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Patricia Phillippy, *Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases and Early Modern Culture*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xii + 258 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-8018-8225-7.

Review by Katharine J. Lualdi, University of Southern Maine.

More than two decades ago, Natalie Zemon Davis painted a compelling picture of how the sixteenth-century French peasant woman, Bertrande de Rols, created her personal identity in part by manipulating gender-based customs to her advantage.^[1] In revealing that women (and men) at the time were aware not only of the existence of gender but also of their ability to fashion their lives accordingly, Davis' approach had implications extending far beyond the events and characters at hand. Consequently, she helped historians to rethink their understanding of the place of early modern women in what scholars largely agree was an increasingly patriarchal society. Patricia Phillippy attests to the vitality of such rethinking across a wide range of disciplines. Female self-fashioning assumes center stage in her book, which, as the introduction states, "studies the intersection of painting and femininity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe as a site for exploring abstract ideas of gender construction and subjectivity in specific, historically grounded models" (p. 2).

Phillippy's use of the term "painting" has a dual meaning, as the title of her book suggests. It encompasses women's use of cosmetics to paint their faces as well as representations and self-representations of women in literary texts and visual arts. Her reasoning stems from the fact that at the time, painting with cosmetics and canvases shared physical features (various cosmetics and paint colors included the same ingredients, for example) along with deeply entrenched ideas about woman's essential being and capabilities. By examining one form of painting in relation to the other, Phillippy explores the gendered assumptions underlying the conventions governing painting and, equally important, how women writers and painters exposed and challenged these assumptions to establish their rights to self-authorship and self-creation (p. 4).

Throughout her study, a key contention guides Phillippy's interpretive and methodological lens: "Despite the cultural and historical differences separating early modern women from twenty-first century critics, it is not anachronistic to attribute to these women's works a feminist sophistication when confronting questions of gender and subjectivity" (p. 4, n. 17). Articulated explicitly only in passing, it is not Phillippy's intent to engage her readers in a debate on the merits of this view but rather to reap what she regards as its rewards. The result is provocative (if at times challenging given the author's penchant for dense prose) and has considerable value for scholars interested in early modern history, literature, and art--and in blurring the lines among the three.

In arguing that women could fashion themselves through words and images, Phillippy is clearly tipping her hat to Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "self-fashioning."^[2] At the same time, however, in the introduction she distances herself from what she regards as the limitations of this notion and its attendant approach (p. 18). Instead of viewing individual texts and paintings within a narrow time and place, she intentionally adopts a broad disciplinary, geographic, and chronological scope in order "to trace the outline of a body of works, attitudes, and practices that, considered 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" (pp. 18-19). But by no means does Phillippy ignore the historical context of this background--in fact, she interweaves concrete historical markers throughout

her analysis—she simply regards these markers as part of a bigger, more dynamic, international web of related ideas and concerns.

Each of the ensuing five chapters centers on a comparative analysis of a carefully selected grouping of physical, visual, and textual sources drawn from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, France, and Italy. The relationships among the sources are occasionally strikingly concrete (for example, Marguerite de Navarre's poetic *Miroirs* and her own mirror, discussed in chapter 3); more frequently, however, they are linked by common, and often conflicting, themes, assumptions, and discourses regarding painting and femininity. On the one hand, cosmetic manuals instructed women on how to use makeup to achieve standard ideals of feminine beauty (blonde hair, black eyes, white skin, red cheeks and lips); on the other, anti-cosmetic invectives warned of the physical and moral dangers of doing so, wary of the gap between outward appearance and inward essence which was considered to be inherent to female nature. This view informed artistic theory as well, claiming that women were masters of surface, not design, of color, not substance.

