

## **From Sanitation to Liberation?: The Modern and Postmodern Marketing of Menstrual Products**

**Shelley M. Park**

You are a lady, gentle reader, are you not? If so, we have something particularly interesting to ask you. Have you seen the latest invention in hygienic underwear, known as Southall's Sanitary Towels?...[T]hese special articles of ladies underclothing entirely supersede the old-fashioned method...

—1892 ad for *Southall's Sanitary Towels* (Jones 54)

It wasn't thin. It was flat. It was practically nothing. I didn't think I was brave enough—or crazy enough—to try it.... But I did—on my heaviest day no less, when I usually wear a thick pad.... I didn't feel anything but protected.... As far as I'm concerned everything else is history.

—1991 television commercial for *New Always Ultra Plus* “with wings”

A comparison of early and present techniques for selling menstrual products reveals interesting changes and similarities. From the days of black and white advertising cards to the age of colored television, the style of these ads changes considerably. The explicit message of these ads likewise changes, proclaiming an important shift in women's needs: early manufacturers of menstrual products explicitly marketed their wares as “hygienic,” emphasizing a woman's need for sanitary protection, but today's sales pitch typically emphasizes “freedom” and a woman's need for liberation.

A brief comparison of the 1890s ad for *Southall's* sanitary towels with the 1990s ad for *Always* pads reveals the shift from modernity to postmodernity. *Always* products come “with wings,” instead of belts and pins. The “crazy” redhead, wearing blue jeans and a paisley vest, who tells of her experience with the product, promises the consumer freedom from conformity to blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty ideals and a restrictive yuppie lifestyle. She also promises freedom from biological and historical time. No longer burdened by a “heavy” menstrual flow, she chooses her time and place. She is an active, independent, “brave” woman, not a passive “gentle reader.” *Always* promises the consumer forever (always), however (all ways) she wants it. *New Always Ultra*

## 150 Journal of Popular Culture

*Plus* “with wings” is not merely “the latest” word in menstrual aids, it is the last word. The *Always* woman, like Hegel, stands at the end of history. She has transcended all difficulties faced by previous generations of women.

Or has she? Why does her menstrual period require her to be courageous? Is she susceptible, by virtue of menstruation, to some special danger? Why is she “crazy” to wear a thin, instead of a thick, pad? And why, if she is “brave” and independent, does she, like the “gentle reader” of the *Southall* ad, need “special protection”? Below, I trace the transition from a modern to a postmodern marketing strategy and the shifting ideologies that these strategies both reflect and reinforce. Following this, I examine the unsettling similarities between the messages of contemporary and early ads for menstrual products. The key theme in these ads, unfortunately, remains virtually unchanged a century after their first emergence: Women are abnormal, unclean and unhealthy, thus needing protection from themselves.

### *From Rags to Riches: Health, Wealth and Feminine Hygiene*

Foucault describes the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as preoccupied with the body, its health, hygiene, descent and race (*History* 124).<sup>1</sup> This preoccupation clearly reveals itself in the marketing of the earliest commercially sold menstrual products. In the late 1800s, two kinds of menstrual aids were available to American women by mail order: disposable towels and yardgoods for reusable rags. Although the method for containing menstrual flow was the same with both products, they were marketed to two different classes of women. *Canfield* disposable sanitary towels, sold by the dozen, claimed to be “cheaper than washing,” but the fact that they were sold as a specialty item, alongside bustles, dress shields, corset hose supporters and prefabricated children’s diapers, indicated that the target consumer was not the washerwoman (Jones 39) (See Figure 1). The majority of women continued to make their own menstrual rags into the twentieth century, long after the first disposable towels were marketed. These reusable rags (and many other things) could be made from sanitary diaper cloth which was sold by the foot (Jones 67). The manufacturers of this cloth offered a free sample by mail.

The chief virtue of the disposable towel was not its ability to relieve women of the tiresome tasks of making and laundering menstrual rags, however. As *Canfield* advertised, their product was “highly endorsed by London Physicians” because it was “easily disposed of by burning.” The chief concern and privilege of the wealthy during this period was, as the name “sanitary towel” indicated,

