Painting Women

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In his *Treatise Against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women* (1616), Thomas Tuke calls a woman’s painted face “the idoll, she doth so much adore.” “Her love of painting,” he insists, “hath transformed her into a picture.” Drawing a striking parallel between Protestant iconoclasm and condemnations of cosmetics, he pleads, “for very shame, let not these heathenish images be brought into the houses of God. They do ill become the bodies of Saints, which are the Temples of the holy Ghost.” For Tuke, face painting corrupts the material bodies of Christian women and the collective spiritual body of the church into which these painted images, objectified as idols, intrude. His argument bespeaks a faith in a direct correspondence between internal vices or virtues and their outward manifestations and the troubled career of that belief in its applications. Thus, he cites Saint Ambrose to show that “the condition of the mind is discerned in the state and behavior of the body. Without a doubt then a deceitfull and effeminate face, is the ensigne of a deceitfull and effeminate heart.” Although during this period men as well as women were likely to paint, Tuke (despite the title of his work) and his fellow polemicists overwhelmingly described the practice as a particularly feminine infraction, one product of women’s inborn pride. Painting
women embody the assumed alliance between internal and external states, in-cluding gender, the threat posed by women’s manipulations of that alliance, and the processes by which men’s interpretations of a woman’s cosmetic self-creation translate her from subject to object: “Her love of painting hath trans-formed her into a picture.”

_Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases, and Early Modern Culture_ studies the intersection of painting and femininity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe as a site for exploring abstract ideas of gender construction and subject-ivity in specific, historically grounded models. The term _painting_ suggests the plural aspects of my approach. First, I address representations of women by men in the early modern period, in works by artists as familiar as Shakespeare and Vasari and in those by lesser-known figures such as Giovanni Luigi Picinardi and Jean Liébault. Second, the term refers to women’s use of cosmetics during the period, a subject the book engages through readings of didactic works, material objects, and artworks that comment on women’s painting, often through the conflation of ideals of artistic beauty with those of feminine beauty. Finally, I examine women’s self-representations, as characters and creators, in literary texts and visual arts, in works such as Elizabeth Cary’s _Tragedy of Mariam_, Aemilia Lanyer’s _Salve Deus Rex Judeorum_, Marguerite de Navarre’s poetic _Miroirs_, and paintings by Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Elisabetta Sirani. I argue that early modern discussions of women’s face painting, despite the commitment of their (almost exclusively) male authors to an essentialist view of femininity, display clear evidence of the constructed quality of gender as performed in the practice of painting. This evidence, in turn, permits women writers and painters to legitimize their entries into print and the visual arts by challenging the essentialist grounds on which the conflation of painting and femininity is advanced. This book reads the material practice of face painting and the polemical writings attending it in relation to literary and visual works by women and shows how painting, in its various senses, served as a point of focus for the period’s cast-ings of femininity.

These chapters assume and demonstrate that constructions of gendered sub-jects in early modern culture, and in the arts that reflect it, depend upon interactions with generic and discursive choices that are themselves coded in demonstrably gendered ways. Focusing on painting allows one to consider in concrete terms and examples the theoretical relationship between psychological or phys-iological “interiority” and the body’s physical exterior—in other words, to en-
gage the vexing question of the relationship between biological sex and cultural gender as manifested in encounters with the conventions of cosmetic adornment and of literary and artistic production. Ubiquitous complaints about women’s deceptive use of cosmetics, for example, are often echoed in condemnations of literary works and visual icons that threaten to deceive readers or viewers. Thus, Tommaso Buoni surmises that men disallow women’s painting, “perche gli Amanti da cotal falsità argomentino alla falsità & doppiezza dell’animo; che chi non teme falsar le cose esteriori, agevuolmente studia à farsar i beni interiori” (“because men from those outward deceits gather the inward untruth and deceit of the minde: For she that feareth not to falsifie these exterioir parts, may with more ease, and lesse feare adulterate the inward Beautyes of the minde”). Philip Stubbes applies similar terms to the illusory, feminized practices of the stage when he compares “masking Players” to “painted sepulchres,” and John Downname makes this twin suspicion of cosmetic and theatrical disguise explicit: “like Players, they [painting women] come disguised in the similitude of other persons, for want of a better, they act their part in the habit of an harlot.”

*Painting Women* undertakes a comparative study of English, French, and Italian writers and visual artists to examine how men’s and women’s different approaches to painting contribute to early modern constructions of gender and to demonstrate the need to interpret gender in specific relationships to historical periods, cultures, and genres. In the past three decades feminist literary critics and art historians have uncovered and documented formerly neglected works by women artists and writers of early modern Europe, attempting to locate these works within the established, predominantly masculine literary and visual canons and to script a feminine history of the arts emergent within women’s works themselves. In their inception these critical efforts struggled with the difficulties attending assertions of literary or artistic value on the basis of sex, often assuming that early modern women’s works are inherently valuable because they appeared in a period that largely suppressed female public expression. This appeal to biographical and biological fact (that is, to an essential femininity) was troubled on several fronts. For example, attributions of anonymous or dubious works confronted the challenge of identifying critical criteria beyond gender, usually ascribed to a work’s feminist or gendered expression, to support arguments for and establish the significance of female authorship. Perhaps more urgently, the association of women’s artistic representations with their gendered bodies could serve to negate the artistic value of their works: thus, women artists and writers
were often portrayed as motivated by a need for direct self-expression rather than by a desire to master the media in which they work.\textsuperscript{13} Recent work in art history and literary studies has moved beyond the essentialism of its critical legacy,\textsuperscript{14} and I hope to contribute to this project by arguing that early modern women’s works can provide a template for contemporary constructionist approaches to femininity insofar as they self-consciously engage gender within the specific discourses of painting. Taking genre—literary, artistic, or cultural—as the starting point for comparisons between early modern men’s and women’s works, I examine performances of gender in relation to painting, rather than seeing literary and visual works as revelatory of their authors’ essential selves.\textsuperscript{15} Insofar as the gendered subject is a product of his or her manipulations of convention, women’s works must be read in relation to the overwhelmingly masculine literary, artistic, and cultural traditions from which they emerge.\textsuperscript{16} I survey the development of the early modern “beauty industry” and relate that phenomenon to other aspects of the culture (to pre- and post-Reformation views of the body and its adornment, for instance) and to the major artistic and literary currents and concerns of the period. My reading of the painting woman takes its cue from early modern women’s works, which establish their authors’ rights to self-creation and self-authorship by exposing and challenging the essentialist underpinnings of the conventions governing painting, in both of its senses.\textsuperscript{17}

