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*Veni, Vidi, Vici: How Acomoclitism has Captured the Human Imagination*

Acomoclitism – the preference for hairless genitals – has been endorsed for millennia with early evidence of depilation instruments from 3500 BCE. Although the means of hair removal varied between cultures – Native Americans and their caustic lye, ancient Turks and their mixture of arsenic, quicklime, and starch - they served the shared objective to eliminate the presence of “uncivilized” hair. Even today, the goal of Islamic teachings to cleanse the body, soul and the mind is ubiquitous in Muslim cultures. To be purified, one must maintain a state of hygiene through circumcision, clipping nails and shaving to possess *fitra*. The notion of *fitra* – an “innate human nature” - demands the removal of one’s pubic hair before forty days has passed since one’s last depilation. The ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome, as well as Arab countries during the time of the Crusades, preferred the removal of “unclean” pubic hair. Ancient Greek sculptors inspired the common standard of hairlessness for nude females in art: Praxiteles sculpted the oldest known significant female nude sculpture without pubic hair (ca. 350 BCE) (Pitts-Taylor). Michelangelo continued this practice with male nude sculptures as validated by the limited pubic hair on his *David* and the complete omission from his male sculptures in the Sistine Chapel. Conversely, during the same period of ancient Greek history, merkins were invented to *add* to the appearance of one’s pubic hair when removal was a practical way to avoid body lice (Ramsey). This paradox is supported by a consistent history of fluctuating trends on the removal of body hair.

For example, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Turkish public baths included special rooms that were devoted to the practice of pubic hair removal; however, they disappeared by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Pitts-Taylor). The current trend of complete pubic hair removal in the United States can be attributed to three key social factors: pressure from society as a whole, peer pressure, and one's own personal body image.

Unlike a majority of the Caucasian women living in the United States today, Caucasian women who had been removing body hair for hundreds of years were prohibited from doing so in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Queen of France, Catherine de Medici. Similarly, American women resisted shaving their legs and underarms between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pitts-Taylor). In fact, most American women did not remove axillary or leg hair prior to World War I (Hope): it was during the Great War and World War II that advertising campaigns focused on associating body hair with poor hygiene and unattractiveness (Riddell). "The Great Underarm Campaign", spanning from 1915 to 1919, stressed the hygienic aspects, psychological factors, and fashion-based appeals of removing underarm hair. The first axillary hair removal advertisement (featured in the American women's fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* in May 1915) declared "Summer Dress and Modern Dancing combine to make necessary the removal of objectionable hair" (Hope). Towards the end of the campaign, the amount of hair remover advertisements in *Harper's Bazaar* increased from six in 1914 to thirty in 1919, reaching its peak in 1921. It was these advertisers in *Harper's Bazaar* and *McCall's*, another women's magazine, that informed American women on how underarm hair was "superfluous" and "ugly" and how its removal was of utmost importance. These advertisement campaigns received further reinforcements from beauty magazine editors and book authors. In a 1930 beauty book, cosmetic entrepreneur Helena Rubenstein explained how hair removal was "as much a part of the routine of every woman as

washing her hair or manicuring her nails” (Hope). One’s value as a human being came to be identified with one’s attention to rigorous personal hygiene routines (Hope).

The perceived necessity to depilate body hair correlates with its negative connotation which began in the United States during the first mass European immigration during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, hairlessness conveyed a social status of affluence and allowed for social differentiation (Pitts-Taylor). Lewis (1987) hypothesized that the removal of female body hair in terms of “cleanliness” may be based on the concept of achieving the “American Dream” of wealth and success since it requires access to water, products, and time in order to remove body hair. Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) further explained this finding by stating that “the lack of body hair associated with spurious hygiene is a very sure way to keep women continuously shaving and waxing ... and of course buying the necessary products” (Riddell). In 1915 the razor enterprise Wilkinson Sword Company designed a marketing campaign to convince American women that axillary hair was unhygienic and unfeminine. It appears that the Wilkinson Sword Company has successfully influenced 98% of American women because in 2002, *eight billion* dollars was spent on disposable razors (Pitts-Taylor). In 2008, the United Press International published a survey detailing how American women spend more than *ten thousand* dollars on shaving products and more than 58.4 days in their lifetime shaving in order to manage unwanted hair (Riddell).

