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Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety

ALAN DUNDES

One of the most disheartening aspects of folkloristics, the scientific study of folklore, is the persistent lack of analysis or interpretation. It is not just popularizers who churn out anthology after anthology of “texts only” without attention to context or possible meaning(s) of such texts, but the academic folklorists themselves, who despite pretentious definitional debates about the wisdom of continuing to use the term “folklore” or exaggerated claims of the importance of reporting folklore as “performed”—even to the point of calling this approach “performance theory”—what exactly is the “theory” supposedly underlying “performance theory”???—do little more than report folkloristic texts totally devoid of the slightest hint of thoughtful commentary. Yes, certainly the legitimate concern for performance has resulted in more accurate reporting of texts, but it is nonetheless hard to find instances where such increased accuracy has yielded actual insights with respect to the meaning or significance of a folkloristic event.

I would like to illustrate this disappointing facet of folkloristics by examining one single traditional ritual found in American folklore. (It has also been reported in Newfoundland [Hiscock 1996].) After surveying what little is known about the ritual, I will propose an interpretation of it which I believe will make perfectly clear what the ritual is all about.

In 1976, Mary and Herbert Knapp, in their anthology of American children’s folklore, devote a whole paragraph in a general discussion of what they term “Scaries” to the following item:

“One child told us she was always too chicken to summon Mary Worth. She said, ‘I knew I’d really be scared.’ And really being scared is no fun.

A child summons Mary Worth, alias Bloody Mary, alias Mary

Jane, by going into the bathroom alone at night, turning out the lights, staring into the mirror, and repeating "Mary Worth," softly but distinctly, forty-seven times. She comes at you out of the mirror, with a knife in her hand and a wart on her nose. Never when we read Mary Worth comic strips did we dream that the respectable busybody was moonlighting as a mirror witch!" (1976:242).

Here we have most of the primary elements of this ritual: a child, almost always a girl, goes into a bathroom at night (or at school in the dark) and repeats the name Mary in some form which supposedly results in a frightening creature named Mary emerging from out of the bathroom mirror.

Folklorist Simon J. Bronner in his 1988 *American Children's Folklore* included an entire page of discussion of what he called "Mary Worth Rituals." He describes the ritual as "a girls' tradition common in elementary school" which invokes "atmosphere of the seance" (1988:168). Whoever the "Mary" figure is, Bronner indicates that the participants are "Huddled typically in a bathroom with the lights turned off" and that they "have to really 'believe' in her, or else she won't appear" (1988:168). In his notes to his texts, Bronner remarks that "Bloody Mary" is yet another name for variations of 'Mary Worth' rituals" (1988:266, n.24). One of the five texts Bronner reports—collected from a male informant from Middletown, Pennsylvania, in 1984—is as follows:

Bloody Mary was a character who was murdered in the woods behind Pine Road Elementary School. To call her ghost, girls go in the bathroom and prick their fingers with a pin to draw a drop of blood. Then they press the two droplets of blood together and say "We believe in Bloody Mary" ten times with their eyes shut. Then upon opening their eyes they look into the bathroom mirror. The image of Bloody Mary's face would appear in the mirror. She was said to have been a young girl with long hair, very pale skin, and blood running down her face from a large cut in her forehead (1988:168-169).

Bronner offers no more in the way of interpretation than did the Knapps, but his text includes an element not found in the Knapps' brief report, namely, the presence of blood. It is precisely this element which turns out to be critical with respect to interpreting the ritual. Though Bronner provides little insight into the Bloody Mary custom he does at least refer in his notes to the only in-depth study of it, an essay by folklorist Janet Langlois entitled "'Mary Whales, I Believe in You': Myth and Ritual Subdued" which had appeared in *Indiana Folklore* in 1978. Folklorist Linda

Dégh evidently thought enough of Langlois's essay to reprint it in her edited anthology *Indiana Folklore: A Reader* in 1980.

