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A CHOICE TO WHICH ADOLESCENTS SHOULD NOT BE EXPOSED: COSMETIC SURGERY AS SATIRE

DAN O'CONNOR*

I. INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *The Safe and Sane Guide to Teenage Cosmetic Surgery*, Frederick N. Lukash, a cosmetic surgeon who specializes in procedures for teenagers, writes:

If you are holding this book in your hands right now, I believe that you agree with me that improving a teen's life by structurally improving his or her physical appearance to conform to normal standards of attractiveness is a good thing.¹

Alas, Dr. Lukash's faith in me is misplaced: I think cosmetic surgery for adolescents—or anyone else, in fact—is actually a “bad thing”, *especially* when it is ranged at conforming to “normal standards of attractiveness.” Cosmetic surgery, I will argue, is a satire upon medical ethics, whereby the ostensible cure for a malady serves only to turn the patient into a carrier of the malady.² That this should be the result of activities involving ostensibly consenting adults is bad enough, but to permit the involvement of adolescents, towards whom duties of protection are owed, is ethically illegitimate.

Satire, as a narrative trope, denotes a form of storytelling in which there is little or no hope for the future. The human characters of Satire are the playthings of forces far outside of their control.³ There is no agency within satire, resulting, as Hayden White put it, in “a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master.”⁴ It is this lack of agency which makes the events portrayed within Satire unethical.

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1. FREDERICK N. LUKASH, *THE SAFE AND SANE GUIDE TO TEENAGE PLASTIC SURGERY 3* (Debbie Harmsen ed., 2010).

2. *See infra* Part III.C.

3. *See* HAYDEN WHITE, *METAHISTORY: THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE 9* (1973).

4. *Id.*

In this article, I will argue that this is precisely the story which cosmetic surgery presents and from which, at the very least, adults owe adolescents protection. My conclusion, which will doubtless seem extreme, is not that adolescents are incapable of making a decision to have cosmetic surgery, but rather that they should never be exposed to the choice for cosmetic surgery.⁵

There are two primary ethical issues surrounding cosmetic surgery: one regarding “unjust appearance standards”⁶ and another regarding the “healing imperative of medicine.”⁷ In addressing “unjust appearance standards,” the primarily feminist discussion, regarding whether or not cosmetic surgery should be considered a triumph of individual agency or a victory for patriarchal beauty standards, can be understood as a debate between three types of narrative: Romance and Comedy on the side of individual agency, and Tragedy on the side of the patriarchy victorious.⁸ A fourth narrative, Satire, emerges when I consider the second ethical issue in cosmetic surgery—the “healing imperative of medicine.” Here, cosmetic surgery legitimates itself as a cure for the psychological pain of abnormal or unsatisfactory physical appearance.⁹ I will go further than other critics, who have argued that commercial advertising for cosmetic surgery helps to create those feelings of psychological pain.¹⁰ I instead suggest that cosmetic surgery actually does something worse; it serves to constitute a narrative in which wholly subjective and unjust standards of appearance are taken as pre-discursive, outside the control of mere mortals, and about which the only thing that can be done is capitulation and surgery.¹¹ This outcome of cosmetic surgery is White’s “drama of diremption.”¹² Cosmetic surgery purports to cure a pain caused by someone’s failure to meet “normal” standards of appearance.¹³ By changing the person, cosmetic surgery reinforces the idea that those standards are normal, pre-discursive, and pre-existing.¹⁴ This narrative renders man, or more likely woman, as ultimately the world’s captive, rather than its master or mistress.¹⁵ In seeking to cure a

5. See *infra* Part IV.

6. See *infra* Part II.

7. See *infra* Part III.

8. See *infra* Part II.B.

9. See *infra* Part III.B.

10. See Franklin G. Miller et al., *Cosmetic Surgery and the Internal Morality of Medicine*, 9 CAMBRIDGE Q. HEALTHCARE & ETHICS 353, 362 (2000).

11. See *infra* Part III.B.

12. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

13. LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 22–25 (suggesting that plastic surgery can help a teenager struggling with body image issues as a result of the standards of beauty imposed by society).

14. *Id.* (describing cosmetic surgery as a means of boosting a teenager’s self-esteem affected by society’s standards of normalcy).

15. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9 (describing Satire as a genre in which man does not control the world and rather is held captive in it).

malady, cosmetic surgery merely constitutes the cause of the malady—the ultimate satire on medical practice and ethics.¹⁶

Most ethical debates regarding adolescent decision making in the medical context hinge upon adolescents' capacity to make certain decisions.¹⁷ This, however, will not be my focus here. Instead, I ask whether or not adolescents should be *exposed to this sort of choice* given that plastic surgery is a satire upon medicine. Satiric narratives are harmful to protagonists within them because the narratives can either completely remove agency or present a false impression of agency. Instead, if society recognizes the harmful nature of cosmetic surgery and adults as owing adolescents some level of protection,¹⁸ then adults are obliged to prevent adolescents from having the opportunity to make decisions about cosmetic surgery.

I am well aware that this is an extreme position. Through this argument, I do not wish to engender angered responses about the many and wonderful results which adolescent cosmetic surgery has wrought, such as appear in Dr Lukash's book.¹⁹ Instead, I seek a more subtle consideration of what it means for medical ethics to allow an adolescent to choose to be part of the "drama of diremption" and, therefore, allow adolescents the opportunity to choose to be a character in a narrative wherein agency is either non-existent or false.

