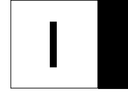

Introduction: From Rags to Riches

IN SPITE OF ALL THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC GAINS women made in the twentieth century, taboos still limit women's activities and public communication about menstruation. It is acceptable to discuss menstruation only in highly limited and circumscribed ways, such as complaining about menstrual symptoms, mocking menstruating women, or helping to sell something related to menstruation. In these contexts, menstruation is either an illness to be managed or a hygienic crisis to be cleaned up and hidden. Construing menstruation as a *problem* creates the possibility of, and perhaps more importantly, a consumer market for, *solutions*—which begs a variety of questions. Why is menstruation still a secret in a modern society that claims to promote equality? How do women manage menstrual needs while maintaining this secrecy? How is secrecy maintained? What role does media play in keeping the secret? Who benefits from the commercialization? Who benefits from the secrecy? And ultimately, what does this mean for women in our society today?

The so-called feminine hygiene industry—at less than 100 years old, a relatively recent development in the history of menstruation—annually exceeds $2 billion in US sales (MarketResearch.com, 2001). This figure does not include sales of such products as over-the-counter or prescription remedies for menstrual pain or premenstrual syndrome (PMS), nor the monies spent on advertising any of these other menstruation-related products.

As menstruation is frequently defined as a medical event, even a pathological one (Lander, 1988; Martin, 1987), the pharmaceutical industry has recently developed products to "treat" menstruation or

its effects, and in doing so clears a profit. In its first few months of availability, $8 million worth of prescriptions were written for Sarafem (Gadsby, 2001), the antidepressant treatment for premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Seasonale, the extended-use contraceptive introduced in 2003, is expected to have even greater sales. Barr Laboratories, the manufacturer of Seasonale, commissioned a 250-person sales force in late 2003 to promote the drug to physicians and healthcare providers (Barr Laboratories, 2003). Advertisements and other publicity for these products have become part of the public discourse about menstruation.

Menstruation is both a biological event and a cultural event; the biology cannot be separated from the culture, and neither is a predetermined category with consistent impact on individual women's lives. Interpretation of menstruation, whether by scientists, medical doctors, social scientists, or the women and girls who experience it, is always ideological (Lander, 1988). Indeed, how a society deals with menstruation may reveal a great deal about how that society views women.

My argument for the significance of menstruation, and thus my analysis of the discourses of menstruation, is grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Although her classic feminist text, *The Second Sex*, is sometimes misunderstood as an outdated or even biased sociological treatise (Evans, 1998; Vintges, 1996), Beauvoir's analysis of the condition and status of women is firmly rooted in the existentialist philosophy that humans have no fixed nature, or essence—an idea that also undergirds much of contemporary postmodern theorizing about gender (e.g., Butler, 1989, 1990). Each of us creates our own identity, through our daily actions and the choices we make; contrary to Freudian and other psychoanalytic perspectives, biology is *not* destiny. Beauvoir's most famous line, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1952: 301), is more than a simple statement of the social construction of gender. Enculturation is not a passive process but an achievement. For Beauvoir, *to become* is to make oneself into; to become a gender—whether feminine, masculine, or something else entirely—involves not merely submitting to a cultural situation, but also creating one (Atack, 1998; Evans, 1998). Much of *The Second Sex* is concerned with delineating the processes by which individuals internalize and adopt cultural norms they did not create (Atack, 1998); in other words, it details the process of "becom[ing] one's gender in a cultural context in which one is not, really, free to become much of anything else" (Butler, 1989: 257).

Beauvoir was among the very first feminist scholars to examine the ways in which women are *represented*. At the same time, Beauvoir remained cognizant of the materiality of the body: "the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a different thing when apprehended in one manner or another" (1952: 36). Consistent with her existentialist worldview, Beauvoir regarded the body as a situation rather than a thing, and therefore its meaning is not fixed.

> It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment—it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself. And, once again, it is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, *the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them.* (1952: 40–41, emphasis added)

With its combination of feminism, materiality, and tolerance of ambiguity, Beauvoir's existentialist feminism is an ideal lens for examining cultural attitudes toward menstruation.