Langlois bases her discussion of "Bloody Mary" upon some seventeen excellent texts, twelve of which were collected in Indianapolis in 1973. (The other texts came from the Indiana University folklore archives.) For some reason, she insisted upon calling the custom a "game" although she was well aware of the fact that the ritual was often connected with a "legend." Indeed, Langlois's principal concern in her essay was to seek to illuminate the long-standing and vexing question of the relationship between "myth" and "ritual". (For references to myth-ritual theory, see Segal, 1980, Grimes 1985, and Ackerman 1991.)

The basic issue in this age-old chicken-and-egg debate is whether ritual derives from myth or whether myth stems from initial ritual. Neither possibility is really satisfactory in terms of explaining ultimate origins. If myth comes from ritual, where did the ritual come from? And if ritual derives from myth, where did the original myth come from? In any case, Langlois interviewed no fewer than eighty students at Holy Angels, an experimental Catholic elementary school for African-American children in northwest Indianapolis. Of these eighty informants, approximately twenty knew the "Mary Whales thing" and about half of that number had actively participated in the "legend/game" (1978:6). Not surprisingly, Langlois reluctantly concluded that "neither the legend nor the game is primary for this particular group" and that "it is not possible to establish in which direction the transformation goes" (1978:9). Although Langlois may have failed in her primary goal of trying to resolve or at least illuminate the myth-ritual controversy, she did make a valuable observation about the ritual. It has to do with the importance of the mirror. Speaking of the function of the mirror, Langlois remarks that "it literally reflects the identification of the participants with the revenant. In normal situations, when any of the girls looks in the mirror, she sees herself; in reports of the game-playing, she sees Mary Whales, or at least, expects to. In a sense, then Mary Whales becomes the girl's own reflection" (1978). I believe Langlois is absolutely correct in this observation, but brilliant though it may be, it does not really explain the underlying meaning of the ritual.

Folklorist Jan Brunvand was sufficiently impressed by Langlois's comment that he referred to it in his own three-page discussion of "I Believe in Mary Worth" to quip that it "should give Freudians something to chew on" (1986:81). However, unfortunately, Brunvand did not elaborate further. In fact, he throws up his hands in despair. "...So what does it all have to do with the kindly Mary Worth of the comics? Nothing, as far as I can tell...so

the precise origin of "I Believe in Mary Worth" cannot be determined" (1986:82).

It is clear that folklorists Bronner, Langlois and Brunvand certainly know about the "Bloody Mary" ritual, but it is equally obvious that its basic underlying significance, if any, seems to have eluded them. And this is exactly what I meant by my opening complaint that there is a persistent and consistent lack of analysis or interpretation in folkloristics. Moreover, if folklorists themselves are unwilling or unable to interpret folklore, they can scarcely blame others for holding the discipline in such low intellectual repute.

What exactly does the reflection of Bloody Mary mean? Or is it essentially **meaningless**? And why does the ritual almost invariably take place **in a bathroom**? What is the significance, if any, of the names: Mary Worth, Mary Whales, Bloody Mary? No analysis of an item of folklore can be deemed complete unless it can explain **all** of the traits or details of that item.

There are important clues in the texts reported by Langlois, clues which have thus far not been adequately explored by folklorists. For example, more than half of the texts she elicited herself (as opposed to those on file in the Indiana University folklore archives) were combined with the "Vanishing Hitchhiker". So one additional question to be asked is why is the "Bloody Mary" ritual attached to this particular legend? Let us consider the first text presented by Langlois. It was collected from twelve-year old Anna L. in February of 1973:

Q. Have you heard about a dead girl called Mary Whales or Mary Worth?

A. Yes, I've heard about Mary Whales. Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know much about her. All I know is that she stood on [the] corner when it rained and she had a long white dress on. and when someone stopped to give her a ride she would disappear in the back seat and just leave a wet spot with blood on the seat, and she wouldn't be in [the] car anymore (1978:13).

