

# The pursuit of beauty in “the age of powder and paint”

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## Abstract

The British eighteenth century was an age of elegance. A vital importance was put on appearances and the consumer boom of the time assumed epic proportions. Towards the end of the century complexions became increasingly more colourful and hairstyles more extravagant. As Neville Williams puts it, “[it] was par excellence the age of powder and paint” (1957:56) and women spared no effort or cost regarding their appearance since presenting oneself with the latest trends was paramount to a woman’s reputation of being fashionable. High-quality cosmetics, wigs and poufs defined rank and power since they were only affordable to the elites and women would sacrifice comfort and safety for the sake of their fashion.

This article aims to present an overview of the use of cosmetics by eighteenth-century elite women and how it constitutes a sign of the

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increased economic prosperity which prompted the consumers' boom.

**Keywords:** Eighteenth-Century Fashion; cosmetics; Georgian elites.

## Resumo

O século XVIII britânico foi uma era de elegância. As aparências adquiriram uma importância decisiva e o consumismo da época assumiu proporções épicas. No final do século, as fisionomias tornaram-se cada vez mais coloridas e os penteados mais extravagantes. Como Neville Williams refere, "[era] por excelência a idade do pó e da tinta" (1957: 56) e a mulher não economizava nenhum esforço ou quantia, dado que exibir as últimas tendências era fundamental para a sua reputação de senhora elegante. Cosméticos de alta qualidade, perucas e pufes definiam posição e poder, uma vez que eram apenas acessíveis para as elites e as mulheres sacrificavam o seu conforto e a sua segurança em nome de moda.

Este artigo pretende apresentar uma visão global do uso de cosméticos pelas elites femininas do século XVIII e como isso constitui um símbolo do aumento da prosperidade económica que impulsionou o consumismo na época.

**Palavras-Chave:** Moda do século XVIII; cosméticos; elites georgianas.

In the eighteenth century, the cosmetic market was thriving thanks to the increased economic prosperity that prompted the boom of consumerism. As a matter of fact, eighteenth-century economics gained momentum both due to the commercial interchanges between the colonies and the empire, and also because of the Act of Union of England and Scotland in 1707. Together with the ongoing application of the Navigation Act of 1651, conditions were founded in such a way that British Public Wealth (BPW) reached a new level of success. Moreover, this new flux of affluence resulted and benefited a larger social group than the previously considered privileged elite, i.e., the middle class was the driving force of the many factories and trade businesses and were also the receivers of the revenues thereof.

On the other hand, scientific advances on several fields, but particularly on the nature of colour and the spectrum prompted the development of new dyes. Isaac Newton, in *Opticks: or, a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections, and Colours of Light* (1704), revealed that all colours could be achieved by combining red, yellow and blue. It was the opening of new and exciting chromatic possibilities: “Chemical dyes and pigments – derived from minerals, plants and lichens – were developed, and by the end of the eighteenth-century, a range of colours in bright as well as subtle and muted tones could be achieved.” (Rooney, 2005:11).

Since most of the products and raw materials were not native to Britain, some would come from other parts of the Empire, but there was still a need to import, as the elites indulged in an orgy of spending and surrendered passionately to the pursuit of novelty and luxury. Indeed, “an eighteenth-century lady in all her perfume, powder and paint was truly a symbol of international trade.” (Chico, 2005: 108) Perfumes, dyes, and other materials used to make cosmetics, as well as the finished products, had always been liable to heavy taxes, but

with the Act of 1786<sup>2</sup> all sorts of toiletries and beauty aids were subject to further tax, as pointed out by Neville Williams, who observes that the very wording of the Act provides ample information about beauty aids:

Tax was due on 'every packet, box, bottle, phial or other enclosure containing any powders, pastes, balls, balsams, ointments, oils, waters, washes, tinctures, essences, liquors or other preparations commonly called by the name of sweet scents, odours or perfumes; or by the name of cosmeticks'; on every 'roll, cake, piece, packet, box, pot or other enclosure containing pomatum, ointment or other preparation for the hair', and on all goods with like properties and uses. In case these definitions should be thought to be too vague and indefinite, the Act contained a schedule in which all the articles of the beauty-box were enumerated [...]. (Williams, 1957:65).

Nevertheless, fashionable women continued to purchase all kinds of luxury products destined to improve their appearance. It was important to consume, but to do so in a conspicuous manner. First-class cosmetics, wigs and poufs defined class and power since they were only affordable for the elites, and women would sacrifice comfort and safety for the sake of their fashion.

Cosmetic(s), as defined by Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) is something "with the power of improving beauty; beautifying" (Johnson, 1755: 485) and, naturally, women would eagerly use them, as they were considered the best way to achieve beauty:

Cosmetics really impart whiteness, freshness, suppleness, and brilliancy to the skin, when it is naturally deficient in those qualities; consequently, they only assist nature, and make amends for her defects; and it may be affirmed, that they are to beauty what medicine is to health. (Corbould, 1825:187).

