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Physical Attractiveness and the Female Life-Cycle in Seventeenth-Century England

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**ABSTRACT**

This article draws on evidence from diaries and letters to discuss how women of the aristocracy, gentry and middling-sorts in seventeenth-century England conceptualised their own physical attractiveness and that of other women. Moving beyond histories of fashion and aesthetics, which have prioritised male opinions, the article demonstrates that women recognised the importance of maintaining an attractive appearance across the life-cycle. Particular attention was paid to the emergence of good looks during adolescence; the importance of physical appearance alongside other qualities in the marriage market; and the means by which physical changes and their psychological impacts were negotiated in later life.

**KEYWORDS**

Attractiveness; youth; age; women; life-writings

**Introduction**

Despite the proliferation of studies of gendered bodies in recent years, two topics remain under-explored and unconnected. The first is ageing since, as Sarah Toulalan has noted, young and old bodies 'have almost entirely separate historiographies and are very rarely discussed by historians in direct relation to each other'. The second is physical attractiveness, particularly facial beauty, which as Kathryn Woods has suggested was 'a means through which women could secure a good marriage, or valuable “friendships”, making it important for female social improvement'. Scholarship on the latter topic can be divided into two categories. Scholars of medicine, fashion and aesthetics have revealed how Neoplatonic arguments undermined classical ideals of beauty and how Puritan moralists condemned processes of beautification in the early and mid-seventeenth century, arguing that a cultural backlash after 1660 led to general acceptance amongst the aristocracy, gentry and urbane middling sorts that artificial embellishment to create a veneer of ‘auxiliary’ beauty was acceptable, particularly when it concealed physical flaws or signs of ageing. Social and cultural historians have highlighted how urban women of the middling sorts and their female servants took pride in their appearances and shared knowledge of beautification, often gaining admiration from and bonding with other women in the process, but also sometimes competing with female peers as to who was most fashionable. The expression of specific qualities and physical traits marked out the
beautiful from the merely pretty, and many women feared losing their beauty through ageing or disfigurement, concerns which reveal how body image functioned as an indicator of female self-identity and self-worth. All these authors have relied largely on evidence from male-authored texts, but Edith Snook has utilised female-authored fictions, histories, letters and advice books to explore how upper and middle-ranking women related to and regarded cosmetics, clothing and hairstyles, moving away from histories in which aesthetic trends impinged on and subordinated women, to investigate how knowledge of and skills relating to fashion and beautification enabled women to shape their own identities.

What follows builds on this scholarship, emphasising how age and ageing were crucial to how women regarded their own physical attractiveness and that of other women. Using evidence from diaries and letters this article examines how women from the upper and middle ranks of seventeenth-century English society conceptualised and adjusted to changes to their appearances, focusing on three stages of the female life-cycle when physical attractiveness was particularly significant: from the mid-teens when the emergence of attractive features in adolescent girls began to be recognised; from the twenties when such corporeal traits (alongside other attributes) became important as a means for many (but not all) to secure marriages; and from the forties, when women sought to cope with the visible and mental effects of aging as they passed through and beyond the menopause. This analytical framework mirrors the tripartite model of maid, wife and widow which many early modern people used to divide up the female life-cycle, a model which stood in contrast to the more well-known (and often explicitly gendered) schema of the seven ages of man, and which defined women by their relationships to men, but also by their age.

Placing female accounts to the fore what follows is a history which examines women’s changing attitudes to their physical appearance across the life-cycle, rather than changing attitudes to aesthetics and beautification across the seventeenth century. Whilst early modern women paid attention to and engaged with the latter trends, displaying concerns in letters and diaries about the maintenance of an unblemished appearance and mentioning specific personal qualities and physical traits, they did not describe or analyse these in detail, but mentioned such signifiers of beauty in passing when discussing their own physical attractiveness and that of other women in relation to key stages of the life-cycle and the emotional and physical impacts of the ageing process.

Life-writings

Before discussing the content of women’s diaries and letters, attention needs to be given to the audience for such works and the forms of self-expression used therein. The emergence, appearance, content and form of diaries during the seventeenth century owed much to the advocacy of self-examination by Protestant theologians, and although only 20 of 332 known surviving examples were authored by women, female diarists displayed the same observational skills and ability to write clearly and succinctly as their male peers. Such texts allowed women spaces to express thoughts, feelings and beliefs; to celebrate or justify actions; and to chronicle changing identities and experiences, but the women who wrote their own lives, or at least those whose writings survive, were primarily from the upper or middle ranks of society, with many being wives, daughters or patrons.
of clergymen. The input of spiritual advisors or employment of scribes might blur connections between authors and the literary selves being fashioned, and writings which appeared in print often functioned as pious exempla, tampered with by authors or editors to fit generic moulds and to persuade readers of the plausibility of their narratives. Even women who wrote without such constraints, or with no intention of having their writings read by more than a handful of individuals, were tactical in how and what they chose to record, often mixing descriptions of actual events and opinions with fictive inventions which were shaped by tropes drawn from their reading of secular and religious texts.9

