

# **“Useful to Hygiene and Favourable to Morals”: Maintaining the Period Sex Taboo in *The Romance of Lust***

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I use medical texts from the Victorian era and secondary criticism to argue that the period sex taboo in the Victorian pornographic text *The Romance of Lust* (1873–1876) functions to protect the female characters’ gentility. I argue that the pornographic text shifts the rules of acceptable behaviors to include illicit acts such as extramarital, premarital, and incestuous sex, but introduces the period sex taboo to realign the female characters with Victorian values of delicacy, modesty, and purity.

In *The Romance of Lust* (1873–1876), Charles and his lovers perform sexual acts considered taboo in the Victorian era including incest, anal sex, and same-sex sex acts, and yet one taboo remains unbroken: the period sex taboo. From his sexual introduction with Mrs. Benson through his affairs with Miss Evelyn and his two sisters Mary and Eliza, all routinely abstain from having sex while the women are menstruating, citing health risks and general ill feeling. While menstruation is used as a narrative technique to allow Charles to sexually initiate his younger sisters, the inclusion of periods (which are typically ignored) in the pornographic text signals that the maintenance of the period sex taboo serves a distinct rhetorical purpose. In this essay I will consider the history of period mythology and Victorian ideas about menstruation to argue that the maintenance of the period taboo in *The Romance of Lust* secures the respectability, modesty, and purity of the female characters by allowing them periods of rest and providing a method of falsifying virginity for marriage.

The erotic appeal of vaginal blood in pornography is inconsistent. Sarah Read analyzes the eighteenth-century fascination and fetishization of excessively bloody defloration that provides a precedent for bloody sex in print pornography as an erotic stimulant. Read argues that part of the “defloration mania” of the eighteenth century was dependent on eroticizing female bleeding, including menstrual blood. Fanny Hill, the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748), experiences multiple partial or figurative deflorations including a faked defloration achieved by having sex while on her period. Martha Vicinus in her book *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, however, argues that overall, the appearance of periods in Victorian pornography is rare. In *My Secret Life*, one of the most popular pornographic texts of the era, the narrator makes a point of stating that he did not enjoy having sex with menstruating women, “although he managed to overcome his distaste on several occasions” (Vicinus 40). While these examples provide a precedent for bleeding, periods, and period sex in pornography, they treat menstruation as either erotic or disgusting, neither of which apply to *The Romance of Lust*. The infrequency of menstruation in pornography, coupled with the unusual treatment of it within the narrative, discussed below, implies that the inclusion of the period sex taboo is deliberate.

Victorian attitudes towards menstruation and menstrual sex were primarily influenced by the Western Judeo-Christian interpretations of the menstruation taboo, which are predominantly negative. The Bible denounces menstruation, women who menstruate, and men who touch women who menstruate as unclean, and prohibits men having sex with women who are menstruating: “If any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days” (Lev. 15.24). Menstruation and menstrual blood are conceptualized by the Bible as contaminating and polluting, and thus verbal and spatial separation is mandated (Gottlieb 147). In an 1874 medical text, Augustus Kinsley Gardner advises Victorian readers that sex during menstruation is harmful for both parties. He cites Moses as the

first authority on the matter and identifies the purification practices described in the Bible as “useful to hygiene and favorable to morals,” demonstrating the Bible’s continued influence on Victorian understandings of menstruation (Gardner 134, 139). While Mrs. Benson states that “all connection between men and women must cease at this time,” imitating the directions of Moses in Leviticus, *The Romance of Lust* goes against the traditional Biblical edict, as the text does not treat women themselves as pollutive during their periods (I: 53). Although they do not engage in vaginal or anal sex during menstruation, Mrs. Benson and Miss Evelyn sometimes perform oral sex on Charles during their periods in response to his begging for intercourse, an action which pollutes neither party. Charles does not see women on their periods as disgusting or refrain from asking to engage in sex acts with them, suggesting that it is not religious prohibition which prevents the characters from engaging in sex during menstruation.

Instead of the dominant religious, and thus negatively morally skewed, perception of menstruation, *The Romance of Lust* engages in the medical discourse regarding period sex and poses it as a potential health risk to all involved. This rationale is also questioned within the text as the characters suffer no physical harm from the few times the taboo is broken. Gardner, if taken as an average example of the Victorian medical attitude towards menstruation, advises his patients that “reason and experience both show that sexual relations at the menstrual period are very dangerous for both man and woman” (143). Gardner disapproves of women engaging in any strenuous activity during menstruation as “all undue excitement is injurious at this period” (143). He additionally characterizes periods as debilitating to women and warns against menstrual sex potentially causing nervous disorders and hemorrhaging (Gardner 143–144). Mrs. Benson, in her first sex lesson to Charles, warns that sex during a woman’s period can be dangerous for both parties. She additionally states that they must not have sex for twenty-four hours after bleeding has stopped as “in some cases a virulent white discharge occasionally followed for some

