

The Process of Becoming a Woman's Body: Menstruation and the Containment of Femininity

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I don't know, it feels yucky – the period, the tampons, it should be secret.

Jenny (quoted in Ponton, 35)

Most girls begin puberty somewhere between the ages of eight and twelve, going through the most significant mandatory body change of their lives until menopause.¹ Puberty is, for both sexes, confusing. On the one hand, it presages the freedoms of adulthood. On the other, one's formerly relied upon and taken for granted body begins to change in sometimes alarming ways. Also, the sexual maturity at which puberty points is confusing at best. For girls, the main milestones during puberty include growing new body hair, getting breasts, and menarche, or the beginning of menstruation. No body event in a girl's (or a woman's) life is more ambivalently coded than menstruation. Tied to both the filth of bodily waste and the possibility of motherhood, menstruation has powerful social connotations that lead to its virtual erasure from "polite" discourse. Well before most girls begin to menstruate, they learn how to hide its effects, usually through consuming an array of products. The ways girls are taught about their menstrual cycles point, in important ways, to cultural attitudes about menstruation and the (potentially) reproductive female body.

When menstruation or menarche are acknowledged openly, it is usually done for one reason: containment. Advertisements for feminine hygiene products stress their ability to hide menstrual blood to the point where the blood itself is erased in favor of a mysterious blue liquid.² In these ads, the actual mechanics of menstruation are never addressed, saving vulnerable men and children from the knowledge of what, exactly, menstrual products do. The two billion dollar a year feminine hygiene industry (Brumberg 30) offers items for sale that "protect." Why do we need so much protection from menstruation, and who, exactly, is being protected? Where does the danger lie? In this paper, I address the ways girls are taught to contain the potential dangers of menstruation and argue that hiding the realities of menstruation forms part of girls' larger project of learning to shape their bodies into the "contained" or "classical" body of normative femininity.

Many feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler, have theorized femininity as a "performance" or "masquerade." Gender is performed, or done, by a person as a collection of "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires" that "create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (Butler 136). Once we begin to realize the performative nature of gender, we must also begin to recognize that there is, in fact, no "natural" body. As Butler states, "that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 136). Rather than being "passive and prior to discourse," the body is "itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex" (Butler 129).

How can there be a natural, discourse free body when it is the body itself that must enact so much of the performance of gender?

One of the most common misreadings of Butler holds that, since gender is performative, people are free to pick and choose the performance they wish to give – people enact masculinity or femininity only because they want to, not because they must. Butler explicitly states, however, that “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” for those who fail to perform, or fail to perform correctly (Butler 139). Those who fail risk the far reaching and negative punishments meted out by a homophobic, patriarchal society.

Part of performing gender correctly includes erasing the performance, and mainstream society does this so successfully that the “cultural fiction” of binary genders “is obscured by the credibility of those productions” (Butler 140). In the end, the punishments that follow hard upon our refusal or inability to perform gender correctly “compels” our insistence in gender’s “necessity and naturalness” (Butler 140). Even still, though, no one can perform gender completely correctly because “gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized [...] gender norms are finally phantasmic, impossible to embody” (Butler 141).

To believe that the costume or act of femininity is somehow optional does an injustice to Butler’s ideas. Even though femininity has been revealed as a highly changeable and historically specific act, it is still an act that every girl and woman must perform to some extent. In this, our specific historical moment, normative femininity³ is both culturally and economically constructed. Dawn Currie, author of *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and their Readers*, states that “Our participation in beauty rituals is an economic as well as cultural phenomenon because it engages us in commodity consumption. As a consequence, gendered identities cannot be studied apart from the huge ‘culture industry’ that provides many of our everyday understandings of ‘gender’” (Currie 5). Currie would have us examine the economic forces at work in everyday life, and how these forces shape identity. Currie is interested in “how the existence of multibillion-dollar industries promoting fashion and beauty links young women’s desires to cultural representations of femininity” (7-8).

Because of this, it is important to remember that much of the discourse that teaches girls about their menstrual cycles has a very specific economic and classed base. All of the ways mainstream society teaches girls to contain their menstrual cycles assume that girls can afford to purchase disposable menstrual products, that they have a stable enough place of residence to keep their bodies acceptably clean and that they have parents or guardians attentive enough to help them with the process of puberty. Further, this line of thought assumes that girls come from cultural backgrounds that deal with menstruation in very specific ways. Girls who cannot meet any of these requirements – due to lack of money, home, guidance or culture – perforce fail this process before they can begin.

The two types of texts upon which this paper relies are girls' magazines (such as Cosmogirl, Teen People and ELLEgirl) and body guides. I define a "body guide" as an instructional manual written by adults for young girls that explains basic body anatomy, body maintenance and answers general questions about puberty. Both girls' magazines and body guides can be read as ideological texts. According to Dawn Currie, the feminist concept of ideology is:

the way in which ideas, beliefs and systems of meaning serve to sustain relations of domination. To view images as ideological is not only to expose them as stereotypical constructions, but to also draw attention to the interests that they serve by restricting and fixing the meanings of social life. Reference to the ideological nature of women's magazine images links their existence and their effects to patriarchal economic interests (Currie 57).