II. USING NARRATIVE ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF UNJUST APPEARANCE STANDARDS ON DECISION MAKING FOR COSMETIC SURGERY

A. *Feminist Interpretations on the Ethics of Cosmetic Surgery*

Much of the formative ethical work regarding cosmetic surgery has been done by feminist scholars.²⁰ Feminist scholars are interested in cosmetic surgery, not just

16. See *infra* notes 94–95 and accompanying text.

17. See, e.g., *Bellotti v. Baird*, 443 U.S. 622, 634 (1979) (discussing whether adolescents have the capacity to make the decision to have an abortion and finding that adolescents are a vulnerable population and unable to make critical decisions in an "informed, mature manner"); Kimberly M. Mutcherson, *Whose Body Is It Anyway? An Updated Model of Healthcare Decision-Making Rights for Adolescents*, 14 CORNELL J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 251, 303 (2005) (arguing that state laws should rest on the presumption that adolescents aged fourteen to seventeen have the decisional capability to make health care decisions); Michelle Oberman, *Minor Rights and Wrongs*, 24 J.L. MED. & ETHICS 127, 127 (1996) (stating that the law governing adolescent health care decision making does not fully take into account adolescent capacity).

18. See *Parham v. J.R.*, 442 U.S. 584, 603 (1979) (describing that parents make decisions on behalf of their adolescents); Lawrence Schlam & Joseph P. Wood, *Informed Consent to the Medical Treatment of Minors: Law and Practice*, 10 HEALTH MATRIX 141, 148–52 (2000) (describing that family autonomy accounts for one reason why parents make decisions on behalf of their children).

19. LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 22–25, 226–27 (discussing cosmetic surgery's positive effects on patients with body image issues).

20. See Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *Becoming/Being a Cosmetic Surgery Patient: Semantic Instability and the Intersubjective Self*, 10 STUD. IN GENDER & SEXUALITY 119, 120 (2009) (reviewing the "great deal of feminist scholarship on cosmetic surgery"); see, e.g., Abigail Brooks, "Under the Knife and

because women are far more likely to undergo cosmetic surgery than men,²¹ but rather because that likelihood indicates a sex-based disparity in the way men and women are treated: namely that it is both socially acceptable and expected that women be concerned with their appearance to an extent which would be both socially unacceptable for, and unexpected of, men.²² Thus, cosmetic surgery becomes a lens through which feminists have interrogated what society expects and accepts from women when it comes to appearance—answers to which tell us a great deal about the lived experience of women, the social construction of the gender, and the sex differences which underpin those experiences.²³

Feminist interrogations regarding the ethics cosmetic surgery can broadly be said to have resulted in two interpretations. Both interpretations accept that women who undergo cosmetic surgery do so in order to meet particular sex-based standards of appearance.²⁴ Where the interpretations differ is in what this means for the woman in question and for women generally.²⁵ In the first interpretation, expressed in the works of Kathryn Pauly Morgan, Sheila Jeffreys, and others, the woman in question is the victim of unjust social expectations about how women are supposed to appear.²⁶ Although a woman may appear to be making a “choice” to

Proud of It: An Analysis of the Normalization of Cosmetic Surgery, 30 CRITICAL SOC. 207, 209 (2004) (noting the debate between feminist scholars regarding whether cosmetic surgery is a coercive or empowering mechanism for women).

21. AM. SOC'Y OF PLASTIC SURGEONS, 2010 COSMETIC SURGERY GENDER DISTRIBUTION (2010) (showing that women obtained eighty-seven percent of the plastic surgery procedures that were performed in 2010).

22. See Kathy Davis, *'A Dubious Equality': Men, Women and Cosmetic Surgery*, BODY & SOC'Y, Mar. 2002, at 49, 59 (explaining that it seems to be common knowledge that women are expected to go to great lengths in order to conform to society's ideals, where as men are supposed to be indifferent about their appearance).

23. See Rosemary Gillespie, *Women, the Body and Brand Extension in Medicine: Cosmetic Surgery and the Paradox of Choice*, 24 WOMEN & HEALTH, no. 4, 1996 at 69, 72–74 (explaining that women's bodies are historically the site of their subordination, and noting that feminists have highlighted the ways medicine shapes women's social position); see also Matt Lamkin, *Racist Appearance Standards and the Enhancements That Love Them: Norman Daniels and Skin-Lightening Cosmetics*, 25 BIOETHICS 185, 186–87 (2011) (demonstrating that structural arguments have also been deployed to critique race-based body modification procedures, such as skin lightening creams to combat the profound effects of race on individuals' opportunities).

24. Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 79.

25. Compare Kathryn Pauly Morgan, *Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies*, HYPATIA, Sept. 1991, at 25, 40 (explaining the perspective that women are subjected to coercion and lack the freedom to “elect” cosmetic surgery), with Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 80 (discussing how cosmetic surgery is an area in which women can make choices to control an area of their lives). See, e.g., Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 82–83 (discussing how although cosmetic surgery may be liberating and boost confidence for the individual woman, women actually reinforce existing society's ideals on beauty and “perpetuate their own oppression” by obtaining cosmetic surgery).