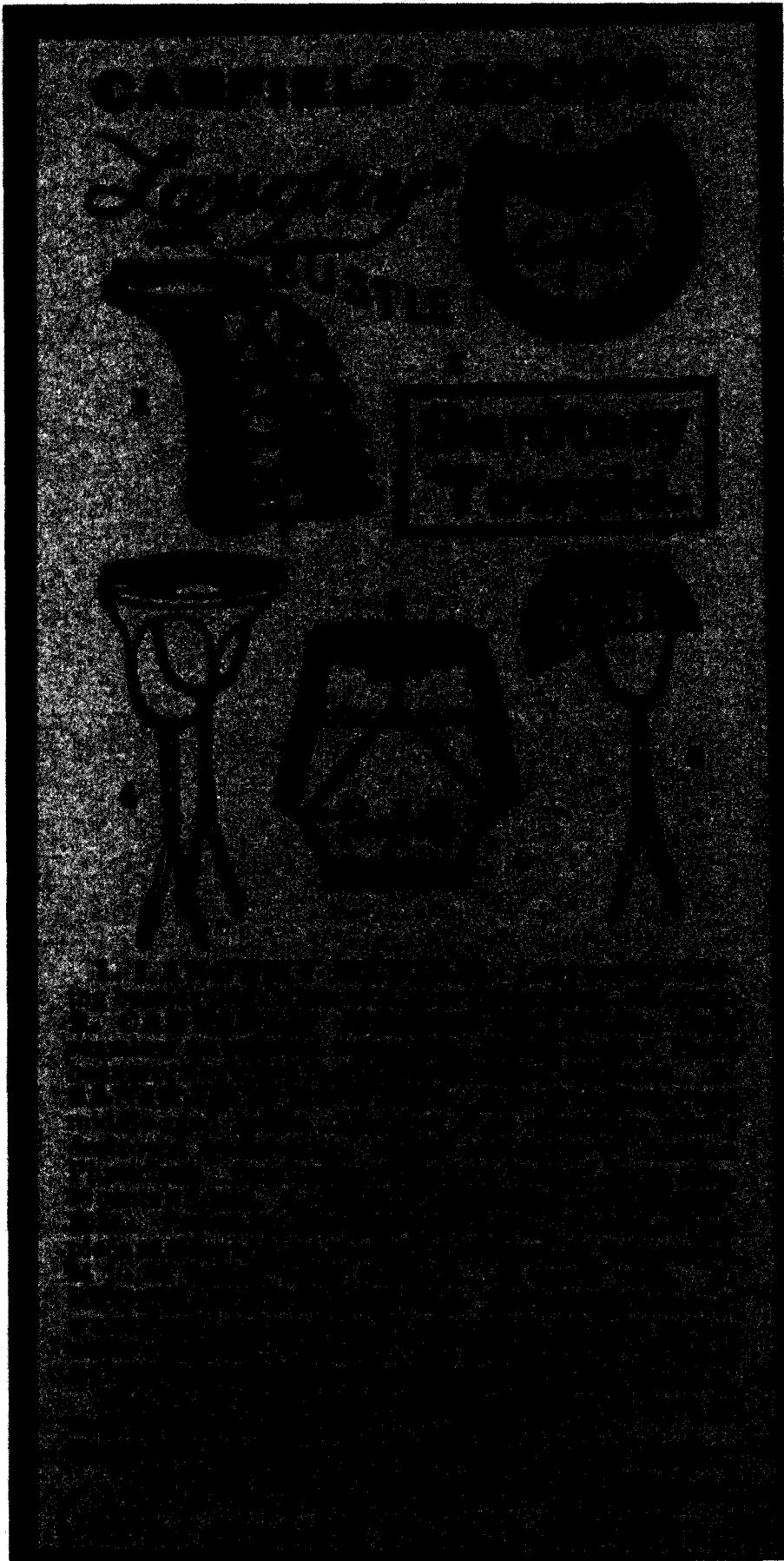


Figure 1. Canfield's 1888 Advertising Card.

and “sanitary diaper cloth” mimicked, personal health and hygiene. Disposable towels were preferable to reusable rags because of their superior hygienic status.


According to Foucault, bourgeoisie concern with personal hygiene arose from an enormously influential metaphor for the human body which has persisted into the twentieth century: the body as machine (*Discipline* 135-169). The machine with its assortment of internal and external gears, joints, pipes and tubes provided modern science and medicine with a paradigm for the ideally efficient and precise body. Thus, “runs like a machine” became synonymous with good health. This metaphor has, as Foucault notes, had the pernicious effect of creating a body whose forces could be extorted, capabilities optimized and usefulness and docility increased, without the need for any explicit or physical displays of power. As feminists have noted, no body has been made more docile by this ideology than the female body (see e.g., Bartky, Bordo). Medical norms of “good health” in the late nineteenth century excluded women who, by virtue of their cyclicity, were deemed abnormal. Menstruation was a malfunctioning of the human machine and a sign of chronic illness.

Menstruation was diagnosed by many nineteenth century physicians as blood resulting from a recurrent internal wound caused by ovulation.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways in which upper-class ladies were urged to convalesce from their periodic wound, in addition to bedrest, was by extensive travelling. Thus, *Southall's* 1892 ad for sanitary towels appealed, in bold faced print, to “Ladies traveling by Land or Sea, Visiting, or away from Home” in marketing its product. Their sanitary towels were touted as “the latest invention in hygienic underwear” which no lady away from home should be without. A sample purchase was accompanied by “medical and press opinions.”

A woman could not, however, spend all of her time travelling. Nor could she, frequently interrupted by sickness, function efficiently in the public workplace. The ideal way for a woman to spend her time was, therefore, to be found in reproduction. Not only would this be of social benefit to the Anglo-saxon race, it would cure her—in a way that travel could not—of her peculiar feminine illness. As the dean of George Washington University's medical school—a gynecologist—deduced in 1875, the proper functioning of the female machine required breeding. The reasoning supporting this conclusion was simple: If menstruation was an abnormality in human physiology, and menstruation ceased while women were pregnant, then pregnancy must be the only strictly normal condition of a woman. Female frailty resulted from woman's deviation from her natural course. Her health required accepting her role as mother and homemaker (Lander 49).

# KOTEX

---




**At stores and shops  
that cater to women**

**N**EW, the most and greatest Kotex comes universal across time  
a romantic background. For, although a woman's utility is  
learned at Calhoun—a wonderful sanitary absorbent which  
science perfected for the use of our men and allied soldiers wounded in  
France.

With your time so well supplied in other fine products—Kotex  
bearing a name so well recognized throughout the world in 1921 and  
forever, made the first sanitary pads of cellulose—so good at once  
and placed them on sale in various sizes. Requests for more followed  
every sale and led directly two years to producing the new, un-  
equalled KOTEX "flow system like system" used in the building of the  
country which makes and adds a hygienic, sanitary contact of health  
benefit. Kotex are now made for every woman's use.