The main ideological thrust of girls' magazines (and, to some extent, body guides) defines the female body as a signifier which must be "invested with characteristics which are culturally read as 'feminine'" To do this, women must perform "body work" because "not all, or any, female body is deemed, a priori, as signaling the aesthetic requirements of 'femininity'" (Currie 16). It is tempting to look at such body work, and the texts that introduce and enforce it, as *either* oppressive *or* pleasurable. Currie would have us get beyond such simple binaries, though, and look instead at the significance of *how* and *why* such texts work (Currie 66).

How and why do these texts work, then? Psychoanalyst Lynn Ponton, who works primarily with adolescents, stresses that girls "are hungry for knowledge about their periods. It is not easy to obtain. Several [girls she has interviewed] have described reading the small-print ads in the Tampax box, searching for information, any information" (32). When any information (or misinformation) is offered, girls seize upon it. The bits of information available in magazines, and the more detailed discussions offered in body guides, then, become very important to girls. Ponton states that one reason for this general lack of information is that "Clearly there are long-standing cultural taboos that prevent open discussion about menstruation, and they are transmitted to girls quite early, long before they have their first period." (33). Ponton further finds that "The lack of response from the culture only further silences the girls and helps to maintain the taboo" (33).

Menstrual Products in Body Guides and Magazines

Both body guides and girls' magazines include information on menstrual products. Body guides present this information primarily in an instructional manner, while most of the information in magazines comes from advertisements. In the end, though, both present menarche as a girl's entry into the consumption of disposable menstrual products for the purpose of concealing her period. By focusing almost exclusively on disposable tampons and pads, in other words, these books and magazines teach girls that the only way to be considered

“clean” and “acceptable” during their periods is to buy commercially available, non-reusable menstrual products. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg states in her book The Body Project, we have a “distinctly American menstrual experience that stresses personal hygiene over information about adult womanhood or female sexuality” (Brumberg 30). Brumberg sees important consequences stemming from the commercialization of menstruation. From “the moment when they begin to menstruate, American girls and their mothers typically think first about their external body – what shows and what doesn’t – rather than about the emotional and social meaning of the maturational process” (Brumberg 29). This “contributes to the way in which adolescent girls make the body into an intense project requiring careful scrutiny and constant personal control” (Brumberg 30). Rather than seeing menstruation as an emotional or social event, American girls are taught to view menarche as an “external hygienic crisis.” Because of this, girls learn that the *only* parts of themselves that they need to worry about are those seen on the outside. As Brumberg states, contemporary adolescents’ fears about their bodies have helped “turn menstrual blood into gold” (49), and because of this, the sanitary products industry must maintain and encourage bodily fears to maintain their profit margins. The fears about keeping one’s body acceptable despite menstruation permeate society, and are replicated and transmitted through magazine articles and advertisements, and, to a degree, in body guides.

Advertisements:

Magazines and body guides offer girls conflicting information about their bodies. Both stress that disposable products offer freedom of movement and the protection from/concealment of menstrual blood. In all of these, the “problem” that femininity presents is a girl’s need to get on with her normal life despite the fact that she is on her period (an event that is always placed outside of “normal” life), and the solution offered is the concealment of the effects of the period (either menstrual blood or cramps) by the product offered. Advertisements cannot, or will not, discuss the physical sensations or cultural meanings of menstruation, so instead they discuss the need for protection against it.

Since advertisements for products that collect and conceal menstrual blood will not explicitly mention their products’ purpose, because the need for concealment extends into the advertisements themselves, ads must invent other advantages the right menstrual product can deliver. Apparently, heterosexual love is one such advantage. One ad for Always pads shows an anime-style cartoon of two girls at a dance looking at a (completely oblivious) boy. The text reads, “Spring dance. And you have your period. The good news is, your hormones make you feel more attracted to the caring, sensitive types. So there’s no better time to check him out! And with Always, leaks won’t hold you back. Always Thin Ultra with Gel Core absorbs better than the next leading ultra by locking liquid away. Now, how about that cutie over there?” (ELLEgirl February/March 137). The purported advantage of the pad becomes, then, a girl’s freedom from worrying that the sudden appearance of menstrual blood will make a cute boy dislike her.

