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Visions of Vice: Morality and Appearance in Feminine Self-Scrutiny

Excessive preoccupation with body image and body size leads many women today into unhealthy patterns of exercise, ranging from exercise obsession and disordered eating to complete withdrawal from physical activity, compounded by feelings of worthlessness and failure. Why is it that women scrutinize their bodies with such severity? Why do they feel responsible for the size of their body, and assume that it is their fault if they do not meet normative standards of body weight or size? Contemporary explanations for the causes of poor body image range from standard medico-psychological interpretations, to medico-sociological and philosophical explanations. Although historians have explored the cultural history of eating disorders, they have not sought to identify an historical reason for this contemporary problem.

In this paper, I explore an historical explanation for this situation. I use the phenomenological definition of “sedimentation,” in its Husserlian sense, to justify the use of history in demystifying contemporary beliefs about the body. I illustrate how we can create collective meanings, notably with reference to the body and its control. I show how the authors of nineteenth- and twentieth-century etiquette books, ladies magazines, religious and medical texts associated physical features with the “inner-self.” They believed that the outer body could reflect inner virtue or character. They encouraged women to focus on self-scrutiny as a means of discovering the truth and created a sense of duty to aesthetic self-presentation. I am most interested in how notions of inner virtue as reflected by outer beauty came to overlap with, and finally be replaced by, notions of hygiene and health. Christian physicians associated notions of morality with diet and deliberate exercise,

associations that became evident in mainstream lay publications and products as the twentieth century unfolded.

I also explore how the concept of “duty” leads to feelings of guilt, and explain how historical beliefs and practices related to self-scrutiny have instilled a sense of duty about physical presentation which leads to contemporary feelings of guilt for body size as well as unhealthy nutritional and exercise patterns.