Most letters were written by the same narrow social strata, although evidence from court records and popular literature suggests women lower down the social scale were involved in epistolary cultures too, writing to exchange advice and information or to offer emotional and material support. Many were responses to particular concerns and events, written when the author was in a specific emotional condition, and letter-writing might be cathartic, providing a sense of release through processes of unburdening or self-justification. Often only one half of a correspondence survives and runs across the life-cycle are rare, with the years of marriage and widowhood best represented. Some include colloquial expressions and phonetic spellings, causing them to resemble speech, but the need to conform to rhetorical and epistolary forms led many authors to use styles, hands and language with care or to employ amanuenses, decisions determined by when and why a letter needed to be produced, as well as by individual literacy skills and physical and mental well-being. Although addressed to specific readers, letters might be read by or to a wider audience before or after being sent, so some writers practised self-censorship or used codes or ciphers, but across the seventeenth century letters became more private, personal and introspective, as well as more varied in style and tone.10

Life-writings thus need to be approached with care, but constitute some of the best evidence for recovering the experiences and mentalities of the women who played a major role in their production, and who in many instances used them to express a broader range of beliefs and attitudes with greater freedom than can be found in other seventeenth-century documents. Historians no longer treat women of the past as a homogenous group to be analysed based solely on their gender, and the sample of writers drawn upon here can be broken down by social rank, religious and political outlook, geography and chronology. The sample consists of the writings of 16 women, 10 of whom were from the aristocracy, nobility and gentry, the remainder from the middling sorts. All were Protestants, albeit of varying temperatures, and their political outlooks covered the spectrum from Royalist to Parliamentarian. Most lived their lives in specific counties, such as Bedfordshire, Cumberland, Essex, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Wiltshire, but many had connections with or spent time in London, whilst Anne Halkett and Elizabeth Freke visited Scotland and Ireland respectively. Chronologically they cover the whole seventeenth century, with four texts dating from the decades before 1640; four from the revolutionary 1640s and 1650s; and seven from the decades after 1660, with the writings of Anne Clifford crossing these chronological divides. Like all historical subjects these women were unique, not least because they wrote their own lives, but the evidence they bequeathed to posterity reveals much about broader seventeenth-century attitudes to physical attractiveness.
Childhood and youth

Neither pre-pubescent girls nor their parents left much evidence of what they thought about their own beauty in childhood or that of their offspring, but concerns about appearances surfaced if such girls contracted smallpox. In 1602, Joan Thynne wrote to her husband, John, to inform him that their children had the disease, and that although ‘the extremity of danger’ was past she could not tell if their offspring would be disfigured, adding that their 12-year-old daughter ‘Doll takes it very heavily and mourns very much by reason of the soreness and store of them, neither can I without mourning look upon her’. Although the couple had two sons and two daughters it is telling that it was one of the girls, on the brink of adolescence, who took the disease ‘very heavily’ and that Joan wrote of her especial concern for Doll, describing the situation with reference not only to the suffering of the girl, but also emphasising her own sadness when noting the changes to the physical appearance of her daughter. Other mothers expressed similar concerns that smallpox would destroy the beauty of their female children. In 1660, Anne Halkett commented on how the physical appearance of her daughter Betty, who died shortly before her fourth birthday, had been affected, noting that ‘when I see one beautifull & healthfull, I may consider how soone the same desease may make that face & person loathsome, for neuer was my poore child so pretty or so well as shee was that time before she sickned’; in her memoirs Ann Fanshawe recalled how in 1664 ‘my little child Betty’ who was then just over two years old ‘fell sick of the small pox’ as had her older daughter Anne, then aged nine, although both ‘recovered perfectly well without blemish’; and in 1666 Alice Thornton wrote that her ten-year-old daughter, Katherine, had recovered sufficiently from the smallpox to go ‘abroad in the house’, and had ‘only lost by this sickness her faire haire on her head, and that beautiful complection God had given’. Two of Alice’s other children, Robert and Alice, also contracted smallpox in 1667: the former, then aged four, ‘not soe much disfigured as his sister Kate’ although ‘he never recovered his sweete, beautifull favour, and pure couler in his cheeks’; whilst the latter, then aged 15, ‘recovered in strength by degrees’ although her ‘haire came oﬀ, and that favour cleane taken from her’. Hannah Newton has argued that parents expressed equal concern about sons and daughters being disfigured by smallpox, but these examples suggest that for mothers such anxieties were greatest and expressed more often with regard to female children, and the topic deserves further investigation.

