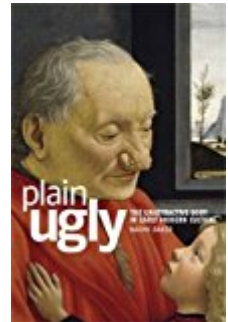


Naomi Baker. *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. 270 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-6874-4.



Reviewed by Patrick M. Schmidt

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The attribution of physical ugliness is one of the stereotypes that people with disabilities have to face. For this reason, studies about the cultural construction of ugliness--and, inevitably, its counterpart, beauty--are highly pertinent to disability studies. One might even ask whether being considered unattractive by other people (and being aware of it) doesn't constitute a disability in itself. This is an (ascribed) property of oneself that can easily influence one's behavior and limit the interactions with other people one feels entitled to embark on.

Nevertheless, in the reviewer's perception, ugliness and beauty are topics that have not been frequently addressed in disability studies. For this reason, Naomi Baker's study *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* merits the attention of scholars in this field. Baker, who is a lecturer in English studies at the University of Manchester, does not look at this subject from the vantage point of disability studies. Her approach can be characterized as belonging to feminist literary criticism. The "early modern culture" she

explores is mainly sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English culture as mirrored in philosophical, literary, and dramatic works. This set of textual sources is complemented with artworks such as paintings and engravings. The main goal of Baker's study is to show to what degree the perception and interpretation of physical ugliness was gendered in the period under scrutiny. At the same time, the author sets out to test a hypothesis formulated by other scholars as part of a modernization theory: while premodern Western cultures had postulated a straightforward linkage between the physical and moral qualities of persons, this conjunction was broken up in the course of the seventeenth century. This development became particularly recognizable in the philosophical works of René Descartes (1596-1650), who conceptualized body and soul as independent entities. Baker asks whether this momentous shift can really be detected in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature.

Baker's study opens with a concise introduction in which she lays out her hypotheses very

clearly. One could even say that it does so to such a degree as to summarize the results of the study (that lacks a conclusion) at its very beginning. Therefore a slightly more comprehensive introduction would have been advantageous as it missed, in the opinion of this reviewer, at least a few paragraphs on the heuristic principles guiding the selection of sources. From the bibliography of primary texts one can infer that Baker has made ample use of digitized collections of early modern printed texts such as *Early English Books Online*. This is a perfectly legitimate approach that has allowed the utilization of a vast number of sources. However, if Baker searched these digitized collections with keywords, it would have been important to know which keywords she used. This is a choice that inevitably has a huge influence on the results of a study. As will be explained below, some reflections on the choice of sources would also have been advantageous for other reasons.

The main part of Baker's study opens with a chapter entitled "Theorising ugliness." It offers a very good overview on conceptualizations of ugliness from Greek and Roman antiquity to the early eighteenth century. While making use of modern cultural theories, namely those of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, Baker relies on a broad range of mainly philosophical and theological texts to show how physical ugliness was defined by different authors over the centuries; how it was seen respectively as an inherent "objective" quality of persons or objects, or rather as the product of subjective perceptions; and in which ways its relationship with moral qualities was conceptualized. In conjunction with the second chapter, "Charactered in my brow: deciphering ugly faces," this part of Baker's study seems to substantiate the hypothesis mentioned above. While most medieval authors defined a person's physicality as a manifestation of his or her character, of his or her virtuousness or sinfulness, this relationship was problematized by early modern authors, par-

ticularly those advocating seventeenth-century mechanical philosophy.

Physiognomy, the theory and practice of deducing a person's character and future from her external features, partly resisted that intellectual development. While, according to Baker, the educated elite increasingly questioned the validity of physiognomy, it continued to be popular among other strata of society. But, more importantly, the author contends, before the eighteenth century only one half of humankind benefited from the new thinking about the relationship of body and soul--the men. This is the subject of the remaining chapters of Baker's study. Male characters with negative physical attributes could be characterized as being virtuous in early modern English literature and drama. Authors used the expression "Silenus" as a metaphor to convey this idea, originally the name of an ugly, but wise satyr belonging to Dionysus's retinue. Even in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, whose title character was unsightly and committed atrocious crimes, there was not a simple equalization between physical appearance and character, as the figure was given a complex personality. One of the few eighteenth-century sources Baker considers is a text that has raised considerable interest among scholars in disability studies: William Hay's *Deformity. An Essay*, published in 1754. Hay, a member of Parliament, had a curved spine and was of very small stature--a person who could be easily described as "deformed." Hay's essay seems to underpin Baker's hypothesis. The politician claimed to be a virtuous person--not only despite, but even because of his "deformed" body. One may ask, however, to what degree this text really represents dominant strains of eighteenth-century thought. Was Hay's claim accepted as a valid one by his contemporaries? And does the essayist's need to argue against a parallelization of physical ugliness and moral inferiority testify to a prevailing tendency to do just that with respect to men as well as to women?

