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Holly Grout, *The Force of Beauty: Transforming French Ideas of Femininity in the Third Republic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. ix + 243 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8071-5988-0.

Review by Susan B. Whitney, Carleton University.

Beauty and cosmetics emerged slowly as topics of serious analysis for historians of women. During the 1970s and early 1980s, when the field's pioneers labored to insert women into reigning historical narratives, makeup was usually dismissed as trivial or worse, an instrument of women's oppression. Developments in the historical profession created fresh possibilities, especially for historians of women's relationship to the modern world and to modernity itself. Once consumption and consumer cultures came under analysis in the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s, new lines of inquiry and argument began to surface.<sup>[1]</sup> Historians suggested the liberatory possibilities offered women by shopping and new approaches to retailing, especially those on display in the grand department stores that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>[2]</sup>

Increased interest in cultural history, gender history, and the history of the body, as well as an intensified engagement with theory, visual culture, and transnationalism on the part of many historians, further set the stage for a historical reckoning with cosmetics and what began to be called "beauty culture." Not surprisingly, given American contributions to global developments in mass production, mass consumption, and advertising, American beauty culture was analyzed first. The pathbreaking, racially sensitive national approach taken in Kathy Peiss's *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* became exuberantly transnational ten years later in *The Modern Girl Around the World*.<sup>[3]</sup> This collection's diverse contributors, of whom Peiss was one, delineated how young women across the globe drew on beauty products and representations of women in cosmetic ads as they fashioned new approaches to the female body and femininity during the 1920s and 1930s. The "modern girl" that emerged became a marker of modernity in locales around the world.

Holly Grout's multidisciplinary study of French beauty culture from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s is an ambitious and worthy contribution to this expanding body of scholarship. In Grout's hands, beauty is at once complex and historically significant. It limits and liberates women, just as it connects the personal to the political, aids women in their efforts to imagine and perform their womanhood, and even functions as a "subversive tool of feminine self-expression" (p. 10). Like gender, at least as analyzed by Joan W. Scott in her classic 1986 article, beauty "reveals and conceals operations of power that structure social relationships" (p. 11) and serves as a "compelling analytical lens" (p. 14).<sup>[4]</sup> Although many historians may instinctively believe that this is an argument for historical significance pushed too far, they will have a hard time mounting a serious intellectual challenge to a book that is imaginative in its plumbing of diverse sources, stylish in its exposition, and rigorous in its scholarship.

The book's first chapter is, in many ways, its most conventionally historical. Here Grout traces the linked emergence of a commercialized beauty culture and the idea that beauty was essential to respectable middle-class femininity. She does this in part by reading cosmetics and beauty into an established body of historical literature on fin-de-siècle France. Grout shows how late nineteenth-

century concerns over the size and health of the French population had consequences for understandings of female beauty. Once the healthy clean female body became a cornerstone of public health and an object of political concern, it was infused with new significance and advice about all aspects of the care and upkeep of the female body proliferated. Many of those commenting on women's bodies were male, with doctors, whose public prestige was reaching new heights, taking center stage. Doctors exhorted French women to bathe more frequently (according to Grout, the average French person bathed only two to three times a year at this time), and they published advice manuals with detailed instructions on such matters as skin care, hair washing, and feminine hygiene.

Although male medical attention to women's bodies in fin-de-siècle France is not new territory,[5] Grout distinguishes herself by showing how these medical interventions helped provide the discursive underpinnings for an emergent commercialized beauty industry. In a nice bit of business history, Grout illustrates how (male) chemists, pharmacists, and elite hairdressers drew on the medical legitimacy conferred on beauty products as they competed to make beauty into a highly profitable industry in France. Sometimes the results could be surprising, as was the case when the late-night kitchen experiments of a (male) Parisian chemistry student resulted in the creation of L'Oréal, the world's largest producer of beauty products. Once beauty products were manufactured, they were marketed to women by a French advertising industry that was modernizing and sold in spaces that were becoming increasingly important to women, especially department stores, beauty institutes, and hair salons. The pursuit of female beauty thus became respectable and a matter of national duty, while beauty itself became big business.

But this is only part of the story, for Grout sees commercial beauty culture as something that also presented important opportunities for female sociability, pleasure, performance, and self-invention. As Grout reminds us, one of the distinguishing features of fin-de-siècle approaches to beauty was their less obvious connection to politics and what one might call the politics of social distinction than had been previously the case. Thus, if late eighteenth-century critiques of the makeup worn by aristocratic men and women had contained within them the seeds of larger social and political critiques, this was no longer the case when the nineteenth-century came to a close. By this point, cosmetics were more concerned with the self, and that self was female.

