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The 'Fair Sex': Skin Colour, Gender and Narratives of Embodied Identity in Eighteenth-Century British Non-Fiction

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Abstract: During the eighteenth century, the phrase 'fair sex' was a pervasive feature of contemporary writing intended for female consumption and texts that discussed issues concerning women. Even today, scholars still employ this expression to characterise experiences of femininity during this period. This article extrapolates the embodied meanings of 'fair sex' from a range of popular non-fictional printed discourses, including medical advice books, conduct literature, advice guides and cosmetic manuals. Specifically, it examines how, why and in what ways 'fairness' was conceptualised as a mutually reinforcing moral, physiological, aesthetic and social ideal for elite British women during the eighteenth century.

Key words: Fair sex, skin colour, complexion, gender, identity, embodiment, social difference

Throughout the eighteenth century, journalists and non-fiction authors of both sexes frequently addressed women as the 'fair sex'. This expression represented an almost universal feature of contemporary discussions concerning female behaviour and conduct. It also made recurrent appearances in discourses that dealt with religious, moral, medical and social issues that were of relevance to women.¹ Whilst conduct books, like *The Lady's Companion: or, An Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex* (1740), provided women with 'RULES, DIRECTIONS, and OBSERVATIONS, for their Conduct and Behaviour through all Ages and Circumstances of Life', medical advice texts, such as *The Ladies Physical Directory* (1727), outlined the nature of every 'Disorder or Distemper the Fair Sex are particularly liable to'.² By exploring the meanings and uses of the word 'fair', a term used to describe someone that was light-skinned and physically beautiful, as well as behaviours that were considered morally 'good', this article examines the moral, physical, aesthetic and social dimensions of the model of femininity characterised by the term 'fair sex'. Through analysis of conduct literature, medical advice books, instructional guides and cosmetic manuals, it also investigates the ways in which print culture etched narratives of gender difference upon the skin, and how these accounts changed in reference to shifting ideas about the relationship between social identity and the body.

Historians have slowly come to recognise the significance of changing understandings of the skin, as a boundary between the 'inner' and 'outer' body, and the 'self' and 'society', in discourses relating to identity formation in the eighteenth century. Steven Connor proposes that until the late seventeenth century, skin was the entity that guaranteed the integrity of the body and the 'person'.³ Skin, in this sense, was 'not the principle of identity, so much as that of entirety'.⁴ However, recent work from an emergent field of 'skin studies', by scholars such as Claudia Benthien, Jonathon Reinartz, Kevin Siena, Kimberly Poitevin and Mechthild Fend, identifies the eighteenth century as a period of transformation for the relationship between skin and identity.⁵ Collectively these scholars contend that as contemporary notions of identity came to rest on the idea of an inward looking 'self', demarcated from the rest of society by the barrier of skin, the skin's visual appearance increasingly became something to be 'read' as a signifier of identity. Through their various investigations into changing understandings of the skin's structure and colour, skin diseases, and activities that transcended or altered the skin's surface, including dissection, tattooing and cosmetics, these researchers also evidence how this understanding of skin as the key to identity manifested itself in a multitude of contemporary discourses and practices.

Gender historians were the first to identify the importance of the skin in the construction of identity. Phrases such as 'skin-deep' and 'beneath the skin' have repeatedly been used within this scholarship to refer to the 'discovery' of sexual difference in the internal structure of the body.⁶ In his influential *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur argues that the identification of 'male' and 'female' as two opposite and incommensurable biological sexes was heralded by the development of sexually comparative forms of anatomical investigation which enabled physicians and anatomists to document 'the fact that sexual

difference was more than skin-deep'.⁷ The idea of the skin as a boundary has also been evoked within gender studies to distinguish the cultural category of 'gender' from the 'biological' determinant of sex. This is because the concept of the skin as a boundary has been used to figuratively describe a theoretical separation between 'sex' and 'gender', with the social category of 'gender' being associated with the external display of the body, and 'sex', in opposition, its internal anatomical structure.

Although studies of 'sex' and 'gender' have implicitly revealed the importance of the skin as a theoretical boundary, investigation of the skin as a subject of analysis in its own right has been led by historians of race. In his research, Nicholas Hudson looks at how visible differences in the appearance of people from various parts of the globe went from cultural forms of distinction, to differences grounded in distinctive forms of corporeality.⁸ Felicity Nussbaum and Roxanne Wheeler have examined this situation in reference to the colouration of the skin. Nussbaum writes that in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century several 'incongruent manifestations of "race"' coexisted in language and culture. She observes that many 'strategic confusions' also continued to persist in discourse, 'regarding the meanings assigned to skin colourings, physiognomies, and nations.'⁹ Yet, Wheeler argues that in the closing decades of the century, flexibility in conceptions of national distinction gave way to increasingly solidified associations between certain races and distinctive forms of skin colouration. The development of these views, she argues, was owing to the emergence of 'a newly receptive audience' searching for 'alternative theories that accounted for human variety'.¹⁰

More recently, historians have observed similarities in the ways that eighteenth-century commentators sought to confirm various forms of social distinction by emphasising 'natural' forms of embodied difference. Dror Wahrman argues that during this period there were 'shared patterns' in the way categories of identity were articulated across a range of cultural discourses and artefacts.¹¹ As a specific example of this exchange, Andrew Wells notes that there were parallels in the ways that contemporaries presented anatomical signifiers as markers of racial difference and sexual distinction. He writes:

