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PREVIEW

# ***Genderless Bodies: Stigma and the Myth of Womanhood***

By

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## Preface

Both as an undergraduate and a graduate student, I was always fascinated by the manner in which fictional texts tied the identity of female characters to representations of their physical bodies. Whatever the genre—whether I studied Chaucerian verse, the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel, postmodern drama, or popular romance, for example—fictional works of all types brought to light the cultural objectification and commodification of the beautiful female body in Western culture. Furthermore, countless texts made a connection between a female character's appearance and the way her life took shape. These literary works suggested that the possibilities open to a woman and what happened to her within the text at hand always depended, in some way, on her appearance.

From my early study of female literary characters, there emerged a clear understanding of the cultural significance of “feminine” beauty and its ties to a narrowly defined fictional heroine, a very specific archetype of womanhood laid out in imaginative texts. Yet, as time went on, the prevalence of this one type of heroine also drew my attention to what was missing in fictional literature: alternative models of womanhood. The dissertation that follows interrogates how women in society are affected by our cultural obsession with a very narrow ideal of womanhood, and how the small number of literary texts that do feature physically imperfect female characters challenge our stigmatization of physical difference. While an exhaustive study of alternative heroines is beyond the scope of this dissertation, my analysis includes women in three, often overlapping, categories: fat women, mid-life women, and disabled women. Through my exploration of literature focused on body size, age, and disability I aim to draw attention

to the social problems created by our cultural overvaluation of physical beauty and expose the negative effects of the stigmatization of bodily difference. It is my hope that this work will pave the way for new ways of thinking about the myths that shape the lives of women, and aid in the development of diversity among the archetypal women that shape these influential myths.

The analysis here would not have been possible without the numerous feminist critics who have lent their thoughts to the development of body criticism or without the advice and guidance of my dissertation committee, Dr. Amy Blair, Dr. Krista Ratcliffe, and most of all, my dissertation director, Dr. Diane Long Hoeveler.

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## ***Marginalized Bodies: Challenging the Myth of Womanhood***

In a broad sense, the objective of this study is to propose a revision of the cultural myths that define contemporary womanhood. Western culture has a rich history of diverse female archetypes, but the majority have little symbolic power among women today, for the romance myth and the romantic heroine it defines have a grip on our collective psyche and have nearly driven out all competing images. From the cradle, we hear stories of women whose surpassing beauty wins them love, and whose romantic bond ensures that they live happily ever after. This archetypal narrative reinforces the understanding of a causal link between appearance, romantic love, and fulfillment in the lives of women. Within this narrative, the heroine's exceptional beauty not only plays an important role in determining what happens to her, it also functions to exclude the unbeautiful from being represented similarly (Russ 82-4). While the fine details of a heroine's appearance vary widely depending on the specific ideal of the era in which she is created (Seid 76), most are described as relatively young and slender, with a perfect face and body. Any deviation from these generalities is an anomaly, and female characters who are identified as fat, aging, or disabled consistently remain outside the bounds of the romantic heroine archetype.

Most often, physically imperfect women are portrayed negatively; relegated to secondary roles, they infrequently appear as the central characters of narrative, literally marginalized in fiction as they are in society. In narrative, a physically flawed woman typically serves to magnify the heroine's positive attributes (Halprin 209), sending a clear



message concerning the value and meaning of beauty, a message which readers are prepared to hear and even expecting since its repetition makes it familiar. Yet, there are instances wherein texts present physically flawed female characters in a manner that poses a challenge to the idealization of physically perfect bodies, and this challenge advances a critique of the cultural myths we look to for meaning in our lives. As a group, these narratives ultimately raise important questions concerning the destructiveness of basing so much of our identity as women on our ability to approximate the delimiting life-script prescribed by the ideals of our culture.