The great comfort in its inches long, three folding system, safe for  
swimming. The idea here's source of great Calhoun, is 2 1/2 inches long,  
by 5 inches long. Kotex are soft, most absorbent, and of lasting utility.  
Kotex are cheap in price and easy to throw away.

**CELLUCOTTON PRODUCTS CO.**  
200 South La Salle Street, Chicago, Illinois



*5c Each 12 for 60c*

---

**INEXPENSIVE, COMFORTABLE, HYGIENIC and SAFE — KOTEX**

Figure 2. 1921 Advertisement for First *Kotex* Napkins.

The idea that women were susceptible to recurrent, disabling illness, continued to be utilized, almost half a century later, in the marketing of the first *Kotex* napkins (Atwan 135, Jones 255). A 1921 ad, depicting a nurse and two other young women attending to an invalid man in a wheelchair, advertised *Kotex* as “a wonderful sanitary absorbent which science perfected for the use of our men and allied soldiers wounded in France” (See Figure 2). Skeptics were encouraged to “ask any nurse.” The *Red Cross* sign on every box further emphasized the product’s status

as a medically approved product. This prevalent post-war symbol was also utilized by *Johnson and Johnson* who marketed their napkins by emphasizing that “the famous red cross trademark distinguished a sanitary product of amazing superiority” (Atwan 269).

By the 1920s, health and hygiene had become a national obsession which kept women—both because and in spite of their frailties—busy cleaning. In a variety of ads, *Lysol* promoted itself as part of a national health campaign and urged women to “unite” with mothers, teachers, doctors and “Health officers of 365 cities” to “prevent unnecessary contagion and safeguard health” (Jones 299, Atwan 21, 264). *Lysol* could be used to disinfect the door-jambs, chair-arms, bannisters and telephone mouthpieces of the American Home which would otherwise “threaten [a] family with the danger of disease.” It could also be used for feminine hygiene.

As one 1926 ad warned, the “modern woman” could not “give in to the vagaries long-connected with the weaker sex” (Atwan 21) (See Figure 3). The post-suffrage, post-WWI woman had to compete with and for men. Thus, “the modern woman—whether in business, the arts, home or society—[had to] *keep* young.” She could not, it was emphasized, merely *appear* young. “Her whole system [had to] be responsive, awake, and keen;” she had to avoid “the usual feminine illnesses.” Drawing on the recommendations of an unnamed, “well-known” gynecologist, *Lysol* encouraged regular feminine hygiene as the “necessary preventative measure.” *Lysol* disinfectant claimed to be “a safe and effective antiseptic” for this “vital” purpose. In fact, the ad boldly claimed, “no antiseptic could be safer for the delicate internal tissues.”

In 1929, as the stock market crashed, personal hygiene was explicitly linked to a woman’s economic health by ads published by the *American Soap and Glycerine Producers* “to aid the work of the *Cleanliness Institute*” (Jones 286, 319). In one of these ads, wives and mothers were informed of their duty to help their men get and keep jobs.<sup>3</sup> Like the earlier *Lysol* ad, this one was designed to appeal to “the modern woman.” Headlined by the question “WHICH two would you hire?,” it depicted three men and three women waiting for a job interview. One was “experienced,” three were “experienced and intelligent,” but only two were “experienced, intelligent and CLEAN.” This graphic implied that one of the two—experienced, intelligent and CLEAN—people who merited hiring was a woman. But the text of the ad indicated that, during a time of scarce employment, a woman’s primary duty was to help her husband or son retain his work. Under a smaller graphic at the bottom which depicted a woman with a load of wash and a man with a very large paycheck, the copy shouted:



## The woman who does a man's work

*She must prove her worth every day. She must keep young, alert, responsive. There can be no let-up*

The modern woman finds herself frequently called upon to do a "man's work."

There can be no slacking in her busy life. She must withstand the same strain on her nerves—the same steady grind, hour after hour and day after day—that a man's work requires.

She cannot give way to her nerves and nerves and weakness are long considered characteristics of the "weaker sex." For her competitors is not alone with men—but with her own healthy, eager sisters.

### The secret of youthfulness

Wit, rick in business, the arts, the home or in society—the modern woman must keep young. The eternal secret of keeping young lies in preventing the usual feminine illnesses. Every such illness weakens the system; and the woman of today cannot afford simply to appear young. Her whole system must be responsive, awake, keen.

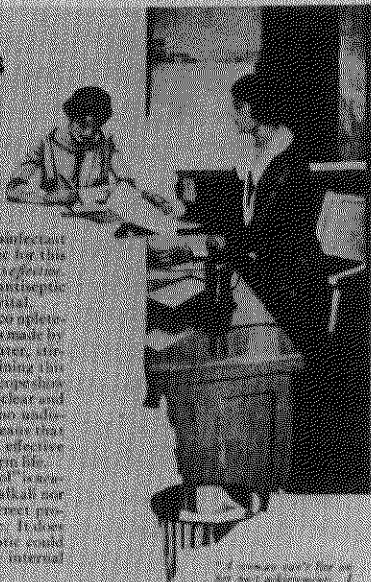
Most typically feminine illnesses can be prevented. A well-known New York physician, chief gynecologist of one of the large hospitals, says, "Most of these illnesses are the result of bacterial infections." For this reason, physicians are recommending regular feminine hygiene as a necessary preventive.