Racial theorizing depended on the investment of meaning in things both located in/on the body and readable by the sense, such as skin colour, skeletal structure, and so on. In a similar fashion, the role of corporeal signifiers in the determination of sex difference was enhanced as their epistemological authority was promoted to the detriment of their non-corporeal parts.¹²

Historians of body image and the 'body beautiful' have identified other analogies in the ways categories of identity were constructed in relation to the appearance body in the eighteenth century. They note that from the late seventeenth century increasing attention was paid to the 'visible evidence of difference on the body'.¹³ In her analysis of early modern court documents Laura Gowing demonstrates how aspects of the appearance of a person's body, such as the size, stature and shape of their torso and limbs, and their skin and hair colour, were presented as sources of evidence about their social identity and

character.¹⁴ David Turner observes that the meanings attached to the appearance of the body during this period evolved in tandem with a range of political, economic, social and medical developments.¹⁵ This situation is illustrated in Colin Jones' recent book *The Smile Revolution* (2014). Here it is argued that in the years surrounding the French Revolution the open-mouthed smile became a fashionable means of self-expression due to a range of 'surgical and scientific advances; significant social, economic and political developments; and also changing notions of emotion, expression, behaviour, selfhood and gender.'¹⁶

As an analytical point of departure, this article proposes that in the late seventeenth century the expression 'fair sex' appeared at an important historical juncture when ideas about women were in transition. To start it examines medical understandings of 'complexion', and the modes by which information about a person's character and morality became located upon the skin's surface between 1650 and 1800. Next, it explores the evolution of terms such as 'fair' and 'fair sex', how the terminology used to linguistically describe women in non-fictional texts reflected changing conceptions of femininity, and why 'fair' was considered the most 'beautiful' skin colour, especially for women. Finally, it investigates the ways in which skin colour was presented as an embodied marker of a person's nationality and race, and how 'fairness' was juxtaposed with other complexions as a signifier of British femininity. Together this analysis shall demonstrate that in the eighteenth century the expression 'fair sex' was a flexible term that characterised a complex gender idiom which was directly correlated to the way embodied identity, particularly gender identity, was conceived at different stages during the century.

I. 'Complexion'

The term most commonly employed to refer to the external colouration of the skin in the eighteenth century was 'complexion.' Samuel Johnson endorsed this definition in his *Dictionary* (1755), where he defined 'complexion' as 'the colour of the external parts of the body'. Complexion, in this understanding, referred to the colour of the hair as well as the colour of the skin. The vocabulary used to describe a person's 'complexion' was extremely rich and diverse, ranging from wan, pale, white and fair, through to sandy, olive, tawny, reddish, swarthy, 'adust' and black.¹⁷ Around the mid-century, the French physician Nicholas Andry noted: 'The Colour of the *Epidermis* is that which makes the Complexion. In most People it is white, in some tawny, in others of an olive Colour, and in others black.'¹⁸ This terminology had a range of connotations in different discursive contexts, sometimes referring to a person's humoral physiology, health and appearance, and in others, their gender, class, nationality or race.

However, in the first three quarters of the century, anatomists and physicians agreed that the skin itself was colourless and transparent. In *De Morbis Cutaneis: A Treatise of Diseases Incident to the Skin* (1714), the first work with a singular emphasis on the skin published in English, the physician Daniel Turner explained that as an independent organ the skin comprised of several distinct parts. Building upon the work of the Dutch anatomist

Goveart Bidloo, who was the earliest to detail information about the skin as seen through the invention of the microscope, Turner explained that the skin had two layers: the *cuticula* or 'scarf-skin', and a deeper membrane called the *cutis*.¹⁹ He noted that the thin transparent layer of the *cuticula* 'Of its own Nature...is white', whilst the deeper, thicker level of the *cutis* was covered by a layer of pigmentation, determined by the balance of fluids in the body, which gave the skin its colour. Turner wrote that for this reason the coloured appearance of the 'Cutis, or true skin', provided an 'Index or Criterion of the Temperament or Constitution, or of the good or bad State of the Body.'²⁰ Later in the century, Andry wrote in agreement that the 'Epidermis or Scarf-Skin' was a 'compact thin Membrane, a little transparent', which allowed 'the Colour of the Skin to appear through it, in the same manner as Objects appear through a Glass.'²¹ Therefore, in eighteenth-century understanding, the colour of the skin belonged to the body rather than the skin because as an independent entity the skin was believed to be transparent.

The idea that the colour of the skin codified the constitution of the body was informed by traditional forms of humoral medicine which dominated understandings of the body, health and sickness throughout the eighteenth century. In this ancient system of medical thought, derived from the writings of Hippocrates and Galen, the body consisted of four key fluids or 'humours': blood, yellow-bile, black-bile and phlegm. Each humour had a different effect upon the body, blood making the body hot and wet, yellow-bile hot and dry, black-bile cold and dry, and phlegm cold and wet. The colour of the skin, the corporeal organ that contained these fluids, indicated the particular balance of humours within the body. James Mackenzie, a popular medical advice author, explained that when 'bile or phlegm prevails in the fluids, the complexion corresponds with the prevailing humour.'²² In more simplistic terms, the artist William Hogarth noted in his aesthetic treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), that:

The cutis is composed of tender threads like a network, fill'd with different colour'd juices. The white juice serves to make the very fair complexion;--yellow, makes the brunet;--brownish yellow, the ruddy brown;--green yellow, the olive;--dark brown, the mulatto; --black, the negro;--These different colour'd juices, together with the different *mashes* of the network, and the size of its threads in this or that part, causes the variety of complexions.²³