In *The Fashionable World Displayed* (1804), John Owen, when describing the "people of Fashion", refers to an "invisible standard" that he calls a "mysterious talisman" (Owen, 1804:62) which, as

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<sup>2</sup> Statute 26 George II cap. 49 (as quoted in Williams 1957, 65).

pointed out by Hannah Grieg in *The Beau Monde* (2013: 3), “involved pedigree, connections, manners, language, appearance, and much else besides. In fact, “within the eighteenth-century beau monde, it was often position and not just powder or paint that comprised the charms of a ‘beauty’”. (Grieg, 2013: 191) As Kendra van Cleave observes: “Fashion – both the specific looks worn by people across the social spectrum, as well as the processes by which they acquire and wear items of apparel and other aspects of personal appearance – cannot be untied from its social, political, and economic context.” (Van Cleave, 2014:9). Indeed, fashion was one of the indisputable signs of class and political and economic power. Access to the latest trends and best products were available only to a select few who would flaunter their privileged way of dress and accessorise. Of course, this would give way to a myriad of imitations, some better than others, of people from lower social echelons wishing to climb up the social ladder.

The concept of *Beauty* as discussed in the eighteenth century was invariably linked to that of *Taste* and both “were implicated in wider cultural changes, as participants in theoretical debate sought to establish positions inflected by the nuances of class position and the uncertainties of gender roles”. (Jones, 1998, vii). It follows that the leaders of taste and arbiters of fashion in the eighteenth century were under constant scrutiny and were often presented in scales which compared fashionable women, as shown in the following examples cited by Hannah Grieg. In September 1776, the *London Chronicle* published a ‘Scale of Beauties’ using the following criteria: person, expression, complexion, and grace. The following month, the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* printed a ‘Scale of Bon Ton’ which graded on the basis of beauty, figure, elegance, wit, sense, grace, expression, sensibility, and principles. In June 1793, the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* and the *Woodfall’s Register* published a ‘Scale of Modern

Beauty' which was divided into form, elegance, grace, fortune, complexion, countenance, softness, expression, and loveliness.

Since "beauty is the most amiable of all personal endowment [and] it will ever command the attention of the elegant and refined part of mankind" (Physician, 1770: 12), *The Dictionary of Love* presents the most important attributes of *Beauty* (du Radier, 1753: xlv-xlii) which feature 'Youth' at the top of the list, so it is not surprising that women resorted to cosmetics to appear younger. Although, as mentioned above, physical allure was not the only desirable attribute, women went to great lengths and expense to present themselves with the latest trends. The painting *Six Stages of mending a face* (1792) by Thomas Rowlandson is perhaps one of the best examples that present (and satirize) the remarkable transformation that occurred in the toilet:

The head and shoulders of Lady Archer at different stages of her toilet. In the first (right), wearing a night-cap, with unsightly pendent breasts, she looks up to the left, tears falling from an empty eye-socket, her gaping mouth showing toothless jaws. In the next she fits in an eye, in the third she places a wig on her head, in the fourth (below on the right) she fits in a set of false teeth; in the next she applies rouge to her cheeks with a hare's foot, holding a mirror. In the last (left) she appears a pretty young woman, holding a mask in her hand. In the last two stages her arms, which were skinny and muscular, have become smooth and rounded and her breasts have been covered with the gauze drapery then fashionable<sup>3</sup>.

*The Spectator* addressed the subject, stating that "compassion for the Gentleman who [wrote a letter], should not prevail upon me to fall upon the Fair Sex, if it were not that I find they are frequently Fairer than they ought to be," adding that "Such Impostures are not to

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<sup>3</sup> Rowlandson, Thomas. 1792. *Six stages of mending a face*. British Museum Collection Database. Registration number 1876,1014.10. Accessed October 6, 2017.

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1482745&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1482745&partId=1)

be tolerated in Civil Society; and I think his Misfortune ought to be made publick, as a Warning for other Men always to Examine into what they Admire." (Adison & Steele, *The Spectator*, v.1, 1776: 178).

The letter in question denounced "the part of the Sex who paint" complaining that:

They are some of them so Exquisitely skilful this Way, that give them but a Tolerable Pair of Eyes to set up with, and they will make Bosoms, Lips, Cheeks, and Eye-brows, by their own Industry. As for my Dear, never Man was so Enamour'd as I was of her fair Forehead, Neck, and Arms, as well as the bright Jett of her Hair; but to my great Astonishment, I find they were all the Effects of Art: Her Skin is so Tarnished with this Practice, that when she first wakes in a Morning, she scarce seems young enough to be the Mother of her whom I carried to Bed the Night before. (Adison & Steele, *The Spectator*, v.1, 1776: 178-9).

