

A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF THE HUMAN BODY

IN THE
MEDIEVAL AGE

Edited by Linda Kalof



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CHAPTER SIX

Beautiful Bodies

MONTSERRAT CABRÉ

Studying the history of human beauty is a difficult endeavor as it was a complex aspect of medieval experience. It is not uncommon to think of beauty as a set of positive, desirable, and historically determined ideal traits forming a canon. Frequently, the subject is not studied as a meaningful element of medieval culture but as an insignificant, even frivolous topic irrelevant to social life. However, the theme is loaded with rich nuances that generate a series of important questions such as the manipulation of bodies to re-create sexual difference, the social relations between women and men, the capacity of humans to embody moral authority, or the malleability of cultural norms by individuals. In the Middle Ages there were many discourses of the beautiful, probably as many as there were subjective perceptions of corporeal aesthetics and shared ideals of the self. As a result of this diversity, the traces medieval beauty has left are of very different kinds and can be either of a descriptive or practical nature, of philosophical or religious character. Some of these discourses are extensive and coherent and address beauty directly; most are fragmented or scattered into thematically irrelevant digressions. If we were to look at them together, these discourses might even contradict each other. A few took direct issue with rival visions; many lived geographically in parallel or intersected without facing opposition. Others simply coexisted closely without entering into dialogue or competing for preeminence.

What may or may not be seen as beautiful in an English leprosy house does not necessarily meet the standards of Icelandic warriors or those commonly appreciated within the walls of a castle in Provence. What counts as beautiful

in a palace in al-Andalus may have been different from what a Jewish community or a Cistercian nunnery envisioned. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) approached the embodiment of beauty in a different vein than twelfth-century Salernitan women, who may have differed from Irish farmers in their practices and opinions. What precisely constitutes the embodiment of human beauty differs according to time, social circumstance, and place, as well as the impact that sexual difference had on all those. Neither can the willingness of individuals to embody beauty be taken as a universal principle. Nevertheless, there are significant features that broadly define how beauty was understood in medieval culture.

Most medieval philosophers—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—agreed that beauty was an intrinsic potential quality of all existent things and beings, proportional to their degree of effective perfection. Beauty was the result of a state of harmony with nature. Beauty could manifest itself—and be perceived—in material entities as well as in spiritual substances; human bodies were an expression of both the inner self and the outer appearance of individuals. As a general definition, medieval beauty was conceived as aesthetic pleasure and ugliness as aesthetic distaste. Nonetheless, ugliness was not opposed to beauty even if both qualities were mutually exclusive. A face without bad-looking features resulting from skin illness might have been closer to perfection but was not necessarily considered to be beautiful.

Latin Europe inherited a rich vocabulary to name beauty and ugliness, and the two comprehensive concepts were associated with moral qualities.¹ Generally speaking, Western cultures conceived beauty as the aesthetic aspect of pleasure and the good; in contrast, ugliness embodied aversion but also wickedness. This connection is made concrete, for instance, in the dedicatory preface of an anonymous thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman text on cosmetics for women. Its composition is justified by explaining that women need to preserve and improve their beauty since they had lost its enduring condition as a result of divine punishment over their giving in to diabolic temptation.² This moral framework welcomed literary and iconographic images that emphasized the beauty of the body of the Virgin.³ Nevertheless, the path from perfection to imperfection was a gradation composed of many layers, and the association of physical and moral qualities was not fixed in one direction but malleable in practice. In one of the most compelling instances, suffering filthy bodies could be described as beautiful.⁴ In such cases, it was the moral goodness inherent in the imitation of Christ's passion that expanded to the physicality of the body expressing beauty. And this was not the case only in religious contexts. Lay literature also provides examples of how worthiness took precedence over ugliness when both qualities were present in a single individual, as Sylvia Huot's chapter in this volume shows. The embodiment of signs of male heroism could also be seen as alluring, and bleeding, wounded knights adorned

with battle scars were found especially beautiful.⁵ The positive value of good behavior extended to the perception of corporeal appearance, and the same was the case with ugliness: The Arthurian giant of Mont Saint-Michel's is ugly because he is bad.⁶ An example of how unthinkable the association of beauty with wickedness was is found in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (ca. 1380s–1390s). A knight who had been forced to marry an old and ugly woman is given the chance to change the situation. Through his spouse's magical powers he can decide whether she will change to become young and beautiful—but unfaithful and bad behaved—or remain old and ugly but loving and faithful. Since he could not bear to make a decision, he returns to his wife the power of resolution: After such a generous move, the wife determines to be both good and beautiful.⁷