The balance of humours within a person's body varied in accordance with their gender, age, sex, place of residence, and personal habit or occupation. While men were understood to be dominated by hot and dry humours, women were thought to be essentially cold and moist. Men were thus expected to possess naturally 'ruddier' complexions than women, who were forecasted to be pale or 'fair'. Turner wrote that 'the most common marks of a hot and dry temperament' were 'rough, brown, hairy skin', and a cold and moist complexion was denoted by the appearance of 'soft, white, smooth skin.'²⁴ Accordingly, if people displayed complexions which differed from the expected norms of physical appearance that were correlated with their social identity, it was thought to suggest

some sort of humoral abnormality or sickness. Henry Bracken, a midwifery author, claimed that red and black haired women, whose complexions were caused by an excess of 'hot' blood in their bodies, were likely to 'perspire or sweat more than other Colours do.' He added that this 'behoves Women of these Complexions to keep their Skins well washed, and change their Linnen, & c. oftener than common.'²⁵

'Complexion', in the first three quarters of the century, also referred to a person's character traits as informed by their humoral 'temperament'. It was believed a prevalence of blood in the body created a sanguine temperament, while an excess of yellow-bile, black-bile or phlegm respectively caused a choleric, melancholic or phlegmatic temperamental complexion. People of a sanguine disposition were thought to be naturally courageous, hopeful and amorous, and individuals who were choleric were believed to be bad tempered. In contrast, people who were melancholic were identified as being despondent and irritable, and those who were phlegmatic, calm and unemotional. In one issue of *The Spectator* the narrator pitied a man who complained of his inability to tell a story without embellishment, proposing that it seemed that the correspondent was simply 'a Person of too warm a Complexion to be satisfied with things simply as they stood in Nature.'²⁶ Coloured terminology, used in conjunction with descriptions of skin colour, was also frequently employed to describe character attributes. In *The Spectator* it was proposed 'a Reader seldom peruses a book with Pleasure, until he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man, of a mild or Choleric Disposition.'²⁷

As the century progressed, there were increasingly close associations between a person's 'complexion' and their 'inner' morality. This was especially true after the 1760s when the 'cult of sensibility', a cultural movement grounded in literary criticism, which placed emphasis on the cultivation of individual 'inner' feelings of sympathy, compassion and benevolence, became an important form of self-expression.²⁸ Now, instead of humoral temperament, commentators looked to the skin for evidence of distinguishing 'complexions' which could be used to identify different 'characters'. In this way, identity became embodied as various skin colours and complexions were indexed with a series of corresponding identity associations, character attributes and emotions. The Irish physician, historian and playwright Oliver Goldsmith remarked in 1774 that: 'a fair complexion seems, if I may so express it, as a transparent covering to the soul; all the variations of the passions, even expressions of joy or sorrow, flows through the cheek, and, without language, marks the mind.'²⁹ Therefore, during the eighteenth century 'complexion' and terms used to describe the colour of the skin had a range of meanings and in different discursive contexts could refer to aspects of a person's humoral temperament and character, as well as their 'inner' feelings and emotions. Due to this myriad of associations, over the course of the century colour referents such as 'fair' unselfconsciously accumulated a range of mutually reinforcing physiological, character and moral meanings derived from their various uses in different discursive contexts.

II. *The Origins of an Idiom*

David Crystal argues that language, especially written language, is 'quintessentially a social tool' that is illustrative of changing ideas, social trends and fashions.³⁰ Analysis of the meanings and fashionable usage of terms that described women in print from the sixteenth century onwards, such as 'fair', therefore offers us insights into the complex relationships between different texts and book genres, and the evolution of ideas about femininity. The word 'fair', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), traces its origins back to the old Saxon word *fagar* meaning 'beautiful', 'pretty' or 'peaceful'. Over the following centuries of British history, as identified in the OED, the word 'fair', 'fayre' or 'faire' went on to accumulate a variety of different meanings, including 'beautiful to the eye', 'of attractive appearance', 'of appearance, colour, personal qualities or attributes', 'excellent and admirable', 'free from blemish, imperfection or fault' and 'offering the prospect of success or good fortune'. The first known applications of 'fair' to a woman or to women collectively, or as a phrase used to express qualities considered characteristic of women, appeared in the English language in the *York Plays* dated to around 1450.

Nevertheless, during the early modern period the phrase most commonly used to refer to women was the 'weaker vessel'.³¹ This expression made its preview in the English language in William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament in 1525. Consequently, it featured prominently in the *Kings James Bible* (1611) and the works of William Shakespeare. From these texts, the phrase 'weaker vessel' slipped into popular parlance, becoming a common feature of British writing relating to women or female issues. This terminology linguistically embodied many early modern assumptions about female bodies and female nature. Whilst Aristotelian medicine attested that the female body was an imperfect inversion of the male, religious doctrine reminded men of Eve's original sin in the Garden of Eden and warned of women's susceptibility to temptation and vice.³² In a wedding sermon of 1607, Reverend Robert Wilkinson informed future husbands that it was their responsibility to protect their wives from themselves. He wrote: 'you must remember she is the Weaker Vessel: God therein exerciseth your wisdom in reforming, and your Patience in bearing it.'³³

