Female Beauty in Art
Female Beauty in Art:
History, Feminism, Women Artists

Edited by

Maria Ioannou and Maria Kyriakidou

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This book collection focuses on the ways female beauty operates as a discourse to create and construct female identity while at the same time operating to expose and elaborate feministic concerns. The function of beauty in women’s identity politics is a novel subject in feminism/gender and cultural studies upon which not much has been written so far. This collection is unique in that it leads the way in examining the as yet unexplored area of the beauty-as-a-discourse of identity theme.

Obviously, the ways beauty influenced women’s self-image have been extensively studied and discussed. In the pioneering work *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Naomi Wolf explains how prevalent notions of beauty function to define women as defective and, most importantly, to make women themselves internalize the beauty myth. As a result, “women’s identity must be premised upon our ‘beauty’ so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval.”¹ More radically, Sheila Jeffreys would like to see the beauty practices of western culture be recognized as harmful cultural practices along the lines of CEDAW (The UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women).² Sandra Lee Bartky defines beauty as a special variant of Foucauldian discipline so that the body of woman is subordinated within a hierarchy of gender.³ In more recent studies, Peggy Orenstein and Natasha Walter have examined today’s Girly-Girl and princess cultures and how they not only underscore and reproduce sexist stereotypes but also encourage practices of self-objectification in girls⁴. For Walter, though the new language of beauty and sexiness (women themselves want to be pretty, desirable and always look sexy) centres around ideas such as empowerment, liberation, choice, adventure, it actually contributes to the current surprising “resurgence of
the idea that traditional femininity is biologically rather than socially constructed”. Women are still seen as biologically determined: they want to be pretty, sexually alluring, subversive, obedient. Women learn that sexual confidence is the only confidence worth having; consequently, the “effect of these choices [i.e. women choosing beauty, prettiness, objectification] … is now to reduce rather than increase women’s freedom.”

Thus, one aspect of female beauty as discourse is that notions of beauty are produced and circulated by dominant structures in society in various discursive and cultural forms. This sort of production and circulation means that specific norms about femininity and womanhood are reiterated and help define subservient positions within society for women to occupy. In this sense, the discourse of beauty operates negatively for women and is an instrument, if not a constitutive element, of patriarchy.

However, the present collection refers to another aspect of beauty as discourse, one which is female-centred and may be employed to facilitate female empowerment. In fact, the notion of beauty as discourse of female identity and/or empowerment is the contribution this collection makes to the area of female beauty in feminism and gender studies. The present volume began from a workshop at the ISSEI International Conference at the University of Cyprus in 2012, which had the central aim of outlining this new and major way of deploying the idea of female beauty.

All the same, the notion of femininity in general and female beauty in particular as a form of discourse dates from Kathy Alexis Psomiades in 1997. In Beauty’s Body, Psomiades refers to Foucault and views gender as a dense transfer point for relations of power and considers that Victorian femininity,

is shaped by the range of ideologies and practices that make up domesticity; the ideology of separate gendered public and private spheres, the institutions of law, medicine, psychology; and so on. It is also shaped through its association with ‘deviant’ masculinities, through increasing public debates on the woman question, through bourgeois women’s political action as the century progresses.

Beauty in woman refers to “an entire apparatus” which conceptualizes what women ought to be like so that “the representation of the beautiful young woman is caught up in larger ideological struggles and historical movements.”

There are a number of keywords in Psomiades’s analysis, which set the framework for later research in the area of female beauty, including the
research presented in this volume. These words include “ideology,” “practices,” appropriate “spheres,” “institutions,” an “entire apparatus,” historical time and place. Following Psomiades’s insights, to read beauty as discourse is to read beauty as a sum of forms of expression creating power relations and positions, and to analyze beauty and its representation as a structure of culturally produced texts, images, themes and stereotypes which can be adapted and developed towards new directions. For Elizabeth Langland, discourse refers to “signifying practices of all kinds,” formulated within institutions and organized fields of knowledge; discursive practices regulate “what is sayable,” “who can speak” and “structure the network of power relations in a society.”

The notion of beauty as (an empowering) discourse targets these elements of discourse –practices, institutions, regulations, social and cultural normative structures—and considers how the representation and embodiment of beauty (art, ideals of the beautiful woman, the presence of beautiful women in various media) can be examined, illuminated and (re)constructed to produce readings which are empowering for women and/or can help to expose the vicissitudes, inequalities and stereotyping which underwrite women within patriarchy.

