy became more important because young men wanted to choose their future brides without parental interference. Prospective bridegrooms turned to stratagems like reading facial features in order to choose amongst the potential brides.

Only a year before Lavater's *On Physiognomy* hit the market, one of the most influential conduct books was published: Dr. John Gregory's treatise on female behaviour—*A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774). Dr. Gregory's treatise underlines and affirms Rousseau's notions of the inferiority and dependence of women. It became widely read throughout the nineteenth century, and was used extensively until the 1890s, exposing innumerable marriageable young women to its teachings and principles. Gregory's agenda exposes the contradictory standards women had to live by, how fine a line they had to walk in order to retain society's approval. Even though Dr. Gregory sounds at times as if he supports something like a companionate ideal, he is decidedly realistic about marriage and the possibility of love: "What is called love among you, is rather gratitude, and a partiality to the man who prefers you to the rest of your sex, and such a man you often marry, with little of either personal esteem or affection. Indeed, without an unusual share of natural sensibility, and very peculiar good fortune, a woman in this country has very little probability of marrying for love" (58-59).

He does have the good sense to recognize appearance, although crucial during courtship, to be of little importance afterwards: "Marriage, indeed, will at once dispel the enchantment raised by external beauty" (89). Part of the paradox introduced by Dr. Gregory, nevertheless, revolves around the issue of presenting oneself in society. It is important to appear neat and advantageous for a woman; however, "[o]ne of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted at even the gaze of admiration" (25). This necessity for delicacy indicates the razor's edge young women had to walk. On the one hand they had to attract men in order to find their "ultimate happiness" in matrimony—this under the handicap of never showing that marriage was indeed their intention. Women were put in the impossible position of both having to parade their beauty and having to appear not to. In spite of his claim that young women should not flaunt their beauty, Dr. Gregory placed them firmly

in the role of objects. Since women should not put themselves forward in conversation, they ought to be an adornment to the room: "A fine woman, like other fine things in nature, has her proper point of view, from which she may be seen to most advantage" (34). Young women have to master a balancing act between showing their beauty in the best possible light and knowing that it is repugnant to do so openly. Looking at Henry Coleridge's letter to his sister, the subject of the marriage market appears on the periphery—even though it is his very first meeting with his grown up cousin Sara. He writes: "Mrs. C. is not prepossessing; she was wonderfully kind and attentive and watchful. I even read *design* in her eye. She dressed most unbecomingly. Sara neat and elegant ..." (Mudge 30)—display is important, and even though Henry detects design in the mother, Sara luckily remains an innocent sylph.

When we consider the way women are talked about in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts—appraised, if you want—we cannot but notice the resulting hierarchy, not only amongst women, but also a hierarchy established between the woman as the object judged according to its beauty, and the subject, the man or society in general, passing judgment. One could apply Bourdieu's ideas about language and symbolic power, the hierarchy expresses the relationship between female beauty and power. Female beauty functions as capital, a means to progress in society, a social currency used to achieve marriage.⁶ However, beauty is a capital that depreciates—we cannot retain it, it is ephemeral, and, as mentioned before, it loses its value in marriage.

When we talk about female beauty, we talk about a critique of the body—up close and personal—and accordingly the mirror comes into play as a medium through which women consider their looks, and as a faithful judge of their appearance—in some ways the maker of their happiness or the cause of their despair. In Anna Krugvov Silver's study on the anorexic body in literature, she claims that a woman's aim for a slender form "attests to her discipline over her body [...] and indicates her discomfort with, or even hatred of her body" (3). Does it surprise us then, that she finds the roots of *Anorexia Nervosa* in the 1820s, which is exactly the decade in which Sara Coleridge wrote her essay? In her book *Femininity and Domination* Sandra Lee Bartky analyzes the feminine body as an instance of internalized oppression and claims that women "discipline" their bodies (66-71). An undisciplined female body is defective, and yet a properly disciplined female body is a body with "an inferior status inscribed" (Bartky 71-72). The attractive woman is an "object of prey" for men, for feminine beauty plays up fragility, weakness, and immaturity (Bartky 73-74) reinforcing the gendered hierarchy. Feminine appearance can be considered an integral part of a woman's sexual identity (Meyers 9).