So controversial had the "before-and-after" become that in 1770 an Act was introduced in Parliament which intended to protect men against women who beguiled them into marriage by using too many artificial aids to make themselves look more beautiful than they really were:

All women of whatever age, rank, profession or degree, whether virgins, maids or widows, that shall, from and after such Act, impose upon, seduce and betray into matrimony one of His Majesty's subjects, by the scents, paints, cosmetic washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high-heeled shoes [or] bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the pay in force against witchcraft and like misdemeanours and that the marriage, upon conviction, shall become null and void. (Poucher, 1923: 12-3)

In fact, there were countless artificial aids available that supposedly helped women achieve the desired beauty standards by disguising the effects of age, blemishes, disease, and sun. As mentioned above, cosmetics were considered the best way to achieve beauty: "Cosmetics had been considered to impart whiteness, freshness, suppleness, and brilliancy to the skin [...] and it may be affirmed, that they are to beauty what medicine is to health". (Corbould, H. 1825: 187).

The basic products, colour schemes, and application of make-up did not change much throughout the century. (Greig, 2013: 172). Numerous works that presented advice and recipes to deal with virtually every aspect of one's appearance continued to appear throughout the century. This is not surprising since the quest for beauty has been something that has preoccupied women (and men) since probably the beginning of time: "the study of the beautiful, the desire to attain the ideal of human perfection [...] has played a part in the world's history, second only in importance to religion and war". (Potter, 1908: vii) Indeed, "the quest for physical beauty is essentially as old as Woman herself". (Joslen, 1939: xi).

Julian Walker's *The Finishing Touch: Cosmetics through the ages* presents a rather amusing list of materials and methods, more often than not bizarre, that have "been used to help women – and men – enhance or hold on to their looks," pointing out that "it opens up a history of ingenuity, imagination and hope, but also of delusion, exploitation and self-harm". (2014): 7).

As noted by Julian Walker, quoting *Abdeker: or, the Art of Preserving Beauty* (1754), the face was the chief site of cosmetics, if not the chief seat of beauty:

The Face is the chief Seat of Beauty: It there displays all its Force and all its Majesty; it is there it places those powerful Charms that command and captivate the Spectator's Heart, and excite his Admiration. (Le Camus, 1755, xxi).

The process of applying make-up to the face was a time-consuming task that required skill. The first step was to ensure an even surface to apply the products. Blackheads, believed to be worms, were a particular nuisance as they spotted and blackened the face: "these worms in some are very numerous insomuch that their faces appear as if they were spotted over with sparkles of gun-powder" to which the *Beauties Treasury or, The ladies vade mecum* presents a

recipe of juice of lemons, unslaked lime, and powder of sulfur. (W., 1705: 39) Afterwards, the skin would be whitened with lead-based ceruse paint to achieve the desirable matt white complexion (Greig, 2013: 173), which was not without its inconveniences:

[...] however well prepared the colour may be, or however skillful the hand that lays it on, it is immediately discovered by the eye at a considerable distance and by the nose at a nearer approach [...]and it has the most nauseous taste imaginable. (*Adam Fitz-Adam*, 1761: 7).

Furthermore, cosmetics carried considerable health risks, since they often contained lead and mercury. Unfortunately, women were almost exclusively concerned with the quality and colour of cosmetics, disregarding their safety (or lack thereof). Indeed, “vanity transcended the risk of death”. (Romm, 1992: 217). The white paints in particular, usually lead-based, were notoriously dangerous:

The white paints affect the eyes, which swell and inflame, and are rendered painful and watery. They change the texture of the skin, on which they produce pimples and cause rheums; attack the teeth, make them ache, destroy the enamel, and loosen them. They heat the mouth and throat, infecting and corrupting the saliva, and they penetrate through the pores of the skin, acting by degrees, on the spongy substance of the lungs, and inducing diseases (Corbould, 1825: 194).

This make-up, known as ceruse, consisted of a combination of hydrate and carbonate of lead:

Ceruse is a white calx [burnt residue] of lead used in painting and cosmetics, made by calcining that metal into the vapour of vinegar. Ceruse is made of thin lamina, or plates of lead, made up into rolls, and so placed as to receive and imbibe the fumes of vinegar contained in a vessel, and set over a moderate fire. The lamina are by means thereof concreated [coalesced] into a white crust, which they gather together, and grinding it up with water form into little cakes. It makes the principal ingredient in the fucuses used by ladies, for their complexion. (Stewart 1782, *apud* Walker 2014: 48).