Another Always advertisement shows a cartoon of a team of girls about to score a goal in a soccer game. The text reads, "Exercise, like soccer, can relieve period symptoms and reduce cramps. What better reason is there to get moving! And leaks? What about 'em? Always Thin Ultra wings are twice as long for better side protection against leaks than other ultras. So, you can sweat your workout, not your protection" (Twist April 27, Cosmogirl May 129). Again, no specific mention of menstrual blood is made, and the ad does not show the how product is used. Instead, it explains the supposed effect of wearing the pad – scoring a goal in a soccer game without worrying about blood leaking. Obviously, I am not trying to imply that women should be comfortable enough with our menstrual blood to want to show it publicly.⁴ I am trying to point out, however, that these ads exacerbate our cultural phobia of menstrual blood to the point where the ads avoid even mentioning it. They euphemistically refer, instead, to "leaks" and "liquid." Leaks from where? What type of liquid? And why do they avoid the color red so assiduously?

Menstrual products that have nothing to do with blood and tissue collection have less of a problem with the color red, though they continue to emphasize the ways they help girls conceal their periods. The mainstream media never actually depicts women experiencing the adverse effects of menstruation, such as cramps or nausea. Instead, "menstruating women are depicted as functioning at optimal activity level and uncomplaining, which means girls and women who do experience discomfort may believe that their reactions are unusual" (Ponton 40). To avoid being "unusual," then, girls will purchase products that promise this "normalcy." ThermaCare, a brand of disposable heating pads girls and women wear over their lower abdomen to help with cramps, ran two ads in the magazines in this study. Both emphasize the freedom of movement and "normalcy" the product offers. The first ad shows a tennis court with two women's bathroom signs superimposed over it. On one, the "woman" symbol, dressed for tennis, has large red lightning bolts and the red word "cramps!" coming out of her abdomen. The other sign also has a woman symbol dressed for tennis on it, but this symbol is wearing a ThermaCare pad and swinging her tennis racquet (Teen People May 93, Cosmogirl May 133). The second ThermaCare ad makes its point more directly. The whole page is a red field, with "Guys get to live without cramps. Now we can, too" written over it in white. Below this, in smaller letters, it says "Slim, snug, comfy. The only one who knows you're wearing it is you" (Twist April 99, Cosmogirl April 107). It is interesting that all of these ads include some fairly standard "girl-power" messages: it is good for girls to be athletically involved, and it is unfair for girls to have disadvantages that boys do not have. They also reinforce, though, the "naturalness" and desirability of concealing all evidence of periods: *no one knows you are wearing it*. Girls want to get rid of cramps not only to be more active, according to these ads, but also to avoid having to make excuses for missing activities, or worse, admitting in public that they are on their periods. Luckily, these products can provide the "normalcy" girls so desire.

Magazines leave girls with the notion that commercially available disposable menstrual products are their only “suitable” choices. Other products may be available, but they do not guarantee the level of cultural acceptance inherent in disposable products. Entering womanhood, according to these sources, requires consuming certain, specific constellations of products to be acceptable.⁵ Advertisements are only one place girls get this message; it is constantly reinforced throughout mainstream culture.

Magazines promote the use of disposable menstrual products through the inclusion of advertisements. Body guides promote the use of disposable products by demonstrating how to use them, and not demonstrating how to use non-disposable methods. In her body guide, titled Growing Up: It's a Girl Thing, Mavis Jukes introduces pads by saying that they are designed to stay on “when we walk, run, play sports, climb on the monkey bars, and generally go about our daily lives” (46). Several guides introduce tampons as a method that many women prefer because they are not as noticeable as pads, and go on to remark that tampons take practice to learn how to use, but that the practice is worth the effort (Blackstone and Guest 75. Gravelle 47, Jukes Growing Up 55). Valorie Lee Schaefer's The Care and Keeping of You, published under the non-fiction arm of the wildly popular American Girl collection and perhaps the most popular body guide available today,⁶ states bluntly that “Deciding which ‘feminine hygiene’ products to use can seem overwhelming at first, but your choices are actually pretty simple: *pads* or *tampons*” (Schaefer 72, emphasis in the original). Along with being the most popular body guide, The Care and Keeping of You is also the most conservative of the guides included in this study (which may account for its popularity). According to this guide, *only* disposable methods are acceptable. Echoing the advice offered in the Tampax-owned website beinggirl.com, Schaefer advises girls to wear panty liners along with tampons, and states that “It’s a good idea to wear a panty liner for a day or two even after you *think* your period is over” (Schaefer 74). Advice like this connects menstrual products with girls’ everyday lives, serving to normalize the products into something that girls buy as a matter of course.

Embarrassing Stories

Another way body guides reinforce this message is through the use of embarrassing stories. The authors of body guides recall embarrassing moments to stress their commonality with their readers, thus making their texts more “trustworthy,” and use this trust to remind readers that their bodies require constant vigilance.

In the guide Girl Stuff, authors Margaret Blackstone and Elissa Guest begin their book with a list of what they call “cringe words,” or words that they found utterly embarrassing as pre-teens. They also include how they defined these words when younger: “Menstruation: Sounded like a fatal disease. [...] Puberty: Something wet and slimy, a creepy alien blob. [...] ‘That Time of the Month’: (sic) As if suddenly you had changed” (Blackstone and Guest 1). In her guide, It's a

Girl Thing, Mavis Jukes includes the story of a friend of hers whose falsies fell out of her bathing suit top in a public pool (8). Finally, almost every guide includes stories of girls' clothing getting stained with menstrual blood in public.