“Femininity,” Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet writes, “is the creation of the mirror.” She explains, “the authority of the reflection is imposed primarily upon women who . . . construct themselves under the gaze of the other.”\textsuperscript{18} As the following chapters show, the cosmetic culture of early modern Europe places women before literal, visual, and textual mirrors that reflect masculine standards for feminine beauty, virtue, and vice. This cosmetic culture, as Saundra L. Bartky’s writes of the contemporary American beauty industry, constitutes “a disciplinary practice [that] produces a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine.” Through a gradual process of internalization, women comply with the means “by which the ideal body of femininity—and hence the feminine body-subject—is constructed; in doing this, they produce a ‘practiced and subjected’ body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed.”\textsuperscript{19} The result of this beauty industry, for the twenty-first-century woman as for her ancestors, is to insist that she “connive,” as John Berger puts it, “in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”\textsuperscript{20} As “self-policing subjects,” painting women engage in a “self-surveillance [that] is a form of obedience to patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{21}
In applying this argument to the cosmetic culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, certain qualifications must be noted. Two separate textual traditions, derived respectively from classical medical discourses and from the writings of the church fathers, sent competing and apparently contradictory messages to women concerning cosmetic self-creation. The first group of texts is composed of instructional manuals on the preparation of cosmetics, offering women recipes for ointments, lotions, soaps, bleaches, and powders to cleanse the body and to dye the hair and skin. These texts set forth a wide range of recipes, some involving harmless (if unsavory) organic ingredients, others casting women as amateur apothecaries handling dangerous substances in their homes, often with toxic outcomes. Mary Evelyn’s recipe for “Puppidog Water for the Face,” in *Mundus Muliebris* (1690), exemplifies organic treatments:

Take a Fat Pig, or a Fat Puppidog, of nine days old, and kill it, order it as to Roast; save the Blood, and fling away nothing but the Guts; then take the Blood, and Pig, or the Puppidog, and break the Legs and Head, with all the Liver and the rest of the Inwards . . . to that, take two Quarts of old Canary, a pound of unwash’d Butter not salted; a Quart of snails-Shells, and also two Lemmons . . . Still all these together in a Rose Water Still . . . Let it drop slowly into a Glass-Bottle, in which let there be a lump of Loaf-Sugar, and a little Leaf-Gold.

Giovanni Battista della Porta’s advice for the preparation of *sollimato*, or mercury sublimate, meanwhile, details the more toxic treatments common in the period. “Havemo detto già, che niuna cosa val tanto a far bella la faccia alle donne, cioè a polirla, e farla lucida, quanto l’argento vivo” (“I said, that there was nothing better than quick-silver for womens paints, and to cleanse their faces, and make them shine”), he writes, and he recommends the following recipe:

Piglia meza oncia di argento vivo purgato, e non falsificato co’l piombo . . . quesi mischia con una meza libra di sollimato, e ponilo in mortaio di marmo, e con un pistello di legno nuovo lo pesterai volgendo sempre in rotondo, primo diverrà nero, poi fra sei hore diverrà bianco se non lascierai di volgere in giro sempre.

[Take one ounce of pure quick-silver, not falsified with lead . . . Mingle this with a half a pound of Mercury sublimate, and put it into a marble mortar, and with a new wooden pestle, stir it well, turning it round about. First, it will be black, in six hours it will grow white, if you cease not to beat it.]
After the addition of salt, the mixture is ground, washed, and let set until the solids sink to the bottom. When “onely powder remain without dregs” (“lapolvere nudo senza bruttezze”), Porta writes, “make little cakes of it, and dry it in the sun” (“ne farai pitole, e sa seccare al sole”).

Underlying the advice of instructional manuals is a consensus on ideals of feminine beauty—blonde hair, black eyes, white skin, red cheeks and lips—culled from and promulgated by the Petrarchan tradition and its transmission across Europe. Giovanni Marinello’s influential Gli ornamenti delle donne (1562) offers the following wisdom on the beauty of women’s complexions, citing the origins of these standards:

le guancie saranno bianche, & vermiglie, & appresso tenere, & morbide, la bianchezza somigli latte, gigli, rose bianche, & neve: & il colore vermiglio paia rose incarnate, & iancinti porpurei, tali le scrisse il Petrarca nel Sonnetto Io canterei d’amore: ove dice.

E le rose vermiglie infra la neve
Mover da’l ora . . .

Et l’Ariosto nel Settimo Canto.

Spargeasi per la guancia delicata
Misto color di rose, e di ligustri.

Dalle quali cose cogliamo, che quattro qualità si richiedono alle guancie, oltre alla loro positura; che siano bianche, vermiglie, tenere, & morbide.

[the cheeks will be white and red, and nearly tender and delicate, the whitest resembling milk, lilies, white roses, and snow and the vermilion colors a pair of flesh-pink roses, and purple hyacinths, as Petrarch writes in the Sonnet, “I will sing of love,” where he says:

and the vermilion roses among the snow
moved by the breeze . . .