The next steps included “rouged cheeks with henna or carmine made from cochineal, a red dye extracted from crushed beetles, and a glaze effect would be achieved by painting a layer of egg white over

the decorated skin". (Greig, 2013: 173). At the end of the century a pearl-based powder, "reserved for not only the ladies of the first rank, but of the most considerable fortunes", (Fitz-Adam, 1765: 7). proved to be a more practical option by achieving equally luminous results without being as sticky (Greig, 2013: 173). In the section 'Carmines – A Rouge for the Face,' *The Toilet of Flora* presents some recipes to achieve the desired red colour:

Alkanet Root<sup>4</sup> strikes a beautiful red when mixed with Oils or Pomatums. A Scarlet or Rose-coloured Ribband wetted with Water or Brandy, gives the Cheeks, if rubbed with it, a beautiful bloom that can hardly be distinguished from the natural colour. Others only use a Red Sponge, which tinges the cheeks of a fine carnation colour [...]

Take Brazil Wood Shavings, and Roch Alum, beat them together into a coarse powder, and boil in a sufficient quantity of Red Wine, till two thirds of the Liquor are consumed. When this decoction has stood till cold, rub a little on the cheeks with a bit of cotton. (Buc'hoz, 1779: 192-3).

Red make-up could be based on cinnabar which "is composed of Brimstone and Mercury [and] when it is reduced to a subtil Powder in a Marble Mortar, it acquires so lively and so high a Colour, that it is called Vermillion"; but the author continues with a word of caution: "Some Ladies mix it with Paint wherewith they rub their cheeks, which is very dangerous; for by using it frequently they may lose their Teeth, acquire a stinking Breath; and excite a copious Salivation". (Le Camus, 1755: 82).

Herbal bases for rouge included safflower, wood resin, sandalwood, and Brazil wood which were mixed with greases, creams, or vinegars to create a paste. Regarding the application of rouge, fashionable women wore it in wide swaths from the corner of the eye to the corner of the lips. (Van Cleave, 2002-1204: s.p.) By mid-century,

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<sup>4</sup> The root of Alkanet had been used as a red dye for centuries (Walker, Julien, *The Finishing Touch: Cosmetics through the Ages*. London: The British Library, 2014: 52).

pomades for lips were being sold, and red seems to have been the most popular choice for the lips. *Abdeker: or, the Art of Preserving Beauty* offers some recipes of *Red Pomatum for the lips*, including washing the lips with pure brandy and other more elaborate methods, such as:

Take an ounce of white wax and of an ox’s marrow, three ounces of white pomatum, and melt them all in a bath-heat. Add a dram of alkanet, and stir the mass together till it acquires a red colour.

Others choose to use the ointment of roses, which is thus prepared:

Take a hog’s lard washed in rose-water; red roses, and pale roses; beat them all in a mortar, mix them together, and let them macerate for two days. Then melt the lard and strain it, and add the same quantity of roses as before. Let them macerate in the fat for two days, and afterwards let the mass boil in a bath-heat. Strain it with expression, and keep it for use. (Le Camus, 1755: 215).

The *pomade à bâton*, a cosmetic in stick form, was actually closer to the sticks of grease paint for stage make-up than to the modern lipstick. (Le Camus, 1755: 215). The shades seen on lips varied between red, pink, coral, and occasionally burgundy. (Van Cleave, 2002-1204: s.p.)

Beauty patches (or *mouches*), popular in the 1600s, were also worn in the eighteenth century. They covered smallpox scars and highlighted the beauty of pale skin. One must bear in mind that smallpox was a wide-spread disfiguring disease which affected no small number of women, quite often dictating their expectations, or the lack of them, in the marriage market. For instance, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu<sup>5</sup>, a celebrated beauty of the time, was scarred by the smallpox marks. So, the red or black patches, made of silk, velvet, satin, taffeta, paper or lead and were attached with gum, would help as

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<sup>5</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) was a renowned writer who championed for the introduction of variolation in Great Britain, after witnessing this practice in Turkey: “The small-pox, so fatal, and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless by the invention of *ingrafting*, which is the term they give it”. (Letter from Lady Montagu to Mrs S.C., Adrianople, April 01, 1717).

fragmented masks or disguising elements in a lady's physiognomy. There were several sizes and shapes, including circular shapes, moon shapes, hearts, stars, castles, and animals. (Walker, 2014: 40). These patches were also believed to be part of a subtle sign system, conveying different meanings, from political allegiances to marital status or personality traits, depending on their position. (Greig, 2013: 172-3).

The removal of hair, namely facial hair, seems to have been a fairly common practice. The *Toilet of Flora* presents a few methods, including the following:

Take a quarter of a pound of Gum Ivy dissolved in Vinegar, a drachm of Orpiment, a drachm of Ant Eggs, and two drachms of Gum Arabic dissolved in Juice of Henbane, in which half an ounce of Quick-lime has been boiled. Make the whole into a liniment with a sufficient quantity of Fowls Grease, and apply a little to the part where you would wish to destroy the Hair, after being clean shaved. (Buc'hoz, 1779: 135).