A burgeoning industry has developed around the practice of removing pubic hair using a variety of methods: plucking and tweezing, shaving, waxing, depilatory creams, etc. Ironically, although women recognize social pressures to remove pubic hair, they are unwilling to identify these issues as reasons that they personally remove their pubic hair. It is reported that there is a relationship between the frequency of pubic hair removal and the pervasiveness of media in the form of fashion magazines and popular television programs. In addition, the American societal

shift towards pubic hairlessness may be influenced by another type of media: pornography (Riddell). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consistent representations of hairless genitals in pornography transformed the way women regarded their own pubic hair (Pitts-Taylor) after the first appearance of a hairless vagina in the magazine *Penthouse* in 1970 (Friedland). A retired pornography actress from the early 1980s admitted that “I posed with a full bush, no one in adult entertainment shaved back then. Now everyone does” (Ramsey). It has also been suggested that the practice of removing pubic hair in adult entertainment has been a way to *avoid* censorship of pornography. Dave Freidman, a theater owner in the 1960s, said that “You didn’t dare show pubic hair. An L.A. vice square cop told me ‘If we see pubic hair then it’s pornographic’” (Ramsey). Just two decades later, the introduction of the thong bikini bathing suit instigated the trend of shaving off a majority – if not all – of one’s pubic hair. This was accommodated by the launch of the Brazilian wax by seven South American sisters – Jocely, Jonice, Joyce, Janea, Jussara, Juracy, and Judseia Padilha – at their waxing salon in New York City. The Brazilian wax was adopted from pornography, marketed to the general public (Pitts-Taylor), and revolutionized the concept of pubic hair removal to encompass not just the bikini line – which was popular in the mid-1960s – but a near-complete removal in the mid-1990s (Riddell).

What was *not* acceptable to be viewed by the general public was pubic hair while wearing a bikini – this is an “extreme fashion faux pas” according to Trager (2006) (Riddell). Bathing suit apparel is the most common reason that is cited in one study for the removal of pubic hair (Smolak). In fact, Cath Ripley wrote an article for the British newspaper *The Observer* in 2002 in which she described pubic hair removal as “the ultimate barometer of how fashionable you really are” (Ramsey). The origins of the association of hair removal to fashion can be traced to 1922, in which the department store chain of Sears began to offer dresses with sheer sleeves. That same

year, products designed to remove hair other than that of the face, neck or arms were offered to the general public for the first time (Hope). Hence, there is a socially constructed view that body hair on women is unfit for public display. According to feminists, femininity is based on an ideological system where female bodies engender gender roles that are determined by these socially constructed views (Smolak). There appears to be the tendency in the United States to view the world in terms of absolutes; hence, men and women are seen as polar opposites: “The body hair of the male denotes strength and manliness. The smooth, fair skin of the female denotes gentility and womanly charm” (Hope).

The 1920s was viewed as a period of “desexualization” in which there was the need to emphasize the distinction between males and females during a time in which barriers between men and women were being torn down (Hope). For example, the Equal Rights Amendment exemplified the feminists’ mission (during the second-wave of feminism in the 1970s) to challenge male predominance and the sexual double standard of powerful men and weak women. Some historians believe that as women cut their hair shorter, gained the right to vote and worked outside of the home, the removal of pubic hair mitigated the fear of men that women were seizing their social power (Pitts-Taylor). In addition, the practice of female body hair removal may be a way in which a culture encourages women to deny full adulthood since the absence of dark hair on places other than the scalp denotes childlike qualities (Hope). In 1974, Larry Flint began to publish the adult magazine *Barely Legal* in which frontal shots of eighteen year-old women with hairless pubic areas inferred that women were “merely children” that men could control (Friedland). University of Ohio’s professor Joseph Slade explains that “Bare pubic areas are most common in videos advertised as featuring young women, because it does infantilize them or make them look pre-pubescent” (Shire). With pubic hair depilation, the genitals are fully exposed and therefore act as

a visual sexual trigger that may appeal to the masculine sexual fantasy of virginal innocence. In Middle Eastern countries, brides are expected to remove all of their body hair – with the exception of their eyebrows and their head hair – on the eve of their wedding day (Hansen). Ironically, pubic hair symbolizes a mature woman's ability to reproduce and it traps the scent of pheromones (Pitts-Taylor). Therefore, it is believed that pubic and axillary hair play a role in social and sexual communication via pheromonal signaling (Ramsey). Even so, this idea of “innocence” is now the preferred appearance of women in the United States (Smolak) - Trager (2006) noticed that younger girls are now removing their pubic hair as soon as it begins to grow (Riddell).