While this is by no means an exhaustive study of how portrayals of physically imperfect women function in fictional literature, my analysis brings together a disparate group of narratives that uncover the cultural malady I call the myth of womanhood. Our cultural myths of beauty, romantic love, marriage, sexuality, and fulfillment are all elements of the myth of womanhood, a set of beliefs that works at our emotional core and plays an important part in shaping the self-concept of women in our society. These narratives reveal the power of the myth of womanhood, but at the same time, interrogate our acceptance of idealized versions of femininity as natural or normal. Femininity is exposed as a cultural construction, a concept of female gender created to absorb our energy into unachievable or self-limiting goals, hindering women on the path to self-realization. These narratives represent an outcry against our culture's narrow definition of women, and they indict the sexist hierarchy of embodiment that denies women "womanhood" if they fall below arbitrary standards of attractiveness. By bringing to light

the constellation of myths that shape our lives, the portrayals of these imperfect women reveal the dehumanizing ideology underlying the stigmatization of bodily difference, and suggest that all of us—women and men—are harmed by the cultural conceptualization of embodiment that fosters this prejudice. Only by revising the myths that determine the basic beliefs at the core of our identity, a long and arduous process requiring the dissemination and exaltation of a wider range of popular female archetypes in literature, can we reform womanhood as we know it in our culture (Rich 11-2).

### *Mythical Beauty*

The overvaluation of feminine beauty has long been recognized as a social problem, and yet, it persists and grows increasingly troubling as time passes and beauty standards become more and more extreme. The cultural naturalization of an unnatural physical ideal is an established tradition (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 27); however, the stringent standards of our time and the availability of procedures and potions for improving one's appearance currently take the potential investment in beauty to a level far beyond that of women in the recent past. The use of cosmetics to improve one's appearance has increased progressively since the mid-nineteenth century (Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*), but the methods of self-modification available to women today make up a multi-billion dollar beauty industry that continues to grow with no sign of slowing down. Reality makeover shows have proven that plastic surgery, hair extensions, and high tech cosmetic dentistry have the power to transform formerly "flawed" women to near "perfection," and as an increasing number of women avail themselves of the powers of

beauty professionals, it becomes “more culturally unforgivable” to deviate from the standard of youthful beauty (Oberg and Tornstam 633).

Marketing experts pitch everything from mascara to liposuction, from hair dye to porcelain veneers, from lipstick to the full face lift, with the same promise: a natural appearance of youthful beauty. An onslaught of media images bombard average women everyday with the message that the “natural” appearance of women in magazines and on television is the norm, but in reality even the most beautiful models are airbrushed on magazine covers, and it has reached the point that a near majority of famous actresses admit to having had some plastic surgery. Women’s magazines contribute enormously to establishing the ideal as the norm, and in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out that

iconography and language describing contemporary cosmetic surgery in women’s magazines persistently casts the unreconstructed female body as having ‘abnormalities’ that can be corrected by surgical procedures that ‘improve’ the appearance by producing ‘natural looking’ noses, thighs, breasts, chins, and so on. This discourse terms women’s unmodified bodies as unnatural and abnormal, while casting surgically altered bodies as normal and natural. (27)

Advertising for cosmetics, skin treatments, botox injections, and plastic surgery democratizes beauty by suggesting a perfect body (or at least a better body) is accessible to all, and according to Sarah Banet-Weiser, our culture has inscribed processes of

beautification in a philosophy of liberal individualism. This way of thinking about beauty obscures questions about self-esteem, sexism, and the dispersal of resources, for “instead of making women’s feelings of inadequacy about their self-image into a ‘political question,’ popular discourse instructs us to revel in the creation of a new self, a self that requires particular disciplinary practices” (Banet-Weiser 17). Indeed, the impetus behind our fascination with transforming the self through modifying the body goes back centuries according to Sander Gilman, who, in *Making the Body Beautiful*, points out, “It was the Enlightenment ideology that each individual could remake him- or herself in the pursuit of happiness that provided the basis for the modern culture of aesthetic surgery” (17). This rhetoric of self-improvement has defeated qualms concerning vanity and recast our efforts to conform as part of an obligatory program of producing our best self.

