



Bildhauer, B 2021 Uniting the Nation through Transcending Menstrual Blood: The Period Products Act in Historical Perspective. *Open Library of Humanities*, 7(2): 16, pp. 1–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6339>



Open Library of Humanities

## Uniting the Nation through Transcending Menstrual Blood: The Period Products Act in Historical Perspective

Bettina Bildhauer, University of St Andrews, UK, [bettina.bildhauer@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:bettina.bildhauer@st-andrews.ac.uk)

---

This article situates the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 in the context of historical imaginations both of menstruation and of the nation. It shows that despite the lawmakers' stated intentions, traditional menstrual stigma still underlies the Act and its parliamentary debates. This allows politicians speaking about menstruation to distance themselves from those who menstruate, claiming a position as part of a privileged, authoritative community, and further associating menstruation with being underprivileged. The article shows how deep and pervasive the roots of this stigmatising pattern are, tracing it back to premodern and early modern humoral medicine, specifically to Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' *Secreta mulierum* (*The Secrets of Women*), and to modern fiction directly discussed in the Scottish parliament: the film *I, Daniel Blake* and Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things*. The parliamentarians, moreover, imagine that the bonds created by speaking about menstrual blood extend to the whole nation. They implicitly understand the nation to be united by a shared blood and at the same time as transcending blood, in this case menstrual blood. This tacit conception is part of a historical pattern of similar imaginations of the Scottish nation in relation to blood, as this article will show in a sample of Scottish historical, fictional and political writing and thought from the Middle Ages to today. Menstruation in this way turns out to be central to historical and contemporary understandings of citizenship.

---



## Introduction

This article sets the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 (Scottish Parliament 2021) in the context of historical imaginations both of menstruation and of the nation. The Act is the first in the world to make free access to period products such as tampons, pads and reusable menstrual cups a universal right regardless of gender, socioeconomic or educational status, or any other marker of identity except for residency in the country.<sup>1</sup> This is an innovative, welcome step as it allows cis women and girls, trans men and boys, non-binary and genderqueer people and others who menstruate greater participation in education, work and in the public sphere, unhindered by the cost and inaccessibility of period products. Following campaigns from diverse groups such as Women for Independence, On the Ball, Girlguiding Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and through pioneering schemes by several councils, colleges, schools and foodbanks, the Period Products Act (as it is known for short) was introduced in April 2019 as a member's bill by Monica Lennon, a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) for Central Scotland, and was passed into law in January 2021.<sup>2</sup>

While the Act's pioneering, progressive role has been emphasised in political debates and in the media, this article will show that the Act and the surrounding discussion also continues two deeply ingrained historical patterns of thought. The first imagines menstrual bleeding as a stigmatised bodily secret that needs to be hidden from the public sphere despite the politicians' intention to tackle just this stigma, as they state in the debates of the Act analysed below. The stigma's unintended persistence means that discourse about menstruation is usually restricted to talking about other people's menstruation. Such discussion can create bonds and privilege for the speakers, and allows them to distance themselves from their own embarrassing bodies, as I will go on to show. This conceptual pattern is important because it means that despite the Act's aim to tackle menstrual stigma, its very premise keeps menstrual stigma in place. It is based on the idea that menstruating without products is undignified and that transcending embodiment is positive.<sup>3</sup> I will suggest that this pattern can be found in the public discussions surrounding the bill, specifically in the two-hour debate in the Scottish Parliament on the general principles of the bill (Scottish Parliament, 25 February 2020). As I will show in the first section of my article, 'Shameful Menstruation and Bonding Menstrual Discourse', the parliamentary debate repeatedly reveals the following underlying assumptions about menstruation: (1) that menstruating is a stigma; (2) that menstruators are always the 'others'; and (3) that menstruation particularly affects those in already marginalised groups. In addition, speaking about menstruation (4) creates a privileged, pioneering position for the speakers; and (5) creates bonds between them. I will give examples of these patterns' historical

precursors in premodern and early modern humoral medicine and in modern fiction. Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' medical text *Secreta mulierum* (c. 1300), the most important source for early conceptions of menstruation in the so-called Global North, which also circulated in Scotland, serves as an example of how old and long-lasting these five linked aspects of menstrual discourse are.<sup>4</sup> I will also analyse two works of fiction that were directly mentioned in Scottish parliamentary debates, to illustrate the wide reach of the same five patterns in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture: Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* (1992).

The second, related historical pattern of thought that recurs in the context of the Period Products Act is imagining the nation as a collective body which is united by a shared blood and which, at the same time, transcends blood, specifically menstrual blood (Anidjar, 2014). A nation is often imagined as a large ethnic group of people related by blood and prepared to shed blood to defend the nation against others. In the second section of this article, 'The Nation as United by and Transcending Blood in Scottish Thought', I will show how persistently Scottish historical and political texts have imagined the Scottish nation in relation to blood from the Middle Ages to the recent past. I have selected examples from some of the most important sources for medieval and early modern Scottish history and self-understanding, namely Andrew of Winton's and John of Fordun's medieval chronicles of Scotland, the popular epic poem *Wallace*, the famous 'Canadian Boat Song' and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, as well as directly from nineteenth- and twentieth-century political pamphlets and publications.

In the recent political discussions of period poverty, this conception of the Scottish nation as held together by blood has been extended to menstrual blood, as I shall argue in the third section of this article, 'The Nation as United by and Transcending Menstrual Blood in the Period Products Act Debates'. Menstrual fluid is commonly perceived as blood, though strictly speaking it also contains cells from the uterine lining and vaginal fluids. I will show how traditional imaginations of menstruation and of the nation come together in the parliamentary discussion of the Period Products Act. The parliamentarians describe the community created by publicly speaking about the taboo topic of menstruation as extending to the whole nation. They cast Scotland as freely sharing not menstrual blood itself but discourse about menstruation, as well as freely sharing period products aimed at hiding this blood. In this way, they envisage a nation held together not directly by blood but by products designed for dealing with this blood, and through discourse about them. Understanding this pattern of thought is important because it provides an example of the wider intellectual significance of menstruation in a wide range of seemingly unrelated areas. When we begin to take

menstruation seriously, it turns out to be at the centre of political, historical and social conceptions of citizenship. Despite tackling an issue that might seem marginal to some, the Period Products Act is situated at the heart of Scottish politics with its current campaign to create a nation state independent from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Scotland held an independence referendum in 2014, in which 55.3% of the electorate voted against Scotland becoming an independent country. The ruling Scottish National Party, which has been in government since 2007 and whose major stated political aim is independence, has continued to campaign for a second referendum during the Period Poverty Act's progress through parliamentary committees. I will demonstrate to what extent such redefinitions of the position of Scotland as a nation within the wider United Kingdom are negotiated through menstrual blood in the parliamentary debate.

My method relies primarily on textual analysis, a technique developed in literary studies to examine and describe the nuanced use of language in fictional texts, often to reveal underlying cultural assumptions of which the speakers or writers may or may not have been aware. It can entail attention to linguistic details such as stylistic, rhetorical and discursive strategies used in finely crafted language (e. g., Herman, 2007). I use textual analysis not only on fictional but on medical and political texts and language. I also view the period poverty debates from a long and deep historical perspective. This allows me to observe the unintended continuities of historical stigma and hierarchies between those who menstruate and those who share knowledge about menstruation in the current debates. While I limit myself to texts and works that were produced or circulated in Scotland for the purposes of this article, much of the thought and writing about menstruation is transnational and part of a shared conception of menstruation in the Global North and beyond. My position is that of a cis woman who menstruates and who is resident in Scotland. I am a member of the Menstruation Research Network, one of the signatories in support of the Period Products bill, but we have not been directly involved in campaigning for this law. Despite the stylistic issues this causes, I sometimes use first-person pronouns ('I', 'we') to refer to those of us who menstruate so as to counteract the academic and public tendency to distance ourselves from our own menstruation, which I will discuss in more detail below.

## **I. Shameful Menstruation and Bonding Menstrual Discourse**

This first section shows that menstruation is often treated as a subject of knowledge about which a privileged group can exchange information while distancing itself from the stigmatised experience of menstruation. I will illustrate this first through the two parliamentary debates of the Period Products Act, secondly through medieval and early

modern medical conceptions of menstruation, and finally through depictions of period poverty and menstruation in modern fiction.