While male authors opened up the possibility for their male characters to develop a subjectivity contradicting their unsightly outward appearance, female characters continued to be defined by it. Dozens of literary texts conveyed this message, showing that ugly women could not be anything else but morally depraved. Portraits of old women in particular were vitriolic, as Baker convincingly demonstrates. Nor did beautiful female characters escape vilification. According to a number of authors, especially those influenced by neoplatonic theories of beauty, attractive female faces and bodies only served to veil corrupted, sinful characters. Baker confronts the reader with a dark, deeply misogynist side of early modern culture. Relying on Kristeva's paradigm of "abjection," she contends that the derision heaped on unattractive female literary figures was a necessary ingredient in a process of male subject formation. "The early modern subject", Baker writes, "is increasingly defined by his rational self-control, his ability to regulate and thus to transcend the body and its potentially chaotic fluids" (p. 96). This emerging modern male subject, she argues, needed the ugly woman as its "diabolical opposite," a "carrier of diseases and transgressor of sexual, social and physical norms" (p. 96.).

This hypothesis is convincingly illustrated by texts--mostly poems--belonging to the seventeenth-century "deformed mistress" tradition. These texts were ostensibly written in praise of ugly women, often adopting patterns of Petrarchan love poetry. As Baker argues, the male authors did not do this in order to question prevailing notions of beauty and ugliness and to dignify unsightly women. Instead, they wrote those poems in order to showcase their own lyrical genius and to give their (male) readers the reassuring feeling of being completely different from these literary figures whose physical features were ultimately not really praised, but mocked. Baker concludes that the true objective of the "deformed mistress" texts was to "define and control the (ugly) female body in order to preserve particular

constructions of the male self" (p. 151). The book's last chapter is devoted to "defeatured women", female literary or dramatic characters whose bodies--in most cases, the faces--were mutilated either by themselves or by men. Apart from Aphra Behn's *The Dumb Virgin: or The Force of Imagination* (1688), these texts were written by male authors. Especially in the case of female self-mutilation, this opens up an interesting perspective. Baker shows that these authors were aware that norms of physical attractiveness defined by men and the need to live up to them might be perceived as a burden by women and that the latter might consequently chose self-inflicted ugliness in order to escape male domination. But, as Baker argues, the authors did not concede liberation of their characters from the censures of a chauvinist culture. Women trying to escape rape by unwanted suitors, or the accusation that their beauty caused their lovers to murder their husbands, find themselves confronted with an interpretation of their acquired ugliness as a sign of their sinfulness.

Plain Ugly is a study to be lauded for numerous reasons. It addresses an important topic, and it is a clearly argued and well-written book based on a wide range of sources as well as research literature. Nevertheless, the reviewer feels that a study claiming to investigate "the unattractive body in early modern culture"--as Baker's book does in its subtitle--should have paid more attention to representations of ugly men than is the case. "Ugliness in early modern culture," Baker writes, "time and again is aligned with female matter" (p. 187). This diagnosis is undoubtedly accurate for the textual sources she has analyzed, but it appears in a different light when one looks at her visual sources, as eleven of the twenty-three pictures included in the book show men. Among these depictions of ugly males are three woodcuts printed in books on physiognomy in order to prove that it was possible to infer character traits from a person's exterior. And even the written record may not have been as silent on un-

sightly men as Baker concludes. Right at the beginning of her study, she postulates that “[w]ith a few notable exceptions, the ugly subject in early modern English texts tends to be female, old, black, obese or from the lower social orders (or any combination of these categories)” (p. 2). But Baker analyzes portrayals of persons of color only if they are female. And her sources did not allow her to scrutinize representations of men belonging to the lower social orders since in early modern novels and dramas the important figures mostly belonged to the elite. If she had included texts belonging to the genre of “rogue literature” in her study, a different picture might have emerged, one in which direct inferences about men’s characters were drawn from their unsightly outward appearances. Furthermore, some early eighteenth-century texts show that such inferences were also made with respect to men in general. For instance, in *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison in 1711 counted men with a “deformity” among those persons particularly prone to be jealous.[1] Where Baker’s interest lay, one may suppose, was with misogynist constructions of female bodies in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature and drama. This is a perfectly legitimate objective for research—but if this decision was taken, the title of the book should not have claimed a wider scope.

Note

[1]. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (1711), ed. Donald F. Bond, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 170.

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