Beyond the Bearded Lady:

Outgrowing

the Shame of Female Facial Hair

By Aîmée Dowd

Illustration by Sködt McNalty

In John Crowley's 2003 Irish ensemble film *Intermission*, twentysomething Sally has an atrocity on her upper lip: a modest but noticeable moustache. The furry growth incites her mother's consternation and symbolizes the extent to which the brokenhearted character has allowed herself to fall apart. After enduring her mother's exhortations to remove the unsightly dark hair, Sally asks a bus driver if she has a "Ronnie," Irish slang for a moustache. When he replies in the affirmative, but adds that she's no Tom Selleck, Sally retreats even further into her shell. It's not until Sally sees herself on television that she acknowledges the Ronnie. "I didn't see it," she explains as she weeps in her mother's arms.

Sally's facial hair is meant to symbolize her character's emotional state, yet it also compassionately highlights the reality of many women who don't recognize their "excess" facial hair until it becomes glaringly apparent in a photograph or in the comments of others. For other women, the scene acknowledges an equally uncomfortable reality—the removal of facial hair as a bona fide female rite of passage.

According to a 1999 Bristol-Myers Squibb study, 41 million American women between the ages of 15 and 74 have removed unwanted facial hair within the past six months, and approximately 22 million American women remove facial hair at least once a week. Whether it's the translucent, downy hairs that appear on women's upper lips during adolescence or the darker, coarser hairs that ebb and flow with hormonal adjustments in their 20s and 30s, if it's there, it's "unsightly"; if it's unsightly, it's gone. But these numbers bring up another question: If so many women have facial hair, why is it considered abnormal? And if so many women are removing their facial hair, then isn't facial hair as genuine a part of the female experience as it is of the male experience?
When humans first walked across the plains in all our hairy glory, the fight for daily survival—to say nothing of the lack of reflective surfaces—presumably superseded the desire to present a soft, smooth countenance. Somewhere along the evolutionary way, women lost much more of their hair than men, and what some women didn’t lose, they were eventually compelled to remove themselves. Since at least the time of the Egyptian pharaohs, women, beauticians, and doctors have devised methods to remedy the “problem” of facial hair: shaving, waxing, plucking, trimming, bleaching, and even scraping. It was in 19th-century France that a doctor first wrote about the procedure of cauterizing follicles with hot needles in order to remove unwanted hair—a procedure that may sound masochistic by current standards, but that was the antecedent to today’s electrolysis.

Although many cultures across the ages have idealized hairlessness on women, modern American culture has perhaps more than others manically sought the hairless ideal through the relentless application of hair-removal techniques. In the 1930s, upper class women were so distraught about their “superfluous” facial hair that they fell victim to removed their unwanted beards and moustaches; those who allowed their hair to grow often ended up in circuses where they were displayed in sideshows as bearded ladies. These days, women sporting obvious facial hair may not be confined to a tent, but they’re still considered a freak show. The many ways in which women bleach, tweeze, and pluck their hair out of existence is more often than not played for either laughs or pity. In Reality Bites, we’re treated to Winona Ryder’s character, Lelaina, hurriedly bleaching her moustache before a date; Rosie O’Donnell, back in the days of her talk show, joked about stringing beads onto her chin hair. On the pity end of things, makeover subjects on Extreme Makeover and The Swan are shown in “before” montages staring morosely at their moustaches or wispy goatees in the mirror while a voiceover details their daily shame.

Despite slowly shifting American attitudes toward traditional gender identities, not even the cutting edge of current fashion hints at the acceptability of beards or moustaches on women. Highly tweeved and waxed visages in contemporary media dictate what is considered beautiful, and the multimillion-dollar hair-removal industry perpetuates the unacceptability of female facial hair through its intense marketing alongside these images of feminine beauty. Advertising for methods both high tech and old-school (laser hair removal has become increasingly widespread, while in some

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quacks who sometimes subjected them to carcinogenic X-rays that resulted in burns, scars, and death. One early 20th-century physician, A. F. Niemoeller, was alarmed by the psychological effects of facial hair, and warned in the 1938 book *Superfluous Hair and Its Removal* that it “has induced in women mental states that bring on the direst of consequences. Such women may become morose and subject to fits of depression, develop a mania for seclusion, and it has even been known to lead to suicide.”

During this time, female hirsutes—women with heavy hair growth on the face and body—urban areas, the traditional Indian process of threading has come into vogue—urgently targets women, with occasionally brazen insults. One recent advertisement in a San Diego weekly newspaper used a photograph of a gorilla to bait women’s anxiety over unwanted hair; in a St. Louis suburb last spring, a billboard towering over a busy thoroughfare showcased a woman, her face fully lathered with shaving cream, dragging a razor down one cheek. Both prey on women’s concerns of crossing irrevocably into the masculine realm by becoming daily face shavers.