There is a record of a French barber who called on the Duchess of Newcastle with the commission of shaving her Grace's upper lip, which seemed to so please the Duke that he "settled upon" the "celebrated artist" £400 a year for life:

On Tuesday the operation of shaving was happily performed on the upper lip of her grace the dutchess of Newcastle, by a celebrated artist from Paris, sent over on purpose by the earl of Albemarle. The performance lasted but one minute and three seconds, to the great joy of that noble family; and in consideration of his great care and expedition, his grace has settled four hundred pounds a year upon him for life. (Walpole, 1752: 271).

In 1804, Marcus Hymans took out a patent for "a composition for shaving without the use of razor, soap or water" (Anon., 1804: 400) which, according to Neville Williams, was the first depilatory to be marketed, (Williams, 1757: 71) although "a depilatory of the resin of the larch-tree, mixed up with that of mastic" had been advised by a physician in 1762. (Anon., 1963: 73).

The eyebrows should be “in arcade, like two lines” (du Radier, 1753: xlv) and black seems to have been the fashionable colour. *The toilet of Flora* alone presents two recipes to change the colour of the eyebrows to a desirable black:

First wash your eyebrows with a decoction of Gall Nuts; then Wet them with a pencil or little brush dipped in a solution of Green Vitriol, in which a little Gum Arabic has been dissolved, and when dry, they will appear of a beautiful black colour. (Buc'hoz, 1779: 86).

Rub them frequently with ripe Elderberries. Some use burnt Cork, or Cloves burnt in the candle; others prefer the Black of Frankincense, Rosin, and Mastic. This Black will not melt nor come off by sweating. (Buc'hoz, 1779: 207).

When the shape of the eyebrows did not match the desirable shape, women would sometimes pluck them, although it was recommended that someone else performed the task: “If the eyebrows are too thick, all the help that is to be made is very carefully to clip off some of the tops of the hairs, an operation so nice that the person must not venture to do it themselves. (Physician, 1770, apud Walker 2014: 133).

Another solution to deal with unfashionable natural eyebrows was to wear false ones. It seems to be a fairly common assertion that these were made of mouse fur, although there is no simple evidence for this, nor a procedure to remove the skin from the animal and make it into a fur patch. However, Jonathan Swift’s *A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed* (1734) seems to support this theory:

Her eyebrows from a mouse’s hide  
Stuck on with art on either side  
Pulls off with care, and first displays’em,  
Then I a play-book smoothly lays’em. (Swift, 1734, 1808:157).

Surprisingly, in an age when science was revered as a factor of progress and health improvement, the urge to embellish, or at least alter, one’s aspect lead to rather questionable practices. The profusion

of pastes, oils and ointments used on facial treatments would often create the perfect breeding-ground for undesirable insects, and the eyebrows were no exception. Therefore, it is not surprising to find recipes for addressing such problems, as seen in a 1660 “ointment for lice in the eyebrows” (certainly not the first or the last on this topic): “take one apple roasted and cleansed, quicksilver killed [neutralized] with spittle, mix them well and anoint”. (Wecker 1660, *apud* Walker: 131).

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of fashion in this century was the hairdos. They may be considered the baroque element in fashion since they were able to create illusory figures, both in height and in the points of attention a lady would draw when exhibiting such art pieces. The end of the seventeenth century saw a peak of artificiality, real *trompe l'oeil* works, which would gradually give way to a less elaborate and simple style towards the middle of the eighteenth century although hairdos would rise in height and extravagance towards the second half of the century, as anticipated in *The Spectator*:

There is not so variable a thing in nature as a *Lady's Head-Dress*. Within my own memory I have known it to rise and fall above thirty degrees. About ten years ago it shot up to a very great height, insomuch that the female part of our species were much taller than men. [...] the present sex is in a matter dwarfed, and shrunk into a race of beauties that seems almost another species. I remember several ladies, who were once very near seven foot high, that at present want some inches of five. How that came to be thus curtailed I cannot learn [...] though I find most are of opinion, they are at present like trees new looped and pruned, that will certainly sprout up and flourish with greater heads than before. (Addison, 1711: 115).