Once girls reached their teens their physical appearances became more noticed and commented upon. In 1653, Dorothy Osborne observed that ‘my mother used to say there was never any body (that was not deformed) but were handsom to some reasonable degree, once between fourteen and twenty’, and in 1663 the 14-year-old Elizabeth Delaval was told by Mrs. Carter, a servant of her aunt, that her ‘growing beauty in some lettle time wou’d certenly make a conquest of many hearts’. That both authors referred to handsomeness or beauty becoming apparent in maids after they turned 14 is significant since this was the beginning of the ‘ripe’ age, lasting from the mid-teens to the early twenties, during which adolescent girls began to enter puberty, causing their breasts to swell, menstruation to begin, and sexual desires to develop, a side effect of the latter being a growing concern with physical appearance and self-presentation. The emergence of good looks in maids was part of a series of physical and emotional
changes, which marked the transition to womanhood, but beauty was unique in being conceptualised both as a biological trait of the individual and a hereditary attribute transferred from parents, and in particular from mothers, to children. In 1650, Anne Halkett deemed Lady Anne Campbell, then in her late teens or early twenties, to be ‘very handsome’, and upon meeting her mother Lady Margaret, then aged 40, ‘saw then where her daughter had deriued her beauty & ciuility’, adding that whilst ‘one was under some decay’ the other was ‘well proportioned’. Such comments might be a source of maternal pride, but pious mothers were cautious not to brag about the good looks of their daughters. Elizabeth Walker, whose daughter Elizabeth died of smallpox at the age of 16, wrote that she was ‘a very beautiful and lovely woman’, but then noted that ‘thus to characterise her may not suit my pen’ and launched into a eulogy of her godly virtues instead. Elizabeth and her husband Anthony, who edited the writings of his wife after her death, sought to fashion an image of their daughter as a pious woman who subordinated concerns of the flesh to those of the divine, but Elizabeth’s pride in the beauty of her female offspring manifested again when describing another daughter, Margaret, ‘a fine, lovely, handsome, well-accomplished woman’ who died 16 days after giving birth.

From these descriptions both daughters were deemed physically attractive, but the genetic dividends of maternal beauty were not always shared equally between female siblings. In August 1653, Dorothy Osborne wrote to her future husband Sir William Temple and compared the Bishop sisters, noting that in her youth the younger was not considered ‘a beauty’ whilst the elder ‘was esteem’d the handsomer’. Dorothy disagreed with this opinion, opining that the elder Bishop sister had ‘noe excesse’ of beauty either, and that ‘a year or two mend’s some as much as it impaires others and she may have now outgrown what shee had’. Aesthetic discrepancies might lead to jealousies and rivalries, and Lucy Hutchinson wrote that when her mother Margaret was in her teens and early twenties ‘there were not . . . so many beautiful women found in any family’ and that she ‘was by the most judgements preferred before all her elder sisters, who, sometimes envious at it, used her unkindly’. How Lucy knew this is unclear and she may have fabricated the story, but in 1656 Margaret Cavendish displayed similar attitudes when she wrote disparagingly that ‘I dare not commend my sisters, as to say they were handsome, although many would say they were very handsome’, adding that ‘their beautie, if they had any, was not so lasting as my mothers, time making suddner ruin in their faces than hers’.

The comments of Lucy and Margaret reveal that some women were keen to praise the appearance of their mothers and denigrate the looks of their sisters, but snide comments were not directed solely at female siblings, with beautiful nieces and maid-servants treated with similar competitive animosity. In June 1653 aged 26 Dorothy Osborne described her ‘faire neece’, Dorothy Peyton, then in her mid- or late teens, as ‘soe much a woman, that I am almost ashamed to say I am her aunte, and soe pretty that if I had any designe to gaine a servant I should not like her company’, and two months later observed that ‘I have knowne some women that have commended others merely out of spite’, adding that ‘if I were malicious enough to envy any body’s beauty I would crye it up to all that had not seen them, ther[e]’s noe such way to make any body appear less handsom[e] then they are’. The heights such jealousies might reach is evident in the comments of Anne Clifford who, at the age of 29 in February 1619,
recorded that Lady Suffolk at Northampton House ‘had the small-pox, which spoiled that good face of hers, which had brought others such misery and to herself greatness, which ended in much unhappiness’, comments which allude to the moral character of Lady Suffolk, and confirm the findings of historians who have studied gendered cultures of dishonour. In medieval society ‘a woman or girl with a damaged face was immediately suspect’ in terms of her bodily (and thus sexual) integrity, and assailants who targeted the female face knew the resulting injuries ‘would be interpreted by viewers as having a deeper, more damaging meaning for the victim’s social status and for the standing of her menfolk’. The same was true in the early modern period, when scratching the face or slitting the nose of a woman was intended to mark her as a whore, with husbands threatening to damage the faces of wives they suspected of infidelity, and wives attacking mistresses of husbands in such fashion, often to reduce the rival’s attractiveness. With regard to smallpox, marriageable young female aristocrats and gentlewomen were imagined as being especially vulnerable to the disease, and by the later seventeenth-century periodicals were advertising preparations to prevent scarring whilst imaginative literature addressed the social consequences of disfigurement. Mirroring the comments of Anne such narratives depicted women gloating when their rivals were struck down by smallpox; recounted how the disease turned the tables on women whose looks had caused the suffering of others; or drew connections between smallpox and the ‘great’ pox in order to suggest that the suffering of female victims was just reward for their alleged moral corruptness.

