



doi 10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00078-5

## GENDER AND BODY HAIR: CONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE WOMAN

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**Synopsis** — Women's body hair removal is strongly normative within contemporary Western culture. Although often trivialised, and seldom the subject of academic study, the hairlessness norm powerfully endorses the assumption that a woman's body is unacceptable if unaltered; its very normativity points to a socio-cultural presumption that hairlessness is the appropriate condition for the feminine body. This paper explores biological/medical, historical and mythological literature pertaining to body hair and gender, as well as feminist analyses of the norm for feminine hairlessness. Much of this literature both reflects and constructs an understanding of hairlessness as 'just the way things are'. Taken-for-granted, hairlessness serves, this paper argues, both to demarcate the masculine from the feminine, and to construct the 'appropriately' feminine woman as primarily concerned with her appearance, as 'tamed', and as less than fully adult. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Body hair removal is strongly normative for women within contemporary Western culture (Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Hope, 1982; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). However, it is neither a modern, nor a purely Western invention; accounts of women's hair removal come from ancient times and diverse cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Tobriand Islands, Uganda, South America and Turkey (Cooper, 1971). Against this backdrop, the contemporary Western norm for hair removal may be a comparatively recent development. Hope (1982), for example, argues that few US women, prior to 1915, removed their leg or underarm hair. This may have been because so little of women's bodies was on public display in the US at the time. Indeed, those parts that were displayed—the face, neck and arms—were targeted by hair removal advertisements, and beauty books of the mid- to late- 1800s assumed that any visible hair, not on the head, was an affliction requiring treatment. The move toward more extensive hair removal among North American women appears to have accompanied a transition in cultural standards of feminine beauty. During the years 1920–1940,

Hope (1982, p. 96) argues, the female leg gradually went from being ignored to being a thing of beauty—so long as it was “tanned, shapely, [and] hairless.” For women living prior to or during this transition period, it may have been a sign of immodesty to pay too much attention to leg ‘care’. Some may even have considered it immoral to remove body hair at all, probably because the first women to do so were considered ‘bad’ (they were likely to have been dancers who displayed more of their bodies than was thought decent) (Hope, 1982). Practical difficulties probably added to women's ambivalence. For example, “[d]epilatories were messy, smelly and sometimes... dangerous... wax was painful and one ran the risk of burns” (Hope, 1982, p. 96), and razor wounds were painful and could scar. These factors did not, however, prevent hair removal from achieving increasing popularity. By 1930, probably in part due to advertising campaigns and advice from ‘beauty experts’, as well as skimpier dress fashions, the magazine, *Hygeia*, was referring to hair removal as a ‘social convention’ (Hope, 1982).

Some 60 years later, Basow (1991) found that 81% of her US sample of women removed their leg and/or underarm hair. Conducting a similar study in an Australian setting, Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) found that 91.5% of their university student sample removed their leg hair and 93.0% removed their underarm hair. Similarly, 92.0% of their high school student sample removed their leg hair, and 91.2%

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This research was funded by the Emma Smith Overseas Scholarship, administered by the University of Natal, Durban, South Africa. The authors would like to thank Carole Leathwood and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

their underarm hair. Estimates in “Epilator 2700” suggest that between 85% and 90% of women have facial or body hair they would prefer to be rid of (cited in Chapkis, 1986, p. 5), and anecdotal evidence also points to the significance of body hair for many women. For example, Prager (1977, pp. 108–109, cited in Hope, 1982) highlights the perceived importance of being “ultra-smooth” for a first date, while Winter (n.d., 2002) details “the pain of growing up hairy” on her website devoted to ‘hirsute’ women (<http://www.hairtostay.com>, Retrieved December 14, 2002). In a similar vein, Chapkis (1986) offers a personal account of her humiliation at reactions to her facial hair. Morgan (1977, pp. 108–109, and see Hope, 1982), in her chapter entitled “Barbarous Rituals”, includes the following on her list of what “Woman is”: “wanting to shave your legs at twelve and being agonized because your mother won’t let you; being agonized at fourteen because you finally have shaved your legs, and your flesh is on fire... [and] tweezing your eyebrows/bleaching your hair/scraping your armpits...”. This requirement to be hairless is implicit in the (almost) ubiquitous mass media image of the depilated feminine body (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Whelehan, 2000), and highlighted by the public outcry following contraventions of the norm. When, for example, the renowned actress, Julia Roberts, appeared at a film premiere with unshaved underarms, her body hair—rather than her lead role in the film—became the focus of (negative) media attention. Tom Loxley, features editor of the magazine *Maxim*, was one of her many critics: “What is Julia thinking?” he asked. “The only place men want to see hair is on a woman’s head. Under the arms is unacceptable. From hairy armpits it is only a small step to The Planet Of The Apes” (cited in Simpson, 1999, p. 32).

