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PREVIEW

LIMINAL STATUS AND CARNIVAL STATES IN THE NOVELS OF HURSTON, ALVAREZ,
WISEMAN, LAURENCE, AND ERDRICH

by

Julie M. Epperson Barak

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Fran W. Kaye

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Liminal Status and Carnival States in the Novels of

Hurston, Wiseman, Laurence, Alvarez and Erdrich

BY

Julie M. Epperson Barak

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

LIMINAL STATUS AND CARNIVAL STATES IN THE NOVELS OF HURSTON, ALVAREZ,
WISEMAN, LAURENCE, AND ERDRICH

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University of Nebraska, 1996

Adviser: Fran W. Kaye

Using Bakhtin, Judith Butler, Mary Russo, Stallybrass and White, and others, in combination with various anthropological studies of liminality and carnival, the dissertation theorizes the uses of laughter, irony, and the grotesque in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Adele Wiseman, Margaret Laurence, Julia Alvarez, and Louise Erdrich, expanding the concept of carnival as a tool for feminist writers and readers.

The texts I explicate in the following chapters work as sites of literary carnival to rewrite patriarchal hegemony. They invert, subvert, and attempt to revise patriarchal "wisdom" through a literary use of carnival. Carnival is intensely political, aiming always to criticize, and often to overthrow, the status quo. However, carnival is also always a personal, participatory event, empowering those who join in its ruckus. In the chapters that follow I attempt to tease out the ways in which the five authors I have chosen to study empower their feminist readers with their strong, rebellious sense of humor.

Carnival humor works subversively through serious play with language, and through serious play with the images of the female body. The five novelists I have studied "question authority" through their texts, highlighting the absurdities of the "authorities" by demonstrating the twisted double-think women must utilize to "be" and to be "real" women, and through

a determined foregrounding and undercutting of the masquerade of femininity, the mask of the feminine that women wear in order to hold a place in a patriarchal society.

PREVIEW

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Foreward

Feminist Humor and the Fruit Lady

All laughter is allied with the monstrous. . . Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over. . . it is the moment at which the woman crosses a dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded.
Cixous and Clement -- The Newly Born Woman

When I was a teenager in Council Bluffs, Iowa in the early 1970's I was fascinated by one of many of our town's "misfits." I was a west-ender, one of the poor kids, who rode the bus up to the east side of town on Saturdays to spend afternoons strolling up and down the streets and through the department stores with my friends. Occasionally, though not often, because we didn't often have money, we would buy a cherry coke at Kings Food Hosts or a forty-five at the record shop next door. What I remember most vividly from this time, though, is not my friends or the music or the taste of the cherry coke. What I remember most vividly is this woman. I looked for her, first thing, when I got off the bus on those Saturday afternoons and all through the week she stuck in my head.

She sold fruit out of the back of a pickup truck outside the Council Bluffs Savings Bank on the corner of Broadway and Main Street, catty-corner to bus stop. She was probably between 60 and 70 years old, though my young eyes may have seen her older than she was. She was short and thin, with, it always seemed to me, a bosom too large for her frame and too firm for her age. Her cheeks were heavily rouged -- big round blotches of cherry-red blushed over a heavy coating of foundation and pasty powder. She wore false eyelashes and she painted on two thick and slightly askew eyebrows. Her lips were cherry-red, too. She wore her too-black hair pulled up tight

on her head into a knot like the cut tail of a Doberman. The dress I remember her in most vividly was a powder-blue dancing gown with an empire waist. The bodice glittered with sequins, the sheer material of the skirt flowed in graceful layers to the middle of her calves. Thick, but high, heels were in vogue at the time. She wore a pair, dyed the same powder blue as her gown.

But this weird get-up,(weird, to me, because she was “old,” and the old women I knew never dressed like that, and because she was, after all, selling fruit from the back of a pick-up, not going to a ball), wasn’t the whole of what stuck with me through the week. What got to me was that she was happy! She laughed! Standing there, all by herself in front of her fruit truck, she laughed. Not maniacally, though; she didn’t cackle like the witches of the fairy tales. She laughed heartily, and although it struck me as strange, it sounded like healthy laughter. She was always smiling and waving at people. Two things about her laughter bothered me then. First of all, there weren’t very many women I could think of in my life who laughed much. My mother, my grandmothers, my aunts, my teachers, my friends’ mothers mostly frowned and were preoccupied, too busy with too many kids, too much housework, and worries about too little money to laugh. Any woman laughing was “different.” Secondly, there was a contradiction for me between her appearance and her laughter. She was all dressed up and ready to waltz, waiting for customers at the open tailgate of that beat-up, black pickup with built up wooden railings, behind her crates of fruit, always apples and oranges, sometimes plums or grapefruits, piled carefully on the truck bed. A woman who looked like she did, who lived like she must have off the meager profits of selling that fruit,

should/must be crazy, abandoned, lonely, according to my middle-class, sexist, ageist sensibilities, and yet, here she was, smiling, talking, enjoying life. As I look back at it, I realize that this was my first experience with the carnivalesque and my education and experience hadn't prepared me for it at all.

