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'Facing' Identity in a 'Faceless' Society: Physiognomy, Facial Appearance and Identity Perception in Eighteenth-Century London

Abstract

English men and women confronted many new questions about the relationship between identity and appearance during the eighteenth century. How did the face reveal information about a person's character, morality, health, class, gender, nationality and race? How should faces be perceived in forms of social interaction? Could appearances be trusted? Through analysis of physiognomic texts, urban literature, aesthetic treatises, conduct books and cosmetic manuals, this article examines the changing social and cultural meanings attached to the face, and developments in the ways contemporary authors advised it should be 'read' as a signifier of character, identity and social difference in eighteenth-century London.

Keywords: Face; Identity; Expression; Physiognomy; London

'Everyone', wrote Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* in 1711, 'is in some Degree a Master of that Art which is generally distinguished by the Name of Physiognomy'. He reflected:

We are no sooner presented to any one we never saw before, but we are immediately struck with the Idea of a proud, a reserved, and affable, or a good-natured Man; and upon our first going into a Company of Strangers, our Benevolence or Aversion, Awe or Contempt, rises naturally towards several particular Persons before we have heard them speak a single Word, or as much as know who they are.

Addison warned that although 'Observations of this Nature may sometimes hold, a wise Man should be particularly cautious how he gives credit to a Man's outward Appearance'.¹ In the eighteenth century, as urban society became increasingly socially diverse and anonymous, complaints about the difficulty of discerning a person's identity through facial perception became common in contemporary literature. Precisely how this changed the way people gave meaning to the face, and how it was perceived in forms of social encounter, remains obscure. This article examines the social and cultural associations attached to the face in physiognomic texts, urban literature, conduct books, aesthetic treatises and cosmetic manuals, to explore transformations in how facial appearance was perceived as a signifier of character, identity and social difference in eighteenth-century London. It argues that in spite of concerns about the difficulty of judging worth and character by 'looks', physiognomic ideas persisted in varying forms and with different degrees of intensity in urban literature throughout the period.

In *The World We Have Lost* (1965), Peter Laslett proposes that the eighteenth century witnessed the decline of 'face-to-face' society.² Before 1700, Roy Porter writes that: 'Subjects were set into the social strata not primarily by choice, or by 'faceless' bureaucracy and paper qualification... but rather by their personal connections with others, especially authority figures'.³ The dissolution of interpersonal forms of social organization, Robert Shoemaker argues, was caused by population growth, urbanization and commercialization, which 'had profound consequences for social life in the metropolis, disrupting or complicating traditional patterns of social relations'.⁴

In 1700 it is estimated that London had about 500,000 residents, but by 1750 its population had risen to around 750,000.⁵ This growth has been explained by increasing fertility and migration.⁶ The majority of migrants were young, single men and women looking to find work in domestic service and trade.⁷ Although London provided migrants with opportunities and greater social freedoms than elsewhere in the country, Tim Hitchcock demonstrates that separation from traditional kin and neighbourhood networks made their economic position precarious.⁸ These groups were reliant upon appearances as a way of gaining employment and forming relationships, as well as determining which 'strangers' were potential marriage partners, friends, allies or enemies.

Faced with so many 'new' faces, Peter Borsay writes that London experienced difficulties 'integrating a large and sometimes heterogeneous body of people into a viable community'.⁹ Some historians suggest that new clubs, societies and voluntary groups helped to absorb 'newcomers'.¹⁰ For others, the organization of London into 'zones' and informal street specialization, helped create networks of neighbours, 'friends' and occupational groupings.¹¹ It is also argued that social inclusion was facilitated by new forms of behaviour such as 'politeness'. As an all-embracing philosophy of social behaviour which promoted social interaction by setting demanding guidelines about how exactly people should behave, 'politeness' was adopted by the landed elites as well as the emergent 'professional' and 'middle' classes.¹² Lawrence Klein proposes that the appeal of 'politeness' was that it offered a common language of social interaction for the men and women who encountered each other in the leisure spaces appearing in London from the late-seventeenth century.¹³

Historians argue that within urban settings physical appearances were key to social legibility and formed the basis of identity perception.¹⁴ However, traditional markers of rank and social identity, such as dress, were rendered unreliable as society became more mobile and as status was detached from economic position.¹⁵ How to judge people by their appearance consequently became a major topic of cultural debate throughout the period. Dror Wahrman suggests that the idea of the metropolis as a 'vast masquerade', presented across a range of urban literature, reveals widespread anxieties about the ways that commercial objects were being used to 'confound all distinctions of age, sex, and rank'.¹⁶ These anxieties precipitated a new focus on the face as an 'authentic' site of identity and 'self' expression. In late eighteenth-century Paris, Colin Jones argues that the open-mouthed smile became a fashionable means of expression because it 'came to be viewed as a symbol of an individual's innermost and most authentic self'.¹⁷

The majority of historical research on appearances has focused on display. Yet, Karin Sennefelt has recently pointed out that we 'cannot take for granted that what a person displayed was what another person read, or that seeing was believing'.¹⁸ She argues that to understand the roles that appearances played in urban encounters we must also investigate the practices of looking 'that made up social order as a system of distinguishing hierarchies'.¹⁹ Sennefelt writes:

We know very little about the logics that underlay modes of seeing and showing social hierarchy in early modern society – the intelligible visual perception that must be adopted to make sense of social life and that ordered status and rank; the way of looking that determined what was meant to be seen and which people, sights and objects were best overlooked; the way of looking that determined how people reasoned about their own appearance and how they judged and acted around others.²⁰

Addressing these issues, this article analyses the ways in which contemporary authors proposed that faces should be 'seen' and used to identify a person's identity and social difference in urban settings.

