“It seems that menstruation is one of the last taboos in Western society.”

“Menstrual myths, misconceptions, and taboos are universal, even today.”

Introduction

Does menstruation still suffer from a taboo in western society as the above quotes imply? Menstruation and the menstruating woman are apparently no longer proscribed in the same way as old religious or social customs once demanded (ritual segregation, “unclean” status etc.) Menstruation is taught to young girls as part of the school curriculum and menstrual product advertising has been permissible for quite some time.

However, there do seem to be rules regarding menstruation, its discussion amongst women and its representation. For example the school curriculum lesson regarding menstruation is typically quite short, perhaps only one to two hours long and is presented through a video or pamphlets. Boys are normally excluded from this lesson and there is a great deal of embarrassment surrounding the subject. Mothers often rely on this lesson to give their daughters all the information they require about menstruation rather than talking it over with them.

Menstrual product advertising is unusual as well. Typical adverts for other products display their product prominently and the text advertises its superior ability, quality, price, design or all of the above. Menstrual product advertising however rarely features the product, nor does it explain what the product is used for. These adverts require a substantial amount of prior knowledge from the audience and rely heavily on “lifestyle” type marketing techniques, although technological advances are also touted.

Messages from these two sources emphasise concealment of menstruation from others and also link menstruation with excretory soiling. Women see menstruation as “a hassle” and women in Anglo-American culture believe unexpected staining of clothes due to menstruation to be one of the most socially embarrassing things that could possibly happen.

Outside of advertising and school education it is surprisingly difficult to find other representations of menstruation. It has rarely been mentioned in the arts, such as fine art,
music, film, television or literature, even in the eras strongly associated with feminism, such as the 1970s.

It seems that menstruation is subject to a very specific kind of discourse, one that seems relatively restrictive in post-millenial times compared with the erosion of other physical or sexual taboos such as gory violence or homosexuality. This study seeks to investigate the formulation of this discourse, its history, its current cultural maintenance, and its relevance to and affect on women today.

At this point it is worth noting that menstruation is just one manifestation of a range of connected female physical processes to do with fertility, reproduction and childbirth. Indeed, in the historical sections of this essay it has been necessary to examine gynaecological literature in order to distil information regarding menstruation. I have chosen to focus on the smaller issue of menstruation in order to maintain a fixed point of reference for this essay whilst being mindful of these other processes. It would be beyond the scope of this essay to include these other issues in detail. I will return to the wider implications for the female body later in the essay.

Historical Taboos

Menstruation has long been a source of fear and taboos. Mary Douglas’ groundbreaking anthropological text *Purity and Danger* refers to the frequency of menstrual blood as one of the primary sources of pollution anxiety in non-western cultures.\(^9\) Cultures from many times and places have held strong beliefs regarding the menstruating woman. The touch or even gaze of the menstruating women was feared to cause the crops or catch to fail, or negatively effect the fertility of the herd. The religious proscriptions are also widespread.\(^10\)

Ceremonies to deal with this taboo typically involve some form of segregation of the woman from the social or religious body, bans on intercourse and ritual cleansing after the menstrual period is over. This kind of taboo is not present in contemporary Anglo-American culture - for example the menstruating woman must now conceal her menstrual status rather than reveal it to the social group. Physical segregation is not required however some sort of psychological segregation occurs stemming from the need to conceal. Private physical hygiene is now imperative as opposed to public ritual cleansing.

Historical Roots

In order to investigate the historical formulation and nature of modern menstrual codes I have looked at three overlapping areas which are the main ways we use to think about

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\(^9\) Douglas, 1966  
\(^10\) Golub 1992
menstruation today to uncover clues to menstrual attitudes in the past. These are: medicine, cleanliness and hygiene and ideas of polite conduct or manners.

The Early Modern Period

Medicine

Medicine as we think of it today was born after the Renaissance with new interest in learning through rational thought and technology rather than relying on the explanations of religion. Ancient Greek medical literature combined with a large measure of folk wisdom proved the basis for this new science and in part due to lack of anatomical knowledge it was strongly biased by the socio-cultural thinking of the time.\textsuperscript{11}

In Tudor and Stewart times all manner of medical speculation regarding menstruation abounded. Despite lack of accurate anatomical knowledge menstruation was (more or less accurately) seen as inseparable from and vital to procreation and therefore something to pay careful attention to. Amenorrhea (absence of menstruation) featured prominently in the medical literature and was considered more dangerous (and noteworthy) than either menorrhagia (excessive bleeding) or dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation). Sex was discussed frequently and was the standard remedy employed for menstrual problems. If intercourse was not possible (unwed girls for example) then stimulation of the genitals by a midwife was sometimes advised.\textsuperscript{12} The belief in humoralism was strong and bleeding with leeches was a common course of treatment for amenorrhea, though the exact details of treatment varied from doctor to doctor.\textsuperscript{13} Menstruation was brought to a doctor’s attention only when its regularity or appearance were lacking. Treatment involved bleeding or simple advice about daily life, for example avoiding being too hot or eating red meat. When intercourse was advised it was administered by husbands or female medical practitioners.

Beliefs regarding the internal organs of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to reasonably female friendly beliefs regarding sex, childbirth and menstruation. For example it was believed women carried “seed” in the same way as a man and the two seeds must join in order to make a baby. Female orgasm was also presumed to be required for conception therefore the clitoris was well regarded. The ovaries were first discovered in 1698 and gradually the idea of female seed fell out of favour. When it was discovered that the womb could not move around the body as once believed, hysterical swoons had to be explained in other ways. The idea of putrid “vapours” rising from the womb to the brain and causing fits was believed in the popular mind well into the Victorian period, despite being discredited in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Introduction in Bynum & Porter 1993
\textsuperscript{12} Eccles, 1982
\textsuperscript{13} Nutton, in Bynum 1993
\textsuperscript{14} Eccles, 1982
Eccles speculates that increasing knowledge of female anatomy helped to fuel the repressive ideas about women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eccles notes “In mentioning such matters as masturbation and lesbianism authors in this period adopt a much more neutral tone than do Victorian authors, who tend to either censor such topics or treat them in a heated or hysterical manner.”

Hygiene

Hygiene is a Greek word originally meaning “health” and its connotations of cleanliness were not present in this period. Cleanliness was limited to the hands, hair and front few teeth, and even these only when in company. In this period unsightly body parts were covered with clothes, hair by wigs and smells by perfumes by those who could afford it. Only the outer layer of clothes needed to be laundered.

Conduct and Politeness

“Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, hundreds of publications were produced to teach Englishmen and women the principles of good conduct and polite deportment.”

Drawing from Turner’s essay and from Anna Bryson’s book From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in early Modern England we see that conduct publications become a literary source of information regarding social mores from the sixteenth century onwards. Turner lists changes such as population growth (and thereby a greater urban population), expanding trade, the prominence of the court under the Tudors and ideas imported from ancient Rome via Italy as reasons for the proliferation of manuals. Bryson explains in more detail the idea of ‘civility’ as a political idea espoused by:

“largely Italian humanist writers propagating the classical ideal of the well-ordered polis... Shorn of dangerous republican implications, the concept was used in English humanist discussions of the values of the monarchical ‘commonwealth’ and the personal characteristics of virtue and learning necessary in its aristocratic rulers. A further dimension was added to the concept during the sixteenth century as the opposition between the ‘civil’ and the ‘barbaric’ implicit in classical writings was elaborated and developed in response to the challenge presented by the discovery of the ‘New World’ and its ‘savage’ inhabitants.”

15 Ibid.  
16 Turner in Defining Gender  
17 Bryson, 1998  
18 Ibid.
She notes:

“While late medieval manuscripts setting out rules for ‘courteous’ conduct had focused on rituals of lordship and service within the noble household, early modern manuals of manners presented ‘civil’ behaviour as a technique for representation of personal virtue within a broader ‘civil’ community.”

Both writers agree that the manuals were intended for the aristocracy or the elite, meaning the majority would be ignorant of their codes. There is no menstruation mentioned in these manuals, though many were specifically aimed at women. Chastity and modesty were the concerns of the day for women and “conduct literature addressed women in three stages of life: maid, wife and widow.” Therefore the majority of advice concerns marriage and the home.

Bodily restrictions were cited in the early modern period in the conduct literature and Bryson links this with a concern not to appear "bestial" - the body being the inescapable site of “animal passions”. Exercising control over one’s body was the outward symbol of a person’s ability to move from animal-like to ‘civilised’. These restrictions include not spitting, especially at the dinner table, refraining from public display of the genitals and private rather than public defecation.20 As a result, it might be possible to suppose that aristocratic women became more private when experiencing menstruation. The new rules of conduct, such as refraining from spitting, were centred around being considerate of others, rather than experiencing shame of yourself. Since we have already noted that this literature was intended for an elite audience and the literature itself is not a precise marker for how people actually behaved we can infer that few women were profoundly affected by the new culture of manners regarding menstruation.

It can however, be seen as a foundation which would be built upon over the centuries with more and more people, seeking to distinguish themselves from the masses by their behaviour, undertaking to display ‘manners’ of a more and more ‘civilised’ nature.

The Georgians/Industrial Revolution

Medicine

At some point in the seventeenth century the Chamberlen family invented the forceps, though they kept this device secret until the turn of the eighteenth century. Forceps greatly helped the delivery of a child during an abnormal birth and symbolise a rise in masculine medical dominance that was pervasive even in a traditionally female occupation - that of midwifery. During this period a cross over was occurring between

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
traditional midwives who learned their skills by experience and learned medical men who had greater knowledge of anatomy and access to technological inventions such as the forceps. This period sees a slow improvement in anatomical knowledge and medical thought which meant wealthier families turned increasingly to doctors for medical advice.21

Hygiene

In his essay ‘The History of Personal Hygiene’ Andrew Wear highlights a number of changes in ideas regarding hygiene from the Renaissance through to the 20th century. By the eighteenth century the French nobility had started to take private baths and the practice of washing under linen as well as outer garments “became a necessary sign of good breeding.”22

There is also the religious element. Wear says “the health of the body had been linked to the health of the soul and the Christian was enjoined to care for the body as well as the soul.”

