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Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. xii + 178 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$38.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3713-7.

Review by Jeffrey J. Cohen, George Washington University.

Any new book in medieval studies that begins by quoting heavy metal from the 1970s (an Alice Cooper song from 1975, no less) is a brave work. Peggy McCracken's *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero* is not just daring (examining a variety of blood-related topics which have not been widely investigated by scholars, especially those who specialize in literature); it is also refreshingly original.

McCracken argues that blood is a substance that signifies differently according to the gender of the body from which it issues. Women's blood, especially when associated with menstruation or parturition, tends to be represented as abject, enfeebling, and proper only to private spaces. Men's blood, especially when it flows on the battlefield or in the veins of progeny, is regarded as powerful, identity-giving, and suitable for public celebration. Yet there are deep ambivalences in the social coding of what was to the medieval mind a fundamental biological substance. "The curse of Eve" (as Peter Abelard called menstruation) might produce a cure for leprosy or purge the feminine body of harmful excesses; the bleeding male body could become feminized. Medieval literature, McCracken argues, tends to uphold the valorization of masculine blood over feminine but can also at times undermine dominant gender values.

This short book is composed of a preface, six chapters, and a conclusion. Each explores a different literary representation of blood. Although the texts that McCracken examines largely derive from England and France in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, her comparative method allows her to range widely through space and time. The first chapter, "Only Women Bleed," traces the linking of women's menstrual blood to suffering. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la charrete*, for example, Lancelot bleeds on Guenevere's bed during their clandestine lovemaking. When the bloody sheets are revealed and the queen is accused of adultery, Guenevere argues that she must have suffered a nocturnal nosebleed. If she is going to lie, McCracken wonders, why does she not claim that she has had her period? The impossibility of asserting such a straightforward explanation leads McCracken to meditate on the absence of menstruation in medieval romance. As it turns out, "in the world organized by battles and the exchange of women between knights, only men bleed" (p. 13)—that is, only men experience a sanguineous efflux that has social consequences, such as the acclamation of heroism in battle.

"The Amenorrhoea of War" (chapter two) explores why women are "naturally" excluded from warfare, the goriest of public spaces. A scene from the Ridley Scott film *G. I. Jane* in which Demi Moore's character "suffers" amenorrhoea (loss of a monthly period) as a result of her combat training allows McCracken to remark how biology must be transcended (and femininity abjected) to allow a female body into battle. A similar removal from corporeality and desire attends the representation of most women warriors, especially cross-dressing heroines both fictional (*Roman de Silence*) and historical (Joan

of Arc). From this analysis, McCracken concludes that such representations exist to demonstrate that women are "unsuited to leadership in battle" (p. 26), an incompatibility revealed in the blood of menstruation as well as of parturition.

Why is it that when a father is willing to kill his child the act can be accounted sacrifice (Abraham and Isaac, Jephthah and his daughter), but a mother's infanticide is always murder? "The Gender of Sacrifice" (chapter three) investigates literary depictions of parents murdering children: Philomena in the twelfth-century French poem bearing her name, Abraham in *Le Mistère du Viel Testament*, the Amicus and Amelius legends, in which a father sacrifices his own children to wash the leprosy from his male friend. Paternal blood, McCracken writes, is shared with the offspring, making a woman's killing of a child an offense directed against that child's father; maternal blood, on the other hand, is imagined to be shed at the scene parturition, a "suppression of the mother's bleeding body" (p. 60).

Monsters tend to arise at social borders, policing what is permitted and what is illicit. Not surprisingly, they were associated with the stigma placed on women's blood. Contrary to the directness of its title ("Menstruation and Monstrous Birth"), chapter four examines not menstrual blood in its relation to monstrosity but "a menstrual logic" that clusters around negative depictions of maternal bloodlines. In works such as *Le roman du comte d'Anjou* and Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," worries about a mother's impure (non-noble) blood allow a lie about her having given birth to a monster to be believed. This denigration of maternal inheritance seldom works for long, however, and does implicitly acknowledge the intimate and enduring connection between the bodies of mother and child (even while rendering that intimacy a threat). Post-partum purification rituals, mandating that a mother be blessed at church after a mandatory "lying in" (*gesine*) of a month, likewise devalue the mother's blood, this time by rendering it a taint that needs ecclesiastical purification.