Beauty, as a short-hand for physical attractiveness, was thus an important attribute for girls and young women to protect and cultivate. Contemporaries recognised it as a hereditary trait, which passed from mothers to daughter, but recognised that not all female siblings were equally attractive and that daughters might struggle more than their mothers to maintain an attractive appearance. For many mothers, having a beautiful daughter was a source of pride, but for young women themselves having a beautiful sister or peers who were more attractive was a cause of concern, eliciting jealousy and (if a rival lost her looks) schadenfreude.

**Marriage**

The gleeful malice with which some women reacted to the loss of good looks in female siblings or peers resulted partly from the recognition that, alongside blood, wealth, character and virtue, appearance was a factor used by men to evaluate potential wives, and that the loss of beauty might remove a rival from the marriage market. In seventeenth-century England marriage could be consented to by anyone aged seven or over, and could be sexually consummated by girls at 12 and boys at 14, although on average women married for the first time in their mid-twenties, generally to man in their late twenties. Social rank and geography added variables, with young noble- and gentry women, as well as those born in London, tending to marry in their early twenties to men up to a decade older than them. Many of those seeking spouses turned to astrologers and experts in physiognomy or perused medical texts in order to determine the suitability of a match or gain insights into the personality and character traits which lay beneath an attractive outward appearance. Female perspectives on such matters have not been explored, and although women knew that cultivating and maintaining
good looks was important when seeking to attract a husband, many regarded beauty as just one attribute which a potential wife was expected to possess, or believed that other qualities were more important when determining whether or not a woman would make a suitable spouse. In January 1653, Dorothy Osborne joked with Sir William Temple that the beauty of Lady Diana Rich was ‘the least of her exelency’s and a few months later stated that Lady Anne Wentworth, then aged 25 and soon to be married, was ‘not ... at all handsome but infinitely vertuous and discretion, of a sober and very different humor from most of the young people of these times’, as well as having ‘much wit’ and being ‘good company’, comments which suggest that Dorothy regarded a sense of humour and sociable disposition in a wife as more important than good looks, although to some degree both were markers of beauty.

Not all women agreed, and when seeking spouses for male friends and relatives Lady Dorothy Randolph noted both the physical attractiveness and financial resources of potential wives, weighing both in the balance before making a recommendation. In 1629, Dorothy wrote that whilst visiting Lady Barrington Sir William Courteen, a Dutchman, arrived with two of his daughters, ‘the one of which was so conveniently handsome that I wished her my cousin’s wife if she had ten thousand pounds; to which Lady Barrington answered, they were reported to have so much a piece, and their father might give them more if he liked the conditions, for he is very rich’, comments which prompted Dorothy to enquire further about a possible match. The following year Dorothy wrote to Lady Jane Bacon, telling how she had heard ‘of a very pretty gentlewoman that has six hundred pounds a year, and her father and mother dead; but there is eighteen hundred pounds to be paid to her grandmother for her ward-ship’ adding that an acquaintance, Mr Randolph, went to see the girl ‘and commends her for very handsome, and sixteen years old’.30 In the first case Dorothy judged Miss Courteen on her appearance, but only came to regard the match as viable once her worth had been determined, whilst in the latter case, despite having precise knowledge of the financial value of the young lady, felt it important to gain a sense of her appearance too.

Not all women were able to negotiate marriages with such balance and detachment. In March 1696, Elizabeth Freke recorded how, whilst her husband was in Dublin, Lord Drogheda proposed a match between their son and his eldest daughter, Ealce Moore, offering a portion of £3000. Elizabeth described Ealce as ‘a very handsome, fine lady and nothing to be objected but her quality’, which she thought ‘too much for a gentleman’, such as her son. The following month Elizabeth wrote that her son was ‘soe taken with the young lady’ and she feared that the Drogheda family ‘would have made us their servants in being paymasters to the young cupple’. Despite her ‘great concerne’ the betrothal went ahead since to back out would ‘be rhuinous’ to the Frekes, and her son was ‘most bitterly angry’ with Elizabeth for trying to call off the engagement.31 Elizabeth, like Dorothy, weighed up the financial and political benefits of the match against the physical and emotional appeal of the prospective bride, but deemed the latter to be more important and feared that the susceptibility of her son to the charms of Ealce risked placing her family in a difficult position.