Besides the moral aspects accorded to the appearance of medieval bodies, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures shared three basic principles or criteria with which to judge physical beauty: light, proportion, and clarity. Although clarity was often associated with bright colors, particularly in Christian traditions, it was a more comprehensive concept closer to cleanliness. In fact, a copious amount of medical texts in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic—as well as all

iebz q' debet fecit. qm luna mag
 nitat hūditate ad cui' signū mī
 t' seque ferro / uhhare mēbz / ad
 hūditate uhhare / mltiplicat ei no
 tū. Vn' p'p'os vulua q' i' p'p'os
 n' sanet. n' delicat. Et sicut dūsa
 gna: sic dūsa o' mēbz. Et sicut
 signū h' mēbz dūditate signū
 a dū sicut uolūt a dū uolūt. Et
 t' ex corp' h'is caput / t' sicut
 ubi / t' sicut nos. Et sicut hūditat
 na. ma' ai dūditat. Et sicut



FIGURE 6.1: Ugly features: head and torso of a naked man covered with spots. London, Wellcome Library, *Miscellanea Medica XVIII*, Ms 544/4 (Glossulae Quatuor Magistrorum), fol. 25r (detail), early fourteenth century. Wellcome Image number L0037335.

other vernacular languages—explained to health practitioners and laypeople how to clean the surfaces of human bodies from all kinds of imperfections, as a main way to embellish their appearance.⁸ A diversity of notions also shared an understanding of beauty as a quality of youth; the physical traits of the young body would necessarily go through a gradual process of decay. Especially characterizing the path to old age were wrinkles and white hair, as well as the loss of teeth, skin dryness, and the growth of hair in the ears; these were considered signs of the spoil of beauty in both women and men. Slowing down the inevitable decrepitude of the body was seen generally as a valid concern that included the care of the skin and hair in order to retain as much as possible a young look.⁹

If there was not a single medieval canon of beauty, the diversity of contemporary notions understood the perception of corporeal beauty as an experience apprehended through the senses; accordingly, seeking to have a beautiful body involved the goal of pleasing those senses. Although sight was privileged as the most comprehensive, all of them were involved in the process of aesthetic judgment. Only smell could appreciate odors, which constituted a significant aspect for measuring beauty, while touch could evaluate the softness of the skin. Hearing felt the voice, a highly valued physical trait in the Middle Ages, and taste could also be at work, since sweetness was often praised as a feature enhancing the beauty of lips.

BEAUTY AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

The experiencing of beauty through the senses was also a fundamental medium to create and re-create sexual difference. Medieval bodies were basic vehicles to construct identity as well as malleable sites of both the most visible and the most intimate of human experiences. Beauty was the result of a negotiation between self-construction and outer perception where the individual and social dimensions cut across. Central to such negotiation was sexual difference, as beauty was part of, and contributed to shaping, the different social roles that women and men played.

As a potential quality of human beings, beauty had different symbolic value depending on whether it was embodied by men or women. Women's worth was often associated directly with beauty, as an essential feature of their social existence, whereas men's honor was primarily related to features of moral character.¹⁰ While writing to praise the city of Salerno in southern Italy in the 1090s, William of Apulia celebrated how feminine beauty abounded in that region, opposing this feature to the plentiful probity that epitomized Salernitan men.¹¹ The same is true of ugliness, as the close connection between wickedness and the lack of beauty considered inherent to old age was formulated clearly for women (the *vetulae*) but not for men, particularly in the misogynis-

tic traditions arising from the thirteenth century on. Whereas old women were portrayed as ugly, bad, and dangerous, old men were depicted as worthy and honorable and their physical traits described more neutrally.¹²

This close connection between women and beauty is found in allegorical literature as well. The personified Beauty in the popular part of the *Romance of the Rose* (ca. 1230) by Guillaume de Lorris was portrayed as a most worthy and beautiful lady whose qualities rightly attracted the God of Love.¹³ In fact, beauty was intimately associated with love and erotic desire in the courtly tradition. Andreas Capellanus started the first chapter of his book on love—written between 1174 and 1186—defining that extreme feeling of affection as a “certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love’s precepts in the other’s embrace.”¹⁴ Indeed, love for a particular individual could have the effect of preventing the appreciation of beauty in other people. This idea was behind courtly culture and was reflected in the poetry of male and female troubadours who sang the worth and beauty of their beloved. Medieval physicians explored the pathological conditions presented by certain noblemen who suffered from lovesickness or excess love, an affliction caused by the diseasing effects of an unreasonable apprehension of beauty, among other circumstances.¹⁵ Beyond gaze, nonvisual forms of beauty could also be at the center of male heterosexual arousal. The power of the female voice was seen as an able weapon to arouse men; this notion was adduced in theological debates against the appropriateness of women’s preaching in public. Also, it was feared that the exposure of women’s beauty and the gracefulness of their movements could lead a man to desire a woman sexually, although as Henry of Ghent (d. 1293) and other theologians ascertained, “it is chiefly the sweetness of her voice and the pleasure of hearing her words that does this.”¹⁶

Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures shared patriarchal ideals that considered female beauty more fragile than male beauty and thus in need of special care. In the words of Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), “manly beauty is the truer, the more solidly established, and of higher excellence, since it can endure, and that without shelter.”¹⁷ While sharing a common aesthetic ground, every culture produced different models of male and female beauty that are embedded in literary sources as well as in texts dealing with the care of the body. Literary sources portray ideals of individual beauty while judging as positive the physical features of the characters that play the lead in the stories, usually people from the high ranks of society. A beautiful noble warrior from England or northern France, for instance, had pale skin, long and curled hair, and a tall, strong, and well-proportioned body. Nonetheless, it was not uncommon in fictional texts to portray the physical features of individuals of low social status as opposed to the beauty of those of higher ranks; therefore, nonnoble

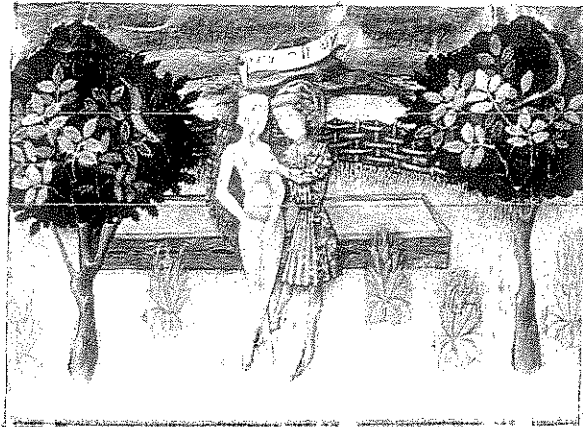


FIGURE 6.2: Beauty and sexual difference. The female body as fragile and available. Granada, Biblioteca Universitaria, Universidad de Granada, Codice C-67 (Fragments of a Latin version of Ibn Butlan, *Tacuinum sanitatis*), fol. 110ra, fifteenth century.

peasants of the period were portrayed as dark skinned with coarse, disproportioned features.¹⁸ Icelandic family sagas honored masculinity by favoring strength and fair skin but considered short hair to be the standard of male beauty.¹⁹

Descriptions of ideal female beauty are much more detailed and frequent than of male beauty—with the exception of Icelandic culture, which privileged the literary visibility of the male body—and could also differ according to status. As for men, white skin was generally highly valued for aristocratic women; however, there may be exceptions to this since popular literature from southern Europe seems to portray brunette girls in positive terms, associating their exposure to sunlight with their working conditions.²⁰ From the twelfth century on, when depictions of an ideal beautiful woman start to appear regularly in literary texts of the courtly tradition, descriptions vary in length but are quite consistent with the following canonical traits: fair hair; pink and white face; tender and soft flesh, free from spots or sores; radiant forehead; arched brows; eyes widely and properly spaced; straight and well-formed nose; bright eyes; full-lipped mouth; sweetly scented breath; red lips and gums; well-proportioned neck; and small, round, and firm breasts; and a well-formed and slender body; a woman would also appear nicer if elegantly well dressed. This basic literary canon derived from classical models, but it was subject to cultural, ethnic, and regional adaptations.²¹

Health-care texts of a practical nature also inscribed the relationship between beauty and sexual difference, offering a great variety of possibilities to intervene on body surfaces with the aim of keeping or improving beauty. They were of nonnormative character and did not insist on a fixed canon, either for women or for men. For instance, they listed a wide range of beautifying recipes that often led to the attainment of contrary goals—for example, dyeing hair black, red, or blond. Many of the recipes were clearly intended to be applied to both sexes, as attested by multiple preparations for skin care or for the improvement of bodily odors that populate medical and surgical texts without being addressed to a particular sex. Likewise, certain features of ideal body shapes were similar for women and men. For example, small breasts were highly valued in women who were not expected to breastfeed, and cosmetic tracts regularly contain poultices to reduce them; ideal male breasts were also small, and some surgical texts (particularly in those of Arabic influence) included operations to reduce both testicles and male breasts.²² In fact, compared to other traditions, Arabic medicine and surgery were significantly concerned with human beauty generally and embraced the care of the appearance of the male body prominently, and through their reception via Iberia and southern Italy, they influenced Western cosmetic practices and texts. Nevertheless, beautifying procedures were often aimed at either women or men, whether the gendered audience was addressed straightforwardly or indirectly, defining what was beautiful and desirable for each sex.

