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BOOK REVIEW

Menstruation's Cultural History

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Read, S. (2013). *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. London, UK: Palgrave. Price: \$95.00 (hardcover) ISBN 978-1-137-35502-7

It has been decades since scholarly research has expanded its scope beyond a narrow focus on the grand affairs of men, wars, nations, and major events to include the quotidian affairs of daily life. Under the no-longer-new “New Historicism” label there is now a wealth of courses, programs, and journals devoted to the study of topics such as food and domestic life. Much of this change was brought about in the wake of second-wave feminism and the rise of a new generation of women scholars who insisted that the significance of women’s roles in shaping cultural practices had been overlooked and that sweeping corrections were in order, particularly in Western cultural settings. However, the historical role of the cultural construction of the menstrual cycle has received relatively little attention. The scarcity of attention to menstruation in American and European settings is in contrast to reports by anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1928, 1930, 1949) who provided numerous examinations of menstruation-related details in tribal life in the South Pacific, and Chris Knight (1991) who claimed that early civilizations evolved around the social construction of the menstrual cycle.

It would be a mistake to view the history of the cycle as a phenomenon that concerns only women. Social meaning is a manufactured thing, and, in the case of menstruation, it comes about through what I refer to as a series of “menstrual transactions.” In many cultural situations, especially paternalistic ones, such transactions are, in large part, governed by men’s interpretations of a phenomenon that is foreign to the workings of their own bodies.

Recently, there have been efforts to focus a corrective lens on menstrual history, and Sara Read has made an important contribution to the field, both in content and in methodology, with the publication of *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. Outside the fields of biology and medicine, the study of the social history of the menstrual cycle has been problematic

for several reasons: women had lower literacy rates; women had less access to publication outlets; women's writings were held in low regard and, thus, were less likely to reach wide distribution or to survive the passage of time; the taboo and secretive nature of menstruation made it an unlikely topic for writers and readers of either gender. These obstacles make Read's accomplishments all the more impressive. Based on nearly 150 primary sources, including midwife guides, funeral sermons, dictionaries, play scripts, epistolary collections, and many other 15th-, 16th-, and 17th-century references, as well as nearly as many more secondary scholarly texts, Read has shed light on a topic that previously seemed inaccessible to historical investigation.

Many of the religious tracts and devotional poems among her sources are built on Biblical passages that occasionally refer to verses such as those in Isaiah, which mention "menstrual rags" to metaphorically describe the corrupt nature of the human soul. Read insightfully concludes that "the biblical teaching that menstruation was spiritually filthy was one regularly cited in sermons and other religious documents reinforcing the difficulty women found in recording openly their menstrual histories" (p. 115). She also alludes to the gospel story known as "Jesus and the bleeding woman" as another source for the notion that a "menstruating woman was shunned by society because of her uncleanness until Jesus cured her" (p. 115). However, she does not include any discussion of how Christian menstrual taboos came to diverge from the more rigid requirements embedded in Jewish practices, as dictated in Leviticus. This is an unfortunate omission because the instructions given by Pope Gregory to St. Augustine during his missionary journey to the British Isles specifically encouraged a more tolerant view of the menstrual condition. Though the exchange between them took place centuries prior to the time frame under examination, perhaps its relevance warranted mention.

The book's 10 chapters cover a wide variety of perspectives including the semantics of the cycle, perceptions of menstrual bleeding compared to hymeneal and postpartum bleeding, and early or late menstrual onset. These are important contextual factors, as Read states, because "One of the key features of female physiology with respect to its reproductive functions is blood loss." Therefore, "... all aspects of vaginal bleeding, including the blood lost upon first intercourse and that lost after childbirth, were considered to be related to menstruation" (p. 1).

Though the analysis draws on a wide variety of sources, ranging from the plays of William Shakespeare, John Ford, William Wycherley, and other dramatists through the poetry of John Donne and John Milton to private letters and diaries, the most significant and influential documents are those that express religion-based interpretations, instructions, and moral conclusions. In this regard, Read provides an important insight into how fully the prevailing religious belief system and its adherents have shaped menstrual beliefs and practices and, by extension, women's lives. In a secular setting, such as the present moment in Western nations, it is easy to underestimate how pervasively religious beliefs enter into the most intimate aspects of life, and Read's book is illuminating in this regard.

The book both gains and loses from its narrow focus: "... a detailed analyses of transitional bleeding as they were represented in literature in England specifically" (p. 3). The gain comes from the deep penetration into the menstrual ecology of the time. The reader experiences an intimacy with the women whose lives are being chronicled as well as with the prevailing values. Of course, the loss comes from the very provocative thoroughness of the research. The reader is stimulated to ask for more of both how and why the particular practices evolved and how and why they have changed since then—if indeed they have. This is not intended as criticism as much

as recognition that similar scholarship needs to be conducted into the full spectrum of cultural history and that this book stands as a worthy model for such efforts.

Read's book is one of a number of volumes in a series titled "Genders and Sexualities in History." As such, it is quite strong on history but might have benefited from the inclusion of the views of more contemporary feminist theorists on the role of the menstrual cycle in shaping gender identity.

Coincidentally, Read's book comes along within a year's time of a volume that dealt with a related phenomenon, representations of menstruation in popular film and television (Rosewarne, 2012). Although the two books examine times, cultures, and media far removed from one another, both authors came to the same conclusion about the scarcity of menstrual portrayals in their respective time frames.

Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England deserves to be included on the reading lists of university courses that focus on the history of the Early Modern era as well as those that deal with gender studies, especially courses that address the methodological challenges facing scholars who want to delve into the cultural experiences of those marginalized by custom and tradition. With clear prose and well-structured design, Read enlivens a time and topic that otherwise might seem somewhat remote or even obscure.

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