Increased cleanliness, then, was a phenomena spreading through all of upper and middle class society during this period as both a social and a moral expectation.

Conduct and Politeness

“Conventional accounts of the immense economic growth and change described as the Industrial revolution locate its birth firmly in the mid-eighteenth century.”23 A growing population, increased urbanisation, technological advances in industry, growth of mercantilist trade both abroad and with colonies, improved agricultural techniques, increasing influence of parliament and a huge expansion of turnpike road networks are all factors in Britain which meant the eighteenth century was a time of unprecedented political, economic and social change.24

What interests us is the possibility that social codes started to change during this period or later as regards prohibitions on the mentioning and display of menstruation.

The nobility or “landed aristocracy” were certainly threatened by “the steady assimilation of small professional and business families” Continental visitors noted that: “Anyone, it appeared, who to chose to dress like a gentleman was treated like one. Middle class, even lower class Londoners aped the fashions, manners and opinions of polite society. This, it seems clear, was the authentic mark of a society in which all social values, distinctions, and customs gave way before the sovereign power of cash.”

21 Eccles, 1982
22 Wear in Bynum & Porter 1993
23 Langford in Morgan, 1984
24 Ibid.
During this time period social codes among the upper classes and the continuously growing middle class started to shift in order to better distinguish themselves from each other, since the usual divider of personal wealth was now no longer obvious. Things such as fine clothes or even education were now in the reach of the recently moneyed middle classes so that observing a person’s dress or manner of speech did not necessarily indicate “good breeding”. Distinguishing the classes was important for both groups. The former elite we anxious to stay that way; heredity was still an extremely important idea of the time to transmit wealth and status within “pure” families and the literature of the time warns young men against marrying beneath them . Similarly the middle classes were striving to define their own values and whilst enjoying the privileges normally reserved for the upper classes they wished to distance themselves from the debauchery and loose morals associated with the same. Middle class morality incorporated “the Puritan values of thrift, hard work and honest dealing” as can be seen by the popularity of Hogarth’s famous ‘Idleness and Industry’ series.25

Dr Vivien Jones notes about the eighteenth century:

“Commercial expansion also meant upward social mobility for many, and readers were eager for advice... on how to behave in private life as new members of an increasingly self-conscious middling class, which used ideas of politeness and respectability to differentiate itself from aristocratic culture.

The middling classes wished to be taken seriously as members of a higher order than the masses even if it was bank balance, rather than breeding, which provided them with this status. In order to appear refined they aped the upper classes in a number of ways. Politeness, cleanliness and manners were the most obvious ways of distinguishing themselves from the working class.

We have also seen however that the aristocratic class was given to excess, while the middle classes were influenced by Puritanism and the idea of hard work earning its just rewards. The aristocratic class still had wealth and heritage to back up their status as the higher order. The middle classes however had little to back up their new status and ‘civil’ behaviour not only provides class distinction but fits neatly with Puritan values. In this period we see an escalation of the number of people adhering to ‘manners’ and the middle classes bringing their own sense of Puritan moral correctness with them.

The Victorians

The Victorian period continued the very rapid changes brought on by advances in

25 Ibid.
26 Jones in Defining Gender online archive
science, politics and particularly the industrial revolution. The middle classes now made up a substantial number of the population and even the working class benefited from improvements in living and working conditions.

In this period the three elements I have examined so far - medicine, hygiene and manners - changed from being relatively discrete entities to becoming an inseparable mass of consensus thought and behaviour.

Medicine

Medicine had advanced over time to include new discoveries of many kinds. It had also become a socially respected field with more people employing the services of a doctor: “From the beginning of the nineteenth century onward, the presence of the medical profession was increasingly noticeable at the bedsides of the aristocratic and bourgeois clients... At the end of the century growing numbers of the newly rich and lesser local luminaries - lumber dealers, livestock merchants, tavern keepers, millers, gelders - were apt to seek out the town doctor as an educated companion... who carried word of scientific advances to the rural masses.”

The scientific community had also made discoveries which rocked the supremacy of the church, not least of which was Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. Brumberg notes: “as the power of spiritual belief declined, the authority of medicine rose.”

During this period menstruation was something to be carefully monitored and controlled. Despite humoralism being discredited many years earlier it was still felt by doctors that menstruation required much “energy” and women should seek bed rest whilst on their period. The prejudices from the medical community centre around women being incapacitated for several days of the month or “one week out of four” and being susceptible to shocks, exhaustion and general vulnerability of body and mind during menstruation. The prohibition against immersing in water - particularly very hot or very cold water - was still adhered to, despite being an idea from the mid-seventeenth century. Overtaxing the mind would result in disruption to menstruation due to drawing energy away from the reproductive organs. This argument was used to prevent women from entering higher education on “humane” grounds. If adequate rest was not taken, especially for younger girls, doctors warned the girl would become feeble and incapacitated.

**Warnings of the frailty of women increased as the movement for female emancipation**

27 Corbin (II) in Perrot, 1990
28 Brumberg, 1997
29 Showalter in Vicinus, 1980
30 Eccles 1982
31 Showalter in Vicinus, 1980
32 Brumberg 1997
began to become visible and various studies late in the Victorian period disproved any
detriment to health caused by studying whilst menstruating\textsuperscript{33}. These small voices of
dissent were largely ignored by the male medical community however.

Discussion between mother and daughter regarding menstruation was changed by
medical intervention. Brumberg speculates that “The threat of having a beloved
daughter become an invalid (or infertile) motivated the respect of many women for
medical authority. Because most mothers did not understand the relevant biology and
stammered over what to call their own body parts, they were willing to turn to physicians
for explanations of normal life experiences, including the growth and sexual
development of their daughters.”\textsuperscript{34} Corbin concurs, “Mothers relied on doctors to
familiarize their daughters with the signs of puberty”\textsuperscript{35}

Foucault argues in \textit{The History of Sexuality Vol. 1} that sex and the body came under
increasing scrutiny during the Victorian period. He describes sexuality as “an especially
dense point for relations of power” and “four great strategic unities... formed specific
mechanisms of knowledge and power centring on sex.” The first one being “The
hysterization of women’s bodies: a threefold process whereby the feminine body was
analyzed .. as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality, whereby it was integrated into
the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it...”\textsuperscript{36}

Women’s reproductive functions then were \textit{intrinsically} placed under the umbrella of
medicine by virtue of their bodily pathology. A Victorian mother might therefore find
herself submitting to male medical pressures by virtue of his own absolute confidence in
the designation of menstruation as being under his area of influence, rather than hers.
Indeed Brumberg later notes the convenient broadening of a doctor’s potential patient
base to include women from as young as eleven years old upwards.\textsuperscript{37} What was once
an invisible private discourse between mothers and daughters has become the concern
of male medical professionals.

**Hygiene**

By the Victorian period the word hygiene was increasingly becoming synonymous with
cleanliness. In previous decades the elite and wealthy began to value cleanliness as a
sign of good breeding and moral character. During this period, “the irony is that the
middle classes did continue to ape the manners of the nobility. In the nineteenth
century... cleanliness [was] a sign of civilised gentility and of good social order.”\textsuperscript{38} Both the
\textsuperscript{33} Golub, 1992
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Corbin (II) in Perrot 1990
\textsuperscript{36} Foucault, 1979
\textsuperscript{37} Brumberg, 1997
\textsuperscript{38} Wear in Bynum & Porter, 1993
upper and middle classes were following practices of personal cleanliness and possibly insisting on it for certain parts of the working class as well, for example the servants who worked in their households. The moral associations also escalate in this period: “The association between cleanliness and morality became very general and pervasive as the nineteenth century progressed.” These social and moral associations lead to what Wear calls “interiorization of cleanliness” (becoming cleaner in successive layers until cleanliness applied to the skin). He goes on: “Keeping one’s skin clean was policed not by others but by oneself, by an internal sense of good manners (or by an internal sense of guilt).” (Italics mine)

The Body

Alain Corbin in his ‘The Secret of the Individual’ in a French book about private life notes that regulation of the body has become a primary concern: “In the nineteenth century modesty and shame were important determinants of behaviour. Behind these terms lurked two fears: fear of allowing the Other - the body - to express itself and fear that an indiscretion might give away one’s most intimate secrets. The first fear led to self-discipline, as people sought to prevent any organic manifestation of the body’s existence. Richard Sennet has described the “green disease”, a form of constipation from which women suffered as a result of fear of breaking wind in public.”

This no doubt had implications for women when dealing with menstruation as well.

Physical behaviour and comportment teachings were transmitted through schools run by nuns and “the precepts taught in convents became stricter around the middle of the century” Through these religious institutions “techniques of self discipline spread to laymen and laywomen.”

Young girls were a source of anxiety for Victorian adults. In France a cult of the angel became popular where angels were held up as role models to which young girls could aspire. Brumberg notes how Victorian social codes in America were anxious to present their girls as beautiful, innocent and virtuous belles. Both Corbin and Brumberg agree that a young girl posed a dangerous problem of being the paragon of innocence and virtue on one hand and potentially sexual and fecund at the moment of adolescence on the other. Corbin notes that “thick books of physiology and hygiene were devoted to pubescent girls.” and in America Brumberg points out “Because knowledge about menstruation was the first step on the slippery slope to loss of innocence, many Victorian mothers simply avoided the subject all together, believing it was in the best

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
interest of their daughters.\textsuperscript{44}

To summarise Corbin's essay: In the latter half of the nineteenth century the idea of the individual and privacy was increasingly gaining currency in both the public and private realm.

