

THE ORIGINS OF LIPSTICK

The History behind all that sexy advertising...

... and the Royal women who caught Hell for wearing it.

When I was still at university, I discovered this, as far as I can recall, in a Latin text regarding Ancient Rome.

Ancient Rome had Guilds, just like today, trade guilds. There were guilds for the same sort of occupations as today, with much the same hierarchy: apprentices, journeymen, masters. There was also the "Guild of Prostitutes." (One must wonder how a lady could progress from "apprentice" to "journeywoman" to "mistress" in such a Guild. I would seriously assume this involved mastering, so to speak, certain talents in matters of the mattress.)

The ancient Romans were no prudes; sexual matters and talents were openly discussed, and only unmarried young women and members of religious orders (pagan, of course) were supposed to be ignorant – at least in practice – of sexual practices. The most famous of these were the women in the Temple devoted to Vesta (the famous "Vestal Virgins") who foreswore marriage, and therefore sexual activity, until they were released from their vows at 38 and left the order. Vesta (the Goddess of the Hearth) protected Rome. She was to be placated by the service of young women, many from the finest Roman families – there were many applicants, and to be a "Vestal Virgin" was a high honour for a Family (Vestal Virgins had many extremely honourable duties, such as mediating in disputes and witnessing and holding Wills, even those of the Emperors.) To serve from the ages of about 12 to 38, the finest (and most fruitful, fertile speaking) years of a Roman woman's life, and the retired Vestal Virgins continued to be honoured.

The words "celibacy" and "chastity" are often confused, It is a misnomer to confuse a person who takes an oath or prefers to remain unmarried with someone who has sworn, or is ignorant of, sex, which is to be "chaste." One of the reasons people often confuse the two is because of religious orders' "Vows of Celibacy" which mean the person who takes the vow promises to remain unmarried. In times past, it was taken as a matter of faith that an unmarried person did not engage in sexual intercourse, so, ipso facto, a "celibate" person was also a "chaste" person. There were always exceptions, of course, or people who saw themselves as not breaking the letter of the oath they took (even as they feverishly broke the spirit of that oath) but it has long since been known that celibacy does not necessarily imply chastity as it once did.

Okay, I've covered the virgins, let's get back to the whores. ;)

WARNING: The following, while historically accurate, is sexually explicit. If you are sensitive, easily-offended or a born-again virgin, you may wish to exit this post now. (Let's be honest here, the aforementioned people will read every word of this post, so they will have something to rant and be offended about. Hey, you were warned...)

Romans of any sophistication were quite used to a broad variety of sexual activity, many of which now are considered somewhat taboo, and certainly, outside of certain circles, not mainstream at any rate. A famous Roman Senator sued his wife for divorce because she refused to engage in anal intercourse – which, in times past, was used as a form of birth control.

Fellatio was celebrated, and appeared depicted in works of art and even on such commonplace and everyday items as dinnerware and frescoes and mosaics that decorated certain chambers in the home. The Emperor Tiberius was fond of shocking young virgins by leading them by the hand into certain chambers in his Palace to "admire" his frescoes (In the Victorian age, this evolved into a gentleman with sexual designs to take a lady to "admire his lithographs." ;) Tiberius would make lascivious comments, ostensibly about the activities depicted on the walls. (Tiberius' preferences usually ran to young boys, who at his infamous Imperial Villa at Capri, were encouraged to swim alongside the Emperor and "bite



and lick at his body like schools of minnows...”)

The Guild of Prostitutes were in every sense “working women.” (Possibly this is the origin of the term “oldest profession” being associated with prostitution.) There was no shame attached to being so, as much as some tried to be snotty and disdain them as “whores,” the Guild’s members sensibly pointed out that they were professionals fulfilling a physical need in a mutually satisfying manner – their customers were carnally satisfied and the prostitutes found their jobs financially lucrative. No one wished to patron a prostitute who did not know her trade, or was unwilling to perform it. Those being facts, the ladies were attentive to what facilitated a good performance.