What is noteworthy about this abbreviated legend is the reference to a "wet spot with blood" in the backseat of the car. There are numerous recorded versions of this popular legend (Motif E 332.3.3.1, The Vanishing Hitchhiker; for more than one hundred references, see Bennett and Smith 1993:338). But in those versions where an object is left behind as "proof" of the truth value of the legend, that object can be "a purse, a suitcase, a blanket, a sweater, a scarf or some other item of clothing, or simply footprints or water spots in the car" (Brunvand 1981:27). There is no men-

tion of blood at all. Wet spots or footprints in the car are “often mentioned in connection with American vanishing hitchhikers,” notes Brunvand, the acknowledged authority on this and other modern legends, but “Why, or how, a spirit would get wet feet is not explained, though” (Brunvand 1993:251). The wetness motif is explained by neither the folk nor folklorist Brunvand.

By now the astute reader may already suspect what the possible significance of the “Bloody Mary” ritual might be. But for those who may still be in the dark, let me present a small but representative sampling of 10 texts from more than seventy-five reports, collected in 1996 unless otherwise noted, from my undergraduate folklore students at the University of California, Berkeley.¹

Text 1:

Bloody Mary

During recess at school, you go into the girls' bathroom. Your friends wait outside because only [one] person is allowed in at a time. One girl stands at the door to turn out the lights once you're positioned in front of the mirror. Once the lights are out, you close your eyes and turn around three times. Then you open them and stare straight into the mirror and chant, "Bloody Mary, show your fright. Show your fright this starry night." You have to chant slowly so she has time to come from the spirit world. Then you wait to see her face. Once you see her, you have to run out of the bathroom where your friends are waiting. If you've sinned or done anything evil in your life then you will have three scratches of blood on your cheek.

(Learned in the third grade in 1983 at Apollo Elementary School in Bossier City, Louisiana by the female collector, age 20)

Text 2:

A bunch of us young girls went into the bathroom to call Bloody Mary. We turned off the lights, turned around 5 times chanting "Bloody Mary" over and over, then stopped quickly and looked in the mirror. We were supposed to look for a headless female in a white gown with a bloody knife in one hand and her head in the other.

(Learned in California by a female, age 20, when she was between the ages of ten and twelve)

Text 3:

A group of girls usually go into a dark room where a mirror is present. Then everyone starts chanting "Bloody Mary" until it appears. A woman's bloody face will appear on the mirror.

(Learned by a nineteen-year-old Mexican-American female in Riverbank, California, when she was in the sixth grade [circa 1989])

Text 4:

Okay, you go into the bathroom and you turn out the lights and you turn around three times and you say "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary" and then Bloody Mary's head is supposed to appear on the mirror.

(Learned by a sixteen-year-old Chinese-American female as a sixth-grader when she attended slumber parties in Palos Verdes in southern California)

Text 5:

If you go into a bathroom mirror every night for three nights, and you say "Bloody Mary" three times, then the first night a spot of blood appears and the second night, it's a little bigger, and the third night, it's supposed to be a woman's face.

(Collected in 1994 from a 22-year-old Irish-American female who learned it at a slumber party in Los Altos, California, in 1979, when she was a second grader)

Text 6:

To make Bloody Mary appear, you look into a mirror at midnight and chant "Bloody Mary" three times. You are then supposed to see your own bloodied face in the reflection.

(Collected from a 23-year-old female who learned it in sixth grade in Fairfield, California)

Text 7:

When I was in grade school (about fifth grade), I would go into the girls' bathroom at St. Thomas Aquinas school [in Monterey Park, California] with two or three of my friends to see Bloody Mary. We turned off the lights, approached the four-foot-wide mirror, and sprinkled water on the mirror. After the sprinkling, we chanted, "Bloody Mary" three times in hopes of seeing her in the mirror. Then we flushed all of the toilets in the stalls and ran out of the bathroom. Bloody Mary's mark would appear later on in the day through bleeding. For example, after I had completed the Bloody Mary ritual, I went to play frisbee during recess. In trying to catch the frisbee, I jammed my index finger, causing it to bleed. All of the girls who had done the Bloody Mary ritual with me attributed the bleeding to Bloody Mary.