Psychological research demonstrates that familiar and unfamiliar faces, and faces in crowds, are cognitively processed and identified in different ways. Robert Johnston and Andrew Edmonds show that the internal features of the face (eyes, nose and mouth) are more important to the recognition of familiar faces than external features (face shape and hair), but that the identification of unfamiliar faces depends on both, and is generally slower and more inaccurate.²¹ Evidence suggests that in crowds the identification of unfamiliar faces is further delayed as people 'defer a decision on an unfamiliar target face until scanning for familiar faces is over'.²² The present research examines how eighteenth-century authors sought to make sense of these cognitive processes at a historical moment when encounters with 'strangers' and experiences in 'crowds' became integral parts of urban life.

This article examines descriptions of London society and the faces of Londoners in non-fictional printed texts principally aimed at the 'middling' literate elites - the gentry, merchants and 'professionals'. To begin, it examines why attitudes towards physiognomy changed over the course of the century. Next, it explores how urban literature informed ideas about the ways the face should 'read' as a signifier of identity in urban settings. The following sections investigate developments in how authors advised the face should be perceived through analysis of discussions concerning facial beauty and ugliness. Here it is asked how these aesthetic models of facial perception created differences in gender, class, age, ethnicity and race. It is argued that changing ideas about how the face should be 'read' as a signifier of identity reflected new forms of social experience associated with the urbanisation of London.

PHYSIOGNOMY

In the seventeenth century, the face was read as a person's identity because it was considered a direct reflection of the God-given soul. In *Religio Medici* (1643), Sir Thomas Browne explained: 'our faces...carry in them the motto of our Soules, wherein he that can read A.B.C. may read our natures'. He wrote that this was because 'The finger of God hath left an Inscription upon all his works'.²³ Subsuming Christian doctrines, physiognomy treated the face a 'window' to the soul. In *Physiognomie, and Chiromancie* (1671), Richard Saunders proposed:

the face is a part so fit to disclose all the affectations of the inward parts, that by it, is manifestly discerned an old man from a young, a woman from a man, a temperate person from an intemperate, a French man a Spaniard, a sad man from a merry, a sound from a sick, a living from a dead: wherefore it may be affirmed that those things which we keep secret and hid in our hearts, may be understood by the face and countenance.²⁴

Physiognomy was closely aligned with the occult 'science' of astrology; an intellectual system of divination which investigated the effects of heavenly bodies, such as stars and planets, upon the human world. Astrology conceptualised the body as a microcosm of nature and the whole universe. The movement and position of

celestial objects at the time of a person's birth, coordinated through the zodiac, were believed to inform facial appearance. *Aristotle's Compleat Masterpiece* (1684), noted: 'the Sign of Cancer presides in the upper most part of the Forehead, and Leo attending upon the right Eye-brow, as Sagitary does upon the right Eye, and Libra upon the right Ear'.²⁵

These beliefs fed into aspects of classical zoological physiognomics, derived from Aristotle. It was argued that if a person looked like a specific animal, it suggested they had characteristics associated with that animal. People with lion-like noses were thought to be, like the lion, strong in character, those with 'foxy' features sneaky, and people who looked like pigs, lecherous.²⁶ When discussing how parents could produce children with attractive faces, the French author Claude Quillet wrote that people born under the 'Aspect of the Bull', Taurus, were likely to have a long nose with wide nostrils, 'Gorgon' eyes, and an 'ugly forehead'.²⁷ This reflected the anthropomorphic beliefs of many early modern naturalists who, Keith Thomas argues, saw 'the natural world as a reflection of themselves'.²⁸

Drawing once again on Aristotle, physiognomists emphasised the need for the face's 'unchanging' elements to be isolated from its fleeting expressions to enable assessment of a person's character. In *On Human Physiognomy* (1586), the Italian polymath Giovanni Battista della Porta asserted that as the face represented 'one's entire countenance, just as it does one's movements, and passions', it was necessary to judge it only 'after the soul's emotions and passions have cooled'.²⁹ It was as a static symbolic form that physiognomists presented the face as a legible transmitter of inner character.³⁰ This sort of analysis depended on the close 'reading' of individual faces. In this way, physiognomy reflected the 'face-to-face' nature of early modern society.