Because young women today have significantly more opportunities and fewer apparent obstacles to overcome in society, they are dismissive of feminist arguments questioning practices of beautification, yet we are in the midst of an epidemic of dissatisfaction with perceived bodily shortcomings. Moreover, studies such as that conducted by Marcene Goodman of The Philadelphia Geriatric Center indicate that “women born and raised after 1950 [are] more vulnerable to the Pepsi Generation demands for youthfulness and beauty that have been delivered with progressive intensity” in recent years (390). Another study, published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in 1999, focused on the effects of television advertising; this study discovered average Americans view over 700 ads per week; furthermore, the research suggested that

exposure to sexist ads contributed to depression and low self-esteem (Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner 1056). Despite indisputable social progress in many crucial areas, as a group, women in Western society continue to invest increasing amounts of time and money appeasing an eternally censorious internal critic. With the beauty industry continuing to raise the standard by producing new technology to “enhance” and preserve one’s body, it becomes difficult to distinguish normal body maintenance from obsessive attention to appearance. In fact, body dysmorphic disorder or BDD is a recently recognized psychological affliction involving excessive concern with real or imagined physical flaws, but the indicators described by Katharine A. Phillips in *The Broken Mirror* are characteristic feminine behaviors:

Do you often check your appearance in mirrors or other reflecting surfaces, such as windows? Or do you frequently check your appearance without using a mirror, by looking directly at the disliked body part? [. . .] Do you spend a lot of time grooming—for example, combing or arranging your hair, applying makeup, or shaving? Do you spend too much time getting ready in the morning or do you groom yourself frequently during the day? [. . .] Do you often change your clothes, trying to find an outfit that covers or improves disliked aspects of your appearance? Do you take a long time selecting your outfit for the day, trying to find one that makes you look better? [. . .] Do you work out excessively to improve your appearance? Do you diet, even though others tell you it isn’t necessary? (49)

A quick glance at any women's fashion magazine confirms that many of these behaviors are construed as the norm, and women often rationalize time and money invested in beauty products and services, clothing and even plastic surgery, as empowering choices.

Some liberal feminists, such as Karen Lehrman, author of *The Lipstick Proviso* (1997), serve the beauty industry's interests by encouraging women to imagine beauty as "a form of power, a strength, an asset"(94), rather than a means of social subordination, but if we have been empowered by the means to control our bodies, why do so many women continue to express unhappiness related to their appearance? Our efforts seldom bring us to delight in our reflection in the mirror, and as feminist body scholar Sandra Bartky points out, since "the technologies of femininity are taken up and practiced by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" (139). If superhumans, models and movie stars cannot compare to their own digitally enhanced images, how, then can mere mortals ever hope to approach such perfection? Over two hundred years ago, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that the cultural emphasis of feminine beauty was an obstacle to the advancement of women; she argued, "Taught from infancy that beauty is a woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to advance its prison" (44). Today, the choice to invest time, money, energy and pain in the pursuit of beauty is presented to us as a pathway to power, much as it was in Wollstonecraft's time, but this rhetoric of empowerment is based on the construction of sexual desirability—the power to attract attention from men—as a meaningful form of power. It remains open to

question whether this is really power on any level; it certainly cannot be lasting since beauty and even ideals of beauty are transient. What is apparent is that despite the dramatic social changes which have occurred in the last fifty years, popular culture continues to reflect the gender relations art historian John Berger describes in *Ways of Seeing* (1973): “Men act and women appear” (47). Difference in popular periodicals reflect this, for men’s magazines focus on providing entertainment and expanding knowledge, hobbies, and activities; women’s magazines continue to focus on improving one’s life by changing one’s appearance” (Milkin, Womian, and Chrisler 647).