Since then, I've grown a lot. I've read a lot. My image of this woman has gone through various stages of exegesis. In my early feminist stage I was enraged at what patriarchy had forced her to do to herself in the name of beauty. A little later I was angry with her for her complicity with the patriarchy. Why, I asked myself, hadn't she been strong enough to cast off those garments, that make-up, and don overalls? Still later, remembering her laughter, I was pleased with her strength, her ability to maintain her own sense of style in the face of the jeers and slurs I knew people slung at her. Then, as I took up Marxist-Feminism, I saw her case as complicated by issues of class. She was, in effect, cross-dressing, crossing the boundaries between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie with her clothing. As I read and thought about materialist feminism I perceived that her predicament was brought on her by standardized images of beauty in a consumer based world. I recognized her recognizing herself as a commodity, dressing herself up, as she dressed up her fruit, for sale. When I turned to Bakhtin I came to a new understanding of the anomaly she has always presented me. She was, and she was powerful as, an embodiment of the grotesque.

In his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains that the concept of the grotesque is based on the perception and development of contradictions, the same kinds of contradictions this woman stirred in me. He writes of the

famous Kerch terracotta collection [where] we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. . . . Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. . . . The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. (25-26)

Here was my old woman, not pregnant, of course, but with her fruit on display behind her, hag-like and laughing, embodying life and death, youth and age, fruitfulness and barrenness, beauty and beast, truth and lies -- all of it. She is a hag -- as Mary Daly redefines the word. In her there is the power to destroy and to rebuild, she is chaos, she is forever. I know her now. I understand her laughter.

But then I was embarrassed by her. She was, in the words my mother taught me, "making a spectacle out of herself." I wouldn't have had occasion to know this phrase, of course, if I hadn't seen other women making spectacles of themselves, if I hadn't had my mother there to point out to me what this entailed and to warn me against doing it myself. Mary Russo learned this same lesson from her mother. She writes, that "making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. . . . [it] had to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries."

[T]he possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly roughed cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap -- a loose, dingy bra strap especially -- were

at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn -- too young or too old, too early or too late -- and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (213)

One sure way for a woman to make a spectacle of herself is for her to laugh or to tell a joke, and yet a woman making a spectacle out of herself is not funny. We were taught to look at her aslant, to try not to look at her at all. When we were little we were hustled out of rooms where women were making spectacles out of themselves, as if it was something "dirty," something too shocking for kids to see. Still, for me, anyway, a woman making a spectacle of herself was awfully compelling. Especially, as in the case of the fruit lady, if she did it consciously and consistently.

A woman laughing, especially a woman laughing by herself or a woman laughing with other women, is almost always making a spectacle out of herself. One popular definition of the distinction between comedy and tragedy is that "The world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel." Women laughing are suspect in our culture because women laughing means women *thinking*, women recognizing incongruities, women rebelling, whereas, the role women have been assigned in our society is that of feeling. It is true in our culture, that not only women laughing, but also women thinking -- women professors; women scientists; women justices; women senators; women, like Anita Hill for example, who think about and act on their supposed "rights" as citizens -- are often viewed as making spectacles of themselves by those who support the status quo. In patriarchy's construction of women, laughter, unless it's laughter directed at themselves in the presence of men, is taboo for women. Mary Daly has said that "the cliché, "She lacks a sense of humor" -- applied by

men to every threatening woman -- is one basic "electrode" embedded just deeply enough into the fearful foreground of women's psyches to be able to conduct female energy against the Self while remaining disguised" (Gyn/Ecology, 19).

If it has been impossible for women to have a sense of humor, for women to be funny, then what is it that women have been doing that has caused them, enabled them, to laugh through the centuries, as Nancy Walker, for one, has recently documented that they have indeed been doing? Laughing, of course, but covertly. Recently, women have begun to publically (re)claim their sense of humor. This has entailed, over the course of the last twenty years or so, the necessity of (re)defining the concept of humor for women and developing a philosophy of women's humor -- especially of feminist humor.