This collection is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to summarize the above notion and begin to work on establishing a theoretical backbone from which further research can be generated. However, other scholars have also engaged with the theme (though not in its theoretical formulation and expression) and I will now proceed to summarize their work.

Current scholarship seems to follow five distinct trends. The first is a call for new writing on women both as viewers and as creators of beauty. Peg Zeglin Brand, in the seminal collection *Beauty Matters*, points out that a woman is never merely an observer on beauty. She must choose to partake in the rites that involve beauty matters. Beauty operates historically, culturally, and politically. We must ask questions like,

> What is beauty, and how does it operate within the context of our culture?  
> … How do inherited notions of beauty operate on girls who, at younger and younger ages, strive to control their bodies to the point of starvation?10

For women, beauty “has always mattered;” thus, “we need more women to speak out about beauty and to engage in a productive dialogue.”11 Moreover, beauty always has to be situated in context so that, as Marcia M. Eaton argues, it can be associated with other contextual factors such as health: “It is harder for all of us to fight bulimia as long as we prefer size-six models to size-fourteen models. The beauty that is
required by healthy societies seems to have eluded us as well.”12 Firmly placing beauty within a framework which investigates and seeks to expose and reverse restrictive or harmful practices is a notion that runs across the collection as a whole so that, as Eleanor Hartney says in the Foreword, “[b]eauty seems in need of rehabilitation today as an impulse that can be as liberating as it has been deemed enslaving.” Beauty is “as capable of destabilizing rigid conventions and restrictive behavioural models as it is of reinforcing them.”13

There is, as Claire Colebrook recognizes in a feminist theory special 2006 issue on beauty, “no simple way in which the feminine is aligned with the beautiful.”14 Rita Felski, in the concluding article, significantly points out that “there is a noticeable lacuna in feminist discussions of beauty ...”. There has to be more investigation concerning “the ways in which women perceive themselves, or are perceived by others, as more or less beautiful. ... Women have created beauty not just in themselves but in the world.” Feminist work on beauty, Felski notes, has followed a trajectory “from the rhetoric of victimization and oppression to an alternative language of empowerment and resistance.”15

Using beauty in art to signify female empowerment – or at least to alert audiences to feminist concerns—is deployed by Third Wave artists and feminist writers. This is the second trend identified in current writing on female beauty. That is, using female beauty imagery and images to provoke critical thinking and awareness while creating a new feminist consciousness. Two central texts here are Gender in the Mirror by Diana Tietjens Meyers and Pin Up Grrrls by Maria Elena Buszek. The former explains how feminist artists like Mae Weems, Orlan, Claude Cahun and Sam Taylor-Wood (now Sam Taylor-Johnson) use the female facial portrait and the traditionally female instrument of the mirror as an “instrument of the unheralded, everyday chore of authentic self-enactment.”16 Peg Zeglin Brand and Mary Deveraux, who have reviewed the book for the Hypatia special issue on women, art and aesthetics in 2003, say that central to Gender in the Mirror is “the recurring notion of the body and the way women artists have sought to portray themselves in ways that create new forms of agency and identity that promote personal empowerment.”17 Indeed, Meyers urges women to turn their backs on mirrors. “[N]ew woman-with-mirror imagery” needs to be found to “authorize women to turn their backs on mirrors.” Women must “define their own attractiveness.” Feminist artists are showing them the way, for example, Cahun refigures the mirror as a private space and “a receptacle for testing out modes of social self-presentation;”18 Orlan shows the martyrdom involved both in capitulating to feminine norms and in
standing up for feminist principles. Weems shows how mirrors are inscribed with “the alien voices of racism and misogyny.” In Soliloquy III Taylor-Johnson suggests that the goddess Venus is “a desireless symbol” of the desire of heterosexual men; women must free themselves from the idealized notions and heteronormative perceptions which are inherent into the reign of Venus, in order to see themselves as beautiful. In general, Meyers believes that “feminist counterfigurations [must] supplant patriarchal figurations of misogyny and reconceive their own identities.”

Pin Up Grrrls is an excellent monograph on how a new generation of feminist artists is subverting stereotypical images of women in order to define and represent their sexuality and exert control over their own images. For feminism and the women’s movement, popular culture is not solely “a reserve of conservative images to rage against, but also … a powerful tool for offering progressive alternatives to these very messages.” Familiar conventions of representing women’s beauty and desirability (such as the pin up) are used to create art that disrupts “the patriarchal subjugation of women.” The pin up is used in subtle and ambivalent ways to underscore female power and plurality.