Despite its widespread practice, little research has been conducted on women’s hair removal (Basow, 1991; Hope, 1982; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). While it might seem trivial in comparison to other female bodily practices (such as weight loss and cosmetic surgery), the hairlessness norm “strongly endorse[s] the underlying assumption of any of the body-altering behaviours, namely that a woman’s body is not acceptable the way that it is” (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998, p. 874). Furthermore, not only are hair removal procedures often uncomfortable and even painful (ibid.), but even today they may cause any of a range of side-effects, including:

wrinkling, scarring, discoloration, and growths from X-ray treatments; neuritis (an inflammatory

or degenerative lesion of nerves marked especially by pain, sensory disturbances, and impairment or loss of reflexes) from depilatories containing thallium acetate; skin irritations (reddening, rash, swelling) due to depilatory product characteristics or because the product had been left on the skin too long; capillary punctures, infections, severe pitting or scarring and inflammation from inexperienced electrologists who insert needles too deep or use too strong a current; and scarring and pitting from mail-order home electrolysis devices. (Ferrante, 1988, p. 222)

For women with so-called ‘excess’ body hair growth, the social and psychological consequences can also be profound. Barth, Catalan, Cherry, and Day (1993), for example, found that 68% of the ‘hirsute’ participants in their sample avoided certain social situations due to concerns about their ‘condition’. Another study found that a ‘hirsute’ sample showed significantly higher levels than controls of both ‘state’ (how respondents feel at a given moment in time) and ‘trait’ anxiety (how respondents feel generally) (Rabinowitz, Cohen, & Le Roith, 1983). Ferrante (1988, p. 223) cites another study, which reported that a typical ‘hirsute’ participant “has the habit of covering the lower part of her face with her hands, of staying in semi-darkness, of nervously and hurriedly moving the entire body so that people cannot observe her closely, of wearing high necked blouses, and of avoiding such physical contacts as hugging, caressing or kissing.” In their study of women with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (one symptom of which can be an increased growth of body hair), Kitzinger and Willmott (2002) found that participants’ hair growth contributed significantly to their sense of being “unfeminine and ‘freakish’” (Kitzinger & Willmott, Bearded Ladies and Hairy Monsters section, para. 1), and that participants typically described their own hair in negative terms, as being: “‘upsetting’, ‘distressing’, ‘embarrassing’, ‘unsightly’, ‘dirty’ and ‘distasteful’” (ibid., para. 2).

Even if it were not for the impact of ‘excess’ hair growth on women, the pervasiveness of ‘mundane’ female hair removal points to its social significance; as Hope (1982, p. 93) suggests, “those behaviors which are most taken-for-granted in a culture may well be the most important ones for revealing an understanding of that culture.” And, as Bordo (1997, p. 90) argues, our daily rituals for attending to the body are “a medium of culture.” The symbolism of male facial and head hair removal has not gone unanalysed (Hope, 1982, and see, for example, Leach, 1958), and ethnographers have considered

head hair symbolism a significant topic for study (see, for example, Hershman's (1974) paper on Hindu and Sikh Punjabi practices, as well as attempts by Hallpike (1969), and Leach (1958), to categorise hair symbolism across different cultures). Ferrante (1988, p. 220) argues that such theorists, whatever their short-comings, offer insights into "hair as a structuring device in that hairstyles are concrete representations of larger social arrangements and of ideas and beliefs underlying these arrangements."

One key social arrangement in which hair plays a role is the division of people into the categories 'women' and 'men' (see, for example, Firth, 1973)—a point well illustrated by a recent promotion for the Super-Max 3 women's shaver, which proclaims: "With summer weeks away, the last thing you want is legs like your dad's" (in *Spirit of Superdrug*, 2001, May/June, p. 53). A 1966 advertisement similarly claimed that hair removal would restore a woman's femininity (cited in Ferrante, 1988). Ferrante (1988) suggests that women's distress on producing 'excess' hair may be caused by their sense of having partially bridged the boundaries between femininity and masculinity, body hair being a visible characteristic that symbolically distinguishes women from men. As Ferrante goes on to discuss, however, the biological story is more ambiguous. In the following section, we explore the literature on body hair and gender that takes a broadly biological perspective. This is followed by a discussion of the literature that considers historical and mythological constructions of body hair and gender. The third section explores more recent socio-cultural and feminist analyses thereof. In conclusion, we argue that much of this diverse literature both reflects and constructs the taken-for-granted status of feminine hairlessness. Indeed, the assertion—made in the 1970s—that hair is "one aspect of our bodies [that] has eluded a thorough public reassessment" (Balsdon & Kaluzynsha, 1978/1987, p. 209) remains relevant today. As a normative bodily condition for women, hairlessness is not, we will argue, merely the outcome of one trivial 'beauty' practice, but serves in the construction of the 'appropriately' feminine woman.

## BIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although we tend to assume that "[m]en are hairier than women" (Cooper, 1971, p. 37), patterns of hair growth differ substantially, depending on factors such as age, genes and 'race' (Lunde & Grøttum, 1984). For example, whites, on average, have more body hair than most 'races', the exception being the Ainu of northern Japan (Cooper, 1971; Jarrett, Johnson, & Spearman,

1977). Such differences unsettle the assumption that *all* men are *naturally* more hairy than *all* women. Nevertheless, it has been argued that "the hair—maleness connection" (Cooper, 1971, p. 37) is evident in how the sex hormones help establish the male pattern of body hair growth at puberty. Such a view proves simplistic, however, in light of women's equivalent potential for hair growth to men: not only do women have "hair follicles for a moustache, beard, and body hair" (Ferrante, 1988, p. 223, and see also Shah, 1957), but they produce significant quantities of the so-called 'male' hormone, testosterone, in addition to the 'female' one, oestrogen. Far from being absolute, the different hair growth patterns typically associated with women and men—i.e. the *tendency* for men to grow more facial, chest, back, leg, arm and pubic hair than women (Cooper, 1971)—depend on a balance between these two hormones (Ferrante, 1988).