How does feminist humor function in a patriarchal culture? Who laughs at feminist humor? Who doesn't? Why? I will attempt to answer these questions in what follows. In Chapter One I examine traditional definitions and uses of humor and contrast them with feminist humor and the tools of feminist humorists -- irony and carnival. Chapters Two discusses the responsibilities of feminist readers toward the texts they read and posits that feminist humor can be best appreciated by those readers who come to the text willingly, ready to accept the revolution feminist humorists propose in their texts. Chapters Three through Seven are readings of the feminist humor in the novels of five contemporary North American women writers -- Zora Neale Hurston, Adele Wiseman, Margaret Laurence, Julia Alvarez, and Louise Erdrich -- detailing how they put irony and carnival to use to produce feminist humor in their texts.

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PREVIEW

Chapter One
Feminist Humor at Work: Irony, Carnival, and the Masquerade

Section One -- Traditional Comedy and Humor

In comedies people end by accepting the social games they had earlier scorned; acknowledgment reinforces social rules of this world and counsels acceptance for others.

Susan L Carlson "Comic Textures and Female Communities" (210)

Traditional comedy, especially stage comedy, is inherently socially conservative. In the beginning someone challenges the existing status quo, creating social disorder through eccentric behaviors that deviate from presumably reasonable values like common sense, good nature, flexibility, moderation and tolerance. This deviation from the normal is sharply ridiculed by other characters because it threatens to destroy revered social structures like patriarchal families and heterosexual, monogamous marriages, male dominated social systems, etc. In the course of the comedy, this intractable and unreasonable character (or characters) is either eliminated, or, more usually, brought back into the fold and, at the end of almost any comedy, order is restored, "the life flow is ordinarily symbolized in a wedding, a dance, or a banquet celebrating the harmony and reconciliation of opposing forces. These social ceremonies allow us to see that good sense wins the day and that humanity endures in the vital, the flexible and the reasonable" (Barranger, 26)

In addition to this upsetting and reestablishing of the status quo, Susan L. Carlson claims that "most comedy exposes, with varying degrees of boldness, sexual double standards. Comedy's central role reversals are, in

fact, based on stereotypes that result from double standards: i.e., women gain control and men lose it, because these are laughable inversions of normal roles.” These inversions, she continues, “endow most comic heroines with [a] memorable free-wheeling power to criticize and belittle an unfair world” (210). However witty a woman may be in the middle of a traditional comedy, though, however loudly and often she may laugh, she will almost always find herself silenced and “hitched-up” to a man by the end. Carlson explains that the re-establishment of the status quo at the end of a comedy, its easy answers to women’s problems, is deceptive and dangerous; comic conventions in and of themselves pressure characters into a limited number of roles. The role of traditional comedy, then, is to keep people in their places, to demonstrate the value of accepting the way things are. It’s goal as a social tool is not to promote change, but to maintain the status quo.

If we move away from stage comedy to humor more generally, we find that in current literature, much the same definition of the function of humor is being offered. For example, a recent and thorough sociological study of humor by Michael Mulkay, *On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society*, posits that one “‘paradox of the humorous’ mode [is] that, although semantically humor involves confrontation with and subversion of a dominant pattern, it is used most effectively for serious purposes mainly in structured situations where it works to maintain that pattern” (177). Just as traditional comedy shows us chaos in order to help us appreciate order, both standardized (as in jokes) and spontaneous (as in conversation) humor subverts the dominant patterns of our discourse, only to reinforce the reasonableness of those patterns.

Early in his work, Mulkay severs humorous discourse from serious discourse and claims that in serious discourse individuals posit a unified real world in order to cope with daily life. Because this unified real world is a fiction, individuals must constantly deal with disruptions or “discrepant formulations” that give them pause, that cause a rift in their perception of a unified real world. By using a set of interpretive practices that take for granted that the discrepant formulations “cannot originate in ‘the world itself,’ but must arise out of human failure to observe or report that world accurately,” individuals are able to “constantly reaffirm the underlying existence of a unitary world” and to “reinforce [their] reliance on a unitary form of serious discourse” (24). He continues:

Thus, when a speaker’s or writer’s claims are taken to give rise to paradox, this is virtually never regarded as following from the paradoxical character of the world, but from some fault in reasoning. Paradox is routinely used in serious discourse, along with ambiguity and inconsistency, as sufficient grounds for questioning or rejecting the assertions to which it is attributed. In this way, discourse is constantly corrected and revised to make it appear to embody and display one meaning required by the basic assumptions of serious discourse. (25)

This line of reasoning leads him to conclude that “if we were to relinquish the assumption that we are able correctly to formulate the pattern of events around us, if we were to abandon ourselves to the recognition that other contradictory formulations are equally viable, it might appear that we would be permanently confused and utterly unable to act” (221).

