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To cite this article: Breanne Fahs (2019) Reinvigorating the Traditions of Second-Wave Radical Feminism: Humor and Satire as Political Work, *Women's Reproductive Health*, 6:3, 157-160, DOI: [10.1080/23293691.2019.1619051](https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2019.1619051)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2019.1619051>



Published online: 30 Jul 2019.



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Reinvigorating the Traditions of Second-Wave Radical Feminism: Humor and Satire as Political Work

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ABSTRACT

This is a commentary on Gloria Steinem's (1978) "If Men Could Menstruate," which is reprinted in this issue. Here I situate Steinem's essay in the context of other second-wave feminists (e.g., W.I.T.C.H., Flo Kennedy, Valerie Solanas) who used satire as a weapon against the patriarchy in their fight for radical social change. Although today we recognize that some men do menstruate, Steinem's humorous approach remains relevant today, and I discuss ways to use her work in teaching courses on feminism and social justice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 February 2019
Accepted 2 February 2019

KEYWORDS

menstruation; satire;
feminist humor; second
wave feminism;
Gloria Steinem

As a scholar who writes about second-wave radical feminist activists and their work, I always find it pleasurable to return to Gloria Steinem's (1978) "If Men Could Menstruate" as emblematic of some of the underappreciated writings of second-wave radical feminists. Some of the best, most lasting, and most impactful work of the second wave arose from the brilliant ways that feminists used language, particularly when they were poking fun at political figures, undermining "serious" institutions, and collaborating to expose the workings of patriarchy. Steinem here is working in the (perhaps lost?) great tradition of second-wave feminist humor. This piece links up with many other examples of brilliant, funny, and impactful actions and interventions.

Most notably, I see this work as connected to the actions of the second-wave radical feminist group W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), who flamboyantly and theatrically "hexed" Wall Street, distributed garlic cloves at Max's Kansas City restaurant in New York, and wore all-black clothing to an "anti-bridal fair" event while releasing white mice onto the streets (Schweigert, 2018). (W.I.T.C.H. has returned since Donald Trump's election, and recently organized a mass hexing of Brett Kavanaugh following his appointment to the Supreme Court in 2018; see Stublely, 2018). Steinem's piece also reminds me of the incredible humor of Florynce "Flo" Kennedy, a radical feminist Black lawyer who worked on many famous cases for clients active in the civil rights movement and in the jazz community (e.g., Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, H. Rap Brown, Assata Shakur, the Black Panthers). Typically dressed in a cowboy hat and pink sunglasses, she made it her mission to "make white people nervous" (Kennedy, 2000, p. 57) and had a famous sense of humor that she combined with scathing social critique when discussing race and gender. For example, Kennedy said of

marriage: “... marriage is a crock. Why should you lock yourself in the bathroom just because you have to go three times a day?” (Kennedy, 1976, p. 2). Kennedy’s ferociously funny sense of humor infused her work as an activist (for example, during her anti-Vietnam War activism, she coined the term “Pentagonorrhoea”; Randolph, 2015). In 1974, *People* magazine called her “the biggest, loudest and, indisputably, the rudest mouth on the battleground where feminist activists and radical politics join in mostly common cause” (Martin, 2000). Kennedy masterfully understood that activism would not, and could not, hook people in and make a dramatic impact without the bite of humor and satire.

I sometimes fear that these feminists’ use of satire, humor, and outrageousness as a form of political activism has been falsely framed as trivial, silly, or inconsequential. Steinem shows us with this piece—one of the most lasting, well-known, and frequently reproduced pieces about menstruation and inequity—that the invisible workings of power (*actual power, actual patriarchy*) lie just under the surface and can be exposed via the rather easy work of mere reversal. By this, I mean that Steinem took a simple premise (flip genders around to expose the absurdity of how we currently treat women’s experiences with menstruation) to expose deeply rooted and complex phenomena (and the ways that people cling to these beliefs regardless of their absurdity).

Valerie Solanas—writer and would-be assassin of Andy Warhol—also worked in this tradition. Her famous *SCUM Manifesto*, which has as its premise the total annihilation of all men, works effectively to expose the mistreatment of women by simply employing the art of *reversal*. She turned around many of the assumptions people held at the time (she wrote the first draft in 1967)—that women were weaker, more pathetic, in need of protection, unable to function in society without men, unable to create great art/music/literature/philosophy (and so on)—by arguing these very things about men. She situated men as sex-starved, pathetic, attention-seeking, pandering, insecure “walking abortion[s]” (Solanas, 1996, p. 1). She wrote of men:

The male is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, of love, friendship, affection, or tenderness. He is a completely isolated unit, incapable of rapport with anyone. His responses are entirely visceral, not cerebral; his intelligence is a mere tool in the service of his drives and needs; he is incapable of mental passion, mental interaction; he can’t relate to anything other than his own physical sensations. He is a half-dead, unresponsive lump, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure or happiness. (Solanas, 1996, pp. 1–2)

Solanas went on to push a more pointed reversal narrative by arguing that men have “pussy envy” and that “the male spends his life attempting to complete himself, to become female ... by claiming as his own all female characteristics—emotional strength and independence, forcefulness, dynamism, decisiveness, coolness, objectivity, assertiveness, courage, integrity, vitality, intensity, depth of character, grooviness, etc.—and projecting onto women all male traits—vanity, frivolity, triviality, weakness, etc.” (Solanas, 1996, p. 3).

