

Peggy McCracken. *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature.* The Middle Ages Series. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 178. ISBN: 978-0-8122-3713-9.

In *The Curse of Eve*, Peggy McCracken explores blood as the representation of medieval gender codes. Drawing from the corpus of medieval texts imbued with discourses about blood, mostly old French, McCracken persuasively illustrates the consistently engendered value of such blood; for example, blood shed by men in battle is revered and celebrated, while women's blood, for the most part, and especially during menstruation or parturition, is polluting and must be relegated to the private domestic sphere. Yet, as McCracken later argues, even though medieval literature mostly consolidates the constructed value of the blood as being dependant on the gender of the body that issues it, there are also narratives that undermine that very same construction. For inasmuch as women's menstruating blood is the curse, it is simultaneously a powerful healing agent. McCracken cites both Hildegard of Bingen for identifying menstrual blood as a cure for leprosy, and Heloise, who in her third letter to Abelard asserts that women tolerate wine better than men can because their bodies purge monthly (§). It is this very type of nuanced interpretation that makes McCracken's book such a compelling read.

McCracken's book is comprised of a preface, six chapters, and a conclusion. To explore the extent to which blood is indexed in gender and cultural values, McCracken compares a variety of literary texts in relation to historical, medical, and religious discourses. In chapter one, "Only Women Bleed," McCracken explores the ritual practices in which gendered blood is seen to reflect gendered cultural values. She argues that values associated with men's blood and women's blood can be seen in oppositional terms. Bloodletting practices, for example, construct gender differences through a focus on control and lack of control. Male bloodletting is controlled bloodshed, the desired expulsion of the polluting female element, whereas female bleeding can not be controlled, nor can it expel the female elements. Male bleeding then is superior to female bleeding.

In the second chapter, "The Amenorrhea of War," McCracken explores the representation of women's blood in the public sphere; more specifically how women are excluded from warfare. The presence of monthly menstruation serves as the eliminating factor. Using Demi Moore's amenorrheic character from the film *G.I. Jane* enables McCracken to illustrate that female biology must be transcended in order for a woman to enter the typically male arena of warfare. Transgressions of femaleness can be seen in most woman warriors, from the historical Joan of Arc to the fictional *Roman de Silence*. McCracken argues

that these consistent messages serve to illustrate that woman are “unsuited to leadership in battle” (26), and that to participate in warfare they must become male-like in appearance.

In “The Gender of Sacrifice,” the third chapter, McCracken surveys narratives that involve child sacrifice. She reviews a number of stories, including Abraham and Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter from the Old Testament, and the Amicus and Amelius legends, concluding that a father’s ending the life of his child is considered an act of sacrifice, a ritualistic right that serves the greater good and perpetuates the dominant power structures. The same act performed by a mother is murder. The delineating distinction is that the child shares the blood of the father, it literally flows in the veins, whereas the child is only connected to the mother through the blood shed in childbirth (43). The mother’s infanticide then is an act not only against her child, but also the child’s father. The narratives depicting the gendering of sacrifice do not, of course, reveal an essential truth about parental ties but, as McCracken argues, they offer a symbolic participation in a corporeal rhetoric that again maps cultural values onto gendered roles, and these specific inscriptions are rendered in the arena of procreation and familial structures (55).

If narratives of sacrifice elevate and promote the father’s relationship with his child as a blood relationship, to the exclusion of the mothers, then the narratives about monstrous births potentially recover the mother’s bloodties with her child. In her fourth chapter “Menstruation and Monstrous Birth,” McCracken begins with the early Church’s prohibition on coitus during menstruation and the belief that any conception during menstruation would result in a hideously deformed or leprous offspring (63). Specifically she cites the late thirteenth-century medical text *The Secrets of Women* to show the dangers and implications of menstrual pollution. McCracken then focuses on Maillart’s early fourteenth-century *Le roman de comte d’Anjou*, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, and Nicholas Trevet’s *Chronicles* as examples of women’s corrupting influence. These narratives illustrate an insistent anxiety about the value of a mother’s blood—her “corrupting” bloodline and the impurity of her postpartum body—and through this anxiety suggest a recognition, albeit negative, of the contribution of the mother’s blood to her child that is absent from the stories of sacrifice.

In chapter five, “The Scene of Parturition,” McCracken continues to explore the value of the mother’s blood, further questioning the corporeal exchange between mother and child. McCracken uses the *Roman de Melusine*, a late fourteenth-century fairy story, as her main narrative. Here, as in many other stories, one can discern a palpable anxiety around menstruation and the birthing body. Such fears were further compounded by the exclusion of the father from

the birth itself and then for several weeks from the post-partum mother. Birth scenes, therefore, emphasize the “the fragility of the figural values associated with paternity” (91).

“The Grail and Its Hosts,” chapter six, differs from the preceding chapters in its exploration of the grail guardian’s bloodshed. Although the guardian’s wound “won’t stop bleeding, and it bleeds from between the thighs” (100) which is, as we’ve seen, typically associated with polluting menstrual blood, it does not prove his body to be unworthy or corrupting; rather, the genital wound marks his body as the divinely ordained keeper of a holy relic (100). Although the male grail guardian bleeds from a private place, that he bleeds in public and for a greater cause serves to sustain gender demarcated cultural values.

In contrast McCracken does align a specific bleeding male body with that of a female, the Jewish male. Male Jews were often thought to experience a menstrual like bleeding which was a biological marker distinguishing them from Christians. McCracken cites Jacques de Vitry as an example: “Jews have become unwarlike and weak even as women, and it is said that they have a flux of blood every month” (104). McCracken posits that by the early fourteenth century, medical, theological, and popular discourses had rendered Jewish men’s blood like that of women, and thus subject to the curse of Eve. Returning to the vagina-like wound of the grail keeper, and finally concluding with Marie de France’s *Equitan*, McCracken asserts that although blood is usually gendered in predictable ways, occasionally literature can intervene and upset the gendered categories used to describe bodies and blood (109).

The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature is thoughtful and compelling. McCracken convincingly demonstrates the symbolic value and complexity of representations of blood in a broad range of medieval texts. As is often the case with survey-type books, at times McCracken’s analysis is unbalanced. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to evenly engage with such a large number of primary texts, some are going to lack the in-depth engagement that is the signature of most of McCracken’s analysis. Having stated that minor shortcoming, on the whole McCracken’s work epitomizes solid scholarship: close nuanced readings of the primary texts, sustained and interlaced engagement with heady theoretical ideas, all supported by extensive secondary sources and thorough documentation. Indeed, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero* is a provocative and sound addition to medieval scholarship.

Shona Harrison
University of British Columbia, Okanagan