Mulkay claims that humor is generated from the “top down” and that this, too, works to maintain the system. In a study of humor conducted among the staff members of a mental hospital it was found that senior staff laughed at or made jokes at the expense of junior staff, junior staff laughed at or made jokes at the expense of themselves or other junior staff, and

ancillary staff, the lowest positions in the hierarchy, and all female, only laughed at the jokes of others and never attempted to create any humor of their own. In this way, claims Mulkay, humor kept everybody in line. What is operating here, of course, is more than the humorous discourse. It is also obvious that there is an economic discourse at work. One doesn't make jokes at the expense of the person who writes your paycheck and controls your economic future. Thus, in conjunction with other modes of discourse, humor works to keep everybody functioning in their "proper" role without having to resort to totalitarian-like modes of behavior modification. The "chain of humor" is a subtle way for people to determine, and remain in, their place in the world.

In some ways Mulkay's work is very contradictory. On the one hand, he claims that "the humorous mode, as we know it is essentially a marginal discourse of withdrawal and multiplicity . . . In our every day world humor is a form of play rather than an engagement with the practical realities of life" (218). On the other hand, he claims that humor is a very serious mode of discourse that allows us to recognize that multiple worlds exist, without threatening the unified real world we need to establish to get on with life. In this sense, according to Mulkay, humor is cathartic. It allows us all to play with the notion of the chaos around us, without submitting to it. He explains that

Humor occurs because mundane, serious discourse simply cannot cope with its own interpretative multiplicity. . . . humor is satisfactory in a more substantive, and a more sociologically significant way: namely, in the sense that the interpretative openness of humor seems more accurately to reflect or reproduce or allow for the multiple realities of the social world. In this important respect, *humor seems to be superior to ordinary, serious discourse*, which is premised on an implicit denial of that fact that we live in a world of multiple meanings and multiple realities. It seems, therefore, that the serious mode is seriously defective. . . . our

language use and our culture are pervaded by a form of language-use that requires us all, . . . to assert our own privileged access to reality, whilst placing us in a social world where that privilege must, to varying degrees be constantly challenged and undermined. (214, 219, 221, *italics mine*)

He comes close here to agreeing with Mary Douglas, whose views he disputes earlier in his work. According to Mulkay's summary of her work, Douglas does not argue, as he does, for a cathartic explanation of joking, in which the status quo is reinforced. Rather, she

stresses that humorous utterances necessarily involve a confrontation with the dominant social pattern. Joking, she suggests, is an activity that is generated by the social structure, but which challenges and disrupts that structure by giving voice to its inconsistencies and irrationalities. . . . humor disorganizes. It destroys hierarchy and order. Joking does not affirm dominant values, but denigrates and devalues them. In the course of humorous discourse, the accepted patterns of social life are shown to have no necessity. (153-54, quoted in Mulkay)

At this point he goes on to ask the most wonderful question and provides me with a segue into a discussion of feminist humor. What if the humorous mode were the dominant mode? The serious mode? "In this new world, the criteria of semantic adequacy would be radically different. In particular, genuine claims about the nature of the world would not be acceptable unless they generated inconsistency, incongruity or paradox, or in some way revealed or acknowledged the multiplicity of the world. Moreover, a mode of humorous discourse would still exist. It would occur, for example, when people inadvertently or consciously implied that some event or action had a unitary meaning" (221). If the humorous mode were the dominant mode the Western patriarchal world would look very much like it does through a post modern lense, and through a feminist one.

Section Two -- The Masquerade:
Self and Other in Women's Writing

Alchemical woman's magical ability to extract socially deranging poisons from assorted trifles is, indeed, the object of my quest -- a poison not dependent upon the arcane texts derived from the philosopher's stone, but made from abrading these texts and wedding them to their populist others.

Patricia Yeager, "PrePostmodernism: Academic Feminism and the Kitchen Sink" (17).

Women are in a perfect position to explore the multivocality and the multiplicity of the humorous world because their own "I" (from whose point of view monological, univocally visioned texts are constructed) is missing; it has been co-opted by patriarchy. This is a notion we've lived with at least since Freud -- women are male wanna-be's; lacking a penis they lack a self and they have babies in order to create their own penis/self through giving birth to sons. Lacan signifies women as a "lack." Women exist only in that they reflect back to men an Other that, as not-male, confirms the masculine self.