1. A third trend concerning beauty within contemporary feminism consists of various re-readings of beautiful characters in literature to create new, feminocentric meanings for female beauty. Such re-reading includes female beauty in the form of literary portraits; that is, the presence of pictorial portraits of beautiful women in works of literature. An excellent example of this is Lynette Felber’s 2007 article in Victorian Literature and Culture on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) titled “The Literary Portrait as Centrefold: Fetishism in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret.” The article refers to a portrait made of Lucy Audley, the eponymous heroine of the novel. Like the portrait, Lucy is an ambivalent and ambiguous figure, at least in terms of patriarchal ideas of female virtue. As Felber explains, Braddon creates a layered representation of Lady Audley’s beauty in the portrait, so that it “comprises a multivalent critique: it protests the power and authority of the male gaze; it anatomizes fetishistic desire, and it raises questions about the construction of women and their sexuality in Victorian society.” For Felber, the portrait constitutes a “profound feminist statement” because, in describing it, “the narrator claims that it is the artist’s representation” which exaggerates the attributes and makes the
subject (Lady Audley) appear wicked. Lady Audley as a femme fatale is a male representation. The male gaze and male authority construct women; the figure of Lady Audley will appeal differently to women who “might very well recognize the complex (particularly economic) motivations for Lucy’s immoral and criminal acts.”

Similar treatment has been given to characters like Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874) by writers such as Pam Morris and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) by writers such as Marjorie Garson. The present volume’s chapter on *Villette* follows this tradition and reads the beautiful woman and female beauty as means through which the text raises themes that escape conventional readings of the text. Ginevra’s erotic beauty allows Brontë to criticize aspects of Victorian ideology and engage the protagonist in fruitful dialogue with elements of the female character which Victorian heteronormativity would rather gloss over and conceal.

A fourth aspect of female beauty within the discourse of feminism is related to the third and regards the accoutrements of female beauty and femininity as constitutive elements of female presence and identity. This issue is further elaborated in the *Villette* chapter. In summary, the approach holds that accessories and accompaniments of femininity such as fashion illustrations, paper patterns for clothes making, mirrors and gloves, aided in the formation of an active female subject and an active female gaze. For example, by making fashionable clothes for herself (copying the paper patterns available in periodicals) a woman rendered herself both an agent and an object of beauty and admiration; by consuming fashion illustrations women learnt to see themselves as objects of desire and formulated their own eroticism. The seminal writers here are Sharon Marcus, Margaret Beetham, Valerie Steele, Ariel Beaujot and Christine Bayles Kortsch.

A fifth and final trend is the function of beauty and the paraphernalia of beauty in Third Wave Feminism. Girlie Feminists celebrate fashion, beauty rituals and Barbie, arguing that they are all elements of female self-expression. Girlie feminists embrace fashion, femininity and sexiness; the fashion and beauty industries not only give pleasure to women – they are also populated by women designers, specialists and entrepreneurs. Girlie appropriates girl culture and argues that if women choose to wear make-up and stiletto heels, i.e. if women choose to be objectified, then their choice ought to be respected. However, Girlie’s emphasis on beauty and ephemera such as shopping and fashion has been criticized as a distraction
from political feministic aims. Girlie has no political agenda and seems to move dangerously towards traditional notions of femininity. Besides, is there such a thing as “free” choice? A number of societal influences determine “free” choice, while Girlie assumes that all women have equal access to education, ideas, employment. Buying lipstick does not result in empowerment and, as for choice, as Walter points out, “it is time to look again at how free these choices really are.” Real equality still eludes us, says Walter. “Women still do not have the political power, the economic equality or the freedom from violence that they have sought for generations. This means that women and men are not meeting on equal terms in public life.” Choices are neither free nor informed.

A more politicized approach to female beauty by Third Wave Feminism is that of Riot Grrrl. Riot Grrrls use beauty —blonde hair, lipstick, lace— in parodic or exaggerated forms in order to draw attention to issues like domestic violence, abortion and rape. Riot Grrrls perform a parodic and ironic version of femininity, to suggest new ways of seeing the female self.

