

Bringing together face painting and the myth of Narcissus, one of the great origin stories of painting, the English *Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (Fig. 1) exemplarily links female makeup and art making, self-reflection and art beholding:<sup>1</sup> Artificial interventions and the use of colored materials transform the human face, «being plastered and deformed with too much brightness,» into «counterfeits of Idols,» in other words, copies of idols.<sup>2</sup> To Puritan eyes, face painting was equated with the idolatry found in the Old Testament and was still alive in modern Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> Like paintings and theatrical performances, painted faces belonged in the realm of the artificial, where natural forms were covered and altered by the application of color.<sup>4</sup>

The English Calvinist preacher and pro-Puritan writer Thomas Tuke (d. 1657) edited his *Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* in the context of the poison murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, one of the great court scandals of the period. This



1 Titlepage, Thomas Tuke, *A Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women*, London 1616, San Marino, California, The Huntington Library.

trial elicited numerous writings against court corruption and the Catholic Church, and the elite facial ideal composed of white and red.<sup>5</sup> The treatise compiles various theological, medical as well as cultural texts against face painting, including Tuke's own contribution, *Of the Painting of the Face*, a collection of the leading arguments against face painting by patristic writers (e. g. Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian) and modern European writers (Luther and Erasmus) as well as English Calvinists (Lambert Daneau). In that it distorts God's likeness, cosmetics are linked to ornament and artifice, adultery, the Fall of Man, and diabolic work in the anti-feminist tradition<sup>6</sup> but also to popery, witchcraft, and murder.<sup>7</sup>

### Puritan Idols

Discussions about the painted human face in seventeenth-century cosmetic literature question the relation between art and nature in the process of artistic creation. The treatise's arguments against it, however, are based on the ontological double nature of women's makeup: In identifying the painted face as a product of an artistic effort, it addresses both God and the woman as the artist. As Frances Dolan stresses that, despite their misogynist arguments and negative tenor, cosmetic discourses opened a field of creativity to women and gave them agency over their own bodies: The made-up woman «gazing into her mirror, absorbed in self-transformation, threatens the boundaries between creator and creation, desiring subject and object of desire, masculine and feminine, self and body, gentlewoman and prostitute.»<sup>8</sup> Emphasizing this point about female agency and female creativity, the pamphlet *Picture of a Picture, or, The Character of a Painted Woman*, in the appendix of Tuke's treatise, characterizes a painted woman as a picture according to Plato's famous critique of the *Politeia*—«They look like they are; however they surely are not in truth.»<sup>9</sup> Referring to Plato's definition of pictures as mere copies of «truth,» the anonymous author connects makeup with a core argument in image criticism. The Puritan concept of art was founded on the writings of the French reformer John Calvin. Based on the idea that man was created in God's image, as stated in Genesis 1:26, Puritan authors described Christians as true images, whereby God is the artist – not man.<sup>10</sup> A Christian was thus a living image and Christian living, a work of art. As both artists and living images, Christians are dependent on artistic practices. The human face, however, is already a divine image. In this context, the pamphlet *Picture of a Picture* explains its concept of the idol: Face painting is an act of hubristic rejection of God's creation, because self-adornment is an artificial intervention in the divine artwork, as is shown by Lucas Vorsterman in a print of an old woman at her toilette table (Fig. 2). Representing pride in a series depicting the seven vices, she is surrounded by attributes of *luxuria* and objects of embellishment, such as jewelry, a flacon, and a comb. The woman is shown contemplating her reflection and adjusting her lavish ruff. Hence, makeup also requires self-contemplation, which is described as an act of self-worship that could turn the face into an «idoll»:<sup>11</sup>

A good face is her god: and her cheeke *well died*, is the *idoll*, she doth so much adore. Too much love of beautie, hath wrought her to love painting: and her love of painting hath transformed her into a *picture*.<sup>12</sup>

As the text continues, the metamorphosis of a woman who paints her face and falls in love with the act of face painting and its results refers to the myth of Narcissus: «she looses her selfe in her selfe, that she may find her selfe in a Picture.»<sup>13</sup> Ever since Alberti defined painting as Narcissus embracing the reflecting surface of the



2 Lucas Vorsterman I  
after Adriaen Brouwer, *Superbia*, from  
the *Seven Vices* series,  
1622/1628, London.  
British Museum.

water, in Western culture the tale has been considered one of the great origin myths of painting.<sup>14</sup> In the Protestant context, the myth of Narcissus refers to the danger in adoring the mere aesthetic surface of oneself or another person.<sup>15</sup> What makes the face an idol is thus a combination of self-transformation and self-contemplation in a mirror.

However, while the agency of face painting was deemed morally hazardous, cosmetic tools and substances bore actual physical risks.

