The truth about beauty

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The truth about beauty

Dr Sara Read looks into women’s beauty routines in the 16th and 17th centuries
With a new miracle beauty product being launched on the market almost weekly, we have to wonder how women in the 16th and 17th centuries achieved beauty by the standards of their time. One of the ways to answer this can be found in an unconventional source.

The first midwifery guide in English, *The Birth of Mankind*, appeared in 1540 and was dedicated, rather unfortunately, to Henry VIII’s short-lived queen Catherine Howard. When this book was revised for reprint in 1545, by the doctor Thomas Raynalde, it included a new chapter entitled ‘Divers Bellifying Receptes’, ie ‘A variety of beautifying recipes’. Raynalde was keen to make it clear that in offering beauty tips he did not support the use of ‘foreign beauty’ or ‘set colours’ – make-up, in other words. He wrote that he was quite sure all honest and virtuous women would shun artificial beauty. Instead, Raynalde’s tips are concerned with enhancing natural looks by means of clearing the skin or making sure a person smelled nice.

Topics covered in his chapter include cures for dandruff, which was thought to be caused by a body which was too moist. The problem, he explained, could be treated by washing your head every ten days with lye soap then soaking it in water steeped in aniseed, cumin, rosemary, fenugreek and pomegranate. People didn’t routinely wash their hair but mainly combed it through with a fine-tooth comb a couple of times a day; this removed the dead skin cells and excess oils and did keep the hair remarkably clean. It was then kept sweet smelling by the use of various liniments or creams made from herbs such as lavender and cloves. As a proverb in John Ray’s 1670 collection said, the normal practice was to “wash your hands often, your feet seldom, and your head never”.

Raynalde was unusual in advocating hair-washing, claiming that the popular idea that this caused headaches was untrue. This was caused, he argued, by people not drying their hair carefully enough afterwards. Raynalde advised covering your head with warm cloths after washing, but he also warned that you should only wash your hair in the morning before eating or an hour before supper or, if in the evening, that you waited until at least five hours after supper. How many women took this advice is a moot point; diarist John Evelyn famously noted in a letter in 1669 that he benefited from a summer hair wash he undertook each year, using warm water and sweet herbs, in a way that suggests it was thought unusual. He claimed it was most refreshing. The results he obtained were much like those promised by Raynalde in that his whole head was refreshed, and he claimed his hair stayed bright and clean for the rest of the year.

**Hair colour**

Another time when women might wash their hair was if it was losing its colour, when a good wash in lye soap once again proved to be the first choice. Otherwise, to blacken the hair, a comb dipped in black leading could be used (this was also recommended for men’s beards). Felix Platter’s *Golden Practice of Physick* (1664, translated into English by prolific Civil War medical author and translator Nicholas Culpeper) warned that you shouldn’t over-darken your hair as this was unattractive, and that if it was naturally very black you could lighten it with by washing it with lye soap and then use the smoke from burning sulphur, known as brimstone. The anonymous author of *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694) wrote “As for the colour of the Hair, opinions are various [...] but above all that it be not red”. Despite, or perhaps because of, the legacy of the red-headed Tudor monarchs, red hair was...
not fashionable. Black hair too definitely seems to have been out of favour at times as Thomas Raynalde even suggested that people with black hair were much more prone to favour at times as Thomas Raynalde was more visible in dark hair. Platter advised that hair could be reddened blond with washes made from the juice of radishes or made with ingredients such as alum. William Langhan’s book of herbal medicine was 28)

A collection of ‘beauty spots’, often used to cover up the ravages of smallpox, but which also became fashionable in their own right

Elizabeth I’s white face and prominent high forehead form a very distinctive look, typical of the aristocracy (and perhaps hiding her own smallpox scars - she had the disease when she was 28)

Sociable Letters (1664) went further and noted that:

Country Housewives take more Pleasure in Milking their Cows, making their Butter and Cheese, and feeding their Poultry, than great Ladies do in Painting, Curling [their hair], and Adorning themselves, also they have more Quiet & Peaceable Minds and Thoughts, for they never, or seldom, look in a Glass to view their Faces, they regard not their Complexions, nor observe their Decays.

How far your beauty regime extended from manufacturing soaps and moisturising balms to keep your skin clear and comfortable, or to wearing make-up and gazing in a mirror, probably had as much to do with your station in life as with any other consideration.

Skin treatment

Clear skin was considered ideal and Raynalde also included treatments to remove freckles and pimples, including dabbing them with oil of tartar. Hannah Woolley advised using almond oil or hare’s blood, and removing too much red from the complexion, for which a jelly made from various pulses was advised. Raynalde advised that skin could be moisturised with deer suet blended with rosewater and musk, or with sweet almond oil. This is said to have worked well on chapped lips. By contrast, Hannah Woolley advised that you should rub dry lips with “the Sweat behind your Ears, and this will make them smooth, and well coloured”.

Significantly, many beauty guides offered potions to try and repair the damage caused to a woman’s face by the ravages of smallpox, which was prolific throughout this era. Cures for the pock marks this left behind were many and various but Woolley says that the best one she had come across was “to wash the Face one day with the Distilled water of strong Vinegar, and the next day with the water wherein Bran and Mallows have been boiled, and continue this twenty days, or a Month together.”

The proliferation of smallpox scars led to use of facial patches, called black patches or spots. These were small pieces of black fabric or leather cut into shapes such as stars of crescent moons and stuck on the face, often to cover a smallpox scar or similar imperfection. Such was their appeal, though, that women wanted to wear them as fashion accessories even when they had nothing to cover. Elizabeth Pepys, the wife of diarist and naval officer Samuel, first went out with patches stuck to her face in 1660.

Tooth care

A nice smile is considered essential to beauty in most ages and this era was no different. Having discoloured or missing teeth was considered ageing. Raynalde recommended that if your teeth were very discoloured and covered in plaque, you went to a barber to have them scoured clean. Barbers routinely did minor surgery, and were known as barbers surgeons, which included not only tooth-drawing but also dental hygiene. To keep on top of your teeth once they had been scoured, Raynalde recommended daily cleaning between the teeth with a toothpick and rubbing all over with the root of a mallow, or a powder made of ground pebbles. Raynalde’s contemporary, Thomas Lupton, who wrote a book A Thousand Notable Things (1579), advocated dissolving a bit of salt under your tongue and then bathing your teeth in your salty saliva as a preventative.

This advice sounds altogether more reliable than Hannah Woolley’s recommendation, a century later in The Accomplished Lady’s Delight (1675), to make the teeth white and sound by taking “a quart of Honey, and as much Vinegar, and half so much White-Wine, boil them together, and wash your Teeth therewith now and then”. While tooth picks were routinely used, and were often highly ornamental and exchanged as gifts, the use of them in public was considered vulgar.

Women of the Court

While the opinion that honest, virtuous women would make the most of their natural beauty without make-up, the women of the Court of course lived by different rules, as is evidenced by Queen Elizabeth’s white leded face, for example.

The anti-make-up stance remained consistent throughout the period, but the class distinctions also held true. In