Manufactured only by LYSOL, INC., 515 Greenwich St., New York City  
Sole Distributors: LEVIN & FINK, INC., NEW YORK  
Consulting Agency: Harold E. Risher & Co., Limited, 30 Market St., Toronto

Compare Lysol with any other disinfectant. The genuine Lysol Disinfectant is not only the most powerful, but also the most pleasant to use. It is a public enemy. You'll find it in every home, school, office, hospital, and public building. It's the only disinfectant that's been recommended by every health authority in the world.

**Lysol**  
Disinfectant

*The ideal personal antiseptic*



"Is Lysol safe? For me and my children... I find it most pleasant and most effective for my use."

measure. And "Lysol" Disinfectant is the accepted antiseptic for this purpose. *It is safe and effective.* It insures the complete antiseptic cleanliness which is so vital.

"Lysol" Disinfectant acts instantly soluble in water. Test made by pouring "Lysol" into water, stirring well and then examining this solution under the microscope shows that every single drop is clear and transparent—there are no undissolved particles. This means that "Lysol" is 100 per cent effective in destroying harmful germs.

At the same time, "Lysol" is neutral. It contains no free alkali nor free acid. Diluted in correct proportions, it is non-caustic. It does not irritate. No antiseptic could be safer for the delicate internal tissues.

And "Lysol" is economical—one-half teaspoonful to one quart of water is all that is required to make the proper antiseptic solution for feminine hygiene.

### Send for Booklet

Concrete vital facts about feminine hygiene are included in a new booklet, which gives complete information and directions for the most personal and household uses of "Lysol" Disinfectant. Every woman should know and follow the rules of personal hygiene contained in this booklet. Mail coupon for free copy.

Get "Lysol" as an antiseptic solution. Complete information on its uses and directions for the most personal and household uses of "Lysol" Disinfectant. Every woman should know and follow the rules of personal hygiene contained in this booklet. Mail coupon for free copy.

Use "Lysol" as a disinfectant without the usual precautions. It is safe and effective for my use.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

SEND NO MONEY THIS COUPON GOOD

LEVIN & FINK, INC.  
Dept. B-2, 155 Broadway, New York City

Mail this without payment until receipt of your booklet. No purchase necessary. Offer good in U.S.A. and possessions.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3. Post-WWI Advertisement for Lysol Disinfectant.

## 156 Journal of Popular Culture

Attention wives and mothers! It concerns you, too, that cleanliness today has so much to do with the size of paychecks. For you are the ones who decide which is to be considered the most important in your household: clean clothes for everyone, or "keeping down the size of the wash." You also can help by providing: an orderly, inviting bath room; a home that sparkles generally; and last, but not least, the benefit of your own good example, with respect to clean hands, face, hair, body, clothes (Jones 286).

As this text indicates, the 1930s would continue to perpetuate the notion of a gendered division of labor, which insisted that a woman's place was in the home. Yet, at the same time, that place would be accorded increasing importance as a site of productive, if unpaid, labor. One effect of the depression was a gradual dislodging of the ideology of the physiologically frail woman, subsequently hastened by the need for women in the workforce during World War II. Thus, in order to return women to their place at the conclusion of the second World War, a new ideology was needed.

### *Looking Good as Feeling Great: Liberal Feminism and the Feminine Mystique*

The intermittent refrain from physical, social and economic activities once demanded of women was, by the suburbia-booming fifties, forbidden. While the pre-twentieth century woman was discouraged from frequent sex, dancing, bicycling or other exertions that might tax her, the mid-twentieth century woman was expected to be sexually and socially active and never miss a day's work—whether in the home or the office—despite any menstrual discomforts. Almost all female complaints regarding menstrual discomfort were interpreted, by mid-twentieth century medical experts, as merely psychogenetic—as signs of neurosis or hypersensitivity resulting from a woman's "unhealthy attitude toward femininity." Science responded to the ideological crisis precipitated by the employment of women during World War II swiftly and effectively: "As the Victorian sex-role distinction had been bolstered by an ideological physiology, so its postwar reincarnation was propped up by an ideological psychology" (Landers 58).

The makers of feminine hygiene products quickly assimilated the new science and norms of femininity into their marketing strategies. Soaps and cleansers once marketed as cures for physical ailments were now marketed as necessities for women's mental and social well-being. The task confronting women, no longer considered physically frail, but suspected of being mentally unstable, had changed from "keeping fit" to



“fitting in.” And this required, above all, attention to beauty and appearance. Emotional and social integration for women required looking dainty and smelling fresh (see, e.g., Jones 447, 449, 456, 459).

This mid-century shift in advertising techniques reflected the idealism of psychology’s—and gynecology’s—“mind over matter” hypothesis. Whereas earlier techniques for selling feminine hygiene products had emphasized the need to *be* healthy, carefully distinguishing this from merely *appearing* healthy, the new strategy emphasized appearance over reality. More precisely, the new strategy conflated appearance and reality: looking good *was* feeling good. Women’s mental health was linked, by professional and popular psychology, to acceptance of their femininity, and their femininity was linked, by commercial and popular media, to a set of beauty ideals (Friedan 33-68, 103-125). Thus, the contemporary woman could find her salvation through the massive consumption of beauty products—a cure that persists for most female ailments during late-capitalism.

Of course, the mental salvation of the contemporary woman, like the intellectual salvation of philosophers from Plato to Hegel, required her to escape her body (see *Flight* 88-95; “Anorexia” 88-93). Whereas the Victorian woman was confined to a destiny marked out by her biology, the contemporary, more liberated woman, was supposed to transcend her biology. Implying her liberation was at stake in selecting a menstrual product, a host of words and images connoting freedom.

