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BOOK REVIEW

Menstruation's Cultural History: The French Connection

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McClive, C. (2015). *Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. Price: \$125.00. ISBN 780754 666035

As discussed in a previous review (Linton, 2015) of Read's (2013) *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*, the history of menstruation as a cultural construction is a challenging topic. Because men, until recently, have dominated historical research and publishing and, therefore, have—perhaps unintentionally—tended to write about subjects they created, experienced, and believed they understood (e.g., war, politics, religion), the social and biological concerns of women have been widely overlooked. Slowly, that omission is being addressed as women and men open new fields of investigation. Due to lingering prejudices and taboos, it has taken longer for the social construction of menstruation to receive the kind of attention it warrants. Although, with very few exceptions, visible menstrual flow is exclusive to women, its social meaning is collaboratively arrived at through what I refer to as “menstrual transactions” in which both men and women participate.

Furthermore, like any other social phenomenon, menstrual meaning varies widely across time and cultures. To address this fact, there is a new, welcome addition to menstrual history: Cathy McClive's *Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France*. The volume follows 2 years after publication of Read's examination of menstruation during the same era in England, so, taken together, the two volumes offer excellent opportunities for comparative studies. Although the authors used similar kinds of materials in their investigations, their conclusions reveal subtle, nuanced differences between the two settings.

Perhaps the most intriguing and surprising of McClive's claims is what she refers to as “the myth of menstrual misogyny” (p. 1). Given the widely held view that menstruation has historically been perceived negatively (as it still is in many contemporary settings) as a sign of women's frail or even contaminating nature, the idea that such views were not generally the case in a European setting 300 years ago is both surprising and refreshing.

Furthermore, contemporary readers might be appropriately chastened to discover that the present moment is not the first in which so-called *gender fluidity* was a concept deemed worthy of recognition. As Gopnick (2015) reported in a recent essay, flagrant cross-dressing was a recognized phenomenon in that era as well. The 17th-century cleric, the Abbé de Choisy, was known to advise French women on fashion and style, and the title of his autobiography boldly chronicled his manner of self-presentation, *The Memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy Who Dressed as a Woman* (Gopnick, 2015).

McClive introduces her approach and her premise this way:

I use materials from early modern France to reconsider three basic assumptions about sex, gender, and reproduction between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: that menstruation was predominantly perceived negatively, that it was a direct signifier of womanhood and that the relationship between menstruation and procreation was straightforward. I am calling these assumptions the myth of ‘menstrual misogyny.’ (p. 1)

Before proceeding to elucidate these three “reconsiderations” (as she modestly describes what is actually quite a radical hypothesis), McClive places her work in the context of broader feminist scholarship and cites the difficulty of bringing together centuries-old texts and current perspectives: “Reading early modern sources on attitudes to menstruation alongside contemporary feminist scholarship reminds us that menstruation is not what we think it is” (p. 2). That last phrase succinctly reminds the reader of the fluidity of meaning, even the meaning of biological phenomena that are virtually universal yet assigned a myriad of interpretations that can even be diametrically opposed to one another depending on cultural and chronological settings. To demonstrate her point, McClive delves into the contemporary debate regarding “the sex/gender dyad” (p. 5), the breakdown of essentialist, dichotomous notions of sexual identity. She points out that, although notions of gender fluidity and the rise of transgender activism and theory are being widely discussed, there is little evidence that these new postulations are being applied to retrospective looks at earlier practices and beliefs. Her book sets out to open a corrective window into her targeted place and time.

Following a clear statement of the conceptual issues involved, the pertinent scholarly and theoretical literature, and the customary definitions and limitations, McClive proceeds through six chapters and a conclusion to lay out her research and analysis in support of the three previously identified characteristics of the myth of menstrual misogyny. To begin with, she provides a thorough review of the Biblical proscriptions as well as related classical literature, particularly writings of Pliny the Elder and Aristotle, concerning the wide range of menstrual regulations including those dealing with sex during menstruation.

The opening chapter is the most thorough and clear review of the historical and religious bases for menstrual taboos and superstitions that I know of, and for that reason alone it would be a valuable addition to any reading list for a course in gender studies and related fields. The discussion of the Leviticus formulation of how to cope with menses as well as semen focus on how both forms of genital emission were viewed as impurities, but as Christianity evolved, the negative views of semen were generally abandoned, whereas menses continued to be seen as a problematic substance.

In addressing the “myth” that “menstruation was predominately perceived negatively” (p. 99), McClive presents some ideas that, upon reflection, seem obvious but have been overlooked. If one accepts the claim made by many menstrual activists that a healthy regular menstrual cycle

is one of life's "vital signs," then its role in settings where medical science was relatively less scientific becomes more crucial. Understanding the relationship between the menstrual cycle and fertility, pregnancy, and women's health in general takes on special importance in the absence of modern pregnancy tests, ovulation charting, and so on. In a chapter titled, in part, "Menstrual Regularity and Irregular Menstruation" (p. 99), McClive marshals dozens of documents (e.g., letters, medical treatises, books) to illustrate how sophisticated her subjects' awareness of cycle nuances actually was and the fact that it was not broadly seen in negative terms.

The book is rich in carefully formulated and well-documented ways of problematizing the Early Modern French perspective on the menstrual cycle, but perhaps the most surprising portions have to do with the discovery that men were sometimes thought to experience their own menstrual cycles. It turns out that the notion of male cycles and male menopause (a term that has been bandied about when middle-aged men behave irrationally, as when Mel Gibson publically displayed boorish behavior a few years ago) has a precedent set several centuries ago.

Among the sources of the belief McClive examines is a reference to "the myth of Jewish male menses" (p. 198). Unfortunately, this element is not pursued further as its perniciousness and durability might have provided a lens on the construction of gender as well as the social and political ends to which beliefs about menstruation can be put. For example, Bernard Malamud gives us reason to believe that the Jewish male menstrual myth even extended into Tsarist Russia as his protagonist, Yakov Bok, in *The Fixer* (1966) is threatened with torture in the form of menstrual extraction through his penis.

The most fascinating portion of this discussion lies in the examination of hermaphrodites in the medical literature of the time and of "vicarious menstruation" (p. 200). McClive emphasizes the importance of "periodicity and regularity [in] . . . early modern humerol medicine and issues of regularity and bodily management were as important for male as for female bodies" (p. 201). Just as a "regular period" is commonly seen today as a sign of good health in women, in the 1780s medical practice "exactly replicates the image of female regularity" (p. 201). This is a striking reversal of the idea that the male body is the standard by which women's bodies are evaluated (hence, penis envy), thereby making the cyclical element of women's menstrual lives the standard for good health.

A brief review cannot do full justice to the depth and richness of the research and analysis presented here. But its most valuable contribution to the growing canon of menstrual history is how it invites the reader to view both the past and the present with fresh eyes.

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