(Collected from a female, age 20)

Text 8:

It can be any time of day, but you usually do it at night. You go into the bathroom—the hot water has to be on—you turn on the hot water full blast—and the bathroom has to have a mirror. Then you flush the toilet and as you're flushing the toilet, you say, "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary"—three times you say "Bloody

Mary” and you turn three times while you’re saying it. and then you look in the mirror and some people say you see Bloody Mary...If you see her, she haunts your house.

(Collected in 1995 from a 9-year-old female who learned the custom in the second grade at the Hamlin School for Girls in San Francisco)

Text 9:

“Bloody Mary”

You go into the bathroom at school, turn out the lights, and close the door. You can go by yourself or with two or three friends. I’m not positive, but I think boys can do it too—if they want to. You light some red candles, like about three, and you put them in front of you in a triangle, two on a side and one in the front. Then you keep on chanting “Bloody Mary” like about three times or something. You’re sitting there and looking at the water in the toilet and chanting. And they say she will appear, her face in the water. Then you have a weird reaction or something and she pulls you down into the toilet and flushes your head down the toilet. And you never come back or something.

(Collected from an 11-year-old Vietnamese-American female who learned it in third grade, in 1992, at Hellyer Elementary School in San Jose, California)

Text 10:

When I was in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, many of the girls celebrated their birthdays (turning age 9, 10, 11) with a slumber party. I remember the game being played a few different ways. The idea was that you go into the bathroom alone and the light would be off, or there would be a candle or flashlight so that it would be barely visible in the bathroom. Then you were supposed to chant “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary” as you look in the mirror. After you say “Bloody Mary” three times, there were a couple of things that could happen:

1) An image of a woman covered with blood would appear in the mirror.

2) You see your own reflection in the mirror but the mirror would soon be covered with blood so that it looked like you were covered in blood. At this point the girls would either run out of the bathroom screaming, or at some parties I remember the girls had to flush the toilet before they could come out. I think the toilet flushing was supposed to make the image go away, but no one ever stayed in the bathroom long enough to see anything disappear. As soon as they pushed the toilet lever, they would run out scared and screaming.

The other version of Bloody Mary I remember goes like this: You say “Bloody Mary” three times, in a dark bathroom, but this time instead of looking at a mirror, you look at the toilet. After you finish the chant, the toilet water was supposed to turn red, or bloody, and then you had to flush the toilet in order to come out. Or, after the chant,

you flush the toilet and as the toilet is flushing, the water turns red.

(Collected from a 21-year-old Korean-American female who learned it in Downey, California, in 1978)

These ten texts should suffice to demonstrate both the traditionality and the gamut of variation of the Bloody Mary ritual. Moreover, it should be abundantly clear that this girls' ritual has something to do with the onset of the first menses. The dramatic change from girlhood to womanhood is signaled physiologically by this catamenial condition. No one has stated this any more succinctly than anthropologist Margaret Mead: "The girl's first menstruation marks a dividing-line between childhood and womanhood. Whatever any given culture may have done in patterning this event, no recorded culture has ever patterned it out of existence" (1955:136).

The beginning of puberty is marked in many cultures by various formal initiation rituals, often in the case of females the ritual consisting of some form of enforced seclusion. A good portion of the discussion of menstruation folklore tends to concentrate on the diverse rituals and customs connected with this event (cf. Crawford 1915, Novak 1916, Voselmann 1935, Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1977:22-30, Malmberg 1982, 1991). In American culture, there is no such formal ritual, but I suggest that the "Bloody Mary" ritual serves an analogous function for pre-pubescent American girls. One study of attitudes found among premenarchal girls reported that "the most frequent response was that of menstruation being exciting since it is related to growing up" (Williams 1980:40). Certainly the Bloody Mary ritual evokes feelings of excitement on the part of participants, excitement tinged with fear and apprehension as well.

There are a number of reasons why a menstrual interpretation of the Bloody Mary ritual makes sense. The ages of the young girls who participate in the ritual run from seven to twelve. According to one authority, the average American girl first experiences menarche at age 12 and 1/2 (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1977:42). The Bloody Mary ritual in that context would appear to be an anticipatory ritual, essentially warning girls of what to expect upon attaining puberty.