While increased body hair growth in women can indicate an underlying medical condition, the two are not necessarily linked; only about 1% of women who visit a physician in connection with their body hair are diagnosed with an endocrine disorder (Ferrante, 1988), although it has been estimated that as many as 20% of women might be affected to some extent by Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome—"the symptom complex of *hirsutism*, menstrual dysfunction and obesity associated with the pathologic finding of enlarged cystic ovaries (Dunaif, Givens, Haseltine, & Merriam, 1992, p. xv, emphasis added). Not all affected women will display all the symptoms, seek medical advice, or be diagnosed accurately, however (Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002). More often, women whose hair follicles have a genetically predisposed sensitivity to androgen, start to develop more body hair when the oestrogen/androgen balance shifts, instigating hair growth—an occurrence often triggered by "significant biological events [such as] puberty, pregnancy, menopause, stress" (Ferrante, 1988, p. 224). Furthermore, while in *both* sexes, much of our body hair decreases with old age, facial hair typically increases (Brownmiller, 1984; Ferriman & Gallwey, 1961).

Thus, in biological terms, body hair growth (including facial hair) is not exclusively associated with men. Indeed, what should count as 'abnormal' female hair growth is not clear even medically. Lunde and Grøttum (1984), for example, note that even in women suffering from *no* medical disorder, terminal hair (i.e. longer, stiffer, pigmented hair) may grow in body areas typically only covered by hair in men. The decision by some physicians to define hirsutism as any hair growth that embarrasses the woman in question, suggests that the emphasis on female hairlessness is not simply a reflection of biological

potential or medical fitness, but can be understood in terms of social norms (Ferrante, 1988).

Given the normativity of women's hair removal in contemporary Western culture, even minor (medically insignificant) increases in hair growth may be deemed undesirable. Simpson (1986, p. 349) makes this assumption explicit, asserting in the *British Medical Journal* that, "[c]osmetic treatments should always be advised." Similarly, Shah (1957, p. 1264) suggests that even if a woman rates as "hairy but normal", this does not mean she "may not require treatment for cosmetic... reasons." Shah offers further implicit support for the norm of female hair removal, suggesting that for "hairy but normal" women, the problem is no different in kind from "that of controlling normal hair growth on any other part of the body" (ibid., p. 1264). Within this context of normative female hair removal, a goal for physicians has been to find a means of differentiating between patients whose 'problem' is 'merely' that, *culturally*, they are defined as having too much body hair, and those whose body hair is associated with a *medical* condition (see, for example, Lunde & Grøttum, 1984)—"including diseases of the anterior pituitary, adrenal cortex and ovary, hypothyroidism, generalized skin diseases, menstrual disturbances and infertility" (Ferriman & Galloway, 1961). Finding a suitable medical definition of hirsutism is significantly complicated by 'racial' and familial differences "in the extent and acceptability" (Simpson, 1986, p. 348) of body hair—differences that are evident even within cultures, across different time periods and social contexts (Ferrante, 1988).

The medical goal is objectivity (Simpson, 1986); the tool is often one of several scoring systems (Ferrante, 1988). Initially, the focus was on the face, with a system developed by McCafferty (1923, cited in Ferrante, 1988), which divided patients into seven groups, partially based on hair colour, texture, and distribution. More recent systems examine the whole body, probably in part due to the increasing exposure of the female body in everyday fashions (Ferrante, 1988). For example, Ferriman and Galloway (1961, drawing on Garn, 1951) suggest rating hair growth in 11 different body areas, using a scale of 0 to 4. Zero represents no terminal hair, and the rest of the scale consists of descriptive ratings, such as, Upper Lip: 1 = "A few hairs at outer margin" to 4 = "A moustache extending to mid-line" (Ferriman & Galloway, 1961, p. 1442). Similarly, the four point scales used by Hatch et al. (1981, cited in Ferrante, 1988, p. 234) cover nine body areas, with 1 representing "minimal hirsutism" and 4 "frank virilization." Prabhaker Shah (1957, p. 1256), also aiming to develop a

clinically useful scale, includes ratings of "quality [i.e. thickness], density, and the proportion of the area of the region covered by hair." By multiplying the scores for each of these three factors, Shah (1957, p. 1256) suggests we may arrive at a figure representing "[t]he total quantity of hair for a particular region". Scales such as these have been adopted by researchers as a quantitative measure of hirsutism (see, for example, Barth et al., 1993). Nevertheless, no agreed upon biological boundary has been established between the 'normally' and 'abnormally' hairy woman.

### HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Synnott (1993, p. 391) concurs that physiological differences in women and men's body hair are "minor... differences of degree"; it takes human work to transform these into "major social distinctions of kind." "Men and women", argues Ferrante (1988, p. 220), "guided by social norms, *arrange* head and body hair to reflect larger cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, of sex roles, and of changes in social-sexual status" (emphasis added). Symbolically, body hair certainly has been linked to men and women in very different ways in Western societies (Ferrante, 1988). While male hairiness has been equated traditionally with virility (Cooper, 1971; Firth, 1973; Synnott, 1993), female body hair—paradoxically—has been associated both with female wantonness and with the denial of women's sexuality. A clear example of the latter is the story of St. Wilgefortis (Ferrante, 1988; Lacey, 1982). According to legend, Wilgefortis, daughter to the King of Portugal, had taken a vow of virginity, planning to devote herself to God. Nevertheless, the king decided to have her married. In response, Wilgefortis fasted and prayed, asking God to destroy her beauty so that she might remain a virgin. Her prayers were answered, although scholars suggest probably not by God; Lacey (1982), for example, explicitly links the St. Wilgefortis story with symptoms of anorexia. Wilgefortis developed both a hairy body and beard, as a result of which the marriage proposal was withdrawn, and Wilgefortis's father had her crucified. Claiming that she had been freed from "'worldly care'... [she] prayed that any woman who used her as a medium of prayer should be similarly blessed as her" (Lacey, 1982, p. 1816–1817). Called St. Uncumber in England, she was prayed to by women who wished to 'uncumber' themselves of difficult husbands, "for she was seen as a woman who had successfully resisted both a husband and father under extraordinary pres-

sure” (Lacey, 1982, p. 1817). The St. Wilgefortis story is known by different names in other countries, the general point being that “[a]ll avoided issues of sexuality by fasting, praying to God for help, and eventually *growing hair*” (Ferrante, 1988, p. 225, *emphasis added*).