Yet, by the late seventeenth century, the phrase 'weaker vessel' had largely fallen out of use. Women were now, individually and collectively, referred to as the 'devout sex', the 'fair' or 'fairer sex', or simply 'the fair'. In 1665, the natural philosopher Robert Boyle wrote: 'it is not strange to me, that persons of the fairer sex should like, in all things about them, that handsomeness, for which they find themselves to be the most liked.'³⁴ This linguistic shift mirrored changing understandings of female 'nature'. After the 1660s, women's physical softness, delicacy and 'beauty' progressively ceased to be presented as evidence of their moral inferiority or as a potential source of female vice, pride and carnality. Roy Porter argues that, among other things, beliefs of this sort were destabilised by new anatomical, scientific and philosophical ideas that emphasised the divinity of the body and identified physical beauty as evidence of 'inner morality'.³⁵ Reflecting the

culmination of prevailing views, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, argued that there was a clearly quantifiable natural order of beauty belonging to order, harmony, proportion and symmetry, and that virtue and beauty were symbiotically conjoined. He wrote: 'all *Beauty* is TRUTH. *True* Features make the Beauty of a Face; and true Proportions the Beauty of Architecture.'³⁶ Accordingly, the recognised beauty and delicacy of the female body became a signifier of inherent female morality. In 1673, the best-selling conduct book writer Richard Allestree proclaimed in *The Ladies Calling* that God 'gave the feeblest woman as large and capacious a soul as that of the greatest hero.'³⁷

Growing female literacy rates and the entrance of women into the commercial book market also played its part in altering the way women and female issues were addressed in non-fiction texts. David Cressy shows that whilst only 5% of women were able to sign their own names in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, that by the end of the seventeenth century this had risen to 25%. In London, the growth in literacy among women was even more pronounced, with female literacy rising from 22% in the 1670s to 66% in the 1720s.³⁸ For entrepreneurial authors and booksellers this represented a commercial opportunity. One individual who explored this prospect was the anonymous author of *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694). This lexical and encyclopaedic text, the first reference work published in English principally for a female readership, was also the first book to address women directly in its title as the 'fair sex'. Included within its pages were favourable discussions of female character, behaviour and conduct drawn from contemplation of the lives of eminent 'VIRGINS, WIVES and WIDOWS; of all Complexions and Humours; the Fair, the Foul, the Grave, the Witty, the Reserv'd, the Familiar, the Chast, the Wanton.'³⁹ This suggests that in the late seventeenth century, the model of moral and virtuous femininity implied by the phrase 'fair sex' proved appealing to women as well as men.

Still, it was not until the early eighteenth century that 'fair sex' became a common form of female address. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele played a significant role in popularising this term in their influential journals *The Tatler* (1709-1711) and *The Spectator* (1711-14). These tri-weekly publications, which were popularly read and referenced throughout the century, were two of the first literary texts to make deliberate efforts to appeal to women as well as men. Steele, in an early issue of *The Tatler*, avowed to include material 'which may be of entertainment to the fair sex.'⁴⁰ In *The Spectator*, it was also remarked: 'there are none to whom this Paper will be more useful, than to the Female World. I have often thought there has not been sufficient Pains taken in finding out proper Employments and Diversions for the Fair ones.'⁴¹ Addison and Steele sought to appeal to a female readership because they believed that female presence in the public sphere was essential for tempering aggressive forms of masculine behaviour and creating a harmonious social environment that was conducive to forms of rational debate. In 1711, Addison attested that anger was a 'male vice', which was 'altogether repugnant to the Softness, the Modesty, and those other endearing Qualities which are natural to the Fair Sex.'⁴² By encouraging women to engage in social debate Addison and Steele also believed that they

would make women more rational, enabling them to be better companions to their husbands and mothers to their children.⁴³

Even though they endeared themselves to women, in their articles on female education, dress, behaviour and conduct, and through their satirical depictions of vain, insolent and immodest women, Addison and Steele made it clear that female participation within the public sphere depended on women's adherence to virtuous, moral and chaste models of femininity. Criticising argumentative and party political women, in *The Spectator* Addison wrote: 'the Faults and Imperfections of one Sex transplanted into another, appear black and monstrous.'⁴⁴ To imbue their entreaties on 'proper' female behaviour with authority, Addison and Steele implied that the female characteristics they celebrated were 'natural' and grounded in the fabric of the female body. They even went so far as to suggest that these traits were distinctive features of the female 'soul'. In *The Spectator* it was stated:

WOMEN in their Nature are much more gay and joyous than Men; whether it be that their Blood is more refined, their Fibres more delicate, and their animal Spirits more light and volatile; or whether, as some have imagined, there may not be a kind of Sex in the very Soul, I shall not pretend to determine.⁴⁵

Accordingly, any behaviour that deviated from these constructed ideals of femininity could be branded 'unnatural' and attract censure from women, as well as men, as it destabilised the fragile conditions upon which female access to the public sphere was permitted. In this light, Addison and Steele's deployment of the expression 'fair sex' can be viewed as a strategic method used by these authors to encourage women to behave in ways that befitted their socially circumscribed, and culturally imperative, gender roles.⁴⁶

Following the lead of Addison and Steele, between 1720 and 1760 a range of, predominately male, non-fiction authors began to liberally adopt the term 'fair sex' as a form of address to women. Conduct authors, through their endless detailed descriptions of idealised forms of female behaviour, also began to construct increasingly precise models of 'polite' femininity based on ideas of chastity, modesty, sociability, charity and benevolence. Within these discourses 'fair' and 'fair sex' represented linguistic signatures that were consciously deployed to normalise idealised types of feminine behaviour. In the introduction to *An Essay in Praise of Women or, a Looking-Glass for Ladies to see their Perfections In* (1733), the physician James Bland wrote:

The Esteem for the Fair has almost constrained me to write in their Behalf; and when I consider them in all Stations of Life, and see their wonderful Industry, their surprizing Frugality, their singular Temperance and Chastity, their incorrupt Justice, their boundless Charity, their polite Education, and their Zeal for our holy Religion; I say, when I consider them in all these Respects...why should I grudge, or rather why should I not use my utmost Endeavour, so to embellish my Frame, as to engage the Fair to look into my Glass?⁴⁷

Like Addison and Steele, eighteenth-century conduct authors therefore purposefully employed the phrase 'fair sex' to make their works appealing to women and to urge women to consent and conform to the models of femininity they presented in their texts.

