

**AMERICA'S BLOODY HISTORY: MENSTRUATION MANAGEMENT IN  
THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts in American  
Material Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

The history of menstruation in the mid-nineteenth century has been shrouded in mystery. This thesis shines a light on the daily realities of managing menstruation before menstrual devices were available over-the-counter. It explores what women wore to absorb menstrual blood, how women shared solutions and stayed informed on best medical practices, and how they affectively responded to cultural conceptions of menstruation. Despite the scarcity of documentary sources describing menstrual practices, an analysis of surviving material evidence reveals the ways in which networks of women participated in an intimate menstrual culture in antebellum America. Patents, recipe books, stained undergarments, and surviving menstrual pads help bring to life existing documentary sources such as medical literature, diary entries, and women-authored fiction. Together, these sources illuminate the conflicting cultural expectations of menstrual regularity and menstrual invisibility. The tension between private realities and public expectations necessitated that women skillfully manage their menstrual blood in private so that they could appropriately perform womanhood in the public sphere.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE MENSTRUAL HUSH

Throughout American history, the silence surrounding menstrual management has allowed the public to ignore women's health and hygiene practices. Ignoring the presence of menstruation makes it more difficult for women to access menstrual products and medical information. In the past few years, women have taken important steps to reduce the perceived impoliteness of discussing menstruation and secured public recognition of basic female needs. Women-owned companies have been responding to the toxicity of pads and tampons, a known cause of Toxic Shock Syndrome and a possible cause of cancer,<sup>1</sup> by creating organic alternatives.<sup>2</sup> Women attending colleges and universities across the country have been successfully demanding easier access to tampons.<sup>3</sup> And, in the autumn of 2017, federal prisons

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<sup>1</sup> Markham Heid, "Cancer, Tampons, Toxins and TSS: Is Your Tampon Safe?" *Time*, July 27, 2016, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://time.com/4422774/tampons-toxic-cancer/>; "Toxic Shock Syndrome: Tampons and More," *Cancer Care of Western New York*, <https://www.cancercarewny.com/content.aspx?chunkid=14716>.

<sup>2</sup> Women-owned organic tampon companies include Cora, Go Aunt Flow, L., Lola, and Monthly Gift.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Falek, "College Students Are Demanding Free Tampons on Campus," *USA Today*, January 05, 2017, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/01/05/college-students-demanding-free-tampons-campus/96191200/>; The Crimson Editorial Board, "Expand

became required to provide incarcerated women with a range of menstrual products.<sup>4</sup> A fog of secrecy has cloaked menstrual practices. The long-standing history of menstrual invisibility in American public culture has obscured the history of women's period management.

Remarkably little historical research has analyzed the material culture of menstruation in nineteenth-century America. As the air of impoliteness surrounding the discussion of menstruation is beginning to dissipate, it is time for an exploration of this subject matter. This thesis seeks to demonstrate how women managed menstruation, both in private and in public, before menstrual products were available commercially. While my research centers on the antebellum period, in the third chapter I reach later into the century to draw on illuminating literary evidence from Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Aside from this section, my evidence comes from an era deemed "silent" on the topic of menstruation. The chapters of this thesis knit together a picture of women's skillful manipulation of materials to regulate and contain menstrual substances in nineteenth-century America.

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Campus Access to Feminine Hygiene Products," *The Harvard Crimson*, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/3/29/feminine-products-harvard/>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Alison Chandler, "Federal prisons must now provide free tampons and pads to incarcerated women," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2017, accessed March 22, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/federal-prisons-must-provide-free-tampons-and-pads-to-incarcerated-women/2017/08/23/a9e0e928-8694-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c17a361db014](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/federal-prisons-must-provide-free-tampons-and-pads-to-incarcerated-women/2017/08/23/a9e0e928-8694-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.c17a361db014).

Organized into three chapters, this thesis draws on previously unexplored evidence to reconstruct the daily realities of menstruating women. Due to the unmentionable status of period blood in the public spaces of the nineteenth century and the ephemeral nature of menstrual products, the evidence that survives is extremely scarce. Yet, while the public mention of menstruation was deemed impolite, women were expected to become familiar with their menstrual flow (and that of their daughters) in order to manage fertility and to protect precious textiles. To successfully manage menstruation, women openly communicated with their female relations within the privacy of their homes.

Due to the ephemeral nature of soiled undergarments and rags, the narrative that emerges in the trace menstrual evidence is not representative of all women. It is highly biased towards white women of the middle and upper-classes. Nonetheless, analyzing new types of sources such as undergarments and recipe books helps flesh out the historical narrative. Such sources record intimate moments in women's lives. In reading evidence such as a small blood stain on a pair of pantalets or a personalized recipe for a regulating syrup slipped between the pages of a shared recipe book, we can witness historical women managing their menstruation. Despite such rich material sources, existing scholarship tends to interpret the scarcity of documentary evidence to mean that women commonly bled into their clothing.<sup>5</sup> In order to mend the

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<sup>5</sup> Harry Finley interprets some of the available sources on this topic and concludes that, "in 'European' America . . . women in the 19th century and before (and into the

imprecision of the existing narrative, this thesis presents new evidence and reinterprets “silent” sources to enlighten our understanding of the history of this universal female experience.

The first chapter presents the various technologies used to manage menstrual blood and analyzes patents, home health guides, and surviving materials such as undergarments and menstrual pads. The second chapter explores the presence of female networks in which women shared advice learned from experience. This history is retrieved through the material investigation of recipe books along with trial testimony, diary entries, and home health guides. The third chapter analyzes how women affectively responded to their leakiness and how these responses shaped their private and public management techniques. A close reading of home health guides and female authored texts reveals the cultural treatment of the menses in the nineteenth century. Together, these chapters demonstrate that menstruation was materially and culturally managed long before commercial pads and tampons became available.

While understudied, early American menstruation is not an untouched field of research. This thesis builds on the work of several scholars. Kathleen Brown’s work,

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20th century) bled into their clothing.” Harry Finley, “What did American and European Women Use for Menstruation in the Past?” *Museum of Menstruation*. Accessed May 03, 2017, <http://www.mum.org/pastgerm.htm>; Esme Whittaker, assistant curator at the V&A, claims (responding to an inquiry into the findings of background research for the “Undressed” exhibition on Victorian undergarments) “most [nineteenth-century] women did not wear any protection and would bleed onto their clothing.” Esme Whitakker, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2017.

*Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (2014), provides a thorough exploration of the history of personal hygiene in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. While it only briefly considers menstruation in the context of household cleanliness, Brown's book lays a foundation for the history of menstrual management by narrating history through the lens of caring for the human body. Susan E. Klepp and Janet F. Brodie, in *Revolutionary Conceptions* (2009) and *Contraception and Abortion in 19th Century America* (1994) respectively, have both done important work on birth control practices and the medical treatment of menstruation in the United States. Understanding the birth patterns and fertility demographics presented in their texts has been incredibly useful for making sense of the frequency with which women experienced menstruation. *Birth of a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (2006) by Marie Jenkins Schwartz shows just how vital and contested menstruation management was in the nineteenth century and presents the perspectives of enslaved women. Schwartz' research aided my efforts to include menstrual habits of women in slavery. While relevant to the field of menstruation history, these sources seek to study menstrual practices only as those practices relate to more expansive historical narratives. They do not define or outline nineteenth-century menstrual history in the United States.

Menstruation management in America is the specific topic of a few books including *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (2011) by Sharra Louise Vostral and *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (1988) by Janice

Delaney. Both books focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, leaving the narrative of nineteenth-century menstruation unwritten. In this thesis, I draw on these texts, adding to the historiography by illuminating the history of nineteenth-century menstruation management.

Menstruation is undeserving of its status as dirty, shameful, and private. Exploring the history of feminine hygiene practices may help change cultural attitudes toward natural bodily processes. Such histories reveal the effects of cultural norms on human bodies. The duality of menstrual normalcy and expectations of its public invisibility has required women to be extremely effective managers for centuries. Instead of ignoring their menstruation, women crafted innovative solutions, shared recipes, and wrote creatively to manage their menses. The research presented in the following pages eliminates any excuse for ignoring the earlier bloody history of women's menstrual management. It reveals that the menstrual material evidence left by nineteenth-century women is far from silent.

## Chapter 1

### THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD: TECHNOLOGIES OF MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

The available technologies for managing menstruation have shaped the lived experiences of American women. Alongside a description of how to wash female genitalia, in 1847 physician and sex educator Frederick Hollick made careful note of the types of napkins used to absorb female discharges: “Napkins used by females should be of soft linen and never employed roughly, and for particular purposes should always be well aired.”<sup>6</sup> Improper use of napkins to absorb menstrual discharge could lead to ill health, pungent smells, or embarrassing stains. Women read home health care literature such as *The Diseases of Women* to ensure that they were using the most effective and up-to-date management methods. According to Hollick, failure to keep the vulva hygienic, especially during menstruation, could lead to the onset of hysteria or other female disorders. Caring for the body played a significant role in the lives of women in the nineteenth century. Using books like Hollick’s, women consumed advice about how to use the most healthful and effective solutions to improve personal comfort and preserve their respectability during menstruation.

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Hollick, *The Diseases of Woman, Their Causes and Cures Familiarly Explained: With Practical Hints for their Prevention, and for the Preservation of Female Health* (New York, NY: Burgess, Stringer, 1847), 241.



Menstrual technologies have been used throughout history. In ancient times, women used softened papyrus, grasses, or wool to absorb their discharge. By the nineteenth century, women commonly used diverse types of pads and, for heavy flows, occasionally employed tampons. The maintenance of status, possessions, finances, hygiene, health, and comfort, motivated the adoption of technologies that helped women contain menstrual fluid.

Due to a general reluctance to collect and preserve human waste-management materials, historical evidence documenting earlier cultural practices is scarce. In the absence of letters and diaries relaying detailed information about the menses, historical analyses of menstruation management rely upon advertisements and packaging for menstrual technologies. Yet feminine hygiene products did not become commercially available until the twentieth century, with a few unsuccessful marketing attempts in the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, we know remarkably little about the material culture of menstruation before the last decades of the nineteenth century. Several surviving objects from the antebellum era offer important details about this hidden history. By examining undergarments, menstrual pads, sanitary belts, and patents for catamenial (a nineteenth-century term meaning menstrual) receivers made between 1840 and 1861, this chapter illuminates how women used

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<sup>7</sup> Sharra Louise Vostral, “‘The Kotex Age’: Consumerism, Technology, and Menstruation” in *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011); National Museum of American History, “Feminine Hygiene Products,” *Smithsonian Institution*, accessed December 23, 2017, <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/health-hygiene-and-beauty/feminine-hygiene-products>.

materials, primarily textiles, to manage their menstruation to improve their lived experiences in the antebellum period. More generally, this analysis of the material culture of nineteenth-century menstruation shows the significant role that bodily management played in historical lives.

Menstruation management devices were increasingly essential by the middle of the nineteenth century because women were more frequently experiencing their menstrual courses. The rise in monthly bleeding resulted from the fact that women were healthier, marrying later, and having fewer children.<sup>8</sup> Women adopted various methods of birth control such as prolonged breastfeeding, withdrawal, the rhythm method, abstinence, douching, and abortion.<sup>9</sup> By the 1850s, birth rates had significantly declined among white, native-born, married women. At the start of the century the average number of children born to a white woman was 7.04; by the close of the century that number had fallen by 49% to 3.56.<sup>10</sup>

The decline in birthrates radically altered many women's relationship with their periods. Many women coming of age in the early years of the nineteenth century had mothers who were pregnant or breastfeeding through most of their fertility cycle.

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<sup>8</sup> Susan E Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 47, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

For this generation of older women, menstruation was an infrequent burden. With the trend toward smaller families, mid-nineteenth-century women more frequently found blood on their undergarments as their ova left their bodies, unfertilized. Women entering adulthood in the antebellum period had to manage menstruation more frequently, and more effectively, than their mothers and grandmothers had.

The trend toward less frequent childbirth did not apply to all women. Susan E. Klepp importantly points out that the statistics available do not adequately reflect the entire population. Enslaved African Americans saw *rising* fertility rates, and thus less frequent menstruation, until after the Civil War. This opposing birthing trend was a direct result of African American enslavement. After the end of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the continuation of slave labor depended upon enslaved women's reproductive capabilities. As Marie Jenkins Schwartz analyzes in her book, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*, white doctors and slave owners became closely involved with the obstetric management of enslaved women. White enslavers sought to increase their laboring population by maximizing black women's fertility. The reproductive demands placed on enslaved women led to limited menstrual occasions. Schwartz writes that, "doctors regularly and readily prescribed substances for stimulating the menstrual flow (emmenagogues) for white women to stave off pregnancy even as they deplored the actions of enslaved women to regulate

the menses.”<sup>11</sup> The first appearance of menstruation was understood as a sign of fertility; pregnancy promised enslavers future income. Enslaved women thus began their reproductive lives at an earlier age than white women. Only after emancipation, when African American women regained control of their bodies, did their birthrates begin to fall.<sup>12</sup>

In part because of the less frequent menstrual occurrences among enslaved women during this era, but mostly because of the paucity of evidence recording their material management of menstrual blood, this essay focuses on the material culture of free women who had access to more resources to participate in, and to record their participation in, a historically legible material culture of menstruation management. As a result, the narrative pieced together in this thesis details the lived experiences of primarily middle and upper class white women.

### **Material Responses to the Nineteenth-Century Rise in Menstruation**

With falling birthrates came more frequent menstruation. In response, many white women routinized management of their monthly courses which, for previous generations, had occurred with infrequency. Bleeding into one’s clothing was not a practical, nor an affordable choice for monthly management. While laundry in

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<sup>11</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 25.

America was done with more regularity than in England or other European countries, the popularity of bright white linens necessitated careful maintenance to preserve their clean appearance.<sup>13</sup> Personal recipe books and popular lady's magazines included recipes for the removal of blood stains,<sup>14</sup> yet the presence of persistent stains on surviving textiles suggests that, like period stains today, the best course of action was prevention. The wearing of menstrual devices was the greatest defense against the ruin of precious linens, undergarments, stockings, and flooring.

Underwear in the antebellum period was commonly open-crotch, making free-bleeding a risk not only to the textiles pressed against the body, but also to carpets and flooring below.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Charles Meigs, a respected obstetrician in the mid-nineteenth century who authored many books on the treatment of female illnesses, encountered few women who wore only thicker petticoats to prevent the exposure of their menstrual bleeding. He responded that, "[s]uch persons must be very slightly hemorrhagic, since the want of a guard-napkin would otherwise be sure to expose their

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 216-218.

<sup>14</sup> Daybook, 1885-1887, Folder 0145, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum Libraries; "Household Recipes," *Godey's Lady's Book* (January 1855).