And Aristo in the Seventh Canto:

The mixed color of roses and lilies
Spread across her delicate cheek.

From which things we gather that four qualities are required of the cheeks, other than their position; that they be white, red, tender and delicate.]

While regulating and standardizing ideals of feminine beauty, instructional manuals, moreover, suggest the considerable labor and expense that women were willing to invest in the self-consuming effort to achieve those ideals. Thus,
Porta concludes his recipe for *sollimato* by confessing, “son molte donne, che non sostengono l’argento vivo sollimato, perche, è molto nosevole alli denti” (“some will not away with quick-silver, by reason of the hurt it commonly doth to the teeth”). But the benefits of the treatment, he insists, outweigh its costs: “Ma veramente di niun modo meglio si cava acqua di argento vivo, che quella, che vien chiara, e humida, perche bagnandosi la faccia con quello, splende . . . ne ho visto in mia vita cosa piu eccellente” (“Yet there is no better water, then that which is extracted from quick-silver; it is so clear and transparent, and the face anointed with it, shines like silver . . . and I never saw a better”). When Margaret Cavendish disapproves of painting’s “Sluttishness,” her complaint is not against the immorality of the practice but against its unladylike labor, “especially in the Preparatives . . . which are very uneasy to lye in, wet and greasy, and very unsavoury.” As for cosmetics themselves, “most Paintings are mixed with Mercury, wherein is much Quicksilver, which is of so subtil a malignant nature, as it will fall from the Head to the Lungs, and cause Consumptions . . . rot the Teeth, dim the Eyes, and take away both the Life and Youth of a Face.”

The toxicity of early modern cosmetics was a common theme in the second group of early modern texts of the cosmetic debate: invectives against painting. Juan Luis Vives’s commentary on the practice in *De institutione feminae Christiane* (1523) is typical. “I should like to know,” Vives asks, “for what reason a young woman smears herself with white lead and purple pigment. If it is to please herself, she is mad . . . But if you are looking for a husband . . . [i]t seems to me that wishing to attract a man with makeup is the same as trying to do so with a mask. Just as you attracted him in this disguise, so will you drive him away when you are unmasked” (“in quo equidem audire pervelim quid spectet virgo, cum cerussa et purpurisse se illinit. Si sic placere sibi, demens est . . . At sponsum quaeris virum et ei conciliari studes fuco . . . perinde mihi videtur esse cupere te fuco pellicere virum aliquem ac persona; quem tantum avertes renudata quantum attrixisti contecta”). The invective catalogues the horrifying physical effects of cosmetics:

Quid quod et tenella cutis citius rugatur et totus faciei habitus in senilem deformatur modum? Foetet spiritus, scabrescent dentes, toto denique corpore taeter hailtus spiratur, tum ex cerussa et argento vivo, tum vel maxime ex dropacibus, sapunculis et smegmatis quis cutem velut tabellam in postridianam picturam parant.

[Young skin becomes wrinkled more quickly, the whole appearance of the face begins to look old, the breath reeks, the teeth become rotten, and a foul odor is
emitted by the whole body, from white lead, mercury, and especially from depilatories, soaps, and ointments with which they prepare their face like a wooden tablet for the next day’s painting.[31]

Vives calls forth classical and early Christian authorities to argue that painting adulterates God’s workmanship, erects a false idol in the place of God’s image, is a temptation to lust, exemplifies feminine dissembling, and was introduced to women by the apostate angels after their fall to earth. [32] Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on home economics, *Della famiglia* (1434), agrees with Vives and underscores the fact that the addressees of anti-cosmetic invectives (as opposed to cosmetic recipe books) are often men rather than women. Alberti’s patriarchal speaker, Giannozzo, instructs his younger male family members on how to “persuade women . . . never to paint with white powder, brazilnut dye, or other makeup” (“come e’ persuavano alle donne per questo non si dipignessono il viso con cerusa, brasile o simile liscio alcuno”), a rhetorical feat that “few husbands can manage” (“niuno pare sappia distornela”). [33] Having informed his wife that “the woman’s character is the jewel of her family” (“la onestà nella donna sempre fu ornamento della famiglia”) and that wearing makeup invariably compromises her chastity, Giannozzo illustrates his point:

Ivi era il Sancto, una ornatissima statua d’argento, solo a cui il capo et le mani erano d’avorio candissimo: era pulita, lustrava, posta nel mezo del tabernaculo come s’usa: dissili: “Donna mia, se alla mattina tu con gessi et calcine, et simili impiastri imbiutassi il viso a questa imagine . . . dimi, dopo molti giorni volendola vendere così lisciata, quanti danari n’aresti tu? Più che mai avendola lisciata?”

[There was a saint in the room, a very lovely statue of silver, whose head and hands were of purest ivory. “My dear wife,” I said to her, “suppose you besmirched the face of this image in the morning with chalk and calcium and other ointments . . . Tell me, after many days of this, if you wanted to sell it, all polished and painted, how much money do you think you would get for it? More than if you hand never begun painting it?”]