In medical advice books 'fair sex' was similarly employed to characterise the idealised healthy and 'beautiful' female body that was formed through morally virtuous forms of behaviour. Through such texts, ideas about women's behavioural and moral 'fairness' assumed an embodied form. *The Ladies Physical Directory* proposed that the 'Fair Sex of this Island...in Beauty, and every other Grace and Perfection, are indeed the Glory of the whole Female World.'⁴⁸ In particular, the behavioural ideals of temperance and modesty, which were closely associated with 'polite' femininity, were identified as moral characteristics that could render the female body physically beautiful. 'Temperance', Bland proposed, 'is such a sovereign Virtue, that nothing is more becoming a *crown'd Head*; and it's no small Argument in Woman's Praise.'⁴⁹ In this mode, 'fairness' became a linguistic signifier for corporeal, as well as moral and behavioural, female 'beauty'.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the repetitive usage of 'fair' in conjunction with discussions concerning women served to alter the meanings of the word 'fair'. Johnson, in his *Dictionary*, identified no less than sixteen definitions of this term which all referred to it either as a feature of beauty, form of colouration, or moral quality.⁵⁰ In the first instance, Johnson defined 'fair' as 'Beautiful; elegant of feature; handsome'. By way of qualification, identifying the associations between fairness and femininity, Johnson added: 'Fair seems in the common acceptation to be restrained, when applied to women, to the beauty of the face.' In the second case, as a type of skin colouration, 'fair' was defined as: 'not black; not brown, white in the complexion, pleasing to the eye; beautiful in general'. However, the majority of definitions referred to 'fair' as a term used to describe moral qualities, including many aphorisms associated with women. These definitions included: 'Clear; pure', 'Favourable; prosperous', 'Likely to succeed', 'Equal; just', 'Open; direct', 'Gentle; mild', 'Pleasing; civil', and 'Commodious; easy'. Correspondingly, through Johnson's *Dictionary* and other non-fiction texts published in the first half of the eighteenth century, the gender meanings associated with the word 'fair' and characterised by the phrase 'fair sex' became unselfconsciously embedded in the English language. This situation, Pauline Scholessser argues, caused 'fair sex' ideology to become something that was 'ordinary, understood, reified, and dogmatic'.⁵¹

III. *The 'Fair' and the 'Beautiful'*

From the Renaissance and through into the eighteenth century, a white, clear or 'fair' complexion was repeatedly described as the most beautiful. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, an emergent genre of cosmetic manuals, such as *A Discourse on Auxiliary Beauty* (1656) and *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1673), set about precisely defining the ideals of beauty as they pertained to skin colour. *The Ladies Dictionary* proposed that an essential requirement for 'Perfect Beauty' was 'a Smooth Complexion,

white and red.⁵² *Artificiall Embellishments* (1665) similarly described the forehead as ‘the Ivory throne where Beauty sits in state.’⁵³ This sort of discussion usually related to facial complexion, although the importance of displaying ‘fairness’ in other exposed parts of the body was also emphasised. *The Athenian Sport* (1707) observed that in the modern era women ‘made it their delight to uncover the parts of their chiefest Beauty, as their Faces, swan-white Necks, soft rising Breasts, Ivory Shoulders, and Alabaster Hands.’⁵⁴

The colour of the complexion continued to be presented as a critical means of displaying beauty in beauty manuals and didactic texts during the eighteenth century. *The Art of Beauty* (1760) avowed: ‘There is nothing so charming as a lively and wholesome complexion, which in a great measure answers the end of beautiful features.’⁵⁵ *Abdeker; or the Art of Preserving Beauty* (1754) proffered reasons why skin colour was the chief ornament of beauty. The text began: ‘I am now going to speak of a Thing that is the most essential to our Subject, as it is the first that makes an Impression upon the Eye. It is the Colour of the Skin’.⁵⁶ Skin colour was identified as a defining feature of beauty due to its imagined ease of perception. Joseph Spence, in his essay ‘Critio; or, A Dialogue on Beauty’ (1761), asserted: ‘THO’ Color be the lowest of all the constituent Parts of Beauty, yet it is vulgarly the most striking, and the most observed. For which there is a very obvious Reason to be given; that “everybody can see, and very few can judge”.’⁵⁷