<sup>15</sup> Cecil Willett and Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (Courier Corporation, 1992).

condition by stains of blood upon their feet or stockings.”<sup>16</sup> Free-bleeding would have been a visible affair in open-crotch undergarments and, as Meigs’s quote suggests, women did not want to publicly “expose their condition,” but instead actively concealed it.

A close examination of several sets of undergarments reveals considerable evidence that women struggled to remove period stains from their clothes. For example, object 55.3 at the Western Reserve Historical Society (Figure 1) is a pair of white cotton pantalets from the mid-nineteenth century that fall below the knee. They have an open crotch and feature a single button closure in the front at the waist. Halfway up the hem of the open crotch, there is a small blood stain. The presence of decorative elements – pleating along the waistline seam, small tucks and tatting at the bottom of each leg, as well as the delicate bright white cotton material used in their construction – suggest that these pantalets were not intended to be bled upon. Yet they were clearly worn by a menstruating woman – who perhaps started her period unexpectedly or who was spotting in the middle of her cycle. The amorphous stain only measures about an inch in circumference. It is not evidence of free-bleeding, but of the difficulty one woman faced in attempting to manage the unpredictability of her menstruation. The small size of the stain and the nice quality of the pantalets testify to the risk menstruation posed to one’s possessions. The absence of additional stains

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Delucena Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art* (Philadelphia, PA: Blanchard and Lea, 1852), 136.

suggests that the owner of this item made an effort to better manage her subsequent menses.



Figure 1. Pair of Pantalets with small blood stain. Object 55.3. Courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Chisholm Halle Costume Wing, Cleveland, OH. Photo by author.

The general lack of bloodied undergarments, while in part due to a modern collecting bias, may also indicate that sullied pantalets were historically not of value. It appears that they were not handed down and preserved as frequently as pristine undergarments but were eventually repurposed as rags or otherwise disposed of. Kathleen Brown observes linen's conflated relationship with the body and its representation of virtue, if clean, and of vice, if sullied.<sup>17</sup> To maintain the value and usefulness of such pieces, one had to take care around the time of the menses.

While the surviving menstrual management devices in this period came from the collections of middle class and wealthy families, these technologies likely would have been important to working-class women too. Bleeding directly into clothing was particularly unaffordable and uncomfortable for working-class women. These women might only have two or three changes of clothes, and they could not afford to launder bloodied clothing daily during their menstrual periods.<sup>18</sup> If a woman bled into her petticoat, she would have to live with the discomfort and stench of menstrual blood until she had the time or money to launder, which could be weeks or longer.

Waged workers could oftentimes not afford to take time off work monthly to tend to their bodies. As Frederick Hollick noted in the 1840s, "Many poor seamstresses, and waiters in stores, suffer from [painful menstruation] to a great

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 215-222. By the mid-nineteenth century, washing increased from seasonal washing to weekly washing for many households but even weekly washing would have been inadequate for menstruating women with only a few clothing items.



extent, their occupation making all treatment useless, and their circumstances compelling them to continue it.”<sup>19</sup> These women not only had to work through their menstruation despite any pain or discomfort, but they also required technology that would protect highly valuable outfits and facilitate more comfortable working conditions.

Ideal technologies would not only preserve the comfort and clothing of working women, but also their reputations. American society expected menstruation to remain out of the public eye. This prompted women of all classes to adopt various solutions to maintain their respectability while bleeding. Both personal and cultural pressures motivated women to make use of a variety of menstrual devices.

### **Makeshift and Homemade Solutions**

Throughout the antebellum era, even elite white women did not have access to scientifically tested technologies. They made do with a variety of sophisticated homemade devices and makeshift solutions. The earliest patent for a menstrual device, attributed to Alfred A. Starr in 1854, offers a rare description of the existing method of menstruation management commonly in use before the invention of commercial technologies:

The method usually adopted by females to secure themselves from inconvenience during their menstrual periods is to girdle themselves with a tape or string to which the ends of the napkin used to cover the

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<sup>19</sup> Hollick, *The Diseases of Woman*, 177.

vulva are attached. This method is attended to with several objectionable features: such as the inconvenience of adjusting the napkins and the tendency of the girdling string to chafe, and cut into the flesh, producing pain and soreness.<sup>20</sup>

The most common solution used by middle-class Americans who could afford it was the T-bandage. As described in Starr's patent, a T-bandage was a napkin attached to a sanitary belt (Figure 2). An obstetrics manual from the early 1850s explains in some detail how such T-bandage sanitary belts were worn and used:

For the most part, as soon as the menses are perceived to begin to flow, the woman applies a T-bandage, consisting of a napkin, called the guard, folded like a cravat, which is pressed against the genitalia, while the ends are secured to a string or riband [sic] tied around the body above the hips . . . Many female patients have assured me they never use less than a dozen napkins upon each catamenial occasion— and fifteen, and even twenty such changes are not very rare in the history of healthy menstruations. An ounce to a napkin is, perhaps, not an excessive computation.<sup>21</sup>

To own twelve napkins was outside the realm of affordability for many poor women, but those who could afford this method would have aspired to achieve the comfort offered by an ample supply of pads. The above description also demonstrates the vast variety of menstrual flows that women experienced. While a common culture surrounded menstrual management, every woman attended to the needs of her unique body and social situation.

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred A. Starr, Catamenial Supporter, U.S. Patent 11,574 issued August 22, 1854.

<sup>21</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 136.

These descriptions demonstrate that many women wore complex homemade contraptions known as T-bandages, yet many other women, especially working-class women who did not have the time or resources to purchase or to hand make sanitary belts, used simpler solutions. Makeshift solutions they employed included inserting rags or other absorbent materials – even mosses for poor or enslaved women in the South – into the vagina.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to rags, women also used more regularized, prescribed tampons during the mid-nineteenth century. While designs and instructions were likely primarily passed along among women, home health guides also offered advice regarding how to make tampons. Hollick's popular household health guide, *The Diseases of Women* (1847) provides such a description:

It may be made of linen rag, cotton, or sponge, in the form of a ball, and introduced into the vagina like a pessary . . . A very good way to make the plug is to cut out round pieces of soft linen cloth, then pass a stout thread through the middle of each and press them close together, till the mass is an inch thick. The string is convenient for pulling it out again.

Another type of improvised tampon involved less cutting and sewing. As early as 1845, many medical journals began to recommend the technique of combining sponge

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<sup>22</sup> One of the earlier commercial devices was “Sfag-Na-Kins,” a sanitary napkin made of sphagnum moss wrapped in gauze and marketed during WWI. The moss was highly absorbent, capable of taking up more than 20 times its weight in liquid. Women likely used locally available mosses to protect their clothing long before the Sfag-Na-Kins marketed moss as the filling for a commercial sanitary napkin.

pads with a medical truss to serve as a menstrual receiver.<sup>23</sup> Trusses, medical instruments typically used to treat hernias or prolapsed uteruses, were readily available medical instruments in the nineteenth century, and sponge pads were available in most drug stores. Together they made an effective menstrual receiver.

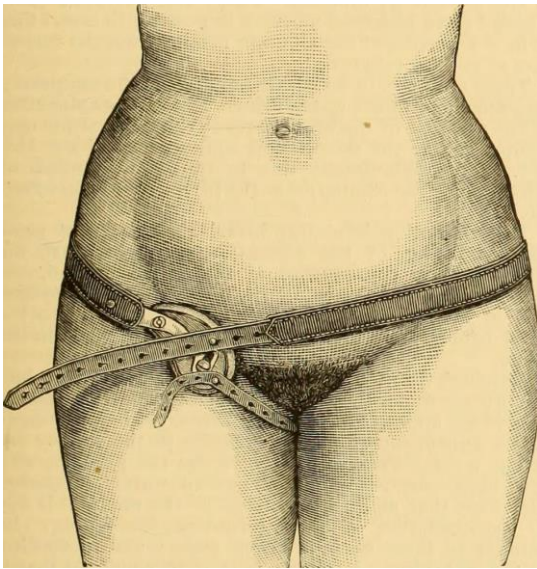


Figure 2. Print depicting a truss in use from Albert H. Buck, *A Reference Handbook of the Medical Sciences: Embracing the Entire Range of Scientific and Practical Medicine and Allied Science* (New York: William Wood, 1885), 261. Image in the public domain.

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<sup>23</sup> Laura Klosterman Kidd, “Menstrual Technology in the United States, 1854 to 1921” (PhD diss., Iowa State University, 1994), 81.

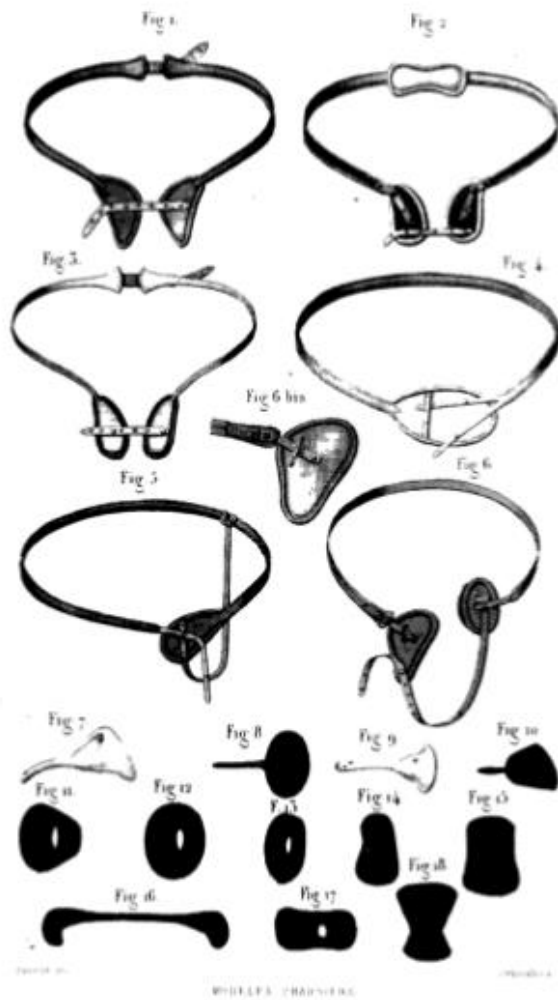


Figure 3. Medical trusses and pessaries to treat various hernias. Figure 6 in this illustration was designed to treat the inguinal region and is likely the type altered by women to use for menstrual absorption. Claude Bernard, Charles Huette, *Illustrated Manual of Operative Surgery and Surgical Anatomy* (Baillière Brothers, 1861). Image in the public domain.



Figure 4. Nineteenth-century examples of tampons from Paul Fortunatus Munde, *Minor Surgical Gynecology* (W.Wood: 1880), 177. Image in the public domain.

Despite the use of menstrual technologies like pads or tampons, some women nevertheless bled into their clothing. This occurrence has been perceived by some historians, including Harry Finley, the founder of the Museum of Menstruation, as evidence that women found free-bleeding culturally acceptable.<sup>24</sup> Placed alongside other material evidence and printed sources, however, this theory appears less convincing. Instead of being an intended cultural practice, free-bleeding most likely occurred when working class women, subjected to ignorant or insensitive factory managers, did not have access to adequate hygiene facilities or time for self-care.

The myth of widespread free-bleeding stems from the ephemeral nature of many of these makeshift solutions. Few household ledgers listed rags because they were not purchased but rather recycled from other items. Many old textiles met their

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<sup>23</sup> Finley, "What did American and European Women Use for Menstruation in the Past?"; Whittaker, e-mail message to the author, April 21, 2017.

end as menstrual rags but did not enter households as such. Thus, menstrual rags do not make an appearance in household ledgers. Yet old scraps of textiles were widely accessible to most women. An account of William Howard Russell's visit to enslaved persons' living quarters in 1863 records the presence of old textiles that could have been repurposed as menstrual rags: "The ground round the huts was covered with litter and dust, heaps of old shoes, [and] fragments of clothing."<sup>25</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, in her extensive history of gynecology, also locates an instance of overseers gathering soiled rags from enslaved women's living quarters.<sup>26</sup> Despite the ephemeral nature of much of the evidence, women who were expected to work throughout their menstrual period would have found ways to make-do by using available materials to help absorb their flow and increase their comfort.

Material concerns and bodily comfort were not the only motivators for managing menstruation. Keeping one's person presentable by containing blood reflected domestic sense and capability. Cleanliness symbolized a woman's purity and virtue. Menstrual technologies were thus essential tools of status and gender performance. As Kathleen Brown notes in her book *Foul Bodies*, there was considerable "pressure on Americans to represent their class position through personal appearance in a fluid society where social mobility (both upward and downward) was

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<sup>25</sup> William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South Vol. 2* (New York, NY: Harper, 1863), 60.

<sup>26</sup> Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 80.

still possible.”<sup>27</sup> Menstrual blood was a substance that women, regardless of race or status, were expected to keep concealed from the public. The performance of social status was dependent upon the successful management of menstruation. As women matured they became skillful at managing the substance in private and preventing its presence from leaking into public spaces.

In *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*, Susan Vostrel suggests that women use menstrual technologies to “mask [their] real body and pass as healthy and free of menstrual burdens.”<sup>28</sup> As will be explored in depth in chapter three, disguising the “real” body in order to present a virtuous body was central to maintaining status, and it contributed to the private culture surrounding menstrual devices in the nineteenth century. As mentioned before, menstruation management was not purely about comfort but was also about social performance in a society in which the subject of menstrual blood was deemed highly impolite if it leaked beyond the confines of the private sphere.

### **Patented Solutions**

The appearance of various patents for “catamenial sacks” in the 1850s coincides with changing working conditions for women. The material innovations in menstruation management coincided with changes in the material conditions of

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 218.

<sup>28</sup> Sharra Louise Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 74.



women's paid labor force participation. When women labored in or near their homes, they had access to wash basins, rags, and possibly even a change of clothes, in addition to some measure of control over their schedules. Throughout the nineteenth century, the growth of women's employment as wage laborers in factories disrupted those earlier practices and limited women's control over their personal hygiene practices. By the late antebellum period, about 20 percent of women participated in wage labor.<sup>29</sup> By the 1850s, women at work in the mills commonly faced unrelenting 13½-hour work days.<sup>30</sup> Long shifts left less time to tend to tampons or sanitary napkins; sometimes women did not even have access to private washrooms.<sup>31</sup> In addition to these obstacles, those who worked outside of the home would also have had to navigate the logistics of transporting used napkins or pads home to wash.

To work long hours without changing pads, women needed products that addressed these new challenges. Between 1850 and 1860, four menstrual devices were patented in the United States. While probably not widely used, these innovative

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Weiss, "Female Workforce Participation Rate" in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition Vol. 2. Work and Welfare* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work a History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Davey, "I am Sick All Over: Working Class Women, Clothing, and the Management of Menstruation, 1873-1914" in *Material Culture Symposium for Emerging Scholars: Selected Papers 2003-2007*, edited by Rebecca B. Worley (Newark, DE: A joint publication by Small Wonder Press and Raven Press at the University of Delaware, 2007).

patents document the widespread desire for effective technology that allowed women to work efficiently while bleeding. Each of the patents addressed concerns about comfort, ease of use, portability, and increased absorbency – concerns that women faced monthly throughout the nineteenth century.