### ***1. Shameful menstruation and bonding menstrual discourse in the Period Products Act's parliamentary debates***

**(1) Menstruating as stigma.** While the main intention of the Period Products Act is to alleviate poverty, the lawmakers also stated explicitly that they aimed to tackle menstrual stigma by openly discussing menstruation and by making period products freely available. Many Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) in the debate mentioned the social 'stigma' surrounding menstruation and the emotional consequence of the menstruators' 'embarrassment' and 'shame', as well as the 'secrecy' of menstruators hiding our blood and even our period products.<sup>5</sup> They also frequently referenced the resulting language taboo that makes even speaking about menstruation embarrassing.<sup>6</sup> This was discussed with the aim of overcoming stigma and taboo. Despite this good intention, however, the speakers also amplified and to some extent legitimised menstrual stigma, shame and taboo by dwelling on it in the exalted public forum of parliament without mentioning any positive or neutral perceptions of menstruation.

The language used by MSPs can further compound this stigmatisation. Lennon's first question on this issue to the Scottish Government in August 2016 and the government's response referred to 'feminine hygiene' and 'sanitary products', terms which imply that menstrual fluids are unclean or unhealthy (Scottish Parliament, 2016). Several MSPs in the 25 February 2020 debate still used such language and suggested that menstrual fluids are embarrassing and dirty: for example, when Alex Cole-Hamilton stated that 'not being able to keep oneself clean and to keep one's clothes unsoiled adds a level of degradation to poverty'. This contributes unwittingly to shaming menstruators further. Most MSPs in the debate spoke of 'period poverty', the term strategically used by activists and preferred by the media in 2019 and 2020 (McKay, 2021). As MSP James Dornan pointed out, however, witnesses heard in the committee discussions of the bill sensitised parliamentarians to the fact that even 'period poverty' is still a negative phrase, implying a lack of money. By bringing the two stigmatised phenomena of menstruation and poverty together, the term discursively increases the very stigma it practically tries to alleviate. For this reason, Lennon and several other speakers in the debate consciously moved to the term 'period dignity', aligning menstruation with the positive term 'dignity' and implicitly associating the universal right to access period products with the universal human right to dignity. Even this term, however, still implies that bleeding without products would be undignified. The language taboo surrounding menstruation means that no suitable language to discuss

it exists.<sup>7</sup> Though naming the stigma, shame, embarrassment and taboo in parliament is a positive step, this does not in itself eradicate these phenomena and might even reify them further.

**(2) Menstruators are always the ‘others’.** During the parliamentary debate, with the exception of one single sentence by MSP Alison Johnston, menstruators were always spoken of in the third person (‘she’, ‘they’) as opposed to the first person referring to the speaker (‘I’, ‘we’), or in the second person referring to the addressee (‘you’).<sup>8</sup> MSPs of any gender spoke of menstruators in the third person plural (‘they’), and employed the first person plural (‘we’) primarily to refer to the community of parliamentarians. When MSP Alison Campbell, for example, in the first debate hoped that ‘we are guided by the needs of the women we all seek to help’, the pronoun ‘we’ refers to the politicians who are helping and ‘the women’ are the others who need help. This is despite the fact that MSPs Elaine Smith and Sarah Boyack explicitly acknowledged that the success of this legislation might in part be due to the large proportion of female parliamentarians, most of whom can be assumed to have experienced menstruation.<sup>9</sup> Not a single MSP mentioned their own menstruation, menarche or menopause, though in the final debate Alex Cole-Hamilton found it necessary instead to state that he was not a woman and had no ‘first-hand experience of menstruation’. This means that personal experience of menstruating is denied rather than valued. The fact that the members usually employed the plural (‘we’ and ‘they’) rather than the singular (‘I’ and ‘he/she/they’) emphasises that menstruation is treated not as an individual experience but serves to create groups: those who menstruate on the one hand, and those who speak and legislate about menstruation on the other. Despite their explicit and welcome aim of tackling menstrual stigma, the parliamentarians in this way reinforced it by distancing themselves from it as far as possible.

**(3) Menstruation is associated with those in already marginalised groups.** In the parliamentary debate of the Act, the identification of underprivileged groups who would benefit most from the legislation has the unintended effect of associating menstruation even more strongly with ‘the others’, especially with already marginalised groups, further compounding menstrual stigma. Lennon and several other MSPs were careful to use inclusive language and not to assume that only women and girls menstruate. Lennon included trans and non-binary people in her list of the beneficiaries of the new law. This accurately represents the fact that menstruation does not occur in only one gender and also acknowledges that both poverty and period shame disproportionately affect trans men and boys, non-binary, genderqueer and other gender nonconforming people who have to deal with their menstruating bodies being wrongly read as female (e.g., Frank, 2020). Emphasising this stigma, however, also has the unintended side

effect of further stigmatising both menstruation and trans and non-binary people. This similarly occurred when other underprivileged groups were singled out as menstruating. Johnston spoke of the access needs for period products of 'older women, trans and non-binary people, disabled women, women for whom English is not their first language and refugee women'. Boyack mentioned 'disabled people, those not currently in education or work, individuals living in rural areas, homeless people, refugees, trans and non-binary individuals and those suffering from mental health issues or in coercive relationships' as being most at risk of missing out in period poverty schemes. Young girls were also singled out by several speakers as particularly in need of the new legislation. This reflects the reality of inaccessibility of period products particularly affecting such marginalised groups but it also unintentionally further stigmatises both menstruation and other experiences and situations.

**(4) Menstrual discourse creates a privileged, pioneering position for the speakers.**

Identifying those who menstruate as 'they' and separating them from the 'we' speaking about menstruation in parliament not only stigmatises menstruators, as mentioned, but also creates a privileged position for the members of parliament. When MSPs construct a 'we' that is helping 'them' (menstruators), this establishes a hierarchy whereby the MSPs are in a superior position as lawmakers helping menstruators, with no overlap between these groups. Several MSPs further emphasised the age gap between the 'we' of the speakers and the others that they were trying to help. For instance, MSPs Miles Briggs, Pauline McNeill and Campbell mentioned 'young girls' menstruating, and Graham Simpson described a witness as 'a very impressive young lady'. This rhetoric puts the speakers in an even more authoritative position. Talking about menstruation in this detached way allowed those participating in the debate to distance themselves from it, whether they experience menstruation or not. By extension, it removes speakers from their bodily functions and from embodiment in general, letting them pretend to have a purely disembodied discursive position.

It is not just the use of pronouns but the very fact of speaking about this taboo subject which further augments this privilege, insofar as the parliamentarians pride themselves on being pioneers and taboo-breakers. They repeatedly congratulated themselves on freely talking about periods in the elevated public forum of parliament. MSP Gillian Martin, for example, claimed: 'The very fact that we are talking about period dignity in our national Parliament sends a strong signal that goes a long way towards breaking the stigma and taboo around periods'. While this may well be true and again has the noble aim of normalising periods, it also means that discourse around menstruation gives speakers the social capital of taboo-breaking progressiveness while menstrual blood and the experience of menstruation is still kept hidden.<sup>10</sup>

**(5) Menstrual discourse creates bonds between speakers.** Several speakers made much of the bonds among them that the development of the law and the debate itself fashioned. Lennon emphasised that the introduction of the bill unified parliament: ‘Too often, this Parliament is defined by division, disagreements and discord, but the bill shows what Parliament can do when we put aside our legitimate political differences and work together.’ Campbell made clear with her thanks to ‘all members who have spoken in the debate, largely suspending party politics and, instead, seeking to build on the cross-party consensus’ that not just the introduction of the bill, but the debate itself helped to create a united parliament. Discussing others’ menstruation in this way is not simply about helping others, but also about forging bonds between the politicians. Smith set this in the explicit context of devolving some of the legislative powers from the UK parliament in Westminster to the Scottish parliament, contrasting the ‘different kind of politics in Scotland’ with the ‘traditional adversarial approach of older parliaments such as Westminster’. In relation to the renewed campaign for a second independence referendum, the claim that the devolved Scottish parliament works better than the UK parliament is a strong argument for independence.