hours, sufficiently acrid to affect [his] local health" (I: 65). Miss Evelyn, too, warns that it will bring them both "very great harm" (I: 128). For men, Gardner warns against menstrual blood causing "superficial excoriations which resemble chancres" and "blenorrhagias which resemble specific strains of gonorrhoeas" (146). However, when Charles has sex with Mary during her first period, without either of their knowledge that it was coming on, he suffers no ill effects (I: 128). Miss Evelyn additionally intends to use her period to mimic defloration, suggesting that she is not concerned with ill effects to her husband or herself (II: 24). Despite warnings, the narrative disproves the characters' own claim that having sex during menstruation is physically damaging. Having proven that Charles wants to engage in sexual intercourse with the menstruating women and that there is no tangible religious or physical punishment for doing so, Charles's respect of the period taboo instead identifies him as capable of exercising restraint for the sake of his lovers and contributes to his respectability as a future gentleman.

The maintenance of the period taboo most significantly identifies the women of *The Romance of Lust* as gentlewomen by identifying them as delicate and preserving their modesty and purity. In the text, Mrs. Benson, Miss Evelyn, and Mary are repeatedly described as unwell during menstruation. This characterization of the menstruating women identifies them as delicate and thus separated from working women and racialized conceptions of women of colour. The women refer to their menstruation as them being "unwell," and Mary repeatedly complains of severe headaches (I: 125). Charles's mother is also described as "feeling poorly" when the other women are menstruating, intimating that she too is synced and experiencing poor health as a result. The idealized Victorian woman was imagined as delicate, weak, and gentle, and this ideal is shaped by the implication that these characteristics apply to white women only (Stone and Sanders 29). This identification separated white women from non-white bodies which were coded as stronger but less evolutionarily advanced and thus better for labour, aiding the goals of British imperialism to subjugate and

enslave non-white bodies as a source of free labour (Stone and Sanders 29). Stone and Sanders argue that “erroneous assessments embedded in Victorian conceptions of gender and race led to the purportedly normal, universal female body being labeled as child-like, weak, fragile, and white” (30). Mary and the other women’s repeated identification of weakness while on their period reinforces their whiteness and thus their status as gentlewomen.

Mrs. Benson, Miss Evelyn, and Mary are granted the privilege to abstain from most or all sex acts and enjoy a period of rest during menstruation, which is in itself a show of their gentility. While only the governesses are discussed as having employment and sex is generally conceptualized as fun in *The Romance of Lust*, it is still the primary labour performed by women in the text. In her analysis of Victorian attitudes towards menstruation, Vicinus examines *My Secret Life* to look at the treatment of period sex and notices that “at no point, significantly, does he mention working-class women or prostitutes, the classes with which he had most sexual contact, being incapacitated by menstruation, maids seem not to have excused themselves from any part of their arduous routine” (40–41). Charles’s lovers, while they still occasionally perform oral sex, are not required to engage either in sexual labour or labour of any kind (besides the governesses who continue to give lessons), reinforcing their elevated position in a society where “women of all but the most wealthy classes worked” and few were in a secure enough position to avoid labouring during menstruation (Stone and Sanders 36).

Maintaining the period sex taboo also preserves the respectability of Charles’s sex partners by contradicting popular conceptions of women as especially licentious, lustful, and unable to control themselves when on their periods. Maria Parsons writes that “from the 1840s on, menstrual bleeding became the sign of swelling and explosion whose corresponding behavioural manifestations were aligned with sexual excitement and animals in heat” (67). Comparisons with women to animals contributed to menstruating women being “rendered as ‘out of control’ and in need of

containment" (Parsons 67). Parsons also traces the connection between women, vampires, and menstrual blood as reflecting "notions of female sexuality as lascivious and licentious" (Parsons 67). The girls and women in *The Romance of Lust* are given similar descriptors for their sexual appetite, such as Eliza who is described by Charles as "a rare example of a truly salacious and voluptuous nature" (I: 131). However, this description is applied to Eliza before menarche and this language never appears regarding a woman who is actively menstruating. Menstruating women are instead depicted as actively uninterested in sex and potentially physically incapable of enjoying it. When Charles engages in sexual intercourse with Mary during her first period, he notices that he had intercourse with her "without apparently exciting her in the usual way," implying that her period is decreasing her enjoyment of sex rather than increasing it, despite Mary not being aware either that she is on her period nor that she is not supposed to be engaging in sex at that time (I: 128). Mary has "an instinctive reluctance" to engage in sex with Charles during her period (I: 128). The use of "instinctive" is in direct contrast with the dominant thought which attributed women's increased sexual appetite during their periods to an animalistic and thus innate instinct. Therefore, the maintenance of the period sex taboo allows the women to remain respectable by separating them from lower classes of women as well as divorcing them from popular animalistic depictions of women who menstruate, identifying them as gentlewomen and protecting their alleged respectability.