Alfred A. Starr's original patented device of 1854 addressed pain caused by the girdling strings of many homemade T-bandages. His new apparatus consisted of, "four light elastic steel-springs . . . adjusted and fastened . . . by means of an adjusting screw."<sup>32</sup> While his menstrual device consisted of metal screws and springs that pressed against the waist and was likely no more comfortable than other homemade belts and pads, his description of "the inconvenience of adjusting the napkins and the tendency of the girdling string to chafe, and cut into the flesh" suggests that many homemade solutions were also uncomfortable. Starr underscores the fact that common methods used for the material management of menstruation had the potential to distract women from their work. Chafing, cutting, and the need for adjustments added to the distraction already provoked by a concern for bleeding onto or through one's clothing.

In 1858 N. Jensen patented the next "improvement in catamenial bandages."<sup>33</sup> This technology recognized that undressing to change menstrual pads on the job necessitated time and privacy – resources that working women did not have in

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<sup>32</sup> Starr, Catamenial Supporter, U.S. Patent 11,574 issued August 22, 1854.

<sup>33</sup> N. Jensen, Catamenial Supporter, U.S. Patent 22,293 issued December 14, 1858.

abundance. As a result, Jensen's patent focused on ease of use, making it simple to replace absorbent materials. His device functioned as follows:

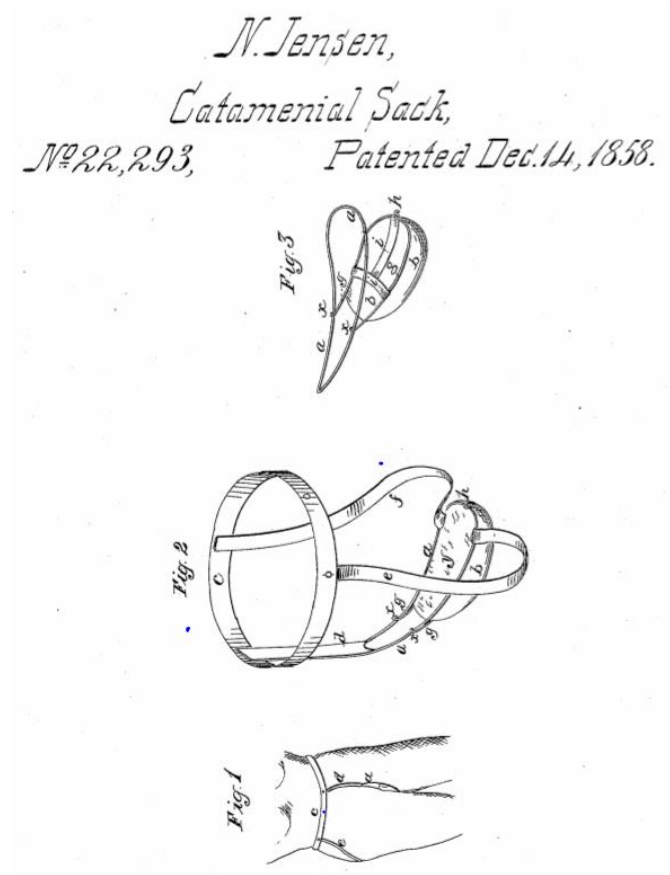


Figure 5. The patent for the catamenial sack includes three images depicting the instrument on the body, the waist belt with attached menstrual receiver, and a detail of the hinged sack for accessing and replacing absorbent materials. Jensen, N. Catamenial Sack. U.S. Patent 22,295 issued July 31, 1860. Image in the public domain.

Whenever the person who wears` this instrument wishes to remove the cotton and bag temporarily from the vagina for the purpose of inserting a new piece of cotton or sponge or any other purpose, she has only to unhook the hook “h”, when the bag and spring “g” may be swung forward on its hinges “a”. This is a feature of great practical utility as it obviates the great inconvenience of frequently removing and replacing the whole bandage.<sup>34</sup>

Jensen’s solution demonstrates women’s need for an expeditious way to replace absorbent materials.

In 1859, Charles E. Clark patented another catamenial bandage that focused on portability while it continued to address issues of physical discomfort. He described his invention:

It is intended to hold a piece of soft sponge in the cavity or space between the two airtight inflatable crescents which are shown at A, B. Each of the said crescents is a vessel made of vulcanized caoutchouc or other proper flexible air tight material, and hollow so as when inflated with air to operate like a cushion, flexible in all directions. These two cushions are conjoined by a septum or connection piece C, which is constructed of waterproof material and extends from the outer surface or edge of one to that of the other, and so as to make an elongated cap shaped space, D, capable of holding a sponge or other proper absorbent.<sup>35</sup>

This patent importantly introduced caoutchouc also known as vulcanized rubber to the design of menstrual receivers. Jensen’s innovation marks a material divergence from the homemade models fashioned from textiles. Rubber was not only waterproof,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Charles E. Clark, Catamenial Bandage, United States Patent No. 23,059, issued 1859.

making it easier to wash, but its flexibility was touted as improving comfort as well as portability.

The only other patented menstrual device from the antebellum period is a catamenial bandage patented in 1860 by Florian Dahis and Frederick Doermer. It primarily addresses the difficulties that women faced in washing and reusing their absorbent pads. This patent description states that “the sponge may be taken out and washed as often as may be required during the menstrual period.”<sup>36</sup> The sponge could be easily rinsed, and its waterproof container allowed for quick cleaning, making it particularly useful to women who needed to make use of every moment of their time. Convenience of application and care were instrumental to the development of successful menstrual technologies. These improvements would have been crucial to the lives of women who lacked the luxury of resting and tending to their menstruating bodies.

In addition to the specific bodily needs of women working away from home, the presence of patents in the antebellum period demonstrates the early commercial viability of menstrual devices.<sup>37</sup> Once women were entering the labor force in

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<sup>36</sup> Florian Dahis and Frederick Doermer, Menstrual Instrument, United States Patent No. 29,362, issued 1860.

<sup>37</sup> Kara W. Swanson, "Rubbing Elbows and Blowing Smoke: Gender, Class, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Patent Office," *Isis* 108, no. 1 (2017): 56; Swanson's essay illustrates the unbridled sexism that was rampant in the U.S. Patent Office of the 1850s and it is plausible that patents submitted by men were more likely to be approved than those submitted by women. Women likely were involved in the inventions of these successful menstrual technologies because they had the benefit of

considerable numbers and menstruating with greater frequency, women – and men seeking to profit from innovative technologies – attempted to remedy the inherent difficulties of menstruating on the job. That men also concerned themselves with

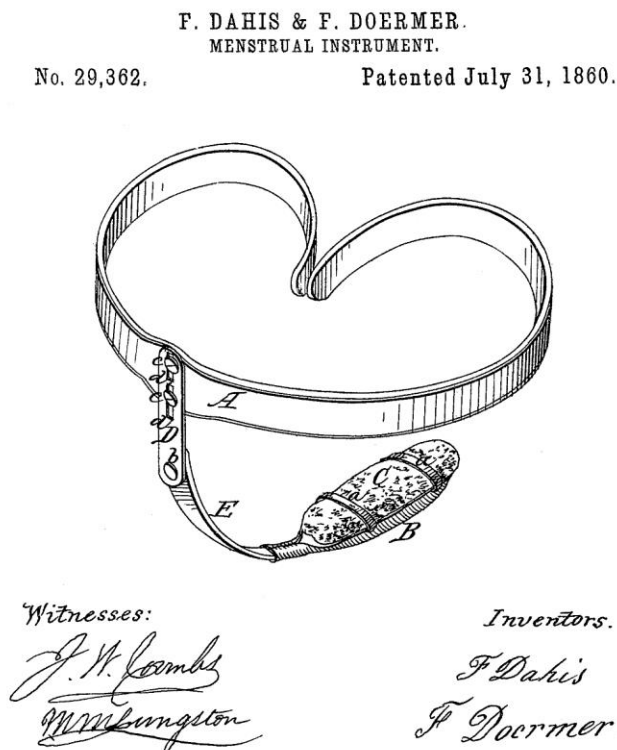


Figure 6. The patent for the menstrual instrument depicts the waist belt with attached sponge. Dahis and Doermer. Menstrual Instrument. U.S. Patent 29,362 issued July 31, 1860. Image in the public domain.

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understanding the highly embodied issue being addressed by the catamenial receivers. The history of developing these patents would benefit from further research.

developing more effective menstrual receivers suggests that there was a perceived commercial market for menstrual devices. The absence of surviving commercially manufactured implements from the antebellum period suggests that the patented devices were not successful, but nonetheless it seems that some women had the option of *purchasing* menstrual devices much earlier than historians have previously recognized.<sup>38</sup> For example, Alfred A. Starr's patent description states that, "[t]o enable others skilled in the art to make and use my improvement I will proceed to describe its construction and operation."<sup>39</sup> Starr intended his design to be made and retailed so that he could earn royalty payments.

The handful of people who registered patents for menstrual products in the antebellum period recognized a potentially colossal market. By the close of the century, this market would be tapped by various entrepreneurs. Menstrual devices facilitated mess prevention, comfort, and the performance of gentility. Yet, in this early era, the intense demand for products was kept quiet and relegated to the privacy of the home. As a result, commercial retailers were not meeting women's needs. Instead, women created their own devices.

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<sup>38</sup> The commercial period for menstrual devices is considered to begin in the last decades of the nineteenth century when ads for devices begin to appear in newspapers.

<sup>39</sup> Starr, Catamenial Supporter, U.S. Patent 11,574 issued August 22, 1854.

### Case Study: The Massie Family's Menstrual Pads

Susan Elizabeth Smith was born in South Carolina in 1822 and married Henry Massie in 1841.<sup>40</sup> They lived in Charlottesville, Virginia where Henry worked as a postmaster and Susan worked hard “keeping house.”<sup>41</sup> An analysis of Susan Massie’s menstrual technologies demonstrates that she was able to afford a degree of luxury in her daily life. The elite quality of the Massie family is further demonstrated by their inclusion in the book *Virginia and Virginians*, which lists the genealogy of “eminent” Virginian families.<sup>42</sup>

Massie likely did not menstruate with frequency, seeing as she gave birth to eight children. She birthed her eldest daughter, Caroline, in 1845. The construction of the menstrual pads and sanitary belts, dating to the 1850s, coincide with the probable onset of Caroline’s first menses. Perhaps Susan made or altered the menstrual pad for the occasion of her daughter’s menarche. With a full-time job of running the home and a husband who provided the family’s income, Susan possessed the skills and time to craft these sophisticated menstrual receivers.

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<sup>40</sup> Smith Family Tree, *Ancestry.com*, accessed August 24, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> United States Census 1870, Albemarle County, Virginia, *Ancestry.com*, accessed September 27, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Virgil A. Lewis, *Virginia and Virginians: Eminent Virginians: Executives of the Colony of Virginia, from Sir Thomas Smyth to Lord Dunmore: Executives of the State of Virginia, from Patrick Henry to Fitzhugh Lee: Sketches of Gens. Ambrose Powel Hill, Robert E. Lee, Thos. Jonathan Jackson, Commodore Maury, Volume 2* (Richmond, VA: H. H. Hardy, 1888), 795.



These material objects provide a window into the culture of menstrual pad construction as well as the lifestyle of their maker and wearer. Homemade from white coarse cotton yarn, these washable menstrual pads measure roughly 2 ½ inches wide by 25 inches long. The absorbent body of the pad was crafted using a thick ribbed knit for increased absorbency while the thin bands at either end were tightly knit for strength. The thick bodied pads reduce to narrower rectangular strips for attaching to the belt at their ends. On one side, the narrower strip is two inches long and on the other it is four inches long. The body and the tails are separated by three decorative rows appearing perpendicular to the ribbed lines of the pad. The length of the pads allowed them to attach to sanitary belts that wrapped around the waist. Stretching from near the bellybutton, around the vulva, to the lower back required the pad to be rather long. Pads could not attach to undergarments like they do today because of the open-crotch common to mid-nineteenth-century underwear.

Each pad in the Massie collection has a distinctive brown stain next to a slit that resembles a buttonhole, yet buttons are entirely absent from both the sanitary belts and the pads. It is possible that the buttons have fallen off over time, making it difficult to ascertain precisely how they fit together. It is also possible that the sanitary belt looped through the hole on the pad to hold it up. On the other end, Susan Massie almost certainly used a metal loop attached to a leather tongue on the pad with a buttonhole-like slit – like that found attached to other menstrual pads from the 1850s

(see Figures 8 and 9).<sup>43</sup> Metal buckles were some of the most popular closures because they allowed a degree of adjustability.<sup>44</sup> This leather piece either buttoned or was looped onto the belt. The four-inch strip of the pad then wound through the metal loop, allowing it to be easily undone so that the wearer could use the restroom without needing to undress entirely.

Both Massie pads reveal bloodstains and suggest that their owner tried to remove those stains. The most visible blood is located on the bodies of the pads near the ends with the longer tails. Evidence of bleaching is also apparent as the entirety of the pads feature white and yellow splotchy discoloration. The bleach staining captures the historical effort to remove blood stains from these well-made white pads.

As the staining on the far end of the pad suggests, the wearer was able to observe the recommended treatment of rest during the first days of her cycle. Instead of pooling in the center of the pad, the blood stains are gathered at one end that would have been pressed against either the woman's behind or lower stomach (depending on what way the pads were worn) making it likely that the pads were worn while the wearer was reclined. Susan Massie or her daughters were capable of tending to the body during their time of the month.

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<sup>43</sup> Metal and leather buckles were likely purchased commercially. The leather and metal components of homemade T-bandages, while not purposed solely for feminine hygiene use, introduce a commercial aspect to menstruation management. The earlier commercial aspects of menstruation management would benefit from future research.

<sup>44</sup> Kidd, "Menstrual Technology in the United States, 1854 to 1921," 36.



Figure 7. Massie family's surviving set of menstrual pads and belts. Objects 46.74.50-55. Courtesy of the Valentine Museum. Photo by author.



Figure 8. An item like the leather and metal buckle seen on this pad was probably used with each Massie pad to attach them to belts and to allow for adjustability. From the collection of Elizabeth A. Topping.



Figure 9. Photos of a nineteenth-century menstrual pad knit from white cotton yarn with a leather and metal buckle. From the collection of Elizabeth A. Topping.



WITNESSES.  
*A. J. Libbey*  
*George F. Noble*

INVENTOR.  
*H. W. Libbey*

Figure 10. An image from an 1868 patent for a catamenial receiver shows two views (front and back) of a woman getting into bed wearing a menstrual device with an adjustable buckle similar to that likely used with the Massie device. Libbey, H.W. Catamenial Sack, U.S. Patent 75,434 issued March 10, 1868. Image in the public domain.