Part of Solanas’s last impacting is the tension she created between satire and genuine intention to kill men; prior to her shooting Andy Warhol, most readers of *SCUM Manifesto* (self-published and peddled on the streets and in various New York City bookshops) assumed she had written a purely satirical diatribe about the necessity of killing men. After the shooting, many assumed that *SCUM Manifesto* = shooting

Warhol (in essence, that she was *dead* serious). One of the great ironies and tragedies of Solanas's situation is that the shooting created the very conditions for widespread publication of *SCUM Manifesto*, but it came at a cost: The shooting undermined Solanas as a great satirist.

Steinem, however, allows us to revel in the purely satirical character of her piece. We understand it as a political statement—an activist piece—and as a piece of great writing. And like so much humorous political writing, it is wonderfully accessible and can be read across time periods, in many places, and within and outside of academia. Here, Steinem asked us to take seriously women's oppression while also taking pleasure in the humorous way she presented her case. And, of course, much of what she wrote is tinged with truth. We know, for example, that medical conditions that disproportionately impact women are understudied and underfunded (Fisk & Atun, 2009). Conditions such as endometriosis receive little public funding and are rarely discussed with menstruators in their doctor's offices (Rogers et al., 2009). Access to menstrual products remains fraught with political tensions (Bobel, 2018). In so many ways—big and small—men's and women's bodies are treated as *fundamentally* different, with men's bodies as “normal” and women's bodies as inferior, dirty, polluted, and abject (Bordo, 2004; Martin, 2001). (I realized this again recently when shopping for women's underwear and finding out that women's clothing stores have policies that women cannot try on underwear in store, whereas men's clothing stores typically allow this. The reason? Women's genitals “contaminate” clothing, whereas men's do not.)

As with *SCUM Manifesto*, I encourage people to read Steinem's “If Men Could Menstruate” as writing that conveys a kind of truth-telling, even if the tone and style are humorous. I want students to work with and understand the value of feminist wit and comedy as one of many avenues through which we can *make knowledge*. For example, in my course on “Hate Speech, Manifestos, and Radical Writings,” I have an entire section devoted to feminist comedy as radical writing. Recently, students engaged with the work of Ali Wong (“Baby Cobra” and “Hard Knock Wife”) and Hannah Gadsby (“Nanette”) in order to think about whether humor or politically motivated violence are more effective at making political statements. I think feminist scholars have an obligation to take feminist humor seriously and to teach students how to think meaningfully about comedy as more than superficial entertainment. Steinem's work surely goes far beyond the superficial and, in many ways, hits right at the heart of what critical menstruation scholars study: stigma, patriarchy, public policy, activism, and interactions between health and power.

For these reasons, I have for many years assigned to students in my Psychology of Gender course the following prompt for a class assignment based on Steinem's essay:

In October 1978, Gloria Steinem wrote a brief, satirical piece entitled, “If Men Could Menstruate” (now considered a classic). After reading this article, your task is to write a satirical piece on one of the following two subjects: “If Men Could Breastfeed” or “If Men Had Vaginas.” (Remember, too, that some men do breastfeed and some men do have vaginas, BUT in this piece you are being asked to draw upon Steinem's satirical vibe to present a subversive critique modeled after her discursive style!). In this piece, you should expose (using satire) the workings of androcentrism by using humor, wit, and subversion

of gender norms. Use the Steinem piece as a guide, but have fun with this! Be sure to cite readings, lectures, and films in parentheses throughout your piece.

This prompt has resulted in plenty of smart, witty, and humorous responses in which students show their ability to see Steinem's essay as a model for *how to think in interesting feminist ways*. Students invent all sorts of responses that show the deep-seated cultural beliefs that breasts "belong" to men, that women's bodies are texts on which social and political stories are written, that vaginas and penises are treated wholly unevenly, and (most important) humor and outrage can go hand in hand.

Ultimately, I want Steinem's essay to be seen—by health and body scholars, feminist scholars, and beyond—as a piece of the tradition of second-wave verbal sparring. I want us to know and understand the important work of frankly hilarious and outrageous feminists who valued humor as a form of survival, particularly key figures such as Flo Kennedy, Valerie Solanas, and Robin Morgan. Further, I want us to reinvigorate the traditions of radical feminism in how we teach and the sorts of skills we want to cultivate in students. After all, if, as second-wave feminists have argued, women's studies is the *academic wing of an activist movement*, we should take every imaginable opportunity to honor that role and to push beyond the stuffy (and forgettable) styles, tones, and forms of writing that remove us from the work of the *movement*.

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