### **The Tools of Embellishment**

The pamphlet *Picture of a Picture* clarifies that the «periwigs,» «powder,» «ointments,» and «feathers» are instruments of embellishment and transformation that disfigure God's living image and turn it into an idol.<sup>16</sup> This is more than an instance of mere Protestant anti-materialism. Its warnings against the temptations of London's emerging luxury market, where the «devices» and «toys» of beauty could be purchased, constitute a kind of criticism of consumerism that begins with a critique of cosmetic substances in the paratext.<sup>17</sup> A discussion of the most common makeup ingredients and their medical side effects prefaces the *Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women*.<sup>18</sup> These *Annotations upon Dioscorides* are exact

translations of two chapters from Andrés Laguna's commentary on Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica* of 1570 by Elizabeth Arnold, most likely a member of Tuke's pro-Puritan parish.<sup>19</sup> Andrés Laguna was a Spanish physician and humanist and served as a doctor to Pope Julius III, a fact which is also noted in the title and underscores the treatise's anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish stance. Nevertheless, Dioscorides' passage provided the canon of makeup ingredients in cosmetic writings of the period.<sup>20</sup>

Cosmetic recipes were included in general collections of remedies and were classified under body care and dietetics. In her study of early modern cosmetics, Edith Snook notes that, in terms of «beautifying physic,» cosmetics were related to «medical culture, diagnosis and treatment» in early modern England.<sup>21</sup> According to the comprehensive humoral model, efforts to improve the physical appearance had a physiological effect on the whole body. Furthermore, it gave attempts at embellishment a «physical and emotional logic» in contrast to the «theatrical» and «performative» nature of paint.<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Arnolds translation concentrates on typical examples of harmful substances in cosmetic recipes used to whiten the face, including white lead («Ceruse»), one of the most widespread cosmetic ingredients; citric acid («iuyce of Lymons»); quicksilver («mercury sublimate»);<sup>23</sup> and «Soliman» or Soliman's Water, which was an early brand name for a mercury-based lotion.<sup>24</sup> Arnold also mentions plant based ingredients, such as lupines and orpine.<sup>25</sup> With the exception of white lead, these ingredients probably did not effect a change in color the way applying paint does. As they were considered pharmaceuticals, however, they may have altered the appearance of the complexion by provoking a physiological response. Considering the medicinal use of toxic metals (lead, mercurous chloride) as preservatives and for anti-inflammatory purposes, Arnold states the side effects of these substances: They may cause irritation and corrode the skin, making it appear reddish.<sup>26</sup> In addition to these irritating effects, citric acid may also have a whitening effect on the complexion by altering the skin's pigmentation.

Hence, the treatise's critique of cosmetics is not limited to morality and religious beliefs. Rather, because face paint may actually alter the condition of the body, the transformations in question are actually physical ones. Unlike dressing up, cosmetic treatments were irreversible due to the physical response caused by the chemical substances.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Arnold stresses the physical side effects, such as premature aging: In her correspondence with de Laguna, she writes about quicksilver, stating that «women, who often paint themselves with it, though they be very young, they presently turne old with withered and wrinkled faces [...]»<sup>28</sup> Vorsterman's allegory of pride showing an aged woman in self-contemplation in front of a mirror should also be viewed against this background of abusing harmful cosmetics substances.<sup>29</sup> The artificial treatment of one's body is thus linked with death, as Petra Leutner notes in this volume.<sup>30</sup> Poisonous substances, such as white lead, transgress the boundaries of body and skin, of inside and outside. When applied to the skin, they set a corrosive process in motion that effects the wearer both externally and internally. To puritan eyes, this is hazardous because it physically alters the divine image irreversibly.

### Face and Idol

Cosmetics transform the human face into an «*imago contrafacta*,» in other words, a copy of an idol—an imitation of an imitation.<sup>31</sup> The transformative look into the mirror could be viewed as a representation of this concept of a circle of imitation,

which overlays God's creation of woman as a living being in his image. However, as the discussion of painting materials reveals, this concept is not limited to concepts of aesthetics, imitation, and theology: Face painting distorts the appearance because the materials used literally transforms one's physical condition. Beside Tuke's negative use of the term «counterfeit» to mean forgery or imitation, the term «contrafactum» and its derivatives also have well-known art-theoretical implications regarding portrayal and questions of representation and identity. In his *Warning Against the Idolatry of the Last Times*, English cleric and iconoclast William Perkins notes that, regarding portraiture, royal and civil pictures for the purpose of commemoration and representation are acceptable. He warns, however, against secular idolatry, caused by images of the imagination—especially those of one's beloved and of oneself—and their powers, which could easily transform a person into an idol.<sup>32</sup> Thus, just before the discoveries of cultures outside of Europe motivated reconsideration of the idol and the fetish and subsequently of the goods on the consumer markets in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Protestant anxiety about images may have fostered a critical attitude toward the beautiful objects from the New World and the love of beautiful things.

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