Coupled with the revelations of Pasteur and Lister on germ theory something that could almost be described as a revolution took place.

Public hospitals introduced single beds while in the home brothers and sisters were also separated into individual beds. Bathrooms were more and more common, British legislation stating the necessity of waste being flushed away by sewers was in effect from 1885.\textsuperscript{45} Roger-Henri Guerrand notes: “Britain experienced a tremendous vogue for flush toilets. The golden age of indoor plumbing had begun and all Europe studied English methods.”\textsuperscript{46} By 1900 locks were installed on communal bathrooms. It must be noted that this kind of change was inevitably uneven “In the Nivernais, the respectable bourgeoisie did not adopt the bidet or sanitary napkin until the turn of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{47}

These changes had important implications for menstruation. “In the 1870s Americans became conversant with Joseph Lister’s concept of antisepsis and the idea that human waste, and even air and water, contained something alive and dangerous. In the 1880s, public health officials, motivated by the new germ theory, began to advocate antiseptic cleanliness of the house and the person.... Menstrual blood, which had long been taboo, was now suspect on scientific grounds as a potential contaminant.”\textsuperscript{48}

Conduct and Politeness

‘As citizens attempted to comprehend and control their intellectual and social environment, conduct writing gained currency. So too did it gain in relative importance as the emergent middle class attained wealth and status and sought to emulate the “superior classes”. A fear of the poor, anxiety concerning change, and an emphasis on propriety and appearances amalgamated in the collective mind of the middle class, prompting them to distinguish themselves from the “masses”\textsuperscript{49}

In this period advice and conduct manuals were aimed squarely at the still-growing middle class, rather than being confined to the upper classes as in earlier periods.

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\textsuperscript{44} Brumberg, 1997
\textsuperscript{45} Guerrand in Perrot 1990
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Brumberg, 1997
\textsuperscript{49} Robinson in \textit{Defining Gender}
\end{flushleft}
as opposed to “bestial” and by the Victorian period have grown to include further dimensions. These include policing and cleanliness of the body, which is supported by moral ideas and startling medical discoveries. Codes concerning “public” and “private” behaviour have become more complex and more important.

Representation

Menstruation in the Victorian period had begun to be represented in the public realm by virtue of its medicalisation. Scientific journals at least published articles on the subject, though these would be available to a select population group. Simultaneously, for reasons of virtue, fear, prudery or intervention by the medical community, Victorian mothers became increasingly reluctant to instruct their daughters about menstruation. Since private tuition regarding menstruation was no longer available, it is important to this essay to examine other public forms of menstrual representation. Historians have found it hard to find any other representations of menstruation from this period. “Menstruation has no literary reflection, true or false... Even the redoubtable Marquis de Sade, who took prurient delight in mouldy faeces and decapitated dogs, appears to have regarded menstruation with faint distaste.”

One other form of representation of menstruation did however exist and that was in the field of sanitary napkin advertising. In the days before sanitary towels were invented women used a variety of ways to cope with menstruation, all of them home-made. Some type of rag or cheap cloth was pinned in thick bundles into underwear and washed for reuse. There is also evidence to suggest that some working women used no absorption device at all and simply bled into their clothes or onto the floor. However, in the late Victorian period advertising for a new disposable product brought a type of representation of menstruation into the public consciousness for the first time.

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50 Showalter in Vicinus 1980
51 Ibid.
52 Golub, 1992
53 http://www.mum.org/pastgerm.html
The earliest adverts are for Hartmanns Wood Wool Diapers, a German company which advertised in European countries. The ads are tiny, situated in yellow back novels - a cheap popular book form sold at train stations and characterised by the cheap yellow paper covers - or in magazines. The early Hartmanns adverts focus on the benefits of ‘cheaper than washing’ disposable diapers as their selling point and repeatedly mention the availability of a circular with “Opinions of the leading Members of the Medical Profession and Principal Hospitals”. They are also labelled as hygienic, antiseptic and healthful.

Adverts from a British company called Southalls are also on the website dating from 1888 onwards using similar ideas to the Hartmanns’ ads and also incorporate the idea of convenience for the lady traveller! From the earliest ad Southalls describes the “private parcels” coming “under plain wrapper” with “plain address labels quite free from anything to attract observation”. They also claim “this department being entirely managed by Ladies” and queries are to be sent to “The Lady Manager”. In later ads (1892 onwards) pictures of a nurse are shown popping the parcel in the post.

Hygiene and antisepsis would have clearly resonated with the audience for these ads as we have seen the importance of new ideas on cleanliness and hygiene. It is also clear
from what we have seen about the medicalisation of menstruation why these ads include doctors’ and nurses’ testimonials. The history of the sanitary towel is also linked with hospitals in other ways. The sanitary towel and indeed tampon had been used in hospitals for years before the availability of commercial products when treating invalid or
comatose female patients.

A new type of bandage made of wood pulp/cellulose had been invented for the Crimean and First World Wars in response to huge demand for a bandage with increased absorption capabilities. Faced with mountains of unused wadding when the wars ended, manufacturers came up with the idea of using it as material to absorb menstrual blood when they heard stories of nurses on the front line using it for this very purpose. They were convenient for a busy nurse who had no time to wash rags and could be disposed of by burning.

This hospital/hygiene link does however imply that anything other than wood wool diapers used for menstrual blood absorption (such as traditional home-made methods) is unhygienic which is not necessarily true. Antiseptic and hygienic qualities are important for bandaging wounds to reduce the risk of infection, yet we now know that menstruation is not a ‘wound’ and poses very little risk of communicable disease. Due to lack of knowledge at the time no distinction was made between menstruation, blood from wounds and other bodily wastes. As a result of the sanitary angle taken by early advertisers, popular “medical” beliefs have been strongly affected, down to this day.

Sanitary towels were a convenience item for the middle and upper classes. This is because the price was prohibitive to the working class. Despite being advertised “at cost of washing”, the 2 shilling price tag represented between one and three days wages for working class occupations such as a labourer or brick layer. They were also advertised to the “Lady Traveller” - travelling being something still closed to the working classes but more and more available to the middle classes.

Southalls relied on the hygienic and antiseptic qualities of their towels in their ads and in 1902 introduce the idea of comfort also. By 1913 Southalls ads were quite refined. The ad below (p.13) was published in a magazine in 1913.

Here we see repeated the “health advantages” and antiseptic ideas. Southalls are now using the supposed health advantages in order to distinguish themselves from competitors and home-made devices (“special antiseptic material... in no other towels”). Interestingly, the idea of “imperceptible use” has appeared for the first time. This is one of the first social selling points to be used in a towel ad - implying it is important that no-one should know one is menstruating. This is reinforced by the phrase “full security”. Presumably this means security from the possibility of menstruation showing on ones clothes - something which could have weighed on the minds of well to do ladies of the time who as we’ve seen suffered terribly trying not to break wind in public. This ad has also introduced the idea of asking for a brand (with the word CAUTION in capital letters) rather than the object, which Kotex in America used to full effect from their first advert in 1920.

54 (http://www.victorianweb.org/economics/wages3.html)
With this ad, disturbing imagery has crept into the hawking of menstrual products.

Though the advert utilises the best possible marketing strategy for its time, danger (to both health and social standing), shame, insecurity and dirtiness are implied.

The word menstruation or any euphemism thereof is not once mentioned in any of these ads. Neither is the product shown or its application. It is presumed that the woman reading the ad can decode what it is advertising. The ads must go to great length to
advertise a product whilst hiding its use. This is no doubt due to qualms from the male publishers over these adverts and worries about the reaction of their readers. These ads must be careful to hide their existence from both men and children. While this may have been a condition of their being acceptable to print, it also created an atmosphere of secrecy for the women to whom the adverts were directed, inadvertently reinforcing the prudish taboos of the day.

Sanitary Protection Adverts in America

In 1896 a company called Lister’s Towels advertised a sanitary towel narrowly and with little success. The product did not fare well although it was in fact owned by Johnson & Johnson. It would take the huge social changes (and surplus bandages) of the First World War to make permissible a large advertising campaign for a commercial sanitary towel. The first trial advert for Kotex was published in 1920 and the full campaign was released in 1921 - the same year women in America were legally allowed to vote for the first time.

The 1920s

In the 1920’s Kotex “burst onto the scene” with a large and sustained advertising campaign in both local, national and international magazines and newspapers, the most famous of which being The Ladies’ Home Companion and the New York Times. Kotex was the leading advertiser for sanitary towels, though by the end of the decade brand names Modess and Curads had also begun advertising campaigns. Brumberg notes “These advertisements constituted the first real public acknowledgement of menstruation.” The messages in all the Kotex ads are similar yet more extreme than the Victorian ads above.

Kotex came up with an advertising solution to a difficult conundrum. They were under pressure from publications to make sure the adverts were “tasteful”, meaning they should not be too obvious or explicit about what they were advertising. Despite the strap line chosen for the 1920’s ads - “Inexpensive, Comfortable, Hygienic and Safe - Kotex” - Kotex’s product was not inexpensive compared to home made methods, was not particularly comfortable, as later adverts admit, and was not strictly any more hygienic or “safe” than home-made methods. However a perfectly good bandage factory could be kept in operation if the product was a success. Kotex copywriters therefore came up with several strategies to market this new product, which women did not need.