The present book posits itself inside and interacts with these five underlying trends in the area of female beauty and its relation to feminism and femininity. That is, it regards female beauty as a sum total of elements, practices, preconceptions, ideas but also, and most importantly, of innovations and innovative methods of expressing, forming and viewing the female self. Belonging as it does to Third Wave Feminism, it aims to address the ways in which female beauty and identity are intertwined in cultural expressions such as art, literature, cartoon design, and sculpture and how female beauty can be used as the conduit of alternative discourses in order to form an innovative discourse of female empowerment. Female beauty in this book refers to the embodied female figure, and is revealed as a malleable form of discourse, which can be drawn away from oppressive or potentially oppressive structures and practices to constitute a discourse of empowerment and female self-definition.

The way this process unfolds will become more obvious in the chapters that follow. The first part of the book comprises three chapters about the creation of female beauty in literature, cartoon strips, fashion illustrations and filmic and photographic art. Chapter two, which is my own chapter on Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, suggests that descriptions of female beauty and fashion in the novel function to create a discourse of female identity formation which proceeds through identification, relationship and contrast with other women. Chapter two examines the notion of female beauty in the Victorian era (19th century Britain) and
argues that the discourse of beauty allowed women to function as subject as well as object; beauty in the Victorian era participates in the definition of a female subject by examining the problematics which surround the female figure in the 19th century. That is, female beauty discourse is not seamless – it exposes and works with problematic issues and debates.

Chapter three is the chapter by Olga Michael on Phoebe Gloeckner. This chapter directly focuses on the sexualization of women which is so insidiously in operation even in contemporary feminist discourses and which has so much concerned critics like Kelly Bean, Rebecca Munford, Natasha Walters and Peggy Orenstein. Michael’s chapter shows how elements of the beauty discourse (sexual allure, an attractive body) can be dismembered and used by Third Wave Feminism to form a discourse which criticizes and interrogates the sexualization of girls. By presenting the alluring female body (which is being raped) from the perspective of the female victim/artist, and female beauty in ways that foreground the damage done to the sexualized girl, objectification is unsettled and passivity deconstructed. A new version of female beauty is introduced, one that is set free from the male gaze.

The fourth chapter is Panayiota Chrysochou’s chapter on the subversive artist Orlan. This chapter functions in two ways; first, to give the volume an overall philosophical background and, second, to examine what Chrysochou calls the disavowal of the subjective body. Chrysochou wonders whether an unreserved feminist celebration of Orlan’s work is possible; Orlan challenges rigid perceptions of beauty, yet the cost she has to pay is too excessive; for Chrysochou, Orlan’s art entails the literal defragmentation of the body in an area (female beauty and embodiment) where this is absolutely not possible, if not perilous and undesirable.

The second part of the book concentrates specifically on Hellenic beauty ideals. While the contribution of Greece and Cyprus to beauty philosophy and beauty mythology (Cyprus is even the traditional birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love) both countries are also firmly placed within a strong patriarchal tradition which operates to keep women in their subservient position.

Maria Kyriakidou, in Chapter five, offers an insightful examination into how beauty discourse can be used for adversative purposes–both to define women as powerful and independent, and as socially compliant figures, with motherhood as their major life mission. While Kalliroi Parren, a renowned Greek feminist and founder of the Lyceum of Greek Women, linked her account of the beautiful female figure to powerful femininity (without excluding motherhood and the support of national endeavours) and equal rights, her beautiful and graceful Lyceum
counterparts at contemporary Panathenian festivals were encountered in dominant public discourse as docile and virginal; the ancient female characters which they invoked (e.g. the Amazons, or the goddess Artemis, all unconventional as well as powerful) were rather “tamed and adjusted to the contemporary docile, feminine ideals of the early 20th century” in order “to conform to social expectations for women” (page 103 in this book).

The chapter by Vicky Karaiskou and Adrienne Christensen is a detailed case study on Cypriot public sculpture since the 1974 Turkish invasion of the Cyprus Republic and the subsequent occupation of 30% of its territory. The representation of the female figure in relation to the 1974 disaster sometimes refers to ancient Greek beautiful goddesses or other powerful presences; most commonly, however, the female figure is represented as notably not beautiful. She is in mourning, a widow, a grieving mother. Female beauty and sexuality are symbolically eradicated to define women only in relation to patriarchal precepts and sentiments. A grieving mother or wife cannot be beautiful; she must forego her beauty and embrace the role patriarchy has drawn for her. Grief for the men must define the woman absolutely. Beauty is erased along with the self; though beauty is absent, or perhaps because of its very absence, beauty becomes the self. The bodies and faces of the women in Cypriot Public Sculpture are made to mirror the sacrifice of the men; facial features lack individuality; women are represented as obedient and in mourning – even the heroic female is asexual and idealized.