When his wife admits that its value would be much less, Giannozzo moralizes his tale: “the buyer of the image does not buy it for a coating of paint . . . but because he appreciates the excellence of the statue and the skill of the artist” (“che chi compera l’imagine non compera quello impiastro . . . ma appregia la bontà della statua et la gratia del magisterio”). Moreover, “if those poultices could have that [ill] effect on ivory, which is hard stuff by nature . . . they can do your
own brow and cheeks still greater harm” (“se queste adunque pultiglie tanto pos-
sono in una cosa durissima, in uno avolio . . . quelle molto più potranno nel
fronte et nelle guance tue”).35

Three points, shared by most anti-cosmetic invectives, become clear in Vives’s
and Alberti’s comments and reveal unexpected affinities between texts of this tra-
dition and the cosmetic recipe books whose existence and contents seem to con-
tradict them. First, Alberti’s address to male householders casts anti-
cosmetic
discourses as a disciplinary practice through which ideal femininity is constructed
and in which masculinity is deeply invested. If masculine ideals of feminine
beauty are enforced in instructional manuals, in which women learn to connive
in conforming their appearances to an acceptable pattern, masculine ethical stan-
daards are imposed upon women in anti-cosmetic invectives. Although espous-
ing contradictory aims, these two genres undertake identical means. As Amy
Richlin writes of the classical Roman forerunners of these early modern types,
moralizing texts coexisted in tension with contemporary technology,” each
striving toward the same disciplinary goal: “Thus in Roman culture as today,
real women can be said both to implicate themselves in a system by which they
beautify themselves, and to be implicated in a system that conceals, disguises,
derides and silences them . . . The term ‘beauty culture’ incorporates the para-
dox whereby a cultural practice simultaneously constructs and erases its practi-
tioners.”36 When Tuke claims that, “because governement is granted unto men
by nature,” husbands must “reform” painting wives, he affirms that men’s res-
traint of women’s painting, like the cosmetic culture that mandates their deco-
roration, is itself a regulatory practice—a form of painting—constitutive of femi-
ninity. He advises:

take away her painting, and do not that with terror and threats, but with a gentle
and sweet perswasion. Let her ever and non heare thee say, that the painted faces
of women doe displease thee . . . Be not slacke to discourse of these things . . .
sometimes speaking faire, and sometimes turning away thine eyes with dislike, and
sometimes againe making much of her. Dost thou not see that painters, when they
goe about to make a faire picture, doe now apply these colours, and then others,
wiping out the former? Be not thou more unskilfull then painters. They being to
paint the shape of the bodie on tables, do use so great paines and care; and is it not
meet that wee should trie all conclusions, use all meanes, when we desire to make
soules better?37
Tuke’s appropriation of feminine painting as a masculine rhetorical strategy devoted to adorning not the body but the soul is typical of the period’s gendering of rival versions of painting, in both of its senses. In treatises on the art of painting, as in cosmetic texts, masculine creativity appears as a function of the mind, women’s creative and self-creative acts as belonging to the body. While a man before the mirror reflects upon the status of his soul, the woman engaged in her toilette is “essentially a bodily being.”

Second, invectives such as Vives’s and Alberti’s assert a relationship between the often unwholesome materials constituting early modern cosmetics and the frailties of femininity. Whereas cosmetic manuals proceed on the presuppositions that “the female body is something that needs to be fixed” and that “a woman’s face, unpainted, is defective,” anti-cosmetic invectives interpret makeup as simultaneously an index and a literalization of women’s “deformities,” physical and, most important, moral. Although at first glance concerns about the toxicity of early modern cosmetics may strike one as “a feminist point, [an] argument in the main interest of women,” the formulaic insistence that painting women “teach their faces to lye . . . getting deformity instead of beauty” confirms that the argument does not aim to promote women’s welfare but to promulgate a view of femininity as flawed, corrupt, and corrupting. Women’s cosmetics are considered to be, in Richlin’s phrase, “something icky put over something icky.” When John Bulwer, in *Anthropometamorphosis* (1653), notes that “Roman Dames had infinite little boxes filled with loathsome trash of sundry kinds of colours and compositions, for the hiding of their deformities, the very sight and smell whereof was able to turne a mans stomack,” he transmits the misogynistic classical discourses (in this instance, Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*) equating the female body with the makeup box, or *pyxides*: beautiful on the outside but polluted on the inside, both are versions of the painted sepulchre. Yet early modern makeup boxes also embody the twin aspects of the cosmetic debate itself. Decorated with scenes from mythology or literature, from the Rape of Lucretia to the Judgment of Paris to Petrarchan *trionfi* (fig. 1), their exteriors, like cosmetic manuals, celebrate the benefits of women’s adornment, while their toxic contents prefigure and promote the fatal outcomes of painting rehearsed by invectives.

Finally, Vives and Alberti both imagine and construct the painting woman as an object—of decoration, display, and scrutiny—in much the same way that cosmetic recipe books posit a (primarily male) audience for whom makeup is applied. Thus, Vives casts the woman’s painted face as a mask or a wooden tablet, and
Alberti sees both wives and statues as objects acquired by the male connoisseur with the acuity to value the skill of the artificer in embodying his Idea in debased matter. The painting woman is an object, moreover, that calls forth masculine interpretation and fashioning. Tuke’s paterfamilias must become a painter to create the ideal wife, while Alexander Niccholes notes the need (which he does not satisfy) for exegetical expertise when confronting the inscrutable feminine text: “There is a Text in woman, that I would faine have women to expound, or man either: to what end is the laying out of the embrodred haire, embared breasts, virmillioned cheekes, alluring lookes, fashion gates, and Artfull countenances, effeminate, intangling, and insnaring gestures.” By staging and exploring “the dichotomies of surface and depth, mind and body, particularly as applied to women,” the early modern cosmetic debate revolves around the objectified figure of the painting woman poised precariously before her polysemous mirror. Unraveling her meanings and mysteries is a case study in early modern gender construction. Buoni’s explanation of women’s motives for painting illustrates one
strategy by which this construction proceeds. Wondering “why doe women which are not borne fayre attempte with artificiall Beauty to seeme fayre?” (“perche le Donne non nate belle con artificiosi belletti tentano apparir belle?”), he speculates:

ò forse perche essendo le Donne assai sottoposte al rossore, che suol nascere da vergogna . . . & già sapendo che la bellezza è commune ornamento di tutte le Dorine; appare grave nota d’infamia à gl’intelletti loro l’esser prive di quello; onde per schifare una tanta macchia non temono con mille inventioni & con mille artificii ornat i corpi suoi.

