

Moi et Stendhal's Lust for Women's Eyebrows

by Con Chapman

What marvelous eyebrows these women of Angouleme have!

The thing that strikes the traveler from Paris most are the fine features of the women in Bordeaux and the beauty of their eyebrows.

Most admirable of everything in Bordeaux are the foreheads and eyebrows of the women.

In the boldness of the nose, in general not too large, the smooth beauty of the forehead, the admirably drawn eyebrows, one can recognize the Iberian race.

Inhabitants of Bordeaux: obvious mixture of the Iberian, the Cimbrian and the Gallic races. Beautiful eyebrows.

Today [in Bayonne], there were many beautiful women with Spanish faces (handsome eyebrows).

Stendhal, Travels in the South of France.

I'm sitting in the cell phone lot at Logan Airport waiting for my friend Marie-Henri Beyle, to arrive from France. And from the past, since he's been dead for 171 years.

Cell phone lot, Logan International Airport, Boston

My phone buzzes and, after a few seconds of fumbling, I succeed in answering.

"Allo 'enri!" I say, trying to make him feel at home with a little Franglais. "Comment-allez vous?"

"Skip the high school French and come pick me up you dingbat," he snaps.

"Okay, Mr. Grouchy Culottes!"



Marie-Henri Beyle, a/k/a Stendhal

I've been a big fan of Stendhal ever since I read *The Red and the Black*. That book has all the elements of a great novel; a young man from the provinces—ambitious, cynical, without social advantages—arrives in the big city and prepares to make his way in the world. And I say this with total objectivity as a young man from the provinces—ambitious, cynical, without social advantages—who arrived in the big city about the time I first read Stendhal and prepared to make my way in the world.

But now, I think as I maneuver my way through the spaghetti-like strands of roadway that lead back to Terminal E where international flights land, our roles are reversed; back then, he gave me guidance to overcome my naivete and provincialism, now I'm going to help him get over his curious fixation with—women's eyebrows.

“Look at the eyebrows on that jeune fille!”

I first noticed it reading his *Travels in the South of France*, as I traveled in the south of France two years ago; from Angouleme, to Bordeaux, to Bayonne, the guy couldn't take his eyes off of women's 'brows.



Frida Kahlo: "Whadda you lookin' at?"

I'll cop to something of an eyebrow jones myself, although I like to think I keep it under control. One summer when my mom tried to get me interested in a rather plain girl she said "She's plucked her eyebrows!" I could have said "And you think that will make her look *better?*"—but I didn't. I don't hang out at Unibrow, the local eyebrow fetish club. I don't do the Walk for the Cure for Synophrys, the one sure-fire fresh-air event to attend if you want to meet nice, wholesome girls with monobrow. I don't have a Frida Kahlo pinup poster in my bedroom.



Duke Ellington

"Please—my sense of taste is too good to be in this post."

But Stendhal—to steal a line from Duke Ellington—he's got it bad and that ain't good, and so I've arranged for an intervention of sorts: I'm going to strap him in a chair and make him watch while world-class aestheticians work their magic, plucking, tweezing, shaping, piercing, threading, tinting and tatooing the eyebrows of Boston's women. That sort of forced overdose ought to cure him.



"I hope you're not going to waste my time practicing your French on me," the great man says as he squeezes himself in my 2006 Pontiac Torrent.

"Pas de fumez," I say with a debonair air.

"I don't smoke," he replies.

"Oh, I thought I was saying 'Of course not, you silly nimmy-not.'"

"Where is it you are taking me?"

"You'll see when we get there," I say cryptically, which shuts him up like a crypt.

"These people are worse than Parisian cab drivers," he says, shaking his head as a man cuts diagonally across three lanes to get to the automated toll lane.

"It's part of our rich cultural heritage," I say, overflowing with bogus sentimentality about the place I chose to make my home four decades ago. "The cows were dizzy when they got off the Mayflower, and everyone has been following their crazy-ass example ever since."



"If you want to get on the Boston Post Road, cut off a team of oxen here and exit right."