Berger’s succinct summary of gender relations still resonates with us due to the ongoing practice of critical self-evaluation that women perform within the context of ever-more demanding standards of appearance. Berger contends,

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. ( 47)

From our earliest days of life, we were reassured by our reflection in our mothers’ eyes, and she expressed her love for us by delighting in every part of our little bodies, from our tiny pink toenails, to the flutter of our fringe of eyelashes, to the dimples in our chubby elbows and knees; in adulthood, our culture encourages women to seek reassurance of

their value in the eyes of men, but instead of this unconditional adoration of our bodies, there is scarcely a single part of a woman's anatomy that is free from disciplinary measures. With the popularization of the Brazilian bikini wax and even surgery to beautify the genitalia on the rise, a trend attributed to the increased availability of pornographic images (Jeffreys 80-81), there seems to be no physical terrain unconquered by the business of beauty, and no limit to what women will endure to improve their powers of attraction. So, although society has certainly progressed in terms of offering women access to greater opportunities, men maintain the power to confirm feminine identity by approving a woman's appearance and validating her sexuality. Because society continues to identify women with their sexuality, women low on the hierarchy of embodiment, marginalized women, often struggle to assert a feminine identity and to be recognized as women. As old-fashioned as the idea may seem, attracting a romantic partner remains a momentous concern for many unattached women because fulfilling the myth of womanhood depends on this connection with a man.

### *Mythical Love*

In the Western world, romantic love is identified as a magical force over which we have no control, a universal human instinct that compels us toward "the one." Love is the key to establishing our identity and finding sexual fulfillment as women, an expression of a primordial drive to complete ourselves in another. In popular discourse, this understanding of romantic love goes uncontested, and we take for granted that our



version of romantic love is a transcultural and transhistorical concept, an essential human truth. We persist in this belief despite significant evidence suggesting our current notion of love has been shaped by history and is a product of our culture (Dion and Dion; Stone; Averill). The ideal of romantic love based on inherent human emotion is sacrosanct, and to suggest its origins lie elsewhere is forbidden.

It is also bad for business since billions of dollars are spent every year as part of fulfilling the fantasy of romantic love. We are conditioned to want this version of love every time bridal imagery is used to sell perfume, and every time sentimental jewelry advertisements suggesting the size of a diamond is symbolic of a woman's value to a man. Roses for her on Valentine's Day, a weekend away to surprise him for his birthday, new lingerie to keep it interesting, these are some of the obvious expenditures associated with romance, but there is no end to what advertisers can sell us by connecting their products with the myths that make up our notion of romantic love. Exploiting the myths of beauty, sexuality, love and marriage provides glamour-related industries with an inexhaustible source of attractive images guaranteed to sell their products, and consumers are barraged with unrelenting reminders of the fundamental significance of romance as a source of pleasure. Because this positive conceptualization of romantic love is so prevalent, many women today have never considered it a potential threat to their well-being. Yet, certain feminists have long argued that the romanticization of heterosexual love and marriage conditions women to depend on relationships with men to bring meaning to their lives (Langford 11).

The public lives of women have been transformed by over fifty years of intense feminist activism, but it could be argued that gender continues to shape our private lives and our personal identity much as it did in the past. Historically, the identity of an adolescent girl was held in suspension until her marriage or until a significant bond was established with a man. Simone de Beauvoir describes this cultural pattern in *The Second Sex*:

She is already free of her childish past, and the present seems but a time of transition; it contains no valid aims, only occupations. Her youth is consumed in waiting, more or less disguised. She is awaiting Man. The adolescent boy, too, undoubtedly dreams of woman, he longs for her; but she will never be more than an element in his life: she does not sum up his destiny. But the girl, since childhood and whether she intends to stay within or go beyond the bounds of femininity, has looked to the male for fulfillment and escape; [ . . . ] he is rich and powerful, he holds the keys to happiness, he is Prince Charming. (328)

Today, more and more women are graduating from college and going on to pursue meaningful careers, and there is no need to marry to attain financial security or as a means of gaining autonomy from one's parents as there often was in the past; nonetheless, the drive to find Prince Charming and the belief that he "holds the keys to happiness" remains strong (de Beauvoir 328). Sociologist Sharon Thompson's work with adolescent girls suggests "sex and romance are primary connecting threads in girls' tradition, [ . . . ]

the organizing principles, the fundamental projects in many, many teenage girls' lives" (354). Thompson found that "most girls expect to work in their adult lives, but overall not even middle class girls seem to expect that richness and meaning will come to them through work" (256).