Physiognomic literature presented information about what the appearance of facial features indicated about a person's character in long lists or charts, sometimes with accompanying illustrations. The nose received special attention. *Aristotle's Compleat Master-Piece*, proposed that a nose which was 'very sharp on the Tip of it, and neither too long nor too short, too thick, nor too thin, denotes the Person, if a Man, to be of a fretful Disposition, always pining and peevish'. If a woman displayed such a nose, she was said to be 'a scold, contentious, wedded to her own Humours'.³¹ Physiognomy thus taught that the specific features of the face operated as a 'universal text' of both the 'human soul' and the 'language either of nature or of God'.³²

Additionally, physiognomic and medical texts presented facial appearance as a means of judging a person's health. Saunders explained that physiognomy was 'a Science very necessary for *Ministers* and *Physitians*, in their visitation of the sick' because 'symptomes quickly appear in the face'.³³ Evidence presented by Olivia Weisser in *Ill Composed*, illustrates the frequency with which descriptions of the colour, texture and shape of patient's faces was recorded by early modern English physicians. In one example, the doctor Thomas Dover noted that his patient, a lawyer called John Goodeers, had sunken eyes, a fallen jaw and hard tongue, with his complexion appearing 'as black as an Indian, with round Drops upon it as big as Pease'.³⁴

Within Galenic medicine, physiognomy was also used to identify humoral temperament of which there were four main 'character' types: sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic. People who were melancholic were identified as being despondent and irritable, and the phlegmatic were forecasted to be calm and unemotional. In contrast, individuals of a sanguine disposition were thought to be naturally courageous, hopeful and amorous, whilst a bad temper characterised those who were choleric. This information was believed to be encoded by facial appearance, especially skin and hair colour, or 'complexion'. *Aristotle's Compleat Masterpiece* proposed: 'He whose hair is of a brownish colour...is a well disposed man, inclined to that which is good, a lover of peace, cleanliness, and good manners.'³⁵ During the seventeenth century, physiognomy was consequently able to accommodate many ways of thinking about the mind-body relationship because it was based on the belief, underpinning a range of different systems of thought, that the body was the visible key to the mind, and that the face was a reflection of the soul.³⁶

THE CHANGING 'FORTUNE' OF PHYSIOGNOMY

From the late-seventeenth century, the intellectual validity and credibility of physiognomy started to be questioned. By the eighteenth century, physiognomy was generally derided as a superstitious nonsense.³⁷ Thomas argues that the decline of physiognomy was due to its links with cosmology, astrology, divination and other sorts of magical belief based on the understanding of the world as a microcosm.³⁸ This was caused by new forms of 'rational' enquiry into man and nature. Particularly influential was an emergent understanding of the body as a 'machine', promoted by philosophers and physicians such as Rene Descartes, Thomas Willis and Herman Boerhave. In 1730, the anatomist John Cook described 'man' as 'a most noble Machine' and that study of the body was fit, '*not only for Philosophers, but Physicians also; and all curious Men*'.³⁹ This shift challenged traditional understandings of the symbiotic relationship between the body and soul, and man and the world; beliefs upon which early modern physiognomy was constructed.

The decline of physiognomy was also linked to the emergence of the 'self'. In *An Essay on Humane Understanding* (1690), John Locke explored the essence of human nature and formulated a new understanding of identity based on the concept of the 'self' as a 'conscious thinking thing...wherein personal identity consists'.⁴⁰ Disavowing earlier beliefs, which suggested that the identity of each individual was contained in the immaterial entity of the soul, Locke proposed that 'men' could make themselves through 'self' reflection on their lived experiences. Locke's concept of personal identity or the 'self', as being something made in the mind and separate to corporeal 'substance', implied that a person's facial appearance was not always conterminous with their identity. This was because unlike the features of the face, the 'self' could easily mutate and assume plethora of different forms.

Focusing on the decline of the physiognomy as a genre, historians have tended to overlook the persistence of popular physiognomic belief. As has already been shown, physiognomy was discussed on several occasions in *The Spectator*. In one

issue, Addison outlined the ways that physiognomists argued that character could be judged in accordance with the appearance of the face. However, as an ardent follower of Locke, Addison added: 'Whether or not the different Motions of the Animal Spirits, in different Passions, may have any Effect on the Mould of the Face when the Lineaments are pliable and tender...I shall leave to the Consideration of the Curious.'⁴¹ In the process, Addison brought knowledge of physiognomy to a much wider audience than any earlier physiognomic text.

Physiognomic beliefs continued to circulate later in the century. In 1743, the novelist and social commentator Henry Fielding pondered whether physiognomy had been wrongly dismissed as a means of assessing a person's character. In Fielding's opinion the only thing known to expose a man's 'true' character was the physical appearance of his face. '[H]owever cunning the Disguise be which Masquerader wears', he wrote, 'he very rarely escapes the Discovery of an accurate Observer; for Nature, which unwillingly submits to the Imposture, is ever endeavouring to peep and show herself'.⁴² Likewise, in a lecture delivered at the Royal Society, and later published as *Human Physiognomy Explain'd* (1747), the physician James Parson explored if the 'Passions of the Mind', informed the 'muscular Structure...which serves for their Expression'.⁴³

Beliefs derived from physiognomy were also presented in popular texts without any specific reference to physiognomy itself. The idea that complexion could be used as a measure of health, temperament and character, continued to play an important role in medical practice. Several French physicians, whose work was published in London, remained particularly loyal to the idea that the face acted as a 'window' to the soul, reflecting the persistence of these beliefs in France where society was less socially mobile. In *Orthopaedia* (1743), a seminal book on the diseases of children, Nicholas Andry suggested that the face took 'the features of the Soul, and moulds itself by them'.⁴⁴ Pierre Dionis, physician to Louis XIV, wrote in agreement that the face 'bears the impressions of the true characters of divinity; and being an image of the soul, makes an outward representation of all the passions that reign within'.⁴⁵ Physiognomic beliefs therefore circulated widely in England during the eighteenth century, despite a general unwillingness among authors to invest any credibility in physiognomy itself.