Generally speaking, men were advised to clean their bodies, comb their hair, wash their hands, and clean their teeth and nails, but they were directly instructed not to paint their face or wear makeup since, as the *Romance of the Rose* states, “only women do that, and those [men] of evil reputation who have unfortunately found an unlawful love.”²³ Male homoerotic behavior—considered unmanly—came together with beautifying practices portrayed as the propriety of women to the extent that the men who took interest in them were called “similar to women” (*effeminate*). But the most comprehensive instance of the sexed character of beauty is body hair. Male ability to grow hair was understood as the physiological result of men’s higher stage of completion, and it was considered a mark of masculinity; on the contrary, the absence of hair signaled femininity.²⁴ Men’s use of fake beards and their care of the hair of the head and face is well attested—including dyeing gray hair—whereas women were concerned with depilating every body surface except the head. Medieval physicians and natural philosophers understood the distribution of the hair on the body as an expression of a basic physiological distinction between male and female complexions, explaining hair in males as a result of their specific way of concocting naturally the superfluous bodily substances that women processed through menstruation. While literally hundreds of depilatories were aimed at women, preparations to grow beards were thought

to be only for men. If there was a lack of harmony with nature and men had too little and women too much hair, as was often the case, beauty was legitimately pursued with the help of human artifice. However, determining what was considered an appropriate use of the beautifying arts was the subject of debate. Tensions ran particularly high concerning the intensity of women's involvement.

NATURE VERSUS ART OR THE ALLIANCE OF ART WITH NATURE

Human beauty was conceived of as a state of harmony with nature; beautiful and desirable bodies belonged to people who acted appropriately and according to their inner character. When personified, Nature herself was presented as a beautiful goddess or lady, depicted as a dressed and well-arrayed female figure holding moral authority. This notion of beauty as harmony was behind philosophical, religious, and medical views that considered nature the source, judge, and enforcer of right living; she dictated norms to look after and nurture such accord. Proportion, balance, and order were valued but fragile qualities of nature, and moderation was a treasured attitude needed to maintain them. Inherent qualities might be disguised but could not by definition be altered in a profound way.²⁵

Within this framework, the artful pursuit of human beauty was thought of as both legitimate and unlawful, depending on how, why, and by whom it was sought. Supplementing beauty to the extent of surpassing one's place in the natural order was considered illicit in the medical and theological traditions.²⁶ Nonetheless, if the art was used to promote or enhance what were considered to be natural qualities or to perform functions ascribed to them by nature, aids to maintain and improve beauty were considered appropriate—like caring for body hair according to what was appropriate for one's sex. For married women, the alliance between nature and art could be desirable, if with beautifying practices they prevented their husbands from falling into the sin of adultery, as Thomas Aquinas argued.²⁷ The beauty of women and men embodied the honor and status of those whom they served. This capacity of bodies to express both self-dignity and the dignity of others they were related to allowed some religious women to make extensive rightful use of artificial adornment. In the twelfth century Rhenish abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) conceived her nuns' bodily embellishments as a service to God since they embodied His divine goodness and beauty.²⁸ However, if beautifying artifices were considered to be used to contravene or cheat the natural order—God's creation—they were thought to be illegitimate. This tendency to threaten nature was regularly ascribed to women, particularly in the misogynistic traditions that reemerged in thirteenth-century Europe.

The tension between the natural and the artificial expressed patriarchal anxieties over the maintenance of a natural order defined in male terms, since diatribes against the improper use of adornment and cosmetics with the aim to embellish their bodies were thoroughly directed toward women. Together with misogynistic literature, from the thirteenth century on, conduct books for women written by male authors regularly taught them how to care for their appearance, although the limits that the authors proposed differed considerably.²⁹

Anxieties encompassed deceit, often perceived as the result of women's strategies of disguise to attain certain instances of self-control. The most compelling association of cosmetics with immoral deceit concerns prostitution, albeit similar arguments were made regarding marriage relationships. Peter the Chanter (d. 1197) and Thomas of Chobham (ca. 1160–1236) agreed that prostitutes who faked beauty with makeup should not be allowed to keep their earnings since they cheated their clients. Cheating was also at the heart of certain descriptions of the use of cosmetics by able-bodied beggars "who simulate bodily infirmity by applying herbs or ointments to their bodies in order to make swollen wounds."³⁰ Manipulating the appearance of their bodies, beggars controlled what they meant to society by presenting themselves as unable to work and thus appealing not to beauty, leading to desire, but to piety, leading to charity.

From the patristic age through scholasticism and early humanism, Christian authors associated both bodily adornment and public silence with women; preaching theorists linked them with ornateness and superficiality, qualities



FIGURE 6.3: Personification of Pride (Superbia) as a female figure beautifying herself with mirror. London, Wellcome Library, Ms 49/4 (Moral, theological and symbolical extracts and 'exempla'), fol. 49v, ca 1420–1430. Wellcome Image number L0023291.

of eloquent speech that did not transmit the truth of Christianity.³¹ In line with this association was the idea that rejected embodiment as a proper representation of men—an idea also rooted in ancient thought. Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) recounted an anecdote in which Socrates, meeting a young, beautiful boy who remained silent, asked him to speak, for it was words, not his face, that made him visible.³² Women, instead, were regarded as visible through their physicality and urged to remain silent. Christine de Pizan (who was born in Venice in 1364 and died in Poissy in about 1431) stands as the first medieval woman who explicitly and directly disrupted this opposition. In her 1405 works *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a prose allegory in defense of women, and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or the Book of the Three Virtues*, a conduct book for women, she took issue with those who maintained that beauty was an ideal sought exclusively by women.

