Painting Women

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Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases, and Early Modern Culture.

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I end this study of early modern painting by returning to our own era through the haunting and heartbreaking refrain of Bruce Springsteen’s “Atlantic City”:

Everything dies, baby, that’s a fact,
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back.
Put your makeup on, fix your hair up pretty,
And meet me tonight in Atlantic City.¹

The lines reiterate the association, often noted in the preceding pages, between cosmetics and death—a connection vividly expressed, for example, when Margaret Cavendish compares women’s “Preparatives” to “Masks of Sear-clothes, which are not only horrid to look upon, in that they seem as Dead Bodies embalmed; but the stink is offensive.”² In “Atlantic City” the artificiality of the made-up face figures the fragility of the speaker’s dream (the American Dream, we might say) of acquiring money, power, and love. His invitation, in the carpe diem tradition, invokes the pleasures of a night on the town in the shadow of an uncertain future. His lover’s made-up face is an emblem of these projected pleasures, shared by the couple and financed—owned, as it were—by the male speaker.
Like painted queens, Atlantic City’s casinos attempt to veil the corruption and decay consuming the city around them but symbolize that corruption in the attempt. The garish casinos are distorted mirrors reflecting disguised faces—fun house mirrors in which the speaker reinvents himself as he imagines crossing the line, once and for all, between losing and winning.

But, perhaps more important for the work at hand, the lines also intimate another connection—not between makeup and death but between makeup and redemption, re-creation, resurrection. If painting signifies the inevitability of death, it also signals the hope, however illusory, for rebirth. Women’s cosmetic self-creation, like the more orthodox art of painting proper, gestures toward immortality, and, like the painted face of “Atlantic City,” it is poised precariously between the beautiful and the grotesque. Across the chasm of centuries the productions of the women writers and artists studied in this book, their performances of femininity on the contested stage of painting, perennially come back. The identities of their creators are reinvented as new readers and viewers rediscover them in contexts unimaginable to early modern men and women but still, at least in part, defined by the cosmetic culture whose disciplinary strategies the works record. Too many contemporary women, I would venture to guess, have felt the dejection expressed by Gauden’s female speaker before the censorious mirror or have turned away from the glass with a sorrow approximating that of Gentileschi’s Magdalen, perhaps more often prompted by self-hatred than contrition. But many of us, too, have felt the exhilaration of self-definition, the defiant power in appropriating one’s own image, that becomes possible as the mirror transforms into the canvas or the page. As the song “Atlantic City” is reinvented with each replay, each new encounter between the singer and the audience, so the performances of the painting women studied here, and active in our culture, argue that immortality lies in this process of re-creation and re-invention. To escape the ravages of time and those of the defining male gaze, the painting woman understands, the body itself must become her work of art. Through art, or, as Cavendish calls it, “Sluttishness”—the mechanical, mundane craftsmanship that constitutes virtuosity—she can reclaim and redeem the flesh.

The afterlife of one notorious painting woman, Anne Turner, demonstrates the brand of redemption ordinarily required of women who undertake transgressive (and in this case lethal) acts of self-definition: repentance. Following Turner’s execution in 1615 for her role in the poisoning death of Sir Thomas Overbury—which allegedly involved her preparation of “Tarts . . . poysoned
with *Mercury Sublimate,* "a common ingredient in cosmetics—she was resurrected in a series of popular texts that showcase her penance. In Richard Niccols’s *Sir Thomas Overbury’s Vision,* Turner’s ghost urges women:

> But be ye not so blinded, looke on me,  
> And let my story in your closets be  
> As the true glasse, which there you looke upon,  
> That by my life, ye may amend your owne.⁵

Niccols proposes that the renovation of the lady’s closet can also ensure the renewal of her soul, as his own text renovates the disturbing details of Turner’s arraignment. Thus, the penitent Mistress Turner, now a reformed mirror for ladies, displaces the heinous image of a “picture . . . of a naked woman, spreading and laying forth her hair in a Looking-glass,” cited in her trial as evidence “that she had the seven deadly sins, viz. A Whore, a Bawd, a Sorcerer, a Murtherer, a Witch, a Papist, a Felone, the daughter of the Devil.”⁶ As Turner’s (now defunct) body becomes both a dead object and a living exemplum, so Niccols’s female addressee is figured in and as her closet: inanimate but intimate; at once a physical and an ethical site; the scene of self-fashioning and of surrender to moral authorities.⁷

By setting visual and textual mirrors for women, such as Niccols’s, alongside the material practices of women engaged in the arts of painting, this study has argued that early modern women were able to complicate and challenge the essentialist assumptions governing and defining them through productive encounters with the objects, materials, and conventions of the cosmetic culture. The preceding pages have marshaled a series of material objects that serve as emblems for women’s engagement with and treatment by the discourses of cosmetics: Portia’s *coltello* and Elisabetta Sirani’s *pennello;* Artemisia Gentileschi’s salacious *scalpello* and the sword wielded by her Judith; Elizabeth I’s phoenix jewel and Aemilia Lanyer’s steel glass; Bellini’s *sponzarol* and the water jug of Lavinia Fontana’s Samaritan; Marguerite de Navarre’s erudite looking glass and Jean Liébault’s clouded mirror of Socrates. Invariably, women’s deployments of the materials of painting trouble commonplace descriptions of feminine nature by stressing that the sometimes laborious effort involved in creating the body’s appearance mirrors their culture’s fastidious constructions of feminine essence. Thus, Mary Evelyn’s painstaking inventory of the lady’s dressing room, circa 1690, glosses and overwhelms Niccols’s simple, allegorized image of the lady’s “closet”:

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⁷ For a discussion of the penitent body as exemplum, see Anneksen, *Gendered Glasses,* 316–18, 365–69.
A new Scene to us next presents,  
The Dressing-Room, and Implements  
Of Toilet Plate Gilt, and Emboss’d,  
And several other things of Cost:  
The Table Miroir, one Glue Pot,  
One for Pomatum, and what not?  
Of Washes, Unguents, and Cosmeticks,  
A pair of Silver Candlesticks;  
Snuffers, and Snuff-dish, Boxes more,  
For Powders, Patches, Waters store,  
In silver Flasks, or Bottles, Cups  
Cover’d, or open to wash Chaps.  

Our attention to the painting woman’s tools of the trade—the literary, artistic,  
and cultural forms and genres available to her—enables us to move beyond the  
unfeatured representations of femininity, virtuous or vicious, advanced by early  
modern men. In the privacy of her closet (an enclosure, like the female body  
itself, that haunts male observers from Richard Niccols to Bruce Springsteen)  
her virtuoso performance of femininity anticipates, enables, and guides her pro-  
vocative entry into the public worlds of literary and artistic exchange. And there,  
centuries later, we can retrieve her likeness and retrace her steps.