The concluding chapter brings together ideas expressed throughout the volume, to raise the all-important issue of an emerging female gaze. Kyriakidou explains the rewards and challenges involved in the process of defining a female gaze, arguing that it is best to consider the possibility that the female gaze might be multiple rather than uniform and standardized.

Correspondingly, the important contribution of this collection to feminist/gender/cultural studies lies in the underlying and emerging theme of the use of beauty as a discourse which illuminates the formation of a powerful female self. Rather than pointing to women’s conformity, beauty and the beautiful female figure can be deployed to point towards and combat the problems and ambiguities that beset women within patriarchy.

This way, the present volume may operate as a theoretical framework for Third Wave Feminists who would like to see the concept of beauty be extended to embrace a political agenda for women. The volume shows how beauty can work well within a political agenda and sets female beauty itself as an instrument for political power: female beauty can easily be
appropriated by women in ways that not only undermine patriarchy but also pose specific questions for the female subject to answer.

**Bibliography**


Notes

Chapter One

6 Walter, Living Dolls, 37.
8 Psomiades, Beauty’s Body, 5.
18 Meyers, Gender in the Mirror, 138.
19 Ibid., 134.
20 Ibid., 133.
21 Ibid., 143. There is also a bleak side to the painting, see Ibid., p. 144.
22 Ibid., 28-29.
24 Buszeck, Pin-Up Grrrls, 7.
25 Such as Marlene McCarty’s matchbox pinups which carry unconventional messages (p. 334) or Peregrine Honig who “uses the genre [of the pin up] to address not women’s beauty, but rather the ugly realities that lurk beneath women’s desirable facades” (p. 351).
28 Ibid., 484.
29 Ibid., 480.
30 See also my own article, Maria Ioannou, “Dora Spenlow, Female Communities, and Female Narrative in Charles Dickens’s David Copperfield and George Eliot’s Middlemarch,” Dickens Studies Annual 44 (2013): 143-164.
31 Details for the books are to be found in the Villette chapter bibliography.


34 Walters, *Living Dolls*, 33-34.

PART I

CREATING FEMALE BEAUTY: ART, FEMINISM, IDENTITY IN DISCOURSES OF THE WEST
CHAPTER TWO

VIEWING AND CREATING FEMALE BEAUTY:
VICTORIAN FASHION ILLUSTRATIONS
AND WOMEN’S FASHION
IN CHARLOTTE BRONTÉ’S VILLETTE

MARIA IOANNOU

This chapter examines the function of female beauty in various forms of Victorian cultural production, and argues that it operates as a dialogue between object and subject, and as a way to negotiate aspects of female identity and gender/identity formation. Firstly, the chapter considers the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of female beauty in the Victorian era, especially in the context of art and artistic creations; then, it elaborates on this concept of female beauty in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette (1853), a novel which deals with female beauty in ways that are both unsettling and unique, while also investigating how female beauty and identity interact with fashion, theatricality and other practices of signification.

The subject of women’s beauty in the Victorian era in Britain is multi-faceted and ambiguous, because it was tied with prevalent notions of appropriate female behaviour and morality. On the one hand, women were urged to look good; in fact, it was imperative for them to consider their appearance, since marriage was the only way for a woman to have a sexual life and a family. Marriage was regarded as a woman’s one and true destination. Thus, a number of studies have appeared which examine how Victorian women tackled what can be called the limits and limitations of beauty; how to be beautiful while also avoiding to appear vain or overtly sexual. For example, Leigh Summers, in her historical investigation of Victorian corsetry, has pointed out that, “the corset’s ubiquity might indicate that it provided women with a culturally sanctioned eroticism in an era of competing sexual discourses that denoted female sexuality as either negligible or demonic.” The corset was on the other hand both feminine and respectable. Fashion historian Valerie Steele concurs. Victorian women used the corset to simultaneously construct “an image of
irreproachable propriety and one of blatant sexual allure,” and “articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way.” Thus, the middle-class ideal of femininity was partly erotic. “The Victorian woman played many often contradictory and ambiguous roles, but she cannot be characterized as a prude, a masochist, or a slave. Her clothing proclaimed that she was a sexually attractive woman,” although, as Steele herself points out, “this has a particular meaning within the context of the culture.”