The mythologies surrounding periods themselves, including the women's cycles lining up with the full moon and Charles's ability to sense their periods by the smell of their breath, protects the women's modesty by sparing them having to repeatedly reveal their physical state to Charles. The narrative instead establishes Charles's ability to detect periods through various culturally popular and text-specific myths. In Parsons's analysis of menstrual pathologies, she discusses the moon-bound vampires as relating back to the

common cultural connection between women, snakes, and the moon: “The sexually undulant wall of the womb renews its wall after one wave-peak of the menstrual cycle: the woman renews her sexual self after shedding blood as the snake sheds its skin” (qtd. in Parsons 69). In *The Romance of Lust*, the connection between women’s menstrual cycles and the moon is consistent, as all of the women menstruate exactly with the moon cycle. Mrs. Benson explains to Charles that menstruation “happened at the full or the new moon, generally the former;” which is supported by Miss Evelyn and Mary’s periods falling on the full moon later in the text (I: 53). The women’s periods lining up exactly with the full moon each month allow Charles to intimate when they will be menstruating. This method of detection is evidenced with Miss Evelyn’s wedding, when Charles notes that with “Miss Evelyn’s choice of the marriage day on the full moon, [he] could not help imagining that she intended to help her deception with the advent of her menstruation” (II: 4). Charles can also tell that a woman is on her period based on the smell of her breath, a period myth which seems to be unique to the text, but provides an additional method for identifying menstruation. It is first noted with Mrs. Benson and then applied to Miss Evelyn as his way of “discovering that Miss Evelyn was exactly in the same state” (I: 54). Openly discussing their periods with Charles, after the initial educational experiences, would suggest immodesty on behalf of the women as witnessed in this passage from Gardner:

The woman when she has her periods takes the greatest care to conceal it from all eyes.... She considers her condition as a blot or an infirmity; and although her modesty ... has been spared by the omnipotence of her husband, she blushes to herself at the tribute which she is compelled to pay to nature. (147)

The use of period myths allows Charles to know when the women are menstruating and erases the need for them to immodestly disclose their condition. Charles can tell when

women are menstruating and give them time to abstain from sex without their having to tell him each month, and thus preserve their modesty.

The women of *The Romance of Lust* who refuse to engage in period sex ensure their purity within the realm of the pornographic text by forming a defensible moral boundary and engaging in a time of purification. As the girls and women repeatedly participate and enjoy premarital, extramarital and incestuous sex, all of which would be ruinous in Victorian England, the period sex taboo functions as a moral boundary that the women are able to maintain and defend. Refusing Charles when he wishes to have sex with them during menstruation functions similarly to a woman refusing sex in a non-pornographic text. The women protect their bodies during menstruation as women in a non-pornographic text would protect their virginity. Though they refuse few acts in the narrative, the period sex taboo shows that the women have inhibitions and restraint, aligning them with Victorian conceptions of moral womanly behaviour. In popular discourse, mainstream medical writers claimed that it was “dishonourable for a woman to allow her husband to have sex with her during her period” (Read 168). As Read argues, Fanny Hill’s willingness to have sex during her period “points to Hill’s lack of inhibition” and paints her as morally compromised (173). Additionally, in Galenic and humoral-based medicine, periods were considered as a way for the female body to flush itself of impurities—similar to bloodletting, which Mrs. Benson intimates when she calls menstruation a “relief to the system” (I: 53). By refusing to have sex during menstruation, the women maintain the purifying act of menstruation and defend their purity within the text.

Menstrual sex also allows the women to maintain a physical appearance of purity by providing a methodology for the women to appear “intact” on their wedding nights and thus secure marriage. This strategy is explicitly employed by Miss Evelyn who times her wedding night to coincide with the full moon. She explains to Charles that she intended for her period to provide the bleeding associated

with loss of virginity; however, she was already pregnant with Charles's child (II: 24). Although unsuccessful, Miss Evelyn's plan regarding her wedding night provides a strategy for Mary, Eliza, and Charles's other lovers to appear pure for their future husbands and thus secure good marriages in the later volumes.

In *The Romance of Lust*, the period sex taboo is enforced by both the female and male characters to preserve Victorian values within the alternative norms of the pornographic text. The narrative departs from the traditional treatments of menstruation that ignore it, eroticize it, or condemn it as sinful. The text additionally contradicts its own claims that period sex is physically dangerous for both men and women. Instead, through the maintenance of the period sex taboo, the women are identified as genteel through their separation from lower class and racialized women, and by maintaining both their modesty and purity. Thus, the period sex taboo in *The Romance of Lust* functions to provide a way for women who engage in illicit sex to maintain their respectability in the pornographic text.

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