In the *City of Ladies*, Christine ascribes bodily adornment to both women and men and separates this practice from the terrain of seductive behavior. While considering extended criticism toward women, Christine shows herself to be preoccupied with the general opinion that women who adorn themselves do so to seduce men. She engages in a conversation on the feminine love of adornment with Lady Rectitude, one of the three allegorical characters that construct the narrative dialogue of the text together with the authorial voice. The conversation begins with a consideration that wise women (“qui ont aucun sçavoir”) should avoid passionate love, since it could turn out to be dangerous and harmful to them:

My lady, you were quite right before when you said that passionate love was like a perilous sea: From what I've seen, women with any sense should do everything they can to avoid it, for they only come to great harm. Yet, those women who want to look lovely by dressing elegantly come in for a lot of criticism, because it's said that they only do so in order to attract attention from men.³³

The answer she obtains does not deny that adorning oneself is indecent but does deny that is a feminine vice, as well as asserting that women who do it are not necessarily trying to seduce men:

My dear Christine, [says Droiture], it's not my business to try and find excuses for those women who are too fussy and obsessive about their appearance, for this is no small failing in a person. Wearing clothes that aren't fitting to one's station in life is particularly reprehensible. However, whilst I've no intention of condoning such a vice, neither do I want anyone to think that they have the right to lay more blame than is strictly

necessary on those who make themselves beautiful in this way. I can assure you that not all women who do this are interested in seducing men. Some people, not just women but also men, have a legitimate taste and natural bent for taking pleasure in pretty things and expensive, elaborate clothes, as well as in cleanliness and fine array. If it's in their nature to behave like this, it's very difficult for them to resist, though it would be greatly to their credit if they did.³⁴

With this statement, Christine breaks with the idea that improving one's own beauty is nothing but a strategy of enticement that women use to please men, as well as a type of individual behavior attributed exclusively to them. In fact, in order to deny the inevitability of the relationship between adornment and seduction, Christine uses the story of a holy man who dressed sumptuously, the apostle Saint Bartholomew. She does not consider this practice as a sin of vanity but as a natural instinct without direct connection to the sex of its practitioner. According to this, adornment should not be judged in moral terms, since only God can make such judgments:

Wasn't it written of Saint Bartholomew the Apostle, a man of high birth, that he spent his whole life draped in fringed robes of silk which were hemmed with precious stones, despite the fact that Our Lord preached poverty? Though such behavior is usually rather pretentious and ostentatious, Saint Bartholomew can't be said to have committed any sin because it was in his nature to wear expensive clothes. Even so, some do say that it was for this reason that Our Lord was content for Bartholomew to be martyred by being flayed alive. My reason for telling you these things is to show you that it's wrong for any mortal creature to judge another's appearance; God alone has the right to judge us.³⁵

To support her opinions, as is usual in the *City of Ladies*, Christine offers as examples events from the lives of women in the distant past. Citing Boccaccio (1313–1375) and Valerius Maximus (fl. 30 C.E.), Lady Rectitude summons the Roman Claudia, a patrician woman who dressed sumptuously and who was very desirous of beautiful ornaments. This inclination meant for her fierce opprobrium to her virtue, until a miracle by the great goddess Pessinunt proved the critics wrong. During the Second Punic War, the sailors of a ship on the Tiber could not get it into the harbor:

Claudia, who was well aware that her behavior had been misconstrued because of her appearance, knelt down before the statue and prayed out loud to the goddess. She declared that the goddess should know that

her chastity was intact and her purity unsullied and so should grant her the favor of letting her pull the ship into port by herself. Trusting in her virtue, Claudia took off her belt and tied it to the rails of the vessel. To everyone's amazement, she then towed it in as easily as if all the sailors in the world were rowing it to shore.³⁶

Christine makes it clear that chastity and beauty are not incompatible and that purity and love of adornment may both inhabit a virtuous woman, as they could accompany masculine proper conduct. In line with disrupting the association of male heterosexual desire and feminine adornment so dear to the misogynistic traditions, she explains how men's attraction toward women is not always related to female coquetry and seductive behavior. This statement is important, since as a result women's efforts to improve their sex appeal through their appearance would not be necessarily successful:

Even supposing that the reason women put such efforts into making themselves beautiful and seductive, elegant and alluring, *were* because they wanted to attract male attention, I'll prove to you that this does not necessarily mean that the men who are decent and sensible are going to fall more quickly or more heavily for them. On the contrary, those men who value integrity are more readily attracted to women who are virtuous, honest and modest, and love them more deeply, even if they are less glamorous (*moins fussent belles*) than flirts such as these.³⁷