It is well documented that current attitudes toward menstruation in the United States are characterized by ambivalence and social discomfort (Houppert, 1999; Martin, 1987; Research & Forecasts, 1981; Roberts et al., 2002). Close examination of communication about menstruation reveals how these discourses contribute to the ongoing media construction of women as Other.

In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir wrote that the idea of the Other is "as primordial as consciousness itself" (1952: xix); the duality of Self and Other is a fundamental category of human thought. Alterity (the state of Otherness) is not inherently attached to women, but is an artifact of a male-dominated society in which the structures of law, economics, and social life work against women's ability to claim authentic subjectivity. Beauvoir described how numerous processes of socialization in patriarchal societies cultivate in women an alienation from their own bodies. A properly socialized woman develops a sense of herself as object, an Other that is both venerated and feared, as she internalizes her society's dominant ideologies about women.

Beauvoir's theory of woman as Other explains how woman is defined and differentiated only in terms of her relationship to man. Because man defines himself as human, as Subject, and woman is relative to man, she is Other. Each group tries to define itself by assigning traits it does not possess—or does not wish to possess—to

the Other. Woman's position as Other is historically created and socially maintained—and thus difficult to escape (Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996).

Consistent with existentialist thought, the Other is woman's *situation*, not her essence. The claim of woman as the absolute Other does not mean every woman is only Other, all the time; "but rather that it characterizes women's general situation" (Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996: 173). This situation is a cultural creation, maintained by law, customs, and institutions. Members of the culture internalize these definitions and adopt them as their own (Beauvoir, 1952) and also resist them.

Beauvoir's detailed analyses of literary and cultural constructions of "the Eternal Feminine" (1952: 286) show how flesh-and-blood women struggle both to conform and to resist this identification. Although Beauvoir believes that everyone is capable of becoming a Subject, doing so requires freedom and self-determination. To become a Subject, one must believe oneself a Subject. To do so, one must live as a transcendent Subject, and when women in patriarchal societies assert their own transcendence, they are regarded as unfeminine (Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996).

Beauvoir briefly discusses the role of menstruation in these processes, noting that menstrual blood is often interpreted as the essence of femininity and thus as further justification of objectification of women. However, Beauvoir asserts that although biology is important, it is not "a fixed and inevitable destiny" (p. 36). While the body is "the instrument of our grasp upon the world," biological facts are "insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever" (p. 36). The biological facts are largely irrelevant; it is existence that defines woman. Because the body is a situation, rather than a thing, it is inherently unstable. The social construction of menstruation as a woman's curse is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other: "the blood, indeed, does not make woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity" (p. 169). That is to say, menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is a curse.

> Just as the penis derives its privileged evaluation from the social context, so it is the social context that makes menstruation a curse. The one symbolizes manhood, the other femininity; and it is because

> femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame. (1952: 354)

Discourses of menstruation in media and popular culture more than fifty years after Beauvoir wrote these words continue to reflect and reinforce woman's alterity. Messages about shame, secrecy, pollution, and Otherness lurk just below the surface even in seemingly progressive messages. For example, Ann Treneman (1989) has analyzed how advertisements for pads and tampons sell shame along with the product. Often they give the appearance of breaking menstrual taboos by speaking openly about the management of menstruation even as they promote its concealment. In advertisements for "feminine protection" the products are never shown in bathrooms, the room they are usually kept and used in; they are never shown in or after use; and blood is never shown or even mentioned. Such ads and their rules help to perpetuate the secrecy and shame surrounding menstruation (Treneman, 1989). The very term *feminine protection,* used *only* in advertising, implies menstruation is something that women (or their clothing) must be saved from.

In our postmodern era, a woman's relationship to her menstrual cycle is mediated through consumerism. That is, menstruation provides an opportunity for participation in consumer culture: Remedies for the illness of menstruation are bought and sold, as are means of coping with the hygienic crisis.