Today, many menstrual products emphasize flight on the product itself or in the packaging of their product. *Always* pantliners come “with wings;”<sup>4</sup> and soaring birds symbolize both *Always* and *New Freedom* brands. Less subtly, the word free, with its double connotation of “inexpensive” and “liberating” is boldly placed on packages and in advertisements: “Buy any two packages of NEW FREEDOM pads and receive an additional package FREE” is a typical sales pitch. (A typical *New Freedom* ad, contains the word FREE four times—the first time in four-inch letters across the entire page—and the word FREEDOM nineteen times. It also contains thirty-six pictures of soaring birds.) (See Figure 4.) Other manufacturers count on us to believe we are already liberated and simply encourage us, by means of brandnames, to *Stayfree*. And yet others, apparently recognizing the hectic life of the contemporary woman, urge us to regain our mental health by “Thinking Pink” and becoming *Carefree*.

Here we see a postmodern marketing strategy for menstrual products which began with the marketing of the first commercial tampons in the late 1940s.

*Keeping Fit and Fitting In: The Tampon Revolution*

Careful examination of a 1948 *Tampax* ad (Jones 504), depicting a young woman in a bikini under the heading "Swim any day of the month with Tampax," reveals three themes of postmodernity. (See Figure 5.) The first theme concerns liberation. While a variety of menstrual pads now market themselves under the banner of freedom, the initial cries of freedom came from tampon manufacturers. Tampons were touted as a technological innovation which would free women from the bondage of belts, pins and pads, as the original *Tampax* slogan emphasized.

The second theme concerns a new phenomenology of female time, brought about by tampons. By virtue of the spatial relation of the tampon to the body, a woman could transcend her temporal cycle. Whereas a woman was once confined to bed rest each month, now, she could be active any day of the month. The body/machine of the tampon user would no longer suffer any "down time" due to menstruation.

Finally, there is the emphasis on the benefits of this product to a woman's appearance. While earlier menstrual products were touted as safe, effective and hygienic, *Tampax* was touted simply as invisible and odorless. "No belts, no pads, no pins, no odor," meant that women could be freed, not only from their cyclicity, but also from the embarrassment which attended public knowledge of their "condition."

Because it's "that time of the month" do you stay out of the water pretending you don't care? You do care and others are likely to know it. So why not use *Tampax* and take your swim. Women everywhere now are doing just that.... *Tampax* is modern sanitary protection worn internally. There are no belts, outside pads or anything else that can show. In bathing suit wet or dry, you are safe from the most watchful eyes (Jones 504).

This last point was the important one. As the graphic in the ad indicated, the true usefulness of a tampon was not for swimming, but was instead for sitting beautifully by the edge of the pool, knowing that no unsightly bulges could be detected in your bikini.

Marketing techniques for tampons have become more sophisticated in the last 40 years, as can be seen when this early *Tampax* ad is compared to the color layout which won *Lil-lets* a silver medal for its 1989 advertising campaign (Piestrzynska, unpaginated). But, as the comparison also reveals, key themes remain the same.

The first page of the *Lil-lets* layout provides instructions for tampon insertion, urging young women to relax because, although some girls find it difficult to use a tampon, "it's only a mental block"

Buy Two  
Get One

**FREE**



Buy any two packages  
of NEW FREEDOM® pads  
and receive an additional  
package FREE.

© Kimberly-Clark      Manufacturer's Coupon      Expires 8/31/01

**Buy 2... Get 1 FREE!**

Use only 2 packages of NEW FREEDOM pads.      Requires 2 packages of NEW FREEDOM pads.

3455



Figure 4. 1990s Advertising Circular for *New Freedom* Pads.

## 160 Journal of Popular Culture

(Piestrzynska). The soft-focus photograph of a young woman wrapped in a white towel in an all white bathroom is worthy of *Playboy*, as is the copy of the ad. After recognizing and appeasing her fears—"it's not surprising most girls are a bit nervous the first time," but these tampons are "simple" and "natural," and insertion can be "soft" and "sensitive"—the young woman is explicitly told to recline and relax. Any discomfort she may feel is insinuated to be her fault: "[I]t takes a bit of practice to get the hang of it...if you find it difficult at first, it's probably because you're too tense" (ibid). A graphic of the tampon wiggling its way across the page towards the towel-clad woman carries a definite sexual innuendo and the youthful consumer is reminded that 25 million women around the world are doing this. The theme of the 1989 *Lil-lets* ad, like the theme of the 1948 *Tampax* ad, is to "fit in" by fitting it in.

The next two pages of the magazine insert emphasize the freedom from embarrassment that *Lil-lets* tampons can guarantee. Playing on the self-consciousness of adolescent women just beginning to menstruate, the second ad proclaims the difficulty of keeping your period to yourself, by prominently displaying the torso of a woman wearing a T-shirt reading "HI! I'VE GOT MY PERIOD." The copy reads,

As you know, the great thing about tampons is that they don't show at all—not even under a swimsuit or leotard. And, of course, you can swim, dance, do anything you like when you're wearing one.... There's no embarrassing odor to worry about either, because the flow is absorbed inside you (Piestrzynska).

Just like the 1948 *Tampax* ad, the 1989 tampon slogan is "No belts, no pins, no pads, no odor." Yet, as the photo in the third ad shows,

an applicator tampon is a lot more bulky than a *Lil-lets* tampon.... You can't hide an applicator tampon in your hand like you can a *Lil-lets*. Which makes it a bit embarrassing when you want to take one to the toilet. Some girls who use applicator tampons try to hide them up their sleeve, but that looks a bit obvious (ibid).