**Conclusion.** The political discourse surrounding menstruation, despite its explicit aim to support and destigmatise menstruators, does not manage to break away from all the traditional patterns of argument, especially the way in which people who menstruate are cast as the others and stigmatised, while speaking about others’ menstruation in public fora creates a privileged, united group of taboo-breakers. Though the Period Products Act introduced the ground-breaking legal status of access to period products as a universal human right, it is still based on the stigmatising premise that for menstruation to become dignified, it needs to be managed through products.<sup>11</sup> These patterns have been typical of public discourse about menstruation in Scotland and in the so-called Global North more broadly for centuries, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

## **2. Shameful menstruation and bonding menstrual discourse in a medieval medical text: *The Secrets of Women***

**Introduction.** The hierarchy between those who menstruate and those who share knowledge about menstruation goes back to premodernity, that is, to the period before 1500CE, as I shall illustrate in this section. Premodernity is often cited as a time when menstruation was still positively valued, for example, by MSP Andy Wightman in the Scottish parliament’s final debate of the Period Products bill on 24 November 2020:

In many pre-modern societies, menstruation was celebrated and revered, but world religions and their associated patriarchy have condemned women and girls to a life of taboo, shame and indignity in far too many countries and cultures across the world.

Though people held a variety of positive, neutral and negative attitudes to menstruation at all times of history, including pre- and early modernity (Read, 2013; Hindson, 2009), a dominant scientific and cultural understanding of menstruation in the Global North stigmatised menstrual bleeding. In the medieval Global North, menstrual blood was often considered impure and polluting in the dominant monotheistic religions, in medical thought, and in culture and society more broadly (Bildhauer, 2006; Shail and Howie, 2005). Some medieval texts, such as the medical compendium *Trotula*, written in twelfth-century Southern Italy in Latin and widely copied and translated throughout Europe including the British Isles, are sympathetic to women, but share basic misogynistic assumptions of premodern humoral medicine. The deep embeddedness of this conceptualisation of menstruation in Scotland and the Global North is what makes it so hard to change. Tracing some of its history also illuminates which wider assumptions about gender and about embodiment it supports and is supported by. Menstruation was one of the tenets used to divide humans into two genders, a male subject with bodily integrity who at the same time was able to transcend embodiment, and a leaking menstruating female body (Bildhauer, 2006).

In the following, I shall show that the same five patterns that I observed in the parliamentary debates are already found in premodernity, giving an indication of the pervasiveness of this conceptualisation of menstruation in the Global North. I will use the example of the most widely circulated natural philosophical text of the Middle Ages and early modernity about women's health and reproduction: *Secreta mulierum* (*The Secrets of Women*, cf. Bildhauer, 2006; Green, 2000). It was written in German-speaking lands in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century CE in Latin and falsely ascribed to the famous scientist and philosopher Albert the Great. It is not concerned with medical practice so much as with physiology and theory. As is usual with premodern academic literature, it was read, copied, translated and augmented throughout what we now call Europe by a transnational elite, rather than being read in just one country. At least two medieval manuscripts of the Latin text eventually made their way into Scotland.<sup>12</sup> The text had its closest association with Scotland in the eighteenth century, when an English translation was published in 1725 under the name of John Quincy, a medical writer who received his medical degree from the University of Edinburgh (Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, 1725). This is the version I use here. The University of Edinburgh was a leading institution in medical training and research at the time (e.g., Bullough and

Bullough, 1971), and Quincy was one of many London-based medical practitioners who trained in Scotland (e.g., McConchie, 2019: 94–95). Claiming an association with him gave the English-language *Secrets of Women* added status.

**(1) Menstruating as stigma.** As in the parliamentary debates, in *The Secrets of Women* menstruation is devalued, gendered and associated with stigma. Medieval medical conceptualisations of the body were based on the humoral system, which was developed in Greece from the fifth century BCE, spread through the Old World, including Scotland, and retained its hold until into the nineteenth century CE (Hankinson, 2017; Siraisi, 1990). Within this humoral system, which was based on an idea of the body as essentially a container or vessel of fluids or humours, all women's bodies were allegedly colder than all men's bodies. Because of this, women were believed to be neither able to heat and purify blood to a high standard, nor to control its flow out of the body. The impurities instead collected in menstrual blood and were regularly expelled. Men's bodies by contrast were supposedly able to refine their blood into its purest form, semen. *The Secrets of Women* alleges that this impure menstrual blood polluted men during sexual intercourse, harmed the embryos conceived during menstruation, polluted pregnant and menopausal women who could not purge themselves of this toxin and even poisoned young children in their cradles when a menstruating woman looked at them (Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, 1725: 89–90). In this way, the humoral medical system perpetuated and legitimised menstrual stigma by giving it a scientific rationale. Though medical knowledge has since moved on to find no basis in the idea that menstrual blood is polluting or toxic, menstrual stigma has survived and is still identifiable even in the progressive Period Poverty Act, arguably because it still fits with the devaluation of non-male genders and of embodiment in contemporary societies.

**(2) Menstruators are always the others.** In medieval public discourse about menstruation, be it medical, legal, religious or literary, the speakers often distance themselves from the menstruation of others. *The Secrets of Women* in its introductory material explicitly describes itself as written, promoted, transmitted and translated by men for the benefit of a reader referred to with male pronouns. Its topic is the secrets of others, namely women, whom the text refers to in the grammatical third person ('they'), and menstrual blood is explicitly identified as the heart of these secrets. This is the same distancing device later used by the Scottish parliamentarians to separate the 'we', the in-group who speaks about menstruation, from the 'they', the out-group who experiences menstruation.

**(3) Menstruation is associated with those in already marginalised groups.** Similar to the parliamentary debate, *The Secrets of Women* singles out young girls and older women as especially affected by menstruation. It also alleges that 'poor and needy women' have

particularly infectious menstrual flow because they eat coarser food (Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, 1725, 90). Age and socio-economic status of menstruators in this way can intersect with and worsen the stigmatisation associated with female gender. Some versions of the text also mention Jewish people as another group of menstruators: they relate the anti-Semitic myth that Jewish men menstruate, an association of Jewish men with blood flow that was found across Europe, including the British Isles, in a variety of sources and allegations.<sup>13</sup> The stigma of menstruation here intersects with ethnic and religious marginalisation. The intersections of menstrual stigma with the devaluation not only of women, but also of people of a certain age, socio-economic status, ethnicity and religious identity, even in this early text, show the deep and broad roots that make such stigma difficult to eradicate.

**(4) Speaking about menstruation creates a privileged, pioneering position for the speakers.** *The Secrets of Women* emphasises how discoursing about menstruation puts its writers and recipients into a privileged position of sharing previously taboo knowledge about others, a position comparable to that of the parliamentarians. The *Secrets'* title and introductory sections highlight how revelatory it is, passing knowledge of the otherwise hidden topic of menstruation. This is information about women rather than information known by women. If women are mentioned as having any knowledge at all about their own bodies, they are suspected of using it to hide bodily conditions from men, such as concealing pregnancy or faking virginity. Thus, men are in a highly privileged position as the only people who write about or even know about menstruation.

**(5) Speaking about menstruation creates bonds between the speakers.** *The Secrets of Women* also makes explicit that the discussion of menstruation creates bonds among those discussing it, again similarly to the Scottish parliamentary debates. The speaker claims that he has written the treatise 'at the earnest Desire of my very good Friends' and out of a 'great regard and esteem for my friends' (Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, 1725: iii-iv). This suggests a mutual emotional bond among men enacted through the writing of the text. The male community created by *The Secrets of Women* extends into the past and future, as the text references a rich tradition of exclusively male-authored texts and was subsequently augmented by several generations of recipients adding their learned comments in the margins. Creating a male bond is thus an explicit aim of sharing knowledge about female bodies in this text.

**Conclusion.** The stigmatisation of menstruation creating a superior group of knowledgeable non-menstruators, as observed in *The Secrets of Women*, was typical of humoral medicine. Books on 'women's secrets' and practices of secrecy around menstruation continued in Scotland and across Europe into the nineteenth century (Read, 2013: 182-83), alongside less misogynistic and more nuanced views of

menstruation both in the medieval and the modern period. The power structure of separating male knowledge from female embodiment also persisted, allowing the conception of menstruation as a shameful secret whose sharing can be powerful to extend into the contemporary political debate.

