The Perfect American Woman

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Beauty pageants today are seen by many as frivolous and pointless: it has been well-established in most of North American society that women are more than just something to be admired. This outlook was not the case in the 1940s and 50s, when the Miss America Beauty Pageant showcased the “perfect” girl from each state for the whole nation to see. The pageant was small at its inception in Atlantic City in 1920, but continued to grow throughout its tenure. The pageant has three main categories: the bathing suit, the evening gown, and the talent section. Each pageant member was judged on all three events; the top fifteen went on to be evaluated for a second time before the five finalists were chosen. Apart from a brief hiatus during World War II, the Miss America Pageant has run every year since 1920. In 1945, the Pageant introduced a new prize for the winners in addition to the title of Miss America: scholarships. The winner and four runners-up would each receive pieces of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar scholarship. This changed the focus of the pageant from female beauty and aesthetics to helping women get an education. Even with the addition of the scholarship, however, the pageant still focused primarily on a woman’s looks—and, with the help of television, broadcast these looks and judgements to the country. This paper will focus on the Miss America Pageant from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, analyzing the goals of the Pageant. As the administrators of the Pageant are able to regulate all aspects of the competition, they are able to heavily limit not only who enters, but who wins the title and award. I will argue that during the period in question, the focus and criteria for entry and winning the Miss America Pageant aimed to display the perfect American woman, and commodified this ideal into a marketable product.

Before beginning analysis of the Miss America Pageant, it is important to contextualize the cultural atmosphere within which the Pageants under discussion took place. During the 1920s, American women began to focus more on their external beauty rather than their internal

beauty.¹ Of course, women's exterior beauty had always been important, but the 1920s produced a stronger fixation on a woman's appearance through the marketing of new products. Cosmetics and beauty products grew in popularity due to women's longing to seem more desirable and emulate the women seen in movies and other media outlets such as magazines and newspapers.² Furthermore, many marketable products became available in response to the fixation on external beauty. Doctors, advice books, and popular magazines began to endorse products that would help a woman lose weight, get rid of her pimples, or correct her figure. When *Seventeen* magazine, still popular and in circulation today, began publication in 1944, it served as a vessel for many of these promotions.³ With these changes in beauty standards, it comes as no surprise that the Miss America Pageant and other competitions like it would serve well to exemplify the ideals of beauty to which all women could aspire.

After the Second World War, "nuclear families", a family consisting of a mother, a father, and one or more children, became the desire for most Americans, and women were supposed to become mothers in order to protect the domestic sphere.⁴ As such, the creation and maintenance of a perfect nuclear family was the aim of many American women. The dreams, expectations, and responsibilities of these wives and mothers, however, were not the same as those of the women who had come before them. They were expected to harness new professional

¹Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: an Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 70.

²Ibid., 70.

³Ibid., 93.

⁴Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Miss America, National Identity, and the Identity Politics of Whiteness," *There She is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 71.

skills in order to keep up with new-fangled and rapidly evolving technology.⁵ These new skills would be showcased in the talent section of the Miss America Pageant.

During World War II, women had entered the workforce, filling many of the job vacancies left by the able-bodied men who had been sent off to war. When the war ended, however, women were quickly shut out of working life and pushed back into the domestic sphere where men believed they belonged. This prompted a renewed enthusiasm for the ideal of the housewife, evident in the ads and campaigns that attempted to persuade women that the home was where they belonged. As a 1959 article in *The Nation*, written by a woman, entitled “Are Housewives Necessary?” argues, “We’ve got to convince women all over again that their place is in the home, because frankly we haven’t much room in another place for them.”⁶ This article focuses on how women were ‘stubborn’ and how it was ‘vital’ that they must return to their places in the home. However, this was not a major hardship for some women. They themselves stopped being focused on their careers and wanted families instead.⁷ As the Miss America Pageant aimed to create examples of good wives and mothers, the nation’s renewed focus on the housewife became a central ideal for the Pageant.

Win Your Man and Keep Him, an example of a standard women’s guidebook of the 1950s, expressed to women that it was essential they “cultivate good looks, personality, and cheerful subservience.”⁸ The Miss America Pageant’s criteria also focused on these factors. As the Miss America Pageant is a beauty pageant, it comes as no surprise that good looks were a major aspect of the competition. This can be exemplified in a 1949 announcer advising the

⁵Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 89.

⁶Eve Merriam, “Are Housewives Necessary?” *The Nation*, January 31, 1959, 97.

⁷May, 71.