While the collection includes only two accessioned menstrual pads, the Massie family donated four sanitary belts to the Valentine. These were also homemade in the 1850s. The greater number of belts, which require less washing, suggests that there were initially more than two menstrual pads.

The sanitary belts are each made of off-white, coarse woven cotton. All measure between 24 and 25 inches long and .5 to 1-inch wide. They consist of a strip of cotton cloth folded over and sewn together using a masterfully executed invisible stitch. The belts have the appearance of unbroken, flattened, tubes, but closer inspection reveals the seams. A loose running stitch along the length of the belt helps it to lie flat and prevents it from tubing. On one end the belts taper slightly to narrower squared ends. Each end features a button hole with an elusive function.

Someone made various alterations over time to the sanitary belts. Because the belt would wrap around the mid-section of the woman wearing it, a close fit was necessary for function and comfort. Two of the belts show evidence of both cutting and resewing as well as tucking. In addition to sewing alterations the belts reveal other evidence of their use over time. The belts have yellowed due to their age and one features a small blood stain. Because the belt was not worn to absorb menstrual leakage, this stain illustrates the messiness of menstruation.

The alterations made to the belts provide insight into how they were used as well as their considerable value. Susan or her daughters took the time to alter the belts and to make repairs to the pads instead of simply replacing them when they wore down or no longer fit. The alterations also might suggest that they were used by more

than one family member. The wording of the accession states that the pads and belts were “worn by the family of Susan Massie.” This could just be vague phrasing or misinformation provided by her descendants, but it seems plausible that such useful items would be shared or handed down among the women of a family, especially given the infrequency of Mrs. Massie’s menstruation due to her many pregnancies.

The Massies were a highly respected family. An 1878 obituary for their daughter, Lulie Massie, describes her as a “beautiful and cultivated lady whose society was much sought.”<sup>45</sup> These pads were used by a family of white women who were skilled at maintaining their status. Their menstrual implements showcase what was ideal for a middle to upper class family and provide an example of what an affluent white woman could afford.

### **Medical Management of Menstruation**

All four of the surviving T-bandages from the antebellum period are made from white textiles. In addition to appearing more sanitary and allowing for bleaching, the white background enabled women to more easily examine their flow. In the mid-nineteenth century, menstruation was frequently considered an illness. The color and quality of the blood, as well as the amount of discharge, served as clues that helped a

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<sup>45</sup> “Death of a Well-Known Lady,” *Staunton Spectator*, May 14, 1878, accessed January 14, 2018, Newspapers.com.



woman understand the state of her health.<sup>46</sup> Women's medical management was interwoven with their material management of menstruation. Books such as *The Married Woman's Private Medical Companion* (1853) helped women address issues such as suppressed, immoderate, painful and imperfect menstruation. Immoderate flows could be caused by lifestyle habits such as "passions of the mind" or "too much dancing" and treated with powders, medicines, teas, and bed rest.<sup>47</sup>

Immoderate flows required more intensive material means of stoppage. The popular medical book, *The Diseases of Woman, Their Causes and Cure Familiarly Explained* (1847) suggested when tampons should be used: "In those severe cases, when the gush of blood is almost instantaneous . . . we may employ . . . mechanical means to prevent it. The best of which . . . is called the *tampon*, or *plug*."<sup>48</sup> Tampons were not suggested by physicians for regular menses, but instead for when flows were particularly intense. "Flooding" was viewed as an illness, and tampons were used to keep the woman from losing so much blood that she became ill. However, the ease of making tampons, detailed earlier in this chapter, likely made them more common than is suggested by the prescriptive literature.

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<sup>46</sup> A.M. Mauriceau, *The Married Woman's Private Medical Companion: Embracing the Treatment of Menstruation, or Monthly Turns, during their Stoppage, Irregularity, or Entire Suppression: Pregnancy [sic], and How it May be Determined; With the Treatment of its Various Diseases* (New York: 1853).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Hollick, *The Diseases of Woman*, 184.

In addition to using tampons, women took medicines to control their menses. As will be explored in chapter two, regulating menstruation was key to health and fertility. The classified sections of newspapers in the antebellum period are home to many pills that promise to regulate menstruation. In the commercial and medical realms, the impoliteness of publicly mentioning menstruation was overridden by the importance of women's fertility. The material culture of menstruation was, in addition to mess management, intimately intertwined with conceptions of womanhood and reproduction. Regulating pills helped women address and regain control of the quality and quantity of their menstrual discharge that they skillfully managed with tampons, T-bandages, and makeshift solutions.

### **Conclusion**

On October 17, 1844 the classified section of *The New York Herald* advertised "The Lucina Cordial or The Elixir of Love." This pill was said to treat barrenness as well as difficult or painful menstruation. In bold print below the description it declares, "LET NO ONE DESPAIR."<sup>49</sup> This small advertisement testifies to both the potential for anguish caused by menstruation but also the determination of women to make use of all solutions within their reach. While materials such as menstrual pads and tampons do not enter the public realm of advertising until after the Civil War,

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<sup>49</sup> "The Lucina Cordial or The Elixir of Love," *The New York Herald*, October 17, 1844, accessed January 5, 2018, U.S. Newspapers.

some surviving examples, patents, and elusive medical references shed light on a subject previously left in American history's shadows. Women did not despair. They used linen rags, cotton, sponge, and other materials to manage the mess of menstruation in nineteenth-century America.

## Chapter 2

### **SUFFERING IN SECRET? FEMALE NETWORKS AND MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA**

In the antebellum era, women were tasked with maintaining the simultaneous appearance of menstrual regularity and invisibility. The same substance that is so deeply related to women's lauded role in reproduction (menstrual blood) was understood culturally as a gross embarrassment. This was because the "ideal" woman of the mid-nineteenth century was virtuous, domestic, and pure. These characteristics required her to balance a challenging duality – the suppression of bodiliness *and* the recurring performance of the ultimate bodily task (child-bearing). Society expected women to toil to maintain a clean house and (re)produce a respectable household. Menstruation occupied a culturally tense ideological space. This tension forced menstruation to occupy a vile, yet vital status as both ubiquitous and publicly unmentionable. As explored in the first chapter, the tedious management of the menses required women to skillfully mask their bleeding, but it also required them to closely monitor the regularity of their discharge to ensure their health as well as their fertility. Menstrual fluid containment, regularity, and stain prevention were thus means to achieving a larger end – the performance of gentility.

Medical professionals shaped the cultural conception of the "normal" female body. Because they linked a woman's health to her ability to bear children, they

viewed irregular menstruation – potentially a sign of infertility – as an illness.

Surviving recipe books belonging to women include recipes for a variety of regulating syrups and powders that echo physicians' medical advice regarding menstruation.

Medical men of the mid-nineteenth century were able to gain some influence within the private female realm through women's acceptance of their professional expertise, which influenced what women expected of their bodies. As a result, women tried to gain control over their bodily health by attempting to regularize their menses (at the same time ensuring their fertility).

Women turned to external sources of information because the corporeal management of menstruation, both containing its messiness and assuring its regularity, was tricky. It required advice and instruction. Books published by doctors (most of whom were men) addressed general medical issues such as dysmenorrhea (difficult or painful menstruation), menorrhagia (excessive flow), amenorrhea (suppressed menstruation), and pregnancy. Male medical authors dominate the historical narrative of nineteenth-century women's menstrual management, but they were not the only source of information regarding menstrual health. Advice about how to manage regular menarche and menstruation circulated in private conversations that elude historical documentation. Traces of these conversations remain, however, in diaries and recipe books. An analysis of surviving items enlightens the historical understanding of how women treated and managed menstruation in the antebellum era. This chapter introduces evidence that suggests that American women shared a menstrual culture well before standardized menstrual products were available

commercially. The trace material evidence analyzed in the following pages shows that women's treatment of abnormal menstruation existed both in accordance with, and in contradiction to, masculine medical advice.

### **The Necessary Evil: Menstruation and Marriageability**

In 1854, a woman named Prudence Morrell observed that, "Females are so constructed that they are not well, neither can they enjoy good health, unless they have their monthly courses."<sup>50</sup> Medical practitioners shaped the widespread belief that in the absence of pregnancy, regular menstruation was a requisite for feminine wellness. This emphasis on regular menstruation was invoked regardless of whether a woman was otherwise in good health. The medical writings found in home health guides and educational texts used by professional physicians look to menstruation as a health indicator.

Both women and the male-dominated medical community considered amenorrhea a potentially serious medical issue. Mothers anxiously anticipated their daughters' first menstrual occurrences because menstruation signaled normal femaleness and facilitated the transition into womanhood. Hollick advises that, "The establishment of the menstrual discharge is an event which every mother should

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<sup>50</sup> Prudence Morrell, "Receipts of Counsels, Exclusively for Female Diseases Selected by Prudence Morrel, When in the Sixty first year of her age," 1854, Document ASC 1016, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum Libraries, 7.

carefully watch for in her daughter, so that no untoward accident may prevent it.”<sup>51</sup>

Menstruation was understood to be an important part of the life cycle of the ovum and the key to fertility. As a result, menstrual health was considered important to family creation and thus to marriage. Reproduction was part of womanhood and marriageability depended largely upon a woman’s perceived ability to bear children. The cultural implications of menstrual absence are exemplified by the following case study of Mrs. Blank.

In the 1840s a medical text described the case of Mrs. Blank, a woman in her early twenties who, despite overall good health, had never menstruated. Doctors applied various medical remedies to induce her flow, but none met with success. Two years into her marriage, her husband became increasingly concerned about this abnormality and its effect on Mrs. Blank’s ability to bear children. Finally, he consulted Dr. Charles Meigs, a widely known and respected obstetrician. Meigs performed a full-body examination of Mrs. Blank. Through his “exploration by the touch,” Dr. Meigs concluded that Mrs. Blank did not have a womb.<sup>52</sup> The doctor captured his feelings on the matter in his book, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art* (1852):

I was deeply impressed myself with the melancholy fate of two estimable persons, who would never have placed themselves in so unhappy of a condition, if, by proper exploration of the parts before marriage, the real state

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<sup>51</sup> Hollick, *The Diseases of Woman*, 214.

<sup>52</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 159.

of the case could have been discovered. *The case also seems to show how improper it is to permit the rites of marriage to be solemnized for persons who do not possess all the attributes properly belonging to the sexes* [emphasis added].<sup>53</sup>

As the case study of Mrs. Blank makes clear, menstruation was intimately linked through fertility to marriageability. While the case of Mrs. Blank is the extreme (her amenorrhea was due to an absent uterus), it demonstrates the importance of fertility and shows that menstruation was the substance that indicated a woman's fecundity. It also discloses that doctor Charles Meig's, along with many others, believed that women's gynecological health was a prerequisite to obtaining the right to marry. As a result, physicians, daughters, and mothers were all on the lookout for menstrual irregularity so that they could diagnose it and prevent infertility in order to ensure marriageability.

Menstruation, as a symbol of fertility, helped define nineteenth-century womanhood. A woman's first menstruation marked a significant cultural shift in her social life; it marked her entrance into a culture of independent social mobility via her fitness to start her own family. Because of social pressures to produce children, women who suffered from irregular menstruation commonly sought medical remedies to address their bodily concerns. Various books such as *The Married Woman's Private Medical Companion* (1847) sought to help women perform their primary marital duty. These texts served as home health guides. They helped women treat their own medical

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<sup>53</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 158.



ailments that otherwise would have required the presence of a doctor. Yet, while these books offered medical instructions, they did not take the place of fellow females' experiential knowledge or motherly advice. Home health guides frequently directed the reader to the most appropriate and knowledgeable sources of information regarding material management: respectable adult women.

### **Seeking Advice**

John C. Gunn's book, *Gunn's New Domestic Physician: Or, Home Book of Health*, was a standard medical manual that included a chapter on menstruation with recipes for treating dysmenorrhea, menorrhagia, amenorrhea, and pregnancy. In addressing the normal onset of the menses and its daily management, Gunn makes clear that maternal counsel was essential. Mothers were expected to be ready to provide their daughters with advice and guidance: "the menstrual effort is commonly preceded, in its first appearance, by a general uneasiness, pains in the back and hips, sickness at the stomach and headache . . . these entirely new sensations . . . should lead [young persons] to seek maternal counsel."<sup>54</sup> This quote suggests that menstrual knowledge was commonly transmitted from mother to daughter in the mid-nineteenth century. At the very least, Gunn sought to present his own sexual advice to unmarried women while at the same time maintaining his own respectability by explaining that he

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<sup>54</sup> John C. Gunn, *Gunn's New Domestic Physician: Or, Home Book of Health* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Company, 1859), 435.

merely sought to give mothers the information that they could then give to their daughters. Gunn thus bypassed the offensiveness of discussing menstruation outside of the private sphere by invoking the propriety of motherhood to sanction his (male) medical advice. This invocation allowed Gunn to dominate a space that traditionally gave authority to mothers.

*The Mother's Own Book and Practical Guide to Health: Being a Collection of Necessary and Useful Information Designed for Females Only* (1843) by Alfred G. Hall, for example, suggests that mothers instruct their daughters in the art of menstrual management. Hall states that, "The mother or guardian of that female should frequently inquire after those symptoms that indicate approaching menstruation."<sup>55</sup> Hall makes clear that it is the task of the mother or guardian to help girls learn to take care of their "secret sufferings."<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Hall conveniently provides answers for the mother within his text. Women desired up-to-date medical practices to supplement their own experiential knowledge due to the social and physical significance of menstruation management.

Mothers were tasked with educating their daughters likely because menstruation remained an inappropriate subject beyond the walls of women's spaces. The cultural sensitivity surrounding menstruation made it difficult for doctors to

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<sup>55</sup> Alfred G. Hall, *The Mother's Own Book and Practical Guide to Health : Being a Collection of Necessary and Useful Information Designed for Females Only* (Rochester, NY: 1843) 24.

<sup>56</sup> Hall, *The Mothers Own Book and Practical Guide to Health*, xiv.

directly address young women. Yet by reading home health guides such as those by Gunn and Hall, mothers absorbed male physicians' advice on menstrual management and passed it along to their daughters. Physician-authors thus indirectly contributed to the instruction of young women. Inciting mothers to instruct their daughters in such delicate female matters helped doctors to maintain professional respectability by excusing men from discussing matters of sex with young women. However, this indirectness allowed mothers to pass on accumulated pieces of advice that were gathered from sources beyond physicians' guides. Women selected, rejected, and altered published medical advice to pass along to their daughters before the young women gained access to medical books themselves.