26. See SHEILA JEFFREYS, BEAUTY AND MISOGYNY: HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE WEST 28 (Jane Ussher ed., 2005) (arguing that “the culture of western male dominance” contributes to women undergoing harmful beauty practices); Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 40 (explaining the perspective that women are subjected to coercion and lack the freedom to “elect” cosmetic surgery); see also

undergo cosmetic surgery, she is merely choosing to do what is expected of her by a society demanding that women look a certain way. Thus, the first interpretation casts the choice to undergo plastic surgery as no real choice at all.²⁷ In this interpretation, the woman's agency is severely restricted,²⁸ which is an ethically troubling outcome. In contrast, the second interpretation, associated with scholars such as Kathy Davis, contends that the first interpretation fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of women's choices.²⁹ This second interpretation accepts, largely, that there are standards of beauty which pressure women into the surgery, but that the eventual choice to undergo surgery is in fact an agential act, a coming to terms with certain realities both about social pressures and the way that they make the woman feel.³⁰ In this interpretation, the woman's agency is retained, and cosmetic surgery is considerably less ethically problematic. Indeed, it can even be celebrated.³¹

Of course, this is a very broad-brush view of the feminist works on cosmetic surgery, and not all of them fall neatly into one camp or the other.³² However, when it comes to questions of bioethics, most feminist debates have formed around the autonomy-based idea of a woman's agency within society.³³ Either cosmetic surgery signifies women's lack of agency or it indicates their potential to operate agentially within social strictures.³⁴ However, as Elizabeth Haiken notes, an acceptance of one interpretation does not necessarily preclude the other. She writes that, "[o]ur commitment to honoring women's voices—to listening to their own interpretations of their actions and their lives—should not obscure our ability to place these voices in context."³⁵ Haiken begins to elucidate the means by which we can view the competing feminist interpretations of the ethics of cosmetic surgery as

Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at at 80 (discussing the viewpoint that women are entrenched in a world where they are oppressed by social and cultural norms).

27. See Morgan, *supra* note 25.

28. See Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 80 (explaining that women do not choose the images of ideal female beauty and rather heterosexuality and Western culture shape women's appearances).

29. *Id.* at 79. See KATHY DAVIS, *RESHAPING THE FEMALE BODY: THE DILEMMA OF COSMETIC SURGERY* (1995). For an even more 'pro' cosmetic surgery article from a feminist perspective, see LOREN ESKENAZI & PEG STREEP, *MORE THAN SKIN DEEP: EXPLORING THE REAL REASONS WHY WOMEN GO UNDER THE KNIFE I* (2007).

30. See DAVIS, *supra* note 29, at 137-58; Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 80 ("[C]osmetic surgery may be a way in which women are able to exercise agency and take some control over their lives.").

31. See, e.g., Brooks, *supra* note 20, at 221 (describing accounts from women who celebrate getting cosmetic surgery and view it as a gift to oneself).

32. See generally NORA JACOBSON, *CLEAVAGE: TECHNOLOGY, CONTROVERSY, AND THE IRONIES OF THE MAN-MADE BREAST* (2000) (providing a history on breast implant technology and an analysis of the materiality of breast implants).

33. Pitts-Taylor, *supra* note 20, at 120. See also Suzanne Fraser, *The Agent Within: Agency Repertoires in Medical Discourse on Cosmetic Surgery*, 18 AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST STUD. 27, 29 (2003) (describing the various notions of agency used in medical texts on cosmetic surgery and how these notions reflect understandings of gender).

34. See *supra* notes 26–31 and accompanying text.

35. ELIZABETH HAIKEN, *VENUS ENVY: A HISTORY OF COSMETIC SURGERY* 275 (1997).

a difference in narrative emplotment. If we take Haiken's "women's voices" as synonymous with the character whose story is being narrated and her "context" as the world in which that story occurs,³⁶ then we can begin to see how we might use the work of Hayden White to describe these feminist interpretations either as Tragedy or Comedy.

B. Comparison of Narrative Forms and the Ethics of Cosmetic Surgery

White writes that in both Tragedy and Comedy characters come to an accommodation with the world in which they exist, but these accommodations are very different in tone.³⁷ "In Comedy," he argues, "hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds."³⁸ This, I argue in turn, is a apt description of the feminist interpretation of cosmetic surgery as ethically valid. In that interpretation, women who undergo cosmetic surgery recognize the forces at play in the social world and standards of appearance, and they come to an accommodation with those forces by deciding to meet those standards via cosmetic surgery of their own volition.³⁹ Thus, feminist interpretations of cosmetic surgery that acknowledge women's agency while still stressing the power of sexist or unjust beauty standards, can correctly be described as Comedic narratives: a reconciliation of women with their world.

In contrast, "[t]he reconciliations that occur at the end of Tragedy are much more somber; they are more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world."⁴⁰ White provides that, "[t]hese conditions, in turn, are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work within them."⁴¹ This definition of Tragedy contains the key difference between the two feminist interpretations of cosmetic surgery: the lack of agency.⁴² Man—or as is much more likely in the case of cosmetic surgery, woman—*must* work within the rules of the world; she *must* live up to the unjust, sexist appearance standards, and so she feels that she *must* have cosmetic surgery.⁴³ In this interpretation, the woman's agency is much

36. *Id.*

37. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

38. *Id.*

39. See Melanie Latham, *The Shape of Things to Come: Feminism, Regulation and Cosmetic Surgery*, 16 MED. L. REV. 437, 444–45 (2008) (describing how women undergo cosmetic surgery to fix a physical flaw as a way to accommodate a society that rewards physical appearance); see also *supra* note 29–30 and accompanying text.

40. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

41. *Id.*

42. See *supra* notes 26–31 and accompanying text (comparing the two main feminist interpretations of cosmetic surgery).

43. See Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 40–41 (describing how the availability of technology for cosmetic surgery "is making obligatory the appearance of youth and the reality of 'beauty' for every

undermined (although not entirely dissolved—awareness of the “conditions” remains).⁴⁴ This apparent lack of agency or inability to make the choice makes cosmetic surgery-as-Tragedy ethically problematic. The Comedic narrative, with its agency, is much more ethically acceptable.⁴⁵

White’s work on narrative holds out the possibility of two other forms of plotment: Romance and Satire.⁴⁶ Romance is “fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it . . . the ultimate transcendence of man over the world.”⁴⁷ Romance is the narrative description favored by the cosmetic surgery profession (some would prefer “industry”).⁴⁸ In this narrative, it is not the unjust or sexist appearance standards which constitute the “forces at play in the social and natural worlds,” but the human body itself.⁴⁹ It is the body which constitutes the world in which the character’s story plays out and it is the body over which the cosmetic surgery patient has ultimate transcendence.⁵⁰ “I cannot,” admits Frederick Lukash, “remake people, but I can refine and balance parts that are out of alignment with the norms of attractiveness . . . a life-altering positive impact on those who feel uncomfortable in their own skins.”⁵¹ This is the language of Romance, of a transcendence not of standards of appearance, but of the body itself.⁵²

In the Romance of cosmetic surgery, the “norms of attractiveness” with which the surgeries bring patients into “alignment” are not presented as sexist or unjust social constructions, but merely as the naturally occurring way of the world.⁵³ Lukash notes that he, “[a]s a physician and pediatric plastic surgeon, [has] felt the sadness and the angst of families whose lives have been challenged by something

woman who can afford it”); see, e.g., LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 148 (discussing how teenage girls view “breast development [as] synonymous with femininity” and how girls seek breast augmentation to feel that they fit in).

44. See Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 40 (explaining that society coerces women to look a certain way and as a result, women lack the freedom to “elect” cosmetic surgery).

45. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9 (“In Comedy, hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds.”); see also *supra* notes 38–39 and accompanying text.

46. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 7.

47. *Id.* at 8–9.

48. See, e.g., LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 3 (noting one pediatric plastic surgeon’s opinion about his profession as “establish[ing] . . . a quality of life robbed by an accident of birth, trauma, or disease . . . [and] refin[ing] and balanc[ing] parts that are out of alignment with the norms of attractiveness”).

49. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

50. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 3 (arguing that cosmetic surgery can improve a teenager’s life by conforming his or her body to “normal standards of attractiveness”).

51. *Id.* at 3–4.

52. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 8–9 (“The Romance is fundamentally a drama . . . of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall.”).

53. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 3–4.

completely beyond their control.”⁵⁴ That “something,” of course, are those “norms of attractiveness” which Lukash’s surgeries seek to bring adolescents into alignment.⁵⁵ Unchecked, this would become a Tragedy; the lack of control signifying the ethically dubious lack of agency.⁵⁶ Thus, to ensure a Romance, it is not the norms of attractiveness against which the character struggles, but rather their own body, which is out of alignment with those norms.⁵⁷ The norms cannot be changed, but the body *can*.⁵⁸ When the body *is* changed, Lukash gives us, in a series of anecdotes about his teen patients, examples of White’s “hero’s transcendence over the world of experience.”⁵⁹ For one boy, after surgery for ears which stuck “way out”, “his grades improved, and he found himself becoming more and more socially confident.”⁶⁰ After breast reduction surgery, one girl “feels more ‘at home’ in her body” whilst another “is very content with her body . . . is on the tennis team and is looking forward to college.”⁶¹ Another girl, bullied because of her large nose, has surgery and “her life improved [and that] [s]he became more secure and socially interactive.”⁶² Another girl, seventeen-years-old and with a flat chest, had a breast augmentation “to normalize a feminine silhouette . . . [h]aving a comfortable body image allowed her to be successful She is now completely a well-adjusted and happily married young woman.”⁶³

In all of these Romances of cosmetic surgery, the body is brought into alignment with the norms of appearance and, thus, there is victory over the “conditions under which [man] must labor”—over the body.⁶⁴ In each of the three potential narratives I have suggested, Tragedy, Comedy, and Romance, the individual patient is in a struggle with the world in which they live.⁶⁵ This struggle is manifest as a feeling that they do not meet the standards of appearance set for

54. *Id.* at 14.

55. *Id.* at 3–4.

56. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9 (describing how in a Tragedy some of man’s circumstances cannot be changed); see also *supra* note 43–45 and accompanying text.

57. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 1–2. Lukash writes:

[T]eens aren’t looking to stand out; they just want to feel ‘normal.’ Existing under the bell curve of average is what they want. Anything out of the norm . . . wreaks havoc on their emotions. When teens fit in, looks become the background to the rest of their living. When they don’t fit in, their appearance and how they feel about it becomes all consuming.

58. *Id.* at 3 (noting that plastic surgeons cannot change peoples’ perceptions of beauty, but they can change physical aspects of the body to conform to “norms of attractiveness”).

59. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 8.

60. LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 28.

61. *Id.* at 28–30.

62. *Id.* at 30–31.

63. *Id.* at 31.

64. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

65. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 1–2; see also WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 7.

them by society.⁶⁶ The struggle is concluded by having cosmetic surgery in order to meet those standards.⁶⁷ In Tragedy, the struggle is resolved unethically because the protagonist-patient is revealed to lack sufficient agency.⁶⁸ In Comedy and Romance, the struggle is resolved ethically, as the protagonist-patient in both narratives acts agentially.⁶⁹ The difference between the two ethical narratives is found in what the protagonist takes to be the “conditions under which they must labor.”⁷⁰ In Comedy, the conditions are the norms of appearance, whereas in Romance the conditions are the fact that the protagonist’s body does not meet those norms. Thus, in the Comedy, there can only ever be reconciliation (an acceptance that the norms are unlikely to change and thus the protagonist must change),⁷¹ whereas in Romance there is triumph (a victory over the body *which can be changed*).⁷²

C. Using Narrative Analysis to Understand the Ethical Implications of Unjust Appearance Standards on Decision Making

Narrative analyses can help us understand how cosmetic surgery can be viewed as both ethical and unethical, depending upon one’s conception of both the protagonist’s agential relationship to the world in which they live, and that world itself. If the protagonist’s agency is undermined by the world in which they live and if the world itself is unjust, then the resolution of the narrative is invariably unethical. This is the Tragedy of cosmetic surgery from a feminist perspective, where the world is unjust (norms of appearance are sexist) and the protagonist is unfairly made to feel that she does not meet those norms.⁷³ Her agency is undermined and the resulting surgery is ethically problematic at the very least. If, however, the story is told so that the protagonist’s agency is not undermined, but that the world in which she operates remains unjust, then the resolution of the

66. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 1–2.

67. See *id.* at 22 (describing how plastic surgery may be the best solution for teenagers with physical differences that “wreak[] emotional havoc” on them); see also HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 10 (noting that while plastic surgeons may claim they rely on an individual’s idea of beauty, the plastic surgeon’s symbol is an “icon of white, western beauty”).

68. See WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9 (noting the essence of Tragedy is the somber resignation that man cannot change the world and rather must work within inalterable conditions); see *supra* notes 43–45 and accompanying text.

69. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9, 11; see *supra* notes 39, 47–49 and accompanying text.

70. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 9.

71. See *id.* at 96, 186 (commenting that Comedy requires a resolution of realization of the unchangeable the conditions of the world); see *id.* at 8–9 (describing Romance as a “triumph of good over evil . . . and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall”).

72. See *id.* at 8–9 (describing Romance as a “triumph of good over evil . . . and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall”).

73. See also *supra* notes 24–28 and accompanying text.

narrative is less ethically problematic.⁷⁴ This is the Comedy of cosmetic surgery: the world is unjust (norms of appearance are sexist), and, yes, it is unfair that the protagonist is made to feel bad for not meeting those norms, however, in acting to meet those norms, she is exerting as much agency as she is reasonably able within an unjust situation.⁷⁵ For the Romance of cosmetic surgery, the injustice of appearance standards is not the “world” in which the protagonist acts, rather her own body is the “world.”⁷⁶ Thus, in undergoing cosmetic surgery, she exerts complete agency over her “world,” making the resolution of the struggle ethically acceptable, perhaps even laudable.⁷⁷ However, as I want to show, this ethical resolution is challenged when we consider some of the ironies that these narratives are seen to contain when we look at them through the second ethical issue in cosmetic surgery: the healing imperative of medicine.⁷⁸

III. COSMETIC SURGERY’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE HEALING IMPERATIVE OF MEDICINE

A. *Understanding the Healing Imperative of Medicine*

In each of the previous narratives, Romance, Comedy, and Tragedy, the protagonist undergoes cosmetic surgery to overcome a malady.⁷⁹ The rubric of all medicine is that procedures are undertaken to cure maladies.⁸⁰ Without a malady to cure, the medical procedure is ethically illegitimate, or even illegal.⁸¹ Historically, it has been important for the cosmetic surgery profession to insist that the malady in question is not the fact of someone being fat, flat-chested, or big eared, but, rather, the psychological pain resulting from those physical “deformities.”⁸² In this conceptualization, cosmetic surgery is not the mere tool of vanity, but a caring medical specialty dedicated to the erasure and mitigation of severe emotional trauma.⁸³ This is neatly encapsulated in the title of Sander Gilman’s first history of

74. See *supra* note 29–31 and accompanying text.

75. See *supra* note 39 and accompanying text.

76. See *supra* note 49–50 and accompanying text.

77. See *supra* notes 31, 59 and accompanying text.

78. See HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 1, 39, 93 (discussing the fundamental struggle in cosmetic surgery as to whether “medicine was meant to heal rather than beautify”).

79. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 22 (advocating the benefits of cosmetic surgery for the healing of emotional and psychological difficulties).

80. FREDERICK ADOLF PAOLA ET AL., *MEDICAL ETHICS AND HUMANITIES* 127 (2010).

81. *Id.* at 127–28. See also HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 1, 93 (distinguishing the legitimacy of medical procedures between those procedures that heal from those which cater to the “vanities and frivolities of life”).

82. See HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 6, 39 (presenting a historical account of the ethical debate concerning cosmetic surgery).