In contrast, the 16th century physiognomist, Giovanni Battista della Porta, “thought that the thicker the hair the more wanton the woman” (Cooper, 1971, p. 77), a view echoed by the 19th century doctor, Félix-Alexandre Roubaud, who wrote that: “In the cold woman the pilous system is remarkable for the languor of its vitality; the hairs are fair, delicate, scarce and smooth, while in ardent natures there are little curly tufts about the temples” (quoted in Cooper, 1971, p. 78). The French doctor, Auguste-Ambroise Tardieu also believed that “the typical highly erotic woman [is] very hairy” (Cooper, 1971, p. 78), and the Abbé de Brantôme recorded the saying that “hairy women are either rich or wanton” (Cooper, 1971, p. 78). One report, published in 1894, and based on a sample of 2200 Danish prostitutes, claimed that there tended to be an unusually large amount of “pubic hair on many of them, including those reputed to be the most highly sexed” (Cooper, 1971, p. 78, and see also, Ferrante, 1988). Similar results were reported in Italy by Giovanni Moraglia and Cesar Lombroso, who concluded that prostitutes, in comparison with other women, had “very thick body hair and more than usual amounts of hair on the face” (Ferrante, 1988, p. 226). Furthermore, Moraglia argued, the degree of facial hair indicated the strength of a woman’s sexuality (Ferrante, 1988).

Female body hair has also been linked to insanity, as well as to witchcraft, although it is thought likely that the unavailability of depilatories in mental hospitals accounts for the former association (Ferrante, 1988). During the witch-hunts in France it was common for suspects to be shaved prior to their torture, the belief being that hairiness came about through consorting with the devil. Not only did shaving allow interrogators to search for signs of Satan, but it was also thought that the loss of her hair would deprive the woman of strength and protection (Ferrante, 1988). Typically, however, the equation between hair and strength has been associated with men. The Kenyan Masai, for example, are thought to hold that their chief will lose his power if he shaves his face, and there is a Roman saying which translates as: “The hairy man is either strong or lustful” (Cooper, 1971, p. 56). Similarly, orthodox Jews regard the beard “as a sacred token of both strength and virility” (Cooper, 1971, p. 41). Hairiness as a

symbol of masculine strength is also evident in the mythology of various cultures: Cooper (1971, p. 43) asserts that “[t]he fierce, the frightening, or the abnormally strong... have all been hairy. The biblical Samson, the Assyrian Gilgamesh, the Phoenician Melkarth, and the Greek Hercules... are all emanations of the same hairy myth... all were men of prodigious strength, and all are represented in their different cultures in the same basic way, as *powerful, hirsute, and bearded*” (*emphasis added*).

The widespread association between male body hair and fertility/virility (Cooper, 1971; Firth, 1973; Synnott, 1993) may partly be explained by the ability of hair to re-grow, coupled with the appearance of body hair only as sexual maturity is reached. However, given that both women and men grow body hair at puberty, why is the association made between hair and specifically *male* fertility and power? Evolutionary-type explanations have been proposed. Cooper (1971), for example, suggests that the link may date back to very early times, when hair helped to make a man appear fiercer than less hairy rivals, and so helped hairier males to attain sexual dominance. Such explanations fail to engage critically with current social norms and structures, however. It is to these that the next section turns.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL AND FEMINIST ANALYSES

Concerned with the popular link between “aggressive sexuality” and hairiness, Greer (1970, p. 38) argues that men are actively encouraged both to grow their body hair, and “to develop competitive and aggressive instincts.” By contrast, women—“if they do not feel sufficient revulsion for their body hair themselves” (ibid., p. 38)—are directed to remove it, an injunction, asserts Greer, that symbolically reflects cultural expectations of women to be sexually passive in relation to men. “In extreme cases”, Greer (1970, p. 38) suggests, “women shave or pluck the pubic areas, so as to seem even more sexless and infantile.” In other words, rather than accepting that the symbolic link between strength, dominant sexuality, and hairiness arose because these traits *happened* to develop in men, we might analyse how/why such links are culturally maintained, and what the effects are thereof.

The norm for feminine hairlessness may be understood as a requirement for women to conform to a view of themselves as less than adult. Hope (1982) suggests that ‘feminine’, when applied to a lack of body hair, implies a child-like status, as opposed to the adult status afforded men. It is children, Hope



points out, rather than adults of either sex, who typically lack pubic and underarm hair, as well as an increase in hair on other parts of the body. Brownmiller (1984) also equates hairlessness with a childlike state, and a demure and placid conception of femininity. She argues that the plucked eyebrow, rather than being “the feminine equivalent of masculine face design vis-à-vis the moustache and beard” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 141), serves to decrease the intensity of women’s facial expressions, turning what could have been “a bold, forthright stare into a pampered, shy glance that is coyly flirtatious” (ibid., p. 141).