In the 1790s there was a dramatic resurgence of intellectual and popular interest in physiognomy. This was ignited by the publication of the English translation of Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789). It is difficult to overestimate the popularity of this book which was published in a new edition in England every year between 1792 and 1810. Alongside the often overlooked persistence of physiognomy in popular thought, there are several other reasons for this explosion of interest in physiognomy at this time. Firstly, Lavater devised a new 'scientific' methodology for physiognomy that was based on the enlightened principles of observation, classification and reason. Promoting the scientific credentials of his work, Lavater noted: 'Whenever truth or knowledge is explained by fixed principles, it becomes science'.⁴⁶ Lavater provided a new intellectual grounding for physiognomy which broadly aligned with contemporary understandings of human nature and the

'self', and other intellectual endeavours concerned with formulating a 'science of man'. Explicitly disassociating his model of physiognomy from astrology, Lavater presented quantifiable 'evidence' of what different manifestations of the parts of the face suggested about a person's character and social identity. This included analysis of annotated diagrams of skulls, portraits and facial features, and the deployment of discursive paratexts taken from the genres of science and medicine.

Secondly, Lavater explicitly addressed contemporary anxieties about the 'truth' of appearances being experienced in many 'faceless' urban communities. Lavater's stated imperative for legitimising physiognomy was to present it as valid means of discerning the 'truth' about a person's social background. This investigation was necessary, Lavater argued, as people frequently hid their 'true' identity beneath deceptive external 'facades'. He wrote:

Rank, condition, habit, estate, dress, all concur to the modification of Man, every one is a several veil spread over him. But to pierce through all these coverings into his real character, to discover in these foreign and contingent determinations, solid and fixed principles by which to settle what the Man really is: This appears extremely difficult, if not impossible.⁴⁷

Lavater argued that his scientific physiognomy model provided a solution to this problem of identity perception. By judging an individual's face against the catalogues of facial features he collated, Lavater proposed that 'solid and fixed principles by which to settle what the Man really is', could be established.

Lavater's physiognomy also allowed the face to be read at a deeper level, as a signifier of the 'inner self'. Lavater incorporated Locke's theory of the self into his work, going so far as to include a physiognomic exam of Locke's portrait. Lavater found in Locke's face 'traces of a superior mind'.⁴⁸ When applying Locke's theory to his model of physiognomy, Lavater explained that the 'self' was a 'bird in a cage' constrained by the body it inhabited. Effectively this rooted the 'self' back into the substance of the body, from which it had been freed by Locke.⁴⁹ '[A]ll faces, all forms, all created beings', Lavater proposed, 'differ from one another, not only with respect to their genus, their species, but also, with respect to their individuality'.⁵⁰ Departing from older models of identity perception, Lavater thus proposed that the specific make, structure, and form of the face, informed the character of the inner 'self'. Therefore, towards the end of the century a new understanding of the 'self' emerged, reflected in and promoted by Lavater's physiognomy, which considered the body determinant of identity.

URBAN LITERATURE AND FACIAL RECOGNITION

The question of how the face should be 'read' was of concern to many eighteenth-century Londoners. They were keenly aware that they were living in a new sort of anonymous and socially diverse society. 'LONDON', wrote Thomas Brown in 1700, 'is a World by itself'. He went on: 'There are so many Nations differing in Manners, Customs, and Religions, that the Inhabitants themselves don't know a quarter of

them'.⁵¹ As most of the people living in London were 'strangers' to one another, it made them reliant on looks as an initial measure of character, whilst also enabling them to exploit the display of established visual markers of status and identity for their own ends. In 1714, Bernard Mandeville explained that in 'Populous Cities, where obscure men may hourly meet with fifty Strangers to one Acquaintance', people had 'the Pleasure of being esteem'd by the vast Majority, not as what they are, but what they appear to be'.⁵²

Documenting all these changes were a new group of media 'men' in a range of urban literature and social commentaries.⁵³ Many of these books were 'popular', passing through numerous editions over the course of the century. Journals and magazines like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* also made important contributions to discussions of urban life because their weekly publication allowed their authors to shape popular opinions on social developments, events and 'fashions' as they emerged. In *The Spectator*, Addison wrote that he planned to 'publish a Sheet full of Thoughts every morning' in order to 'contribute to the Diversion or Improvement of the Country'.⁵⁴ Extending the idea that print could be used to manage social encounters, Brown wrote: 'the World...is a Book that ought to be read in the Original'. 'Those who are qualified to Read and Understand the Book of the World', he continued, 'may be beneficial to the Public, in communicating the Fruit of their Studies'.⁵⁵