55 Golub, 1992
56 Brumberg, 1997
57 Advert examples from 1920-1959 and their biographical information have all been quoted from the Ad*Access online project provided by the Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library at: http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/
58 Brumberg 1997
Medicine and Science

Kotex enthusiastically promoted the medical “benefits” of their product. The very first
ads use a nurse in the picture and the Kotex box had a red cross symbol as its logo, cementing the relationship between medical images and the product. Menstruation is promoted as a medical problem with a medical solution (“4 Reasons the Doctors Say Use Kotex” -1928). The ads refer to “scientific methods”, “approved by doctors and nurses everywhere” but offer no examples of where or who recommends them. Many of the ads are supposedly written by the (obviously fictional) “Ellen J. Buckland, Graduate Nurse.” Many ads claim the pads were invented by a “famous doctor” although none say exactly who. Almost every ad of the 1920’s claims the product has been “scientifically” developed, a buzzword encompassing ideas of advancement that were prevalent at the time. They also frequently quote patent numbers, another gimmicky tool.

Health and Cleanliness
As well as the medical angle of these ads the idea of hygiene, cleanliness and health is heavily used, quite frequently referring to menstruation as “woman’s oldest hygienic problem” or even “hygienic handicap”. A series of ads intended for adult women from 1925-27 were entitled: “Active Women of Today Are Free: From the Handicap of Yesterday’s Hygienic Worries”, “This Ends the Worries of Old-Time Hygienic Methods: By Providing Protection That Is Absolute” and “The Safe Solution of Woman’s Greatest Hygienic Problem: Which 8 in 10 Better-Class Women Have Adopted” (from the Canadian Home Journal, Ladies’ Home Journal, Woman’s Home Companion).

As well as promoting their product, Kotex ads discredit traditional methods by repeatedly stating that home-made devices are unsanitary and even “dangerous to health”. These ads also make oblique reference to the smell of menstrual blood, claiming women can unknowingly “offend others” and deodorised sanitary towels are the answer. The link between cleanliness and social anxieties is explicit.

Menstruation Negatively Effects Life

Another strand of the ads implies menstruation can upset normal life, either through hygiene problems, mental problems related to worrying about the hygiene problems, loss of “poise” or “daintiness”, and being unattractive. For example these lead titles for ads: “Under the Most Trying Hygienic Handicaps: One Can have Peace-of-Mind, Poise, Immaculacy” (1927). “Exquisiteness under circumstances once considered impossible”, “Your Life Will Hold More Contented Days” (1925) and this startling lead title: "Authorities say that the average woman spends one-sixth of her days in a state of lost self confidence - often in fear.” (Kotex Modern Priscilla Magazine, 1924). Social fears were manipulated so that women viewed their bodies in a negative light, artificially creating demand for these products. These include the need for concealment, both hygienically and through personal behaviour and fear of unexpected menstruation causing “emergencies”.

Curads and Modess are two other brands which begin to advertise at the end of the 1920’s. It seems that Kotex’s effective campaigns were relied on by these companies for the new language of menstruation and their ads are shorter, with even less mention of what the product being advertised does, however they parrot the same message as Kotex, “Curads solve this very difficult problem”, “Modess [are] safer... deodorizing”

Scripting The Mother-Daughter Discourse

In the late 1920’s Modess ran an ad campaign called “Modernizing Mother” (below) portraying daughters humiliating their mothers and their “quaint ways” of the “[eighteen] nineties” in at least nine different episodes. Kotex also targeted older women by

Deodorant in sanitary towels and tampons is now considered unhealthy due to the possibility of irritation or allergic reaction - see Golub 1992 p.152
claiming the youth are championing their product (though no empirical evidence is ever used to back up these claims) or threatening that “modern” and “youthful” women are daring to try Kotex. They also blackmail mothers with supposedly positive messages for their daughters - “A Great Hygienic Handicap Your Daughter Will Be Spared” (Kotex - Butterick Quarterly Magazine 1926).

This mother and daughter idea was taken up by sanitary protection companies from the other side of the equation as well. From the 1920’s onwards sanitary protection companies began to produce instruction pamphlets for mothers and daughters and later for schools which gave advice about menstruation. These pamphlets no doubt served a function in helping educate both mothers and daughters by providing useful information but certainly they were an excellent opportunity to advertise. It is interesting to note that despite being written under the guise of “growing up” booklets, none of the company-produced publications were written or addressed to boys. Whatever the intentions behind them, these pamphlets introduced negative anxiety producing messages to children who had no outside knowledge of menstruation and therefore no possibility of weighing up alternative arguments.

The first ever pamphlet was published by Kotex in 1927 and entitled ‘Marjorie May’s Twelfth Birthday’ . It is written in the guise of a mother talking to a daughter. First they go upstairs in order to be “private” and then mother explains that in years gone by mothers and daughters did not have a close companionship and did not talk to each other. In explaining menstruation Marjorie May’s mother asks her to remember what she knows about getting rid of “bodily wastes” regularly by going to the toilet. She then tells Marjorie May she is growing taller and part of “growing up” is noticing a “slightly blood stained fluid” - another “unused substance” of her body. To deal with the fluid mother advises using a Kotex pad and Kotex sanitary belt. She informs her that in the future she will have to change her pad four times a day because if it becomes too moist it will be “extremely uncomfortable and unpleasant”. She tells her that the instructions for using the belt are enclosed and she should read them on her own. In order to plan for her period mother teachers Marjorie May to mark the first day of the arrival of the “fluid” on a calendar. She says that it should be 28 days later that she has another period (unless an illness makes it later or earlier) and keeping an accurate calendar can help with taking her sanitary products to school but also if the period deviates from 28 days regularly they will have to arrange to see a doctor. She also advises Marjorie May to ignore “silly superstitions... unless a sensible, scientific reason can be given for it.” She says one such superstition advised against bathing but now doctors say bathing is acceptable. However she goes on to say it must be a warm bath, never too hot or too cold and she must “wash that part of your body very thoroughly” every time she changes her Kotex pad (which she has just said should be four times a day). Exercise is also not forbidden but “hard games” and “excitement” must be avoided. This new experience explains

All examples of educational pamphlets throughout the essay are scans of original documents found at the Museum of Menstruation at http://www.mum.org as such some dates may not be exact.
why her friend was “quiet” at the birthday party.

This pamphlet creates a very specific discourse around when, how and in what way it is permissible to talk about menstruation. The women talk in private, away from Daddy, and it explains people didn’t talk about it at all in the past. Marjorie May must “take it
easy” in a variety of ways whilst on her period but also grapple with complex new body monitoring and hygiene responsibilities. Only a few lines actually explain menstruation in any physical way and it is referred to as being dirty enough to warrant thoroughly washing four times a day. Menstruation is explicitly associated with faeces and “waste matter”. The only information about dealing with a period is in the form of the product Kotex which is mentioned by name six times and no instruction about this is really given - Marjorie May has to read the instruction leaflet in private. While claiming to be dismissing menstrual myths (which had been invented by Victorian doctors) it propagates those same myths in a slightly altered format - it is a Victorian prejudice that women are more frail and susceptible to “shocks” of extreme temperature whilst menstruating. The injunction
against exercise is the same myth about taking no exercise, watered down.

But a more pressing point is that the pamphlet replaces the actual talk between mother and daughter that happens in the story. This pamphlet is designed to aid conversation between mother and daughter which due to historical prejudices might never have taken place otherwise, however the reality is that the booklet has given the mother an even better way of avoiding the “growing up” conversation. The booklet was published with a tear-off slip at the start of the book which provided instruction for mothers on using the book. It refers to the mother’s menarcheal experiences as full of “heartaches and embarrassed hours” and describes telling a daughter about it a “burden” saying “there isn’t one mother in a thousand whose gift of eloquence enables her to advise her daughter of the coming menstruation...” Instead mothers should buy a box of Kotex and place the booklet with it in their daughter’s room and ensure “the child will be alone... while reading the story” (italics theirs) and if carried out correctly “your child unconsciously gives YOU the credit for the enlightenment.”

The pamphlet makes some attempt at instructing girls about menstruation before it occurs but if the guidance was followed as advised this surely created its own gulf between mothers and daughters. A child would be bemused to be given this story rather than having her own mother speak to her about it. Being alone reading the booklet means she has no chance to ask questions and since her mother has declined to even provide this first bit of information face to face the child will surely be afraid to seek her mother out.

Importantly, due to their commercial nature of this booklet other aspects of the bodily experience have been ignored: the emotional impact is not mentioned, the impact of body image change is not discussed; what the maturational change means for the child - such as sexual development and reproductive capacity - is glossed over. Even practical aspects of using sanitary protection, and whether this is even needed are obviously not broached. By twinning menstruation with defecation menstruation is seen as dirty, smelly and something to be kept strictly secret. If the subject is taboo with mother then surely it is even more so with father and brother and later husband and employer. There is just one further source of public information open to the girl - Kotex advertisements. These claim “everyone is talking about sanitary towels” but reinforce the feelings of embarrassment and shame regarding menstruation.

‘Marjorie May’s Twelfth Birthday’ is just the first in a long line of pamphlets which have been printed from the 1920’s to today. They were made available for free by writing to the sanitary towel company and were advertised along with the product in magazines. By the 1940s they were being used as teaching aids, once again for free and so called “teacher’s packs” were entirely made up of several versions of the pamphlets (for younger or older girls) and product samples.
Brumberg notes that in the 1920’s these pamphlets helped bridge the gap of silence carried over from the Victorian era: “The new hygiene provided middle-class mothers with a safe script for their private conversations with their daughters. Instead of talking about “the curse of Eve” or “nerve stimulation” (which one could not see) they focused on the
logistics of “sanitary protection”  

However, “Maternal advice about the purchase and use of sanitary napkins... was certainly well intentioned and extremely useful, but it did have an unintended effect; it encouraged the idea that menarche was a matter of consumer decision-making and that coming-of-age was a process to be worked out in the marketplace rather than at home.”

Maternal advice suffered from the intrusion of commercialism. I would argue that this was deliberate. Brumberg goes on to admit: “The availability of so much free, corporate sponsored teaching material meant that many mothers and teachers simply gave out pamphlets and samples rather than provided individual advice and counsel about growing up female.”