I take the Government Center exit and soon we are driving down fashionable Newbury Street, home to more salons devoted to the care and upkeep of hair, skin and nails than anyplace else in New England.

"Your women," Stendhal begins, "they have bodacious . . ."

"Hank," I say cutting him off, "we're going to try and do something about this obsession you have with women's eyebrows."

"I am *not* obsessed with women's eyebrows!"

"Oh yeah—I found *six* references to them in *Travels in the South of France*. You don't think about anything else!"

"So what?" he asks, implicitly conceding the point. "It's much healthier than a foot fetish, or staring rudely at a women's . . ."

"Watch it—this is a family blog."

"I'll keep it French—*mammaire*."

"Thanks. No it's not, it's downright weird."



"Show us your eyebrows!"

"Nobody's complained before you."

"Um, did you ever make it into *l'Academie Francaise*?"

He looks hurt, and for good reason. As every French schoolboy—or anyone who cares to look it up on *Yahoo! France Questions Reponses*—Stendhal didn't get invited to be one of the *les Immortels* who guard the purity of the French language, while a political hack like Valéry Giscard d'Estaing got to wear *l'habit vert*.

"It wasn't fair!" he sniffs.

"What did Jack Kennedy's father tell him?"

"I dunno."

“Life is unfair—to people who don't have tons of money and beautiful women throwing themselves at their feet.”





"Please—take a number!"

"It was a big disappointment," he says, but I break into my "I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" chant and he cans the self-pity.

We park and I feed the meter with two hours' worth of quarters—that oughta do it—and we find Brow Beat, a clean well-lighted place that specializes in women's eyebrows. I poke my head in to make sure Hemingway's not here—I don't want Stendhal to get sucker-punched—and when I see the coast is clear, introduce myself to the receptionist.

"We'd like to observe a few plucking sessions," I say, trying to project a mature if slightly goofy self-confidence. I've found that you can bluff your way into just about anything if you act like it would be the height of effrontery for them to turn you down.

"We have a session in progress. Are you . . . a city inspector?"

"Federal Food and Drug Administration," I say, opening my wallet and flashing a health club membership card. "We want to make sure you're not putting any eyebrow hair you pluck into children's cereal."



“Me and my partner Harry Morgan have a few questions to ask about those tweezers.”

“Oh, okay,” she says. Apparently she hasn't taken the American Government course at beauty school yet.

They take us to a room with a two-way mirror looking out over the salon floor, where the owner, a Serbian woman named Branka, observes the girls' technique.

“Thanks,” I say to the young woman as she shows us in.

“Can I get you anything?” she asks politely.

“What he wants doesn't come in a bottle,” I say, nodding my head at Mr. Sourcil.



"You have such thick, lustrous brows!"

I tell Stendhal to sit down, then I strap him in. I'm going to subject him to his worst nightmare, like Winston Smith being attacked by rats in Room 101 in Orwell's *1984*; I'm going to make him squirm while women's eyebrows are plucked out.

"Did I tell you what my major was in college?" I ask, once he's uncomfortably situated.

"No, what?"

"Philosophy, concentrating in aesthetics. That's why I get along so well with aestheticians."

"Get outta town—I majored in aesthetics too!"

He seems under control at first, but after a while the sight of women's brows being plucked and then thrown away as if they were merely—I dunno, hair—begins to be too much for him.

"No—don't," he moans, then closes his eyes.

"Not a pretty picture for a beauty parlor, is it?" I say, tightening the screws.

"Please—make them stop!"

"It's the circle of life. Like a cat's whisker, or a gnat's eyelash."

"They are . . . so much more than that!"

"What, exactly? Tell me . . . what is so damned erotic about an eyebrow?"

"It is the facial feature by which a woman expresses skepticism, so vital to the proper functioning of a man's constitution."

I have to say, at this point he's lost me. "And why is *that* so important?"

"It is essential," he says, breathing heavily, "to be reminded from time to time that you are completely full of merde."