One wonders why women need to be embarrassed about menstruating. If we are not embarrassed about going to the toilet to defecate, why should we be embarrassed by going to the toilet to change a tampon? One might also wonder why we need to take tampons or pads or anything else with us to the toilet. Why aren't such products, like toilet paper and paper towels, already there, free of charge, for our use? The answer is that the menstruating woman is, postmodern technologies

and marketing techniques aside, still considered unclean and that menstruation is still considered an abnormality.

*Still Cleaning Up Our Act: Pads, Tampons and Garbage Bags*

Advertising circulars inserted into municipal newspapers sell menstrual products in one of three ways: as a beauty aid alongside hair dyes and cosmetics; as a "healthy value," alongside vitamins, cold medicines, laxatives, antifungal sprays and band-aids; or as a "housekeeping" product alongside lice control sprays, baby wipes, floor wax and garbage bags. When tampons are sold alongside *Clairol* cosmetics, it implies that a woman's natural attributes are in need of fixing. When douches are sold alongside *Sudafed* cold medicines, it implies that women are unwell. When pantliners are sold alongside *Hefty* cinch sacs, it implies that women are unclean and messy.

The brand names of various menstrual aids further conveys the message that women are unsanitary. Products such as *Whenever*, *Always*, or *Anyday* tout the virtues of a product that can be used everyday, implying that women are in need of sanitary protection on an ongoing, not simply an intermittent, basis. Or, more precisely, if one considers the notion of a "panty shield," that a woman's underwear is in constant need of sanitary protection from her.

The idea that women are unclean continues to be propagated also through the marketing of a vast array of "intimate" mists, soaps, douches and towelettes designed to make women "clean and fresh." *Summer's Eve* markets an entire line of "cleansers designed especially for a woman," under the slogan "bring back

any day of the month with Tampax

Precisely it's that time of month? Do you stay out of the water pretending you don't care? You do care and others are likely to know it. So why not use Tampax and take your swim? Women everywhere now are doing just that... Tampax is modern sanitary protection worn internally. There are no belts, outside pads or anything else that can show. In bathing suit wet or dry, you are safe from the most watchful eyes. Made of compressed absorbent cotton, Tampax was invented by a doctor for this monthly use. Individual applicators make insertion easy and when the Tampax is in place it cannot be seen or felt. It is quick to change and easy to dispose of. Also, no odor can form. Do you wonder that millions of women are now using Tampax? Buy Tampax and swim to your heart's content. At drug stores and notions stores in Regular, Super and Junior absorbencies. Month's supply fits into pants. Or get the economy box with 4 months' supply (average). Also look for Tampax Vendor in rest-rooms throughout the United States. Tampax Incorporated, Palmer, Mass.

NO BATHING SUITS NO PADS NO BATHING SUITS

Regular TAMPAX

Approved for Advertising by the Journal of the American Medical Association

TAMPAX INCORPORATED L.P.X. 24-74 Q2  
Palmer, Mass.

Send and me in plain wrapper a trial package of Tampax. 1 dollar for (same or other) in amount of mailing. Use is checked below.

( ) REGULAR ( ) SUPER ( ) JUNIOR

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

[1048]

Figure 5. 1948 Advertisement for Tampax Tampons.

freshness anytime" (*New Woman* May 1992, 87).<sup>5</sup> Their "Feminine Bath" can be "used daily," as can their "Feminine Body Bar" which will "cleanse sensitive areas without irritation" and "provide deodorant protection all day" (*ibid* 88). Their "Feminine Wash," an "intimate cleansing cloth," can be used several times a day.

Refresh anytime, anywhere. Wherever you go. Carry these individually wrapped cleansing cloths with you. They're pre-moistened with a unique cleansing formula to gently cleanse away odor-causing bacteria. Relax. These large, super-soft cloths won't irritate. Feel clean, confident, fresh. Everytime

(*Seventeen*, May 1991: 72).

Similarly, *Massengill* markets a spray for "external odor protection," a disposable douche for an "easy, sanitary way to feel refreshed in seconds" and a "soft cloth towelette," "to give you a fresh, clean feeling" whenever "you need it." ("They're so simple and easy to use, you'll wonder how you ever did without them;" *Woman's Day*, May 1991, 71). *Sofkins* advises a woman to use their "Personal Cleansing Cloths," whenever she goes to the bathroom, for "a clean that's cleaner than bath tissue alone." ("If you think about it, it makes sense," *Woman's Day*, May 1992: 140.)

That ill health is "natural" for women is the explicit message of a variety of non-prescription powders, lotions and suppositories designed to cure yeast infections. *Gynecort*, developed by "a leading gynecologist" and awarded the "Good Housekeeping seal of approval," promises to "heal irritation of occasional external feminine itching." *Femicine* and *Yeast-Gard*, developed by "a homeopathic physician for the Women's Health Institute," promise to "relieve the discomfort of feminine itching and burning" (*Woman's Day*, May 1991: 135; *First*, May 1991, 86).<sup>6</sup> And *Gyne-Lotrimin*, endorsed by female gynecologists who are "familiar with the repeated annoyance of vaginal yeast infections," promises "early treatment, early cure" (*Essence*, March 1991: 21-23).