In fact, the 1770s and 1780s presented some of the most outrageous excesses of these styles. The Lewis Walpole Library held an exhibition in 2003 entitled *Preposterous Headdresses and Feathered*

*Ladies: Hair, Wigs, Barbers, and Hairdressers* that presented a selection of prints focused on the theme.<sup>6</sup>

As for hairstyles, every *coiffure*, or “the head-dress of a lady”, (Fairholt, 1860: 421) had a name (most of the fashion-related terms were French) and having one’s hair styled, or “dressed” as it was called, was an essential part of women’s toilette (Van Cleave, 2014:10), as fashionable display was a key aspect of eighteenth-century society:

The more elaborate the hairstyle, the more wealth and leisure time was shown to be available to the individual. Hair and its styling visibly demonstrated the wearer’s ability to consume but more important, to do so in a conspicuous and theatrical manner. (Cross, 2008: 23).

Therefore, hair and wig styles were a significant feature and focus of social comment. At the beginning of the century, there were some popular styles, like the *fontange*, in which the front of the hair was held by wire, and the *commode*, in which the hair was placed high on a silk-covered frame. (Cox, 1966: 45, 66). The latter part of the century saw some of the most outrageous headdresses imaginable:

The body of this erection was formed of tow, over which the hair was turned, and false hair added in great curls, bobs, and ties, powdered to profusion; then hung all over with vulgarly-large rows of pearls, or glass beads, fit only to decorate a chandelier; flowers as obtrusive were stuck about this heap of finery, which was surmounted by broad silken bands and great ostrich-feathers, until the head dress of a lady added three feet to her stature, and the male sex, to use the words of the Spectator, “became suddenly dwarfed beside her. (Fairholt, 1860: 475).

Regarding the colour, dark hair appeared to be the fashionable choice, which is testified by an advertisement placed in an evening newspaper: “the only true chemical liquor for the hair which gradually

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<sup>6</sup> See the Lewis Walpole Library, Programs and Exhibitions: “Preposterous Headdresses and Feathered Ladies: Hair, Wigs, Barbers, and Hairdressers”. Accessed January 2, 2016.

changes red, grey or hair of any other disagreeable colour [...] into the most beautiful Black” (*London Evening Post*, 8 Oct. 1751 *apud* Picard, 2000: 224). In June 1755, *The Lady’s Magazine* published an article by Dr. John Cook entitled ‘Receipt for Changing Yellow Hair’:

[...] for the sake of those of the fair sex not so well satisfied with the present unfashionable colour of their hair, I freely proffer the following short prescription, easily to be had, and as easily prepared, whereby they may privately alter, whenever they please, the disagreeable yellow hue of their hair into an agreeable black, and that without either sin, danger, or shame.

Squeeze any quantity you choose of the juice of ripe elderberries, or those from the dwarf-elder, as being the stronger; let it stand all night to settle; next day pour off the clean liquor, put into a cup full (more or less) of red wine, let them simmer together gently, 2 or 3 minutes, over a slow fire, then bottle it for use.

With some of this liquid warmed, wash the hair now and then, in time it will safely dye it of an agreeable black colour. (*The Lady’s Magazine*, Jun 1775, *apud* Corson, 1965: 342-3).

*The Art of Beauty* also offered a recipe for darkening the hair:

First warm your head with springwater, then dip your comb in Oil of Tartar, and comb yourself in the Sun: repeat this operation three times a day, and at the end of eight days at most the hair will turn black. (Corbould, 1825: 10).

Hairdressing became a very successful profession. In Britain, the number of hairdressers increased significantly, with one report stating that the profession had grown from two in London at the coronation of George II in 1727 to fifty thousand in Great Britain by 1795. (Corson, 1965: 360). French hairdressers were particular sought after since “a French *friseur* of the last importation, who dressed hair to a miracle, *au dernier gout*” (Devonshire, 1788, 2007: 31) was the most fashionable choice. This originated much criticism, either from a nationalistic point a view, or from a gender perspective. Firstly, the fact that many French *friseurs* were earning their living by means of British finances was sometimes considered as a kind of

treason to their national hairdressers. Secondly, in a patriarchal society, the man of the family would be outraged by the time spent by his wife or other women of the family in under-garments with supposedly salacious Frenchmen, with one writer in *The Lady's Magazine* cautioning: "I will not marry a woman who suffers a French barber to breathe in her face every day, handle her hair, and take a thousand impertinent liberties with her." (Grey, 1774: 69).

Hairstyles had become increasingly elaborate with the addition of numerous accessories, ranging from small to enormous ornaments. These styles were created by resorting to a glue-like paste called pomatum, which was typically made from the fat of pigs, calves or bears, whilst powder was applied at the end to set and style it and give it a clean appearance. (Cross, 2008: 16-7).

Legros, perhaps the leading *coiffeur* in Europe at the time, presented his own recipe for beef pomatum in his book:

To make beef pomatum, take some beef marrow, and remove all the bits of skin and bone, put it in a pot with some hazel nut oil and stir well with the end of a rolling pin, adding more oil from time to time until it is thoroughly liquefied, and add a little essence of lemon. (Legros, 1768, *apud* Carson 1865: 332).

