

## Miss Anachronism

The morning after she was crowned Miss America in 1951, in a meeting with Miss America's board of directors, Yolande Betbeze was shocked to learn she was expected to attend a variety of public events in her bathing suit. One engagement in particular perturbed her: appearing in a Milwaukee department store wearing nothing but a bathing suit and heels. Betbeze outright refused to be paraded in such a state (Sinclair). She believed that such antics were unbecoming of the winner of a scholarship competition. Unfortunately, she didn't realize that she hadn't won a scholarship competition; she had won a beauty pageant. Of the countless forms of female objectification present in popular culture, one of the most high profile and controversial examples is the Miss America Pageant. The Pageant explicitly reinforces the idea that a woman's form is significantly more important than her function, as it's little more than a yearly ritual of ceremoniously judging a woman's body. Despite the many changes implemented throughout the years, every aspect of the Miss America competition is deeply rooted in the belief that a woman's value is primarily based on her appearance and-implicitly-on how desirable she is to men.

The Miss America Pageant was first held in Atlantic City in 1921, following the success of another beauty pageant held the previous year by a handful of businessmen seeking to capitalize on the appeal of young, attractive women (MissAmerica.org). At its genesis, the Pageant was fairly candid about its intentions. The organizers of the early Pageants believed that gathering a host of beautiful women together in one place would attract a great deal of attention – and money – from all over the country (PBS). They were right. Advertisements, promising nothing more than a bathing suit parade featuring the most beautiful women in the country, were widely circulated in anticipation of the inaugural event. The scantily clad bodies of young women was all Miss America offered and, for the hundred thousand people that flocked to the inaugural pageant, that was enough. Following the staggering turnout, the men behind the first Miss America competition were convinced they had a winning formula on their hands. So, for the next eight years, the subsequent pageants they organized attempted to replicate the pageant of 1921 as faithfully as possible. This meant that for the rest of the decade – the same decade that saw the enfranchisement of women – the sole focus of the

competition that purported to elect a woman to represent all of the United States was physical appearance. Following the established precedent, the judges charged with evaluating a contestant's looks went about their task without the slightest discretion. They went as far as disparately rating individual body parts. Points were awarded for different appendages (five points for the construction of the head and the limbs, three points for the torso, two points for the legs, etc), mirroring a butcher shop that might charge different amounts for different cuts of meat (PBS). The way the pageant evaluated living, breathing people was so thorough and effective, it can't simply be called objectification; it was an explicit denial of personhood. The proceedings of the early pageants obviate the possible existence of any altruistic motivations for the creation and continuation of the Miss America Pageant. The financiers of the pageant had wanted nothing more than to use the bodies of young women to make a large amount of money. Even at the time, this blatant sexual objectification taking place in Atlantic City disgusted large swaths of people all over the country-albeit for a variety of different reasons. Conservative religious groups joined forces with liberal women's clubs and waged an all-out PR war. Unwilling to see Atlantic City's reputation tarnished, the city's Chamber of Commerce canceled the pageant (PBS). Had the story of Miss America ended there, the cancelation of future pageants would have been one of the many strides women made towards equality that decade. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

In less than four years, the Great Depression gutted the city's economy, and Atlantic City could no longer afford to turn away the large amounts of money the extremely well attended pageant was sure to generate. Thus, in 1933, Atlantic City's moneyed interests revived the pageant and scheduled a nominally new Miss America Pageant- which was, in reality, a facsimile of its previous iteration-to take place later that year (MissAmerica.org). Fully cognizant of all of the reasonable objections previously raised by concerned Americans all over the country, the organizers of the 1933 pageant did nothing to address a single complaint. Even though small, common-sense procedural changes could have shown that, at the very least, Miss America had the young contenders' best interest at heart. Consequently, everyone – including the contestants themselves-understood that the women's bodies were the reason for all the pomp, circumstance, and excitement Miss America provided. The 1933 pageant, the first one after Miss America's brief suspension, saw fifteen year-old Marion Setzer crowned. She later

said of her victory, “To the judge's eyes, I was the typical American girl. Totally unsophisticated, very naïve, had a lot of enthusiasm, had a lot of talent that they didn't ask for, but I did have that. . . My figure then as they described it was a typical Mae West figure which was hourglass, thirty-four bust, a twenty-six waist, eighty-two buns” (PBS). Despite being an underclassman in high school at the time, Setzer was able to discern what the judges found important.