Her unhappy experience of married life may have led Elizabeth to regard marriage primarily in financial terms, but she was not the only woman to be irritated by the manner in which some men were seduced by pretty faces, highlighting a dividing line in
regard to what women and men prioritised when evaluating the suitability of a woman as a potential wife. In 1669, having received news that Lord James Annesley had married Lady Elizabeth Manners, Lady Elizabeth Delaval was ‘strangely amazed when I consider how immediately after I left him, Lord Annesley proved false’ and rationalised his decision with reference to the attractiveness of Lady Manners, noting that had James ‘seen and loved’ her ‘before I lost his heart, he wou’d have had some little (tho but an ill) excuse, for some beauty’s are so dazling that they conquer young men by surpr[i]se’. By contrast Lucy Hutchinson recalled that her husband, John, was ‘so chaste’ that ‘none of the most fair or enticing women could ever draw him so much as into unnecessary familiarity or vain converse with them or any sort of play or dalliance’ and that even ‘a young gentlewoman of such admirable tempting beauty, and such excellent good nature, as would have thawed a rock of ice … could never get an acquaintance with him. Wealth and beauty this in vain tempted him, for it was not yet his time of love’. On their wedding day in 1638 Lucy, then aged 18, had fallen ill with smallpox, making her (in her own words) ‘the most deformed person that could be seen for a great while after she recovered’. However, John was ‘nothing troubled at it, but married her as soon as she was able to quit the chamber, when the priest and all that saw her were affrighted to look on her’. Such comments came from the pen of a self-deprecating wife who adored and eulogised her husband, but Lucy was not the only woman scarred by smallpox who was able to find a husband. In 1698, Cassandra Brydges wrote to her stepbrother-in-law, Edward Bullock, to thank him for congratulating her on recovering from the disease, adding ‘I doubt you will change your opinion when you dare venture to see me & no longer think that I have the small pox to my advantage & also by the alteration it has made, be convinced that I had no beauty to spare’. These self-deprecating comments mask the concerns of Cassandra that her chances of finding a husband had been reduced, but eventually she married at 43, with the delay more due to her wariness of marriage and independent spirit rather than any physical scars.

Whilst Lucy and Cassandra worried that losing good looks would ruin their marriage prospects, other women were surprised to hear of men courting those they deemed plain or unattractive. In 1646, Anne Halkett heard that ‘Mr H was in loue with my Lady Elizabeth Mordaunt: and shee with him’ and recorded how some of the company she was with ‘smiled and said, itt might bee her witt had taken him butt certainly nott her beauty’. Anne agreed, writing that when it came to beauty Lady Elizabeth ‘had as little of that as my selfe’. The comment of Anne about Elizabeth echoes that cited above by Dorothy Osborne about Lady Anne Wentworth: both women were deemed to have ‘wit’, although the reference by Dorothy to Anne was intended to be complimentary, whilst that of Anne to Elizabeth appears to have been tinged with sarcasm. Anne also deployed the same self-deprecating language as Lucy Hutchinson and Cassandra Brydges, although she had not suffered from smallpox, suggesting that when women referred to a personal lack of beauty it might be out of a desire to fashion a modest persona as much as due to the loss of physical attractiveness occasioned by disease.

Dorothy Osborne too was surprised to find women she deemed to be unattractive capable of attracting suitors. In July 1653, she dined with the recently widowed Lady Briars, who she deemed ‘old’ and ‘never handsom[e]’, yet who was ‘courted a thousand
times more then the greatest beauty in the world would bee that had not a fortune’, and Dorothy complained that the women ‘could not eate in quiet for the letters and the presents that cam[e] in from people that would not have looked upon her when they had mett her, if she had bin left poore’. 

Although aware that it was the wealth of the widow which occasioned the stream of admirers at her door, Dorothy deemed the situation unusual since the widow lacked the good looks which most women needed to secure a match, and the following month she was again surprised to discover that Lady Victoria Udall, then aged 33, was to marry a blind man that lived in the house with her, and who, according to Sir William Temple, had been in love with Victoria for seventeen years. Dorothy deemed this turn of events to be strange ‘for if she did not love him what could persuade her to marry him, and if she did … she made him but an ill requital for seventeen years’ service’ as she ‘had spent all her youth and beauty with another’ adding that Victoria ‘was handsom enough once, or else som pictur’s that I have seen of her flattere her very much’, and that her good looks together with her wit led her to acquire so many suitors ‘that they hinderd one another’. These comments suggest that Dorothy regarded good looks as an aesthetic dowry which a husband was entitled to possess and enjoy, but also that Victoria had reached a stage in her life where the opportunity to attract a husband based on her physical appearance had disappeared or decreased significantly, and that the only option she had left was to marry a blind man.

