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Kirk D. Read, *Birthing Bodies in Early Modern France: Stories of Gender and Reproduction*. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xiv + 206 pp. index. Bibl. \$99.95 ISBN: 978-0-7546-6632-5.

Review by Kathleen Wellman, Southern Methodist University.

In the concluding section of *Birthing Bodies*, entitled “Postpartum,” Kirk D. Read describes his project as a kind of salon, in which he brings texts describing early modern birthing experiences into dialogue with ancient texts, early modern literary and medical texts, and the work of modern literary and gender theorists. His role is then analogous to that of a *salonnière(e)*; he orchestrates a conversation using the early modern texts to inform modern understandings of the issues they raise. His project derives from the unassailable claim that the pregnant body is a prominent trope for nourishment and generation, and that, more generally, discussions and images of bodies were important ways to express anxieties about women’s power in society and politics in the early modern period.

The narrative strategy Read deploys in each chapter is to tell the birthing tale of a particular early modern text or set of texts, to compare it or them first to relevant, contemporary texts and then to other treatments of the same texts or of a similar theme in works of literary criticism and gender theory. The juxtaposition of these sources with modern interpretations sometimes allows Read to posit less misogynistic readings of early modern birthing text than conventional interpretations have allowed. The fluidity of Read’s approach allows him to treat a wide variety of birthing stories and treatments of them. His first three chapters consider how these tales influenced women to embrace both biological and literary production. His three last chapters move from this theme into more unconventional terrain as he treats tales of hermaphrodites, indeterminate births, and tales of male birth experiences. Read finds these tales in which men complicate gender narratives by appropriating women’s generative function especially revealing about “what is most salient and telling about how people lived in their sex and gender through the domain of their bodies’ actual and metaphorical birthing potential.” (p. 8.)

In the first chapter, Read focuses on *Les Caquets de l’accouchée*, published in eight installments in 1622. In this text, a man hides in the room of a woman who has just given birth to hear the gossip. Usually understood as advancing an anti-feminist stance during the *querelle des femmes*, this text, in Read’s reinterpretation, valorizes reproduction as the male observer assumes the restorative power of birth and regains his own health. Read then ties his appreciation of this masculine role to Gianna Pomata’s work normalizing menstruation and presenting male bleeding as male menses and to Faith Beasley’s association of *Les Caquets* with salon culture. For Read, these connections sustain his claim that the male observer is not the conventional, derisive critic of female culture. Rather he has been altered by his integration into the female process of birth and the postpartum setting. This chapter is the most thoroughly developed of Read’s six chapters and gives the best model of what his treatment offers his readers. They gain a different reading of *Les Coquets* and they are placed, mid-dialogue, into conversation with other, recent works of literary criticism and gender theory.

The second chapter, Read discusses Rabelais’s lurid accounts of Gargantua’s and Pantagruel’s births wherein the voice of male medical authority mocks incompetent midwives. He then sets Rabelais’s birth

tales against the account of the practicing midwife Louise Boursier of her vital and competent role in the births of Marie de Medici's children. Read validate her gynecological text but also takes it seriously as a literary text and comparing it with Rabelais's. For Boursier like Rabelais, Read claims, "the birthing woman's body is her way into "writing and self-legitimation" (p. 65)—Boursier actually and Rabelais figuratively. While both texts are interesting, the relationship between them seems forced, especially as Read discusses Rabelais in the context of literary scholarship and Boursier in relation to studies of midwifery,

In the third chapter, Read uses two early modern invocations of the myth of the ancient Greek gynecologist, Agnodice, who disguised herself as a man to gain a medical education. These two sources allow Read to compare an early modern medical work in dialogue to a literary text. For the doctor Jacques Guillemeau, the myth points to the shame of men who carry out these medical functions, whereas for the poet Catherine des Roches, Agnodice's breaking of the taboo of female medical practice resembles her own transgression of the taboo of female authorship. Read then asks the reader to compare Guillemeau's work to that of feminist critic Susan Gruber's on women's creativity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Guillemeau's notion of the shameful of birth to Mary Daly's modern manifesto *Gyn/Ecology*.