[Perhaps because women being for the moste parte subject unto that pleasing redness, which ariseth of shamefastnesse . . . and knowing that this Beautifull bashfulness, giveth splendour and ornament to all women, it seemeth to their understandings a great note of infamy to be deprived thereof; and therefore to avoyde so great a blotte, they feare not with a thousand artes and inventions to give the like Beauty to their faces.]⁴⁹

Such interpretations blame feminine duplicity (imagined as inherent in women’s natures) for behaviors prompted by aesthetic and ethical standards imposed upon women by men. Modest women blush, women are told, and so they paint, perhaps not primarily to feign blushing (and thereby mask immodesty) but to conform to male expectations for feminine appearance and behavior. Yet, by attempting to prove themselves modest, to avoid “infamy,” they indict themselves as immodest. If Buoni suggests the double bind attending women’s decisions to paint or not to paint, Roy Porter summarizes the semiotic double bind in which painting places male interpreters. “She who couldn’t blush,” he writes, “was a woman without shame. But the woman who wore rouge . . . wore an artificial blush, which (men feared) all too readily . . . hid the bare-faced cheek of the shameless woman.”⁵⁰

Women’s objectification by the cosmetic culture of early modern Europe and the seemingly un navigable sea of contradictions confronting them, caught between the mandates of the beauty culture, on the one hand, and the moral indictments of anti-cosmetic polemicians, on the other, present bleak prospects for readers hoping to see these women as self-conscious, self-governing subjects. Viewing the practice of making up as “self-deconstructing, since this focus on the surface calls into question the existence of any underlying self,”⁵¹ a number of contemporary feminist critics have compared cosmetics to decapitation; an
“eroticization” of the female head that silences women and robs them of identity. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz writes, “it is precisely the desire to be looked at rather than the desire to look which is signaled by cosmetics.” Yet, as Buoni’s discussion of the feminine blush illustrates, early modern women may have found themselves as effectively silenced and objectified by injunctions against cosmetics as by cultural expectations for feminine beauty. To illustrate the similar regulatory outcomes of the cosmetic debate’s twin genres, we might recall Vives’s warning to women that painting alienates husbands, who suspect feminine deception and are repelled by the ravages of cosmetics. Despite Shirley Garner’s suggestion that early modern “women’s pleasure in making up may have been heightened by its linking them with the forbidden, sinful, and sexually illicit,” we must note that a common defense of face painting in the period insisted that wives embellish themselves to please their husbands. Porta explains the essentialist underpinnings of this defense:

[But when God, the Author of all things, would have the Natures of all things to continue, he created Male and Female . . . and to make Man in love with his Wife, he made her soft, delicate and fair, to entice man to embrace her. We therefore, that Women might be pleasing to their Husbands, and that their Husbands might not be offended at their deformities, and turn not to other Womens chambers, have taught Women how, by the Art of Decking themselves and Painting, if they be ashamed of their foul and swart Complexions, they may make themselves Fair and Beautiful.]54

In light of the “violent implications of the patriarchal politics of painting,” which seek to silence women either through the eroticization or castigation of their physical forms, the notion that early modern women could assert a “right to paint” may amount merely to admitting their inevitable complicity in a sys-
tem in which they could only please (or displease) their male governors, rather than pleasing, or governing, themselves.

What possibilities existed for women implicated in the early modern cosmetic culture for negotiation, self-authorship, and autonomy? Is it always true that women painted only to be viewed, thereby denying their identities as viewing, discriminating subjects? If it is true that “integral to the fashioning of a personal identity is the construction of a physical body,” this study asks: How can painting help to construct the feminist body of early modern women?

With Gionnozzo’s wife, the quiet recipient of her husband’s stern advice in Alberti’s *Della famiglia*, we can begin to answer these questions. When asked whether his wife obeyed his injunction against painting, Gionnozzo admits:

Pur tale ora alle nozze, o che ella si vergognasse tra le genti, o che ella fosse riscal-data pel danzare, la mi pareva alquanto più che l’usato tincta: ma in casa non mai; salvo il vero una sola volta quando doveano venire gli amici et le loro donne la pasqua convitati a cena in casa mia; allora la moglie mia col nome d’Idio tutta impomiciata, troppa lieta s’afrontata a quelunque venia, et così a chi andava si porgeva, a tutti motteggiava. Io me n’avidì.

[It is true that at weddings sometimes, whether because she was embarrassed at being among so many people or heated with dancing, she sometimes appeared to have more than her normal color. In the house, however, there was only one time, when friends and their wives were invited to dinner at Easter. My wife, on this occasion, had covered her face with pumice, in God’s name, and she talked all too animatedly with each guest on his arrival or departure. She was showing off and being merry with everyone, as I observed.]

To remedy the situation, Gionnozzo pulled his wife aside and said: “Oh dear, how did your face get dirty? Did you by any chance bump into a pan? Go wash yourself, quick, before these people begin to make fun of you” (“Tristo a me, et come t’imbrattasti così il viso? forse t’abbattesti a qualche padella? Laverati, che questi altri non ti dilegino”). He concludes triumphantly: “She understood me at once, and began to cry. I let her go wash off both tears and makeup. After that I never had to tell her again” (“Ella me intese, lagrimò; io gli die’ luogo ch’ella si lavasse le lacrime et il liscio. Dipoi ebbi mai di questo che dirgliene”).