Capitalizing on the Curse explores representations of menstruation in US mass media and consumer culture from a feminist critical perspective informed by Beauvoir's feminist existentialism. A material-semiotic approach is used to examine these discourses, recognizing that "representation does not supersede materiality nor does materiality supersede representation" (Tuana, 1996). The analytic method is interdisciplinary, drawing upon my training in feminist cultural studies, speech communication, and folklore studies, and generally follows Stuart Hall's model of cultural analysis in three interconnected phases: (1) close, textual analysis of cultural material; (2) consideration of the effects of the cultural material on the society; and (3) placement of the material in its specific social and cultural contexts to produce an interpretation of cultural meaning and significance (Hall, n.d.).

The cultural texts I have chosen to examine here include print and television advertisements, films, episodic television programs, magazine articles, websites, and corporate press releases. They constitute

what social scientists call a convenience sample; that is, most were selected for easy availability rather than by systematic searching or random sampling. Most of these cultural artifacts are not indexed and are difficult to locate any other way.[1] Many are from my own serendipitous searching and collecting, but I am also fortunate to have had numerous friends, students, and colleagues send me clippings and videotapes over the years.

I argue that these cultural texts about menstruation reinforce and even help create negative attitudes toward menstruation, toward women, and toward women's bodies, and that these attitudes are exploited to enhance corporate profits. I find the cultural meanings of menstruation to be intertwined with consumerism in numerous and often paradoxical ways. Consumption both constrains and empowers women (Miles, 1998; Lury, 1996). In popular discourses of menstruation, women are sold products that will liberate them from the perceived bonds of cyclic menstruation. This mind-set is so pervasive that it appears natural and undeniable. Even much of the emerging menstrual counterculture, while promoting alternative attitudes to the view of menstruation as an illness or hygiene crisis, still offers solutions through shopping.

The first two-thirds of the book presents some of the ways menstruation is imbued with consumerism. Chapter 2 examines the most well-known depictions of menstruation in mass media: feminine hygiene ads. These advertisements are part of the larger cultural narrative of ads directed toward women that instruct in how to maintain idealized femininity while concealing biological evidence of femaleness.

Chapter 3 scrutinizes those occasional moments in entertainment television and film when the arrival of a daughter's first period generates a few laughs. Some might argue that mention of menstruation in these venues at all is a progressive step for women and for minimizing menstrual taboos. Though my first inclination was to agree, critical examination of these depictions revealed them to be both reflective of and contributive toward a profound cultural gender bias that contributes to the collective definition of woman as Other.

Chapter 4 examines the disputes surrounding the creation of a new category of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* based on menstruation. It is argued that the impetus behind the creation of premenstrual dysphoric disorder was to increase the market for fluoxetine hydrochloride (originally patented as Prozac and recently patented as Sarafem for the treatment of PMDD) and other psychotropic drugs. Defining a normal part of

female menstrual cycles as mental illness has the potential to label all women as mentally ill and perpetuates the dangerous trend of allowing pharmaceutical companies to define what counts as disease.

Chapter 5 addresses another pharmaceutical product designed to profit from distaste and shame about the menstrual cycle: Seasonale, an extended-cycle oral contraceptive that suppresses menstruation. Direct-to-consumer advertisements promote the drug not for its contraceptive effectiveness but for what is arguably a side effect: “Fewer periods. More possibilities.” The possibilities include higher risk of breast cancer, osteoporosis, heart attacks, and stroke, but these are minimized in the drug’s aggressive marketing campaign.

Chapter 6 considers the questions about dioxin and other contaminants in feminine hygiene products and examines the discourses of these debates. Promotional materials from major tampon manufacturers as well as those of makers of alternative products are examined. The final third of the book, in the second half of Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7, presents alternatives to the consumerist, corporate definitions of menstruation.

Chapter 7 looks to counterculture expressions regarding menstruation for alternative means of understanding and talking about menstruation. Harry Finley’s online Museum of Menstruation is reviewed, along with Geneva Kachman’s campaign to celebrate menstruation with her development of an original holiday, Menstrual Monday, and her own virtual museum. The emerging popularity of Vinnie’s Tampon Cases is also evaluated. In Chapter 8, I offer strategies for building on the successes of this “menstrual underground” to transform cultural meanings and to become, in the existentialist sense, authentic menstruating subjects.

Note

1. It is rarer still for these items, particularly television and film products, to be indexed for menstruation-related content.