Ponton points out that, because of cultural taboos surrounding menstruation, "little sharing of information with friends seems to take place after the initiation of menstruation, although at later points friends share stories about symptoms and negative attitudes" (Ponton 41). When relaying the negative effects of menstruation, then, the cultural silence around menstruation is lessened. While these negative effects are certainly real and must be dealt with, nowhere within magazines did I find any discussion of the positive effects of menstruation, such as feeling proud or powerful, or even the general sense of well-being some girls and women experience while they are premenstrual. It seems that, as long as girls are complaining about menstruation – one of the most important markers of becoming biologically female – they are allowed to discuss it. Positive statements about menstruation, however, are still suspect. This could contribute to the fact that, while "many girls are extremely positive about the *anticipation* of their menses," girls feel far less positive about their periods once they arrive (Ponton 40). Brumberg argues that girls discuss menstruation in this way because they are using the only language available to them. While she admits that "these stories of embarrassing personal moments were honest and funny," she also notes that "they all focused on issues of personal hygiene because that is the language we use in America for talking about such things" (Brumberg 52). Girls do not share their inner feelings about menstruation, whether they are positive or negative, because they do not know how.

Embarrassing stories ring true because, even though the products recommended in body guides and magazines "protect" girls and their clothes from menstrual blood, this protection is not as perfect as we could wish. In her guide called Growing Up: It's a Girl Thing, Jukes states that, "many girls and women choose not to wear their best underwear during a period" because of leaks (50), and all of the books suggest that it might be a good idea to keep a dark sweater around to tie around the waist if blood gets onto a girl's clothes.⁷ Girls learn that hiding their menstrual blood is so important that they must keep backup methods on hand at all times. They must do so because they live within institutions that will not change to accommodate their needs. In her book, The Woman in the Body, Emily Martin writes that "the woman trying to sneak a tampon from the classroom into the bathroom" is "being asked to do the impossible: conceal and control their bodily functions in institutions whose organization of time and space take little cognizance of them" (94). Girls are embarrassed when they bring attention to their menstrual cycles in public because most public institutions – institutions that have been created by and for the bodies of men (boys) – will not admit that the bodies of women (girls) exist. If they did, for example, girls would not have to justify to their teachers why they need unscheduled bathroom breaks. Most girls do not recognize this, though, because it has been presented to them as normal (Martin 99).

Menstruation and Filth: Kristeva

Self surveillance becomes especially important for the body because, with the onset of puberty, girls' bodies become associated with (or soon will be associated with) reproductive functions. One of society's jobs is to control the reproductive functions of young women, as witnessed by the public outcry over teenaged mothers.⁸ Anita Harris, author of Future Girl, locates this anxiety in economics. Girls today are expected to achieve both "labor market accomplishments and a glamorous consumer lifestyle," and both of these "are premised on the idea of an unencumbered individual who can devote herself to full-time paid work. An intrinsic element of the can-do experience is thus the delaying of motherhood" (Harris 23). Because of this, "the families of you women who are high-achieving [...] tend to be committed to the regulation of their daughters' sexuality" (Harris 23). Girls who delay motherhood contribute economically through the purchase of consumer goods. Girls who do not are warned that they will inevitably become economic drains, the stereotypical "welfare mothers" whom society only devalues.

Beyond their sexualized meanings, female bodies with the power to reproduce also have the potential to break down social codes in frightening ways. Julia Kristeva, in The Powers of Horror, describes this potential. She calls the logical extreme of this potential the "abject," or that which is neither subject nor object. She writes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). Our objections to showing or mentioning anything related to menstruation in public goes beyond the physical dirtiness of menstrual blood. We only call menstrual blood filthy because it threatens abjection, and people are urged by society to hide and devalue it. But not all "filth" is equivalent, though. As Kristeva says, "Filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (69). Girls are urged to hide their bodies' excremental functions for the same reason that boys are, but they hide their menstrual and reproductive functions for far different reasons:

Polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, [...] have any polluting value. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationships between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (Kristeva 71).

Menstruation threatens to upset both the boundaries between internal and external (what was once inside of my body is outside of it – and I am ok) and self and other (the potential to have a life within the female body which then moves

outside of the female body and into its own subjectivity). Once these boundaries of identity are threatened, no boundary is safe because all have been marked as permeable. To prevent this from happening, we reject that which threatens the boundary. As Butler states, “the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (Butler 133). We put such tremendous energy into maintaining these boundaries because “What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (Butler 133).