One of the major questions for these authors was how a person's identity could be judged in relation to their physical appearance as the basis or criteria for further forms of social interaction. Believing in the truth of physiognomy, some authors proposed that identity information about 'strangers' could be easily identified from their facial appearance.⁵⁶ In *Trivia* (1716), John Gay rhymed: '[R]emark each Walker's diff'rent Face/And in their look their various Bus'ness trace'.⁵⁷ Yet, others seemed less sure that faces could be read as an accurate measure of character. They argued that looks were often deceptive and sometimes even duplicitous. Addison wrote:

It is an irreparable Injustice we are guilty of towards one another, when we are prejudiced by the Looks and Features of those whom we do not know. How often do we conceive Hatred against a Person of Worth, or fancy a Man to be proud and ill-natured by his Aspect, whom we think we cannot esteem too much when we are acquainted with his real Character?⁵⁸

This led many to the realization that looks, social identity and 'character' were not always conterminous. In *The Rambler*, Samuel Johnson proposed: 'The rich and the powerful live in a perpetual masquerade, in which all about them wear borrowed characters'.⁵⁹

Commercialization was confusing the question of how the face should be perceived even further. As a range of clothing and accessories became more affordable, individuals of lower social status were able to dress 'the part' of their 'betters'. Others used these material objects to 'beautify' themselves, disguise their age, or pass themselves off as the opposite sex. Wahrman characterises the eighteenth century as the 'age' of masquerade, where transforming appearances

through masks, makeup, and wigs became a common way of assuming new identities.⁶⁰ Mandeville certainly complained that: 'People where they are not known are generally honour'd according to their Cloaths and other Accoutrements they have about them'.⁶¹ For many commentators this was a problem as they recognised that good looks could be socially facilitating in courtship, trade, and the formation of friendships and social networks.

This is illustrated in criticisms concerning women's use of cosmetics from first half the century. When displayed by women, facial beauty was thought to evidence good character. *Look er'e you Leap*, a text which guided men on their selection of a wife, proposed: 'a lovely fair Face does generally prove the Index of a fairer Mind'.⁶² Facial beauty was thus a means through which women could secure a good marriage, or valuable 'friendships', making it important for female social improvement. Poitevin argues that this was especially true for middle class women for whom cosmetics constituted 'tools for social mobility'.⁶³ Nor was this situation lost on contemporaries, and this fed into their concerns about the 'truth' of looks. A correspondent to *The Spectator* lamented that after being seduced into marriage by the 'beauty' of his now wife, he was afterwards disappointed to have discovered that her 'fair Forehead, Neck and Arms' were nothing but the 'Effect of Art'.⁶⁴

Married and older women were criticised, in particular, for using cosmetics. In the case of married women, as proposed in *The Guardian* (1713), it was argued that: 'No Body exposes Wares that are appropriated. When the Bird is taken the Snare ought to be removed'.⁶⁵ Older women were also attacked for using cosmetics to try and disguise wrinkles, perceived as a sign of mortality and associated with the menopause and declining procreativity.⁶⁶ Lynn Boteltho argues that in early modern England, 'a woman became old when she looked old'.⁶⁷ The conduct author François Bruys wrote that even if old women applied 'all the Art and Paint in the World...the Deformities of Old Age will show themselves'. [W]hatever Secret the Tire-Women may bragg of', he went on, 'all her Skill cannot recover fading *Beauty*; and she is so far from giving it *new Life*, that she only hastens its *Death*'.⁶⁸

Contemporaries continued to struggle with the questions of what looks meant, and how they should be perceived, as the century progressed. Most authors avoided the question by instead following Addison and Steele's model of 'politeness' as the primary means of identity articulation, expression and display. 'Politeness' demanded that people looked beyond appearances and instead use the behaviour and expression of others as the principle measure of character. Addison advised that when walking through the city streets one should 'make every face you see give you the satisfaction you now take in beholding that of a friend'.⁶⁹ He also proposed that a 'man' should be 'honest, just, good-natured...in spite of all those Marks and Signatures which Nature seems to have set upon him for the Contrary'.⁷⁰ 'Politeness' also required facial expression to be managed to facilitate sociability. In *Letters to His Son* (1774), often identified as a text which epitomised behavioural 'politeness', Lord Chesterfield wrote: 'Make yourself absolute master...of your temper, and our countenance, so far, at least, as that no visible change do appear in either, whatever you may feel inwardly'.⁷¹

In *The Polite Lady* (1760), Charles Allen revealed how contemporaries wrestled with the contradictions between what popular 'polite' discourse instructed and the reality of the way they used looks to display and judge character in daily life. Allen wrote that although 'no great friend' to 'the judging of people's characters by their looks', he believed there was at least 'something in it'. He informed his fictional daughter: 'it concerns every young lady to be very careful of her looks, since her character depends as much on these as any other part of her behaviour'.⁷²

In the second half of the eighteenth century, contemporaries also started to lament the decline of 'face-to-face' society and the difficulties of identity perception in cities and towns such as London. In 1779, it was complained in *Pictures of Men, Manners and the Times*, that in 'the great metropolis of the British empire characters are so blended and intermixed, that it is a difficulty for the nicest speculator to distinguish the persuasions and principles of each individual'. Much more reassuring, to this commentator, were the 'traditional' forms of social organization that still existed in the 'various towns and hamlets in his majesty's dominions, where each person, his family, and connections are known to everybody', and in which ascertaining a person's character was 'the easiest thing to trace...to its source'.⁷³ It was these complaints that set the scene for the re-emergence of physiognomy after 1790.