Christine frees women from being responsible for how men treat them, no matter whether they are virtuous or find pleasure in adorning themselves. As much as love of adornment is neither sexed nor intrinsically imbued with a negative moral judgment, the practice of modesty may also attract men sexually toward women. She illustrates this reflection with the example of Lucretia, a Roman matron who was desired by her husband's friend Tarquinius Sextus because of her modesty and virtuosity, not for her investments in beautifying her image. In the absence of her husband, she refused Tarquinius's approach but was nevertheless raped, an act that caused her great misery and distress.³⁸ Christine concludes that it is not what women do that determines male behavior:

Now, some might retort that, since it's a bad thing to appeal to men in the first place, it would be better if those women who used their virtue and modesty to catch men's eyes didn't in fact possess such qualities at all. However, this argument is utterly worthless: one shouldn't refrain from cultivating things which are good and useful just because some idiots use them unwisely.³⁹

Once it is made clear in the *City of Ladies* that adorning oneself is not necessarily related to seduction and that any human creature may be involved in such behavior, the *Book of the Three Virtues* is concerned with giving women practical advice on how to properly care for their appearance. In the turmoil of the political crisis in France in her day, after having created a strong defense of women's worthiness, Christine intends to restore feminine authority through education, offering a guide of conduct to the next generation of women expected to rule the French kingdom.⁴⁰ While exposing the temptations that a princess might have, Christine does not leave aside jewels, ornaments, and capricious dress as part of the pleasures to which a woman may surrender.⁴¹ Her critique includes men and women who do not limit their dress to match their status and considers the appreciation of adornment to be a French feature, unknown in other places. She particularly warns about the perils that it may provoke in domestic economies when the boundaries are not properly kept.⁴²

Christine also considers that women's interest in adornment might have negative consequences for women's alliances, since it might arouse envy among them, leading to the rejection of potentially beneficial friendships. In this line, she opposes the influence that husbands might have on their wives if they encourage them to engage excessively in beautifying themselves, since it may deprive them of profitable relationships with other women while being instrumentally used as a standard of male power:

But what makes it even worse is that the wicked husbands (for there are such) get them started and actively encourage them in this folly. Or alternatively, if they do not do that, they grow angry with their wives, thinking, "I have a greater claim to nobility than a certain other man, so my wife should take precedence over his." And the other will think in his turn, "But I am richer, or hold a higher post (or something like that), so I will not stand for his wife taking precedence over mine!" Good Lord, what presumption and what senseless! Such outrageous behavior absolutely ought not to be allowed among Christians!⁴³

In the *Book of the Three Virtues*, Christine's insistence that women should maintain themselves within the margins of what is acceptable within the dominant gender system should be related to her commitment to look for strategies that not only acknowledge but also sustain feminine authority. Christine insists on the notion of balance as the key to maintaining order and sums up five reasons why women should avoid extravagant appearance: It is a sin and displeases God to be so attentive to one's own body; it is not a source of praise but of demerit; it is financially impoverishing; it is a bad example to others, tempting them in their zeal to excel; and, finally, a woman wearing an inappropriate or extravagant outfit may rouse in another woman envy

or a longing to dress above her station, which is a thing that displeases God very much.⁴⁴

Her arguments on adornment coincide partially with those given by male natural philosophers, theologians, and canonists, inasmuch as they shared the idea of harmony as the key to maintaining health in bodies, both political and physiological. But unlike them, her notion of natural order embraced feminine authority, and women's bodily dignity was rooted in their own worth rather than subjected to men's desire and control.

WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE ON BEAUTY

The strong association of medieval women with beauty extended to another aspect. In a wide variety of sources—including misogynistic texts—women were portrayed not only as particularly prone to embellishing themselves but also as experts on how to maintain and attain beauty. Monica Green has noted that women's prominent role in cosmetics was unique compared to any other area of body care.⁴⁵ Women were perceived as knowledgeable agents of cosmetic procedures and as authors of texts to aid the promotion of human beauty.

The recognition of women as authors of cosmetic literature was rooted in antiquity. Whether they literally wrote on this and other topics of medical concern has been the subject of scholarly debate, since remaining sources about women writers and their works are few and unclear. However, beyond the difficulty of identifying historically individual authors and their texts, late antiquity left to the Middle Ages a rich heritage of recognizing the authority of women in the cosmetic domain. The Greek physician Galen (129–ca. 217 C.E.) acknowledged *Elephantis* as an expert in cosmetics, and various medical sources from the second century on—including Galen himself—mention a woman named *Cleopatra* as the author of a cosmetic treatise that has not been identified to the present day.⁴⁶ During the early Middle Ages the name *Cleopatra* functioned as a figure of authority in medical matters concerning women, and the name came to be identified with the Egyptian queen *Cleopatra VII* (69–30 B.C.E.). A Latin tract on gynecology—known in two versions—and a collection of pessaries, unrelated to any cosmetic treatise, were also spuriously ascribed to her, and the texts and their attribution to *Cleopatra* enjoyed a certain degree of popularity.⁴⁷ For most of the Latin Middle Ages, *Cleopatra*'s name as author was associated only with gynecology, but the Arabic tradition kept alive the ancient ascription to her of a cosmetic treatise. The Cordoban author *Avenzoar* (*Abū Marwān b. Zuhr*, ca. 1090–1162) acknowledged her as a predecessor in his cosmetic compendium.⁴⁸ *Ibn al-Jazzar* (b. ca. 898 C.E.) mentions her authorship, and *Qusṭā ibn Lūqā* (ca. 830–910) explains that he himself used her work “devoted to enhancing women's beauty” in a text