To assert that the early modern cosmetic debate serves as a case study in the period’s constructions of gender requires one to show how anti-cosmetic invec-
tives and instructional manuals support an essentialist view of femininity while implicitly acknowledging that cosmetics are troublesome specifically because they expose the constructed qualities of masculinity and femininity. Gionnozzo’s anecdote illustrates both the essentialist underpinnings of the cosmetic debate and their troubled applications as they move beyond polemics toward the material objects of their concern, women’s bodies. He censures not only his wife’s painting but also her garrulousness, emphasizing multiple feminine vices that together compromise her modesty. Her “showing off” is imagined as a product of women’s natural shortcomings as descendants of Eve, and Alberti’s goal is to curb women’s natures through the controlling wisdom of male governors. Yet the story also demonstrates the pragmatic and semiotic limitations of this masculine rule: as Gionnozzo admits, he is unable to determine at social gatherings whether his wife is painting or is simply flushed from dancing or (in accordance with the masculine dream of feminine modesty) might, in fact, be blushing with embarrassment. The inference of women’s essential characters is profoundly shaken by the practice of painting. If the empirical evidence is inconclusive or, worse yet, deceptive, what can one affirm about women’s natures? Barnaby Rich, in *My Ladies Looking-Glasse* (1616), makes explicit the dilemma implicit in Gionnozzo’s narrative when he admits that external evidence of women’s characters can be misleading and easily manipulated: “But let us enter a little into consideration, how we might distinguish between a good woman and a bad; we cannot do it by the outward show; for if we should ayme our judgements but according to their lookes, we might sometimes thinke the old painted face of Proserpina to be the same that is was, when she first became to be Plutoes wife.” Not only does makeup sever the link between women’s internal characters and external shows, it also marks the borders of gender. If “the surface of the body is a site for the display of difference,” the early modern cosmetic culture acknowledges with anxiety the possibility that men, through painting, might become feminized, even as painting women might assume a creative and self-creative authority ordinarily reserved for men. Gionnozzo’s report implies that his unassuming wife may have dared to assume this right of self-creation and that her husband may have remained entirely unaware.

Women’s painting, then, threatens not only men’s control over women but the very terms on which that control is established—that is, men’s superiority as demonstrated by the equation of women’s internal weaknesses with the frailties of the female body. A central assumption of Alberti’s project of wife taming, one employed repeatedly throughout the cosmetic debate, is that women must be
molded and given shape by the creative intellect of men. Women are, in essence, matter upon which men impose form. Rich suggests this when he argues that women, rather than men, must beware the hazards of painting “because as women are more flexible, and therefore more apt to be seduced to ill, so they are more tractable againe, and therefore more easie to be induced to vertue.” He concludes optimistically, “There is more possibility to reclaime ten ill living women, to a conformitie of a better life, then to reforme one misliving man.”

The more pessimistic, and more common, view was that the painting woman dared to usurp the privileges of masculinity by molding and fashioning herself. While clearly a debased version of masculine rule, devoted only to the body rather than the soul—a material painting rather than the spiritual art imagined by Tuke—women’s self-fashioning threatened, chiefly by impersonating, masculine creative sovereignty and natural superiority.

This image of malleable woman imprinted by man informs both the cosmetic debate and discussions of the art of painting, in which it guides theories of the relative merits of disegno and colore. Derived from the Aristotelian precept that, as Patricia Reilly summarizes it, “form, or the idea in its ideal state, is equated with the male . . . [while] matter is subservient to form, merely fleshing out the divine world of ideas,” the dichotomy posed challenges for women artists during the period. As Fredrika Jacobs has shown, thanks to the gendered division of form and matter, theorists commonly assign to women the ability merely to copy, rather than to improve upon, nature. Thus, portraiture was considered the genre at which women painters, lacking the creative ingegno of male artists, might excel. As Giovanni Battista Armenini put it in De veri precetti della pittura (1586), “poiche da mediocre ingegno può esser posseduto à bastanza, tutta volta ch’egli sia pratico ne’ colori” (“even an artist of mediocre talent can master this art as long as he is experienced in colors”). Moreover, given that “la Pittura esser femmina et il Disegnio maschio” (Painting is feminine and Design is masculine), as Pietro Testa claims, color requires the restraint and order provided by the masculine creativity embodied in design. Thus, it is the male painter’s task to subdue the seductive qualities of colore. As a result of these concepts, the works of women artists, who were deemed incapable of exercising the intellectual control of disegno, were subject to interpretations that emphasized the unmediated imitation of nature and direct expression of women’s essential natures and passions. Vasari presents Bolognese sculptor Properzia de’ Rossi, the only woman to appear in the first edition of the Vite in 1550, first and foremost as a woman in
love whose unrequited passion reveals itself in her major work, *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*. Vasari reports:

Nel quale ella finì, con grandissima maraviglia di tutta Bologna, un leggiadissimo quadro, dove perciòché in quel tempo la misera donna era innamoratissima d’un bel giovane (il quale pareva che poco de lei si curasse), fece la moglie del maestro di casa di Faraone che, innamoratasi di Josep, quasi disperata del tanto pregarlo, a l’ultimo gli toglie la veste d’attorno con una donnesca grazia e più che mirabile. Fu questa opera da tutti reiputata bellissima et a llei de gran sodisfazione, pandole con questa figura del vecchio Testamento avere isfogato in parte l’ardentissima sua passione.

[She completed a most graceful panel, to the great amazement of all Bologna—since at the time the poor woman was very much in love with a handsome young man who, it seemed, cared little for her—in which she carved Potiphar’s wife, who, having fallen in love with Joseph and almost desperate after so many entreaties, finally takes off her clothes before him with a womanly grace that is more than admirable. This sculpture was deemed most beautiful by everyone, and it gave her great satisfaction, since with this figure from the Old Testament she felt she had expressed in part her own most burning passion.]^70

Imagining the woman artist to be incapable of crafting a work of pure invention, Vasari refers the panel to De’ Rossi’s personal experience, conflating artist and subject and interpreting Potiphar’s wife as a self-portrait of the desperate sculptor. As Jacobs has argued, moreover, Vasari portrays De’ Rossi as a victim of “erotomania,” a specifically feminine form of melancholia understood to be devoid of the creative genius associated with male melancholia during this period. Even in her despair, the female artist could only remain on the surface of things, copying the debased images that reflected her own inferior nature.