Girls hide their menstrual cycles to reinforce the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine and, in so doing, patriarchal hegemony (Kristeva 70). Menstrual blood is disgusting because of its tie to the feminine, which is socially devalued in favor of the masculine, and because of its potential power to disrupt. To make up for this, girls are supposed to hide the (disgusting) fact that they menstruate. This need for concealment goes beyond just hiding menstrual blood, however, and extends to everything connected – in any way – to menstruation. A significant part of this, to girls, is to hide any potential smell caused by menstrual blood. As Karen Gravelle’s body guide The Period Book repeatedly states, a girl needs to change her pad frequently “even if they aren’t in danger of soaking through,” to avoid the “obnoxious odor announcing to everyone that they’re having their period!” (49, 52-3). As I stated above, advertisements point out the need to hide the cramps as a symptom of menstruation. The need to hide menstruation, together with the capitalist need for endless consumption, leads to the “natural” notion that cleanliness and social acceptability requires that women buy disposable menstrual products. Kristeva calls this the “mapping of the self’s clean and proper body” (72), and girls learn this early.

The Unruly Body: Rowe and Butler

Kathleen Rowe, author of The Unruly Woman, believes many taboos are tied to the female body because of the belief that its reproductive functions could become “unruly.” As she states, “The identification of women with reproduction has rarely worked to their advantage” (Rowe 34). The ability to reproduce is seen as powerful and potentially overwhelming and frightening. All too easily, women could realize this power and become what Rowe calls “unruly women” who create “disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men,” allowing their bodies to become “excessive or fat, suggesting (their) unwillingness or inability to control physical appetites” or speaking excessively and loudly (31). Rowe differentiates between this unruly, or “grotesque” body and the classical, or “bourgeois” body, writing that “Ideology holds that the ‘well-adjusted’ woman has what Helene Cixous has described as ‘divine composure.’ She is silent, static, invisible – ‘composed’ and ‘divinely’ apart from the hurly-burly of life, process, and social power” (Rowe 31). The “well-adjusted” woman must have the classical body which conceals the processes that the grotesque body revels in and reveals

(Rowe 33). Rowe echoes Kristeva's language about the borders of the internal and external when she states, "The grotesque body is above all the female body, the *maternal* body, which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of 'becoming,' of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death" (34, emphasis in original). Finally, the unruly woman is "associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence" (Rowe 31). Where the classical, static body can be categorized instantly, the unruly, changeable body cannot.

Judith Butler takes Kristeva's and Rowe's arguments one step further, explaining that social groups reinforce the differences between the internal and external which menstruation threatens "through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (134). The menstrual blood that was once part of the girl now becomes something dirty and "gross," something girls must deny was ever part of them. This denial happens: for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit (Butler 134-5).

Just as girls must deny that the menstrual blood was ever a part of them,⁹ they also learn to exclude people who cannot or will not function within society's limits. The power of embarrassing stories in guides is to remind girls that, if they cannot (or will not) control their bodies, they can be socially excluded. Further, it teaches girls that they must – to remain acceptable – exclude others deemed unacceptable. Girls are not only regulated by how they behave, but the behaviors they accept in others. This social control extends to every area of a girl's life, including regulating her body, her actions and her sexuality, but, in many ways, it begins with menstruation.

Menstruation and Ambivalence

We do not only view menstruation as filth, however. Part of what makes the "filthiness" of menstruation necessary is its potential power to create life, a part of traditional femininity that has been as valorized as it has been feared. Both the magazines and the body guides included in this study at least make motions towards trying to end the traditional connection of menstruation and filth, but in the end, they continue to view menstruation ambivalently. In the introduction to her book, [The What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls](#), Lynda Madaras tells parents that they need to examine their internalized ideas about the grossness of menstruation, so that they do not accidentally pass on these ideas to their children. She advises parents, especially mothers, to be honest about how they were brought up to think about their periods so that they do not confuse their daughters when they send out conflicting messages. Madaras writes:

Even if we are conscious of [internalized uneasiness about menstruation] and decide that it is time that this deplorable situation was dealt with, the taboos and our cultural embarrassment about menstruation may still take their toll. Wanting our daughters to have a positive view of their natural bodily functions, particularly if we have suffered in this area, we summon up our courage and carefully rehearse the proper lines. Intent upon improving the script our mothers wrote for us, we boldly announce to our daughters: “Menstruation Is a Wonderful Part of Being a Woman, a Unique Ability of Which You Should Be Proud.” At the same time, none of us would think of hiding our toothbrushes under the sink or in the back corners of the bathroom cupboard, yet it is rare to find a box of sanitary napkins prominently displayed (xxiv).