A more recent study of high achieving men and women funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council found that definitions of success differed substantially based on gender, with men emphasizing material success and women placing more value on striking a balance between career progress and personal relationships (Dyke and Murphy 358-66). In interviews, women whose career progress suffered as the result of prioritizing family and loved ones generally "seemed to accept the tradeoffs they had made" (Dyke and Murphy 365). This study and many others suggest that we continue to be influenced by traditional gender stereotyping which conditions men to think of themselves as breadwinners and women to focus their energy on establishing and maintaining relationships. As part of their explanation of "How We Define Success," sociologists Elaine Dyke and Steven Murphy summarize an extensive body of research substantiating the earlier arguments of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, both of whom explained gender conditioning as a major factor determining the degree to which personal relationships affect identity (358).

Having been conditioned to seek connection with others (Gilligan 17), women continue to emphasize relationships as an important part of self-definition and as the key to fulfillment, and while being an unmarried woman is no longer stigmatized as it was in

the past, committed heterosexual relationships and marriage are portrayed as unique opportunities for establishing a close bond with another person. Moreover, while the sexual revolution diminished the double standard and gave women the freedom to explore their sexuality more fully, both inside and outside marriage, the new permissiveness toward sexual experimentation has contributed to “the belief in sex as the source of personal meaning” in our lives (D’Emilio and Freedman 327). Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman claim that this increased openness has fostered the belief that sex is central to our psyches; as a result “the erotic [has become] a vehicle for exploring new realms of intimacy and power” (337). Although women have experienced more freedom as a result of the social approval of nonmarital sexuality, this permissiveness has also put pressure on women in an unprecedented manner, since we have now been conditioned to think of ourselves as failing to fulfill our potential if we are not enjoying our sexuality to the fullest; of course, as far as heterosexual women are concerned, this still requires a man.

In August of 2000, the four female stars of HBO’s major hit, *Sex in the City*, were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine as part of a celebration of the life single women have carved for themselves in society (Edwards 47-54); however, given that all four major characters on the show were eternally preoccupied by their relationships with men, the actresses seemed an ironic choice as representatives of the strong, secure, serious women featured in the story. As a viewer, episode after episode left me wondering whether the show’s popularity was a function of single women identifying with the

characters and the challenges they faced, or, on the other hand, if women in relationships were responsible for the show's success, tuning in to find reassurance that single life was superficial and isolating. Despite the fact that each of the major characters had more than a few lovers over the course of the six seasons, fear of remaining single forever, fear of losing sexual vitality and the ability to attract men, and loneliness were common themes of the show. *Sex in the City* gave us characters that were undeniably sexually liberated, and yet the sexual encounters that ensued from their freedom often seemed less than spectacular, somewhat empty and unsatisfying.

The show was presented as a contradiction to the belief that women need men for fulfillment, but in the end it seemed to confirm the popular opinion that falling in love improves the quality of one's life. Only when she was in the throes of love did any of the characters truly seem happy. *Time* presented the ladies of *Sex in the City* as "single women who live the supafly life and discard men quicker than last season's handbag—and look damn good doing it," but somehow these characters seemed to share a kinship with the adolescent girls de Beauvoir describes as "consumed in waiting, more or less disguised" (328). Like the women polled for the article in *Time*, 80% of whom "thought they would eventually find the perfect mate," we have been conditioned to define marriage and heterosexual commitment as essential to success, happiness and fulfillment. *Sex in the City* was limited by the fact that the characters could only go on so many dates and have sex with so many different partners before they began to appear pathetic failures at finding love. Like the romance readers in Janice Radway's ethnographical study, we

reject stories that do not have a happy ending (i.e., end in marriage or engagement) (170), and our cultural myth of womanhood features love as an integral part of fulfilling femininity.