Male-focused makeover shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have brought the term “manscaping” into the pop lexicon with segments about back-hair waxing
and eyebrow plucking, suggesting that there’s nothing strictly girly about men curving their body and facial hair in order to enhance the overall package. But there’s no female correlate, no suggestion that a little extra underbrush on the ladies is okay, too; if anything, the body-grooming imperative has intensified for women as it has been normalized for men. So it’s hardly surprising that a masculine/feminine dichotomy still plagues the topic of facial hair, and for women this means a barrage of assumptions about power, sexuality, and—most of all—“normal” femininity.

**Fuzz Busters**

During World War II, American women gave up their stockings to save silk material for the war effort, leading to a widespread appeal for bare, hairless legs. This look, which emphasized women’s skin, and hence their femininity, emerged at a time when women were entering the workforce and adopting traditionally male roles. These days, women’s removal of their facial hair is just another concession in the militarized zones of masculine and feminine, where women must still conform or confront considerable judgment and ridicule. For all the traditionally masculine activities annexed by women along the way—wearing pants, racing cars, smoking cigars, running companies—there is still a stiff line between appearance and practice. (Just ask any female executive who’s been asked to take one of those seminars on how to be less aggressive and “masculine” in her management style.)

The removal of facial hair has a longer tradition than the removal of body hair among American and European women, but the reasons for doing either are similar: Hairlessness conforms to beauty ideals, and social pressure pushes the practice into the realm of the normative. Over the past century, the beauty industry has run a number of remarkably influential campaigns offering “cures” for such “problems” as body hair—like Gillette’s

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1) **Julia Pastrana**, born in 1834, had dark, thick hair over her entire body and traveled with the circus as the “Ape Lady.” After her death, she was mummified and displayed in the circus as an oddity.

2) Starting in the 1890s, **Lady Olga** traveled with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. She worked for most of her life as a sideshow attraction and appeared in the famous 1932 film *Freaks*.

3) Born with hair on her face, **Priscilla the Monkey Girl** was one of the last renowned bearded ladies. She was married to the Alligator Man and has appeared on the *Jerry Springer Show*.

4) **Vivian Wheeler** currently lives in Illinois and holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest female beard (11 inches). She has said, “It really helped to have a Guinness World Record... it showed me I could be proud of being me. It made me feel like I had a chance in society.”

5) **Patricia Arquette** starred in *Human Nature*, the 2001 film by Charlie Kaufman, as a female hirsute who grows hair all over her body, including a full beard. She hides her excess hair growth from her boyfriend (Tim Robbins); in some touching scenes, her electrolyst (Rosie Perez) carefully removes each hair.

6) **Jennifer Miller**, founder and director of Circus Amok, a politically progressive circus that performs for free on the streets of New York City, is a juggler, an escape artist, a mistress of ceremonies, and a bearded woman. She also teaches classes on feminism and performance.

7) **Actor/director/writer Harriet Dudgeon** had a prominent role in John Waters’s 2000 film *Ceil B. Demented*; her goatee was never remarked upon in the film, but Waters has professed his admiration of it in interviews. In the 2003 indie flick *By Hook or By Crook*, which she cowrote, she played Val, a gender-bending dyke. When Val finally tracks down her long-sought-after birth mother, she expresses her fear of rejection, pointing out the obvious (but as yet unstated) in her pal Shy: “I have a beard.” Shy replies, “Yeah, and it’s a nice fuckin’ beard.”
1915 “Great Underarm Campaign,” which succeeded in both demonizing women’s underarm hair and prescribing shaving as the cure. In teen magazines, on women’s health websites, and on makeover shows, the language is always the same: Don’t worry most women have facial and body hair; it’s totally normal. And here are all the ways you can (and, by implication, should) get rid of it.

A 1991 study by Susan A. Basow asked a group of professional women in the United States about their reasons for shaving their body hair. The 96 percent of women who shaved at least once a week said that they did it to appear feminine and to escape social disapproval. A more recent study suggests that there was considerable merit in their perceptions and fears: After investigating attitudes toward women’s body hair, Marika Tiggemann and Christine Lewis concluded in December 2004’s Psychology of Women Quarterly that “body hair on women, but not on men, has become an elicitor of disgust and its removal correspondingly normative.” Interestingly, men are currently employing laser hair removal and other techniques more than ever, however, Tiggemann and Lewis’s study did not test for what might be considered “excessive” hair on men’s bodies. The fact that men are removing body hair in increasing numbers nonetheless suggests that the “disgust response” for body hair is strong for both sexes, while the “perceived disgust” for facial hair falls more exclusively on women.

Another investigation, conducted in 1998 by Basow and Amie C. Braman, asked 195 undergraduate men and women to watch two videos of a woman drying off after a swim. In one video, the woman’s legs and armpits are hairy, and in the other, her body is shaved. The hairy woman was seen as significantly “less friendly, moral, and relaxed,” and “more aggressive, unsociable, strong, nonconformist, dominant, assertive, independent, and in better physical condition.” While the positive and negative meanings of these descriptors depend on individual perceptions, their gendered connotations cannot be mistaken. Given these responses to armpit and leg hair, it’s difficult to imagine women with obvious facial hair receiving more positive responses.