Neglecting to mention that recurrent vaginal infections may well be the effect of perfumes, deodorizers, douching and tampon use, these ads explicitly market their products as a further necessary intervention for a "naturally" occurring female dysfunction. Thus, the female physician/spokeswoman for *Gyne-lotrimin* tells the consumer of the natural abuses a woman's body must undergo, equating "becoming a woman, childbirth, and yeast infections." *Norforms* locates the precise cause of feminine itching and irritation in normal vaginal discharge.



New Norforms Medicated Feminine Powder contains zinc oxide to soothe itching and irritation...But Norforms powder does even more. It absorbs moisture from discharge and perspiration, the major cause of itching and irritation. So it actually prevents further irritation. Norforms Medicated Feminine Powder keeps you dry all day long. And it's safe to use as often as you wish. A comforting solution to an irritating problem (*Woman's Day*, May 1992: 65).

*Norforms* also provides a "natural" explanation and an artificial cure for feminine odor:

Feminine odor is caused by bacteria which occur naturally in the vagina. Of all leading products, only Norforms Suppositories neutralize these bacteria to give you all day protection (*Cosmopolitan*, May 1992: 22).

Finally, while *Lysol* is no longer advertised as a product which can clean both the dark crevices of one's home and one's body, a variety of feminine hygiene aids tout the virtues of common household products. *Massengill*, and other douches, proclaim the advantages of "Vinegar and Water—for years the ingredients most recommended by doctors." *Stayfree*, and other pads and tampons, tout the advantages of baking soda in their ads. Indeed, baking soda has replaced *Lysol* as the all-purpose household item of the nineties. It can be used not only for baking, but also for brushing teeth, deodorizing refrigerators and kitty litter and, of course, making women smell fresh and clean.

Of course, deodorant tampons and pads and douches are still, at best, medically unnecessary and, at worst, potentially dangerous, since the female body is a self-cleaning organism that requires no such intervention in the normal course of things. The idea that regular douching can promote vaginal health can only stem from the idea that the course of things is never truly normal when it comes to women.

### *Midol for My Doll*

Just as tampons will "free" us from those unsightly bulges created by belts, pins and pads, *Midol* will "free" us from those unseemly moods created by pain, tension and bloating. The personality traits associated with PMS—anger, aggressiveness and general bitchiness—are precisely those characteristics that women, especially wives and mothers, are not supposed to possess. We are supposed to be docile, patient and altruistic; thus being otherwise is pathological. This creates a market for a cure. As the *Midol* slogan proclaims, *Midol* will "make it all"—the edginess and the crankiness, as well as the pain—"go away."

The *Midol* television commercials include all the themes conveyed by other menstrual product ads within seconds, by means of a strikingly postmodern juxtaposition of audio-visual images. These ads are, by their fast pace, disorienting camera angles and overlapping noises, designed to make the consumer feel irritable. If she didn't feel the symptoms of PMS before watching the ad, she will begin to notice them during it.

A typical ad (shown during *Sally Jesse Raphael*, March 21, 1991) opens with an angled black and white shot of a coffee cup crashing to the floor next to a woman's feet.<sup>7</sup> We never see more than her ankles or feet, but we know that she is a businesswoman by her high-heeled pumps and hosiery. This image is quickly followed by another black and white image of a sad and frightened young boy descending a staircase, carrying a toy airplane, as his mother shouts "I said no and that means no!" Another, more controlled, voice overlapping mother's says "The edginess." Again, we never see more than a part of the woman—in this case her hip with her hand on it—but the silhouette and tone of voice clearly indicate a female parent. This image is, in turn, rapidly succeeded by a black and white image of a woman's wringing hands and a female voice moaning "Even my head aches." Again, an overlapping voice "The pain"—as the screen turns into a black and white grid. The brand names *Tylenol* and *Advil* quickly follow each other across the grid in white letters, as a voice-over claims that "ordinary pain relievers will relieve only pain."

Briefly, a blue and orange picture of a *Midol* box brightens the screen, accompanied by the soothing words, "Midol PMS does so much more."

Again, the ad returns to a black-and-white, angled shot. A young woman is lying on a bed arguing on the phone with someone we presume is her boyfriend. She yells at him "I'm not cranky, you're cranky." One more quick, off-centered image of part of a woman's body appears—this time a pair of hands attempting in vain to do up the zipper of some jeans. And then...

Finally, the pace slows and color returns. Sheer white curtains flowing on a gentle breeze lead us into a peach bedroom. There the camera settles its eye lovingly on a neatly arranged bureau with a box of *Midol* nestled amidst perfumes, cosmetics and flowers. Softly, a voice says, "Midol makes it all go away."

As the coffee spills, we are reminded that even liberated women are clumsy and messy; as mother yells at her innocent son, we are reminded that even homemakers reject their femininity and become mentally unstable; as the hands wring, we are reminded of the physiological

ailments that all women are susceptible to; as the hands struggle with the zipper, we are reminded that even young women regularly transform into fat, ugly, bloated creatures. As the young woman—the only woman fully depicted in the ad—yells at her boyfriend, we are aware that she is at a precipice. If she continues to be irritable and unreasonable, she, too, will fragment into only a partial woman: an untidy working woman, an unkind mother, a frigid middle-aged woman with migraines and middle-aged spread. *Midol* promises to help her regain her full femininity, to put her back on course, to secure her *future* by taking her *back* to the days when ladies were gentle, homes were healthy and happy, and a woman's place was in the bedroom. The juxtaposition of black-and-white, off-center, rapid-fire camera shots, accompanied by strained, irritable voices, with pastel-colored, centered, peaceful images, accompanied by soothing voices, encourage her to imagine the present as the past and the past as the future: an historical transformation made possible by popping a pill (cf. Caputi 487-495).