BEAUTY

Alterations in how the face functioned as a signifier of identity and social difference in the eighteenth century are evident in contemporary discussions concerning beauty. In the first half of the century, facial beauty operated as physiognomy for 'politeness', subsuming many of physiognomy's earlier tropes. This was facilitated because analyses of facial beauty within 'polite' literature were framed by discussions concerning moral behaviour and self-expression. David Turner argues that contemporary notions of facial beauty were 'comparative and evaluative', being used to establish differences 'not simply between individuals considered more or less favoured in terms of their looks, but between classes, races, and nations'.⁷⁴ Beauty was also a more flexible model of identity perception than physiognomy, making its application more useful in momentary encounters in urban social settings.

Early in the century, facial beauty was defined by the display of regular, symmetrical, ordered and proportional features. The short-lived journal *Delights for the Ingenious* (1711), posed the question: 'What are those *Features* and *Accomplishments of Body*, which in your Opinion make a *perfect beauty*?' The answer, presented in a list like a physiognomic exam, was:

1. Youth.
2. A Stature neither too big nor too little.
3. To be neither too fat nor too lean.
4. Symmetry and Proportion of all the Parts.
5. Long, Light and Fine Hair.
6. A Delicate and Smooth Skin.
7. A Lively White and Red.
8. An Even Forehead.
9. The Temples not Hollow.
10. The Eye-brows as two Lines.
11. Blew Eyes, close to the Head giving an amorous Look.
12. A Nose somewhat long.
13. Cheeks roundish, making a little Dimple.
14. A graceful Laughter.
15. Two Coral Lips.
- 16.

A little Mouth. 17. Teeth White as Pearls, and well set. 18. A Chin roundish and fleshy, with a little Cherry-pit at the end of it.⁷⁵

Classically beautiful facial forms generally enjoyed favourable moral associations. In *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Lord Shaftesbury argued for a clearly quantifiable 'natural' order of beauty belonging to order, harmony, proportion and symmetry. He wrote: 'all *Beauty* is TRUTH. *True* Features make the Beauty of a Face; and true Proportions the Beauty of Architecture; as *true* Measures of that Harmony and Musick.'⁷⁶ *The Universal Spectator* similarly equated physical beauty with good character, proposing that 'Virtue, Modesty and Beauty' were the 'Foundation for a woman's claims to Love and Respect.'⁷⁷

Yet, around the mid-century, ideas about the 'essential' qualities of beauty began to change. Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), questioned the truth in 'every body's mouth, that we ought to love perfection'. From his own enquires, Burke said he had found that physical 'perfection' did not 'by any means produce beauty'.⁷⁸ Likewise, in *The Analysis of Beauty*, the artist William Hogarth criticised the elite's obsession with notions of classical beauty. He argued that the faces of 'real' women, who often failed to exhibit all the qualities usually considered essential for beauty, were more engaging than the classical ideal. Hogarth rhetorically asked: 'Who but a bigot...will say that he has not seen faces and necks, hands and arms, in living women, that even the Grecian Venus doth but coarsely imitate?'⁷⁹

The emphasis in discussions concerning facial beauty also started to shift away from the face's features towards its 'general' appearance. In his acclaimed essay 'Crito', Joseph Spence argued that there were two principal categories of physical beauty: form and colour. Firstly, Spence proposed that instead of perfect proportions and symmetry, physical beauty depended on the exhibition of 'Delicacy and Softness'.⁸⁰ Secondly, Spence suggested that when displayed by the face, beauty was chiefly determined by the colour of the complexion. This was because, he argued, it was the 'most striking, and the most observed' aspect of its appearance.⁸¹ This new focus on the 'external' aspects of facial appearance reflected the ways in which 'unfamiliar' faces were being perceived in urban settings.