### **3. Shameful menstruation and bonding menstrual discourse in modern fictional examples: *I, Daniel Blake* and Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things***

**Introduction.** The pattern of describing menstruation as a shameful secret of women, the discussion of which can create privilege and bonds for the non-menstruating speakers, was also found outside scientific discourse both in pre- and early modernity and in modernity. In the following section, I will briefly investigate two very different examples of modern fictional imaginations of menstruation that are also complicit in this pattern. I have chosen the film *I, Daniel Blake* and Alisdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* for their direct mention in debates of the Scottish Parliament, though there are of course other powerful and successful Scottish fictional depictions of menstrual shame, such as Janice Galloway's short story 'Blood' (1991). MSP Neil Findlay in the 25 February debate of the Period Products Bill referenced the compassionate depiction of period poverty in the British film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), directed by Ken Loach and written by Paul Laverty, who was born and raised in Scotland and is based in Edinburgh. The film is mentioned multiple times in parliamentary debates, and MSPs took part in screenings and in a trailer for the film (Scottish Parliament, 15 November 2016; Scottish Parliament, 23 November 2016).

While Scottish writer and artist Alisdair Gray's Gothic novel *Poor Things* (1992) was not directly referenced in the Period Poverty Act's debates, its protagonist, Bella Baxter, has become a relatively well-known personification of Scotland. Importantly, she is described at one point in the novel as lacking menstrual shame. Her character in the illustrated novel is depicted as an emblem of Scotland and labelled Bella Caledonia (Latin for 'beautiful Scotland') and on this basis was adopted as a personification of Scotland by the pro-independence 'yes' campaign (Engström, 2018: 191; cf. Stirling, 2008: 87–96; Gray, 1992: 45). Gray's and *Poor Things*' towering political influence is further corroborated by the fact that the novel's famous epigraph, 'Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation' is one of 25 quotations engraved on the Canongate wall of the Scottish Parliament Building (Scottish Parliament n. d.). Furthermore, the Scottish parliament marked Gray's death shortly before the first discussion of the Period Poverty Act with a debate devoted to him, in which several MSPs mention reading and teaching *Poor Things*, and meeting and collaborating with its nationalist author (Scottish Parliament, 20 January 2020). These fictional presentations exemplify

the pervasiveness of this conceptualisation of menstruation as a shameful but bonding secret in broader Scottish and transnational culture.

I shall in the following show how the five components of creating a distance between menstruators as ‘others’ and those discussing menstruation as privileged, which I identified in the parliamentary debates and in *The Secrets of Women*, also persists in *I, Daniel Blake* and in *Poor Things*.

**(1) Menstruating as stigma.** While *I, Daniel Blake*’s strength lies in empathetically showing the suffering of people on state benefits, it nevertheless perpetuates the traditional idea that period poverty and by extension menstruation is shameful. The character Katie Morgan, whom the eponymous male protagonist Daniel Blake befriends, is shown shoplifting a pack of menstrual pads, a pack of razors and a deodorant. The store detective brings her to his manager, who takes personal pity on her and lets her go. Katie’s embarrassment at being caught shoplifting and the manager’s pity are clearly compounded by the fact that these items are intended for dealing with menstrual fluid, body hair and sweat respectively. The film does not so much question if menstrual shame needs to exist, but rather uses it to create sympathy for Katie.

*Poor Things* describes a fantasy of a woman living without menstrual shame. This is the female protagonist Bella Baxter, whose pregnant corpse a Glaswegian male physician finds following her suicide attempt. He transplants the brain of her own unborn foetus into her attractive adult body and manages to revive her. The transplant allows her to avoid menstrual shame, because, as her Frankensteinian creator puts it at one point: ‘Her menstrual cycle was in full flood from the day she opened her eyes, so she has never been taught to feel her body is disgusting or to dread what she desires.’ (Gray, 1992: 69). Leaving aside the highly problematic construction of women’s and children’s sexuality here, and the lack of a logical connection between the absence of shame and an early onset of menstruation and of sexual desire, Bella is marked as a unique exception to the rule of menstrual disgust and stigma.<sup>14</sup>

**(2) Menstruators are always the others.** Both *I, Daniel Blake* and *Poor Things* portray menstruation not from the perspective of those who experience it, but from that of non-menstruating men. *Poor Things* is told by Bella’s husband, and the passage referring to her menstruation is spoken by her male creator, while a final section that revisits the events from Bella’s point of view does not mention menstruation. *I, Daniel Blake* is highly sympathetic to Katie, but the film’s focus is on Daniel Blake, who is depicted as transcending his body and struggling instead with his pride as a man, worker and citizen, while Katie illustrates the physical effects of poverty. Though both the manager and the store detective are sympathetic to Katie, the film puts both men at a distance from such physical needs. It is only Katie who is shown as embodied not only through

needing period products, but also through being hungry, having caring responsibilities for her children and displaying her body as a sex worker, which is often stigmatised as degrading physical labour. Neil Findlay in the parliamentary debate, too, despite his obvious empathy distanced himself from menstruators by using the first/third person dichotomy:

No one who saw *I, Daniel Blake* could fail to be moved by Katie's plight, when she was forced to steal sanitary towels from her local shop because of her poverty. If we claim to be a civilised society, we should not have people resorting to such levels of indignity.

The laudable aim to eradicate poverty was here couched in terms of 'us' as a civilised society, who should not have 'people' in the third person who are having to steal period products.<sup>15</sup>

**(3) Menstruation particularly affects those in already marginalised groups.** The menstruators in *I, Daniel Blake* and *Poor Things* are again underprivileged in terms not just of gender, but also of socio-economic status. Katie's status as dependent on state benefits intersects with her gender to disadvantage her doubly, and the humiliation of stealing gendered menstrual products compounds the humiliation, for example, of having to resort to a food bank. Menstruation is shown again as an experience of people who are already underprivileged, reinforcing the stigma associated both with menstruation and with poverty. Bella in *Poor Things* equally comes from an initially poor working-class background, but she is presented as being able to escape not only menstrual stigma, but also poverty through her unique reanimation and Frankensteinian creation.

**(4) Speaking about menstruation creates a privileged, pioneering position for the speakers.** In *Poor Things*, speaking about Bella, including intimate details such as her menstruation, again creates a superior position for the male protagonists and narrators. Experimenting on Bella gives them a pioneering position in medical science. In the plot of *I, Daniel Blake*, Katie's period poverty is not directly spoken or written about, only shown, though the store manager and detective (and in a wider sense the manufacturer and traders of period products) are clearly in a privileged position of having power over the law-breaker Katie. Outside the fictional world, the film's portrayal of period poverty was rightly seen as ground-breaking and gave the filmmakers political influence and kudos for broaching this subject.

**(5) Speaking about menstruation creates bonds between speakers.** In the plot of *I, Daniel Blake*, the manager and store detective bond over Katie's period poverty when they both help her in different ways, even if not directly through dialogue. *Poor Things* uses a similar layering as *The Secrets of Women* to create a male community of speakers

and writers who are bonding over the menstruating woman whom they describe. The bulk of the novel claims to be a self-published illustrated memoir by Bella's husband, citing letters from Bella. The whole work is framed by an introduction and commentary written in the voice of Gray's authorial persona, who alleges merely to have edited the text of the memoir with the help of its finder, a Glaswegian local historian. The male community of a fictional writer, editor and historian is not as exclusive as that of the *Secreta*, insofar as an addendum to the memoir is also written in Bella's voice, but it nonetheless allows male characters to bond by exchanging knowledge about a woman and her menstruation.

**Conclusion.** Such cultural depictions of menstruation give an insight into the unspoken public assumptions about menstruation that inform the politicians' ideas. I have shown that the pattern of stigmatising menstruators as others, while actually enjoying the privileges and bonding that discussing menstruation can bring, is a widespread conceptualisation that can be observed in premodern, modern and contemporary discourses. I will now analyse how this pattern works to help to construct larger communities of nations.

## ***II. The Nation as United by and Transcending Blood in Scottish Thought***

**Introduction.** Not only the Scottish parliament, but also the Scottish nation as a whole is presented in the Period Products Act's debate as being united by freely shared discourse around menstruation, and the freely accessible period products. This creates an open public sphere with reference to menstruation, but simultaneously excludes visible menstrual blood itself. This pattern stands in a long tradition not only of speaking about menstruation, but also of defining the nation in relation to blood and at the same time as transcending blood.

