

# **FEMININITY & THE BODY**

Oppression & Justice (Fall 2013)

Laura Guidry-Grimes

## INTRODUCTION

- “Killing Us Softly” with Jean Kilbourne: <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=241>
- How might norms of beauty and femininity affect women in regards to their...

Sociality and  
social mobility?

Self-perception of  
agency and agential  
functioning?

Sexual  
identification and  
desires?

Short-term and long-  
term priorities and  
end-setting?

Judgments of her own and  
others' respect-worthiness?

WOMAN – THE BODY /  
MAN – THE MIND

- Historically, men were associated with minds (higher level thinking, autonomy, control), whereas women were associated with their bodies (trapped in physical functions, less control, victim to passions and appetites)
- Entrenched embodiment → associations with animals, children, the colonized
- Focus of early feminist movements

“To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air”  
--Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792

“I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash a well! And ain't I a woman?” –Sojourner Truth, 1851

**FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION...**

- Do you think women and men are still associated in this manner? If so, in what ways or in what spheres?
- How might these associations affect, e.g., norms of rationality or scientific research?
- How does the association of women with their bodies contribute to their exclusion or oppression?

## THE BODY'S MEANING

- “Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies” (Bordo 165)
- Social environments shape the possibilities, limitations, expectations, desires, mobility, and attractiveness of bodies -- imprint of cultural norms
- Ideals of beauty and femininity are unattainable, so **require obsessive and constant attention**
- What are the moral harms that accrue to women who become obsessed with external appearance? Do you think it's hypocritical or problematic for a female feminist (or any woman who cares about ending women's oppression) to wear make-up or otherwise self-adorn?

## THE BODY & POWER

- When the body becomes an object of obsession and becomes fair game for judgments of someone's self-care, professionalism, marriageability, etc., then it also becomes a source of acute **vulnerability**.
- Vulnerability results from what?
- “the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (Bordo 167)
- Sustained powerlessness and objectification
- Cultivated obsession with body → desires to perfect a form that can never be perfected → “buy in” to the norms of acceptability, normalcy, deviance → “willing” oppression

## PATHOLOGY

- Hysteria, anorexia, and agoraphobia as extreme embodiments of feminine norms
- Reveal absurdity of norms – could be sign of unconscious protest (for some), damaging to all with these conditions
- These conditions would not exist (perhaps) in a truly equal and just society – or at least they would not be conditions that are associated mainly with women.
- **Reveal double bind**
- Expected to have “totally other-oriented emotional economy” unless they want to enter professional realm, in which case they must embody masculine norms ...
- Cannot perfectly embody both sets of norms, since they are built to be mutually exclusive

## CASE TO EXAMINE: COSMETIC SURGERY

- Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* argues that cosmetic surgery (when not therapeutic or needed to repair burned skin) is violence against women, even when they are willing participants.
- Bordo: “To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (179)
- How would you morally evaluate practices such as breast augmentation? Is it morally problematic for a doctor to offer those services? What about a woman who wants the augmentation “for her, not for a man”?





**QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?**