Beauty also began to be conceptualised as a subjective judgement belonging to the eye of the beholder. David Hume explained that: 'Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplate them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.'⁸² Facial beauty was now thought to depend on the 'joining...of certain agreeable qualities of the mind to those of the body'.⁸³ Effectively it was argued that perceptions of facial beauty relied on the character of the mind of the exhibitor and perceiver, rather than any existential 'order'. Remoulding Shaftesbury's aesthetics in accordance with contemporary views, Andry proposed: 'Were we able to trace Things to their first Principles, we should find that there are different Orders of Beauty as well as of Architecture'.⁸⁴

Unlike older understandings of beauty, this aesthetic model allowed both men and women to be beautiful. The qualities displayed by beautiful male and female faces

were considered distinct as they varied according to the moral and behavioural characteristics associated with the two sexes. Frances Reynolds, sister of the portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, stated: 'the beauty of each sex is seen only through the medium of the virtues belonging to each'. Reynolds reasoned that it was this 'moral sense' that not only gave 'each its distinct portions of the same virtues', but which also drew the 'line which neither can pass without a diminution of their specific beauty.'⁸⁵ Detailing the specifics, Spence noted that whilst in the case of women '[t]he distinguishing Character of Beauty' was a 'Delicacy and Softness', for men it was the appearance of 'either apparent Strength, or Agility.'⁸⁶

From the mid-century, the idea that the 'inner self' was an entity determined by the fabric of the 'social' body gained momentum. Facial beauty began to operate as a measure of a person's femininity or masculinity. For example, in sentimental dialogues female beauty was equated with women's supposed distinctive 'moral' characteristics, including softness, modesty, sociability and delicacy. Criticisms of women's use of cosmetics also started to soften as the exhibition of beauty, either natural or cultivated, became essential to the display of femininity. *The Art of Beauty* stated:

There is nothing so charming as a lively and wholesome complexion, which in a great measure answers the end of beautiful features, where they are wanted: and as the very severest people allow, that beauty is a great recommendation, if not absolutely necessary to the fair sex; woman are therefore not only justifiable in being solicitous about this matter, but in taking every method to remedy, by art, the defects of Nature.⁸⁷

David Bindman suggests that the growing recognition that beauty was a 'veil for self-interest' and social display, and associations between beauty and the feminine 'desire to please', were two 'essential' arguments that could be made against Lavater's 'connection between physiognomy and the soul'.⁸⁸ Here it is argued that Lavater's work enjoyed widespread popularity precisely because it provided a solution to these problems of facial perception by presenting physiognomy as a rational, 'masculine' science of reading the face, based on fixed principles.

UGLINESS

'Far from being solely preoccupied with beauty', Naomi Barker argues that the early modern period 'was an age in which the human figure in all its often repellent as well as potentially magnificent variety was an object of fascination'.⁸⁹ Faces that were oddly shaped, asymmetrical and irregular were described as being 'ugly'. In the rules of entry for society called the 'Ugly Club', described in *The Spectator*, it was proclaimed that 'no Person whatsoever shall be admitted without a visible Quearity in his Aspect, or peculiar Cast of Countenance'.⁹⁰ Ward's *History of London Clubs* also provided descriptions of various members of a club 'of Ugly Faces'. Notable members included a man with 'a chin as long as a grave patriarchal beard...in a shape like a shoeing horn', another 'with a disfigured mouth like a gallon pot', and one individual who had

'a pair of convex cheeks, as if, like Æolus, the god of the winds, had stopped his breath for a time'.⁹¹

Throughout the century, ugliness was thought to indicate bad character, sin, corruption and immorality. The nose was a facial locale particularly associated with immorality, especially sexual vice. Traditionally a long nose was thought to suggest a large penis in men and sexual lasciviousness in women.⁹² Deformities of the nose were also recognised as symptoms of sexual diseases like syphilis. *The Tatler* warned young men coming to London against consorting with prostitutes, stating that such women were only 'after their noses'.⁹³ Generally speaking, it was not thought to be in society's interest to ignore these marks of sin. Emily Cook shows that although contemporary surgeons possessed the knowledge of how to undertake rhinoplasty, many were 'unwilling to trade' in this 'shameful commodity' because it was viewed as an 'attempt to conceal the history of a perverse body'.⁹⁴

Associations between facial ugliness and sin persisted despite the cultural predominance of 'politeness' which condemned this sort of correlation. This occurred for two main reasons. Firstly, in medical writing 'dark looks' were presented as evidence of a phlegmatic or choleric temperament. Whilst not condoning the association, Addison admitted: 'When I see a man with a sour shrivelled face, I cannot forbear pitying his wife.'⁹⁵ Secondly, it was because ugliness was primarily discussed in relation to the appearance of London's urban poor. One author wrote:

If any Person is born with any Defect or Deformity, or maimed by Fire or any other Casualty, or by any inveterate Distemper, which renders them miserable Objects, their Way is open to London, where they have the free Liberty of shewing their nauseous Sights to terrify People, and force them to give Money to get rid of them.⁹⁶

As 'politeness' was a form of behaviour chiefly associated 'elite' society, seeing past looks was not deemed a charity that the 'polite' needed to extend to the lower orders. Nor was this necessary as poverty and low social status were evidenced by other visual identifiers, such as dirty or ragged clothing, undressed hair, and in many cases, bodily infirmity, deformity and disability.⁹⁷ 'Polite' authors also advised that these people were best ignored since interactions with them were not likely to be socially facilitating.