Most of the body guides and magazines try to break the connection between menstruation and filth by stressing its normalcy, both by saying that every girl gets her period¹⁰ and that every girl’s body has its own timetable for menstrual events. Statements such as, “You may have your first period at any time between the ages of eight and seventeen, and whatever age you are, that’s what is normal for you” (Blackstone and Guest 69, 71) or “Each girl’s body develops according to her own special timetable. That means that each of us begins to menstruate when the time is right – for us” (Jukes Growing Up 43) are fairly common. Ponton also notes that it is important to point out the large range of what constitutes “normality” to adolescents and pre-adolescents, because one overriding anxiety within adolescence is the fear that one is not “normal” (144). Another way guides attempt to reassure girls about the normality of their experience is suggesting that they talk to friends and family members. Jukes repeatedly suggests that girls talk to a trusted friend or adult about how they feel about menstruation because, “sharing feelings with those we trust can be very comforting” (Jukes Growing Up 7). Jukes wants to end the silence around menstruation, and reminds her readers that “just because something’s private doesn’t mean it’s secret. It’s reassuring to talk and think and read about things to do with growing up” (Growing Up 4). Madaras emphasizes the importance of discussing a girl’s period with her father or other trusted male relative. Madaras urges her readers not to “write your dad off just because he’s a man. Guys know about these things, too” (Madaras What’s Happening? 164). Ponton believes that simply ending the silence around menstruation would help girls (and boys). She states that “potentially the introduction of this important topic to both boys and girls offers an opportunity to introduce positive elements and to erase secrecy, a process that has not yet happened” (Ponton 42). Ending this secrecy is important because “both silence and ‘taboos’ dim our understanding of the important subject of menarche. The lack of light on this topic is reflected further in our overall understanding of the entire process of menstruation, not just the first step” (Ponton 43).

Medical Metaphors of Menstruation: Martin

Body guides don’t stop at suggesting that girls talk about menstruation with those they trust. These books also give girls basic anatomical information about their

bodies and descriptions of how menstruation works. Even though body guide authors include this information to help empower girls, they need to be careful with the type of language they use to describe menstruation. No matter how much the authors may want to empower girls information, they can sabotage their goals through the words they use. In her book The Woman in the Body, Martin examines the language medical and biology textbooks use to describe menstruation, and finds that most medical models of menstruation begin with the metaphor of the body as factory. Like a factory, the body's goal is to be efficient and productive. For women, this goal includes the production of children (Martin 37). Because of this, the female reproductive system "is seen as organized for a single preeminent purpose: 'transport' of the egg along its journey from the ovary to the uterus and preparation of an appropriate place for the egg to grow if it is fertilized" (Martin 44). With pregnancy as the only goal of a woman's reproductive system, "it should be no surprise that when a fertilized egg does not implant, [medical texts] describe the next event in very negative terms" (Martin 45). She continues,

The fall in blood progesterone and estrogen "deprives" the "highly developed endometrial lining of its hormonal support," "constriction" of blood vessels leads to a "diminished" supply of oxygen and nutrients, and finally "disintegration starts, the entire lining begins to slough, and the menstrual flow begins." Blood vessels in the endometrium "hemorrhage" and the menstrual flow "consists of this blood mixed with endometrial debris." The "loss" of hormonal stimulation causes "necrosis" (death of tissue) (Martin 45).

Martin believes these medical models are so formational because it is "a cultural system whose ideas and practices pervade popular culture and in which, therefore, we all participate to some degree" (Martin 13). The medical model of "seeing menstruation as failed production contribute[s] to our negative view of it" (Martin 45). Taking the metaphor of the factory to its logical conclusion, menstrual blood is a useless product, "unsalable, wasted, scrap" (Martin 46). Menstruation becomes a (subconscious) monthly reminder of failure – no wonder some girls and women dread it! Martin further adds that, one of the reasons this model may be so negative is that "women are in some sinister sense out of control when they menstruate. They are not reproducing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not providing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man's sperm" (47).

As I stated above, body guides spend a great deal of time explaining menstruation to their readers. Although it is obvious that they are trying to describe menstruation in neutral or positive terms, they often fall into the failed production metaphor, an odd rhetorical device to use when writing for young girls. In Jukes' book Growing Up: It's a Girl Thing, she talks about menstruation in fairly neutral terms. She writes, "About once a month an egg will pop out of an ovary, be caught and swept into a Fallopian tube, and will tumble down into her uterus. Since the egg will not be fertilized, the uterus will shed its lining ... and this will happen month after month ... and year after year until she grows into a

woman” (Growing Up 43). In this, Jukes sees menstruation, not pregnancy, as the logical and hoped for conclusion of the reproductive cycle. Jukes also stresses that, “*A girl’s reproductive system begins to work years before she is actually ready to be a mom*” (Growing Up 32, emphasis in original). In her book for slightly older girls, called It’s a Girl Thing: How to Stay Healthy, Safe and in Charge, Jukes changes her language, though. She writes, “Once a girl goes through puberty, her uterus makes a special lining of bloody tissue every month to prepare for a possible pregnancy. [...] If a woman or girl isn’t pregnant, the lining of her uterus isn’t needed to nourish an embryo, and the lining is released” (Jukes Girl Thing 15). She continues, “If the egg isn’t fertilized, it disintegrates when it reaches the uterus” (Jukes Girl Thing 17). In this selection, Jukes language conforms closely to the language mentioned by Martin.