The three remaining chapters focus on far less conventional cases of birth and uses of birthing metaphors. The fourth chapter uses breast-feeding—the trope of the nursing father— as a metaphor for the mentorship Pliéade poets offered younger authors. Read not only places the metaphor in the context of Thomas Laqueur's single-sex continuum but also explores what a feminist critique of canonical male authors can reveal about how gender shaped the literary forms men used. He looks explicitly to Ann R. Jones's work on how female writers utilized male literary conventions to describe the distinctly female experience of birth. Read does the reverse, showing instead how men used a female condition to develop literary conventions and their distinctly masculine agenda.

In chapter five, Read focuses explicitly on tales of birthing men. The chapter takes its analytical cues from the recent scholarship of Kathleen Long and Judith Butler in particular. The central text of this chapter is Thomas Artus's *L'Isle des hermaphrodites* (1605), which sought to undermine Henry III as hermaphrodite, making sexual perversion the mark of political corruption. Read compares this text to other contemporary texts, such as those of Pierre Boaistuau and François Belleforest, which entertained their readers with stories of sexual ambiguity and medical anomalies, as well as to medical texts, which were more analytic than judgmental. This chapter is richly illustrated with many images of ambiguous sexuality, which complicate and challenge our understanding of early modern notions of sex and gender.

In the sixth chapter, Read explores literary accounts of *couvade* in which men reported experiencing some physiological effects of birth. These experiences were not simply exotic but most frequently reported by travelers returning from exotic locales. Read relates these tales to earlier, similar accounts in Strabo's *Geography* and the medieval fiction *Aucassin and Nicolette*. Tales from the New World, Read suggests, raise the possibility that the colonies may have been more generously ungendered.

Read has made rich and productive use of the comparison at the heart of his work between women invoking their birth experiences as analogous to literary production and men comparing their literary production to generation or simply appropriating the birthing experience themselves. Read's narrative strategy brings a variety of texts into dialogue across disciplines and centuries and often in unexpected ways. His comparisons are intriguing but not always entirely effective. To deploy his own *salonnière* analogy, Read often brings texts into uneasy conversation—like guests who may not feel they have much to say to each other. So too, the texts Read forces to interact do not engage each other as readily or as persuasively as he suggests—like guests who miss the point under discussion or talk at cross purposes.

Read's challenge is to persuade his reader that texts he treats are actually comparable. His early modern women writers who likened their difficulties in writing to giving birth may not be easily brought into dialogue with actual gynecological texts. In some cases, Read's treatment makes more of the metaphor than may be there. Likely because some of the connections he draws between the texts seem strained, Read seems compelled to tell the reader where he has been and where he is going at virtually every points of transition within each chapter. It is hard to determine if so many, rather redundant signposts are necessary to allow readers to follow his argument through such disparate texts.

Read is very generous in acknowledging his intellectual debts to other literary theorists. His frequent digressions on those debts put his work in dialogue with theirs. As a *salonnièr(e)*, Read gives advice to his fellow literary theorists, especially those working on other periods of French literature, on how they might use the texts he treats in their own work. Readers who are not literary theorists may feel excluded from the conversation. While Read expresses concern that his use of so many texts by men appropriating the birthing experience might "forestall a truly feminist critique of gender in this period," he nonetheless hopes to that his work will provoke further such studies, beginning with *couvade* (p. 189).

*Birthing Bodies* contributes to both historical and literary studies, pointing out and challenging the binaries of good and bad traditionally ascribed to male and female genders respectively. For the historian, Read's study revives some early modern birthing accounts and compares them to other texts, including medical texts, and brings them into dialogue with modern literary theories that may well be less familiar. But Read's conversation will likely most thoroughly engage the literary theorists who have influenced his own formulation of the questions he addresses to early modern texts and his treatment of them as contributing to historical conceptions of gender and contemporary constructions of gender identity.

Kathleen Wellman  
Southern Methodist University  
[kwellman@smu.edu](mailto:kwellman@smu.edu)

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