Accordingly, facial ugliness was often presented as an embodied signifier of class-based distinction that set the lower classes apart from the elites. Samuel Stanhope Smith, observed that: 'The poor and labouring part of the community are usually more swarthy and squalid in their complexion, more hard in their features'. He added that they generally wanted: 'the pleasing regularity of feature, and the elegance and fine proportions of person'.⁹⁸ In the second half of the eighteenth century, ugliness also started to be presented as evidence of an 'inferior' mind, which was said to define and characterise the lower classes and put them in their social 'place'. Reynolds wrote: 'In the face or form of an idiot, or the lowest rustic, there is no beauty'. She explained that this was because 'wanting the surrounding influence of a moral system, i.e. of the

general influence of education on the exterior...they could not suppress or veil a semblance incongruous with beauty'.⁹⁹

These beliefs were also present in emergent discussions concerning embodied differences in nationality, ethnicity and race, which arose alongside the expansion of empire. Whilst perceptions of beauty and ugliness were generally recognised as being culturally relative in popular discourse until the mid-century, afterwards aesthetics were used as a means of separating the "civilised" from the "savage".¹⁰⁰ Using the example of 'negroes', Reynolds argued that 'defective' bodies could only create 'defective' minds. She wrote:

The negro-race seems to be the farthest removed from the line of true cultivation of any of the human species; their defect of form and complexion being, I imagine, as strong an obstacle to their acquiring true taste (the produce of mental cultivation) as any natural defect they may have in their intellectual faculties.¹⁰¹

The popular author and physician Oliver Goldsmith made similar observations, suggesting that the extent to which a 'nation' was ugly or beautiful reflected their level of civilization. He provided an example by accounting for what had happened to 'Arabians' who had migrated to Africa in the ancient past. These once civilized people, he observed, 'seem to have degenerated from their ancestors; and forgetting their ancient learning, with their beauty, have become a race scarce any way distinguishable from the original natives.'¹⁰² Towards the end of the century, facial ugliness was thus increasingly presented as determinant, and expression of, embodied social difference based categories of distinction, such as class, nationality, ethnicity and race.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that how the face was perceived as a signifier of character, identity and social difference, and faces' roles in forms of social interaction, went through several transformations during the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, when identity was believed to be located in the immaterial, God-given, substance-based entity of the soul, facial features were read as inherent signs of an individual's character and social identity. Yet, by end of the century, the emergence of mechanistic philosophy and the idea of the 'self', separated the mind from the body, challenging the theoretical foundations of physiognomy.

Related to the emergence of the new understanding of identity as the 'self', from the early-eighteenth century 'polite' authors, such as Addison and Steele, recognised that the question of what facial appearances meant was not the right one to be asking about the perception of identity. Instead, they argued that the character of the 'self' chiefly revealed itself through a person's behaviour and expression, and that this (instead of looks) should be used to measure character. Nevertheless, the perception of facial beauty was an exception to this general rule because it was thought to suggest information about the mind. At the same time, associations

between facial ugliness and sin were allowed to persist because ugliness was a facial quality that was thought to suggest corruption of the 'inner self'.

This paper has shown that transformations in the ways identity was understood, and how the face was perceived, were changes connected to broader social, economic and cultural developments associated with the urbanisation of towns and cities like London. As much as any intellectual developments, the decline of physiognomy as a genre was caused by changing modes and purposes of facial perception, and the decline of 'face-to-face' society. In new socially diverse and anonymous communities, contemporaries had to look for original means of facial and identity perception because 'close' reading of faces was no longer facilitated in the momentary social encounters common in these settings. The culturally predominant solution that appeared in emergent forms of urban literature was 'politeness'. Through discussions of facial beauty and ugliness, based on analysis of the face's general 'external' appearance, 'polite' urban literature provided a morally verified, and socially useful, explanation for the new sorts of cognitive reasoning contemporaries were experiencing in terms of the way they perceived 'unfamiliar' faces in 'crowds'.

When the influence of 'politeness' started to decline in the last quarter of the century, the question of what appearances implied about character reemerged in new forms. Alternate solutions appeared in popular discourses associated with the 'science of man'. Social commentators began to look to the body, identified as the 'vehicle' through which individuals perceived and experienced the world, as an entity which informed the character of the mind or 'self'. This led to new ideas about gender distinction, based on the idea that facial beauty was displayed and perceived differently by the two sexes. It also caused commentators to identify facial ugliness as a defining characteristic of 'inferior' members of society, and other nations and races. These developments formed the backdrop for the re-emergence of physiognomy at the end of the century, as a scientific means of discerning the character of the individual 'self', as determined by a person's social 'face' or body.

Further research can usefully examine the roles that facial perception played in the construction of 'alliances' and 'friendships', and other sorts of social relationships in urban settings during the eighteenth century. This research will provide fresh insights into the ways embodied appearance and perception operated in the initial formation of social connections between relative strangers, and how politeness functioned 'on the ground'. It will also offer better practical understanding of how contemporaries experienced and adapted to, the social, economic and cultural changes associated with urbanisation and the emergence of 'faceless' society. Examination of descriptions of faces in newspaper adverts for runaway wives, servants and criminals, and trials from the Old Bailey, could also facilitate analysis of the ways ideas about the face presented in popular literature informed people's social interactions. This article has shown that in the 'faceless' society of the English metropolis, the face came to occupy special status as a marker of character and worth, and identity and self-expression.

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