

Before Gwyneth Paltrow and Goop: 19th century's Madame Yale and her 'Religion of Beauty'

On an April afternoon in 1897, thousands of women packed the Boston Theatre to see the nation's most beguiling female entrepreneur, a 45-year-old former homemaker whose talent for personal branding would rival that of any Instagram celebrity today. She called herself Madame Yale. Over the course of several hours and multiple outfit changes, she preached her "Religion of Beauty."

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The sermon was her 11th public appearance in Boston in recent years, and it also covered the various lotions and potions—products that Yale just happened to sell.

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Madame Yale had been delivering "Beauty Talks" coast to coast since 1892, cannily promoting herself in ways that would be familiar to consumers in 2020. She was a true pioneer in what business gurus would call the wellness space—a roughly \$4.5 trillion industry globally today—and that achievement alone should command attention.

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Think of her as the spiritual godmother of Gwyneth Paltrow, founder of the \$250 million [Goop](#) corporation.

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It's tempting to think of Madame Yale as either a wellness visionary ahead of her time or a scam artist; in reality, she was both. She recognized that beautiful women are treated better than their ordinary-looking counterparts, and she gave women a nobler way to frame their pursuit of [beauty](#).

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