Whereas in the past women sought marriage for practical reasons—financial security, culturally sanctioned sexual relations, independence from parents, etc.—social evolution has freed many women from such concerns today. Nonetheless, the relationship with a significant other, our soul mate, continues to be a major theme in our culture, and romantic love is upheld as a transcendent bond, uniquely empowered to bring spiritual significance to our lives (Langford 153). Although it may seem the romantic and sexual playing fields have been leveled by changes in society, many inequities remain. For one thing, women are culturally conditioned to place greater emphasis on relationships than men; therefore, committed love remains especially important as part of crystalizing self- and social identity for women. Furthermore, although increasing financial independence among women has removed much of the stigma associated with being a single woman, if a man is accomplished and successful, no one thinks him unhappy without a mate, but even the highest-achieving women are often pitied for their lack of a romantic partner. Perhaps most troubling is the double standard concerning appearance. The proliferation of beauty images in the media conditions men to have unrealistically high expectations, giving them the false impression that unusually beautiful women are the norm—after all, they are everywhere (Levine and Marano 44). For women, their ability to meet certain standards of appearance validates their

“entitlement to sexual life” (Galler 168), and failing to attract a desired man is often attributed to an appearance flaw. If only she were beautiful enough no one would ever hurt her, no one would ever leave her. Our culture continues to maintain the heterosexual committed romantic relationship as so essential to the well-being of women that happiness without it is almost unimaginable, and the myth of womanhood is engineered to maintain this belief.

***Marginalized Bodies: Exposing Damage Done by the Myth of Womanhood***

The myth of womanhood, that is, the belief that beauty, love, marriage, sexual entitlement and fulfillment are irrevocably bound together in a recipe for happiness, is part of a deeply entrenched ideology which originated in patriarchy and continues to maintain hegemony through the forces driving our consumer culture. Romantic love is upheld as an ideal to both men and women, but the glamour-related businesses that thrive on the perpetuation of this ideal primarily target women. As much as we like to consider ourselves part of a progressive society, Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), describes gender divisions in the consumption patterns of our distant ancestors that seem similar to our own. This is particularly true of the investment women make in creating and maintaining an approximation of the feminine ideal, for as Veblen explains,

women take thought to alter their persons, so as to conform more nearly to the requirements of the instructed taste of the time; and under the guidance of the canon of pecuniary decency, the men find the resulting artificially

induced pathological feature attractive. So for instance, the constricted waist which has had so wide and persistent a vogue in the communities of the Western culture, and also the deformed foot of the Chinese. Both of these are mutilations of unquestioned repulsiveness to the untrained sense. [ . . . ] Yet there is no room to question their attractiveness to men into whose scheme of life they fit as honorific items [ . . . ] They are items of pecuniary and cultural beauty which have come to do duty as elements of the ideal of womanliness. (90-91)

As Veblen suggests, self-modification signifies submission to social forces, and the altered body is a symbol of refinement and wealth, an assertion echoed by contemporary theorists Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch who claim that even today, “a woman’s beauty is seen as a reflection of a male partner’s social status” (Fine and Asch, “Beyond Pedestals” 16). The reconstructed body is not necessarily improved from an objective standpoint, if there is such a thing where beauty is concerned, but the modification itself has social meaning.

Because beauty practices are time-consuming, costly, often painful, and sometimes even dangerous, it may seem logical to assume that men reap the benefits of beauty’s role in the myth of womanhood while women alone pay a price for the cultural construction of femininity, but this is not the case. Although some are harmed far more than others, in truth, everyone loses something as a result of this fixation on a narrow ideal of beauty. Here, even as I aim to expose the way the myth of womanhood