The nation— including the Scottish nation— is often imagined as a social body (Cheah, 2003; Engström, 2018; Poovey, 1995) that historically had been held together by blood (Anidjar, 2018; Caverero, 2002), united as a large ethnic group by the blood of kinship (originally at least in part maternal menstrual blood), and by sacrificing its own and shedding its enemies' blood in defence of the nation. At the same time, as political theorist Gil Anidjar observes, modern nations are often imagined as transcending blood, relegating the community of tribalism and bloodshed to the past and to the realm of metaphor:

Blood figures that which ... politics transcends, manages, or excludes; what it should, at any rate, exclude: the archaism of blood feuds, the threat of cruel and unusual punishment—or of menstruation—and the pertinacity of kinship, of tribalism, and finally of race.<sup>16</sup>

According to Anidjar, modern politics distances itself from blood in several ways: from bloodshed that is or should be a thing of the past, as well as from the use of physical violence or death as a state-sanctioned penalty, from the racist definition of a nation as based on descent, and from menstruation. Anidjar does not elaborate on the latter, but the Period Products Act illustrates his point.

Anidjar constructs a historical timeline where premodern communities saw themselves as united by blood, and modern communities perceive themselves as transcending blood. In his account, the medieval church provided the model for a community held together by blood. Modern nation states followed this model, but distanced themselves from actual blood and instead defined themselves through a circulation of money, commerce and political discourse: ‘where blood was, there politics shall be’ (Anidjar, 2018: 27). However, he also points out that this timeline is not absolute: ideas of a union through blood are still found in modern imaginations of communities, and distancing from blood is already found in medieval ones. The premodern community of the Church was already configured by theologians as held together by the blood of Christ, but at the same time excluding blood when it prohibited its clergy from contact with any other blood (Bildhauer, 2016: 133–64).

The Scottish nation historically defined and continues to define itself through blood, as well as through transcending it, in three ways: (1) as sharing the same unifying blood in an extended kinship group; (2) as a ‘social body’ held together by the circulation of blood as a metaphor for money; (3) as having achieved its external borders and national sovereignty through bloodshed against its enemies.<sup>17</sup> I will illustrate these three ways of conceptualising the Scottish nation through blood in the following with representative examples from fifteenth- to twentieth-century Scottish politics and culture. The examples have been selected because they are either historically significant and influential (Andrew of Winton, *Wallace*, John of Fordun, ‘Canadian Boat Song’, Adam Smith), or come directly from political pamphlets and publications (Shaw, Erskine, Napier, McIntosh, Begg). The final part of this article will then describe the variations of these patterns in the Period Products Act’s debate. The Act in this way becomes visible as another way of configuring the Scottish nation as united by but also overcoming (menstrual) blood by creating a free circulation of period products, and of discourse about menstruation, which at the same time keeps the public sphere free from menstrual blood.

**(1) Shared (menstrual) blood as creating a unified nation.** Scottish political and literary writers have long and often imagined Scotland as a collective suffused by a shared blood. The well-known anonymous song ‘Canadian Boat Song’ (first attested in 1829), whose chorus is engraved into the Canongate wall of the Scottish Parliament

Building, expresses Scottish national identity in relation to blood from the perspective of Scottish emigrants to Canada:

From the lone sheiling of the misty island  
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas –  
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,  
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides. (Scottish Parliament n.d.)

In this complex image, Scotland is imagined from a distance as the landscape of the Highlands and Islands that poetically merges with the blood, heart and body of the collective ‘we’ of the speakers or singers. Blood somehow overcomes the ‘division’ caused by the mountains and the sea between ‘us’ (presumably Scots in Canada) and the Scottish landscape, and creates a community of blood across the physical distance. The strength ascribed to the blood, presumably that of the community of Scots in Canada, might refer to the strength of yearning for Scotland. This community only has one shared ‘heart’, which moreover, is not *in* the Highlands, but is identical with ‘Highland’: the individual heart is indistinguishable from the landscape as well as from the heart of the collective ‘we’; individual, community and territory share one body and heart held together by blood.

The idea that the Scottish nation and other nations each have the same blood is spelled out more clearly already in Androw of Wyntoun’s *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (Original Chronicle of Scotland), written around 1420. This historical chronicle mentions ‘Scottish blood’ (Scottys blude) and ‘British blood’ (Brettis blud; Wyntoun, 1872–9: Book VII, Ch. 4, l. 407; Book V, Ch. 12, l. 4242). Blind Harry’s Scottish epic poem *Wallace* (c. 1475) also speaks of ‘English blood’ (Sothroun/Sothroune blude, Ingliss blude; Blind Harry, 2003: Book II, l. 10; Book III, l. 386; Book IV, l. 297). Blood is here referenced as something that has a nationality, and similar phrases are still common as a shorthand for national identity, often ethnically defined.

This understanding of a nation as sharing the same blood has historically been linked to thinking of the nation as an extended group of blood relatives. The term ‘blood relatives’ (Latin *consanguinis*) was and still is used for kinship groups across Europe, including Scotland. The idea that a family shares the same blood is attested, for example, in John of Fordun’s *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (Chronicle of the Scottish Nation), written in Scotland around 1365–85, which uses ‘nearness in blood’ (Latin *sanguinis proximitas*) as a shorthand for a close family relationship.<sup>18</sup> This idea of blood kinship goes back to humoral medicine, where the blood that was shared between relatives was often believed to be more precisely menstrual blood from which the foetus was created.<sup>19</sup> Though the connotation of blood relations with menstrual blood has

faded from public consciousness, and science now considers family traits to be shared through DNA rather than blood, the idea of blood as creating family bonds still survives in common metaphors and phrases.

The idea of a 'Scottish blood', a national community based on common descent irrespective of geographical location, also continued, not only obliquely as in the 'Canadian Boat Song', but also, for example, in a pamphlet published by the Scottish National Party in 1964, which mentions such 'Scottish blood' in the context of the Tartan: 'The Tartan is ... the symbol of an ancient, revered and most democratic state or clan family society, linking those of Scottish blood the world over' (McIntosh 1964: 40). Blood is here still understood as holding the nation together like a large kinship group.

**(2) The nation as held together by blood as a metaphor for money.** Blood is also often used as a metaphor to discuss another substance or phenomenon that holds together the nation, such as money. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), the Scottish political and economic thinker Adam Smith used the free circulation of blood as a metaphor for the free circulation of commerce. This is in the context of a disturbance of that circulation through what Smith sees as an overreliance of Britain on trade with its colony America, a trade which he describes as a 'blood-vessel, which has been artificially swelled beyond its natural dimensions' (Smith, 1993: Book IV, Chapter VII, Part III, 353). In the 'body politick' of Great Britain, referred to by the female pronoun 'she', the blood stands for 'industry and commerce' (Smith, 1993: 352). Blood in this way figures as a metaphor for that which should suffuse the nation imagined as a large human body. On the one hand, this perpetuates the idea of the nation being held together by circulating blood like an individual body, on the other it transcends blood, which is here a mere metaphor, while what actually circulates is industry and commerce.

This understanding of the nation state as freely circulating money and trade as if it was blood was hugely influential in modern political thought, and filtered down into public consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Blood is similarly invoked as something that used to hold the nation together through shared kinship, but that should in a modern nation be replaced with money, for example, in early nationalist activist Ruaraidh Erskine's book *Changing Scotland* (1931). Erskine imagines a modern Scotland in which syndics would replace the 'tribal' Celtic communities, and people would be united not by blood, but through their role in circulating wealth:

in the modern Celtic state therefore there would be, not tribes united to one another by blood as formerly, but groups or syndics arising out of industry, but determined

in this case to government ... the grand object of the Celtic State would be to diffuse Money. (Erskine, 1931: 63)

Tribalism based on blood is here relegated to the past, though its structures are mimicked by the regional syndics aimed at circulating wealth. A self-published pamphlet probably dating from 1957 similarly uses blood as a metaphor for money infusing the body politic in the context of Scottish financial contributions to British revenue: 'How long can our modest population afford to make free gifts of that magnitude and at what point will the continual blood-letting lead to the complete collapse of the patient?' (Shaw, 1957 (?): 8). Blood here stands for money, and for something on which the medicalised Scottish national body ('the patient') depends for survival. This both continues to invoke blood as essential to the nation, and replaces it with money.