Indeed, femininity itself has been theorised as lacking the active adult qualities attributed to masculinity. Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, understood ‘normal femininity’ to entail passivity; one of the key shifts a girl was supposed to make in order to achieve this state of normalcy was to move “from active to passive mode” (Chodorow, 1994, p. 6). A classic study by Broverman et al. (1970, cited in Hope, 1982) found that clinicians defined women as less than fully adult. The study required one group to “specify the traits of a ‘mature, healthy socially competent adult man’, another to do the same for a ‘mature, healthy socially competent adult woman,’ and the third to describe a ‘mature, healthy socially competent adult (sex unspecified)’” (Hope, 1982, p. 98). The final lists showed similar traits for adult men and adults in general (including traits such as dominance, independence and objectivity), but not for adult women (this list included traits such as submission, lack of independence and subjectivity). Furthermore, for ‘healthy’ adult women, but not for ‘healthy’ adults in general, it was considered normal to be preoccupied with one’s appearance (Freedman, 1986). Given that body hair may be understood both as a signal of (sexual) maturity, and as a symbol of masculine strength, the requirement for women to remove their hair may thus reflect the socio-cultural equation of femininity with a child-like status, passivity and a dependence on men.

A study by Basow and Braman (1998) offers some contemporary support for the above perspective: they found that college students who viewed a white, female model with visible leg and underarm hair, rated her as more aggressive, active, and strong, than did students who viewed the same model without hair. Basow and Braman speculate that this could be due to an association between hairlessness and femininity; since femininity is not stereotypically associated with strength, activity and aggression, it may be that the hairier woman, perceived as ‘unfeminine’, was not thought to fit the traditional femi-

nine mould, and hence, could possess traits not typically associated with femininity. Alternatively, suggest Basow and Braman, it may be that women with body hair are generally thought to be feminist and/or lesbian<sup>3</sup>; again, stereotypical assumptions about these groups could explain the so-called potency findings.

Other commentators have opposed the equation of female hair removal and diminished adult status. Schreiber (1997, p. 33), for example, states: “[h]air is not what determines my quality as a human being. I like the tactile sensation of smooth skin. I don’t equate it with baby-ness, or relinquishing my right to think for myself, or an admission of anything. I like feeling *clean*” (emphasis added). While the link between hairlessness and cleanliness is not new—women and men of ancient Egypt, for example, practiced depilation in the belief that body hair was dirty (Cooper, 1971; Hope, 1982)—in contemporary Western culture, only women’s body hair is routinely treated as cause for disgust, much like other body products (such as blood, faeces, sweat or odours) that are thought to be unclean (Hope, 1982).

The belief that female body hair is dirty is reflected in standards of “good grooming” (Yoder, 1997, p. 30) for women, which have disadvantaged those unwilling or unable to conform. For example, a female YMCA employee was fired “for refusing to remove ‘excessive hair growth’” (quoted in Synnott, 1993, p. 119). When the woman questioned: “‘If God gave it to me, why should I have it off?’” (ibid., p. 119), her employers argued it was a matter of good grooming. Appearing well groomed may be impossible for many women due to a lack of resources. As Bartky (1998, p. 34) points out, “[t]he burdens poor women bear in this regard are not merely psychological, since conformity to the prevailing standards of bodily acceptability is a known factor in economic mobility.” Wolf (1991) asserts that, while ‘beauty’ was once defined as necessary for only a very small number of so-called display professions (such as acting and modelling), it has become increasingly normative for appearance to play a role in decisions to hire and promote women. Details may vary—in another example, a waitress lost her job because a customer complained about her unshaven legs (Synnott, 1993, p. 270)—but the underlying message is the same: what a woman looks like is more important than the work she does. Indeed, it is pertinent to note that, in the case of the YMCA employee discussed above, the complaint about her hair growth was made on her *work* evaluation sheet (Synnott, 1993).

Kubie (1937, p. 391), in his discussion of the human “fantasy... that the body itself... [is a]

mobile dirt factory, exuding filth at every aperture,” claims that it is almost a universal assumption that hairiness is dirtier than smoothness. Similarly, he argues, pigmentation is considered dirty, making dark hair ‘dirtier’ than blond. Furthermore, any bodily aperture is presumed dirty, a consequence of which, argues Kubie (1937, p. 396), “is an unconscious but universal conviction that woman [having an ‘extra aperture’] is dirtier than man.” Kubie did not draw a link between these assumptions and the norm for female hair removal. However, it is disturbing to consider the possibility that a woman’s sense of cleanliness following hair removal might reflect a cultural presumption of female ‘dirtiness’, requiring constant efforts on the part of women to keep the dirt at bay.

Feminists have highlighted the effort entailed in producing an acceptably feminine appearance. The equation between laziness and unattractiveness adds guilt to the burden of failing to conform to ‘beauty’ standards (Bartky, 1998; Freedman, 1986); the process of conforming is made more complex by the assumption that femininity should appear ‘natural’. The result: a cycle of effort to maintain the illusion that femininity is effortless. That women must make both the effort to be hairless and make the state of hairlessness appear ‘natural’ is illustrated by a magazine advertisement for the Phillips “Ladyshave and Care.” Juxtaposing a picture of a woman’s shaved legs with one of a flower, the ad reads: “Nature has many surfaces that are smooth and soft. Just like a woman” (in *Marie Claire*, 1999, p. 119). The irony of likening shaved legs to the naturally hairless surface of a flower is sharpened by our knowledge that the ad’s goal is to market the tools for producing feminine hairlessness.