Margaret Blackstone and Elissa Haden Guest’s Girl Stuff: a Survival Guide to Growing Up follows much of the same pattern. They begin by mentioning that, “from when you are about eight or even younger, your body starts getting ready for the time you will be able to reproduce or have a baby” (Blackstone and Guest 61). Although Blackstone and Guest are careful to point out that “this does not mean there’s a rule that says you *must* have a baby one day; it only means that your body is getting ready should you decide to do so” (Blackstone and Guest 61), they follow with the odd suggestion that the girl “picture the inside of your body just prior to puberty as a darkened room” that is designed to hold a baby (Blackstone and Guest 61). Blackstone and Guest continue their mixed message throughout. They follow the factory metaphor by mentioning that “when a girl ovulates (releases an egg), her uterus has been busy building up a thick lining of blood and tissue, which would become home to an egg if it were fertilized by a sperm. Most of the time the egg isn’t fertilized, so this rich nutrient-filled lining is not needed. So, the lining begins to break down and drip out of the vagina” (Blackstone and Guest 65). Then they follow by stating that, “menstruation is a cleansing process for your uterus” (Blackstone and Guest 65). The authors cannot decide if menstruation is the failure of the body to become pregnant or a routine “cleansing process.”

The Care and Keeping of You also views menstruation ambiguously. Unable to decide if “periods are a sign that your body is healthy and working properly” (Shaefer 70), or merely the result of a failure to become pregnant, the guide uses much of the language of the failed production model. Schaefer writes that when young girls menstruate, their bodies are “preparing to do the grown-up work of having a baby someday. Every month your body practices for this by building a ‘nest,’ a place for a baby to grow inside your uterus. The nest is a lining of blood and other fluid that builds up on the uterus walls” (70). When a girl does not become pregnant, “the lining is shed and you have a period” (Schaefer 70). Lynda Madaras, in her book My Body, Myself for Girls, provides the most neutral description of menstruation, though she still slips into the failed production metaphor at times. Madaras begins her discussion of menstruation by stating,

Of course, you're not ready to be a parent yet and probably won't be for some years. Even when you are ready, it's unlikely that you'll want to keep having children one right after the other. You won't be trying to get pregnant each and every month! Nonetheless, the monthly cycle of changes that prepare your body for pregnancy is repeated over and over again, month after month, throughout a woman's reproductive years, so your body will be ready if and when you decide to have a baby (Body 7).

In this, then, Madaras describes menstruation as a process of preparation, but a process that does not necessarily have an end goal. Later, though, Madaras still manages to fall into the same trap mentioned by Martin. She writes:

Most of the time the woman's ovum is not fertilized and she does not become pregnant. So, about two weeks after ovulation, the newly grown portion of the uterine lining begins to break down. The tissues of the lining disintegrate, and pieces of the lining collect in the bottom of the uterus. This collection of blood and tissue is known as the menstrual flow, menstrual blood or menstrual discharge (Madaras Body 78).

Throughout, the body guides use words like "break down" and "disintegrate," both negatively-charged terms that tend to equate menstruation with the failure to reproduce. According to Martin, the failed production metaphor reinforces both capitalism (via the need to produce constantly) and the patriarchy (via the need to control women's bodies). Otherwise, the metaphor would not have such power in a society in which most women strive to avoid pregnancy most of the time. Because of this, Brumberg stresses the need to question the type of information given to girls about their bodies. She writes that "the long-term consequences of demystifying the process of menstruation [...] are not entirely benign" (52). Instead of giving girls information about their bodies, we give them information about the relationship of hygiene and consumerism.

To compete with this model, Martin would like us to think of the menstrual cycle as just that: a cycle of events whose purpose is to induce menstruation. The language introducing such a perspective could read like this:

A drop in the formerly high levels of progesterone and estrogen creates the appropriate environment for reducing the excess layers of endometrial tissue. Constriction of capillary blood vessels causes a lower level of oxygen and nutrients and paves the way for a vigorous production of menstrual fluids. As a part of the renewal of the remaining endometrium, the capillaries begin to reopen, contributing some blood and serous fluid to the volume of endometrial material already beginning to flow (Martin 52).

Rather than looking at pregnancy as the hoped-for goal of the cycle, and menstruation as something that thwarts that goal, authors could write about menstruation as the usually hoped-for goal and pregnancy as something that may block menstruation from occurring. It would seem more logical for body guides aimed at pre-teen girls to write about menstruation in this way rather than using the failed production metaphor, especially because all of the authors agree that their readers should avoid pregnancy until they are "grown up." Authors' use

of the failed production metaphor serves to reflect society's ambivalence towards the reproductive potential of young girls. While society fears the "menace" that is teen pregnancy, it also fears a potentially reproductive female who chooses, whether by being celibate or through the use of birth control, to opt out of the production of offspring.