**(3) The nation as defining its external borders through bloodshed.** Scotland was and is also often imagined as having to shed blood to defend its outer boundaries against the English, and having to shed blood on behalf of the United Kingdom. The *Wallace* poem mentions English blood only in the context of Scots shedding it in battle. An 1896 pamphlet similarly refers to the bloodshed of war necessary on behalf of the feminised nation against England: 'Scotland had up to this time [the beginning of the eighteenth century] retained her independence, although the blood of hundreds of thousands of her sons had been shed in defence of liberty' (Napier, 1896: 5). Scotland is here cast as the victim of English attempts at colonisation or conquest that it historically resisted through sacrificing Scottish men's lives, rather than as an active part of the colonial Empire that profited from slavery. As with the blood of kinship, the blood of battle is here also invoked only to relegate it to the past. James Begg in a nationalist pamphlet similarly mentions bloodshed as a solution to English attempts at treating Scotland as yet another province, but again locating it in the past: 'Our wiser ancestors, we believe, would have shed the last drop of their blood rather than have submitted to such national degradation' (Begg, 1871: 3). Supporters of Scottish separation still simultaneously describe bloodshed as a past means for independence from England, and emphasise that they have achieved the devolution of many powers of the UK parliament to the Scottish parliament without violence (e.g., Crawford, 2014: 12, 11).

### **III. The Nation as United by and Transcending Menstrual Blood in the Period Products Act Debates**

**Introduction.** The Period Products Act's treatment of menstruation can be seen as the latest iteration of this thought pattern defining the nation as both united by blood and as transcending it. As mentioned, menstrual fluid is usually read simply as blood. The

legislation constitutes a public sphere held together by the circulation not of blood, but of the period products that allow the blood to be kept hidden, and of the discourse about menstrual blood. The nation's external borders are particularly contested, and negotiated through the sphere in which period products circulate. The need to redefine the unity and borders of Scotland arises in the context of the United Kingdom's external borders to the EU being renegotiated due to Brexit (in effect from 2020), and of the ongoing campaign championed by the Scottish National Party to secure another independence referendum for Scotland.<sup>21</sup>

**(1) Shared menstrual discourse creates a unified nation.** In the parliamentary debates, the bonds between speakers constructed by talking about menstruation were extended not just to parliament, but to Scotland as a whole. Findlay with some justification (cf. McKay, 2021) made explicit that not only parliament had begun to speak openly about menstruation, but also the media and wider public: 'One thing that the bill has done is break down the barrier of our inability to discuss such serious issues about our health and wellbeing in the media or in public without embarrassment, reticence and discomfort.' The whole country is here imagined as a united 'we' group that partakes in the collective privileging and bonding experience of discussing menstruation without barriers. It is unified not so much by directly sharing blood, but by transcending blood and circulating discourse about menstrual blood instead.

**(2) Shared access to period products creates a unified nation.** Access to period products, not just to the discourse about them, is also believed to bring forth a privileged unified nation. Menstrual products in the parliamentary debates were imagined as suffusing the nation and circulating in the same way as blood or commerce in earlier imaginations of Scotland. A core principle of the bill, referenced many times in the debate, is universal access: the availability of the products to everyone without having to prove financial or other need. While primarily introduced as a more practical and less stigmatising alternative to a voucher scheme or other targeted or means-tested approaches, the principle of universal access has the side effect of the population being treated as a unified whole, not divided by economic status, gender or other categories. Menstruators are not envisaged as individuals, but as a group. The key word used was 'access' to period products, rather than, for example, circulation or distribution, putting the emphasis not on those providing the products, but on the recipients imagined as a group. This access to products was believed to give the users at the same time access to the public sphere, in Johnston's words, 'access to education, work, sport and so much more', thereby creating a more unified public. The access to products was also often specified to be 'free' or 'barrier-free'. While 'free' in this context primarily means without cost, it also carries connotations of freedom and free movement for the collective who can access these products.

The idea of ‘barrier-free’ access mirrors the parliamentarians’ frequent claims that they are breaking down barriers in menstrual discourse, and thus again emphasises not only the emerging united collective, but also the barrier- and taboo-breaking nature of the legislation. The whole nation is imagined as partaking in the privileged position that not only the menstrual discourse, but also the menstrual legislation, creates. Campbell, like several other MSPs, repeatedly referred to the pioneering position of ‘Scotland’, not just of the Scottish parliament and legislature, for example, speaking of ‘Scotland continuing to lead the way internationally’ or ‘the world leader that we all want Scotland to be’. Lennon opened the debate with a metaphor of this ground-breaking community not as a nation, but as a body: ‘This debate is possible only because we are standing tall on the shoulders of previous generations of feminists, trade unionists and equality campaigners’. This envisages the collective that brought about the Act as a pyramid or chain of human bodies merging into a larger cross-generational whole.

**(3) The nation defines its external boundaries through access to period products.** This unified nation in which period products are freely accessible to all was imagined in clear distinction from neighbouring England. The border with England and the relationship to the English is negotiated through access to period products. This is a demarcation transcending the bloodshed ascribed to the past, and instead shifting to menses. National identity is created bloodlessly, but through products designed to hide menstrual blood. The discussion about the exact limits of the ‘universal’ access along the border with England is particularly relevant in the context of the current independence movement in Scottish politics, which tries to create a new nation state of Scotland as separate from the United Kingdom. It also coincides with the renegotiation the rights of EU citizens living in the UK following Brexit. What emerges in the discussions of the Period Products Act are the contested limits of a territorial understanding of nationhood. While the current Scottish National Party’s position is that nationhood is defined through residence in Scotland rather than through descent or lineage (which would be ‘ethnic nationalism’),<sup>22</sup> the negotiations around the Period Products Act showed the uncertainties in this definition. The Act introduced a person’s physical presence in Scotland as an additional criterion that needs to be fulfilled for someone to be allowed access to period products, but that is not in itself enough to secure a right to access.

This discussion centred on the fear of ‘cross-border tampon raids’ which Findlay referenced in the parliamentary debate. This phrase was used in the Scottish press (e.g., Hutcheon, 2020; Murray, 2020; Hall, 2020) and its mention in the debate provoked immediate protest from members of the Scottish Government. The phrase rhetorically exaggerates and ridicules a concern that the Scottish Government had raised in a written submission to the Local Government and Communities Committee, which had

prepared the bill for parliamentary debate (Scottish Parliament, 8 January 2020). The submission referred to the bill's clause that a provision might have to be made against fraud and abuse of the scheme (the pilot scheme indicated that there was little abuse, and the phrase does not appear in the final version of the bill). Relevant in our context is that the government submission suspected exclusively people outside of Scotland of such illegal behaviour, warning against 'people outside Scotland seeking access to the products or people accessing them to sell at a discounted rate outside Scotland' (Scottish Parliament, 8 January 2020, Annex A, Written Submission from the Scottish Government, p. 9, para 46). The people who might sell and buy stolen goods were envisaged as 'outside Scotland', but not people in Scotland. People outside Scotland were thus classed as potential abusers of the scheme, and the Scottish local authorities providing the products as potential victims of crime: Scotland appeared to be under threat from the outside.

The same written submission by the Scottish Government also raised concerns about who exactly the provision of free period products for 'everyone in Scotland', as the text of the proposed bill then had it, might cover: 'it is not clear whether this includes people who are visiting Scotland, for example, or who work in Scotland but live just over the border in England (and vice versa), or who would check on residency and therefore eligibility' (Scottish Parliament, 8 January 2020, Annex A, Written Submission from the Scottish Government, p. 7, para 33). The people singled out for particular scrutiny here are those visiting Scotland and those living in England and working in Scotland, even though the Act does not concern tourist attractions or workplaces. The addition of '(and vice versa)' formally includes people resident in Scotland and working in England, though this is not spelled out. The redundant place marker 'just over the border' emphasises the distinction and at the same time physical proximity between the two nations. Though the government submission did not ascribe a particular national identity to any of the groups mentioned, Lennon did so in her formal response to the submission by using the heading 'eligibility of non-Scots' (Scottish Parliament, 2020: 5). 'Non-Scots' appears to refer to those 'visiting Scotland' as well as those living in England and working in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> This makes national identity dependent on residency: a Scot is someone resident in Scotland, a non-Scot is someone not resident in Scotland. Though Lennon is a member of the Labour party, this is in line with the Scottish National Party's recent so-called 'civic' rather than 'ethnic' definition of Scottish national identity.

The outcome of this discussion was that the amended bill specified that the provision is for those not only resident but also present on Scottish territory: 'the needs of a person who lives in Scotland are to be regarded as all arising while in Scotland'.

Those who are not resident but temporarily present in Scotland are excluded. Those who are resident are regarded as also being present in Scotland. The Period Products Act thus offers a new definition of the 'Scotland' who is granted universal access to menstrual products: people both resident and present in Scotland. At the same time, it demonstrates the importance of the land border to England as a focal point of political uncertainty.