Chapkis (1986, p. 5) points to the tendency for women to hide “the tools of transformation” from men (and see also Ussher, 1997), in order to maintain the illusion of a ‘naturally’ hairless feminine body. Consider, Chapkis (1986, p. 6) suggests, the absence of “a female counterpart to the reassuring image of father, face lathered and razor in hand, daily reminding his family and himself of his manhood in the morning ritual of shaving.” In contrast, when women write about removing their facial hair, a key theme is secrecy and shame: Brownmiller (1984, p. 129), for example, writes of “furtively” visiting an electrologist, while Freedman (1986) tells of how, when her mother took her for electrolysis as a teenager, she was expected to tell nobody. Freedman (1986, p. 222) argues that the message was clear: “having ‘unwanted’ hair was shameful and removing it was equally shameful.” “Such secrecy”, Freedman (1986,

p. 222) continues, “prevents both women and men from recognising the full burden of feminine beauty.” Skinner (1982), herself having undergone treatment for facial hair, asserts that such secrecy maintains the myth that women are hairless, thereby denying our biological reality (see also Brownmiller, 1984).

Wolf (1991) argues that it is no coincidence that advertising plays on this myth. Rather, it reflects a clever marketing move to maintain women as consumers. Paraphrasing Betty Friedan’s (1982, quoted in Wolf, 1991, p. 66) assertion that the real purpose of keeping women “in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid of state of being housewives” was to get them to buy more things for the house, Wolf (1991, p. 66) argues that women are now “kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring ‘beauties’” so that they will buy more things for the body. Indeed, Hope (1982) suggests that advertisements were instrumental in bringing about the norm for underarm hair removal, informing readers that new dress fashions made it necessary for a woman to have hairless armpits. As Hope (1982, p. 95) concludes: “it is perhaps only too obvious that by publicly defining underarm hair as ‘superfluous,’ ‘unwanted,’ ‘ugly’ and ‘unfashionable,’ the depilatory advertisers were greatly expanding their potential market: few women have continuous growths of dark hair on their face and neck during adulthood, almost all have underarm hair growth.”

Beauty books and magazines picked up the hairlessness theme. In 1941, for example, the beauty editor for *Harper’s Bazar* informed its female student readership: “As to neatness... if we were dean of women, we’d levy a demerit on every hairy leg on campus” (cited in Hope, 1982, p. 97). One author extended this scolding to older women, asserting: “...I find that there are many who still do not consider it important to keep the legs free of hair. Such women should be forced to wear heavy hose. If they are modern enough to demand silk stockings, then they should certainly prepare their legs so that no thick ‘forest’ of hair is visible through the sheer fabric” (cited in Hope, 1982, p. 97). It is unclear exactly how soon such instruction was generally heeded. However, statistics suggest that by 1964, “98% of all American women aged 15–44... removed body hair (70% of those older than 44 did so)” (Hope, 1982, p. 97), and by the 1990s, Basow (1991, p. 93) reports, many white US women were shaving everyday, and most “at least once a week.”

Hope (1982) notes that the development of women’s hair removal as a US norm began at a time when

gender differences were becoming less marked in other arenas. Problematising even the basic assumption that there are only two—*opposite*—sexes, Hope (1982) considers the tendency to see women and men as polar opposites (think, for example, of the widespread assumption that ‘feminine’ traits are necessarily ‘unmasculine’ and vice-versa) to be a cultural belief. Hope (1982, p. 97) argues that the “seemingly trivial practice” of women’s hair removal may correspond to such beliefs, noting that along with the emerging 1920s emphasis on women’s hair removal, came female suffrage, the loss of restrictive female clothing styles emphasising the breasts and waist, and a reduction in the norm for women to behave extremely discreetly in public. These ‘coincidences’ suggest that hair removal may have developed to help maintain, symbolically, an emphasis on gender difference at a time when other gender markers were being challenged.

Wolf (1991) explicitly links an increase in ‘requirements’ for feminine ‘beauty’ with women’s increasing liberation, arguing that female ‘beauty’ images help produce an undercurrent of self-hatred in otherwise powerful women. In this way, the material successes of feminism are countered, Wolf argues, at a psychological level. For example, Wolf (1991, p. 11) suggests, just as women began to explore their sexuality, “a commodified ‘beauty’” began to be linked directly to female sexuality, undermining this tenuous move toward women valuing themselves as sexual beings. Indeed, feminism has been positioned as the enemy of femininity (Synnott, 1987). One doctor, for example, characterised feminist agitators “by ‘their low voices, hirsute bodies, and small breasts’” (Wolf, 1991, p. 68), thereby equating feminism with a loss of femininity. Doctors have also linked female facial hair with women’s “invasion of man’s domain of activities” (quoted in Ferrante, 1988, p. 226), blaming ‘unfeminine’ practices such as smoking, drinking and bobbing of head hair for female facial hair growth.

The hairlessness norm may be understood as resting on heterosexual values (Basow, 1991), such as the assumption that women should make an effort to be appealing to men. Lesbian women, for whom this goal is arguably absent, may not be, Basow (1991) suggests, as strongly subject to the hairlessness norm. Indeed, her survey findings suggest less conformity to the norm amongst lesbian and bisexual women, than among those who identify as heterosexual. Furthermore, Basow’s (1991, p. 94) study of the reasons women give for hair removal suggests that lesbians may be more likely to remove their hair in order to avoid social disapproval, whereas hetero-

sexual women may typically remove hair “for reasons related to femininity and attractiveness”. Dworkin (1989, p. 28) points out that if we define a lesbian as “a woman whose primary ties are to other women” we might assume that lesbians should escape male-defined images of ideal femininity. However, Dworkin asserts, the literature suggests otherwise. In general, although there is a mounting attack by lesbian feminists against patriarchal norms around female body image, lesbians have tended to suffer “all the negative feelings about themselves and their bodies that nonlesbian women suffer” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 33). This is unsurprising given that lesbians are also brought up in a predominantly heteropatriarchal society, where “[t]he socialization process of all women teaches lesbians that privilege and power comes with an acceptable, i.e., male-defined appearance” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 33).