Menarche was a particularly significant moment of education as many women believed that failure to properly treat a daughter's first instance of menstruation could lead to permanent dysmenorrhea or even a perpetually ruined complexion.<sup>57</sup> In handling such an important private matter, even experienced mothers frequently sought help from other women outside of their household. Women trusted other women when it came to menstrual advice. Not only did they turn to doctors and the pages of medical literature, they sought advice from family, close friends, and respected women in the community.

Advertisements in the mid-nineteenth century reflect the atmosphere of female trustworthiness in feminine matters. While many advertisements persuaded consumers

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<sup>57</sup> Hall, *The Mothers Own Book and Practical Guide to Health*, 25.

of the efficacy of regulating pills by touting the assurances of male doctors, others drew on the reliability of the first-hand experiences of females. For example, an 1840 advertisement for “Madame Restell’s Female Monthly Regulating Pills” identifies Mrs. Restell as, “the celebrated midwife and female physician, (grandmother of the advertiser).”<sup>58</sup> Not only was the creator of the regulating pills described as a well-established medical specialist, she was also described as an experienced family woman who (it could be inferred) intimately knew the difficulties posed by irregular menstruation. The advertisers understood that women perceived maternal figures to be as trustworthy as doctors in matters of monthly bleeding. Like home health guides that instructed young women by way of their mothers, the advertisement for “Madame Restell’s Female Regulating Pills” provides an example of how male physicians subtly regulated female bodies by offering medical solutions under the guise of intimate female knowledge. Despite the reach of male medical influence into female circles, women privately modified and personalized medical regimes for themselves and their daughters.

Medical men did not have all the answers. While home health guides provided standard advice regarding menstrual medicine such as how to make and use T-bandages, tampons, emmenagogues, and so on, they did not provide advice concerning makeshift solutions for such problems. Many mothers, particularly those who were of

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<sup>58</sup> “Madame Restell’s Female Regulating Pills,” *Morning Herald* (New York, NY), January 11, 1840.

the working classes or enslaved, educated their daughters using remedies invented, discovered, or passed along among private networks of females.

One network of girls and women sharing in a menstrual culture is illuminated in the trial testimony from an 1848 New York Supreme Court case that attempted to ascertain whether the Reverend Issachar Grosscup had raped a young woman, Roxana Wheeler. The trial hinged on the timing of Ms. Wheeler's pregnancy, which she first suspected when her menses did not come as usual. Once she was certain she was pregnant, she informed her rapist, Grosscup, who persuaded her to keep her situation a secret and to obtain an abortion.

Keeping her suppressed menses a secret from her mother would not be an easy task. Wheeler worried: "suppose that my mother should say something to me for not being as I ought to be, what then should I tell her?"<sup>59</sup> This piece of testimony reveals that Ms. Wheeler's mother closely monitored her pubescent daughter. The presence or absence of menstrual rags would have been observed not only by the individual who was menstruating, but also by her close female family members.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Trial of Rev. Issachar Grosscup, for the Seduction of Roxana L. Wheeler, Comprising the Testimony in the Case, & also a Sketch of the Arguments Addressed to the Jury in Behalf of the Defense by Lapham, Bowne & Willson, & the Reply in Behalf of the Prosecution by Mark H. Sibley at the February Circuit of the Supreme Court, held at Canandaigua, Ontario County* (New York: 1848), 6.

<sup>60</sup> Middle-class and working-class women often lived in close quarters, sometimes even sharing beds. It is not surprising, then, that menstruation was not an entirely private affair.

Mothers kept a careful watch over their daughters because menstruation brought with it new social precarity. The onset of menstruation signaled that a young girl would soon be eligible for marriage and that pregnancy was possible. The upward social mobility offered by an advantageous marriage was counterbalanced by the potential for a young woman to lose her virtue through unwanted pregnancy. Daughters not only learned how to contain their fluid and manage their health, many also learned the importance of virtuous behavior and the risks of sexual intercourse.<sup>61</sup>

Regardless of sex education, fertility management sometimes included abortions, frequently achieved by using medicines that promised to treat “suppressed menstruation.” Doctors, such as Charles Meigs, were wary of any woman who claimed to suffer from amenhorrea (absence of menstruation). Meigs wrote, “suspect of pregnancy every married woman who complains of amenhorrea . . . Many have been the occasions of my being consulted for catamenial obstruction, with the design to entrap me into the administration of drugs that might remove the difficulty by procuring abortion.”<sup>62</sup> Because of the suspicions of doctors and the delicacy of the

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<sup>61</sup> James Ashton, *The Book of Nature: Containing Information for Young People Who Think of Getting Married: On the Philosophy of Procreation and Sexual Intercourse, Showing How to Prevent Conception and to Avoid Child-Bearing: Also, Rules for Management During Labor and Child-Birth* (New York: Wallis and Ashton, 1861); April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 154.

<sup>62</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 155.

situations that required abortive medicines, women often turned to one another for help.

Roxana Wheeler's pursuit of an abortion without the input of a physician, as detailed in the trial testimony, demonstrates her access to a female network of bodily management and creative problem solving. The Reverend Grosscup sent young Ms. Wheeler to his wife to seek help. Using a fictional backstory for her pregnancy, Wheeler obtained the help of Mrs. Grosscup to abort her unwanted child:

I then told her that I was in trouble by a young man . . . I then asked her if she thought she could do anything for me to help me out of my trouble. She said yes, she could. I then named the medicine to her . . . She then wanted to know how I had heard of the medicine . . . I told her Mrs. Richards. I then asked her if she had got the medicine? She said yes, she had, and that she had the instrument that it was to be given with, and said that if I would come up to her house she would prepare the medicine and that I might take it, up there . . . she then said that she would little rather have the consent of my mother before she administered the medicine.<sup>63</sup>

This testimony reveals the network of female support for obstetric challenges that were part of nineteenth-century life. Mrs. Grosscup, Mrs. Richards, and Mrs. Wheeler all were involved in Roxana Wheeler's fertility management. Doctors could not always be of assistance in matters of delicacy, and they adamantly advised against abortion. In these instances, women provided knowledgeable help and advice that went against male physicians' prescribed course of action. The fact that Ms. Wheeler went to Mrs. Grosscup, a woman with whom she was not intimately familiar, shows

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<sup>63</sup> *Trial of Rev. Issachar Grosscup, for the Seduction of Roxana L. Wheeler*, 9, 10.

that female networks of bodily management were not localized to one's immediate household.

### **A Shared Material Culture**

In addition to the delicate situation of unwanted pregnancies, women shared a more mundane network of bodily management know-how. They created communities to help each other cope with the daily physical burdens of womanhood including sharing tips on how to balance the tricky illusion of menstrual regularity and invisibility. In the words of Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, "the biological realities of frequent pregnancies, childbirth, nursing, and menopause bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy."<sup>64</sup> Physical intimacy was central to female networks, and out of these close circles of bodily awareness came a shared culture of menstrual management.

Extant recipe books suggest that women not only shared recipes for menstrual management but kept track of which ones "worked." A recipe book in the Downs Collection of the Winterthur Museum contains, among recipes for meals and house cleaning solutions, recipes for managing "menses profuse" and "female complaints." Entries under these headings are attributed to various women within the book-owner's social circle. Women tried and tested these recipes and found them to be effective.

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<sup>64</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 9.



Unlike the recipes listed in medical manuals that male doctors recommended, these recipes came with seals of approval from friends or from the book owner herself.

The physical characteristics of the recipe book reveal its utility and value. Measuring 17 X 21 cm, the recipe book is bound in leather and covered with oilskin that is decorated with a flower and diamond design motif. The book changed hands at some point. It features two distinguished sets of cursive scrawls, and recipes pasted from dated journals span the length of the nineteenth century. The owner likely handed it down to her daughter. Both owners made detailed entries of recipes gathered from a variety of sources, such as newspapers, doctors' recommendations, personal discoveries, and the advice of friends. As the recipes were tried and tested, the women added suggestions and edits to improve the effectiveness of future treatments. The original owner and her successor excitedly underlined important lines and occasionally added completely updated recipes. The owners wrote down many of the recipes by hand, but others they clipped from newspapers and pasted in. On the front paste-down and endpaper, the women attached newspaper clippings covering a range of topics. Medical advice and recipes such as, "A Simple Cure for Diphtheria," "A Few Good Things for the Family Table," and "To Keep a Stove Bright," occupy the prime location directly inside the front cover. From its endpapers alone, one can tell this was a well-used book that offered its user important help in moments of medical need, meal preparation, and house cleaning. It also demonstrates that health and housekeeping knowledge was an eagerly shared commodity among nineteenth-century women.

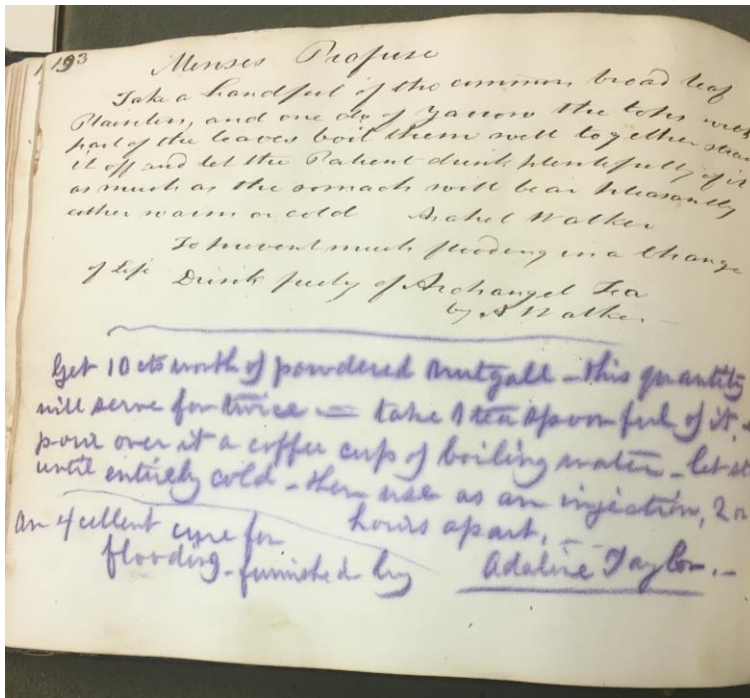


Figure 11. Page 193 of a recipe book (ca. 1829-1884) that contains entries for “Menses Profuse” and “an excellent cure for flooding.” Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum. Photo by author.

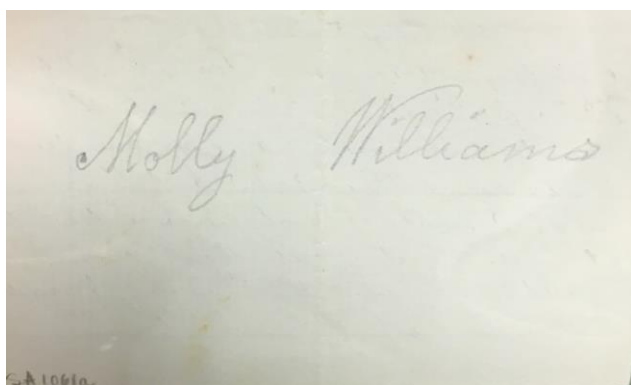
Relatives or close friends of the book owner provided many of the entries, including recipes to treat private ailments. For example, a recipe to treat menstrual flooding reads, “Get 10 cts worth of powdered nutgall . . . take 1 teaspoon full [sic] of it – pour over it a coffee cup of boiling water—let sit until entirely cold—then use as an injection, 2 hours apart. –An excellent cure for flooding furnished by Adaline Taylor.”<sup>65</sup> This recipe to cure menstrual flooding is pages away from a recipe,

<sup>65</sup> Personal Recipe Book, ca. 1829-1884, Document 1381, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum Libraries, 193.

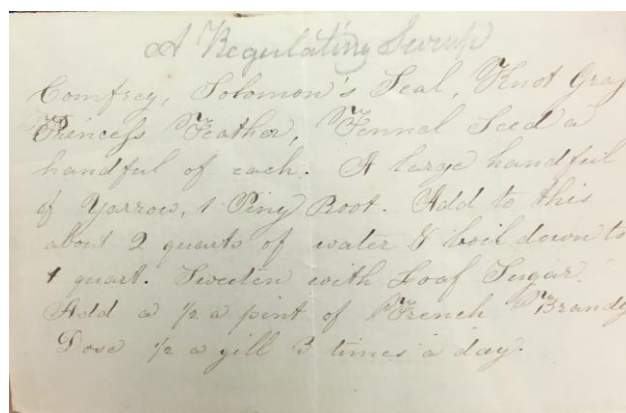
furnished by the book owner's niece, for curing meat. In this book menstrual recipes are not sequestered, but instead are placed alongside other, less provocative, household recipes. Women shared menstruation management tips just as they shared other advice.

Women used their familial and social networks to share the secrets of menstrual management, but when they lacked kinship ties, they improvised new ways of conveying essential information about women's health. While Shaker women had access to literature such as home health guides, they did not share in intimate female networks of kinship. To make up for this, celibate women who lived in the Mount Lebanon Shaker village created and circulated a more formalized document, a recipe book compiled for the use of an entire community of women. In 1854 Prudence Morrel, a medical woman who lived in the Shaker community at Mount Lebanon, New York, compiled this recipe book, now held in the Downs collection of the Winterthur library. This slight volume is only 22 pages long. It is bound in green paper, and the white interior pages are faintly printed with gray-blue lines. The pages are filled with neat cursive handwriting in black ink. The sixteen entries provide guidance on the regulation of menstruation by outlining recipes for pills and powders to promote and check the menses accompanied by notes of advice to nurses and to general readers.

This unique document provides evidence of a network of women sharing solutions to the problems posed by female bodies. Shaker women did not only read this volume, they apparently occasionally contributed their knowledge to its pages.



Molly Williams



A Regulating Surup  
Comfrey, Solomon's Seal, Root Gray  
Princeps Weather, Fenmel Seed a  
handful of each. A large handful  
of Yarrow, & Pine Root. Add to this  
about 2 quarts of water & boil down to  
1 quart. Sweeten with Loaf Sugar.  
Add a 1/2 pint of French Brandy.  
Dose 1/2 a gill 3 times a day.

Figure 12. Detail (Front and back) of small paper inserted into Prudence Morrell's recipe book. Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum. Photos by author.

Surviving along with the recipe book is a small square of loose paper that someone stuck between the leaves of the book. On one side, it features an additional recipe for "a regulating surup" with the name "Molly Williams" written on the reverse. This small note helps us to glean how this book was used. Not only did women use it to take advice, but Molly Williams, who had knowledge of an effective regulating syrup, contributed her own recipe to the book. This document was a communal source of information about menstrual management for women in the Mount Lebanon Shaker

community and it facilitated a female network that was prohibited in the daily encounters that Shaker women had with one another.