These headdresses usually involved an almost obsessive attention to detail and were often achieved without regard for comfort or hygiene. Hair was enlarged by being set on top of a cushion and by being "frizzed and piled up" and then embellished with several ornaments, together with powder and pomatum, which resulted in a pungent odor and a potential breeding-ground for insects, which were usually dealt with by items such as flea-traps and head-scratchers, usually special jeweled sticks. (Rooney, 2005: 5) These latter devices were intended to "remove the vermin" (Romm, 1992: 219) and, as a further precaution, women would wear protective caps of metal wire mesh to keep rodents away at night, a "practice [that] must have

proved just a drastic defence of the lady's chastity as any belt invented by a medieval knight" (Gunn, 1973: 117), as Fenja Gunn humorously observes. A letter published in *The London Magazine* in August 1768 gives a rather colourful account of such problems:

In all this mutability of modes, my fair countrywomen have always outshone all others in splendid cleanliness as well as beauty, till very lately, that invention being perhaps exhausted, the reversal of the characteristic neatness has at last had its turn. [...] I allude to the present prodigious, unnatural, monstrous, and dirty mode of dressing the hair, which, adorned with many jewels, makes them at once shine and stink upwards. Attracted by my eyes to approach as near as I could to these beautiful creatures, I have soon been repelled by my nose and been obliged to retire to a respectful distance. [...]

I went the other morning to make a visit to an elderly aunt of mine, when I found her tendering her head to the ingenious Mr. Gilchrist<sup>7</sup> [...]

When Mr. Gilchrist opened my aunt's head, as he called it, I must confess its effluvia affected my sense of smelling disagreeably, which stench, however, did not surprise me when I observed the great variety of materials employed in raising the dirty fabric. False locks to supply the great deficiency of native hair, pomatum with profusion, greasy wool to bolster up the adopted locks, and grey powder to conceal at once age and dirt, and all these caulked together by pins of an indecent length and corresponding colour. When the comb was applied to natural hair, I observed swarms of animalcules running about in the utmost consternation and in different directions, upon which I put my chair a little further from the table and asked the operator whether that numerous swarm did not from time to time to send out colonies to other parts of the body? He assured me that they could not; for the quantity of powder and pomatum formed a glutinous matter, which like lime twigs to birds, caught and clogged the little natives and prevented its migration". (*The London Magazine*, Aug. 1768, *apud* Corson, 1965: 337-8).

The use of powder was essential to achieve the desired results not only in terms of creating the hairstyle, but also because of social status: "Whether a woman wore her own hair or a wig, profuse powdering was essential. [...] Ladies who failed to powder their hair

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<sup>7</sup> Mr. Gilchrist was a successful hairdresser at the time and the author of *A Treatise on the Lady or Every lady her own Hair Dresser* (1770).

lost much prestige". (Williams, 1957: 86). Hair powder could be made by using a variety of materials, ranging from the poorest quality (corn and wheat flour), to the best (finely milled and sieved starch). The colour was usually white, but brown, grey, orange, pink, red, blue, or violet were also available. As to its application, "powder was applied with a bellows (the powderee being covered with a cone-shape face mask and fabric smock), with a puff used for touchups". (Van Cleave, 2014: 22). *Palacocosmos, or the Whole Art of Hairdressing* presents the following recipe "to make powders of various colours":

Take a pound of ivory black, in powder, as pass it through a sieve, and a pound of fine powder, which you must put on the fire, in a new saucepan, till it turns very black; then wet it with half an ounce of eau de Mareschalle. After that, take of cloves, four drachms; cinnamon, two drachms, four drachms; dry these three pieces on a red-hot shovel; after that, peel them, and beat them to a powder, so that they might pass through a sieve; then mix all together and the black powder will be done.

This is the powder that is called the Poudre a la Mareschalle, and that serves to make up all the other kind of coloured powders, except the fair, the rose, and the red [...] (Stewart 1782, *apud* Walker 2014: 116).

Powder could be used during the creation of the style and not just at the end of it:

The best method I have found to fill the Hair is to lay a good deal of powder in it, and comb it well thro' opening the Hair in Layers as you put in the Powder, then make a soft Pomatum, and do the same, combing it from Root to Point, as you put it in, after you have put Pomatum in once, take more Powder and comb in, then add more Pomatum 'till you find it sufficiently filled. For a fortnight after, you will find a small Quantity will do, except the Hair is comb'd out of the Frize; if you put the Pomatum in the Hair first, you will find it unequally powdered and striped, and a great Difficulty to mix the Powder in. (Moore, 1780: 26-7).