83. *Id.*

cosmetic surgery, *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul*.⁸⁴ Beauty, the meeting of unjust/normal appearance standards, is not the ostensible point of cosmetic surgery, assuaging psychological pain is.⁸⁵ Within this conceptualization, cosmetic surgery meets what we might call the “healing imperative of medicine,” becoming as ethically acceptable as heart surgery or chemotherapy.⁸⁶

I argue that a fourth way of narrating cosmetic surgery, as a Satire, becomes possible when we reconsider cosmetic surgery’s relationship to the healing imperative of medicine, particularly the related questions of the cause of the malady and the result of the ostensible cure. The malady of the protagonist’s emotional pain has different causes in each of the three narratives I have explored above. In Romance, the malady is caused by the failure of the body to meet normal appearance standards.⁸⁷ In Comedy and Tragedy, the malady is caused by the fact the so-called “normal” appearance standards are unjust (sexist, racist, ageist).⁸⁸ It is only in the Romance that the supposed cause of the malady—the body’s failure to look right—is addressed by medical procedures.⁸⁹ A flat chest causes emotional pain and so it is made larger, and, thus, the cause of the pain is removed.⁹⁰ In this way, the Romantic narrative of cosmetic surgery is similar to other ethically acceptable medical procedures, such as a heart transplant, in which the cause of the pain (a faulty organ) is removed (and replaced).⁹¹ In Comedy and Tragedy, on the other hand, the causes of the malady are, unjust appearance standards, which cannot be removed by medical procedures.⁹² Instead, parts of the body are changed in order to avoid or mitigate the pain caused by unjust appearance standards.⁹³ In this

84. See generally SANDER L. GILMAN, *CREATING BEAUTY TO CURE THE SOUL: RACE AND PSYCHOLOGY IN THE SHAPING OF AESTHETIC SURGERY* (1998).

85. HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 6.

86. Compare PAOLA ET AL., *supra* note 80, at 127–28 (outlining ethical goals of medicine), with HAIKEN, *supra* note 35, at 6 (explaining some of the ethical justifications for cosmetic medicine), and LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 22 (advocating the benefits of cosmetic surgery for psychological healing).

87. See *supra* note 53–58 and accompanying text.

88. See *supra* notes 39, 43 and accompanying text.

89. See *supra* notes 59–63 and accompanying text; see LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 24 (noting that while people cannot get a new body, they can surgically change certain aspects to find peace with themselves).

90. LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 31 (describing how a breast augmentation improved the self-esteem of a patient); see also GILMAN, *supra* note 84, at 12 (“In modernity, being unhappy is identical with being sick, and if you are sick, you should be cured. The idea that you can cure the soul by altering the form of the body has become a commonplace in the twentieth century.”).

91. See GILMAN, *supra* note 84, at 19 (describing how the concepts of beauty and healthy, and ugly and diseased, are synonymous and cosmetic surgery acts to renew mental health by removing the ugly and diseased).

92. See, e.g., Gillespie, *supra* note 23, at 82–83 (arguing that women actually reinforce existing appearance standards by obtaining cosmetic surgery); Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 36 (arguing that women who undergo cosmetic surgery are doing so to conform to appearance standards).

93. See Margaret Olivia Little, *Cosmetic Surgery, Suspect Norms, and the Ethics of Complicity*, in *ENHANCING HUMAN TRAITS: ETHICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS* 162, 163 (Erik Parens ed., 1998)

way, the Comedic and Tragic narratives of cosmetic surgery could be compared to cauterizing a wound; a medical procedure in which the cause of pain (a possible infection) is not changed, but the body's susceptibility to that cause is.

The Satirical narrative employment of cosmetic surgery arises as a possibility when we consider an alternative, more ethically problematic, origin for the cause of the psychological pain in question. Rather than the body itself (Romance) or unjust social appearance standards (Comedy and Tragedy), what would it mean if the cause of the psychological pain which cosmetic surgery claims to cure was actually cosmetic surgery itself?⁹⁴ This is the inexorable logic of an argument put forward by Miller et al. who suggest that cosmetic surgery, as a practice, fails to meet basic standards of medical professionalism because of the complicity of cosmetic surgeons in causing the psychological pain which the practice ostensibly cures.⁹⁵ "It is," Miller et al. write, "a very basic component of the internal morality of medicine that physicians not be involved in the deliberate creation of disease just so that they can expand their practices and increase their earnings."⁹⁶ Yet this is precisely what Miller et al. argue that commercial advertising for cosmetic surgery does: create a disease which expands their earning potential.⁹⁷ They provide, "[t]he ads are deliberately designed to convince people who might previously have thought that their appearance was acceptable that they are in fact seriously inadequate unless they seek a surgical correction for their newly discovered 'problem.'"⁹⁸

B. Cosmetic Surgery as Satire: Healer as Cause of the Disease

In the Comedic and Tragic narratives of cosmetic surgery, it is unjust social expectations about appearance which cause the pain and protagonists turn to cosmetic surgeons in order to mitigate the pain as much as possible.⁹⁹ These narratives arguably become Satirical when, if Miller et al. are correct, those cosmetic surgeons are playing upon those unjust expectations to generate

(observing that cosmetic surgery serves to ease suffering based on social standards and not some chronic condition or dysfunction).

94. Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 355, 361 (arguing that advertisements used by cosmetic surgeons offer misleading images and slogans that appeal to emotional helplessness and create impractical expectations, without addressing complications and risks).