The Shaker doctrine of celibacy added considerably to the importance of menstrual management for Shaker women for at least two reasons. First, as Shakers did not intend to reproduce, they menstruated with much greater frequency. Shaker women had a pressing need for a resource that advised them on how to treat menstrual problems that arose. Even without the concerns of marriageability and fecundity, menstrual health was considered vital to normal womanhood. Shakers were not exempt from this American conception of femaleness.

Second, celibacy prevented the mainstream culture of mother/daughter intimacy from shaping a young woman's education. Whereas young women traditionally sought maternal counsel when they experienced their menarche, Shaker women did not have mothers to turn to. Shaker culture also discouraged special friendships and tried to eliminate all intimate connections. A community such as the Shakers would find such a publicly accessible and intimate feminine recipe book highly useful in maintaining their health (and perhaps also for maintaining an appearance of celibacy.<sup>66</sup>)

Prudence Morrel justified her creation of this book by stating, "Feeling a deep interest for my female companions . . . I have taken pains to solicit some of the best

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<sup>66</sup> Some of the recipes contain abortive ingredients. The field would benefit from further research into the reality of celibacy in Shaker communities and their use of birth control.

receipts, and set them in order, where they can be understood as being safe to rely on.”<sup>67</sup> This passage suggests that it is not only for matters of convenience that women share these recipes, but also for matters of safety. The value placed on “regular” menstruation led many women to attempt to induce or suppress their menses using potentially dangerous medicines. Morrell provided a recipe book to help women in her Shaker community who lacked the guidance that was usually provided by female family members and guardians.

In addition to medical advice, which leaves its traces in female recipe books such as the two detailed above, American women of the nineteenth century shared in a culture of menstrual containment. The first chapter of this thesis provided a detailed description of the menstrual pads and sanitary belts belonging to Susan Elizabeth Smith Massie in Virginia in the mid-nineteenth century. Two other homemade pads (Figures 8 and 9), also from the mid-nineteenth century, survive in the home of a private collector in Ohio. These pads share many visual similarities with the washable pads at the Valentine. While of differing widths, they are all the same general form, knit, and material – made of white, coarse cotton yarn knit in a ribbed fashion. It is curious that the examples of pads from the different collections, likely from various parts of the country, are so similar in design while clearly made by separate hands. It indicates that there was a circulating pattern for homemade pads or at the very least a shared idea of what a knit menstrual pad looked like.

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<sup>67</sup> Morrell, “Receipts of Counsels, Exclusively for Female Diseases.”

Recipe books and menstrual pads help us retrieve a previously undocumented history of women's communication on a private subject. Female menstrual advice networks were formed out of necessity. Girls had to enter womanhood, and this process involved learning how to manage one's newfound fertility.

### **Entering Upon Womanhood: The Need for the Network**

The transitional period between menarche and motherhood was brief. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg eloquently notes, "The roles of daughter and mother shaded imperceptibly and ineluctably into each other."<sup>68</sup> Once married, individuals were separated from their mothers in order to become more independent.<sup>69</sup> By the time of marriage, it was expected that these young women were capable of maintaining a house as well as their own personal appearance. Like the owners and users of the recipe books detailed above, many young women found ways to access female advice-networks once they moved away from their childhood community support systems.

In the antebellum era, the performance of womanhood required women to be in control of their bodies. Preparation for marriage was also preparation for motherhood. This preparedness did not only require women to be capable of conceiving children, but more specifically it required them to gain a degree of mastery over their fertility. By the 1850s, birth rates were on the decline. The popular desire for smaller families

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<sup>68</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," 9.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 17, 18.

required women to know how to employ methods of birth control. Women continued their search for feminine information long after they left their mothers' households. Women attempted to learn about their cycle by exploring their own bodies and sharing their findings with a close network of female friends.

Attempts to control fertility led to an increased interest in more fully understanding the cycle of fertility. Accordingly, the rhythm method grew in popularity in the early nineteenth century.<sup>70</sup> One woman's effort to track her period survives in the form of encoded diary entries. Analyzed in detail in Janet Farrell Brodie's book, *Contraception and Abortion in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*, Mary Poor's diaries "provide an intimate view of one couple's sexual life and possible attempts to limit family size."<sup>71</sup> Mary Poor used her diary to track her menses. She drew small plus signs roughly every 28 days, likely indicating the start of her cycle.<sup>72</sup> Small Xs mark the dates when she and her husband Henry had sexual intercourse. Poor's diary demonstrates her attempt to use period tracking to gain control over her own fertility. Poor thoughtfully observed her menstruation in an effort to understand her body and manage her life.

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<sup>70</sup> The rhythm method met with little success because in the antebellum period it was believed that women were most fertile directly before and directly after menstruating.

<sup>71</sup> Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



The plus signs and Xs subtly mark eventful dates in lieu of phrases containing words like “sex” or “menstruation”. The subtle nature of Poor’s private diary markings further demonstrates the cultural pressure to maintain menstrual invisibility in addition to regularity. Yet the complexity of management occasionally prompted women to write down cycles, recipes, and ideas that were more commonly only thought or discussed privately among women, as is demonstrated by Mary Poor’s diary and the other women’s recipe books,

Menstruation is also obliquely referenced in diary entries. In writing to her mother in 1845, Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis wrote, “I should have begun my bulletin this week, but have two chills and my *usual pains* unusually severe” [italics in original].<sup>73</sup> In the privacy of the home, mothers and daughters, like the friends who shared recipes, communicated about this usually clandestine topic. Often, the bloody rags and mess of menstruation were unavoidably evident to family members who shared close quarters, beds, or laundry. Despite this familial intimacy, explicit discussions of the menses remain absent from most written correspondences. If mentioned at all, menstruation was referenced in terms that an unintended (male) audience might have struggled to understand. Letters may have been read aloud to family and friends, which may account for the preference for euphemisms. Avoiding

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<sup>73</sup> Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis to Margaret Louisa Kempe Howell, July 1845, in *Jefferson Davis: Private Letters 1823-1889* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 30.

direct references would have spared the author any embarrassment if their letter were to fall into men's hands.

The absence of direct questions about menstrual management in the correspondences of daughters and mothers suggests that women who could stay in touch with their mothers through letters did not dare ask for intimate advice through written communication. The transition from daughterhood into married life thus appears to have ended daily ties of intimacy with one's birth family. Yet young women's training in the arts of womanhood did not end with the beginning of marriage. Women found their way into new networks and continued mastering their bodily control.

### **Conclusion**

Evidently, the air of silence that surrounded menstruation did not extend into the domestic sphere. Here, women worked to maintain the public illusion of both menstrual regularity and menstrual invisibility. This tricky achievement benefitted from a network of women sharing solutions to menstrual problems. By confiding in each other and accumulating friends' and neighbors' recipes for reducing or inducing flow, women gained control of their bodies. They did not have to rely solely on prescriptive literature published by (primarily) male doctors who were not always principally concerned with women's best interests.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **LITERARY PERIODS: UNCOVERING MENSTRUATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

White and middle-class concepts of the normal female body molded the embodied experience of womanhood in the nineteenth century. As explored in chapters one and two, the ideal woman did not publicly menstruate, yet she was highly fertile. Performing this tricky feminine norm required innovations in bodily control such as emmenagogues, tampons, and menstrual pads. To more fully understand why the menses were strictly contained within the home, this chapter moves beyond the disciplinary limitation of material culture and embraces the intersections of literature and the material world to uncover cultural perceptions of white female embodiment. By analyzing women's published fiction that alludes to menstruation, this chapter illuminates how literature shaped women's private lives (with its frequent menstrual containment practices) by perpetuating the norm of menstrual invisibility in the public sphere.

Literature provides a window into the cultural experience of the nineteenth century. White middle-class Americans glorified the ideology of separate spheres, one public (male) and one private (female). The concept of separate spheres allowed for the clear ideological separation of male and female social duties. In reality these

boundaries were highly permeable. Men had private lives and women participated informally in politics and performed public identities.

This essay breaks away from the simplicity of gendering these realms. Instead, the ideological spheres become synonymous with the imagined/performed (public) and the real (private). Literary depictions of women published in the antebellum era supported the cultural belief that virtuous women were in control of their bodies by portraying only non-menstruating bodies. The expectation of non-leaky femininity promoted by publicly consumed literature demanded that women manage their leaks privately. The contradictions inherent in public and private conceptions of nineteenth-century femininity deepened the divide between public expectations and private realities of womanhood.

The seeming absence of published female writing on the menses necessitates that scholars read against the grain to locate subtle references. While chapter two outlined instances of writing about menstruation in diaries and personal recipe books, the lack of widely legible menstrual references in published literature allowed the general male public to remain ignorant of female processes of body care. Due to the significant role of the menses in women's lives, menstruation is legible (though coded) in female-authored texts of the antebellum period. This chapter also draws on fiction from later in the century. These later texts are more emotionally-charged; they illuminate how women affectively responded to their leakiness and to the expectation of its suppression. Each text considered in this chapter possesses an "undertell" that

acknowledges the act of menstruating.<sup>74</sup> The authors rely on readers who are part of the private female culture in order to subtly communicate about menstruation without provoking public backlash by breaching the cultural relegation of menstruation to the “private sphere.”

In his groundbreaking material studies text, *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown notes the “intimate relation between the human body and the artifact.”<sup>75</sup> The boundaries between artifact, body, and idea, certainly do begin to bleed when one tries to understand the culture of menstruation in the nineteenth century. Literary artifacts, such as circulating weeklies and medical texts, not only reflect cultural beliefs but help culture to take shape. Women-authored literature that subtly alludes to the menstruating body reveals the tension between cultural conceptions and private experiences of the female body. The closeness of body and artifact, observed by Brown, helps to explain why menstruation occasionally entered published texts.

Susan Gubar’s work, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” provides a theoretical lens for examining these cultural artifacts. She writes that, “women have had to experience cultural scripts in their lives by suffering them in their

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<sup>74</sup> In reading women’s fiction for descriptions of menstruation I am employing the concept of the undertell, which allows a reading of signs in texts to reveal truths that are encoded in the subtext. This is a lens employed by authors such as Gabrielle Foreman in her essay, “Manifest in Signs: Politics of Sex and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.”

<sup>75</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 93.

bodies.”<sup>76</sup> According to Gubar, little distance exists between a woman’s life and her art. Female art – in this case literature – tends to represent female embodiment; a concept that is exemplified by the recognition of sentimental literature (which is known for emotional responses felt in the body, e.g. crying) as a distinctly female form. Literature allows greater distancing from the body than other art forms. This distance seemingly allows women to eliminate their menses from composed narratives of womanhood. Yet as Gubar suggests, women’s bodies are intertwined with the works that they produce. Gubar asserts that women’s writing frequently draws on the female body.<sup>77</sup> This theory helps us to discover and understand instances in which women wrote menstruation into text.

The experience of menstruating influenced some female-authored fiction. However, the subtle allusions may only have been legible to those familiar with the experiences of womanhood. By mining American women’s fiction, we can glimpse women’s motivations for maintaining and improving upon their menstrual material culture. We find the ideological reasons why women made elaborate T-bandages or inserted rags like tampons. We also sense the underlying frustration produced by the strict cultural control of women’s bodies.

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<sup>76</sup> Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 251.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



Figure 13. A woman is immersed in the domestic sphere in a lushly furnished parlor. She tends to an infant while two other children sit at her feet reading a book. “The Sphere of a Woman,” illustration in Godey’s Lady’s Book, March 1850. Image in the public domain.

### **Cultural Conceptions of Menstruation**

It is difficult to know precisely why menstruation is seemingly absent from nearly all female-authored publications, but a few motives seem most plausible.

Women withheld allusions to menstruation in their published writing for reasons of great practicality. Most obviously, menstruation was excluded to prevent female intellectual work from seeming improper and controversial. While solutions to

menstrual issues were often communicated among female friends in the privacy of the home, mentioning the menses in non-medical published texts would have seemed inappropriate and offensive.

Some women authors also likely attempted to dissociate from their stereotype as intellectually weak due to their “inferior” feminine biology by constructing female characters who did not suffer from uniquely feminine afflictions. Physicians frequently pointed to female organs to justify the cultural belief that women were intellectually inferior to men. Dr. Charles Meigs, a respected obstetrician in the mid-nineteenth century, includes in his medical text, *Females and Their Diseases* (1848), the commonly held belief that a woman “differs from men . . . in her reproductive organs, that are peculiar to her; and in her intellectual and moral perceptivity and powers, which are as feminine as her organs are.”<sup>78</sup> This quote demonstrates the nineteenth-century cultural belief that one’s sex determined one’s characteristics and capabilities. Meigs continues to explain, “Women cannot . . . participate in the affairs of nations or municipalities, because, by the very nature of their . . . physical constitution they are bound for the horns of the family altar.”<sup>79</sup> Meigs’ outlook was not uncommon, and many other doctors such as Edward Clarke and Henry Maudsley held similar views. Perceptions about women’s intellectual impairment circulated in

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<sup>78</sup> Charles Delucena Meigs, *Females and their Diseases: A Series of Letters to his Class* (Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Blanchard, 1848), 38.

<sup>79</sup> Meigs, *Females and their Diseases*, 364.



misogynistic medical understandings about how female organs functioned. These texts asserted that female wombs inhibited female minds.

In addition to binding women to their “inferior” physicality, the substance of menstrual blood was popularly viewed as more foul and dirtier than blood from the veins. While nineteenth-century doctors viewed menstrual blood as simply “less pure” blood with higher amounts of “fatty matter” and “globules,”<sup>80</sup> much older superstitions continued to circulate alongside newer medical texts. An 1855 translation of the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder states that, “the menstrual discharge itself . . . is productive of the most monstrous effects . . . the congress with a woman at such a period being noxious, and attended with fatal effects to the man.”<sup>81</sup> While doctors analyzed the fluid and scientifically deemed it non-poisonous, other sources of the era suggested otherwise with assertions such as that menstrual rags were permanently contaminated or that copulating during menstruation could result in “monstrous births.”<sup>82</sup> Menstrual fluid was abhorred and even feared by men who were not educated in the biological realities of menstruation. Female authors understandably did not want to taint their work with a misunderstood substance that had long been used to

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<sup>80</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 149.

<sup>81</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, Translated by John Bostock (Taylor and Francis, 1855).

<sup>82</sup> *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* (New York, NY: Published for the trade, 1846), 34.

shame women as carriers of a curse. It was not simply a mess to be managed, but a substance that threatened and frightened many men.

With these prevailing medical and cultural beliefs regarding menstruation, it is not surprising to find that fiction writers largely excluded menstruation from their works. Women had to practice restraint of both their minds and their bodies to maintain their respectability. Literary scholar Joanne Dobson eloquently wrote that “absent from, or apologized for, or negated in the writing of most women of the white middle class in that period are what were ‘deviant’ qualities for women – sexual passion, . . . anger, and aspiration for recognition outside the private sphere of the family.”<sup>83</sup> Women writers were already perceived as “deviant” for seeking recognition in the public world of publishing. They likely did not discuss menstruation in their texts because it would exceed the limits of acceptability to have a woman writing publicly *and* inappropriately mentioning a substance that was strictly relegated to the privacy of the feminine domestic sphere.