The interpretation here proposed would certainly explain why the ritual invariably takes place **in a bathroom** and why there is such an explicit and repeated emphasis on **the sudden appearance of blood**. Another seemingly curious detail in some versions (texts 7, 8, 9, and 10) involve the flushing of one or more toilets. Inasmuch as one of the greatest fears of newly pubescent girls concerns the potentially embarrassing prospect of blood

“showing,” care is taken to ensure that any expelled blood from the urinogenital area be wiped off the body and flushed down a toilet. Sometimes, the pad or tampon may also be disposed of in the same fashion. The point is that the **flushing of a toilet** can easily be understood in the context of a menstrual interpretation of the Bloody Mary ritual.

There are other elements of the ritual which may also be illuminated by the theory proposed. The name “Mary” seems to be a constant whether it is Bloody Mary, Mary Worth, Mary Worthington, Mary Lou, Mary Jane (Brunvand 1986:81). The question is why! There could be an allusion to the Virgin Mary here—the ritual does occur frequently in Catholic elementary schools. Virginity is still an issue for young girls, especially when the risk of pregnancy is understood as a concomitant feature of pubescence. In addition, the vowel in the name “Mary” as pronounced in some American dialects of English is the same vowel as in the verb “marry.” Part of the culturally defined transition from girlhood to womanhood entails the expectation that one day marriage might occur. The headlessness of Mary in some versions (text 2) might be a reference to Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587) who was in fact beheaded by order of Queen Elizabeth. However, it is by no means certain that elementary school girls would necessarily be familiar with this historical figure. (As a matter of fact, it was another queen Mary, namely Mary I (1516-1558), the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, who was tarnished with the negative label of “Bloody Mary” because of the many bloody persecutions occurring during her reign.) A Freudian rather than a historical gloss on the headless image might construe the loss of a “maiden head” as a symbol of lost virginity, a loss in which the breaking of the hymen could result in blood flowing. The possible erotic connotations of the term “Bloody Mary” are perhaps suggested by the folk term for a well-known drink. A “Bloody Mary” is comprised of tomato juice, Vodka, and a splash of Tabasco Sauce. A “Virgin Mary” is the same concoction minus the Vodka.

More plausible is a hypothetical rationale for the name “Mary Worth.” A girl is socialized into believing that her “worth” as a female will be realized through achieving womanhood, marriage, bearing children, etc. To be, then, a worthy Mary, one must first become a woman, hence experience menarche. This, I suspect, is the reason why “Mary Worth” was selected as an alternative name for “Bloody Mary.” In terms of symbol substitution, if we take the two names as synonymous, then “Mary” is the constant, and “Bloody” must be equivalent to “Worth” which is precisely the argument here advanced. (I wonder if “Mary Whales” is a rendering of

“Mary wails” with the idea that crying might occur as an emotional response to menarche, especially if young girls are kept in the dark about it, the latter situation perhaps suggested by the “turning out the lights” to set the stage for the ritual.)

The consistent utilization of a mirror in the Bloody Mary ritual confirms Langlois’s intuition that the image is in some sense a self-image. (Texts 6 and 10 make this explicit.) Little girls influenced by a host of cultural factors ranging from Barbie Dolls to mass media advertising have already begun to worry about their appearance. “Looking good” to both peers and to members of the opposite sex is surely a desideratum. A mirror is an obvious source of narcissistic pleasure (or concern) in this respect. Curiously, Aristotle is alleged to have said that “if a menstruating woman looks into a mirror, not only is the polish lost, but the person who next looks into the mirror will be bewitched. Pliny, speaking of this tarnishing effect on mirrors, says the polish can be restored by having the same woman look steadily upon the back of the mirror” (Novak 1916:272). Anthropologist Wallace reports that among the Mohave, a girl experiencing menses “must not look at her image in water or in a mirror or she will become cross-eyed” (1948:37).