Once married the need to maintain an attractive appearance remained at the forefront of the minds of women, and even an exceptionally pious wife deemed it her duty to fashion a grave or modest demeanour befitting her age and rank which would reflect well on her husband and enable her to win his affection. For godly women this posed a challenge, with the need to shy away from frivolity or extravagance having to be balanced with maintaining a pleasing, clean and wholesome appearance. To circumnavigate this problem some women emphasised that they cultivated good looks primarily to please others rather than due to personal vanity. In August 1653 Dorothy Osborne wrote to her future husband Sir William Temple that ‘if you would not have my face better, I am sattisfyed it should be as it is, since if ever I wish’d it otherwise, twas for your sake’ and two months later claimed to be unconcerned ‘whither people think mee hands[om] or ilfavourd’. Dorothy was asserting that she sought to beautify herself solely to please the man she would marry, and for a woman who sought to fashion a beautiful appearance purely for the benefit of her husband, widowhood might lead her to end the pursuit of beautification completely. In 1665, at the age of 38 the widowed Katherine Austen described her body as ‘the worst part of me’ and claimed that the body of ‘every servant made and country wench may excel mine, and can give the same satisfaction as mine’. Downplaying the importance of physical attractiveness in determining her sense of self-worth, Katherine wrote that she valued more the ‘virtues and quality’ of her soul and wished that ‘if anything in me is to be loved, I hope ‘tis my mind’. Whether this was a long-standing belief, or a shift in mentality that had occurred during widowhood and in response to the onset of middle age is unclear.

In general women recognised that physical attractiveness alongside financial assets and positive personality traits were key factors when considering the suitability of a young woman as a potential wife, and expressed surprise if a man pursued a woman
whose peers deemed her to be plain in appearance or to have lost her looks, with even the possession of significant wealth not always deemed sufficient to override a lack of beauty. As was the case at earlier stages of the life-cycle, disfigurement due to smallpox was feared, but in practice did not necessarily preclude women from finding husbands, and marriages in later life when the looks of a woman were deemed to be fading was possible, as the examples of Cassandra Brydges, Lady Briars and Victoria Udall reveal.

Later life

The comments by and about these three women provide evidence that women were aware that ageing and the loss of good looks might have a detrimental impact on their social standing, something even proto-feminists and early bluestockings were concerned about. The speed and effects of ageing on women varied according to living conditions and diet, but in general physical traits, such as tooth loss; stooped shoulders; wrinkled skin; age spots; facial hair; and grey or thinning hair on the head began to manifest in the fifth or sixth decade, often coinciding with the onset of the menopause between 45 and 50. Women feared and loathed such alterations, not least because they were found in literary and visual representations of witches which reinforced negative gendered ideas about ageing. Some poets and playwrights urged young women not to waste their good looks which, like their reproductive capacities, would diminish and ultimately disappear with age, but others drew on proverbial wisdom that moral failings became increasingly visible as a person aged in order to discourage what they regarded as inherent female vanity. Such authors mocked old women who used cosmetics to hide physical decay, depicting them not only as victims of verbal abuse, but also as loquacious individuals with threatening powers and as sexual aggressors attempting to seduce young men. However, evidence from trial reports and medical tracts contradicted such comments, suggesting that elderly women were not attractive enough to be victims of rape, and that old women (and men) were deemed unsuitable for sexual intercourse because of their infertility and unattractiveness, the physical signifiers of which resulted from humoral imbalances and overlapped to a certain degree.