### **The Material World of Literature**

As explained in chapter one, by the middle of the nineteenth century, women were experiencing menstruation more frequently in comparison to earlier time periods. In general, women were healthier, marrying later, and having fewer children than they

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 156.

were in the previous century. As a result, menstruation management became more important. With this rising importance, it is surprising to find menstruation largely absent from non-medical literature. However, when one considers the role of book ownership in the nineteenth century, this absence makes more sense.

Books are a staple of material culture studies alongside furniture, prints and paintings, and textiles. Their materiality provides invaluable insight into historical cultures. Nineteenth-century industrialization led to inventions such as iron and cylinder presses which made larger print runs more economical and cut down the cost of books. By the mid-nineteenth century, books were affordable household items for many Americans, yet they maintained their role as symbols of status. The right books could demonstrate virtue and intelligence as well as one's material success, while other books could be used as evidence of someone's bad character.

In this landscape, the types of books one owned mattered greatly. Book ownership was not private but was for display. According to Karen Sanchez-Eppler in her chapter, "The Writing of Childhood," fiction was thought to be capable of corrupting innocence and arousing evil traits such as lustfulness.<sup>84</sup> Respectability was thus demonstrated by what one selected to read and to display on one's bookshelves. For authors, this demonstration of respectability extended to the contents of their writing.

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<sup>84</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "The Writing of Childhood" in *Dependent States: The Child's Part in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Cultures* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7.

This idea is exemplified by the reputation surrounding the book, *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. Originally published in 1684, the book stayed in print until the Comstock Acts prohibited it in the 1870s. It addressed common though private concerns regarding intercourse, pregnancy, and the formation and function of sexual organs written in a style intended for a lay audience. The broad and long-lasting consumption of this book suggests that it functioned as a common tool for sex education in America, yet it was far from a respectable read.

*Aristotle's Masterpiece* directly discussed menstruation. For example, it claimed that, "the aptest time for conception is instantly after the menses are ceased."<sup>85</sup> This book is referenced in various trial testimonies including the testimony of the *Trial of the Reverend Issachar Grosscup for the Seduction of Roxana Wheeler in 1848*. During the trial, Maria Mead testified that she "had seen [Wheeler] have some obscene books in the year 1844; the title of one was 'The Midnight Scene;' [she] thinks the other was 'Aristotle's Masterpiece.'"<sup>86</sup> The prosecution used Ms. Wheeler's book ownership to demonstrate her bad character and loose morals. Maria Mead's testimony reveals how literary consumption was closely linked to identity. It was believed that what one read acutely affected how one thought and behaved.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> *Trial of Rev. Issachar Grosscup, for the Seduction of Roxana L. Wheeler*, 56.

<sup>87</sup> Sanchez-Eppler, "The Writing of Childhood," 7.

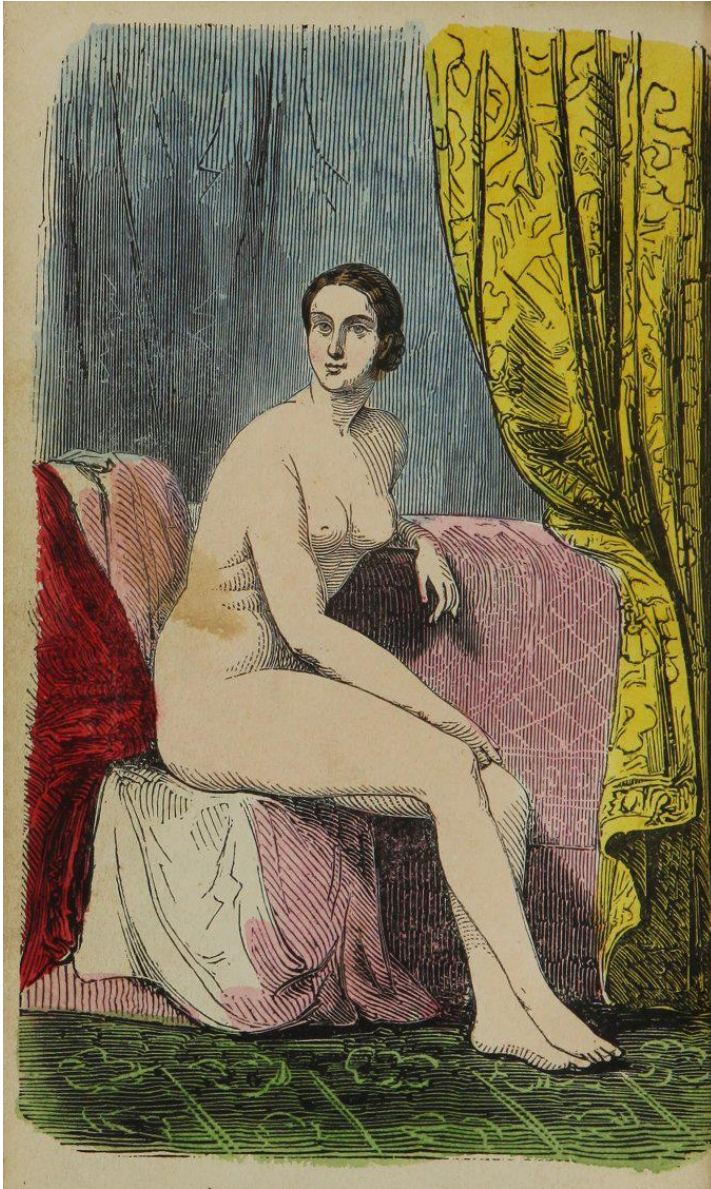


Figure 14. Frontispiece from an 1846 edition of Aristotle's Masterpiece published in New York. The image depicts a seated nude woman looking directly at the viewer. Image in the public domain.

Like *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, books that discussed women's menstruation in a non-medical context were sources of shame, reflected in the fact that the author of the book elected a guise of anonymity. As a result, the material world of nineteenth-century literature does not provide many illustrations of how women managed their more frequent incidents of menstruation. Yet we can gain some insight by analyzing the instances in which menstruation bleeds onto the page in subtle, socially acceptable ways.

Menarche was a cultural tradition. While it directly related to menstrual bleeding, it was not as strictly relegated to the private sphere. This was because the onset of menstruation marked a girl as a woman capable of marrying and bearing children, making the continuance of patriarchal society possible. Literary scholar Jacqueline Harris's dissertation, "The Buried Life of the Facts of Life: Female Physical Development in Nineteenth-Century British Coming-of-Age Literature" calls attention to the presence of pubescent bodiliness in schoolgirl literature. She asserts that, "though discussion occurs euphemistically or referentially, these components are a crucial part of representing coming of age."<sup>88</sup> Women would have been interpreting menstruation when writing and reading about the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Harris criticizes historians' and literary scholars' assertion that

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<sup>88</sup> Jacqueline H. Harris, "The Buried Life of the Facts of Life: Female Physical Development in Nineteenth-Century British Coming-of-Age Literature," paper presented at the North American Studies Association Conference, Toronto, Canada, October 2015.

menstruation is entirely absent from nineteenth-century women's writing: "In rejecting possible euphemistic treatment of puberty, scholarship neglects authors who signaled—even if obliquely—the changing body's role in female adolescence."<sup>89</sup> When one analyzes respectable literature that concerns transitioning into womanhood, many allusions to bodiliness emerge.

Although Harris examined British texts, coming-of-age stories penned by American women share similar themes. The subtext of novels such as *Girlhood and Womanhood* (1844) provide an example of oblique references to the menstrual cycle. The book traces a group of girls from their boarding school years into adulthood. In the opening pages of the text, their beloved teacher Mrs. Norville explains to her female pupils "the wonders of physiology."<sup>90</sup> Instead of directly discussing the female body, the book discusses the cycle of fertility abstractly using a fallen leaf:

She traced its progress from the closely cinctured leaf-bud to its full expansion, and its final decay; and then showed us that it had fulfilled its allotted work, in having contributed to the nourishment of the parent tree, and had now fallen to the earth to mingle with its mould. This train of thought led her to point out the various objects around us, which had also performed the part assigned them, by Him who made them the plant withering when its flowers have passed away, and its seeds have become ripened, and the fruit trees casting their leaves as soon as their rich treasures are ready for the use of man.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Mrs. A.J. Graves, *Girlhood and Womanhood: or, Sketches of my Schoolmates* (Boston, MA: T.H. Carter, 1844), 13.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 13, 14.

Indirectly, Mrs. Norville prepares the girls for the primary duty of womanhood: “bearing fruit.” The language of ripening in the opening pages of a book about entering womanhood is not accidental, especially considering that the female pupils were approaching the typical age of menarche. The natural world of the outdoors can easily be interpreted as an allusion to the female body. By using nature as a code, bodily changes enter many nineteenth-century texts without seeming indecent. This is in large part because in writing about menarche and menopause euphemistically the authors erase the presence of blood while still signaling to female readers the nature of their subject matter.

A poem published in *The Christian Advocate and Journal* in 1862 titled, “Entering Upon Womanhood: To a Daughter” signed “The Mother and her Work” provides another example of how menarche was a moment of ritual coming-of-age that was a culturally sanctioned subject for publication if handled delicately. The poet writes:

Thou art going up life’s way;  
I am going down:  
The cross thou hast not lifted yet;  
I am near my crown.

.....

Friends are thronging round thy path;  
Mine mostly are in heaven:  
Love yet is in the bud for thee;  
Its fruit to me is given. (1-4, 8-12)

This poem shows that while menstrual blood was spurned, its ties to fertility were appreciated. The poem, about menarche and menopause, has a clear theme of



fecundity. The mother has produced her “fruit” and has earned her place in heaven while her daughter must now begin down her path of love that leads to children that are “yet in the bud.”

*The Christian Advocate and Journal*, a newspaper printed in New York City by the Methodist Episcopal Church, was one of the largest circulating weeklies in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> An estimated 150,000 people read its contents, and it was considered suitable for families. Referencing menarche did not offend the readers of this paper in part because the author invoked maternal qualities to legitimize and defuse her potentially provocative subject matter. The author of the poem is known only as “The Mother.” She can publish a poem indirectly about menstrual tradition in a family newspaper by retaining her primary maternal social identity and by alluding to menstruation only as an indicator of womanhood that makes child-bearing possible.

Despite its indirect reference to menstruation, the poem’s intended audience of women readers would understand that “entering upon womanhood” was an occasion marked by physical changes such as monthly bleeding. “Life’s way” is defined by the author as guided by a female’s reproductive cycle. Menstruation was a key component of life, and while direct allusions could be avoided, the experience of menstruating played an important social role marking womanhood in nineteenth-century culture.

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 19.

Material knowledge of the body affected how women read and understood texts such as *Girlhood and Womanhood* and “Entering Upon Womanhood.” Yet due to the success of the authors’ efforts to conceal menstruation, entering womanhood was not commonly associated by the male public with menstrual bleeding.

### **Writing on Menstruation in the Early Commercial Era**

Direct allusions to menstrual blood are highly elusive in the antebellum period because public discussions of menstruation were strictly relegated to the medical realm. With the first advertisements that circulated menstrual apparatuses in the 1870s, the ideological wall between public appearance and private management began to crack ever so slightly. Looking to examples from later in the century, when women published with greater frequency, we find some instances of writing on the menses that contain references to catamenia. Such writing almost certainly also exists in women’s writing from the antebellum period, but it likely remains undiscovered in private journals.

The expectation that women be quiet and obedient home-makers was increasingly aided by scientific thought throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Americans witnessed an increase in the variety and number of mental afflictions suffered by females as newly “discovered” ailments such as neurasthenia and hysteria came to dominate the field of female medicine. All “unwomanly” behavior was perceived as potentially detrimental to a woman’s health.

Late nineteenth-century feminine mental disorders enhanced the antebellum idea that weak (menstruating) female bodies represented weak female minds. Only in the last decades of the century did literature published by women begin to contain more explicit references to menstrual blood. Women pushed back against the growing strictness of American society that trapped them in their bodies, yet they still had to maintain their respectability in order to publish. As a result, the literary protests remain largely coded.

The work of Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gillman provide nineteenth century textual artifacts of the bloody, menstruating female body. Their invocations of the menses help us glean two women's affective responses to their embodied womanhood. Poems such as "The Name- of it- is 'Autumn'-" (1862) and stories such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) address menstruation obliquely. The author of "Entering Upon Womanhood" writes about menstruation using the social signifiers of menarche and menopause which allow her to allude to fertility without directly referencing menstrual bleeding. Dickinson and Gillman incorporate the actual material of menstruation into some of their works, yet their descriptions are vague enough to be interpreted as representing other, more tolerable bodily fluids. For example, Emily Dickinson's poem "The Name- of it- is 'Autumn'-" written during the Civil War in 1862, is most obviously about fall colors or perhaps a bloody battlefield:

The name-of it-is "Autumn"-  
The hue - of it - is Blood -  
An Artery - upon the Hill -  
A Vein - along the Road -  
Great Globules - in the Alleys -

And Oh, the Shower of Stain -  
When Winds - upset the Basin –  
And spill the Scarlet Rain-  
It sprinkles Bonnets - far below -  
It gathers ruddy Pools –  
Then - eddies like a Rose – away  
Upon Vermilion Wheels-

While the poem is ambiguous, its menstrual imagery is obvious. The use of quotations in the poem reveal the use of a euphemism and suggests that the word “Autumn” functions as a substitute for many ideas that give the poem a variety of meanings (1). The “Autumn” that Dickinson describes could simply be the season marked by the changing of leaves from green to fiery red. Or, it could refer to America’s bloody war that was raging at the time this poem was composed. Blood stained fields would have certainly called to readers’ minds the incredibly deadly battles of the Civil War occurring in the fall of 1862 including Antietam and the Second Battle of Bull Run. However, menstrual themes are also present in this poem.

The metaphor of the changing seasons introduces the theme of cycles to the composition. In the end, the “Scarlet Rain” (8) “eddies like a Rose- away” (11), unlike the bloody battles of the Civil War that continued through the winter and the spring. The seasons provide a much more apt metaphor for menstruation than they provide for the Civil War. Menstrual blood, like the red leaves, falls to the “ground” and starts its cycle anew.

The poem’s many references to blood provide highly specific menstrual imagery. As a childless woman, Emily Dickinson would be familiar with the

menstrual cycle, and even in writing of Civil War battles, her most intimate knowledge of blood may well have come from her own body. While the poem uses various terms to describe blood such as “ruddy Pools,” (10) it makes use of the term “Globules,” (5) used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe the peculiar material of the menses. Charles Meigs explains in his 1854 medical book, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, that “menstrual fluid is impure blood . . . rich in blood-globules.”<sup>93</sup> Menstrual blood, according to nineteenth-century medical knowledge, was less pure than regular blood due to its mucosal content that made it more globular. Many of her poems seem to intentionally undertell secondary meanings that perhaps would only be successfully interpreted by women whose daily realities involved concealing menstrual fluid.