With regard to the supposed bewitching effect of menstruating women gazing into mirrors, we recall that the Knapps wondered why the comic strip figure of Mary Worth had become a mirror **witch** (1976:242), a sentiment echoed by Brunvand (1986:82). In a fascinating discussion of the folklore of menstruation, it has been suggested that “in folklore, the conclusion is that menstruation causes a woman to act like a witch” (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1977:124). Devereux goes so far as to claim that “The Menstruating Woman as a Witch” is the central theme of the psychoanalytic approach to menstruation (1950:252). The fact that in many versions of the Bloody Mary ritual, the summoned figure menaces the participating girls by attacking them, usually by scratching, resulting in the drawing of blood, would tend to support Devereux’s thesis “that all forms of genital bleeding are, unconsciously at least, imagined to be the result of aggression” (1950:251). As to why the Bloody Mary figure might be justified so to speak in attacking prepubescent girls, some reports suggest that it might be a punishment for sins, real or imaginary: “If you’ve sinned or done anything evil in your life” (text 1) which would seem to offer some support for Karen Horney’s suggestion that “the onset of menstruation...for the girl who has a fear of being damaged by masturbation, emotionally means a definite proof that this damage has in fact occurred” (Horney 1973:241).

With the aid of the hypothesis that the Bloody Mary ritual is a prepubescent fantasy about the imminent onset of menses, we may now re-read the text reported by Bronner cited above. To summon the ghost, the girls go into the bathroom where they prick their fingers with a pin to draw a drop of blood. The “flowing” of blood from their bodies evidently induces a young pale-faced girl to appear in the mirror with “blood running down her face from a large cut in her forehead” (1988:169). In Freudian terms, this would be an instance of “upwards displacement” with blood issuing from the head instead of from the urinogenital area. This upwards displacement is substantiated not only by the indubitable historical relationship between the words “maidenhood” and “maidenhead,” but also by the assignment of facial features to the vagina, e.g., as mouth with lips (labia) which confirms the symbolic equivalence of head and genital area.

We may also return to the problematic text presented by Langlois. The particular coalescence of the Bloody Mary figure with the Vanishing Hitchhiker can now be interpreted. Recall that the Bloody Mary hitchhiker left “a wet spot with blood on the [back] seat”. One of the greatest causes of anxiety for young girls newly pubescent is that they may “show’ or “spot.” Typically, nervous girls repeatedly check the back of their slip, skirt, or dress to see if there are any telltale blood spots. Field research indicates that “menstruation was considered an event to be hidden and girls expressed concern about noticeable staining” (Williams 1980:16). Fears about “showing” are common (Ernster 1977:21). An intriguing feminist argument suggests that menstrual taboos generally are basically imposed by men as part of an overall male chauvinist effort to subjugate women—women bleed because they are inferior beings—and furthermore even women’s attempts to conceal their menstruation from men are also attributable ultimately to male, not female esthetics (Laws 1990:128-30, 129).

The fear of leaving a spot of blood (which males might see) might explain the substitution of a wet blood spot in the standard Vanishing Hitchhiker legend in place of the more usual token of scarf, pocket-book, etc. But why did that particular legend combine with the Bloody Mary tradition? To answer this question, we must briefly consider the latent content of the legend.

Brunvand entitled one of his popular anthologies of legends *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* and he provides a substantial number of interesting versions of the legend (1981:24-46), but his attractive subtitle “American Urban Legends & Their Meanings” (my emphasis) notwithstanding, one looks in vain for any discussion of the possible meaning(s) of the legends in Brunvand’s

compilation. Michael Goss in an entire book devoted to the legend, *The Evidence for Phantom Hitch-Hikers*, avers that “the story must have **some** meaning, **some** significance” (1984:30, 32, his emphasis). However, Goss’s major concern is that of a parapsychologist intent upon “proving’ that ghosts may really exist and that the legend may represent literal history so to speak, not folkloristic fantasy. In his book-length treatment of the legend, Goss can do no more than propose the following vague “theory” of what may “lie behind the allure of the Phantom Hitch-Hiker”. According to Goss, “Not sexuality nor car worship, though these may play subsidiary or contributory roles, but a sense of adventure: a timeless adventure, a Romance of the Open Road” (1984:136-37). At least Goss deserves plaudits for realizing that such legends may mean something. But “romance of the open road” does not really address all of the particular details of the legend.