The 1930s

In the 1930’s Tampax, one of the first and most successful tampons came on to the market. The advertising campaigns made similar claims about the benefit of tampons (no smell, invisible, safe) that sanitary towels made. However, while sanitary towels set themselves up against home made devices to absorb menstrual flow, tampons made these claims of increased hygiene, security, “freshness” etc. against sanitary towels. To overcome fears associated with worries about insertion and lost virginity, tampons had to market something extra which made them different - and better - than sanitary towels. This “hook” was swimming. It was the one thing you could do with a tampon which you absolutely could not with a sanitary towel. Therefore tampons marketed heavily the idea that tampons made one “free” to participate in anything. This normalising message disregards period pain, mood change or any other emotional or physical experience that differs from non-menstrual days and promotes the image of constancy and hiding menstruation as ideal.

Modess’ version of the growing up pamphlet in 1938 was entitled “What A Trained Nurse Wrote To Her Young Sister” introducing the idea that a medical practitioner should take precedence over the mother when introducing information about menstruation to girls. A similar description of menstruation is given, with emphasis on cleanliness and regularity. It also says that “it is not normal to feel any real discomfort” when menstruating and that menstruation is a woman’s “job”.

One Modess advert from 1935 in Modern Romances magazine (above) equates menstruation with mental illness, and a whole series of adverts is devoted to the phenomenon of “accident panic” - paralysing fear of “having an accident”, presumably meaning bleeding into ones’ clothes.

61 Brumberg, 1997
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
The Second World War did much to elevate the role of women as thousands became employed in traditionally “male” roles in factories and other jobs and thousands more doing “hard” work such as maintaining garden-sized vegetable patches to help with the war effort. During this period a number of scientific studies concluded that menstruation probably did not negatively affect women whilst at work, either physically or mentally\textsuperscript{64}, but slightly different ideas were being promoted through sanitary protection ads.

The ‘40’s ads have adapted to include images of women in their new war effort roles but continue to promote the idea that women are negatively affected whilst on their period if not properly “protected”. The ads use patriotism to persuade consumers how doubly important it is not to “be unprotected” whilst menstruating since the war effort is so important! “Freedom like this naturally increases efficiency - on the ‘off days’” says a Tampax Inc. advert in \textit{Parade} magazine from 1943. Doctors were also being advised to recommend tampons to their female patients to “reduce absenteeism”. The adverts use questionable statistical analysis claiming “female absenteeism is 50% higher” than men, and “though available data do not clearly assign the responsibility for this marked differential, obviously menstrual inconveniences account for a considerable proportion of

\textsuperscript{64} Golub, 1992
the days lost.” (Published in *American Journal of Nursing*, 1944)

Obviously.

In fact two studies conducted during the war and published in 1944 and 1950 both found that menstruation had no effect on absenteeism and in fact fewer errors and increased production was recorded on menstrual days.65

The first ads aimed directly at teens appear in this period and do not represent female emancipation as part of their message. Instead they entitled such things as “Why Was I Born A Woman?”(above) and “It Just Isn’t Fair!” These ads constantly refer to your “secret” and to the mythical girl who “always keeps smiling, no matter what time of the month.” “Although the postwar sanitary products industry encouraged more autonomy in teens, it also stimulated angst. Advertisements for sanitary protection consistently played to adolescent awkwardness, concern about peers, and the embarrassing spectre of soiled clothes.”66

Modess’ 1944 “Growing Up And Liking It” pamphlet is in a more friendly and easy to read language but perpetuates similar taboos. The booklet says “it [menstruation] doesn’t interfere with any other bodily function - and it doesn’t make you any “different” than you are on any other day” but later the booklet condemns jitterbugging, horseback riding, basketball, ice skating, tennis, vigorous dancing, hot baths and getting wet in the rain as unsuitable while menstruating. Discomfort during periods is dismissed as being a result of uncomfortable sanitary napkins, poor diet, constipation and not standing up straight. This pamphlet is one of the first to introduce several medical diagrams accompanied by a lengthy scientific explanation of the internal operation of menstruation, which is explained by a male doctor. This section used the same language that Emily Martin identified in *The Woman In The Body*, published in 1987 which expresses gender bias when talking about biological processes. The pamphlet expresses menstruation as a “failure to conceive” and uterine tissue is a “waste product”. The womb regenerates every month to make a “fresh, new” environment (italics theirs).

This new development of including medical diagrams is unsurprising, considering sanitary product companies’ love of all things medical, scientific and relating to male doctors and hospitals. Finally the pamphlet talks about what happens next. Of course the only option for what to do about periods is expressed as using the companies’ own sanitary “protection” with the familiar rhetoric of being “safe” to “protect from accidents”.

This format, incorporating the scientific diagram and explanation followed by menstruation as an hygienic crisis to which sanitary protection is the answer, is the informational model still used in booklets today, even those not produced by commercial companies.

65 Golub, 1992 p.104
66 Brumberg 1997
The 1950s

Menstruation is still something that can interfere with daily life, that must be concealed both in itself and its odour. Social fears of having “accidents” and being “caught out” are described in nearly hysterical fashion as is the possibility of visible sanitary protection. New types and sizes of sanitary towel are being invented - corners are now “scientifically tapered”. Presumably from long experience sanitary protection adverts are becoming more subtle (except possibly the ones for teenagers - Modess’ “True or False” series perpetuates taboos about vigourous exercise whilst menstruating: “it’s not smart to get too strenuous at that time of the month”) however other products on the market are being advertised in an almost grotesque fashion as the picture above shows.

The 1960s

The 1960s is known for being the start of a long period of new feminist thought and further emancipation of women (and indeed equal rights campaigns for non-white races). Birth control pills were approved in 1960 and made available in 1961. The Equal Pay Act was passed in congress in 1963 the Civil Rights Act that includes Title VII prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, national origin, or sex was passed in 1964. In 1969 Redstockings, a radical feminist group organised and introduced such terms as "Sisterhood is Powerful", and "The Personal is Political". They also call for repeal of abortion laws.

The Sanitary protection industry were unfazed by these new feminist developments and the advertising continued much as before. There were still absolutely no representations of menstruation in the public eye other than these adverts.

To illustrate, Brumberg says:

“In 1965, the publication of a novel by Louise Fitzhugh, entitled The Long Secret, prompted debate about the appropriateness of even mentioning menstruation in fiction for girls. Reviewers... focused on the fact that Harriet's friend Beth got her period and Fitzhugh allowed the girls to talk about it. Although the entire discussion is upbeat and healthy... some critics were disquieted because they thought it inappropriate to include the subject in juvenile books.”

Modess’ menarche booklet, still entitled ‘Growing Up and Liking It’ from 1964: The tone of this booklet is friendly and positive, making some effort to describe emotional as well as bodily changes, however these are glossed over simplistically, with no real

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87 Brumberg, 1997
examples of what “emotional” feelings a girl might experience. The internal model is presented immediately, as failed reproduction (the egg “degenerates”), and a series of complex diagrams is shown. Despite alluding to marriage, no mention is made of sex and there is no reference to external body parts at all.

While the advice on dealing with menstruation has attempted to be gentle and measured, the sections dealing with sanitary protection use the same alarming metaphors as we have seen for the previous five decades. “Be sure of your protection. You’ll be more confident if you know you can trust your sanitary napkin. Look for... a protective feature that will prevent embarrassing accidents.” The paragraph also uses “shielded”, “moisture-proof”, “spotting” “staining”.

Again, the leaflet advises against “hard” exercise and extremes of water temperature both in swimming, wet weather and bathing situations. Bathing is once again promoted as extra necessary as if menstruation makes you more unclean. The following section advises a daily health and beauty routine which includes good grooming, proper diet, mild exercise and correct posture to improve your “appearance” so that when menstruation comes round “your body will be in good condition to handle the physical and emotional change.” Constipation is again inferred as the cause of menstrual cramps. “Be relentless about keeping your face and hair clean.” Long guidelines on nail filing are included - “carry a nail file or emery board for quick repairs.”

At all times the leaflet promotes “being normal” and “ignoring it” while at the same time advising strict adherence to bizarre, lengthy and elaborate body controlling rules.

As in other booklets of the decade there is a long list of exercises to do to “keep in shape” that will supposedly also help with cramps. These exercises are a new feature that are reprinted from this point onwards. This is a new trend in menstruation booklets which implies negative feelings, whether physical or emotional, are the fault of the individual girl and it is up to her, through personal effort, be it physical or emotional, to correct them. This trend continues through the modern booklets, for example this excerpt from Tampax “Accent On You” (1970s-1980s): “a poor mental attitude will do much toward tensing muscles and causing cramps... Some girls hold back from feeling and looking their best on those days... it’s up to you to prevent embarrassment.” (italics theirs)

The final pages of the Modess guide: “choosing your sanitary protection” are simply a bumper Modess advert. There are no other options even mentioned in this section, just Modess napkins, belts and panties. The following are used in the four page spread: “helps keep you dainty and relaxed during your menstrual period.” “Protects”,

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68 As an aside, all of these booklets explicitly advocate traditional roles for girls. This booklet begins “Someday, when you fall in love and marry, you will want to have children.” (the same text is used in the 1970 version)

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“shielded”, “moisture-proof”, “accident-proof”, “feel completely safe, worry-free”, “hugs securely and secretly”, “anchors... securely,” “prevents telltale bulges”, “undetectable”, “delicate pink”, “care for your sanitary belt as you would your lingerie” (a twelve year old wears lingerie?), “Rinse out each night, so it will be clean and fresh”, “important to your protection and daintiness”, “another way to protect your daintiness”, “snugly, securely”, “assures perfect fit”, “moisture-proof”, “prevents embarrassing accidents”, “stain-proof”, “Special kind of protection”, “control for... daily daintiness”, “confidence and protection”.