In poems such as “A still – Volcano – Life,” (ca. 1862) Dickinson references the vulva and its secretions as a source of devastating power:

...  
 The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol –  
 The lips that never lie –  
 Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –  
 And Cities – ooze away – (9-12)

This poem’s presentation of oozing coral lips presents a threatening female sexuality. The reference to red “lips” that open and close is distinctly sensual and is out of line

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<sup>93</sup> Meigs, *Obstetrics: The Science and the Art*, 138.

with the public perception of ideal womanhood that was pure and non-sexual.<sup>94</sup> It explodes social pressure that attempted to limit women to “a domestic hearth, [that] warms but does not threaten.”<sup>95</sup> The vulva, present in the red “lips” (10) that hiss and “ooze” (12), is endowed by Dickinson with the power to destroy instead of to produce. The presence of menstrual blood indicates that one is not pregnant. In tying together menstruation and destruction, the poet restores to women the ultimate power over the continuation of nations and municipalities that was denied to them socially and politically.

Dickinson uses her poetry to reclaim the cycle as a source of female power. She recoups the feminine organ and presents it as a font of creative power instead of a source of weakness, yet she does so in a way that guides the general reader to the more palatable ideas presented on the surface. After all, Dickinson is talking explicitly about a volcano and lava but the choice of her words, like “globules” in “The name of it is ‘Autumn’” (5) and “lips” in “A still – Volcano- Life” (10), endows the poems with subversive meaning for female readers. It suggests that while publicly silent on the subject of menstruation, privately, women did not view it as a substance to be shunned.

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<sup>94</sup> For a detailed discussion of the historical construction of female sensuality as threatening and sinful see Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America*.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Kamilla Denman, et al. “On 601 (‘A Still--Volcano--Life’),” *Modern American Poetry*, [www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/dickinson/601.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/601.htm).

Even while menstruation was expected to be kept out of the public sphere, it seems that some viewed the vulva as a source of power. Even Dr. Charles Meigs recognized the intimidating dominance of the female body and referred to the clitoris as “endowed with the most intense erotic sensibility, and . . . the prime seat of that peculiar life power.”<sup>96</sup> Instead of caving to the social pressures that united female sex organs with shame and that encouraged menstrual invisibility in the public eye, Dickinson embraced this “life power” in her poetry. Lack of pregnancy and the presence of female sexual autonomy, both suggested in the imagery of female “oozing,” recall to readers’ minds the power that is suppressed, or to use Dickinson’s volcano metaphor, that lies dormant, within the female body. The female organs, as Meigs makes clear, were a site of both oppression and creativity. The material culture of menstruation management was deeply entangled in these complex literary representations of the female body.

These poems were not published during her lifetime, although they circulated among her friends and family. Since their publication in the 1890s, only a few scholars have noticed the menstrual themes that some of her poems contain.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, menstruation is undeniably present in some of Dickinson’s writing. Dickinson’s reclusive nature, living far from public eyes in her father’s house (where she spent

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<sup>96</sup> Meigs, *Females and their Diseases*, 120.

<sup>97</sup> For more information on menstrual themes in Dickinson’s poetry see the epilogue of Clark Griffith, *Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson’s Tragic Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1964).

nearly the entirety of her life), allowed her to bleed into her poetry with less fear of being shamed or rejected.

The “Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman also explores the cultural tension surrounding menstruation. In this story, Gilman “undertells” a story of a woman’s discovery and acceptance of her leaky body. Her story criticizes the confinement of women in houses as well as in maternal bodies.<sup>98</sup> The protagonist of the story suffers from postpartum depression and is prescribed the rest cure. Locked in a bedroom, specifically an old nursery, she becomes hysterical. Her hysteria is triggered by the lack of control she has over her own body. The expected sacrifice that women must make – bearing children and raising a family - prompts the woman’s longing to break free of her social and literal confinements. She discovers a woman trapped within the wallpaper of her room and wants to free this woman, who serves as a double for herself. The story concludes with her metaphorically breaking free of her wallpapered cage, reuniting with her double, and “creeping” in circles around the room - stepping over the body of her husband who has fainted at the sight of her. In obsessively circling the room, the woman contributes to a stained “smooch” along the wall.

The “smooch” is highly suggestive of vaginal fluid, perhaps menstruation or postpartum leaking. The Oxford English Dictionary clarifies that in the nineteenth

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<sup>98</sup> Catherine Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* (Routledge, 2004), 91.



century a “smooch” was a “smutch or a smear.” Early in the story the caretaker, Jennie, chides the protagonist for not being more careful about the wallpaper, which “stained everything it touched,” and for letting yellow smooches sully her clothing.<sup>99</sup> While the yellow wallpaper stains the protagonist’s clothes, the protagonist also stains the wallpaper. The smear that she leaves around the nursery is not ascribed a color, but it has a distinct scent. The smell that haunts the main character, which she associates with the smell of the wallpaper, is evocative of unwashed female genitals.<sup>100</sup> Gilman describes the protagonist’s reaction to the smell in “The Yellow Wallpaper”:

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad--at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house--to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell. (141)

The smell, that at first is repulsive but then becomes comfortable, interestingly mirrors the protagonist’s embrace of her selfhood and her decision to try to release the woman, who is her mirror image, in the wallpaper. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra

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<sup>99</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* (Routledge, 2004), 140.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Jacobus, “An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading,” in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticisms* (Taylor and Francis: 1986): 229-48.

Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret “The Yellow Wallpaper” to be a tale of liberation. The subtle references to the smooch and the smell throughout Gilman’s story bind together female liberation with an acceptance of the leaky female body.

Whether it is menstrual blood or another female leak such as a natural sexual lubricant or postpartum urinary incontinence, remains unclear. Yet the setting of the nursery and the clues that the protagonist’s hysteria is tied to postpartum depression, make it highly plausible that menstrual blood is the mysterious substance. Managing to regulate the menses allowed women to control their fertility and retain bodily autonomy.

Female bodily autonomy was threatened by the medical treatment of the rest cure. Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was directed at Silas Weir Mitchell, who prescribed the rest cure to Gilman, so that he might reconsider the effectiveness of this treatment. The rest cure restricted female activity by keeping ill women in bed until they were cured. The protagonist of Gilman’s story is not cured, but instead seems to be driven further into her insanity. Yet, her “insanity” seems to bring with it a return of her selfhood and her liberation from a cage that is much larger than the rest cure alone. Significantly, both her freedom and her “madness” are tied to her foul-smelling body.

Like Dickinson, Gilman somewhat masks this reference in her story. She redirects vulvar references to the wallpaper. For example, the smooch seems to come out of the wallpaper instead of out of the body of the protagonist, and it receives

minimal description beyond its smell. The description of the smooch can be read as both non-bodily or intimately bodily. Gilman cleverly ties the protagonist directly to the wallpaper by placing the body of her (untamed) double within it. She writes that, “*the paper* stained everything it touched,” not the leaky body of the protagonist [*italics my own*].<sup>101</sup> Yet, the smooch is also found on John’s clothing, which does not come in contact with the wallpaper, but does come in contact with his wife.

Like Dickinson, who never had children and likely menstruated regularly throughout her life, Gilman was intimately familiar with menstruation. In *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism*, Judith A. Allen notes that “[Gilman] charted with an “X” not only her own menstrual periods but also those of Knapp.”<sup>102</sup> Adaline Knapp, an American author and journalist, shared a close, and potentially sexual, relationship with Gilman. Gilman tracked Knapp’s menstruation when they were cohabitating in Oakland.<sup>103</sup> She also tracked her own to try to find a correlation between menstruation and her depression.<sup>104</sup> Gilman’s curiosity about menstruation lends credence to reading underwritten themes of menstruation in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

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<sup>101</sup> Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 140.

<sup>102</sup> Judith Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 51.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*.

Dickinson and Gilman both provide excellent examples of how women wrote subversively about menstrual fluid. The texts highlighted here seem to be imbued with a “wink.” They allow recognition from a culture of menstruating women, while presenting alternative narratives to those uninterested in acknowledging that culture. This type of writing facilitated the coexistence of separate public and private spheres that demanded different performances of womanhood. These writings also allow us to glimpse women’s affective response to a culture that demanded that they do their menstrual body care in private. While written after the antebellum period, these pieces of creative writing provide invaluable insight into nineteenth-century women’s emotional response to a cultural assertion that stemmed from the antebellum era: that female bodies evidenced fragile and less capable minds.

### **Conclusion**

An analysis of literary references to menstruation allows us to glean an understanding of cultural conceptions of menstruation and the motivators for its suppression from the public eye. Literature demonstrates that while difficult to locate, women’s elusive history of menstruation is present in spaces scholars have previously deemed it absent. It shows that there is still much to be discovered about the nineteenth-century material culture of menstruation. While patents, recipe books, and surviving artifacts all provide insights into practical management, the literature of the period – both in its profound absence and in its coded presence – allows us to better

understand how women *felt* about expectations that they enact their material culture of menstruation in private.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **FINDING THE FLOW: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING MENSTRUAL HISTORIES**

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, companies began selling menstrual implements. Commercial items slowly began supplementing and replacing items that women had historically made for themselves. The commercialization of these products gently shifted the culture surrounding menstruation by moving the materials of management away from the privacy of the home and into public consciousness. The silence surrounding menstruation grew into a soft, but audible, whisper. Advertisements and trade catalogues reproduced images of catamenial receivers, sanitary belts, aprons, and serviettes, allowing them to circulate among a public viewership. While menstruation remained a private affair, advertisers managed to reach their market audiences and create a slightly more visible culture of menstruation management.

While ads for menstrual products began to appear in the late nineteenth century, commercial devices were not standardized until after World War I. During the war (1914 – 1918), women were recruited into jobs that were left vacant by men who enlisted in the army. In the same historical moment, cellucotton was mass produced by firms such as Kimberley-Clark to treat wounded soldiers. After the war,

the newly discovered and highly absorbent material found a market beyond the battlefields: the modern working woman.

**WOMAN'S COMFORTER!**

**MRS. SMITH'S**  
UNIVERSAL

**BANDAGE SUSPENDER**  
*For Supporting the Usual Bandage.*



In adjusting the Suspender, place the long strap at the back; the short strap in front has our brand on the under side of it, the point of the hook or holder, being outward.

Catch the end of the bandage in the hook, and move the point of the hook under the guard. It is a perfect safety fastening, and can not be displaced.

No. 36 for ladies whose bust measure is less than 36 inches.

No. 40 for ladies whose bust measure is less than 40 inches.

No. 44 for ladies whose bust measure is more than 40 inches.

It can be used with any bandage a lady may wear; suspending the same from the shoulders, and is attached to the bandage, both front and back, by means of our *New Improved Safety Shirt and Bandage Holder*.

This Suspender is the most convenient article for ladies ever known. Every lady knows the inconvenience and annoyance it gives when, to suspend the bandage in the old way, with a string of band around the waist, as well as the uncertainty of its holding the bandage at all. Our *Improved Bandage Suspender* will hold the bandage exactly in place, will hold it securely, is easily adjustable, and will give more relief to the wearer than any thing else she may use for the purpose. They can be washed as easily as any undergarment without removing the hooks and slides.

No lady will be without one when she has once tried it or has seen it used. They are sold by our LADY AGENTS at 60 cents.

**QUEEN CITY SUSPENDER COMPANY,**  
Sole Proprietors and Manufacturers for the United States and Canada.  
No. 179 Main Street, Cincinnati, O.

**AGENTS WANTED.**

Figure 15. Brochure from the 1870s advertising a menstrual pad suspender. Courtesy of the Museum of Menstruation at mum.org.



Figure 16. These advertisements from the Sears, Roebuck Catalog in 1908 demonstrate a couple of the various belt and pad combinations worn by women before standardized products became commonly available. Courtesy of the Museum of Menstruation at mum.org.

Companies such as Kimberley-Clark quickly devised marketing strategies to meet this newly discovered demand. Susan Strasser observes in her book, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, that the growing number of professional women of the early twentieth century required simpler solutions to their menstrual burdens: “College and business women had less space, less time, and less opportunity for making sanitary supplies. They could not easily store materials in their single rooms and small apartments, they did not accumulate extensive supplies of rags and sewing scraps, and many simply considered themselves too busy.”<sup>105</sup> Many women no longer

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<sup>105</sup> Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, NY: Owl Books, 1999), 164.



led lifestyles that allowed them to use homemade solutions. Competing commercial products created copious quantities of advertisements and decorative packaging.



Figure 17. Kotex sanitary napkin ad, May 1921. Courtesy of the Museum of Menstruation at mum.org.

The lifestyle of the modern woman of the 1920s and 30s differed considerably from the antebellum woman. Loosely draped dresses hung close to the bodies of women who had recently won the vote and a right to public spaces. The “modern

woman” of the twentieth century required better, more convenient menstrual products. As a result, brands such as Kotex and Tampax created a rich menstrual material culture that many historians such as Sharra Louise Vostral and Janice Delaney have carefully analyzed. The upsurge in advertising created historical documentation allowing historians to more easily incorporate the menses into twentieth-century narratives of women’s history. Due to the lack of marketing in the antebellum period, however, scholars have been uncertain how to study earlier menstrual practices.

Multiple scholars’ assertion that women practiced free-bleeding in the nineteenth century highlights the fact that earlier menstrual histories need to be studied to more fully understand women’s histories. As I have asserted throughout this thesis, caring for the body significantly shaped the lives of women in the nineteenth century. To misunderstand how women treated their monthly courses is to misunderstand women’s lived experience. Women did not begin containing their monthly blood only once corporations began making commercial instruments; they have been managing their courses as long as they have been menstruating.

American culture’s reluctance to discuss menstruation has led to the perpetuation of related issues such as the lack of access to products in prisons and universities, and the inclusion of potentially harmful levels of toxins in the vast majority of the pads and tampons that are accessible. To normalize menstruation as a universal female experience that necessitates thoughtful management, we must begin to discuss menstruation management’s extensive history. This thesis has started the

dialogue by extending the historian's exploration of American menstrual management practices into the antebellum period.

This thesis has located and interrogated a variety of material resources related to menstruation that the historical narrative has overlooked. Menstruation was materially and culturally managed long before commercial pads and tampons became available. Reading between the lines of poetry, recipe books, trial testimonies, home health guides, and diaries, and examining surviving pads, sanitary belts, and undergarments, the material culture of menstruation can be gleaned without the aid of advertisements, illustrations, or packaging.

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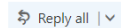
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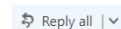


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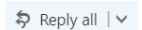
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