Dry lips do not facilitate a good performance. Taking their cue from the physiological fact that a woman’s lips (oh, okay, both pairs, if we are going to be graphic about the whole enchilada here) swell and flush from the rush of blood during sexual arousal, and that people often perspire, albeit sometimes only lightly, the idea of lipstick was born. Of course the swelling and moisture of a vagina’s “lips” were more graphic and noticeable, but why not mimic it by moistening and painting the face’s lips? And to lubricate these lips would greatly facilitate a penis’ gliding in and out.

These ladies were also famous for perfecting the “sword swallower’s trick” in which the performer relaxes his or her throat muscles, thus being able to “swallow” the length of a sword. Sword, penis... hey... the idea occurred to them, and with apologies to Linda Lovelace, the idea of “deep-throating” was born.

Thus the connotation between a lady’s painted lips and her willingness/presumed expertise in the art of fellatio was born. Vestal Virgins were not capering about with painted lips – members of the Guild of Prostitutes were.

The Roman Empress Messalina (while her aged and doddering husband, the Emperor Claudius was away) once challenged the Guild to produce a “champion” in a contest to see who – true story, folks, one of my degrees in Ancient Roman History, and it reads just as saliciously in Latin – could “wear out” the most men in an evening. To the shock of Rome (and it took a LOT to shock Romans at this point) the Empress called for two couches (we would recognize them more as beds or chaise lounges) to be brought and placed almost side by side (Messalina did not want any accusations of cheating) and with a witness, she and the prostitute Sylla there proceeded to the contest. (The historian Graves has the prostitute’s name as Sylla and has her crying “Her insides must be made of old Army boots!” at Messalina, but Graves, while a historian, often wrote apocryphally in some of his tales touching the Roman Emperors, notably Claudius, though they were artfully weaved around actual events.) Messalina won. The contest was said to have lasted “the whole of one day and night.”

Claudius later had Messalina executed (for her bigamous marriage to her lover and her plans to have Claudius deposed and killed.) Messalina’s infamy and notoriety were so undying that Elizabeth I’s mother was called “the English Messalina” by her detractors and the name of Messalina was also applied to Catherine de Medicis, presumably for Catherine’s willingness to kill for the promotion of her children (as Messalina had been) and not for sexual reasons (though Messalina was really more interested in promoting herself through her children. Oh okay, Catherine did that too, she was just more discreet about it than Messalina.)

The association of lipstick with fellatio, and thus with sexual pleasure, and thus again with the notion that any woman who sought, enjoyed or had any control over her sexual life was a whore, was perpetuated.

Elizabeth I as a young girl disdained make-up (which in those days was obvious and clumsily-applied, at any rate) to shore up the image she wanted to portray of herself, as a religious and serious young Protestant woman. Her colouring helped – she was of exceedingly fair colouring, and as a young woman it appeared “fresh” and “wholesome.” When Elizabeth’s looks began to fade (and she had never been considered a great beauty, but had been praised for her looks, especially when they were compared to the fading and embittered visage of her much-older half-sister, Mary I at the same time) she began to use make-up in increasing amounts.

The combination of Elizabeth’s painted lips and her unmarried status as the celebrated “Virgin



Queen” caused a lot of talk – those opposed to Elizabeth and her policies freely began to believe her a whore and a hardened man-eater (now there’s a literal term in conjunction with this subject matter. ;) That they would have anyway was immaterial, her use of lipstick was considered confirmation.

That men of the same period were strutting around in increasingly larger codpieces and no one was calling them names disparaging their characters was not seen as incongruous. If you think that the sight of a twelve year old girl with a puss full of Chanel red is silly, try visualizing the nine-year old Edward VI sauntering around in a codpiece that advertised him of being of approximately the same generous proportions as a Clydesdale stallion. (I can do codpieces in another post, if anyone is dying to know.

Catherine the Great of Russia would suffer similar attacks on her reputation – though lipstick was then much more commonly accepted as make-up. Her determination to be her own woman, be it on Russia’s Throne or in the privacy of her own bedroom, caused talk that her use of lipstick, like Elizabeth’s was confirmation of her expertise and willingness to perform this sexual act. (And there probably can be made a damned good argument that Catherine would not have been shocked by fellatio and could reasonably be thought to have had a familiarity with it.)

So, now you have something to chuckle about the next time you see Cindy Crawford on TV licking her lips and promising they will retain their painted colour and moistness if you buy Revlon lipstick.