Murmen and Smolak (2009) believe that a feminist identity would change the meaning of depilation and improve a woman's body image since presently women's bodies are culturally defined as objects for men's sexual pleasure. The supposition that women are subjugated by the sexualizing gaze of peers is known as the “objectification theory” of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and McKinley and Hyde (1996) (Smolak). Young women have learned through mass media to become more concerned with observable body attributes rather than non-observable ones. Many women compare their bodies and sexuality to the eroticized female identity seen in dismemberment publicity, which focuses on a single female body part for the purpose of selling a product (Kilbourne 2002) (Greening). Since there is Western cultural support for the sexual objectification of women, American college women expect that if they are compliant with this sexual ideal then they will achieve greater social, romantic, and occupational success. However, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and McKinley and Hyde (1996) hypothesize that women who follow social norms by removing pubic hair usually suffer from *self*-objectification. With minimal body fat, narrow hips, and long legs as the characteristics of the ideal woman, removing pubic hair is one way to achieve the desire look of being “smooth” and to meet the societal definition of

attractiveness. Brumberg (1997) argues that American female bodies are viewed as “projects” to be improved upon. Furthermore, Hope (1982) and Toerien and Wilkinson (2004) add that depilation of body hair reflects a societal discomfort with the adult female body (Smolak). Basow and Braman (1998) and Tiggemann and Lewis (2004) are quick to point out that the removal of body hair is part of the female beauty norm in Westernized women and that to reject this norm is to risk an unfavorable evaluation from fellow peers (Riddell).

Although the issue of self-objectification engages women to a greater extent than men, there is a relationship between self-objectification and body image for certain groups of men under certain circumstances (Daniel and Bridges 2010). It is these men that tend to suffer from muscle dysmorphia and eating disorders (Grieve and Helmick 2008, Wiseman and Moradi 2010). It is possible that the removal of pubic hair on men – known as “manscaping” - is part of a broader body appearance schema. Men may suffer less body shame since body hair on men is deemed as less culturally unacceptable and hence the objectification theory might not apply the same way to men as it does to women (Daniel and Bridges 2010) (Smolak). Nevertheless, male body shaving is gaining popularity: a survey conducted on behalf of the consumer goods company Procter and Gamble found that nearly half of the men surveyed said they shaved their groin area (Harrison). Although men do not share the same issues to the same extent as women – American women actually *prefer* body hair on men (Dixon et al. 2003) (Smolak) – they are still subject to the pressure to change the appearance of their bodies. Men in Ancient India and Egypt employed similar methods of body hair removal as women although the latter specifically removed hair from their arms, legs and pubic regions more often than men (Hansen). Martins et al. (2008) suggests that pubic hair removal demonstrates an inverse relationship to self-consciousness during sexual experiences. Boroughs et al. (2005) conducted a survey that demonstrated that nearly 75% of

American college men remove groin hair usually because of the issue of cleanliness and to make their genitals look larger (Boroughs et al. 2005, Martins et al. 2008) (Smolak). Stephen Perrine, the editor-at-large for *Men's Fitness* magazine, explained that “Whereas decades ago, a guy might not have seen another guy naked in a locker [room] . . . , now it’s much more common. Nonverbally, that communicates a huge amount about physique”. He further adds that “Being fit and well groomed is not something you can out-source or buy or get a bargain on. It’s one real marker of success, and of having control over yourself” (Farnham).

The erotic ideal of hairless genital areas has been reflected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the prevalence of hairless pubic areas in pornography and the number of participants that have had removal procedures performed (Pitts-Taylor). However, studies on preoperative genital shaving (Kovach 1990, Basevi and Lavender 2001, Kaptanoglu and Duruk 2005) have shown that there are increased bacterial infection rates that are related to shaving. The transmission of viruses is possible with micro abrasions, contact dermatitis and skin disruption due to methods of pubic hair removal (Riddell). In addition, an article by a pediatrician has indicated an increased trend for pubic hair removal in younger females without the proper skin care resulting in folliculitis (Ramsey). Although clinicians have reported cases of pubic area rashes, razor or wax burns, and irritated pubic skin more than ever before, this information has been overlooked. Blogger Nicole Williams wrote in 2010 that “pubic hair . . . is a hot spot for germs . . . . Shaving of the pubic hair will greatly reduce the likelihood of these problems” (Riddell). The intermingling of fact and fiction has created a reality for women that combines masculine fantasies – “clean”, innocent women – with feminine nightmares – constant objectification and depilation side-effects. Nevertheless, the removal of pubic hair has a long history, a present popularity, and an unbeknownst future. The catalysts of large-scale social pressure, close-knit peer pressure, and self-

imposed pressure have spurred on the creation and evolution of pubic hair depilation in the past and the present – will they also account for its decline in the future?

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