The association of the legend with the Bloody Mary ritual makes it logical to assume that it might possibly have something to do with the transition from girlhood to womanhood. If we see the legend in metaphorical terms, then we can appreciate it as a symbolic morality narrative, a cautionary tale. A girl who hitch-hikes, that is, allows herself to be “picked up” by a perfect (male) stranger, runs the risk of losing her virtue (signaled by the wet blood spot in the car’s backseat, a well-known locus of teen-age and even pre-teen necking and petting). The car to prepubescent girls and boys represents a potential mobile bedroom. Souped-up cars used to be called “hot rods,” a bit of argot fraught with phallic overtones. Moreover, and this is critical, a girl who allows herself to be picked up in this way can never go home again. In more explicit terms, a girl who has once lost her chastity is punished for all eternity by trying desperately though to no avail to return to the sanctity of home with all its associations of family values. With this reading of the legend, we can see how a “Bloody Mary “ ritual in which a girl bridges the transition from prepubescent girl to nubile nymph might be related to a story about the dangerous consequences of a girl’s being picked up by a male driver with a hot rod.

I believe that my interpretation of the Bloody Mary ritual (and the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend) is reasonable and that it plausibly takes account of the actual traits of this extremely popular piece of American folklore. But I realize that many conservative literal-minded folklorists as well as informants familiar with Bloody Mary may not agree. I can imagine such informants saying words to the effect: “I participated in it myself and I never once thought about menstruation” or “I know the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend, and I never once thought of it in terms of the incipient dan-

ger of a girl's being picked up by a total stranger". Precisely! This is because the majority of folklorists are unable or unwilling to recognize the unconscious content of folklore fantasy. If individuals **knew**, consciously knew, what they were doing when they participated in symbolic rituals, or told jokes, or sang folksongs, etc. they could not perform such. Folklore as a socially sanctioned outlet to permit individuals to do what is normally not permitted by society, superego, conscience, normative morality, and the like often needs the guise or disguise of fantasy. This is why it is so often taboo topics which inspire the creation and perpetuation of folklore. So the fact that participants in Bloody Mary rituals might not be able to articulate fears about the menarche in no way invalidates the theory proposed in this essay. Quite the contrary. I would not in the least expect most girls from age 7 to 12 to confirm my analysis.

Is the topic of menstruation taboo in American society? As Buckley and Gottlieb note in their useful survey of anthropological research on the subject, "In the West we are accustomed to thinking of menstruation as largely negative. It is 'the curse'..." (1988:32). There is no doubt about it. The plethora of traditional euphemisms—more than one hundred—attests to its taboo status (cf. Joffe 1948, Boone 1954, Larsen 1963, Ernster 1975, Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1977:92-94, Laws 1990:80-982). Some terms are used by men; others by women; a few by both men and women. With regard to folk speech, it is noteworthy that there does seem to be a decided gender distinction in the very pronunciation of the word "menstruation." American men tend to use four syllables in contrast to women who typically use only three in "menstration" without the "u". Most dictionaries (presumably compiled chiefly by men) include only the men's pronunciation.

One could argue that the more folk speech (circumlocutions, euphemisms) for a given item or activity, the more taboo it is likely to be. In the present context, it is surely noteworthy that one of the ninety expressions reported by Joffe in 1948 was one from a woman in the American military: "I'm Bloody Mary today" (1948:183, 185). This constitutes prima facie evidence that "Bloody Mary" can refer to menstruation.