"The Scene of Parturition" (chapter five) continues this investigation into the dangers imagined to be posed to patriarchal culture by the corporeal bond between mother and child. Here, McCracken reads the construction and subsequent violation of feminine privacy zones, most notably in *Le roman de Mélusine*. In Jean d'Arras's romance, a fairy-descended mother forbids her husband from ever viewing her at her bath; when he violates the taboo he beholds her as half-woman, half-serpent. McCracken argues that the interdiction that has in fact been violated is against the witnessing of menstruation (another kind of "bodily transformation" [p. 83]). She then turns to an examination of the prohibition of men being present at the scene of birth, especially as a parturition episode is worked out in three versions of the Beves of Hampton story. Because birth scenes underscore "the fragility of the figural values associated with paternity," McCracken concludes, "the scene of birth is always monstrous" (p. 91).

A disharmony between literal and symbolic meanings of blood is often witnessed in representations of childbirth. A similar interpretive knot may be seen in the Grail romances, where a magical chalice is represented as bearing the blood of Christ. This divine substance is also associated with that flowing from the grail's keeper, a wounded (often castrated) king. A close reading of *Perlesvaus* and the *Estoire de saint graal* allow McCracken to discern in these narratives an intricate linking of conversion, conquest, and embodiment—seen, for example, when a Saracen woman is cured of a bloody flow upon becoming a Christian. This miracle enables McCracken to invoke a category that has been haunting her analysis all along but had yet to be invoked, race. Male Jews were often thought to experience a menstrual-like bleeding, a fundamental difference in biology that set them bodily apart from Christians, rendering their blood similar to that of women. A closing section returns to the vagina-like wound of the Grail keeper, arguing that this king's efflux ultimately suggests the "occasional inadequacy of gendered categories to describe bodies and blood" (p. 109). A brief conclusion entitled "Bleeding for Love" reiterates the main theses of the book, reads a rich scene of bloodletting in Marie de France's *Equitan*, and asserts that although blood tends to be gendered in predictable and discouraging ways, literature can sometimes "intervene" in this system of representation to question its "legitimacy" and "values" (p. 117).

The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero is an ambitious work, provocative and wide-ranging. There are times, however, when it is not well served by its own brevity. For example, even though I admire McCracken for her comparative methodology (at least in the early chapters; the second half of the book is rather more circumscribed in discipline and geography), the danger of a comparative method is that there is likely to be more within the field or body of literature to which one alludes than can be covered in a few pages of reference. In chapter two McCracken turns to Old Irish myth to discover all kinds of negative representations of women, war, and bodily function. She focuses mostly on Medb, the warrior queen who proves herself superior to the men of Ulster until during battle she finds herself incapacitated by her period. McCracken connects this episode with the unforgettable scene when the otherworldly woman Macha gives birth to twins during a running contest, an event that causes her to curse the Ulstermen with the recurring labor pangs that came to be their definitive mark. This second episode seems to me rather like the bloody sheets scene from Chrétien, where McCracken focuses so much on Guenevere and menstruation that she nearly neglects the source of the blood, the torn (post-virginal?) body of Lancelot. Macha's curse effects a fundamental bodily transformation of the Ulaid (men of Ulster), making them suffer repeatedly the pain of parturition. This is well-deserved justice for their unfeeling treatment of pregnant Macha and seems to offer an alternative to the denigration of birth scenes McCracken explores elsewhere. Compared to the women in most of the works which McCracken examines, women are quite differently portrayed in the Irish sources, exhibiting a potential for valorized "masculine" behavior that makes them rather similar to the women of Old Norse texts. The great hero Cu Chulainn, for example, is trained in Scotland by the matriarch Scáthach and has his only son with the warrior princess Aife; these women appear to offer an undemeaned alternative to Demi Moore, Silence, and Joan of Arc. A similar criticism could be advanced for McCracken's treatment of the Jewish choice of taking their lives 'al qiddush ha-Shem rather than be forcefully converted by crusaders at Mainz in 1096. The episode is so tersely narrated that it lacks context, especially because its depictions of women's blood are as highly literary as any found in the texts examined at more length in the book.

As McCracken herself admits, the problem with writing a selective book on a capacious topic is that most readers will find that some favorite scene of flowing blood has been omitted (p. 111). I do not mean to judge her work for what it might have been rather than for what it is, especially because it is such a valuable contribution to gender studies, medieval studies, and corporeal theory. *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* is a fascinating, lively, entertaining book. Built upon solid scholarship and proceeding through nuanced close readings of an impressive range of texts, it is a work that anyone interested in feminism, the history of the body, and the historical complexities of human identity will want to read.

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