⁸May, 89.

judges to pay attention to grooming and symmetry of form: for example, “did the thighs and the calves meet at the right place?”⁹ Women competing in the Pageant had to exemplify the correct type of beauty; as such, every aspect of their physical bodies was subject to judgement. A woman’s weight, the size of her bust, waist, thighs, hips, calves, and ankles, and her shoe and dress sizes were all collected during the competition.¹⁰ The ideal woman of the 1950s would have “full pointed breasts combined with long legs, usually displayed in high heels.”¹¹ The announcer of the 1949 pageant counsels the judges to look out for these characteristics, to be sure that the girl is aesthetically pleasing according to the beauty standards of the time. The winner of the Pageant had to be universally admired; therefore, the judges had to pick someone that would please the adoring fans of the competition. These standards were reflected in the growing media representation through television and movies throughout the 1950s. Once these standards had been firmly embedded in the minds of the general populace, it was easy for the pageant to regulate a particular type of beauty that fit into an acceptable model. The judges, having been influenced by the same media, would likely have internalized the same standards and presumably made their judgments accordingly. Thus, the Pageant solidifies its first element of the perfect Miss America: physical appearance.

Beauty was an obvious goal for the Pageant, but contestants were not expected to be simply “beautiful.” As the Campaign Manual for the Miss America Pageant states, “The search was on for America’s most typical girl of the year, who had charm, poise and talent.”¹² Accordingly, the contestants’ personalities were also judged. The contestants attended breakfasts

⁹Lillian Ross, “Symbol of All We Possess,” *The New Yorker*, October 15, 1949, 23.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Brumberg, 94.

¹²Miss America Pageant, *Atlantic City, N.J.: Campaign Manual for the Direction of Local and State Contests*. Atlantic City, NJ: Miss America Pageant, 4.

with the judges throughout the competition, allowing the judges to take the women's personalities into consideration.¹³ As such, competitors could not simply get by on their good looks; a certain amount of 'breeding' was required. The ability to judge contestants' personalities allowed the judges to choose a Miss America whom they believed embodied the values that would create ideal American wives and mothers. While poise and talent were judged in the main part of the competition—the televised portion—charm could really only be judged at these exclusive breakfasts.

The Campaign Manual goes on to describe the ideal Miss America: "She is not the girl who seeks publicity or thinks she is a potential Miss America. Modesty and good breeding are too much a part of her charm and character—one of the first requisites of a successful Miss America contestant."¹⁴ Not only were "modesty and good breeding" *suitable* for the perfect candidate for Miss America; they were essential. These qualities were requirements of a successful candidate. As each contestant in the national Miss America pageant first had to win their home state's Pageant in order to qualify, most of the girls who made it to the national contest had already been pre-screened for the correct personality type. In fact, rule number five in the campaign manual stipulates, "Contestant must be of good character and possess poise, personality, intelligence, charm and beauty of face and figure."¹⁵ Good character was not simply an aim but an official qualification. These girls had to express more than just beauty; they had to demonstrate the intelligence and character that, it was believed, a quintessential American woman should possess. Not only would the state-level Pageants have acted as a pre-screening for a contestant's proper breeding, but the judges who selected contestants to move forward would

¹³ Ross, 19.

¹⁴ Miss America Pageant, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

know that the personalities of the chosen competitors formed a large part of their ability to win. The choices of judges at the state level, as well as the exclusive competitors' breakfasts given at the national level, permitted Pageant judges to further hone in on the preconceived archetypes which the Pageant wished to put forth, allowing the judges to handpick the contestants they felt most exemplified the "ideal" American girl.

Rule number two in the Campaign Manual reads "Contestant must be single and never have been married, divorced, or had marriage annulled."¹⁶ As discussed earlier, there was a particular societal focus on marriage and the nuclear family in 1950s America. In fact, many of the sources read by women at this time argued that twenty-one was the optimal marriageable age, and that it was the woman's job to achieve this goal.¹⁷ The Miss America Pageant did not back away from this standard, but embraced it, providing a way to showcase the optimal choice for a wife. Contestants from the pageant must be between eighteen and twenty-eight years of age, and therefore reflect the commonly held understanding of a "marriageable age."¹⁸ Additionally, as Lillian Ross, a journalist writing about the Miss America Pageant in 1949 discovered, "most of the Miss Americas back to 1921 got married soon after winning their titles."¹⁹ The Pageant, then, served as a springboard for a woman to find her husband. After all, if the most "ideal" American women were competing in this Pageant, a man looking for a wife could not find her in a better place. Even those who did not win the national competition still expressed the "good breeding" and beauty that the Pageant aimed to cultivate, and thus were still good candidates for marriage. The announcer at the 1949 Pageant outlined this point perfectly while congratulating the losers:

¹⁶Ibid., 6.

¹⁷May, 89.

¹⁸Miss America Pageant, 7.

¹⁹Ross, 16.

“Give the valiant losers a hand, folks...They’ve got what it takes. They are your future wives and mothers of the nation.”²⁰

The requirements of the talent section were just as strictly delineated as the other aspects of the pageant. The Campaign Manual allows for “singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, dramatic reading, or...a three-minute talk on the career she wishes to pursue.”²¹ As far as talents go, this list which pageant contestants were allowed to perform was quite limited, shedding light on what the pageant deemed acceptable activities for women to participate in during their leisure time. In an article entitled “Sisterly Advice,” Susan Margret Claydon, head of Washington D.C.’s Trinity College, advises that “the mark of an educated woman is her use of leisure. Reading a book of the month or seeing the latest play aren’t enough...We’re not in the business of training committee women or bridge players.”²² This article demonstrates that the way a woman used her spare time was an important part of that woman as a whole. As such, the Miss America Pageant had to be sure to cultivate the “right” kinds of talents. The women competing had to demonstrate this “good character” and demeanor through every aspect of their lives, and the talent competition was one way they were able to do so.