95. *Id.*

96. *Id.*

97. *Id.* at 362 ("By promoting *dis-ease* and thus stimulating demand for cosmetic surgery, such advertisements clearly violate the internal morality of medicine.").

98. *Id.* at 361.

99. See *supra* notes 39, 43 and accompanying text; see, e.g., Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 38 (finding that while women who have cosmetic surgery are seeking liberation from the constraints of their bodies, they actually become more vulnerable to social norms because they are dependent on male assessment and the services of the surgeons).

custom.¹⁰⁰ The very professionals in whom the protagonist places her trust to cure her, are in fact at least partially responsible for her pain to begin with.¹⁰¹ It is the irony of this situation, the healer as cause of disease, which renders cosmetic surgery Satiric. White describes Satire as a narrative in which the possibilities and truths of Comedy and Tragedy are viewed “[i]ronically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully.”¹⁰² Cosmetic surgery, in the argument of Miller et al., is Satiric because protagonists (patients) are unable to comprehend the world fully, because for example, they do not recognize that their healer is actually a cause of their pain.¹⁰³

Romance, too, can be ironically reinterpreted as Satire in this way. In Romance, we recall, the pain is not caused by appearance standards, which are constructed as normal and inviolable, but by the body’s failure to meet those normal standards.¹⁰⁴ The cosmetic surgeon’s role in defining appearance standards as normal is key here for, although appearance standards may be “normal” in so far as they are widespread or commonly accepted, it does not follow that they are thus “normal” in the sense of being naturally occurring and, thus, beyond either analysis or challenge.¹⁰⁵ Yet this is almost exactly the position that Romantic cosmetic surgeons, such as teen specialist Lukash, seem to take:

In reality, we know that looks do not constitute a person’s worth. Unfortunately, a common perception is that they might. Placing value on attractiveness is hardwired into our biology. Attractiveness signals health and vitality, and those who possess it are at a social advantage. It is also true that perception can become the reality. If your teen feels bad about his or her body, there may be spin off into other aspects of life.¹⁰⁶

100. See, e.g., Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 360 (“Targeted at women, these ads play on, and possibly contribute to, widespread dissatisfaction with body image and foster unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved by cosmetic surgery.”).

101. See Little, *supra* note 93, at 170 (arguing that when cosmetic surgeons advertise and endorse societal standards of appearance, surgeons sustain the pressure to conform to the “norms of appearance”).

102. WHITE, *supra* note 3, at 10.

103. See Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 361 (asserting that cosmetic surgery advertisements appeal to people who may not have previously thought they needed surgery).

104. See *supra* note 57 and accompanying text; see, e.g., LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 26 (stating that in a case where a child has prominent ears and is suffering because of his ears, cosmetic surgery is the best choice to deal with the problem).

105. Compare *id.* at 32–33 (“It is my firm belief that a . . . teen with asymmetrical breasts will always be comparing herself to the norm and will never feel complete until she is balanced.”), with Little, *supra* note 93, at 175 (“Medicine and surgeons must be aware the extent to which their participation in cosmetic surgeries involving such norms ends up contributing to a broad and unjust system of constraining pressures and forces.”).

106. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 13.

Ironies run through this statement. At first, the reality is that looks don't equal worth; however, that is soon overthrown by a common perception that they do. In turn, this perception actually becomes the reality and the fact that a teenager feels bad about themselves is blamed not upon common perceptions (the unjust expectations of Comedy and Tragedy), but upon the reality that their body does not meet those perceptions. Cosmetic surgery *qua* Romance thus hinges upon a belief that *nothing can be done* about appearance standards except attempt to meet them.¹⁰⁷ Lukash writes:

I have felt the sadness and the angst of families whose lives have been challenged by something completely beyond their control. I have seen children at a fork in the road of their lives: They could alter their appearances through surgery or they could continue to endure taunting and teasing¹⁰⁸

Whereas the ironies of Tragedy and Comedy reveal the healer to be a cause of the pain (endorsing unjust appearance standards through advertising), the irony of the Romance is that the cosmetic surgeon is not so much a cause of the pain, but that he locates the cause in the protagonist's body, rather than in those who would taunt and tease.¹⁰⁹ It may not be too extreme to say that the Romantic cosmetic surgeon misdiagnoses—the ultimate medical irony out of which ethical Satire is born.¹¹⁰

In Tragedy and Comedy, at least, there is an acknowledgment that the protagonist fights an unjust world of racist, sexist, fattist, ableist and ageist appearance standards.¹¹¹ In the supposed Romance, that world of racism, sexism, fattism, ableism and ageism is “hardwired into our biology” and is “completely beyond [our] control.”¹¹² It becomes a mute, unchanging, normative background for which alteration cannot even be considered—not because it is true, but because the Romance would not otherwise work. The changeable world is reduced to the protagonist's body not because this is truly the location of the cause of the pain, but because this enables a narrative in which the protagonist triumphs over the world in which he or she is trapped.¹¹³ The Romance of cosmetic surgery becomes a Satire because it locates the problem in the adolescent, rather than in the bullies who

107. See *id.* at 14 (arguing that children who are bullied for their physical appearance can either change the way they look, thus altering their lives for the better, or continue being taunted and teased); see *supra* note 57 and accompanying text.

108. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 14.

109. See *supra* notes 43–44, 73, 75 and accompanying text; see also Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 361–62 (discussing how advertising portrays unjust appearance standards and encourages people to get cosmetic surgery).