For many feminists (e.g., Chapkis, 1986; Freedman, 1986), one strategy for challenging oppressive definitions of femininity is for women to end the silence surrounding the practices of ‘beauty’. Silence, argues Freedman (1986), works hand in hand with subordination, implying that we accept the rules and definitions of femininity. If we speak out, however, we can transform our apparently private struggles into a public issue; things *are* altered by women’s assertion of the way they perceive the world (Freedman, 1986). Describing how she once dug her fingernails into the arm of a man who taunted her for her moustache, Chapkis (1986, p. 3) suggests that such acts are “too private to be a real solution.” Going beyond private solutions, she argues, requires speaking out. Highlighting the insanity of a society in which female facial hair *matters*, Chapkis (1986, p. 3) suggests that “[i]t shouldn’t matter enough to tell”—it shouldn’t matter enough to make it frightening to tell. And yet, Chapkis (1986, p. 3) asserts, “there can be no truly empowering conclusions until our beauty secrets are shared.”

### CONCLUSION: KEY ISSUES IN CONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE WOMAN

Much of the diverse literature relating to body hair both reflects, and itself constructs, the taken-for-granted status of feminine hairlessness; apart from feminist efforts to disrupt, explicitly, this presumption, the literature routinely fails to question it. As such, the equation between hairlessness and femininity is made apparent to us insidiously—be it through mythology, advertising or medical texts—not as a social construction, but as simply ‘the way things



are'. Hairlessness is the taken-for-granted condition for a woman's body in contemporary Western culture. And yet, as advertisements for the tools of hair removal display, hairlessness typically involves work; a woman's body is not biologically incapable of hair growth, even in areas conventionally associated with 'male' hair. Although commentators may note their personal preference for hairlessness (e.g., Schreiber, 1997), workplace requirements for so-called 'good grooming', and negative social consequences of failing to conform to the hairlessness norm (e.g., Chapkis, 1986), suggest that performing this body-altering work is not simply a matter of choice. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of women have been found to practice hair removal (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). In the absence of such normativity, we might understand hairlessness to be just one of a range of equally weighted options for woman's bodily appearance. This is clearly not the case in contemporary Western culture. As a normative bodily condition for women, hairlessness needs to be understood, we would argue, not as a merely trivial 'beauty' routine, but as a significant feature of the construction of femininity.

The equation of hairiness and masculinity is clear in the literature: the hormones linked to increased body hair growth are designated 'male' (Cooper, 1971); hairiness may be described by medical practitioners as "frank virilization" (Hatch et al., 1981, cited in Ferrante, 1988, p. 234); body hair serves as a symbol of masculine strength (Cooper, 1971); hairy legs rightfully belong only to 'dad' (in *Spirit of Superdrug*, May/June 2001, p. 53). Were contemporary Western culture to assume a less dichotomous understanding of femininity and masculinity, an association between body hair and the masculine might not exclude hair from a definition of femininity. However, with the masculine assumed to be unfeminine (Hope, 1982), feminine hairiness becomes an oxymoron. Thus, hormones, which appear in an intricate balance in both women and men's bodies, are labelled in dichotomous gendered terms; Hatch et al.'s (1982, cited in Ferrante, 1988) medical rating of women's body hair grades it not in its own right, but in relation to men's; hairiness becomes a symbol of masculine strength only, since to be strong is to be masculine, and to be masculine is to be hairy. Constructed as masculine, hair, when visible on a woman's body, represents a symbolic threat to the gendered social order; to be a hairy woman is partially to traverse the boundary between the feminine and the masculine (Ferrante, 1988). Constructed as masculine, hair has no rightful place on the feminine body.

To be hairy and a woman, on this logic, requires an explanation. The available explanations are, as we have seen, overwhelmingly constructed in terms that are widely construed as negative: hairy women are witches, insane (e.g., Ferrante, 1988), oversexed (e.g., Cooper, 1971), lazy (e.g., Synnott, 1993), dirty (e.g., Hope, 1982; Shreiber, 1997), ugly (e.g., Basow & Braman, 1998), not to be married (e.g., Ferrante, 1988; Lacey, 1982), masculine (e.g., Ferrante, 1988; Hope, 1982; Synnott, 1993), possibly lesbian (Basow & Braman, 1998), or—perhaps at best, since blame is arguably removed—suffering from a medical disorder (e.g., Ferriman & Gallwey, 1961; Lunde & Grøttum, 1984; Shah, 1957). These constructions are all at odds with conventional notions of appropriate femininity. To be properly feminine is to avoid the fringes of society, populated by the mad or the maverick; it is to take care over one's appearance, to be attractive to and attracted by men; it is even, given gendered biological labels, to have a hormone balance designated 'female'—too many 'male' hormones, and one's femininity comes into question (see Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002).

To be hairy then, is to risk a range of negative connotations, which serve as sanctions against non-conformity to the hairlessness norm. This norm may, therefore, be understood as a form of social control, not only in the symbolic use of hair (and its absence) to embody the presumption of masculinity and femininity as opposites, but also through the definition of femininity underlying the norm. Hairless femininity is, we would argue, 'tamed' femininity (see Greer, 1970). Not only is the body itself tamed—the messy eruptions of tufts and strands of hair routinely kept under control—but the cultural associations of hair with strength and virility are denied to the feminine woman; she is to be kept in a perpetually pre-adolescent state of relative powerlessness. Indeed, the currently dominant mass media image of the feminine body—"slim [and] depilated" (Whelehan, 2000, p. 149), with "high taut breasts, and smooth unwrinkled... skin" (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998, p. 873)—represents a conflation of ideal femininity and eternal youthfulness (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Ussher, 1997; Wolf, 1991).