As Phillippy reveals, female artists and authors were well aware of the limitations placed on feminine creativity intrinsic to the cosmetic debate and theoretical discussions of the arts, and self-consciously used them to shape their own images in the public forum. Phillippy's analysis of the painting, *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* by the Italian artist, Elisabetta Sirani, in chapter one is illustrative of the book's central concerns (not coincidentally, a color reproduction of the painting adorns the book jacket). Beautifully made up and attired, Portia holds a compact male toilet set, from which she has removed a nail file and gouged her thigh. But her wound is a superficial one, an unsurprising result given the implement used. Why did Sirani choose to depict Portia in this way? Phillippy's creative methodology yields a compelling answer. She juxtaposes two images, one a detail of the toilet set in Portia's left hand (fig. 6); the other a photograph of a larger version of a mid-seventeenth-century English set now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum typical of the type purchased, inherited, or received as gifts by wealthy men during Sirani's lifetime (fig. 7). When viewed side by side, the two images remind us of the physical realities governing Sirani's visual vocabulary while lending credence to Phillippy's assertion that, "Borrowed from her husband, Portia's toilet set displaces the material objects of feminine painting with those of masculine self-definition and self-fashioning. As such, Sirani explicitly engages the cosmetic culture on gendered terms, exposing the degree to which men as well as women are implicated in its mandates and exploring the contours of its gendered form in creating her masculine-feminine heroine" (p. 55).

Chapter two continues this exploration into female creativity and empowerment, in this case as revealed in the "intersection of painting and justice" found in three distinct genres: the transcript of Agostino Tassi's 1612 trial for the rape of the artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, Gentileschi's paintings of Judith, and Shakespeare's play, *Measure for Measure*. As in other chapters, Phillippy effectively supplements these sources to illuminate the interplay between local and more general attitudes towards femininity. In the rape trial, for example, Tassi claimed Artemisia was a whore because several times he saw men leaving her house, and once, he saw her at the window with her arm around a man (p. 61). At the time, it was a cultural commonplace in Italy that women should not be seen at or near a window lest they appear loose or shameless. Tassi's defense clearly drew upon this commonplace; but women artists could use and control it, too, as Phillippy's analysis of Lavinia Fontana's *Self-Portrait* demonstrates. Lavinia presents herself looking straight at the viewer (her future father-in-law, for whom it was painted). A window appears in the background, with an easel placed in front. Although she situated her perfectly made up face far away from the window within the frame of the canvas, she created the image through the instruments of her art, including her easel.

Working as a pair, chapters three and four guide the discussion towards the role of religion, specifically Reformation debates on idolatry, in shaping early modern attitudes toward women. Critics of religious images and cosmetics shared a fear of the power of images to seduce the viewer into believing that outward appearances equaled inner substance. Against this backdrop, Phillippy discusses how the works of four public women, with Marguerite de Navarre's *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* and *Le Miroir de Jhesus Christe crucifié* as the starting point, recast femininity by transforming woman into a new creature in Christ. Through her corporeality, these women proclaimed in words and images, woman was joined with and redeemed through Christ, God made flesh. For those familiar with the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, this angle—albeit in an entirely different setting—will strike some familiar notes, thus suggesting that female self-fashioning has important medieval antecedents.[3]

Religion likewise frames the content and argument of chapter five. Here Phillippy explores the relationship between new constructions of female subjectivity and post-Reformation descriptions of conscience as the product of an inner dialogue between internalized authorities and the mind of the individual. Works as diverse as Elizabeth Cary's drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam* and Artemisia Gentileschi's painting, *Mary Magdalen*, portray women who harmonized their outward countenance with their inner selves according to the dictates of their conscience. In this way, they challenged the long-held view that women were nothing more than malleable matter in need of male guidance and form.

Viewed as a whole, Phillippy's study makes a compelling case that early modern women were able to navigate male control and hierarchy to create self-portraits in words and images, thereby controlling the mirror, not just being controlled by it. In the process, Phillippy strikes a delicate interpretive balance between contemporary criticism and specific historical periods, cultures, and genres that will undoubtedly guide future research.

NOTES

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[2] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[3] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

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