In the 1949 competition, the talents, as observed by Ross, were as follows: singing, dancing, a speech about raising purebred Herefords, performing a Hula, showing a movie demonstrating swimming ability, playing the violin, showing a movie as well as giving a speech about nursing as a profession, horseback riding, and giving a dramatic reading of Juliet’s potion scene.²³ A select portion of these talents were not proposed in the Campaign Manual, illustrating

²⁰Ibid., 33.

²¹Miss America Pageant, 7.

²²“Sisterly Advice,” *Time*, November 2, 1959.

²³Ross, 21, 24, 28, 29, 30.

that the limited talents that the manual did list were not in fact the *only* talents a contestant could present. However, none of the competitors who deviated from the preapproved talents won the talent section for any of the nights. Therefore, while a contestant *could* choose to perform another talent, it would perhaps have been wiser for her to pick one of the preapproved talents. The apparent favouring of some talents over others further cultivates the paradigm of ideal womanhood that the Pageant aimed to project. In the 1949 Pageant, Miss New York State's boyfriend commented to Ross that he knew she was not going to win, because her talent was nursing and "they'll want singing or dancing or something like that."²⁴ Miss New York State did not win the competition; her loss possibly showcasing that certain talents were preferred by the judges. The approved talents laid out by the pageant helped create an image of the prototypical American woman, even if the skills and interests of "real" American women were far more diverse.

Television changed the way Americans interacted with media and the world around them. The Miss America Pageant was televised beginning in 1945, placing the competition on a new, truly national stage.²⁵ It was no longer simply the people who came to the pageants who were able to witness them, but anyone who watched them on television. This moved the pageant's audience up by millions, increasing the marketability of Miss America as an ideal figure of American womanhood. Television was a new type of cultural form, one that often focused on national issues.²⁶ The Miss America Pageant capitalized on this idea by broadcasting the "ideal" American woman to the nation. The pageant judges as well as the general public certainly believed that they had a right to the consumption of these women's bodies and identities, and

²⁴Ibid., 8.

²⁵Banet-Weiser, 76.

²⁶Ibid., 77.

television made it easier than ever before for this consumption to take place. As observed above, in her article about the 1949 Pageant, Ross includes the weight, bust, waist, thigh, hips, calf, ankle, shoe size, and dress size of every contestant she introduces.²⁷ Not only does this demonstrate that Ross believed the public reading her article had the right to know this information, but that the organizers of and competitors in the pageant felt this way as well, as demonstrated by their willingness to provide this information to a reporter. These women became commodities that the Pageant sold to the general public as their version of an ideal American woman—and this sale was extremely profitable.

The pageant received sponsorship from several major companies. The Pageant in 1949 was sponsored by “Nash Automobiles, Catalina swimsuits, and a cotton fabric known as Everglaze;” not only did these companies sponsor the pageant, but they donated prizes to the winner as well.²⁸ The Pageant saw their competition as a business, and as a business, they had a right to all of their products—that is, the women competing. In line with the women’s new status as metaphorical commodities, the judges were entitled to advise the competitors how to act when in Atlantic City for the competition. They were not allowed to go to dinner, drinks, or any event with any man, including their fathers or brothers because the public had no way of knowing that this man was a contestant’s relative, and the judges were wary of giving the wrong impression.²⁹ The competitors had to remain marketable to men: being in public with a man would seem to take them off the market, so they therefore they had to remain with their female chaperones at all times.

²⁷Ross, 3, 10, 12, 23.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 14.

To further illustrate this point, Mrs. Shermer, an organizer of the 1949 Pageant, states to the contestants, “We’re making you almost inaccessible, because all good businessmen put their most valuable belongings in a safe place.”³⁰ Shermer directly states that the contestants are commodities and a part of a business transaction. The pageant sells the contestants for the viewing pleasure of its audience and judges, the women receive scholarships if they win. The transaction is simple: the beauty and character of the women competing were sold to the masses. The buyers, were happy to buy into the transaction.

The Miss America Pageant controlled its contestants through every stage of the competition, in the aim of shaping and selling the ideal American woman. This control was built into the structure of the Pageant from its inception. The beauty standards of the time were more accessible through the growing media and consequently created a standard to which each contestant had to measure up in order to continue competing. Additionally, the character of each contestant, based on broad definitions such as “good breeding,” was judged at state-level pageants and then at private breakfasts with Pageant judges. This allowed the Pageant to decide what they believed qualified as the correct characteristics for Miss America. The limited talents each contestant was permitted to perform reflected the narrow range of activities approved by the Pageant. By creating and strictly maintaining a set of standard rules and regulations, the Pageant conjured its own vision of the perfect American woman and, with the help of television, broadcast that vision to the nation and the world.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

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