**Conclusion.** On the basis of historical precedents, it has become visible that a crucial effect of the Period Products Act is that it redefines the nation's relationship to blood. A nation, as I have argued, is often imagined as having in the past been united by blood and separated from its outside by bloodshed, and at the same time as in the present transcending blood ties. Blood for this reason comes up at moments of negotiating and redrawing the limits of a nation, as is currently the case in Scotland's independence movement. Scotland is given unity by free, universal access to period products, which keeps menstrual blood invisible in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

This article has situated the Period Products Act in two related imaginaries: that of the nation held together by and transcending blood in historical and political texts; and that of menstruation as something excluded from public view and discourse, which can nonetheless create bonds when the taboo is broken, in medical and fictional texts. Both imaginaries are related in their attempts to keep the public sphere free of actual blood, while at the same creating social bonds by speaking about blood.

On the basis of my historical overview of constructions of the Scottish nation in relation to (menstrual) blood, the free nation-wide circulation of discourse around blood that I observed in the first part of the article in the Act's public debates now becomes legible as another way in which blood itself is kept out of the public sphere and yet retains a crucial role in forming it. Speaking about menstruation creates communal bonds not just among parliamentarians, but also among the general public. This community is created in parliament not directly by blood, but by discourse about products designed for dealing with this blood, so by an absence as much as a presence of blood. As I demonstrated in the second part of this article with reference to the premodern and early modern medical text *The Secrets of Women*, Gray's modern novel *Poor Things*, and Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake*, this pattern is not new in the period poverty debates, but based on a long history of understanding menstruation as stigmatising and best hidden. What is new in the debate is the prominence given to menstrual blood rather than blood more generally in the construction of the nation and of a discursive public sphere.

The fact that the Period Products Act in this way serves other agendas such as nation-building, and perpetuates privilege and menstrual stigma, however, should not distract from the significant progress it signals and achieves in the fight against poverty and against stigmatising those who menstruate. Many countries are currently working towards similar legislation, usually in the hope of achieving greater gender and economic equality. Menstrual stigma has a way of mutating and taking on new forms, despite the best intentions of those trying to tackle it. As long as the inequalities underlying menstrual stigma persist (specifically the devaluation of women and other genders, and the devaluation of the body in favour of discourse, together with intersectional factors such as age, socio-economic status and ethnicity), menstrual stigma will also persist. It is nonetheless important to make its new iterations visible, and to be aware of the unintended side-effects of even the most innovative—and welcome—legislation.

---

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Scotland is not the first country to have passed a law that obliged the government to provide free menstrual products in schools, which first happened in Kenya in 2017 (Basic Education (Amendment) Act, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> As a member of the left-wing Labour party rather than the governing Scottish National Party, Lennon had to introduce this initiative as a member's bill rather than acting on behalf of the government. Lennon first asked a question to the Scottish Government in 2016 and consultation on the draft proposal of the bill took place in late 2017, with several funding streams for period poverty introduced by the Scottish government between 2017 and 2019. The bill was introduced on 23 April 2019 and was researched and debated, primarily in the Local Government and Communities Committee as Lead Committee. It passed stage one (support for the general principles of the bill) on 25 February 2020. It passed stage two (changes to detail) at the Local Government and Communities Committee on 28 October 2020, and stage three (final changes) after a parliamentary debate on 24 November 2020. It became an Act by gaining royal consent on 12 January 2021. A transcript and videorecording of the debate, as well as of the related debates and meetings in chronological order, and further materials are available at <https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/period-products-free-provision-scotland-bill?qry=%22period%20products%22>. For more details and contextualisation of the law, see the introduction to this special collection.
- <sup>3</sup> The persistence of stigma through emphasis on the need for products has been analysed in menstrual advertising in Przybylo and Fahs (2020). Bobel (2019) has also observed a similar persistence of menstrual stigma despite the best intentions in advocating products as a 'technological fix' in the Menstrual Hygiene Management movement in the Global South (e.g., 10, 23).
- <sup>4</sup> On the Global North/ Global South dynamic in menstrual politics, see Bobel (2019).
- <sup>5</sup> Stigma is mentioned by MSPs Alex Cole-Hamilton, Lennon, James Dornan, Aileen Campbell, Alexander Stewart, Neil Findlay, Annabelle Ewing, Annie Wells and Gillian Martin. Embarrassment is cited by MSPs Cole-Hamilton, Graham Simpson, Pauline McNeill and Miles Briggs. Cole-Hamilton states that many menstruators feel the need to hide their period products; Lennon and Campbell in the final debate also make reference to women 'hiding tampons up their sleeves' (Scottish Parliament, 25 November 2020).
- <sup>6</sup> The taboo against speaking about periods is mentioned by MSPs Lennon, Dornan, Briggs, Simpson, McNeill and Neil Findlay. Sarah Boyack talks about 'secrecy'.
- <sup>7</sup> Activist Chella Quint has introduced the term 'period positivity' (Quint n. d.), with 'period pride' also occasionally used to avoid negative associations. Though Quint's Period Positive Pledge acknowledges that periods can be 'good and bad' and 'a pain in the uterus', similar concepts have been criticised as enforcing a celebration of menstruation as another 'tyranny of embodiment'. For a discussion of this, see Bobel (2019: 282–4).
- <sup>8</sup> Gillian Martin also included herself in the category of those of us who need menstrual products, though not directly of those of us who menstruate, when she switched from speaking about 'our society' in the first person and 'women' who need products in the third, to using the first person when talking about women's health ('our health'): 'the gaps in our society where women have limited access to these products, which are fundamental to our health, self-esteem, hygiene and dignity'.
- <sup>9</sup> On the significant role of women in the Scottish Parliament, see Breitenbach (2020); Kenny and Mackay (2020). The use of the collective first person plural 'we' to refer to parliamentarians and the third person plural 'they' to refer to breastfeeding mothers is similar to the parliamentary debates of the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Act 2015, though some MSPs in that debate speak of their own individual breastfeeding experiences in the first person singular ('I') rather than the first person plural ('we') (Scottish Parliament, 23 November 2004).
- <sup>10</sup> This dynamic of situating charities and industries as positively taboo-breaking through promoting products to hide menstrual blood is also typical of some charity activity in the Global South, see Bobel (2019), esp. 195–99; and of the menstrual product industry, see Kissling (2006).
- <sup>11</sup> On this dynamic within the campaigns for period dignity, see again Bobel (2019), 211–42.
- <sup>12</sup> Glasgow, University Library, ms Ferguson 152, which was acquired in 1921; and Glasgow, Hunterian Museum, ms. 414, bequeathed by famous Scottish obstetrician William Hunter in 1783.
- <sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus (1992), 71, based on two sixteenth-century Latin versions from Lyons and Venice. See, e.g., Johnson (1998), Bildhauer (2006), 91–96, 132.

- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Stirling (2008), 68–75, for similar problematic sexual fantasies in Gray’s narrative 1982, *Janine*.
- <sup>15</sup> This pitting of poor menstruators as a spectacle in need of saving by civilised society is again a common pattern in well-intentioned menstrual activism and charity work, see, e.g., Bobel (2019), 118–20, 190–1.
- <sup>16</sup> Anidjar (2014), 84. Repeated verbatim in Anidjar (2018), 25–26.
- <sup>17</sup> The nation is also thought of as a collective body in more concrete ways, as a group of citizens whose physical state can be organised communally as public health issues (Poovey, 1995), which includes blood-related issues such as blood-borne diseases and menstruation.
- <sup>18</sup> Johannis de Fordun (1871), 144; translation in: John of Fordun (1872), Book IV, Ch. 1, 134.
- <sup>19</sup> Humoral medicine had two major models for understanding conception, the Aristotelean and the Galenic: Aristotle in the fourth century BCE argued that a foetus derives all its physical matter from the mother’s menstrual blood, while the male seed contained in the semen provides its non-material form but no material continuity: its shape, soul, spirit and rationality. Galen in the second century CE theorised instead that both mother and father contribute a form of seed, though in practice later texts such as *The Secrets of Women* often conflated the female seed with menstrual blood.
- <sup>20</sup> For other uses of the blood as money metaphor in Britain, including Scotland, see Valenze (2006).
- <sup>21</sup> For a related use of menstrual blood and of access to period products in political fights about the independence of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom, see O’Keeffe (2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Leith (2008). On Scottish national identity more broadly, see McCrone (2020) and Ichijo (2004). On unacknowledged racism in Scotland, see Davidson et al. (2018).
- <sup>23</sup> There is a theoretical possibility that ‘non-Scots’ refers to those living in Scotland and working in England, but the definition of national identity through place of work would be very unusual.