How beauty and beauty products became imbricated in twentieth-century French women's self-fashioning, performance, and even power are prime concerns of the book's remaining chapters. Chapters two, three, and four are set against the backdrop of scholarly discussions of the New Woman of fin-de-siècle France, especially the contributions of Mary Louise Roberts.[6] Chapter two pivots around three models of womanhood that Grout argues challenged dominant notions of liberal bourgeois femininity: the "Nineteenth-Century Venus," the "Grand Coquette," and the "Beauty Countess." Grout begins with the Nineteenth-Century Venus, which she approaches via Manet's 1865 painting, *Olympia* and Zola's 1880 novel, *Nana*. Drawing on both art historical and literary criticism, Grout explores the depiction of women in these two nineteenth-century cultural works in a manner that highlights both their sexual power and the ways that beauty and beauty products were marshaled to enhance this power. Up next is the media creation that Grout refers to as the Grand Coquette, who was visible in the pages of the era's increasingly important women's press in the form of socialites, actresses and courtesans. These women were featured in celebrity profiles and in the magazines' beauty contests, and they were depicted in relation to a range of products, especially those associated with beauty. Grout demonstrates how these new models of womanhood were fashioned within the context of a flourishing commercial culture and points out that the Grand Coquette herself became a "prepackaged consumable commodity" (p. 56). Beauty countesses, women who assumed aristocratic *noms de plume* to pen books advising women on bathing, shampooing, oral hygiene, skin care and the like, round out the chapter. In the final analysis, Grout argues that the amalgam that was the Grand Coquette broadened the range of the possible for turn-of-the-century French women. Beauty entered the twentieth century as an obtainable goal and "a route to social legibility and sexual power" (p. 70).

Beauty's complicated relationship to female power is interrogated through an analysis of Colette's life and work in chapters three and four. Performer, novelist, journalist, and, eventually, beauty entrepreneur, Colette was simultaneously a flesh-and-blood New Woman *and* a writer whose diverse literary and journalistic output helped construct the New Woman as a figure in the fin-de-siècle French cultural imaginary at the same time as it promoted the use of makeup and other commercially available beauty products by actual French women. Colette was also one of twentieth-century France's most famous women, one whose life testified to the complicated nature of female sexual desire and to the performative nature of femininity. Chapter three, the book's most unabashedly literary, consists of a close textual analysis of two of Colette's novels, *La vagabonde* (1910) and *Chéri* (1920), which are set in the worlds of the music hall and boudoir respectively. Grout uses her close reading to explore how beauty enabled Colette's female protagonists to earn an autonomous living, pursue pleasure, and even "dominate the opposite sex" (p. 88). But the age-related loss of beauty brought a diminution of power and crisis. In this analysis, makeup is a weapon deployed in diverse ways by the female protagonists.

Grout continues the focus on Colette's relationship to makeup in chapter four by shifting to an analysis of its function in her journalistic and business life. In the prewar short stories that Colette wrote about music-hall life for the daily *Le matin*, Grout shows how makeup performs all manner of narrative work. It conceals exhaustion, allows for fluidity of identity (including gender identity), and even symbolizes the economic precariousness of the female music-hall performer's lot. Makeup becomes the entire story in the advice columns Colette wrote for such glossy women's magazines as *Femina* and *Vogue* in the years following the First World War. From this platform, Colette dispensed tips on such things as the best skin-care products and the correct way to apply makeup. Taking her engagement with commercial beauty culture one giant step further, Colette opened her own beauty institute in Paris in the summer of 1931, the very year that the French economy started to feel the effects of the global economic crisis. Despite the Art Deco exterior, sleek up-to-the-minute interior design, and lavish press coverage, "La Société Colette" closed its doors less than two years later, but not before Colette offered herself "as a commodity, an object for purchase" (p. 125). For Colette, Grout concludes, makeup "mattered because as a conduit of self-fashioning, as a tool for self-creation, and a strategy of self-presentation, it enabled women to literally and metaphorically produce herself." Beauty "marked the feminine" (p. 128).