known in the Latin West from the twelfth century on.⁴⁹ By the first half of the fifteenth century, scattered references that associate Cleopatra with a cosmetic tract reappear in learned literature, probably as the result of the transmission of the Arabic and Galenic traditions.⁵⁰ During the Renaissance, an influential author of a cosmetic treatise acknowledged her as an ancient authority on beauty to the extent of wondering before his readers whether the anonymous source he used to write his text, identified only as the work of a Greek queen, could be attributed to her.⁵¹

The medieval connection between ancient texts, queenship, and women's authority over beautifying procedures took yet another vein. A Greek compendium on women's conditions ascribed to a certain Metrodora is known in a single twelfth-century copy but was probably written originally in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages.⁵² Metrodora's text consists of a compilation of recipes for gynecological matters followed by a section of cosmetic recipes on embellishing the female breasts, face, hands, and feet and improving bodily odor with perfumes. The text states that one of the recipes devoted to the care of the face was used by Berenice, the Egyptian queen also called Cleopatra, a significant mention as there are no other authoritative references for the cosmetic procedures described in the text. But the textual and contextual connection between these two women went further. The gynecological part of Metrodora's compendium closely resembles a Latin text from late antiquity or the early Middle Ages, *On the Diseases of Women* (*De passionibus mulierum*), known in two versions. The actual author of this text is unknown, but it was ascribed in the Middle Ages to various medical authorities, including Cleopatra.⁵³ This is, in turn, similar to the medieval gynecological treatise that circulated under Cleopatra's name, and its Renaissance editor ascribed it to her. By the sixteenth century, then, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra had become the author of a gynecological compendium—part of which had been in fact the work of a Greek woman named Metrodora—as well as of a lost text on cosmetics whose first ancient mentions ascribe it to a Cleopatra, without reference to her status or birthplace.

But the steadiest medieval attribution of a cosmetic text to an individual woman originated in twelfth-century southern Italy, and from there it soon spread widely throughout western Europe. The city of Salerno was a lively center of medical learning, and its geographic location favored the confluence of different peoples, cultures, and traditions. The strong influence of Arabic medicine and its distillation of ancient lore acted as intellectual stimuli for the composition of new texts that eventually had an important impact in Latin Europe. One significant product of such an atmosphere is the treatise entitled *Women's Cosmetics* (*De ornatu mulierum*), a practical description of cosmetic preparations presented in a head-to-toe order. This text originally circulated in an anonymous manner, and the earliest known versions present clear traces of

male authorship. In the thirteenth century *Women's Cosmetics* was compiled together with two other texts written by different authors, as Monica Green has demonstrated. The compendium was called *The Trotula*, a name that derives from Trota, a medical authoress active in twelfth-century Salerno, and then that title was misunderstood as the alleged authoress's name. *Women's Cosmetics* was the most far-reaching medieval text on cosmetics and circulated extensively as the work of a woman's pen. In the sixteenth century one of its editors questioned the *Trotula's* authorship in favor of an ancient male slave, opening up a long debate that lasted until the manuscript sources were studied in depth.⁵⁴

But in the Middle Ages, as the accompanying image vividly shows, Trotula functioned as a female figure of authority on the global care of the female body. Either as the title of Latin and vernacular texts on women's medicine or as the embodiment of a woman writing on women's physical concerns, Trotula was associated with authoritative knowledge on women's health.

A meaningful instance of how the Middle Ages understood that knowledge about beauty belonged to the domain of women's health is a late fourteenth-century Catalan text entitled *Tròtula*, intended to give women practical medical advice. Unlike other Latin and vernacular texts dealing with cosmetics, master Joan's treatise is clearly addressed to women to aid them to care for themselves—not to health practitioners involved with women's health—delimiting what could be conceived as a sphere of ordinary self-care.⁵⁵ It is also significant because it presents the treatment of the female body as a comprehensive enterprise including gynecological concerns, guidance for heterosexual coupling, and recommendations for healthy living in the form of a regimen of health. Maintaining and enhancing beauty is by far the lengthiest of the topics considered; probably commissioned by a woman of the Aragonese royal family, the text shows both noblewomen's interest in having extensive collections of written recipes as well as how health practitioners—first physicians, and later surgeons and barbers—were ready to assign to cosmetics an important place within their working notion of women's health. Neither in the learned medical literature nor in treatises addressed to laymen is it possible to find analogous interest in cosmetics on the part of men or in any operative notion of male health.⁵⁶