## Acknowledgements

The research for this work was funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Arts and Humanities Research Network Grant 64992. Many thanks to the RSE for their support, and to my wonderful colleagues on this project.

## Competing Interests

The author’s involvement as an editor of this volume has not led to a conflict of interests. The author has been kept entirely separate from the peer review process for this article.

---

## References

- Andrew of Wyntoun** 1872–9 *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, ed. David Laing. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- Anidjar, Gil** 2014 *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/anid16720>
- Anidjar, Gil** 2018 ‘Blood’, in J. M. Bernstein, Adi Ophir, and Ann Laura Stoler (eds). *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*. New York: Fordham University Press, 25–44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xhr6ms.5>
- Basic Education (Amendment) Act 2017**, *Kenya Gazette Supplement*, 97 (Acts No. 17), 23 June 2017. [http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/AmendmentActs/2017/BasicEducation\\_Amendment\\_Act\\_17of2017.pdf](http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/AmendmentActs/2017/BasicEducation_Amendment_Act_17of2017.pdf) [Last accessed 30 November 2021].
- Begg, James** 1871 *A Violation of the Treaty of Union: The Main Origin of our Ecclesiastical Divisions and Other Evils: A Second Address to the People of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter.
- Bildhauer, Bettina** 2006 *Medieval Blood*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

- Blind, Harry** 2003 *The Wallace*, ed. Anne Mc Kim. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Bobel, Chris** 2019 *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89414-0>
- Breitenbach, Esther** 2020 'Scottish women and political representation in the UK and Scottish parliaments (1918–2020)', *Open Library of Humanities*, 6 (2): 14, 1–38. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.579>
- Bullough, Vern and Bonnie Bullough** 1971 'The causes of the Scottish Medical Renaissance of the Eighteenth Century', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 45: 1 (Jan–Feb), 13–28.
- Caverero, Adriana** 2002 [1995] *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy and the Question of Gender*, trans. from Italian by Robert de Lucca and Deanna Shemek. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11022>
- Cheah, Pheng** 2003 *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/chea13018>
- Crawford, Robert** 2014 *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314–2014*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Davidson, Neil, Minna Liinpää, Maureen McBride and Satnam Virdee** (eds) 2018 *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Luath.
- Engström, Robin** 2018 'The body politic of independent Scotland: National personification and metaphor as ideological visions', *Metaphor and the Social World*, 8: 2 (October), 184–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/msw.17009.eng>
- Erskine, Ruaraidh** 1931 *Changing Scotland*. Montrose: Review.
- Fahs, Breanne** 2016 *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Frank, Sarah E** 2020 'Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics', *Sociological Inquiry*, 90, 371–404. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12355>
- Galloway, Janice** 1991 'Blood', in Galloway, *Blood*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1–9.
- Gray, Alasdair** 1992 *Poor Things*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Green, Monica H** 2000 'From "Diseases of Women" to "Secrets of Women": The Transformation of Gynecological Literature in the Late Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, 5–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-30-1-5>
- Hall, Alice** 2020 'How Scotland led the world to make period products free for women', *The Telegraph*, 25 November. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/scotland-led-world-make-period-products-free-women/> [Last accessed 30 November 2021]
- Hankinson, R J** 2017 'Humours and Humoral Theory', in *The Routledge History of Disease*, ed. Mark Jackson. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315543420-2>
- Herman, David** (ed.) 2007 *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521856965>

- Hindson, Bethan** 2009 'Attitudes towards menstruation and menstrual blood in Elizabethan England', *Journal of Social History*, 43:1, 89–114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.0.0246>
- Hutcheon, Paul** 2020 'SNP criticised over "tampon raid" fear in opposing period poverty bill', *Daily Record*, 11 February. <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/snp-government-criticised-over-tampon-21469707> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].
- Ichijo, Atsuko** 2004 *Scottish Nationalism and the Idea of Europe: Concepts of Europe and the Nation*. London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203337806>
- Johannis de Fordun** 1871 *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed. William F. Skene. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- John of Fordun** 1872 *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, trans. from Latin by Felix J. H. Skene, ed. by William F. Skene, 2 vols, The Historians of Scotland IV. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- Johnson, Willis** 1998 'The myth of Jewish male menses', *Journal of Medieval History* 24, 273–295. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-4181\(98\)00009-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-4181(98)00009-8)
- Keating, Michael** 2020 *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198825098.001.0001>
- Kenny, Meryl and Fiona Mackay** 2020 'Women, gender, and politics in Scotland', in Keating 2020, n. p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198825098.013.4>
- Kissling, Elizabeth Arveda** 2006 *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/e673552007-001>
- Leith, Murray Stewart** 2008 'Scottish National Party representations of Scottishness and Scotland', *Politics* 28: 2, 83–92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2008.00315.x>
- McConchie, Roderick** 2019 *Discovery in Haste: English Medical Dictionaries and Lexicographers 1547 to 1796*. Berlin: de Gruyter. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110639186>
- McCrone, David** 2020 'Nationality and National Identity', in Keating 2020, n. p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198825098.013.2>
- McIntosh, Sandy** (pseudonym). 1964. *England's Vassal State: Pungent Exposure of Scotland's Vassalage*. Glasgow: Scottish National Party.
- McKay, Fiona** 2021 'Scotland and Period Poverty: A case study of media and political agenda setting', in *Routledge Companion to Political Journalism*, ed. by James Morrison, Jen Birks and Mike Berry. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429284571-38>
- Murray, Ian** 2020 'What SNP Government's fear of cross-border "tampon raids" says about independence', *Edinburgh News*, 13 February. <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/what-snp-governments-fear-cross-border-tampon-raids-says-about-independence-ian-murray-1556299> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].
- Napier, Theodore** 1896 *Scotland's Relationship to England Past and Present: A Plea for the National Rights of Scotland*. Edinburgh: 25 Merchiston Park.
- O'Keeffe, Theresa** 2006 'Menstrual blood as a weapon of resistance', *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, 8: 4, 535–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740600945123>

**Poovey, Mary** 1995 *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Przybylo, Ela and Breanne Fahs** 2020 Empowered Bleeders and Cranky Menstruators: Menstrual Positivity and the “Liberated” Era of New Menstrual Product Advertisements, in Bobel, Chris et al. 2021 *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. 375–394. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7\\_30](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_30)

**Pseudo-Albertus Magnus** 1725 *De secretis mulierum: or, the mysteries of human generation fully revealed*, trans. John Quincy. London: E. Curl.

**Pseudo-Albertus Magnus** 1992 *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries*, trans. Helen Rodnite Lemay. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**Quint, Chella** n. d. ‘Period Positive Pledge’, <https://periodpositive.com> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Read, Sara** 2013 *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137355034>

**Scottish Parliament** 23 November 2004 Meeting of the Parliament Official Report. <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=4531> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 15 November 2016 Meeting of the Parliament Official Report. <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=10626> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 23 November 2016 Meeting of the Parliament Official Report. <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=10642> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 8 January 2020 Local Government and Communities Committee. Papers for 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting (Session 5) (LGC/S5/20/1/A). [https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S5\\_Local\\_Gov/20200108PUBLICpapers.pdf](https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S5_Local_Gov/20200108PUBLICpapers.pdf) [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 20 January 2020 Meeting of the Parliament Official Report. <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=12485> [Last accessed 30 November 2021]

**Scottish Parliament** 25 February 2020 Meeting of the Parliament Official Report. <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=12536> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 25 November 2020 Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid) Official Report. <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12966> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** 2021 Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2021/1/contents> [Last accessed 30 November 2021].

**Scottish Parliament** n. d. Canongate Wall Quotations, <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/visitandlearn/21013.aspx> [Last accessed 30 November 2021]

**Shail, Andrew and Gillian Howie** (eds) 2005 *Menstruation: A Cultural History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Shaw, Arthur** 1957 (?) *How London Spends Your Money*. Edinburgh: self-published.

**Siraisi, Nancy** 1990 *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226761312.001.0001>

**Smith, Adam** 1993 [1776] *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations: A Selected Edition*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Stirling, Kirsten** 2008 *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401206662>

**Valenze, Deborah** 2006 *The Social Life of Money in the English Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