If the chapters on Colette serve to bridge the pre- and post-World War One worlds, the analysis moves squarely into the interwar period in the final two chapters. During the frenetic postwar 1920s, *la garçonne* loomed large, a figure fraught with symbolic importance in a country reeling from the devastation of the Great War. Although the cultural significance of *la garçonne* is by now well established,<sup>[7]</sup> Grout's interest in beauty culture allows her to approach 1920s womanhood and femininity in fresh ways. Chapter five traces the emergence of a modern and commodified version of female beauty out of two popular 1920s entertainments: beauty pageants and the cinema. Both predated the postwar period, but Grout demonstrates how it was only in the 1920s that they assumed the forms and following that would characterize them throughout the twentieth century.

Rooted primarily in the photographic beauty contests that became a staple of magazines and newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic in the late nineteenth century, the modern beauty pageant came to life in the second half of the 1920s as the Miss Universe pageant. An American creation, the Miss Universe pageant necessitated a Miss France pageant, at least in the view of one French entrepreneur, and this brought French and American ideas of female beauty into competition. Although Grout exaggerates the extent to which this resulted in a "transatlantic battle of cultures" (p. 135), her analysis of the pageant's long-term effects is apt. Indeed, with its swimsuit competition and focus on the female body, the Miss Universe pageant helped popularize and legitimize new ways of exhibiting and looking at women.

So too did that other great American export of the 1920s, the Hollywood film industry. Grout nicely illustrates the interplay between beauty pageants and Hollywood, including its attendant celebrity

culture. Beauty queens were often given plum movie roles while films promoted a new version of modern commercialized womanhood through close-ups of carefully made up female faces and lingering shots of trim and youthful female bodies. What is particularly noteworthy here is Grout's argument that this commodified new model woman provided a safe corrective to the more disturbing figure of *la garçonne*.

The closing chapter returns the story to the French beauty industry, exploring how manufacturers, retailers, and self-styled beauty advisors labored to sell their wares to women during the interwar period. By this point, the beauty industry was flourishing in France, but French companies had to position themselves carefully to fend off challenges from American competitors. This they did by introducing new products (including the signature perfume Chanel No. 5 in 1922, beauty aids for men, and the first sunblock in 1935) with packaging that often incorporated Art Deco design elements, and utilizing innovative marketing and retailing methods. Grout shows how the French beauty industry utilized massive trade fairs, or exhibitions, of the kind that the French had been using to promote their cultural and industrial products and the French nation itself since the late nineteenth century.

In the final analysis, *The Force of Beauty* is an admirably wide-ranging book, one written in a style that is both scholarly and accessible. It applies insights from an international and interdisciplinary body of scholarly literature to the study of France, and it does so compellingly. Readers will draw their own conclusions about whether Grout has pushed the book's introductory arguments for the significance of beauty and makeup too far. Regardless of where they land on this question, they will come away from this book with a much better sense of how a commercialized beauty culture and a commodified notion of femininity took hold in twentieth-century France. I suspect that readers will also come away agreeing with Grout's analysis that the modern beauty industry was inextricably linked to modern ideas of womanhood that emerged in interwar France, even if they may not accept that this development held out the possibility of the kind of empowerment that Grout identifies. Reading this book has helped me appreciate that French Communists were more in tune with the realities of young women's desires than I perhaps understood when the Communist newspaper, *Jeunes filles de France*, advised young women on the art of applying makeup in the late 1930s.[8] It has also made me stop and look differently when coming across both a poster ad with the tag line "Let's Beauty Together" and, as happened recently in Toronto, the 2015 International Make-Up Artist Trade Show. Perhaps beauty really does mark the feminine in the modern capitalist consumer cultures in which we live—whether we like it or not.

## NOTES

[1] The foundational collection from this mid-1990s moment is Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[2] For analysis of women's relationship to department stores, see among others, Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[3] Peiss's book was published originally by Henry Holt in 1996 and re-issued by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2011. *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* was edited by Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, and Madeleine Yue Dong and published by Duke University Press in 2008.

[4] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91/5(December 1986): 1053-1075. According to Joanne Meyerowitz, Scott's article is by far the most

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accessed article of all the *American Historical Review* articles available on JSTOR. See Joanne Meyerowitz, "AHR Forum: A History of 'Gender,'" *American Historical Review* 113/5(December 2008): 1346.

[5] On French doctors' discussions of female bodies, see Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s-1930s* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), especially chapter two.

[6] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[7] See Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[8] Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 201.

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