The production of an appropriate (youthful) appearance then, becomes a feminine priority; feminine worth is assessed not, for instance, in terms of capability or workplace achievement, but in relation to the extent to which a woman meets the contemporary appearance ideal (see Wolf, 1991). To be appropriately feminine, women must direct their energies predominantly towards achieving this ideal. This emphasis on appearance is reinforced not only

overtly by mass media marketing, but is so taken-for-granted as to make its way into the annals of medicine: for the hairy woman, “[c]osmetic treatments should always be advised” (Simpson, 1986, p. 349). While the medical definition of ‘excess’ hair remains debatable, the social prescriptions are clear—virtually any hair is ‘excess’, should it be visible on a woman’s body (Ferrante, 1988).

Overwhelmingly, the literature on women’s body hair refers either to women as a homogenous category—overlooking differences such as class and ‘race’/ethnicity—or refers specifically to white women. In part, this may reflect the sense that, as Bartky (1998, p. 34) argues, “[t]he larger disciplines that construct a ‘feminine’ body out of a female one are by no means race- or class-specific. . . . The rising young corporate executive may buy her cosmetics at Bergdorf–Goodman, while the counter-server at McDonald’s gets hers at KMart. . . both are aiming at the same general result.” However, Skeggs (1997, p. 99) has shown femininity itself to be “a (middle-) classed sign, a sign of a particular form of womanhood” against which black women and (black and white) working-class women have been defined as deviant. On the one hand this opens up space for resistance. Davis (1995, cited in Skeggs, 1997), for example, shows how African-American women have, as a consequence of exclusionary definitions of femininity, created models of womanhood that radically challenge dominant conceptions of what it means to be feminine. With respect to body hair, Basow’s (1991) study suggests that different social norms may exist for black and white women. Although her sample of black women was too small for extensive statistical analysis, she found that despite an absence of significant differences between her black and white participants with respect to key factors included in the study—age, degree of body hair, growth rate, frequency of shaving, sexual orientation or degree of feminist identification—more blacks than whites reported *not* removing their leg hair. Furthermore, those black women who *did* remove their hair, rated most of Basow’s possible reasons for doing so (generated through interviews with white women) very low—especially the reasons related to social norms. The possible existence of alternative body hair norms for black women highlights the potential for constructing notions of femininity that challenge the normative assumptions discussed in this paper.

On the other hand, however, the classed and racialised false dichotomy between feminine respectability and unfeminine (sexual) vulgarity, may result in women from a range of backgrounds attempting to

meet the normative standards of (white, middle-class) femininity in order “to avoid being positioned by the vulgar, pathological, tasteless and sexual” (Skeggs, 1997, p. 100). Indeed, Skeggs (1997) found that the working-class women in her study invested in (middle-class) femininity in an effort to prove their respectability. No studies have specifically investigated the relationship between class and hair removal. However, Skeggs (1997, p. 100) argues that, “the White female working-class body is often represented as out of control, in excess. . . working-class women have often been associated with the lower unruly order of bodily functions such as that of expulsion and leakage. . . which signified lack of discipline and vulgarity.” Given that the presence of hair on a woman’s body may be taken to represent dirtiness (Kubie, 1937; Schreiber, 1997), poor grooming (Synnott, 1993; Yoder, 1997), and laziness (Freedman, 1986), by retaining her body hair, a woman may risk being negatively positioned by representations of the ‘unruly’, ‘out of control’, ‘vulgar’ working-class woman. While challenge is always possible, it also invokes, as Skeggs (1997, p. 109) points out, possible costs to the individual: “cultural stigmatisation in her local situation; a challenge to all her friends who collude in femininity; a sign of difference; the loss of potential future emotional and economic security.”

To say the feminine bodily ideal is a social construction is thus not to say it lacks power. Rather, the opposite: social constructions have concrete effects on our lives, opening up (and closing down) possibilities for the types of practices that are conceivable and appropriate in our society, as well as for the types of people that we might conceivably and appropriately be (Weedon, 1997). Those practices that are the most pervasive (and the least obviously constructed) are particularly powerful, for they are routinely left unquestioned, taken-for-granted, assumed to be ‘just the way things are’ (Potter, 1996). We have argued that the hairlessness norm is one such taken-for-granted social practice. Strongly normative, and unquestioned across a range of contexts, women’s hair removal symbolically demarcates the feminine from the masculine, reflecting and constructing a ‘tamed’ notion of femininity. By recognising hair removal as a socially constructed norm—rather than assuming it to be the only appropriate condition for the feminine body—we highlight the extent to which femininity is itself a production (e.g. Butler, 1990). Far from being the inevitable outcome of a biological imperative, femininity is produced through a range of practices, including normative body-altering work such as routine hair removal. The very normativity of such practices obscures their

constructive role: because the vast majority of women remove their hair, feminine hairlessness comes to seem 'natural'; to not remove hair is thus not a legitimate option. By questioning the inevitability of the norm for hairlessness, we question not merely a routine 'beauty' practice; we question an insidiously prevalent, socially enforced, and (arguably) unacceptably restrictive construction of the feminine woman.

## ENDNOTES

1. Now at the Department of Sociology, The University of York, York, UK.
2. Now at the Department of Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada.
3. While we recognise that "lesbian", "bisexual", and "heterosexual" are fluid and contested categories, we have used authors' own terms in this review.

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