As Miss America endured through the years, surviving to this very day, it embraced a variety of changes in order to remain relevant. These changes certainly haven't resolved all of the issues presented by beauty pageants, in general, and Miss America, in particular, but they at least attempt to afford contestants some respect. The first round of meaningful changes to Miss America came in 1935, when a nude statue of that year's sixteen year-old winner was unveiled in her hometown (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette). Amid a media firestorm, the pageant turned to twenty nine year-old public relations specialist, Lenora Slaughter. Her guidance over the course of the next thirty years is largely responsible for making Miss America what it is today. As soon as she took the job, Slaughter instituted a strict set of rules designed to protect the Pageant from any further ignominy. She set a minimum age requirement of eighteen, added a talent portion to accompany the swimsuit competition, required contestants to be in the company of a chaperone at all times, instituted a curfew, banned contestants from visiting bars or taverns, and forbade any private interactions with men (PBS). In many ways the changes Slaughter wrought did have some beneficial effects: Her rules compelled judges to consider something more substantial than looks when selecting a winner. Furthermore, disallowing participants under the age of eighteen prevented the sexualizing of children on Miss America's stage. But, along with the changes that infused Miss America with common decency, Slaughter also enacted measures that, while reducing the degree of objectification to which the competitors were directly subjected, firmly reaffirmed a woman's inferior societal position. Rules restricting where and with whom pageant contestants spent their time robbed the women of their autonomy. Counterintuitively, the rules designed to limit the undue sexualizing faced by the participants of preceding pageants only perpetuated the notion that women had to be treated like fragile objects that need to be protected and watched over.

Slaughter's initial round of reforms had their shortcomings, but she was not one to rest on her laurels. Before long, despite having fully rehabilitated Miss America's public image, she

implemented more changes in an attempt to make the competition even more rewarding to the women actually competing in it. While the policies she put into place before aimed to protect the contestants, the measures she would later implement were designed to *empower* women. In 1944, at the height of America's war time efforts, Lenora Slaughter accomplished something truly remarkable: she established, and found sponsors to fund, a scholarship prize for the pageant's winner. Slaughter's scholarship plan challenged the zeitgeist of the time. Despite an abundance of over 200 sponsors bankrolling the pageant, Slaughter was able to convince no more than five to fund the scholarship (MissAmerica.org).

After successfully incorporating a scholarship into the pageant, Slaughter spent the rest of the decade championing the rights of her gender within the competition. It was during her tenure at the helm that Miss America saw the incorporation of a talent portion, a "Personality and Intellect" category, and an "on stage question" segment. Slaughter even required contestants wear one-piece bathing suits that covered more of their body (PBS). Unfortunately, her efforts to innovate eventually succumbed to increasing opposition on several fronts. Even relatively inconsequential measures-like allowing the winner to be crowned in her evening gown instead of her bathing suit-were met with fierce opposition from the pageant's financiers. Slaughter resorted to making minute changes. For example, she replaced the term "bathing" with the term "swim," believing that a swimsuit sounded less demeaning than bathing suit (Riverol). Aside from minor procedural tweaks, 1947 proved to be the last time the pageant underwent any kind of substantial transformation.

After being rebuffed by Yolanda Betbeze in 1951, Miss America's biggest sponsor, Catalina Swimsuits – already weary of Slaughter's progressive changes-pulled their support for Miss America. Catalina even started two pageants of their own in order to challenge Miss America's hegemony (Deam). The undue pressure from Catalina ended with their sponsorship in 1952, but it did little to change the state of affairs at Miss America. Less than two years after Catalina's departure, the Miss America Competition rocketed into the stratosphere when the pageant was broadcast nationwide by ABC. Nearly half of America's television audience, more than 47 million people, tuned in, making Miss America the most viewed television program to date (PBS). The success of the television broadcast ensured that the basic structure and the format of pageant would stay the same.

Slaughter's scholarship would prove to be her most significant and impactful contribution to Miss America. If the pageant's website is any indication, its addition was one of the most important moments in Miss America's long history. The telecasts of pageants today are littered with references to their scholarship fund, as is the Pageant's website. If not for the abundance of women showing more skin than they covered, Miss America could be mistaken for a run of the mill scholarship competition. The incessant talk of scholarships, unfortunately, is just that-talk. The Miss America foundation claims to offer over 45 million dollars in scholarships to young women (MissAmerica.org). In reality though, the pageant spends no more than 500,000 dollars on scholarships (Oliver). John Oliver, as part of an investigation on his HBO program *Last Week Tonight*, uncovered the reason for the discrepancy after poring through all the public tax records of every national, state, and local Miss America pageant he could get his hands on. He reported, in an obvious state of disbelief, that the most generous analysis of financial records indicated that Miss America grossly misrepresented the amount awarded to pageant winners and contestants. The pageant calculates every possible scholarship a participant can accept in theory, even though, in actuality, a contestant can only accept one of the scholarships offered to them. Thus, the pageant can claim with much braggadocio to "make available" 45 million dollars to young women while, in reality, only awarding less than one percent of that (*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*).