With the “discovery” of premenstrual syndrome, we have indeed completed the cycle that takes us through the future back into the past. A woman's problems are once again, in the 1990s, as in the 1890s, attributed to her physiology. The symptoms include a variety of psychological “abnormalities”: a lack of female gracefulness, beauty and docility, but the causes are hormonal and require a physiological cure. Medical science has resurrected the notion that women are chronically unreliable and unpredictable and apt to do everything from crashing planes to beating their children and killing their lovers (see Zita).<sup>8</sup>

A postmodern marketing strategy, however, masks this renewed version of female biology as destiny, making it appear we can cure our ailments by simple consumption. The pills that will cure your mood swings are to be placed on the bureau next to the perfumes that will cure your body odor. To appear well is to be well and this can be achieved through smart shopping.

It hardly needs pointing out that calling our menstrual periods and our periods of rage a disease has been, and continues to be, a handy way of not looking at what women are upset about and why. Equally handy is the strategy that minimizes our cramps and anger by comparing them to our body odor. Our “problem” is not merely physiological, nor psychological, but societal. The remedy, therefore, is neither medical, nor cosmetic, but is political. Women are irritable because they are still not free to go where they please, do what they wish, or say what they want. And neither *Midol*, nor “Thinking Pink” will change that fact. Nor will the “internal protection” of a tampon. We do, indeed, wish to be

freed from the constraints that bind us, but while tampons come without belts and pins, neither they, nor postmodernity, come without strings attached.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I agree with Foucault that the emphasis on private and public hygiene is correlated with a preoccupation with "improving the human lineage" and thus indicates "a type of 'racism'" (*History* 125). A complete account of the ideological underpinnings of feminine hygiene products would examine the connections between the marketing of soaps, cleansers, menstrual aids and non-prescription contraceptives and home pregnancy tests. It would also examine the subtle, yet noteworthy, differences in the marketing of these products to white women and women of color.

<sup>2</sup>There were two competing theories of menstruation during the nineteenth century: the ovulation theory of menstruation sketched here, and a wave theory of menstruation which interpreted menstrual flow as "an external manifestation of rhythmic changes" affecting not just the pelvis, but the entire body. Both theories served arguments for restricting the social, educational and economic roles of women, and physicians of both schools recommended substantially the same "cures" for the malady. The wave theory of menstruation is noteworthy, however, because of its remarkable similarity to contemporary theories of "premenstrual syndrome." See Lander 26-57 for a full account of these theories and their ideological role.

<sup>3</sup>The other teaches women how to catch a husband, selling cleanliness as a "beauty secret."

<sup>4</sup>Contemporary print ads analyzed here and below were found in a variety of places including *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, *New Woman*, *Seventeen*, *Teen* and *Woman's Day* magazines, advertising flyers, supermarket and drugstore advertising displays and product-packaging itself from 1990-1993.

<sup>5</sup>Class coding persists in these soap and cleanser ads. *Summer's Eve* "makes loads of luxurious bubbles" as it cleanses according to its magazine advertisements; and *Actibath* "turns an ordinary bath into a carbonated spa treatment," according to coupons depicting a castle.

<sup>6</sup>Both of these products, distributed by *Lake Pharmaceuticals*, are marketed by ads exemplifying a "think pink" theme, with pastel-colored layouts and pictures of angora and lace.

<sup>7</sup>A series of these ads ran from 1991-1993 during "women's programming" on major networks. In 1994-95, these ads were still run occasionally on the

*Lifetime* ("a woman's") channel. These spots varied in length, but not in style or substance.

<sup>8</sup>The law has also propagated the notion that women are disabled by progesterone levels. In the United States and Canada, women escaped charges for assault, shoplifting and a variety of minor offenses in the early 1980s. In France, PMS became the grounds for a plea of temporary insanity; and in Britain, two women escaped homicide charges on the grounds that their violence was triggered by biological forces beyond their control. See Fields, Nicolson and Barltrop, and a 1982 issue of *MacLeans*.

### **Works Cited**

- Atwan, Robert, Donald McQuade and John W. Wright. *Edsels, Luckies and Frigidaires: Advertising the American Way*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1979.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." In *Feminism and Foucault*. Eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988. 61-86.
- Bordo, Susan. "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture." *Feminism and Foucault*. Eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988. 87-118.
- Bordo, Susan. *Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*. New York: SUNY P, 1987.
- Caputi, Jane. "Seeing Elephants: The Myths of Phallotechnology." *Feminist Studies*. 14:3 (Fall 1988), 487-524.
- Fields, Steffi. "In England, Two Killers Go Free." *People Weekly*. 17 (1982): 94, 97.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1963.
- Jones, Edgar R. *Those Were the Good Old Days: A Happy Look at American Advertising 1800-1950*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.
- Lander, Louise. *Images of Bleeding: Menstruation as Ideology*. New York: Orlando Press, 1988.
- Nicholson, John and Kay Barltrop. "Do Women Go Mad Every Month?" *New Society* 59 (1982), 226-28.
- Piestrzynska, Izabella, Ed. *The One Show: Advertising's Best Print, Radio, T.V.* 11. New York: The One Club for Art and Copy, 1989.
- Zita, Jacquelyn N. "The Premenstrual Syndrome: 'Dis-Easing' the Female Cycle." *Hypatia* 8:1 (Spring 1988).

**168 Journal of Popular Culture**

**Shelley Park** is a member of the Department of Philosophy, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL.