At the same time, ‘fair’ complexions continued to be applauded in contrast to those that were yellow, tawny, red, brown, adust or black. It was said in *The Art of Beauty*: ‘The colour of the parts is one of the articles that Nature should observe in the composition of a handsome body; and, if a fair skin is a perfection, one that is brown, yellowish, and covered with freckles, is to be accounted ugly.’⁵⁸ From the 1720s, ideas about the beauty of ‘fair’ complexions were shaped by aesthetic discussions concerning the perception of beauty, which placed significant emphasis on colour. Through such dialogues, definitions of corporeal fairness became more precise. In *A Philosophical Inquiry in to our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke assessed the varying qualities of colour in reference to beauty. Influenced by contemporary aesthetic Rococo styles, which were associated with creamy pastel colours, he noted ‘the colours of beautiful bodies must not be dusky or muddy, but clean and fair.’ He added that ‘they must not be of the strongest kind’ and that ‘those which seem most appropriated to beauty, are the milder of every sort.’⁵⁹ Burke used skin colouration as a key exemplar of how beauty was displayed through colour. He proposed that in a ‘fine complexion, there is not only some variety in the colouring, but the colours; neither red nor the white are strong and glaring.’ ‘Besides’, he continued, ‘they are mixed in such a manner, and with such gradations, that is it impossible to fix the bounds.’⁶⁰ In the eighteenth century ‘fair’, as a form of skin colouration, correspondingly referred to complexions which were white but which also displayed a balance of red and pink hues.

The idealised physical attributes of beauty varied between the two sexes in accordance with contemporary conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Spence explained 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.'⁶¹ Due to ideas about their inherent morality, 'delicacy' and 'softness', beauty for women depended on the display of a 'fair' complexion. Bland stated: '*Woman*, you know, is of all the Creatures, the most fair and beautiful.'⁶² The myriad of associations between femininity, beauty and fairness is revealed in contemporary discussions concerning the beauty of breasts, a uniquely female part of the body. Repeatedly breasts of a white, 'snowy', or 'alabaster' complexion were described as being particularly beautiful. Spence stated: 'The *Bosom* should be white, and charming', whilst in the *Art of Beauty* the breasts were described as 'two ivory globes, or a little world of beauty.'⁶³ The fictional narrator of the journal *The Guardian* also noted that he enjoyed looking upon women's 'Busts of Alabaster', and objectively observing the 'yielding Marble of a Snowy Breast'.⁶⁴ Revealing women's perspectives on contemporary preferences for corporeal 'fairness', in another issue of *The Guardian* a young female correspondent complained to the narrator about clothing fashions that left large portions of the breast exposed. The chief article of her complaint was that olive skin, such as she possessed, made for a 'very indifferent Neck'.⁶⁵ She protested that 'Fair Women' must have 'thought of this Fashion to insult the Olives and Brunettes', because: 'They know very well that a Neck of Ivory does not make so fine a Show as one of Alabaster.'⁶⁶

Throughout the century, equations between women's physical beauty, 'fairness' and virtue were calculated in advice books and conduct texts. *Look e're You Leap*, a book which counselled men on their selection of a wife, certainly presented good looks, including a fair complexion, as an indication of good character. It advised male readers that they should select a 'moderately fair and beautiful' wife as 'a lovely fair Face does generally prove the Index of a fairer Mind.'⁶⁷ By contrast, it was noted that when a woman displayed a 'swarthy skin' and 'a cloudy, sullen and sour aspect', it plainly indicated 'a great Disorder in the Mind, and that her soul is as unlovely as her Body is.'⁶⁸ In a similar manner, a range of medical texts presented 'fairness' as a physical characteristic that was most often exhibited by young, 'pure' and 'innocent' female virgins. The physician Nicholas Culpeper noted that the disease 'green sickness', which was most common among 'Virgins fit for a Man', produced a 'change of the Natural Colour into pale and green, with fairness, and heaviness of the Body.'⁶⁹

On the other hand, when exhibited by men, 'fairness' was often identified as a deformity because it was believed to evidence a dominance of cold and wet humours in the body. This was a problem because men were expected to be essentially humourally hot and dry. The medical practitioner and astrologer Richard Saunders proposed that 'fairness' in men showed effeminacy.⁷⁰ Likewise, *Aristotle's Compleat Masterpiece* asserted: 'Hair of a yellowish colour shows a man to be 'willing to do anything, fearful, shamefaced, and weak of body.'⁷¹ For men, physical 'fairness' was also associated with the depletion of semen or 'seed', which was thought to cause wastage to the male body and ruin its procreative powers. This was because blood, the dominance of which in the body was thought to create a 'ruddy' complexion, was understood to be the original fluid from which several other

'vital' bodily liquids, including male 'seed', were derived.⁷² 'Young Men, that are too much given to Women', proposed *Abdeker*, 'have always a pale and disfigured Countenance.'⁷³ In his influential anti-masturbation tract *Onania* (1766), the French doctor Samuel Tissot similarly argued that 'licentious masturbators' could be easily identified by their 'pale and sallow' looks.⁷⁴

That said, exactly how 'dark' British men's complexions should be remained discursively ambiguous throughout the century. This was due to the awkward positioning of British men's complexions, which were generally white or pale, in relation to the 'fair' skin of British women, and the 'darker' complexions displayed by people of other national and racial extractions. We can therefore only assume that the idealised complexion for men fell somewhere between these categories, being white in appearance but slightly 'ruddier' than the 'fair' complexions exhibited by British women. To negotiate this problem, authors instead focused their attentions on how men could cultivate a complexion befitting a British 'gentleman' through their behaviour. Medical advice books and conduct literature told men to engage in rigorous pursuits, such as horse riding, to encourage the production of 'hot' humours in their bodies to 'darken' their skin. Conversely, the same sorts of texts instructed women to avoid spending too much time outdoors in the sunshine. Andry, for one, recommended that young girls should not leave the house without a mask and gloves to shield their skin from the danger of the sun.⁷⁵ These prescriptions reflected contemporary gender associations between men and the public sphere, and women with the domestic sphere and enclosed public spaces such as the tea table and assembly hall.⁷⁶