This context demanded that women remain inconspicuous, yet the desire to be seen and be considered beautiful created a struggle, very well articulated in 19th century fiction. Moralist writers such as Charlotte Mary Yonge saw dress as “the greatest temptation to the greatest number of women in existence,” arguing that the woman’s adornment lay “in her meek and quiet spirit.” Sarah Stickney Ellis was stricter than that, equaling physical beauty with vapidity. The ideal woman was ethereal, “a creature of disinterested love and nurture, the moral centre of the home and of society as a whole.” Women had to “downplay every aspect of their physicality including (but not limited to) their sexuality,” as Anna Krugovoy Silver has explained.

Therefore, beauty had to be negotiated, in order to be made into a form that could be adjusted to cultural expectations and norms. Female beauty and sexuality needed to be filtered through acceptable channels. For instance, women could use mainstream fashion plates and illustrations to visually enjoy their own sexuality.

Produced by women, for women, fashion plates solicited a female gaze for images that put women, their bodies and the objects that adorned them on display. Fashion imagery objectified women as sexually attractive figures designed to be looked at […].

For Sharon Marcus, who has analyzed the figure of the female Victorian viewer of (female) beauty, “the most overt pleasures Victorian fashion offered women was looking at other women and being looked at by them.”

What Marcus’s analysis suggests, is that Victorian female beauty (and its accoutrements such as fashion and adornment) comprised an active interplay between object and subject, action and passivity. Margaret Beetham has also brought forward the capacity of beauty to include two very different roles for women, saying that the paper patterns to be found together with fashion plates in women’s magazines, “was a brilliant device for bridging the gap … between the reader as household manager on the one hand and fashionable lady on the other.” The meek, domestic woman, the angel in the house, could recognize “herself as the woman of the
fashion plate. The ‘same’ woman could not only accomplish two different feminine identities in her dress, but could move from one femininity to another.” The woman could turn herself from a “skilled manager,” and “actor” and “subject,” to a “desired object.” Fashion “produced the female body as the subject/object of desire;” femininity was at once “artful and natural … desired object and desiring self.”

Interestingly, a corresponding exchange between subject and object is reflected in the Pre-Raphaelite circle and in the arts and crafts movement. One way of looking at 19th century art is, as John Berger has pointed out, as an “absurdity of … male flattery.” Paintings featured numerous naked or semi naked women of saccharine beauty, functioning to remind the male spectator that “he was a man,” and the painting’s sexual protagonist. Berger refers specifically to “the public academic art of the 19th century,” but it is nonetheless true that even subversive, much maligned Pre-Raphaelite art can also be seen to inscribe gender difference, that is to reinstate public discourse on what men and women are/ought to be. What is denied in the Rossetti drawings of Elizabeth Siddall, for example, says Griselda Pollock, “is their status as work, as being worked, the products of history and ideology. Instead they are made to proclaim that the masculine artist, in love, reveals the truth of the feminine model.” This relationship inscribes “a hierarchy of power in which man is the owner of the look.” However, Pollock herself says that Rossetti’s Astarte Syriaca breaks the mould of the Rossetti work and is a towering, powerful figure, while Virginia M. Allen has argued that in Lady Lilith, Rossetti has produced a “modern” narcissistic woman in a private moment in a private space embodying in the image 19th century fears of female emancipation and comprising an attempt to exorcise “a demon of his [i.e. Rossetti’s] own,” i.e. Lizzie. Though both Pollock and Allen attribute only vicariously to Rossetti the potential to upset gender boundaries, current focus on the female members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement has highlighted the ways object and subject can relate to each other in Victorian artistic production. Both Lizzie and Gabriel took Lizzie’s own artistic work seriously; Lizzie had a “dual role” in the movement, says Jan Marsh—“she was both model and artist.” In portrait sketches, she is repeatedly “shown concentrating at her own easel.” Even Millais’s Ophelia, “the best known image of Lizzie” and her subsequent illness are testimony to Lizzie’s professionalism—the determination to keep her pose and stay inside the bathtub where she floated for Millais to paint her, although the water was becoming dangerously cold. When she was artistically creative, Lizzie felt “emotionally energized and alive.”
Similarly, Jane Morris, model for countless paintings, valued her reputation as a working embroiderer highly. Her work was magnificent; “Mrs. Morris’s chief occupation was embroidery,” Marsh observes.25 Thus, 19th century embroidery is also being studied for its contribution to the formation of female identity and female agency. Needlework was part of a woman’s “complete education,” among her achievements and, as Kathryn Ledbetter argues, “the most significant of a young, middle- to upper class woman’s accomplishments.” It also took up a large section of a woman’s time and activity.26 Additionally, needlework, embroidery and the sister art of sewing, are considered a special type of feminine knowledge that “could be utilized as an alternative to mainstream, patriarchal discourse. It could offer women a private language and culture, understood to be traditionally feminine.” Literacy in dress culture “would function simultaneously as an alternative discourse and a traditional one”27 and gave women a kind of authority and cultural capital.28