Women were aware of the transience of beauty, observing and recording the ageing process in themselves and female contemporaries with sadness and nostalgia. In the summer of 1614, aged 39 and 13 years into her second marriage, Benedicta Hoskyns wrote to her husband, John, that ‘the beauty which you out of your loue thought I had had is now with age and siecnes deca[y]ed and gone”; in 1652 aged sixty-two Anne Clifford remembered how pleasing her youthful body had been, ‘for never was there child more resembling both father and mother than myself’, noting how ‘time and age hath long since ended all those beauties”; and in October 1662 Ann Fanshawe met Henrietta Maria, then aged fifty-two, and deemed her to be ‘a very honourable, wise woman, and I believe had been very handsome’ a comment which suggests that remnants of youthful beauty might remain visible to the keen eyed-observer. Benedicta made her comments about the loss of good looks in her late thirties, which appear to have resulted as much from sickness as from ageing, but those by Anne Clifford and about Henrietta Maria were made when the women were post-menopausal, and as such provide clues to how women responded to and regarded the shifts in physical appearance which accompanied the loss of fertility in later life.
However, it was not only middle-aged and elderly women who wrote about the impact of ageing on the female body. Dorothy Osborne, then in her mid-twenties, observed but also evaluated the nature of beauty in relation to the aging process. In May 1653 she wrote to Sir William Temple commenting that ‘were my face in noe more danger of changing then my minde I should bee worth the seeing, at threescore, and that which is but very ordinary now, would then bee counted handsome for an old woman’, adding that she was ‘likely to look old before my time, with greife’ due to her bad luck ‘with servants, what with marrying, and what with dyeing, they all leave me’. Three months later she reminisced with her future husband about ‘what an age tis since wee first mett and how great a change it has wrought in both of us. If theire had bin as great a one in my face it would be either very handsom or very ugley’. Dorothy appears to have believed that if she retained her minimal beauty then she would be considered good looking within her age cohort in later life, which may have been a result of being at a stage of her life when beauty was a source of competition for women seeking to marry for the first time. Yet she also expressed concerned that her appearance was being harmed by the stress of searching constantly for new servants, and linked mental well-being with physical appearance again in July 1653 when describing her ‘Cousin Peters’. Dorothy could not ‘believe her beauty able to smite any body’, yet deemed her cousin to be ‘as merry as ever she was, which perhaps might make her look young but that she laughs a little too much and that will bring wrinkles’. The comment is intriguing since within early modern medical discourse merriness was regarded as key to a healthy and long life, as well as a cure for sadness and melancholy, both of which were held to cause mental and physical illness. By the eighteenth century laughter was regarded as the physical manifestation of cheerfulness, and cheerful individuals were imagined as pious, civic minded and morally upright, people who were sociable and enjoyed good company and commensality, activities which in turn enabled them to live calm and contented lives. Medical literature depicted cheerfulness as a positive mental attribute with physical and psychological benefits, an antidote to ageing and a means of preventing physical decline by quickening the circulation and aiding secretion. Cheerfulness was equated with joy and contrasted with melancholy and mirth, the latter being deemed as the manifestation of excessive joy, acceptable in youth, but too strong and potentially harmful in weaker or aged constitutions. The comments suggest that although Dorothy regarded a positive state of mind as crucial to creating a youthful appearance, she also believed laughter needed to be moderated, since being merry risked negating the potential benefits of cheerfulness.

Some women retained their good looks for longer than others, and as the aforementioned comments about Henrietta Maria suggest, signs of beauty might survive the ageing process. In 1624, Lucy Russell wrote of how ‘even at this age’ of 45, the recently widowed Frances Howard had ‘extraordinary beauty’, highlighting how notions of old age and beauty varied between individuals and different social ranks; in 1653 Dorothy Osborne wrote that although she had not seen her sister-in-law, Eleanor, for some time, she was sure Eleanor would ‘have lost noe beauty, for I never saw any shee had but good black ey’s which cannot alter’; and in 1655 Margaret Cavendish deemed the beauty of her late mother, Lady Elizabeth Lucas, to have been ‘beyond the ruin of time, for she had a well favoured loveliness in her face, a pleasing sweetness in her countenance, and a well temper’d complexion, as neither too red, nor too pale, even to
Moreover, if women did lose their looks, how they coped depended on the reactions of friends and spouses, as well as their own character, mentality and everyday activities. Writing in the third person, Lucy Hutchinson recalled that her husband, John, was ‘so constant in his love that when she ceased to be young and lovely, he began to show her more fondness; he loved her at such a kind and generous rate as words cannot express’. Lucy delighted in having a husband whose love for her appears not to have diminished as her physical appearance altered with age, and her comments chime both with those of Katherine Austen, who wished to be judged by qualities other than her appearance, and of Elizabeth Delaval, who in 1664 at the age of 16, reflected that when beauty was banished by sickness or youth by old age, then and then only shall we discover flatterur’s and discern a true friend (if we are so happy as to have any), one that loves our soul so well that though our aged body put’s them in mind of there own mortality (to most people a sad remembrance) rather then entertaines them with cherefull look’s and discourse, yet however as they use to do still share with us in all our concerns.

Elizabeth expressed these thoughts on beauty and the ageing process in her teens, and Dorothy Osborne began to make observations on the connections between physical appearance and emotional well-being in her mid-twenties, but it was post-menopausal women in their fifties and sixties who felt the effects of such changes most acutely and commented on them with the greatest sadness. Regardless of how old they were, contemplation of the impact of the ageing process on their physical appearances led women to reflect on the nature of their relationships with husbands, parents and friends since many were concerned that the loss of good looks would damage these most personal of connections. Popular stereotypes did little to quell the anxieties of women in the later stages of the life-cycle, but some managed to retain attractive physical traits into later life, and amongst the sample of women analysed, none seem to have been ostracised when their beauty declined.