Following critics such as Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Patricia Reilly, and Philip Sohm, who align attitudes about feminine self-creation in the early modern cosmetic debate with those attending discussions of the art of painting proper, these chapters describe a feminist intervention by women artists that foregrounds the constructed quality of gender when viewed through the lens of painting. My contributions to art historical criticism are to demonstrate how the dynamics of the cosmetic debate illuminate women artists’ self-representations and, beyond this, to align these visual works with texts by women writers that engage the cosmetic debate in similar ways and deploy similar strategies for authorial self-
fashioning. Although Bartky argues that “painting the face is not like painting a picture,” for the woman artist, negotiating restrictions on feminine creativity advanced by the cosmetic culture and in theoretical discussions of the arts, the two acts may be more similar than they appear. Because the judgments and mandates of the early modern cosmetic culture and those of connoisseurs and consumers of women’s writing and painting during the period rest upon shared assumptions about women’s nature and their creative capabilities, “gross imbalances in the social power of the sexes,” integral to the cosmetic culture, also attend the creation and the reception of women’s works. Through various approaches to the subject these chapters assert that painting, in both of its senses, can constitute a gesture of feminine control over the mirror and its reflection.

This study locates the intersection of painting and femininity in a number of works by men and women, in different media and from different countries of origin. I employ comparative, interdisciplinary principles to approach the cultures of early modern Europe as they are reflected in disparate texts and visual arts emerging from a wide-ranging temporal period (roughly two centuries) and a far-reaching geographic area (from Catholic Italy to Protestant England). In doing so, I share the comparative perspective delineated by Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes that sees literary (and, I would add, artistic) activity “as involved in a complex web of cultural relations,” and I concentrate on the figure of painting to negotiate and describe this network.

The juxtapositions of works, authors, and national cultures undertaken in these chapters may strike some readers as going beyond what is generally deemed advisable for historically based criticism, daring imprudently “at one slight bound [to] o’erleap . . . all bound.” I maintain, however, that moving freely, although far from arbitrarily, from Italy to France to England, and from literary to visual works, can remind critics of the early modern period (myself included) of the extensive, dynamic culture of the Renaissance: an international cultural movement whose documentation—or, perhaps more correctly, celebration—occupied nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century critics and admirers of the period. The primacy of this concept has been eclipsed by more recent critical approaches, chiefly new historicist, that view individual texts and artworks within limited temporal (usually synchronic) and geographic (occasionally national but most often more narrow regional, civic, or local) contexts. Rather than advocating a return to an antiquated, laudatory approach to the period, I utilize painting to trace the outline of a body of works, attitudes, and practices that, consid-
ered in its entirety, constitutes a background against which local gestures take on new meaning and novel relationships among discrete texts, discourses, and artworks are revealed. This involves shifting my primary focus away from issues of geographic, chronological, or intertextual influence in order to delineate a coherent, sustained conversation on gender, performed by different voices in different tongues and registers, as they construct masculinity and femininity in relation to painting. Remaining mindful of the diverse and dialogic qualities of early modern cultures, and of the unfinished, progressive natures of identity and subjectivity in the period, I seek connections across national and disciplinary borders that illustrate diverse commentaries on and performances of gender. Conversely, these connections underscore the consistency and frequency of some constructions of identity through men’s and women’s relationships with the material practices of painting. Such an interdisciplinary approach, which encompasses a wide range of texts, objects, and practices, can augment partial views of early modern subjectivity resulting from highly specific approaches to literary, artistic, and cultural texts.

In moving across national borders, this book revisits the remains (if not necessarily resurrecting the spirit) of an earlier scholarly project devoted to describing the progress of the *translatio studii* across Renaissance Europe. In some measure both the early modern cosmetic debate and theories of the art of painting, as they unfolded across the Continent and in England, offer textbook examples of the translation of classical studies. Derived from a small core of classical and patristic works, pro- and anti-cosmetic texts appeared first in Latin before being translated into the vernacular languages, with many Italian works receiving translation into French and English in turn. Classical sources on the art of painting followed a similar line of transmission, their commonplaces reiterated by Italian, French, and English authors over the course of several centuries. Indeed, the repetitions of anti-cosmetic invectives could be seen, by the seventeenth century, as grounds on which to reject these works: John Gauden’s *Discourse of Artificial Beauty* (1656) challenges the authority of invectives by pointing out that “the number of mens names” in the chorus condemning painting far surpasses “the weight of their reasons.” Although the body of texts constituting the early modern cosmetic debate and the related corpus on the art of painting rely upon basic ideas of representation and self-representation gleaned from a small number of classical core texts, their transmission invariably bears the traces of the political and cultural climates in which they were received. Such cultural distinctions, in fact, illustrate the multinational character of Renaissance
culture and support my assertion that the meanings of early modern texts, artworks, and material practices cannot be fully understood when interpreted only on the parochial level, without reference to aspects of the more general culture, in all of its diversity, informing them. The works themselves reflect their authors’ recognitions of the cultural conditions of reception—conditions that, in turn, bespeak material and practical differences in women’s relationships to painting in early modern Italy, France, and England. Thus, for instance, Tuke at once relies heavily upon an English translation of an anti-cosmetic invective by Spaniard Andres de Laguna and distinguishes between Englishwomen’s unacceptable but manageable painting and the ungovernable “Italianate” practices of Catholic women, whose disguises transform them into “Romish Jesabel[s].” Rather than eliding these distinctions, I respect and utilize differences among representations of painting in order to describe early modern cultures’ shared and disparate perceptions of how women come into being through their manipulations of the materials of cosmetic self-creation.