Scholarship posits handicraft as a naturalized metaphor for writing,29 an “antidote to the mass produced commodities of the industrial era”30 and as an element to “the production of self,” giving us, today, “unique insights into the production of self-identity and self-display through things.”31 It connoted skill, accomplishment, imagination, sentiment, and contained a message as well as a woman’s “close observation and reinterpretation of nature.”32 Elizabeth G. Gitter also spoke about the close connection between weaving, story-telling and plot-creating in the Victorian imagination,33 listing the connection between thread and female narrative as a constitutive element of the “mythology of women’s magically powerful golden hair” developed by the Victorians.34 Women were often active agents in the production of beauty. Jane Morris, says Wendy Parkins35 is usually associated with beauty, the model, with immobility, with desire. Jane Morris is, quite often, “the silent muse”, the girl who modeled, the object of the gaze, later the wife and mother. This association ignores Jane’s creativity; Jane identified herself as a craftsman, part of an artistic community. She was not professional, but she was able to produce artistic work; all her friends were artistic women. She carried family values into the family business and expressed a resistance to the alienated labour William Morris associated with industrial production and commodity culture.

This mechanism of identity formation—and especially of gendered identity formation—through arts and crafts is present in the 19th century literature in significant ways. In Jane Eyre (1847), for example, Charlotte Brontë makes a statement for the value of feminine education and accomplishments: Jane is excited by the idea of learning to sew and do
fancywork at school; formal education at Lowood not only produces in Jane a cultured young woman, able to earn a living in an antagonistic and intimidating world and participate in discussions with a learned gentleman like Mr Rochester—Lowood is also presided over by Miss Temple, depicted as a paradigm of female culture and achievement. Jane’s art forms the key to her recognition by St John; in *Villette*, Lucy Snowe uses embroidery as a private language while making the gift of a watch chain for M. Paul. Lucy, an orphaned and impoverished genteel young woman, is the first person narrator and protagonist of *Villette*. As a teacher in Brussels, Lucy makes two friends, erotic and beautiful Ginevra Fanshawe who, like Lucy, is of limited financial means, and pretty, angelic, wealthy and aristocratic Paulina Home. Lucy also divides her affections between two men: good-looking but cold and narrow-minded Dr John, and Paul Emanuel, ugly-looking but emotional and warm-hearted. The intended recipient of the gift in this scene assumes that it is made for his considered rival, Graham “Dr John” Bretton; for Lucy, however, the making of the chain is a way to signify the transfer of her affections from one man to the other. While M. Paul succumbs to jealousy, Lucy sews calmly, defining herself as a rational and composed woman as opposed to the irascible, impulsive and emotional male. Estella in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) is shown to knit in the scene where she announces her engagement to Bentley Drummle to Pip, while she is seen to be sewing Miss Havisham’s tatterred wedding dress, after Miss Havisham tore it in a paroxysm of despair over fear that Estella does not love her. Rather than read these scenes as haphazard or as showing Estella’s alienation and inability to control her fate (though the needle is in her hands, her destiny is not), I prefer to read them as steps in the path which will lead Estella to the sort of self-fulfillment she achieves in the end. Knitting and sewing appear in moments where the two relationships that have marked and formed Estella’s life appear to be cemented and complete. The knitting scene contains Pip’s declaration of unending love for her, while the sewing scene shows the importance of Estella’s relationship to Miss Havisham; though not a healthy relationship, it has made Estella who she is. In fact, Estella is the only person allowed to mend the skeletal wedding dress; both she and Miss Havisham are given a kind of redemption in the end.