The taboo status of menstruation and the "shame" wrongly associated with its presence means that even in the late twentieth century, little girls are often kept in the dark about it, a metaphor which is apt in the light of the darkness imposed as part of setting the stage for Bloody Mary rituals—which are either performed at night, e.g., midnight, or in bathrooms during the day with the lights turned off. Some parents and teachers, products of repressed American culture, are reluctant to discuss

menstruation openly with little girls. As a result, the subject remains mysterious, shrouded in secrecy. It is "scary" but something that every little girl will encounter sooner or later.

According to one study, since "nice women do not discuss such matters," many young girls have little or no prior information about the menarche. One southern white individual "recalled spending the afternoon in an outdoor privy reciting a biblical verse that she had been taught would staunch bleeding" (Snow and Johnson 1977:2737). This latter vignette is reminiscent of one in the 1976 motion picture *Carrie* based upon the 1974 novel by Stephen King, in which early on the innocent main character is shown in a shower in a state of shock, not able to comprehend or understand what has occurred—her first menses! (Carrie's possession of special supernatural powers—often attributed to menstruating women [cf. Devereux 1950:253] and the final dramatic scene at the senior prom when a bucket of blood is unceremoniously dumped on Carrie suggest that the entire plot is basically an extended menstrual fantasy. When in March of 1997, I specifically asked Stephen King about my interpretation of *Carrie*, he would neither confirm nor deny it, saying only that he thought that he drew upon the alleged association between menstruating girls and poltergeist powers, [cf. Houppert 1999:116-21].)

In the absence of reliable detailed information about the whole physiological process of menstruation, little girls turn to folklore for the "facts," just as little boys tend to first learn about sexual activity from "dirty" jokes. The Bloody Mary ritual may not be a scientifically accurate picture of menstruation, but it does represent an anticipatory image of a forthcoming major event in the individual female's life cycle. Just as "dirty" jokes do not necessarily describe sexual activity with unvarnished objectivity so "Bloody Mary" may distort the details of actual menarche. The folklore about an event thus may, and very often does, precede the event in question. So it is that young girls learn one or more of the many euphemisms for menstruation before experiencing it (Ernster 1975:12).

The proposed explanatory rationale underlying the Bloody Mary ritual has the decided advantage of being able to illuminate the myriad details of the ritual. As a prepubescent fantasy about the somewhat fearsome but inevitable onset of menarche, it is enacted usually by an individual girl (or an all-girl group), it takes place in a bathroom, it involves a bloody image, sometimes a bloody self-image appears, and the ritual may conclude with the flushing of a toilet. I would hope that anyone proposing an alternative theory of the Bloody Mary ritual would be able to account for all these various distinctive features.

We can now better understand the aura surrounding the ritual. Little girls admit that they are somewhat apprehensive about participating in the ritual. Some are so frightened that they elect not to do so; others do enter the bathroom but with the sincere hope that the bloody image will not appear. One might legitimately ask why, if the ritual is so “scary,” do little girls participate in it at all? I suspect the answer lies in peer pressure. Although it can be an individual activity or performed singly, it is much more often a matter of a small group of girls, three to five in number, huddling together in the dark in a bathroom. The strong desire to be “one of the gang” makes it difficult for a girl to refuse her comrades’ request to participate. And, of course, biologically speaking, it is not possible for any girl to refuse to acknowledge the appearance of the menarche when it finally does occur. In some pubescent girl groups, there is even an unspoken competition as to who among them will be the first to reach menarche.

If there is validity in the feminist hypothesis that it is males who have defined menstruation as something “unpleasant” and “disgusting” thereby compelling oppressed women to accept this “male” definition of a female natural bodily function which in turn contributes to feelings of so-called self-hate (Laws 1990:207), then the Bloody Mary ritual may function as a positive rite of passage for young premenarchal girls. Rather than being persuaded by their culture to feel shame and embarrassment about menstruation, the ritual might be construed as an attempt to celebrate the onset of menses.

Let me close as I began. While there will always be an unending demand for the publication of folklore texts—the popular appeal of folklore data is not likely to fade—I believe it is incumbent upon professional folklorists to do more than simply compile anthologies of children’s folklore or modern legends. In the final analysis, there should be refined analysis!

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Note

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