The 1970s

In 1970 the Boston Women’s Book Collective published *Our Bodies, Ourselves* a text written by women for women on the female body, including current medical knowledge as well as female experiences and opinions on a variety of topics, from childbirth to breast cancer, menarche to menopause.
In the same year Judy Blume’s children’s book *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* was published. Judy Blume is known for being an author writing about “difficult” subjects for children, such as death. In *Are You there God?*... the central character wants two things more than anything else, to grow breasts and to get her period. The book explores to some extent the emotional desires surrounding wanting to be “grown up” and mentions, possibly for the first time, of the absurdity of the then-current menstrual education. There are no notions of shame in the book and the central character Margaret is happy to have finally “got it”.

However the narrative ends with Margaret’s mother offering help with sanitary protection and is rebuffed when Margaret says she has been practising for two months. The practical, experiential and emotional aspects of menstruation that occur in that pivotal point after the first few periods remain unaddressed. The book gives readers a small amount of information, parodies the stilted classroom information and was not so doubtfully reviewed as Louise Fitzhugh’s book. However the narrative is cut off at the moment of menarche. A young reader would have to go elsewhere for further information regarding the practicalities of menstruation.

In 1970, along with Miriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago founded the Feminist Art Program. In 1971 their first project was called *Womanhouse*, a derelict Hollywood mansion transformed into a series of scenes about the female experience. Chicago’s contribution was entitled *Menstruation Bathroom*, a work that provided a public representation of the menstrual experience. The work was an installation of a white bathroom space with sanitary towels and tampons arranged on shelves above the toilet and washbasin. In the corner stood an overflowing bin of used sanitary towels and tampons, with one used tampon placed on the floor. The red colour of the used products is particularly startling against the bright white walls of the bathroom.69

At the time *Menstruation Bathroom* received much criticism and impassioned debate, it was a landmark for bringing menstruation into the public realm. Despite being a bold first step, the feminist group couldn’t help feeling embarrassed around the piece of work in front of other women:

“I was a student in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts from 1971-1972, my first year of graduate school. I worked on the *Womanhouse* project, which opened in February 1972. For the month that *Womanhouse* was open to the public, there was always a group of women from the Feminist Program on site to give tours. One day when I was there, a number of middle-aged ladies from the neighborhood came by in their housedresses. As our little group of young feminist art students realized that we were approaching Judy Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom*, filled with feminine hygiene products and “bloody” tampons, we melted away, leaving these ladies to their own...

69 Jones, 1996
devices. Later, they came to find us and laughingly chided us for thinking they would be embarrassed.” - Mira Schor

This piece did something to bring menstruation into the public eye and did so by using the iconography of menstrual products. The brand names of the products were familiar to the audience and viewing menstruation juxtaposed with these items may well have inspired the disgust, fear and shame the advertising of these products actively promoted. Other scenes in the house also portrayed the difficult life of women, which then questioned why this should be the case, but did not necessarily offer a solution or rereading of the situation. This is what I feel to be the case with Menstruation Bathroom. Hopefully the work will have led the audience to question their negative feelings around menstruation and could have been the starting point for a public consciousness of menstruation that is not tied up with these feelings. However, apart from Chicago’s print Red Flag, a screen print of a woman from waist to knees pulling out a tampon, no other artworks seemed to pick up the theme of menstruation.

The now infamous Carrie by Stephen King was published in 1974 and the film adaptation was made in 1976. The story describes how Carrie, who was kept ignorant of menstruation by her Christian mother and, discovering her first period in the shower at school, is humiliated by the other female pupils who pelt her with tampons. From the moment of menarche Carrie becomes telekinetic. After further humiliation on the part of her classmates - they drench her in pig’s blood - the climax of the film shows Carrie using her powers to take murderous revenge her classmates and her mother. Due to overwhelming guilt at killing her mother, Carrie destroys her own house which collapses on her and kills her. Though not exactly extremely positive about menstruation this may be one of the first mainstream films to have both menstrual blood and tampons on screen.

Though menstruation has finally been represented outside advertising, these representations are couched in the terms set up by sanitary towel companies, and use products such as tampons and even explicit brands as a visual or cultural reference for menstruation. The product has become so tied up with the process itself that it is inextricable from and can even serve as a signifier for it.

The 1970’s also saw the first truly major technological advance in sanitary towels since their invention in the 1880’s - that of the sticky strip, a simple strip of adhesive on the underside of the towel with a protective strip of plain paper over the top which is peeled away on use - exactly like a self-seal envelope.

70 http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/meaning/04/forum.html accessed 01/2008
71 In correspondence with the founder of the Museum of Menstruation website Chicago mentioned that people frequently did not know (and asked her) what the red object in the picture was.
The advertising of the time promotes this new idea - which was taken up by all the manufacturers relatively simultaneously.\textsuperscript{72} The impact of feminism may or may not have effected adverts in the 1970's.\textsuperscript{73} They seem to have less copy - and therefore greater assumption about the knowledge of the audience - and have moved away from line drawings to colour photography. The ideas of shame, smelliness, dirtiness and imperative to conceal are still present however.

“Freedom” seemed to be the new buzzword, with Kotex pads being called New Freedom (freedom from “All the old hang-ups”) and Johnson and Johnson’s version is called StayFree (freedom from “menstrual odor”). Marketing for teenagers also continued the earlier shame trends.

Adverts on television became permissible in America for the first time in the 1970s, but in Britain it would take until 1984. Television ads are anecdotally known for being highly embarrassing.\textsuperscript{74} It is not surprising that after many decades of fostering shame in consumers that they reacted poorly to adverts on television, feeling particularly uncomfortable in mixed company.\textsuperscript{75} However the other source of embarrassment on behalf of audiences was due to how poorly made they are. The ads fall into two categories - the product demonstration, which invented the idea of “blue fluid” being absorbed by a sanitary towel/tampon and the overly happy and energetic woman in tight white trousers. Both bear no relation to the experience of menstruation at all and both convey similar messages to the print ads, even if, at least in Britain, there are strict rules against implying that menstruation is dirty.\textsuperscript{76} So whilst TV ads have brought menstruation further into the public eye, the audience has turned away in embarrassment.

In the 70’s some feminist theorists became interested in menstruation. In 1975
researchers Lynn Whisant and Leonard Zegans conducted a small scale survey of middle class white american girls at a summer camp. Some of the girls were pre- and some post-menarcheal. They concluded: “the prevalent view that menstruation is a sickness is conveyed through advertisements for ‘women’s medications’ and ‘feminine products’... Preparation for menarche involves assembling a suitable array of products... Menarche is then portrayed as a hygienic rather than maturational crisis.” The link between menstruation and defecation was explicit: “The girls strongly associated the menses with excretory soiling... The education provided them, in particular by commercial companies, focusses on this aspect.” Since “many mothers were uninformed or unable or unwilling to discuss the broader significance of menarche with them” “Most of these girls attempted to deal with menstruation by strict adherence to ‘the rules’ given in health texts, especially commercial pamphlets.”

The information which had most impact on girls came from commercial companies, whose messages are saturated with negative images. Indeed, Whisant and Zegans reported that the pre-menarcheal girls were excited about getting their first period and they said they would share the information with their friends. However the postmenarcheal girls “did seem to experience menarche as a disturbing event: they were frightened and ashamed in spite of their stated belief that they should not be.”

The 1980s

The 1980s have been described as a decade which reacted negatively to Feminism’s modest gains and even reversed laws proposed in the seventies such as the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion laws. Feminists continued their research, even if the arts and job market became more hostile to them.

Commercial booklets for girls remained similar to other examples. o.b. tampons (owned by Johnson & Johnson) produced “Your Personal Guide To Menstruation and Tampon Usage”, published in 1988. This booklet has a more modern feel and is more straightforward. The opening paragraph talks about how “by understanding... menstruation... you can gain a little more control over your own life during your period,” as if a woman’s internal cycle sends her out of control, and that artificial means of control are essential to ones health and comfort.

A biological model similar to the 1940s examples is used, then discusses the difference between pads and tampons. Four pages follow with the usual scare words involving “protection” and “peace of mind”.

77 Whisant & Zegans 1981
78 Ibid.
79 Faludi, 1992
What is startling for this study is a comparison between this and a booklet produced in the same year by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America Inc., which the author of the Museum of Menstruation’s website notes “is not trying to sell anything.” The wording is extremely straightforward and easy to understand, emphasising periods as normal. It also explicitly mentions the possibility of pregnancy after the onset of menstruation. It notes the most fertile days after explaining the process of ovulation.

This is the first mention of sex and what the results are in any puberty booklet I’ve examined. The booklet acknowledges cramps and advises exercise will relieve them, it promotes baths and does not mention water temperature. The booklet discusses both sanitary towels and tampons - something the commercial companies only do if their range encompasses both of these. The majority do not. It also acknowledges that using sanitary protection of any kind can feel strange and advises close consultations with a trusted adult who can go with the child to buy the products - another point unmentioned in the commercial booklets.

As part of the tips section it advises changing pads/tampons regularly to avoid odour and blood stains on clothes - again something not mentioned in commercial publications. It gives practical advice about what to do when blood does get on clothes (wash in cold water with soap), thus tacitly acknowledging that this does happen. It also advises on whether to flush protection or not - sanitary towels being notoriously unflushable despite advertising to the contrary.

In answer to the question “What if my period starts and I’m not prepared?” The booklet advises using a vending machine or asking the school nurse or another woman. It says: “Don’t be shy. Remember all women have or have had periods.” It also bothers to mention the end of periods, or menopause and explains a woman cannot get pregnant after this time. In the case of problems, it advises talking with a close adult (mother, school nurse, teacher) before mentioning the doctor.