Generally, identity for women in the Victorian era was largely (if not wholly) formed through relationship; women were “relative beings,” with marriage forming the central axis of a woman’s life. An excellent summary of a woman’s defined place in the Victorian era is given by Marilyn Yalom in *A History of the Wife*. The material well-being of the
woman depended on the financial situation of the husband. Through “a burgeoning advice literature” women were told how they should fulfill “their domestic responsibilities.” Women had to obey and satisfy their husbands, keep their children physically and morally sound and maintain the household. There were permissible activities such as attending church and philanthropy, while the duties of men and women were defined by the doctrine of separate spheres (the domestic life of unpaid work, silence and passivity for the women and the public life of paid work and activity for the men). Other well-known and well-accepted ideas defined the woman as the angel in the house, “the spiritual guide of the family,” conditioned by nature for the purposes of wifehood and maternity. Society elevated the woman morally; nevertheless, her power was of the “powerless” sort. “[W]ives were never to forget their dependence on the men … Women simply did not exist in their own right.” Further, the attribution to woman of an angelic identity meant that her nature was by definition asexual: the healthy woman was supposed to be incapable of sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Women succumbed to their husbands so that they could produce offspring.36 Women who did not marry were called odd, surplus, or redundant.37

Victorian society and culture being dominated by a “male, middle-class ideology of gender,” the ideal woman was considered to be the fragile, leisurely woman of the middle-class, while working-class women suffered a “very different plight.” Because of their involvement in the public and male spheres of “the nation’s factories and industries” they were often seen as unfeminine (by reason of their physical strength and presumed good health and robustness) and sexually available.39

Thus, female identity in the 19th century was constructed to a great extent by a masculine culture; the face of woman was fashioned by the male.40 Lucy Snowe in Villette is isolated, because she does not fit within the ways (male-dominated) culture defined female middle-class identity: she is orphaned, poor, plain; she is single and needs to work. Lucy is excluded “from [the society’s] official narratives of happiness and success.”41 Society has the power to render Lucy “invisible and mute,” and Lucy is aware of this.42 Lucy challenges what Sally Shuttleworth calls “the alternative models for womanhood created by men”43; and in particular by male visual art, namely the paintings of the sexual Cleopatra and the obedient daughter-wife-mother and widow in the La vie d’une femme, while the society’s “perfect woman” is Paulina Mary Home, still a mental infant at nineteen.44

As has already been argued, beauty was an important component in 19th century female identity, while an appropriate measure of concern with
female beauty was presumed to be a constitutive part of female identity. As has also been mentioned, “appropriate” meant within the limits of feminine modesty and within the single aim of pleasing the (perspective) husband and never the self. The female self was, in large part, supposed to be constituted by negation—negation of independence, of agency, sexuality, potentiality and intellectual power and achievement; negation of physicality, bodily experience and the body. Women were disembodied, as Krugovoy Silver has also convincingly explained. Women had to be ethereal and slim in order to connote sexual purity, regulation of appetite and self-control. Hunger, appetite and body fat were unnatural in women.45

To conform to the ideal, women were urged to downplay every aspect of their physicality, including (but not limited to) their sexuality. Meal times in particular, were seen as opportunities for women to demonstrate their incorporeality through the small appetite and correspondingly slender body.46

Beauty could be, therefore, a limiting form of discourse on the one hand for 19th century women. Beauty can easily be seen as another of the limiting discourses framing the Victorian woman’s identity. Current scholarship, on the other hand, indicates that the discourse of female beauty also operated as a mode of establishing or allowing female agency (see Marcus and Beetham earlier) and it is the argument of this chapter that female beauty in 19th century Britain is a discourse positioning female identity as the result of relationship between women and is a liberating as well as limiting discourse.

Mary Haweis’s idea that it is neither a “sin” nor “folly” for a woman to want to look lovely also led her to ask, “[a]fter all, what is vanity? If it means only a certain innocent wish to look one’s best, is it not another name for self-respect—and without it, what would woman be worth?”47 Haweis sets herself up against conduct book advice, but is also able to see woman as a reasoning subject, a rational creature who is entitled to an amount of self-admiration. A beautiful woman is, in Sarah Stickney Ellis’s discourse, a being with very little ability for self-definition: she will be inevitably led astray because of the admiration of others. In Haweis’s discourse, by contrast, a beautiful woman is able to define herself through her own reason—staring at the mirror is an aid and not an obstacle to attainment of character. As a result, beauty can provide us with a new and empowering language with which to read female identity and experience.

Correspondingly, various aspects of beauty, including the language of beauty, the visualization of beauty and beauty accoutrements are being