This book argues, then, that comparison and interdisciplinarity are fundamental to understanding local instances of the gendering of early modern painting and to connecting the concerns of the cosmetic debate to more general attitudes about femininity and women’s capacities for self-expression and self-creation during the period. Interpreting women’s works in relation to one another and to the dominant, male-authored discourses from which they emerge, I hope to return the Renaissance to the early modern, remaining mindful that “the Renaissance’ as a nineteenth-century, retrospectively painted portrait,” like any painted face, reflects both likeness and difference.

Chapter 1 examines William Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece” and Elisabetta Sirani’s Portia Wounding Her Thigh through their engagements with the gendered arts of painting, rhetoric, and cosmetics. Against the backdrop of Sirani’s funeral, with its display of an extraordinary effigy of the artist that carries the trace of her culture’s complex negotiations with women’s painting, I argue that Sirani’s painting and Shakespeare’s poem respond to the commonplaces of the early modern cosmetic culture and, in varying degrees, challenge its disciplinary mandates. Whereas this challenge is only partially realized in “The Rape of Lucrece,” which ultimately contains its heroine within Shakespeare’s “rhetoric of display,” Sirani’s Portia advances the painting woman’s right to self-create by emphasizing the heroine’s self-mutilation as a cosmetic wound. Sirani’s image is an exemplary work for the concerns of this book because it demonstrates one
means by which the feminist artist could establish the female subject by negotiating and exposing the essentialism of the early modern cosmetic culture.

Chapter 2 studies the transcript of Agostino Tassi’s 1612 trial for the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi in relation to constructions of femininity in Gentileschi’s paintings of Judith and in Shakespeare’s juridical tragicomedy, Measure for Measure. Although the transcript has most often been used to infer a psychological drama enacted in Gentileschi’s paintings, I read it as a documentary history of gender relations and assumptions informing both the female painter’s and the male playwright’s works. A brief discussion of two domestic portraits of women, by Prospero Fontana and his daughter, Lavinia, illuminates the shared concerns of the rape trial and Measure for Measure with women’s places within and beyond the troubled household. I argue that the trial, Artemisia’s Judith paintings, and Shakespeare’s play all explore the intersection of painting and justice and expose the dependence of men’s judgments on women’s agency. Shakespeare and Artemisia both envision a newly empowered female subject, created through her control over her own specular image. Augmenting the simple, binary formula for determining women’s characters, Artemisia and Shakespeare complicate conventional images of women’s duplicitous characters and repair the female friendships threatened by the polarizing approach to gender current in the legal and aesthetic assumptions of early modern culture.

Together, chapters 3 and 4 consider the interplay between representations of women’s painting in the cosmetic culture and Reformation discussions of idolatry and iconoclasm. Chapter 3 considers Marguerite de Navarre’s two textual mirrors, Le Miroir de l’âme pécheresse and Le Miroir de Jhesus Christe crucifié in the context of Continental discussions of idolatry, on the one hand, and the cosmetic culture’s gendering of vision and contemplation, on the other. I show how the frequent deployment of the image of Socrates’ mirror in cosmetic texts (specifically, in Jean Liébault’s Trois livres de l’embellishment et ornemment du corps humain) renders the painting woman at once an idol, in her objectification, and an idolater, in her illicit power of self-creation. By emphasizing women’s intimacy with Christ, grounded upon his relationships with women during his Incarnation, Marguerite and Lavinia Fontana both describe the female subject as discriminating and self-aware.

Chapter 4 traces Marguerite’s influence in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, where John Bale’s publication of Elizabeth’s youthful translation of Le Miroir de l’âme pécheresse uses Marguerite’s imagery to advance Elizabeth’s legitimacy as heir to the throne and to defend Anglican iconoclasm against Catholic
idolatry. Bale’s redeployment of the themes of Marguerite’s first *Miroir* informs Elizabeth’s iconography throughout her reign. Eight years after Elizabeth’s death, Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judeæorum* comments on the difficult legacy of Elizabethan imagery, tainted by its associations with idolatry and debased women’s painting. Attributing to women an interpretive acuity and spiritual self-awareness approximating Marguerite’s, Lanyer imagines an immaculate female subject whose intimacy with Christ repays the troubling division between her inward state and outward show.

Finally, chapter 5 studies the vicissitudes of concepts of custom and conscience as they permeate post-Reformation and Counter-Reformation approaches to women’s cosmetic self-creation. A prefatory discussion of two visual mirrors for women, by Giovanni Bellini and Titian, illustrates the legacy of the cosmetic debate’s two literary genres in representations of painting women and shows how both genres rob women of interiority while enabling their male creators to engage in various cultural dialogues through the display of the objectified female form. Next, I concentrate on two English works written in moments at which the nature and sovereignty of individual conscience were particularly pressing concerns. Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam* embodies the commonplaces of anti-cosmetic invectives in Salome while exploring the possibility of women’s self-determination and self-creation, grounded in her inviolable conscience, in the figure of Mariam. In John Gauden’s *Discourse of Artificial Beauty* the conscientious defense of women’s rights to cosmetic self-creation enables the construction of the female subject. Finally, I consider the interplay of custom and conscience in images of Mary Magdalen’s conversion by Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, illustrating that the strategies for constructing female subjectivity in Gauden’s work parallel those employed by women writers and artists during the period. Defending a woman’s right of self-creation, these works illustrate the birth of the female subject through her negotiations with the rival demands of the countenance and the conscience.