Yet, if women were not lucky enough to be naturally 'pale' skinned, beauty manuals contained recipes that could be used by them to concoct cosmetics which made the skin appear more 'beautiful' and 'fair'. The author of *The Accomplished Ladies Rich Closet of Rarities* (1687) wrote 'I undertake this Treatise' to put 'into your hands an opportunity to render your selves more beautiful', as well as to 'preserve what you have, at least from the ruins of time or unfortunate accident.'⁷⁷ 'To make the skin, though dusky and brown, as white as alabaster', *Beauties Treasury* (1705) told women to 'Take oil of tatar an ounce, comphire and borax of each a dram, allom two drams, make these into a fine powder'. Then it was advised to pour this powder 'into a quart of rosewater' and let the potion 'simmer half an hour over a gentle fire.' The resulting cosmetic, it was concluded, would 'whiten the skin so like snow, that the eyes of the beholders will dazzle, if they be fixed too steadfastly upon it.'⁷⁸

Cosmetics and beauty manuals were popular among women from a range of different social backgrounds because they provided them with tools for social mobility. At this time, working men and women generally displayed darker complexions than members of the aristocracy, gentry, and merchant and professional classes. This was because, unlike the elites, working people spent a large amount of time outdoors exposed to the sun. Andry explained: 'Country People, who are exposed all their Life to the Sun, contract a tawny Complexion, which it is impossible to correct.'⁷⁹ However, as 'fairness' became an important attribute of femininity, many working women sought to cultivate a 'white' complexion and

appear 'elite' by using cosmetics.⁸⁰ Tassie Gwilliam shows that in the first half of the century, because of the way such preparations allowed women to alter their appearance and construct their own identities, cosmetics were often viewed with suspicion by men.⁸¹ One male correspondent to *The Spectator* complained bitterly about discovering that his wife was not 'naturally' beautiful or 'fair' as he had thought before their marriage. He wrote: 'As for my Dear, never Man was so inamour'd as I was of her fair Forehead, Neck and Arms...but to my great Astonishment, I find they were all the Effect of Art.'⁸² The subject of the man's concern, he at least claimed, was not that his wife was less beautiful as he had first thought, but rather that she had deceived him and was not the woman of character he had originally believed. This evidence suggests that women recognised that by whitening their skin and displaying a 'fair' complexion they were likely to be regarded to have a 'good' character.

In the second half of the century, attacks on women's use of cosmetics relaxed. Ideas about cosmetics softened because new ideas of sensibility, which focused on the cultivation of the mind rather than the expression of the body, gave contemporaries the freedom to express themselves through the use of various forms of external adornment. It was also because by the 1770s, women's continual use of cosmetics in the proceeding decades had played a role in creating a situation where 'fairness' was now seen as a 'natural' and defining complexion of British women, and by extension, the British nation.⁸³ Now instead of being condemned, women's use of cosmetics was encouraged by men. 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; women are therefore not only justifiable in being solicitous about this matter, but in taking every method to remedy, by art, the defects of Nature.⁸⁴

Therefore, between 1660 and 1790 'fairness', as a form of skin colouration, went from being an ideal of beauty, to an explicit marker of British femininity. This shift was caused by a growing aesthetic preferences for colours that were 'fair', muted and pale, the identification of 'fairness' as a signifier of women's adherence to ideals of feminine behaviour, and the solidification of associations between 'fairness' and female morality.

IV. 'Fairness', Nationality and Race

Before the mid-eighteenth century, the colour of a person's 'complexion' was rarely used alone to identify their race or nationality. Instead, descriptions of people's skin colour were almost always accompanied by explicit references to their ethnicity or nationality. In *The Tatler*, an ancestor of the fictional narrator Sir Isaac Bickerstaff was described as having a 'very swarthy complexion, not unlike a Portuguese Jew.'⁸⁵ This situation mirrored the

contemporary belief that variations in national skin colour owed to environmental and climatic differences. Whilst hot climates were believed to produce 'hot' humours in the body and render the complexions of those who lived in these areas 'reddish', brown' or 'black', colder regions were thought to cool the body and cause 'white', 'pale' and 'fair' complexions. In 1744, Lynch explained:

That the Complexion depends much upon the *Air*, is plain from Experience; the Complexion of the Inhabitants of several Countries being fair, swarthy, black or adust, according to the Degrees of Heat, Drought, Moisture, or Coolness of the *Air* they live in; for the Inhabitants of Countries in great Latitudes are generally fairer than those that live nearer the Sun.⁸⁶

In classical medical texts, revered and referenced by authors throughout the eighteenth century, the world was climatically divided into a tripartite division of northern, southern and temperate regions. In these works, the Mediterranean was identified as the 'temperate region', and the part of the world which produced the best 'complexions' (in both a temperamental and physical sense), with Britain and Scandinavia being denoted as the northern area, and Africa as the southern. As a 'northern' region, the climate of Britain was thought to disorder the bodies of those that lived there, rendering them 'fair', intemperate, fleshy and 'feminine'.⁸⁷ Mary Floyd-Wilson argues that this situation created a problem for British men. This was because however much they worked to differentiate themselves and their bodies from women and the lower orders at a local level, on the international stage they continually 'found themselves characterised as excessively pale, moist, soft-fleshed, inconsistent and permeable.'⁸⁸