Conclusions

Evidence from life-writings of women from the upper and middle ranks of English society reveals how good looks remained important to them across the seventeenth century and throughout the life-cycle, but also that their sense of their own appearance and concerns about maintaining good looks altered as they journeyed from childhood to old age. In several letters and diaries fears surfaced of the damage that might be wrought by smallpox, revealing the importance of maintaining a blemish-free complexion, and there are isolated references to fair hair, coloured cheeks, and black eyes, but in general the women who wrote about physical attractiveness did not dwell on aesthetics or beautification, instead linking their comments to concerns about ageing, marriage, and mental health. As such they differ in focus from the male-authored poems, plays, diaries, medical texts and artworks which have been used by the majority of scholars who have explored the subject of beauty previously. The diaries and letters of women also provide little evidence of their authors questioning the importance of cultivating and maintaining an attractive appearance from adolescence into old age. The period when most women were on the marriage market between their teens and thirties
emerges as a particularly important period in which conforming to expectations of what constituted an appropriate appearance mattered, with the financial, social and emotional benefits of finding a good husband being potential dividends of investing in the cultivation of an attractive appearance.

Mothers were keen to protect the complexions of daughters from the ravages of smallpox from infancy onwards, and the word ‘beauty’ appears to have been the main term used to refer to the attractive appearance of pre-pubescent girls, although some deployed ‘pretty’ as a descriptor too. Once adolescence began the vocabulary of good looks shifted and widened to include words such as ‘fine’, handsome’ and ‘lovely’, and from as early as 14 years of age the physical appearance of girls began to be commented upon regularly, with some becoming regarded as yet more attractive as they progressed from their teens to their twenties.

These years were when an attractive appearance might be used to best effect, and women regarded good looks as an important commodity in the marriage market, although they placed equal emphasis on financial capital, as well as valuing civility, virtue, discretion, good humour and sociability when considering who male relatives and acquaintances should wed. That women made such evaluations for their menfolk suggests that there was a significant degree of consensus between the sexes about who was an attractive woman, but the fact that women were irritated or angered if men were enticed into marriage by a lovely, beautiful or handsome face, as well as surprised if a man married a woman they considered plain or unattractive, suggests that such notions were gendered in subtle ways. As well as facilitating the making of marriages, physical appearance helped define relationships between women. Mothers took pride in the good looks of their daughters, whilst sisters, maidservants and female acquaintances were envied for their physical attributes. Women compared the appearances of female peers and made cutting remarks about attractive rivals, but were guarded about their own appearances and expressed desires to be valued for their mental, as well as physical attributes, not least because they knew that disease, pregnancy and the aging process might destroy good looks.

The outward features of old age were well-known but emerged in individuals at different stages of life. Dorothy Osborne was probably unusual in deeming 30 as the age at which women began to lose their good looks, and in general the onset of menopause was a key point of transition. Many women tried to identify physical and psychological factors which triggered ageing, and contemporaries commented positively if women retained remnants of beauty into later life, but different standards as to what constituted an attractive appearance applied at each stage of the life-cycle. For many the opinions of husbands, family and friends did as much if not more than their own sense of self-worth to determine how much effort they put in to maintaining an attractive appearance, highlighting how physical attractiveness served as a means to unite and divide women from both men and other women at different stages of the life-cycle, and some women hoped that the loss of good looks would not result in the loss of love and friendship, which it does not appear to have done. Moreover, there are indications that women were sceptical of the emphasis placed on physical attractiveness. Both Katherine Austen and Elizabeth Delaval believed that women ought to be judged on intellectual capacity and personal demeanour instead, but in an era when bodily health and beauty were believed to be determined by mental well-being and contentment, separating different measurements of cultural and social worth was a task that was difficult if not impossible to achieve.
Notes

17. Trill (ed.), Lady Anne Halkett, p. 99. Lady Margaret Married in August 1626, so her daughter was probably in her early twenties.
19. Parker (ed.), Letters, pp. 129–30. Parker suggests the sisters were the daughters of Edward Bishop of Parham in Sussex and Mary, daughter of Nicholas, Earl of Thanet, who married in 1626, so they were probably in their early twenties.
22. Parker (ed.), Letters, pp. 104, 126. Dorothy Peyton’s Parents Married in 1636, so she would have been sixteen or seventeen years old when her aunt wrote the letter.
29. Parker (ed.), Letters, pp. 66, 84. Both women were peers, and in the case of Diana a friend of Dorothy, so would have been in their twenties. Anne Wentworth has been identified as the daughter of Sir Thomas Wentworth, Lord Deputy of Ireland during the reign of
Charles I. Cf. n.33 below for another evocation of ‘wit’ as a potentially positive quality in a future wife.


47. Parker (ed.), Letters, pp. 102, 123.

48. Parker (ed.), Letters, p. 113. It is unclear who ‘Cousin Peters’ was.


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