But it doesn’t take a social scientist to document the social denigration—from disgusted looks to job discrimination to outright violence—accorded to women who, by resisting the pressure to remove body hair, dare to transgress into “masculine” territory. A small but growing subculture of lesbians and transgenders is proudly embracing facial hair as a marker of desired female masculinity, but homophobic confusion and ignorance in the larger culture has reinforced perceptions of this follicular rejection as haplessly unfeminine rather than purposefully subversive. And in mainstream pop culture, especially as typified in shows like The L Word, lesbians are just as prone to normative femininity as straight girls.

But for some women, facial hair is simply a proudly revealed part of the female, even feminine, experience. Teresa Carr, a 50-year-old consultant and poet, has not shaved since 1973, when she discovered hairs growing on her chin. Strangers regularly inquire about her beard—which she describes as a Ho Chi Minh–style goatee—with questions that are genuinely inquisitive and sometimes rude. For Carr, facial hair is a way of making people pause and think. “This was at the beginning of the heyday of women’s defiance about the strictures of roles and stereotypical ideas of women,” Carr recalls. “There was no question in my mind that allowing my beard to grow in and refusing to shave was part of a social and political dialogue about masculine and feminine attributes. It does not take a beard to challenge assumptions about women’s abilities or roles; however, [the beard] puts it right out there.”

Jennifer Miller, 44, director of Circus Amok, a politically progressive circus that addresses current events through age-old acts, has reinvented the tradition of the bearded lady, developing the persona of the “bearded woman.” The bearded woman doesn’t wear hyperfeminine clothing as former bearded ladies did, nor does she cloister herself within the circus’ sideshow tents; instead, she offers a positive, unapologetic image in a world of the plucked, shaved, and waxed.

Miller was performing in the circus before she grew her beard. She wears it proudly in her day job as an adjunct college professor, but she does recognize the pressure women feel to hide facial hair growth. “Women with facial hair suffer scrutiny and oppression,” she says, “and women have a fear of not being seen as
women, a fear of not being clean-skinned, a fear of being a freak.” Miller recounts the experience of meeting women who spend much time and expense removing their facial hair: “Women would come up to me and say, ‘Wow, I’ve been doing electrolysis every week for 20 years! I wish I could do what you do.’” Miller says, “You can,” while also recognizing that it’s not always easy to don facial hair.

Miller decided at one point to shave her beard for a job, and found that removing her facial hair was a difficult experience. She recalls crying as she shaved, feeling that she was “maintaining a closeted position and the myth that women don’t grow facial hair.” She continues. “If society could accept that women have facial hair, I might enjoy the times I choose not to grow it.” Miller says that when she looks at herself in the mirror, she does not identify any features as masculine or feminine, and she definitely does not see her beard in particular as masculine.

For Carr and Miller, growing their substantial facial hair sends a message about the realities of women’s bodies and personal freedom. “Socially,” Carr says, “the discrimination is meant to proscribe the footsteps of women who choose to walk an alternative, self-determined path. I think that wearing your facial hair is an announcement of that self-determination.”

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Almost a decade ago in the New York Times was titled “Step Right Up! See the Bearded Person!” Though it quotes Miller as saying that she doesn’t see her beard as a problem and she doesn’t care what caused it, the article makes no effort to position female facial hair growth as a common experience. We’re even willing to revise history: Deeply carnal, famously moustachioed Frida Kahlo was literally cleaned up for her transition to the big screen in 2002’s biopic, the moustache she immortalized in so many self-portraits nowhere in sight.

If the normalization of cosmetic surgery has shown us anything, it’s that people will go to great lengths and take big medical risks in order to conform to cultural beauty standards, and that women in particular seem sadly susceptible to the shame marketing that characterizes electrolysis, waxing, and laser hair removal services. And though ideas of masculinity and femininity are questioned more consistently now than they were back when doctors were scarring women with painful follicle cauterizations, the standard of hairlessness has a particularly tenacious hold on many cultures.

But there are those who challenge it. Trish Morrissey is an artist whose photos of women with facial hair function as a direct confrontation with the idea of femininity, hair, and power. Her subjects stare unflinchingly into the camera; neither sidestep characters nor politically motivated facial-hair activists, they simply are—and, by simply being, are a challenge.

Then there’s Intermission’s Sally—who, after overcoming the denial of her Ronnie, tells a man to whom she is obviously attracted that she is going to have to have the moustache waxed. In this moment, when Sally is starting to recover her emotional strength, the fellow says, “What moustache?” Although he eventually admits that he can see it, his kindness makes a big difference to the fragile woman, and helps her come out of her shell. The audience doesn’t actually see Sally remove the Ronnie—although she does—but, as for many women, knowing that some people accept her natural hair makes the plucking and prodding far less painful.

Aimée Dowd is a teacher and writer. She’s tried it all—waxing, shaving, plucking, and letting it grow.

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