110. See Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 357 (discussing how those who seek cosmetic surgery do not have a diagnosable problem and that the surgery is not medically necessary).

111. See *supra* note 39, 43 and accompanying text.

112. LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 13–14.

113. See *supra* notes 49–50, 57–58 and accompanying text.

torment and tease her.¹¹⁴ *She* must change, not them. The ethical nature of the Romantic narrative hinges upon the triumphant agency of the protagonist. But once again, as with the Tragedy and the Romance, the protagonist is revealed as unable to perceive the world correctly, not because the healer is the cause of her disease, but because the healer locates the disease, the cause of the pain, within her own body, when it is, in fact, located within the bigotry and cowardice of her tormentors. I don't, for one moment, imagine that Lukash or the parents he works with, think that the bullies and schoolyard gossips are *right* to tease and make people's lives miserable because of how they look, but it is hard to avoid the implication that cosmetic surgery seems to say the same thing as the bullies: "your body is deformed and you should change it."

C. The Ultimate Irony: Cosmetic Surgery Causes the Malady It Seeks to Cure

The unethical Satire of cosmetic surgery is only compounded when we consider once more Miller et al.'s suggestion that cosmetic surgery violates the internal morality of medicine by, in effect, reinforcing the stereotypes that cause the psychological pain which the specialty claims to assuage: promoting *dis-ease*.¹¹⁵ They used the analogy of a doctor poisoning the well,¹¹⁶ but I would argue instead for a doctor giving a patient a vaccine which, although it cures the patient, turns her into a carrier of the disease. Yes, the patient feels better about herself, but she is also now a living sign of the unjust appearance standards which caused her to feel bad about herself in the first place.¹¹⁷ This outcome is the ultimate irony. Her body is now the cause of the pain—a notion which the Romance of cosmetic surgery ironically suggested—but now it will be somebody else's pain.¹¹⁸ Somebody who will perhaps seek the same "vaccine" of cosmetic surgery. Now *that's* satire.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, I contend, cosmetic surgery is a Satire upon medical practice. It not only causes pain through the endorsement of unjust appearance standards, but it then relocates the cause of that pain into the protagonist's body's failure to meet

114. See LUKASH, *supra* note 1, at 11 (describing the torment and ridicule some adolescents face because of their looks); see also Morgan, *supra* note 25, at 36 (discussing how women conform to the standards of society because they are continually shown that their own bodies are not good enough).

115. See Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 357.

116. *Id.* at 361.

117. See Miller et al., *supra* note 10, at 361 (discussing how advertising promotes cosmetic surgery to people and makes them want to have it even if they had never thought about undergoing cosmetic surgery in the first place); Joan Patterson, *In Search of Perfection*, LAS VEGAS REV. J., July 22, 1999, at 1E (discussing how teenagers are looking to cosmetic surgery to feel better about themselves).

118. See *supra* note 49 and accompanying text; see also Patterson, *supra* note 117 (discussing how teenagers and women see other women getting cosmetic surgery through the media and everyday life and then feel compelled to get cosmetic surgery too).

those standards, rather than in the standards themselves.¹¹⁹ In this Satiric narrative there is little or no hope for agency—the protagonist is not only a captive of the world in which she lives, but she is also, by her surgeon’s ironic location of the cause of the pain in her own body, unable to perceive the truth of that world in which she is captive.¹²⁰ In changing her body to meet the standards which truly caused her pain, she necessarily endorses the social discourse about expected standards of appearance which will, in turn, cause someone else pain.¹²¹ It cannot be ethical to “heal” someone by turning them into a carrier of the disease. However, this is what cosmetic surgery does.

It is from this nightmarish Satire upon medical practice that I argue—contentiously, I freely admit—that adults have a duty to protect adolescents from the choice of having cosmetic surgery. A primary duty of adults to children is to help to bring them up, to nurture them, as fully agential persons operating with a clear comprehension of the world in which they live.¹²² Exposing adolescents to cosmetic surgery—a medical practice which both undermines agency and promotes the misapprehension of the world—is a violation of this duty. I do not disagree with Lukash that the many and varied cosmetic surgeries he has performed upon adolescents have made them feel much, much better.¹²³ Nor do I suggest that the decision-making process they underwent was somehow skewed or improper. I am simply saying that it was, by dint of the (ironic) Romantic construction of unjust appearance standards as normal and unchanging, necessarily Satirical. Cosmetic surgery tells adolescents that there is something wrong with their bodies, when, in fact, there is something wrong with the people who bully them about the way their bodies look. Allowing adolescents to make the decision to have cosmetic surgery is, perhaps, to allow them to enter into a narrative in which the bullies are right about their bodies, and in which their bodies in turn will become an endorsement of another adolescent’s belief that there is something wrong with the way she looks. It is vaccinating adolescents against a disease and, in doing so, making them a carrier of it. This is not the sort of decision adolescents should be allowed to make.

119. See *supra* Parts III.B–C.

120. See *supra* Part III.C.

121. See *supra* Parts II.A, III.B–C.

122. See Leonie le Sage & Doret de Ruyter, *Criminal Parental Responsibility: Blaming Parents on the Basis of Their Duty to Control Versus Their Duty to Morally Educate Their Children*, 40 EDUC. PHIL. & THEORY 789, 796 (2008) (stating that parents have the duty to educate and raise their children in a way that allows them to think on their own and grow into moral adults).

123. See *supra* notes 59–63 and accompanying text.