Regarding the use of colour, since there were several available, it would ultimately be up to the dresser to decide which colour would most favor each lady:

White powder is regaining its general use and promises to be the universally adopted taste, but the use of white powder in the extreme is an error that a nice distinguishing taste for elegance can never adopt, because the colour of the powder must ever be governed by the prevailing tints of the person's complexion. (Baker 1786, *apud* Corson 1965: 357).

The choice of colour would thus be left to the dresser, provided, of course, he was a man of taste:

Pomatum and powder, when employed in the hands of a man of taste, who has a genius for style, will considerably augment the beauty of the hair; but these two powerful ingredients in the hands of an ignorant or negligent dresser, are like the pallet and pencil in the hands of an unskillful painter. (Baker 1786, *apud* Corson 1965: 357).

Women seldom wore whole wigs. The usual procedure was to have hairdressers combine their natural hair with false locks, working the hair with powder, accessories and ornaments, while trying to remain “natural”. (Van Cleave, 2014: 13). The best wigs were made from human hair, but as it was very expensive and in limited supply, there were plenty of cheaper and more available alternatives, such as horsehair, goat hair, yak hair, silk, or feathers. (Rooney, 2005: 54-5). However, the demand for human hair continued to increase: in 1720 only £573 worth of human hair was imported from the continent but in 1750 the figure had risen to £7,971, and it continued to increase in the following decades. (Neville, 1957: 82). Despite their high cost and discomfort, wigs were an important item of dress and represented a product of conspicuous consumption:

Many fashionable items are uncomfortable to wear. Indeed, the expenditure, inconvenience and uselessness in part create its symbolic value. Only those possessed of leisure and wealth could afford the hours it took to dress a head, not to mention the price of a “pound of hair and two pounds of powder. (Fiesta, 2005: 54).

The greater extremes of fashionable hairstyles were frequently satirized and circulated in prints, either paintings or texts, denouncing the excesses of the *nouveau-riches* and their eagerness to show off. A

text published in the *Lady's Magazine* of March 1776 gave the following account of fashionable ladies:

I have seen several ladies, very handsome, so disguised and features quite distorted, by the horrid drag of their hair to a height absolutely half as tall as themselves, and so loaded with game, flowers, fruit, herbs, ribbons, pins etc.... that it really seemed a pain for them to move or speak for fear the wonderful building be demolished. (*The Lady's Magazine*, Mar.1776, *apud* Cunningham 1957: 377).

The fashionable hairstyles were not only impractical – including the inconvenience of sitting on the floor of the carriages, for example, as illustrated in M. Darly's *The vis .a .vis. bisected. Or the ladies coop* (1776)<sup>8</sup> – but also serious fire hazards, as seen in this passage of the Duchess of Devonshire's poorly disguised autobiography:

[...] some of the superfluous ornaments of my head-dress, coming rather too near the candle, caught fire, and the whole farrago of ribbands, lace, and gew-gaws, were instantly in flames.[...] I retired to my dressing-room [...] to inspect the almost ruined fabric; but such is the construction now-a-days, that a head might burn for an hour without damaging the genuine part of it. (Devonshire, 1788, 2007: 75)

Satirical as always, Rowlandson did not miss the chance to illustrate the perils of wearing such hairdos in his *A doleful disaster or Miss Fubby Fatarmin's wig caught fire* (1813)<sup>9</sup>. There were several incidents of this kind. One of the most serious was in 1755, when "a titled

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<sup>8</sup> Darly, Matthew. 1776. *The vis .a .vis. bisected. Or the ladies coop*. British Museum Collection Database. Registration number 1869,1211 .55. Accessed October 6, 2017. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1453274&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1453274&partId=1)

<sup>9</sup> Rowlandson, Thomas. 1813. *A doleful disaster, or Miss Fubby Fatarmin's wig caught fire*. British Museum Collection Database. Registration number 1882,0610.64. Accessed October 6, 2017.

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1655013&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1655013&partId=1)

lady's head-dress was set on fire by a chandelier, with which it was level, and the unfortunate lady died of burns". (Fairholt, 1860: 389).

Ultimately, by pursuing fashion to the very extreme, the ladies rendered themselves highly ridiculous and put their health and well-being at risk. Furthermore, their aesthetic options, instead of helping them to rise the social ladder, made them poor silly figures to be, quite often, laughed at and seldom pitied. Nevertheless, they point out the transitional principles between two worlds: one more puritanical and conservative where notions of parsimony and regard towards our fellow-men would take the upper-hand; and a more modern urban world where material wealth had to be obvious to everybody, thus stating an image of success.

However, as we have seen, the purportedly glamorous fashion of the eighteenth century, often depicted in period films and series, involved processes and practices which were not so glamorous, but instead rather disgusting. When revisiting these fashions, in these remakes and adaptations, our distanced views convey this two-sided approach of prosperity and illusive achievement.

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