You're Still a Kid...

Menarche's connection to girls' reproductive functions may be the greatest source of our cultural anxieties about menstruation. Children and adults both worry about the onset of menstruation because it means that, at least physically, girls have reached sexual maturity. Girls and adults share the same fears about menstruation: that it means that girls will have to start acting like grown-up women. The body guide authors address both fears. Schafer tells her readers that "there's a lot more to being an adult than getting your period and growing breasts" (81). Blackstone and Guest state, "When you start your period, will everything change? No. Will some things change? Yes. You'll have new things to pay attention to. But the sooner you say, 'Hey, this is my period and that's the way it's going to be,' the better for you" (82). Madaras quotes a fifteen-year-old girl named Janelle, who said, "I was afraid I was going to have to be all grown up and wear high heels all the time instead of being a tomboy and climbing trees, but, really, it turned out that I did just the same things I always did" (What's Happening? 59). Jukes makes the most extensive statements on this subject, repeating throughout her book that puberty does not mean girls achieve instant womanhood. She begins her introduction with "No matter when a girl begins to go through puberty, she will still be a kid. Having breasts and hair in private places and having a period won't change that. She will not be a woman for a very, very long time. She will not be expected to act like a grownup and will not be treated like one" (Jukes Growing Up vi). She ends with a statement echoing the one from her introduction, that

Beginning to have periods is a big step toward becoming an adult woman, but only so far as the body is concerned. When a girl starts her period, someone might tell her, 'You're a woman now!' But she isn't really. And she won't be for a long time. A girl stays a kid the whole way through puberty and past it. [...] She'll still be a kid, entitled to the love, care and protection of the adults around her (Jukes Growing Up 69).

Clearly, these authors worry – and assume their readers also worry – about connecting the onset of menstruation with immediate entry into adulthood, and for good reason. One way to disconnect menses from being completely "grown up" and also make girls feel more positive about their menstrual cycles could be to turn menarche into a rite of passage. Companies that produce menstrual "learning kits," such as, Tampax, hope to make buying their first box of tampons into a commercial rite of passage for girls, one that solidifies the relationship between menstruation, filth and consumption. Obviously, then, not all rites of passage are made equal. What's Happening to My Body? and Girl Stuff also suggest that girls make their first period into a rite of passage, but these rites

take a far different form. Blackstone and Guest do not give girls a specific form for their rite of passage to take, but they do state that some girls enjoy celebrating “with their families and friends when they get their periods for the first time” (82).

These authors feel the need to add, though, that “on the other hand, you may feel very private about it and decide you don’t want to tell anyone but your mother or father” (Blackstone and Guest 83). Madaras is more insistent that the onset of menstruation deserves a celebration. She writes that, in India, girls get a party where they wear a crown, sit on a type of throne and receive gifts. While she doubts that most parents would go along with this, she suggests that girls “invent a special moonlight ceremony, have a slumber party with all your female friends, or be given a ring or special gift to be passed on to the next generation. It could be anything” (Madaras What’s Happening? 165). Her rite of passage focuses less on becoming a consumer and more on making a girl’s first period a celebratory experience. Ponton also believes that menstrual rites of passage are important, not only to make girls feel more positive about starting their periods, but also about themselves in general. She states, “I believe that younger teens feel betrayed by [the] lack of attention, even neglect, for their developmental milestones, and have slowly but surely developed their own initiation rites. Among these, the onset of sexual activity is the most obvious” (Ponton 42). When society does not sanction rites of passage for children, then, they develop their own. These rites may not be healthy or desirable.

Conclusion

Menstruation’s connection with filth and shame is perpetuated through our culture’s continued silence about it. At the moment, menstruation is almost completely erased in television shows and films aimed at tweens. Unfortunately, one can certainly not imagine the heroines of Disney’s *Lizzie McGuire* or *That’s So Raven* discussing their protagonists’ entry into womanhood. As Currie states, “For cultural studies to be truly critical, it must show how the ideology of commercial culture is constitutive of everyday relations, including gendered relations of domination and subordination” (142). Women’s everyday practice of concealing menstruation begins even before our cycles start, and continues throughout our fertile years. (One could even argue that much of the discourse surrounding menopause concerns the concealment of that phase of life as well.) Girls learn mixed messages about menstruation from their families and friends, from body guides and magazines, and practice these attitudes by both “protecting” themselves and others from their periods with menstrual products and (perhaps) celebrating their periods as wonderful, natural events. Learning to contain periods in acceptable ways through consuming disposable products becomes one early, important step in teaching girls how to contain their entire bodies through the practice of consumption, and conform, to some extent, to the “classical” body ideal. In other words, the way we feel about menstruation is one of the foundations of the way we feel about our bodies in general. Interrogating this learning process can begin the process of changing the messages girls

internalize about their bodies. Before we can help girls (and women) feel better about their bodies as a whole, we need to help them find more constructive ways to think about menstruation.

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