To resolve this issue and rehabilitate northern identity, from the late seventeenth century British authors began to revise classical accounts of national skin colour variation. Firstly, writers emphasised the positive values of the cool British climate and the 'fair' complexions it produced. After the 1720s, British physicians, such as George Cheyne, increasingly advocated a 'cool regimen'. These doctors argued that maintaining bodily health was dependant on the regulation of various physiological processes through bodily 'cooling'. Thanks to its 'cool' climate, Cheyne wrote that 'there is no Place in the World more likely to lengthen out Life than *England*, especially those Parts of it, that have a free open Air'.⁸⁹ These doctors also emphasised the value of dietary temperance and the consumption of a 'cool' diet, consisting of simple native foods like oats and milk, by presenting it as a moral virtue and necessity to health. In turn, they argued that temperance was most clearly corporeally signified by the display of a 'fair' complexion. British men's fairness, in this way, became a signifier of behavioural moderation and self-control. Over the course of the eighteenth century, 'fairness' was thus re-cast as a form of complexion, and indicator of national identity, that the British could be proud of.

Around the 1760s, commentators also started to suggest that variations in skin colour might indicate fundamental physical, social and moral differences between different nations and races. A 'white' complexion was now presented as the 'norm', with other

complexions being identified as 'deformities' which evidenced various bodily and mental deficiencies. In an appended note attached to his 1758 edition of an *Essay of National Characters*, David Hume stated that he was 'apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites', because there 'scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation'.⁹⁰ Correspondingly, skin colour was increasingly used as an index against which different nation's levels of civilisation could be measured. In this vein, Frances Reynolds, sister of the fashionable portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, stated:

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, 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.⁹¹

Towards the end of the century, discussions concerning skin colour became politically charged due to their connection with debates concerning the abolition of the slave trade.⁹² The prominence of slavery debates in popular culture caused knowledge about the causes of variations in skin colour and the anatomy of the skin to become culturally predominant. Most commentators in the eighteenth century were monogenesists, who believed that all men descended from a common ancestor and that differences in skin colour were determined by climate. People who subscribed to this view did not always condemn the slave trade, but the ideas they promoted were used by those that did.⁹³ Primarily, anti-slavery campaigners emphasised racial similarity, arguing that differences in complexion were only 'skin deep'. The anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson proposed that all 'men' of all colours and races were essentially the same. He argued that this was demonstrated by the fact that anatomical studies had shown that 'the cuticle of the blackest negroe was of the same transparency and colour, as that of the purest white'⁹⁴

Yet, for those who supported the slave trade, differences in skin colour were presented as clear evidence of fundamental embodied distinctions between 'blacks' and 'whites'. For instance, some supporters of slavery, such as Edward Long, argued that African slaves were vital sugar production in the colonies because their distinctive physiological make-up and black skin made them more suited to plantation labour than European 'whites'.⁹⁵ Reinforcing these arguments was a small but growing number of polygenesist authors who believed that different groups of men were descended from distinctive ancestors made by God. The Scottish judge Lord Kames, a firm advocate of this view, stated: 'to me it appears clear from the very frame of the human body, that there must be different races of men fitted for different climes.'⁹⁶ This model provided a clear explanation as to why 'white' people were superior to 'black' that was founded on the distinctive colouration of their skin.

These discussions often included a gendered dimension because by utilising the idea that the fairness of women's complexions indicated the distinctive moral qualities of their gender, commentators sought to show that British national and racial superiority was

indicated by the 'fairness' of the British nation. The naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster, who accompanied James Cook on his second voyage of the Pacific, noted that although the women of Tonga had becoming 'brown complexions', their charms failed to match 'those of the European fair ones...among which the British ones, no doubt, deserve the first rank.'⁹⁷ Charles White, an advocate of polygenism, also used British women's physical fairness as evidence of the moral and civilizational superiority of the British nation. He rhetorically asked 'where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion' was better shown than 'except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermillion?'⁹⁸ Together this evidence suggests that the identification of women as the 'fair sex' during the eighteenth century was motivated by British male desire to emphasise national and racial differences between themselves and other nations, and present 'whiteness' as a sign of physical, moral and civilizational superiority, as much as to promote ideas of gender distinction.

V. Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, the associations attached to skin colour were flexible and fluid, being inscribed with various physical, aesthetic, moral and social meanings in different contexts at different times. Examination of the terminology used to describe skin colour, such as 'fair', has illustrated that perceived differences in the appearance of a person's complexion went from being seen as accidental, environmental or cultural forms of distinction to essential embodied differences. The identification of 'fairness' as an embodied signifier of elite British femininity represents one example of the ways skin colour was indexed to demarcate men from women, the elite from the lower classes and people of different nationalities and races. Equally, the preceding analysis has shown that non-fiction authors, through their repetitive deployment of terms such as 'fair' and 'fair sex' in discussions concerning women, contributed to normalising the idea that 'fairness' was a defining characteristic of moral femininity and its physical expression. Investigation of the changing relationship between skin colour and gender has also revealed fresh insights into the discursive processes and exchange that played a part in causing sexual difference to become 'more than skin-deep'. Future research may usefully examine whether there are parallels in the way that other categories of identity, especially class and nationality, which remain under-examined, were constructed in relation to skin colour. This article has therefore demonstrated that the identification of women as the 'fair sex' served to create differences in gender, class, nationality and race, and was part of the development of new ideas about embodied identity and the skin as a signifier of the 'self' that were emergent during the eighteenth century.

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