



Arden, Elizabeth (1881-1966)

by Elise Chenier

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Elizabeth Arden was one of the founders of the beauty and cosmetics industry. Her business empire and cultural influence extended well beyond her original New York Fifth Avenue location. By the time she died in 1966, Elizabeth Arden products were sold in 78 countries, and Arden was widely recognized as one of the most successful businesspersons of the twentieth century. The question of her sexuality is perforce speculative, but it is likely that she had at least one sustained lesbian affair.

Arden epitomizes the classic rags-to-riches tale. Born Florence Nightingale Graham in the small Canadian rural town of Woodbridge, Ontario, on January 31, 1881, her mother died of tuberculosis when she was four years old and her father supported his five children by peddling household supplies to local farmers.

Arden completed her formal education at the age of seventeen. How she spent her early twenties is not known, but in 1907 she moved to New York City where she began working as a cashier at Mrs. Eleanor Adair's, a Fifth Avenue salon where wealthy female clients paid for manicures and facial massages. In 1909 Arden joined forces with Elizabeth Hubbard, who had her own line of skin preparations, and together they opened Salon d'Oro. The partnership lasted only nine months.

When Hubbard left d'Oro, Arden changed her name and created her eponymous product line. At that time women used very few cosmetic products, most of which were prepared at home or by local pharmacists. Working from behind her salon's trademark red door, she carefully cultivated an elite clientele, and was perhaps one of the earliest to master the art of packaging as a means to convey quality, luxury, and status. In the 1920s she dramatically expanded production and distribution, and was an early pioneer of advertising and mass marketing.

Arden became an American citizen when she married Tommy Jenkins Lewis in 1915. Lewis spent the next four years in Europe fighting in World War I. Upon his return, he became an important part of the Arden company team, but was less successful as a husband.

By the mid-1920s Arden was spending less time with Lewis and more time with a new female acquaintance, Elisabeth "Bessie" Marbury (b. 1856). Though it is clear they became close friends, whether or not they were intimately involved can only be a matter of speculation.

At the time of their meeting, Marbury was one of the best-known literary agents in America. She was also homosexual. Her professional and personal relationships with Oscar Wilde, Sarah Bernhardt, and Noël Coward are well documented, as is her long-term intimate relationship with the successful interior designer Elsie de Wolfe.

Together Marbury and de Wolfe cultivated a different sort of salon culture in New York. Their Sutton Place home was regularly visited by leading American and European writers and artists, and they counted notable lesbians such as Anne Morgan, Anne Vanderbilt, and Eleanor Roosevelt among their closest personal friends.



Elizabeth Arden in 1939.
Photograph by Alan Fisher.
Image courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

In 1926, Arden's advertising agent, Henry Sell, introduced her to Marbury. The two women were a study in contrasts. Arden was the living embodiment of health, beauty, and soft femininity; Marbury was obese, suffered from limited mobility, and preferred literature and politics over glamour and fashion. Arden was a Republican, Marbury an ardent Democrat. Although she paid her female employees better than most in her industry, Arden showed no interest in feminism or women's rights. In contrast, Marbury was part of a consortium of women who organized housing and educational opportunities for working women.

However, it may be that opposites attract; and in 1926 both women were without companions. De Wolfe had recently left Marbury to marry a British aristocrat, and Arden was disenchanted with her husband Lewis. Moreover, Arden was Marbury's "type," if de Wolfe can be used as a measure. For Arden, Marbury's connections and business acumen may have provided the initial spark of interest.

Whatever the degree of intimacy between them, their relationship had a significant impact on Arden, even if only for a brief period. Arden spent many of her weekends at Lakeside Farm, a large property Marbury owned in Maine where she presided over some of the most important Democratic fundraising events of her time. Marbury convinced Arden to buy an adjoining 750-acre estate, Maine Chance. She also encouraged Arden to join the Opera Guild and the Friends of the Philharmonic, and cultivated her interest in the art of Georgia O'Keeffe, among others.

In January 1933 Marbury died. The main beneficiary of her will was Elsie de Wolfe, with whom she had reconciled, but she left Arden a gold bracelet with her name, Elisabeth, spelled in diamonds. Arden wore the bracelet publicly, but few would have known its provenance.

Perhaps even more intriguing was the fate of Lakeside Farm. In her will Marbury requested that it be turned into a home for working women, but her friends failed to see the plan through. In frustration, Arden purchased the property with the intention of overseeing the project herself, but in the end she combined Lakeside Farm with Maine Chance and made it into the first of many luxury resorts where patrons paid top dollar to enjoy a full range of dietary, exercise, and beauty regimens.

Although she held two Democratic fundraisers at Maine Chance in the immediate aftermath of Marbury's death, in 1936 she returned to the Republican Party. According to a recent biography, during the 1952 Presidential race she told her guests "you can't vote for [Democrat Adlai] Stevenson, the man's a queer!"

Arden finally divorced Lewis in December of 1933. There is no evidence to suggest that she maintained any connection with Marbury's network of friends. She was later known to be involved with a married executive from Hearst, a leading publisher of magazines, and in 1942 she married Michael Evanloff. They were divorced 11 months later.

Arden died October 18, 1966 of complications following a stroke and pneumonia. Despite an outstanding tax bill of \$35 million dollars, she died an extremely wealthy woman. In 1970, Eli Lilly bought Elizabeth Arden for \$38.5 million.

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About the Author

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