The “old wives tales” section is also useful. It mentions a host things that are myths, all found in the sanitary ads I’ve quoted, such as: being unclean, a menstruating woman’s smell, avoiding bathing and cold drinks and showers bringing on cramps. The booklet concludes with an easy to understand glossary of all the words a child might have found difficult, including how to say them. Though this booklet has been influenced by the discourse of menstruation created by adverts in some ways, such as the biological diagram that expresses womb “degeneration” and commercial pads as the only thing available to absorb flow, it clearly differs in significant ways by mentioning vital things normally left out by companies.

Roseanne was an extremely popular comedy series involving a family that was started in the 70s and that the network tried to take off the air more than once in the 80s for

www.mum.org
slipping too far from the networks policies on what was appropriate television. According to Kissling, the episode on menstruation gives a more balanced and counter ideological view of menstruation than anything before it or indeed since it was aired.

Further research into young women’s ideas on menstruation was undertaken in the eighties. For girls yet to have their period, the excitement expressed in Judy Blume’s book is evident. However once menstruation begins, attitudes of girls very closely reflect messages in commercial advertising: “postmenarcheal girls, even when they are intellectually well prepared for menstruation, report more feelings of shame, apprehension and disgust and less pride than their premenarcheal peers.” In 1988: “premenarcheal girls were more likely to express excitement about... menstruation. In contrast, newly postmenarcheal girls talk about negative feelings and reactions, being “grossed out” and feeling sick... although premenarcheal girls expect to tell their friends and talk about it with others, the newly postmenarcheal girls reported that they didn’t talk much to others about it at all.” Also quoted by Golub is a study by Leonore Williams conducted in 1983 in which “many were influenced by concealment taboos, with a majority expressing concern about concealing sanitary napkins and menstrual odor.” In this study the majority of girls had yet to start their period and so had no experiential cause to believe menstrual “odor” even existed. By “a majority” I take it to mean more than 50%. This is double that of other menstrual taboos in the same group - only 22% of the girls believed they should not be active in sports while menstruating (this taboo itself was also one propagated by sanitary protection companies). The researchers of the time express concern and surprise at these results but surely this attitude is not so puzzling considering the reliance on commercial information which preaches a double standard of normalcy and shame.

The 1990s

One or two films, some television shows and one or two visual artists made representations of menstruation.

The artist Kiki Smith’s *Train* (1993) and *Moon* (1996) explicitly highlight menstruation in a non-tampon context, providing the possibility of positive readings. However Smith’s work, while engaging, deals very much with the idea of the abject and woman’s relationship with it, consequently her figures seem primarily to express pain and melancholy. Other examples of works include Emily Culpeper’s *Period Piece* and Christine Lidrbauch’s *Menstrual Blood Wallpaper*, though neither of these are particularly

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81 Faludi, 1992
82 Kissling, 2006
83 Rierdan et al. 1985 in Golub 1992
84 Stubbs et al. in Golub 1992
85 Williams in Golub, 1983
86 Posner, 1990
famous outside of the art world. Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom* was reinstalled in Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 1995. Once again however menstruation seems to be just a small part of these artists’ oeuvre.

One or two films deal with menstruation. There is a brief scene in *My Girl* (1991) where the lead experiences her first period (off camera) and has the event explained to her by her stepmother. The event is used as a plot point to signify the character’s impending growth into maturity which must include giving up her tomboy activities. In *A Walk On The Moon* (1999) - the audience actually sees a brief flash of blood on a pair of panties and there are some longer scenes dealing with menarche, though it still must be concealed from men and the character experiences extreme embarrassment. She too, cannot escape her status as woman and therefore Other. *Boys Don’t Cry*, (1999) was a dramatic interpretation of the last year of Brandon Teena’s life. Brandon has successfully pretended to be a boy but is discovered to be a girl by the audience when he wakes up with a blood stain on his jeans and is later seen washing it off. The discovery of hidden tampon wrappers are part of the information leading to the unravelling of his story. In the film and real life Brandon was raped and murdered for his “betrayal” which Kissling reads as the ultimate punishment for violating gender norms.87

In the adverts for sanitary protection there finally seems to be a divergence between Britain and America, with some British ads using humour (below) and even naked women to advertise the product. However, the messages remain the same. Tampon adverts in this period occasionally show the product in order to advertise how easily hidden it is. The word “period” is used, though mention of what the products do, what they “protect” from and where/how they are used is still carefully made into euphemisms.

I was at school during the ’90s and experienced “the talk” in a very similar way to the descriptions in this essay, along with the commercial literature.

Simes and Berg made a study of adverts in magazines between 1985-2001.88 They found that menstrual product adverts perpetuate silence and shame:

“a prominent theme in the advertisements is that one’s period must be concealed at all times. This pervasive emphasis on concealment, it seems to us, reinforces the shame and silence associated with menstruation.”

They point out a reader would have to have sufficient requisite knowledge in order to decode these adverts and that without such knowledge menstruating girls who have sought private information from menstrual product adverts could easily misinterpret their message.

87 Kissling, 2006
88 Simes & Berg, 2001
They continue:

“Embarrassment: The silence surrounding menstruation clearly implies that there is something shameful or wrong about menstruating. To prevent embarrassment, the adolescent girl learns that she must be diligent to prevent discovery of her status as a menstruator.... In order to prevent embarrassment the adolescent girl learns that she must not get caught having her period”

They outline ways that adverts inform her she may be caught out: Not participating e.g. in swimming, odor: (“The advertisements imply that women would not need odor suppressing and odor absorbing products if there was not something inherently smelly and unclean about the state of the menstruating female body”) and inadequate protection (from other products).

In order to avoid “getting caught” the girl must engage in certain strategies:

“Being Fresh: The advertisements stress the importance of making sure that one is always clean and fresh. The implication is that in the absence of these feminine hygiene products, a woman will not be able to achieve the ideal state of being fresh or clean due to her menstruating body.”

“Being secure: A very interesting claim made in the advertisements is that menstrual hygiene products can make a girl or woman secure. Being secure in one’s menstrual management system allows a woman to act as though she is not menstruating.”

“Being Discreet. The advertisements convey to adolescent girls that another sure way not to “get caught” is to be very discreet about their menstrual status.” “Being Confident. In order for a woman to be confident, leaks and stains must not occur. The message is clearly that only certain products assure confidence for their users.”

In the section “Managing One’s Body Everyday”, Berg and Simes summarise how adverts in the modern period imply the female body needs protection on every day of the month, including panty liners for non-menstruating days: “These messages certainly imply that improvement of body hygiene is required throughout the month”, a significant addition to the older adverts.

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
Under the heading “Understanding and Using Menstrual Technology.” the ads imply that an entire system of pads, tampons and medication is required to set up an adequate “system” of “protection”. Dirtiness is further indicated by “odor” which is implied by the importance of deodorant in sanitary protection and also “Pad Hygiene.” Yet another example portraying menstrual blood as dirty occurs when pads are marketed as having a special layer which pulls the “moisture” (i.e., menstrual blood and/or discharge), away from the surface of the product so that it “will not touch the wearer.” Similarly for tampons, the marketing of the applicator so a woman does not have to touch herself implies the uncleanness of the female menstruating body. Modern adverts then carry the same messages as we have seen in previous decades.

Houvouras’s study confirms these findings for adult women. She notes that the ads imply women’s bodies have power over them and “by using the advertised products, women can gain power over their bodies.” She says the ads claim this power is exerted because women’s bodies control women, they interfere with daily activities and cause pain and suffering.

Feminist Theory

The idea of inherent bodily disgust, (which therefore leads to shame and concealment, emotions one might say “innocently” utilised by sanitary towel companies to sell their wares) is immediately raised when trying to analyse the discourse of menstruation. One could argue that menstruation is simply similar to that other bodily process, defecation, which is also concealed and its smell avoided. We have seen earlier in the essay, that even this process became concealed in a socio-cultural shift regarding manners and later hygiene and cleanliness. However in modern times further scientific research has shown that blood of any kind is potentially much less dangerous than faeces in terms of the danger of communicable disease, rendering excessive cleanliness unnecessary. But the main point about menstruation as being “inherently” disgusting is that the disgust is unevenly distributed amongst bodily substances. Why should menstruation be labelled as disgusting as faeces, yet urine, sweat, tears, semen and indeed blood from other parts of the body, such as a wound, are not also seen in this way?

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Houvouras, 2003
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 We could even speculate on the idea of faecal abjection itself - did not the entire population live amongst this substance their whole lives without much comment before the invention of sewers?
101 Even with the advent of HIV it is necessary to mix blood into an open wound before infection occurs, unlike faeces where accidental inhalation or consumption of an invisibly small dose can transmit harmful bacteria
William Ian Miller’s ‘Anatomy of Disgust’ analyses a broad range of bodily elements that may trigger a reaction of disgust. Included in his analysis are bodily wastes, one of them being menstrual blood. Throughout the text menstrual blood is twinned with faeces as a possible candidate for a universally disgusting substance, whilst he acknowledges a hierarchy of disgust for other substances.

“For all the delight which travel literature, anthropology, history and archaeology have taken in showing that the substance of the disgusting varies cross-culturally and trans-temporally, there is a noteworthy convergence in just what things and kinds of actions will prompt disgust. Some claim faeces, others menstrual blood, as universal disgust substances. There might be and probably are isolated exceptions, but that is not important for they are exceptions” (italics Millers)

Despite the frequent assertion that menstruation could possibly be as disgusting as defecation, and having analysed sweat, tears, pus, hair and smells in detail, Miller curiously says very little in the way of analysis of menstrual blood. He rightly dismisses Freud’s bizarre assertion, made in a footnote of Civilisation And Its Discontents, that all humans are organically wired to find menstrual odour disgusting (while we have to learn to find excrement disgusting): “Freud’s account... depends on its purporting to describe only male disgusts and desires.” Yet Miller struggles to come up with a reason of his own.