Sara Coleridge is aware of the ill-effects this obsession with appearance has on women, and how it affects their relationship to their mirrors, the reflection on and of their bodies. Coleridge states that women's "happiness is

⁶ There are several fine articles exploring this conflict between social necessity and the individual choice of young marriageable, notably Hyunsook Kim's "Marriage as Women's Economic Activity."

dependent on the varying though faithful report of [their] mirror!" (190) and she calls into question even the happiness of a woman in possession of beauty:

But does the possession of Beauty *tend* to inspire cordial peace into the bosom of its owner? [...] like all other good things of this life[,] personal advantages, I believe, are more craved for when unattainable than enjoyed when possessed. What are the feelings of the flattered belle, of her that is accustomed to be gazed at & raved about, when she examines her admired form & features in the glass? Except on rare occasions she can feel little gratification in the idea that the image before her is surprisingly fair, that she is handsomer than the generality of her young companions; but is she more or less handsome than she was so many years, months, weeks ago? (Coleridge 189)

This, of course does not mean that the plainer part of the female population has a more satisfactory dialogue with their mirror. According to Coleridge, “a freedom from such petty cares is the enviable privilege of the other sex” (190)—and with this statement she genders the issue at hand.

As Diana Meyers notes in her book *Gender in the Mirror*, it is interesting that narcissism is considered a female vice, even though Narcissus was a man (100). She claims that society forces women to be narcissistic, while men (like Narcissus) need to escape their self-love. “Thus, imperfect as [women] are, yet assigned the task of representing perfection through their appearance, women are obliged to dedicate themselves to self-beautification. To meet men’s psychic needs—to free men from the icy sepulchre of self-love—women must take up the mirror and become narcissistic” (105). Meyers calls it self-objectification.

In her essay, Sara Coleridge observes what happens to young women in her time and age, and she considers the development of the culture and society she grew up in. Her concerns are reflected in her writing, and they are also reflected in the literature of the romantic era. Female writers especially consider appearance a subject close to their hearts and close to the hearts of their readers. Changes in the marriage market influenced the print culture of the day, which in turn fed the obsession with beauty and appearance. This cycle is not broken, but heavily attacked by nineteenth-century texts and literature. Women became even more aware of being looked at as ornaments—Krugvov notes that “the pursuit of beauty was considered such an important aspect of women’s feminine role” and that “very different writers [...] agreed that women’s role was in part ornamental or aesthetic” (Krugvov 19).

Sara Coleridge, as well as other female writers and thinkers in the Romantic Era, such as Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Harriet Martineau—whose writing accompanies Sara’s life, and in whom she had a keen interest—take it upon themselves to alert their readers to

the ill effects the general obsession with beauty has on young women and society in general. They are paving the way for other controversial female characters to be created and written in future. As Anne Mellor so rightfully states, "Writing by women in the Romantic period constructed a new version of the ideal woman, one who was rational rather than emotional or sexual, one who participated in an egalitarian marriage" (107). I claim that society's focus on their exterior aspects kept women in a liminal space, where they were—whether they were beautiful or ugly—forever bound in a lost struggle to come to terms with their identity constructed by their fleeting and ephemeral appearance, a mere façade. Female writers and thinkers like Sara Coleridge demonstrate that women need to reject the mirror forced upon them by society in order to progress in life. By gazing at their reflection in the mirror, women seem to lose themselves, and neglect to cultivate other virtues they might possess, obscuring their own progress and future. To quote Sara Coleridge, "by fastening our attention too exclusively on what is external we overlook in the woman [...] the beauty of the soul" (200).⁷

⁷ *Works Cited*

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