If woman, the feminine, is "missing" as a voice in our culture, where can we begin to find her, to hear her speaking? How can she create feminist humor when the "feminine" doesn't exist? How can she assert an "I" to speak? Who is speaking when she does? Anne Herrmann addresses this issue in *Dialogic and Difference: "An/Other Woman in Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf."* One simply must begin to speak -- "I . . ." So that, even though

[t]he female subject is doubly split because when it appropriates the first-person pronoun, it vacillates between a subject position which is masculine and the function of the feminine which is that of object[, a]t the same time, the first-person pronoun is the least stable of all linguistic signifiers, since its referent changes with every utterance; every person who says "I" refers to a person with a different name. By masking gender it obscures the fact that any subject speaks from a position marked by sexual difference; by

masquerading as genderless it embodies the possibility of disrupting difference by eliminating gender altogether.

In other words, a woman using an "I" is in a sense creating the fiction of a feminine presence. Creating this presence in language is the first step in creating it in the world. One must begin somewhere, and according to Monique Wittig, there is no better way to begin than to just begin. Judith Butler summarizes Wittig's argument as follows: "The task for women . . . is to assume the position of the authoritative speaking subject -- which is in some sense their ontologically grounded "right" -- and to overthrow both the category of sex and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin. Language for Wittig is a set of acts, repeated over time that produce reality-effects, that are eventually misperceived as "facts" (115). Butler continues:

Relying on the assumption that all speaking presupposes and implicitly invokes the entirety of language, Wittig describes the speaking subject as one who, in the act of saying "I," "reappropriates language as a whole, preceding from oneself alone, with the power to use all language." This absolute grounding of the speaking "I" assumes god-like dimensions within Wittig's discussion. This privilege to speak "I" establishes a sovereign self, a center of absolute plenitude and power; speaking establishes "the supreme act of subjectivity." This coming into subjectivity is the effective overthrow of sex and, hence, the feminine: 'no woman can say I without being for herself a total subject -- that is, ungendered, universal, whole.' (117)

According to Butler, "Wittig argues that 'it is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine, "even a perfect war machine.' The main strategy of this war is for women, lesbians, gay men -- all of whom have been particularized through identification with 'sex' -- to preempt the position of the speaking subject and its invocation of the universal point of view" (119).

In addition to the power of the feminine “I” in constructing the presence of the absent feminine in the real world, enabling women to participate in creating “alternative memories” and possibilities for action, the very fictionality of that feminine “I” has a subversive power of its own in its essence as masquerade. Mary Anne Doane, in “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” posits that women who flaunt their femininity, may be consciously “foregrounding the Masquerade.” In other words, recognizing that the role of the feminine is a construct of a patriarchal society, women may choose to gain power by acting out the charade of femininity as fully as possible.

By calling attention to the complete “otherness” that they are, women are empowered. In one sense this is true, Butler observes, because as “Lacan clearly suggests . . . power is wielded by th[e] feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who “has” the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and hence, to be the Phallus in its “extended” sense” (44). In masquerade the woman “mimics an authentic -- genuine womanliness, but then, authentic womanliness is such a mimicry, is the masquerade; . . . to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity, femininity is that dissimulation” (Heath, 47). As Mary Russo notes in “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” deliberately assumed and foregrounded femininity as a mask, for a man, is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; for a woman, a similar flaunting of the feminine is a take-it-*and*-leave-it possibility. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off” (224)

The power of making conscious or being conscious of the masquerade of femininity comes from recognizing that “[w]omanliness is a mask which

can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic" (Doane, 281). According to Anne Herrmann, defining "femininity as 'imagistic' equates the image with the feminine, while the masquerade allows for distance from the image by unmasking the feminine as fictive. Behind the image lies another image, but this time, a self-reflective one which reveals itself as mask. Through this distancing, the female viewer [of her own self and of other feminine selves] destabilizes the image and thereby defamiliarizes traditional forms of iconography" (29-30). By foregrounding the fictiveness of her role, woman can gain a distance from it for herself and use it in her work to undermine the patriarchy by "training" other viewers to see its fictiveness, also.

A woman masquerading as a woman is performing a subversive act. First of all, by recognizing the masquerade she must be beginning to (re)establish her elemental self, the self that existed before its construction by patriarchy, and secondly, the power of her parody must be unsettling in the world around her. And, here I can't help but be reminded of the fruit lady I began with. The power of her presence in my life all these years may have been in her parodying, whether consciously or not, the roles our society demands women learn in their youth -- of the desire for the romance of going to balls in beautiful dresses on the arms of princes, of the need to remain forever young, of the patriarchal world's mandate that women disguise themselves with cosmetics and reshape their bodies with restrictive and/or padded clothing in order to "look" like a woman. She is