He does ask whether menstruation is perceived to be so disgusting because “among us the socialization regarding menstruation takes place at a later stage of development, long after the disgust mechanism has been primed, prepped and fashioned by its interactions with excrement?” No further analysis is made.

Also, Miller believes that semen is heavily polluting, yet he makes no mention of his late socialisation theory as a reason for the disgust, despite it also being a substance which is not present in the child’s life until the onset of puberty. Many would argue (including Kristeva) that semen is not seen as disgusting, nor regulated by taboos in the majority of human experience. It’s certainly never touted as a universal disgust substance. Why then is the one substance (menses) so disgusting while the other (semen) not much more so than possibly sweat or tears, despite having a specific smell, being viscous, arriving in conscious life late on compared with faeces and issuing forth from the genitals? Miller seems unwilling to tackle the subject.

Kristeva herself marries menstrual blood and faeces as the ultimate substances

Miller 1998
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Kristeva, 1980
Ibid.
capable of producing abjection. She claims faeces represent death, and therefore a
danger to identity from the outside, whereas menstrual blood represents a danger
“issuing from within the identity” and using ideas inspired by Douglas, claims it endangers
the “identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.”

Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out the difficulty of this idea and says “I cannot understand
how Kristeva can claim that menstrual blood can represent a danger to both sexes that
semen does not.” Why should one sexual fluid be “worse” than the other, in that one
is consistently related to excrement and the abject while the other is not?

Grosz has discussed Douglas’ and Kristeva’s ideas about the disgust potential of bodily
fluids and says: “Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary
dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death
implies), to the perilous divisions between outside and inside.” This is what makes
bodily fluids disgusting. Grosz suggests that purely biological markers do not account
for the areas most specifically focussed upon when discussing differences between men
and women (there are others which could serve this purpose), but that the areas
associated with being a female are those sites which are fluid or (over)produce bodily
fluids distinct from men - the breasts and genitals: “[women] are represented and
represent themselves as seepage, liquidity.”

While maturity for a boy is signified by a sexual awakening, a girl’s maturing body is
“overcoded with the resonances of motherhood” She goes on: “For the girl,
menstruation, that leaks... uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs,
indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was lead to believe ends with
childhood.” This could account for the feelings of shame occurring with the onset of
menstruation in girls.

“The development of shame, disgust and other moral functions, is, as
Freud has argued, a consequence of the child’s learning to control its
bowels. The clean and proper body’s development is directly linked to
the child’s negotiations with the demands of toilet training and the regulation
of body fluids. Within this cultural constellation, it is not surprising, then, that
women’s menstrual flow is regarded not only with shame and
embarrassment but with disgust and the powers of the contaminating.”

The shame and disgust conferred on menstruation by patriarchal prejudices have been

Ibid.
108 Grosz 1994
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
taken up and exacerbated by commercial advertising. This accounts for the continued success of the adverts examined in this essay, since girls of a young age have lost an oral common-sense discourse that relieved feelings of shame.

There is little other literature available that makes mention of menstruation: “menstruation is not an issue highly theorised in contemporary feminism.”114 Even in feminist theory, menstruation has taken somewhat of a sideline.

This Effect of the Discourse Women

As we have seen, girls have internalised taboos about menstruation long before they experience their first period, such as beliefs that menstrual odour is strong and unpleasant. Concealment taboos are twice as strong as other beliefs115 and older women describe their education as lacking in practical information regarding the experience of menstruating for example simple facts such as the colour change in menstrual blood over the few days of a period.116 These beliefs are in direct correlation with information dispersed by commercial companies which is negative, inaccurate and lacking in major experiential areas. We have also seen that despite books and information mothers have in fact been encouraged to not educate their daughters about menstruation, relying instead on the sexual education class which is conducted with the exclusive aid of leaflets and samples produced by sanitary protection companies.

Menstruation is linked with excretory soiling by patriarchal culture and this means commercial messages of shame and embarrassment are believed and internalised from a young age. Menstruation becomes a crisis which is to be negotiated through commercial products: “Unfortunately, many American girls grow up equating the experience of menarche and menstruation with a hygiene product.”117 and this subverts the relationship between mother and daughter: “Instead of beginning an interlude of special guidance and support from other women, menarche today is just another step that moves girls deeper into a consumer culture...”118 with the result that: “When they start menstruating, modern girls reach for a sanitary napkin even before they reach for their mothers.”119

In response to all these messages: “girls had to be extremely wary ...about showing, smelling, offending. In effect, they had to get their bodies under control.”120 This, Brumberg argues, has led to young women of today feeling they have to exercise

114 Ram & Jolly, 1998
115 Williams in Golub, 1983
116 Golub, 1992
117 Brumberg 1997
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
bodily control to an extreme degree, to maintain every visible aspect of their body with
greater rigidity and anxiety than ever before: “By creating a profit-making enterprise from
adolescent self-consciousness, the postwar sanitary products industry paved the way
for the commercialisation of other areas of the body, such as skin, hair and breasts - all of
great concern to developing girls.”

The awkwardness of adolescence is heightened rather than calmed when it comes to
menstruation. Shame and embarrassment are normalised through adverts and lack of
frank talk between mothers and daughters is the result of commercial discourse. As a
result, the presumed societal view is that menstruation should not be discussed in public,
and the apparatus of menstruation must be hidden. Brumberg mentions this in the
introduction to her book: “this book... is intended to provoke the kind of intergenerational
conversation about female bodies that most adult women like myself have wished for
but never really had.”

These beliefs are not restricted to young women. Despite being more able to analyse
adverts from a critical perspective, especially in light of their personal experience of
menstruation, older women carry negative images with them through their lives.

Emily Martin interviewed 165 women of various life ages and social strata about
menstruation. She reports “women often see menstrual bleeding as ‘messy’ and the
blood itself ‘gross’ or disgusting.” She says, “women are aware that in our general
cultural view menstruation is dirty... most centrally no-one must ever see you
dealing with the mechanics of keeping up with the disgusting mess, and you must never
fail to keep this disgusting mess from showing on your clothes, furniture or the floor.”

She then goes on to note the difficulty women have in maintaining this standard when no
provision is made for it - such as a woman was too embarrassed to explain to her boss
why she had to keep using the bathroom. “I couldn’t even tell him, because that stuff
isn’t spoken of, what was the matter with me.” She also notes: “the middle-class
interviews are full of anguish surrounding first periods”. “Many have tried to dispel the
feelings about the ‘dirty secret’ and struggle with the task.

As a feminist using de Beauvoir’s ideas Kissling comments: “In purchasing and using
these products, women are compelled to buy into the idea of the menstruating woman
as somehow tainted and internalize their own Otherness.”

Although some women come to terms with this bodily function there seems to be little

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Martin, 1987
124 Ibid.
125 Kissling, 2006
hope of changing the attitudes of “society”. When these women become mothers the cycle of silence is maintained and their daughters learn about menstruation through commercial messages all over again.

**Private Beliefs**

Has this discourse evolved in general, both in the popular and individual minds? How big a part has advertising had to play? Kissling notes: “When the subject of advertisements is one around which there is a great deal of ambivalence, it is easier for advertisers to interpret culture for consumers.”

However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the public script of shame is not necessarily believed.

Golub gives examples of women who have been “caught out” and though the tellers of the stories do not explicitly acknowledge it, the disaster or terrible embarrassment which is the feared result of an an “accident” described in menstrual discourse does not come to pass. Many of the stories involve soliciting help from a female friend who is always understanding and kind. Even one lady who was on a double date with two men and whose menstrual blood soaked through to the seat of the car did not suffer ridicule from the men. It was simply not mentioned. Despite her terrible embarrassment, the man involved can’t have been too disgusted as the couple later got married.

We saw earlier in the essay that the older ladies viewing Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom* were not embarrassed by it, as the younger women expected.

With some diligent searching, it is possible to find large numbers of internet forums, websites and groups which feature discussions regarding menstruation. Many of these discussions centre around the negative messages of adverts, the inappropriate nature of their school education, thoughts about their own menstrual experience and health issues. Recently new products have become available for absorbing menstrual flow that are reusable and recyclable and also by definition cheaper than disposable products. These are informally marketed and discussed on these forums.

Validating this personal experience with regard to wider society necessarily requires further research.

**Conclusion**

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Ibid.

Golub, 1992

http://www.flickr.com/groups/feminism/discuss/176106/

http://www.divacup.com
A very specific discourse has evolved around menstruation. From its roots in Victorian science and ideas of propriety cleanliness, menstruation has become strongly associated with a need to conceal and cleanse its evidence. This link with excretion, combined with its inherently private nature has made menstruation into a shameful secret which is not openly discussed. Mothers and daughters have an uneasy time talking about menstruation, and where instruction is provided it is of a hygienic rather than maturational nature. Rather than negate adolescent embarrassment, current menstrual education heightens insecurities which continue into adult life. As a result, menstruation has been represented infrequently in public life and those ideas about menstruation which are a detriment to the well-being of women have been perpetuated into the present.

Some theory has been presented as to why menstruation may have been treated this way, but more ideas are needed. At any rate this menstrual discourse was largely formed and then presented to every woman in the Anglo-American world through pervasive advertising, including the working class, who were historically relatively immune to restrictive ideas of propriety.

Feminists have made attempts to appropriate medical knowledge about their bodies and remove gender bias from further study\(^\text{130}\) (menopause article in white folder). Yet despite increased discussion amongst women, facilitated by the internet, there is still an atmosphere of public reticence which makes it hard to rewrite the script of menstruation through positive public representation. Perhaps this will be more easily achieved if current menstrual education in schools is overhauled to provide more relevant and appropriate information to young girls, whilst also removing negative commercial messages from educational literature.

The modern menstrual discourse is understandable, yet pervasive and regrettable.

\(^{130}\) Fausto-Sterling in Price & Shildrick 1999
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