Female figures embodied authority in cosmetic writings; however, most medieval recognitions of women's knowledge pertaining to beauty were given in an anonymous or generic form. Most often the acknowledgments are very general, for instance, "there are women who do it," followed by a specific recipe explaining how to make a certain ointment, poultice, oil, or water to apply on a surface of the body or the hair to pursue a desired effect. But cosmetic texts sometimes also mention particular women, referring to them by the place they were born or lived rather than by their personal or family name. It is



FIGURE 6.4: Trotula as a female figure of authority on women’s health. London, Wellcome Library, Miscellanea Medica XVIII, Ms 544/5 (*Trotula minor. De ornatu mulierum*), fol. 65r, early fourteenth century. Wellcome Image number L0015682.

important to note that the bulk of these mentions are of Muslim women, particularly acknowledged as beauty experts in cosmetic literature. In his original rendering, the male author of the *Salernitan Women’s Cosmetics* refers several times to the practices of Muslim women as his own source, even claiming to

have seen one of these knowledgeable women undertaking her art in Sicily.⁵⁷ Following this pattern, later vernacular authors also ascribed to Muslim women certain cosmetic procedures. A Saracen woman from Messina is mentioned on six occasions as an expert on cosmetics in a text that also acknowledges Trota, as well as Salernitan and other Italian women. Although Jewish women may occasionally also be called on, Christian authors of cosmetic texts attributed knowledge about beauty to Muslim women, writing down recipes that—whether copied from earlier texts or not—they claim to have learned from them.⁵⁸ This may have been a marketable strategy to validate certain recipes and exotic styles considered precious since we know that Christian women mirrored Muslim women's fashions, at least in western Europe, and women's interactions related to beauty knowledge across religious lines seem plausible.⁵⁹ But it clearly shows an openness to valuable beauty knowledge coming from Middle Eastern cultures. Arabic medicine embraced cosmetics within its learned tradition, a tradition that largely influenced the medieval West. If the works of reputed Arabic physicians and surgeons were admired in Latin Europe, Christian sources also unambiguously distinguish Muslim women's expertise in the art of beauty treatments. Women were hence portrayed not only as the final receivers of cosmetic recipes to be applied on them but also as active producers of the collective knowledge that the texts recorded and disseminated, often through male authors.

Nevertheless, the most common way that knowledge on beauty was transmitted in the Middle Ages was not through lengthy written texts but oral communication and hands-on learning face-to-face. Although this is a difficult sphere to trace, women's collections of cosmetic recipes in the context of household practice emerge in the late Middle Ages, as well as instances of recipe exchange, witnessing the extent to which beauty knowledge was produced, valued, and shared among women in the course of their ordinary lives.⁶⁰

Medieval notions of beauty envisioned it as a moral quality that people embodied in different ways. Pursuing beautiful bodies involved creating and re-creating sexual difference, since aesthetic canons for women and men differed. Human beauty was legitimately sought by women and men, whose willingness to embody beauty through adornment and body care was perceived to help maintain harmony with the natural order. However, beauty had different symbolic value in women and men. Beautiful male bodies were more dependent on moral features, whereas female beauty was physically embodied: Men were culturally visible through their use of the public word, women through their appearance. Moreover, women's looks were deemed to represent male dignity and honor rather than to epitomize the women themselves. Anxieties over women's adornment expressed tensions over controlling these sociosymbolic functions, and they were contested explicitly at length by Christine de



FIGURE 6.5: The queen Semiramis with her courtesans in a beautifying scene that had a significant iconographic tradition. Flemish Tapestry, Honolulu Academy of Arts, ca. 1480. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:QueenSemiramis2.jpg>.

Pizan. But male control was also ordinarily challenged by women's practices of embellishing themselves as well as by their extensive production of knowledge on human beauty, whether transmitted orally or—no doubt much less often—in written form. No other area of expertise on the body has a history of acknowledging female authority and women's authorship that is as steady as actions and texts intending to bring forth beautiful bodies.

96. *Ancrene Wisse*, 174.
97. As the demon says to Saint Margaret, "That's the thing I hate most under the sun, people running often to confession of their sins." *St. Margaret*, p. 298.
98. Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, vol. 1, bk. 5, chap. 47, p. 382. There are many examples of stories in which the sign of the cross protects the one who makes it from evil; one of the most dramatic is in the life of Saint Margaret, in which the sign of the cross that she makes as the demon-dragon tries to swallow her causes him to burst asunder.
99. *St. Juliana*, 314.
100. *A Song of Praise to Our Lord*, in Savage and Watson, *Anchortic Spirituality*, 326.
101. Keck, *Angels*, 168.
102. "Saint Michael the Archangel," 585–86.
103. *St. Margaret*, 298.
104. *Ancrene Wisse*, 156.

Chapter 6

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Chapter 7

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