Almost as disingenuous as the pageant's scholarship claims are the segments of the Pageant intended to perpetuate the notion that Miss America is primarily a scholarship competition. The façade is mainly supported by the question and answer portion of the show. Its mere existence would seem to indicate that Miss America was concerned with more than just outward appearance. Unfortunately, the question and answer portion-like every other part of the competition-is less about what the competitors say than how they say it. The questioning portion, in its earliest iteration, makes this painfully obvious, and subsequent alterations prove to be inadequate in overcoming the segments insidious roots. In 1947, when the on-stage interview was first given a prominent place along the swimsuit and talent segments, the questions posed to the women were brutally honest about the pageant's view of women and what they had to say. They were inane or outright hostile to women. One contestant was asked what she thought was the best way to start a conversation with a young man. The woman

answering the question dutifully responded that when starting a conversation with a young man, the focus should be on him and his interests. She suggested sports and, if he isn't receptive to that, she recommended staying "quiet for the rest of the evening." Another contestant was asked if women have "become too dominant" and were at risk of usurping men in society. She indignantly answered, "I believe that there are far too many women in the working world. I can see many cases where this is a necessary arrangement, but I do feel that a woman's place is in the home with her husband and with her children" (PBS). In recent years the questions were revamped and seemingly more relevant to issues in the real world. In 2014, for example, Miss Virginia was asked how, in light of recent beheadings, ISIS should be dealt with. Such a question has no simple answer and continues to puzzle policy makers, scholars, and heads of state all over the world today. Asking an eighteen year old such a complex question, just moments after she was paraded around the stage in a bikini, is truly laughable and clear evidence that her response is immaterial to the pageant. Unsurprisingly, despite a remarkably coherent and sensible response-so impressive, in fact, that John Oliver quipped that Miss Virginia did a better job of addressing the issue than President Obama had done in his previous week's address to the nation-Miss Virginia was not crowned the winner (*Last Week Tonight with Jon Oliver*). On the other hand, this year's pageant saw Miss Georgia crowned despite not making much sense while answering a much simpler question. News outlets and bloggers were quick to question how she could have won the pageant after making a fool of herself during the question and answer portion. The answer is obvious: Miss Georgia certainly sounded like a fool, but she looked great doing it.

Ultimately, the scope of the direct damage inflicted by the Miss America Pageant is relatively small. No more than fifty women can be tricked into participating in their dehumanizing exhibition. Unfortunately, the number of the pageant's immediate victims pales in comparison to the number of women it victimizes indirectly. The pageant establishes an ideal every time it crowns a young woman "Miss America." As a *New York Times* editorial proclaimed after the very first pageant in 1921, "Margaret Gorman represents the type of womanhood America needs, "the *Times* declared, "strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests." From the very beginning, the significance of Miss America wasn't lost on anyone. During World War II, all

public events were discontinued-except the Miss America Pageant. Organizers successfully argued that Miss America was a vital part of the culture that would help the war effort if allowed to continue as normal (PBS). As Kathy Peiss, an American historian, noted in her book *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, beautiful women are a reminder of the women left behind; they were a reason to keep fighting. After the war, pageant winners weren't reminders to men but, rather, to other women. Miss America became the standard bearer for all women. She was the pinnacle that all women should mold themselves after. In the words of former Miss America CEO, Leonard Horn, "[t]he concept of Miss America as an ideal American woman was consistent with society's ideas of what an ideal young woman was. She was your everyday young girl who any man would be happy to call daughter, any man would be happy to call wife. Miss America was the American girl next door. She was an ideal that many women aspired to." By selecting the best looking woman even though she was not the most talented or the most articulate, the message to other women is clear: It's important to be talented, and being able to hold conversation is desirable, but looking good is of the utmost importance. The pageant precludes the notion of subjective beauty. Instead, it operates under the assumption that there exists an objective metric with which a woman's beauty and, by extension, the very essence of her femininity can be measured. By presenting an unattainable image of the ideal woman, Miss America not only reinforces noxious gender roles and stereotypes, but also implies that a majority of women have failed at womanhood itself.

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