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Richard D. E. Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004. ix + 291 pp. Includes bibliographical references and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-80145-4207-9.

Review by Rebecca Rogers, Université Paris 5, Sorbonne.

This book tells the story of eleven women who weep, bleed, fast and otherwise punish their bodies in pursuit of a sacred ideal. Many persons have seen their stories as edifying; as a result, they have been recounted, fictionalized and sanctified, most notably within the Catholic Church and in the writings of an ultra-Catholic intelligentsia whose hey-day stretched from the French defeat in 1870 to the period of Vichy. Richard Burton, a literary scholar, portrays these women's lives in their relation to the sacred and uses them to illuminate the gendered significance of suffering and sacrifice within an increasingly secular French society. Although he acknowledges that the culture of suffering he describes was a "minority calling," it nonetheless speaks a great deal to the gender dynamics within the Catholic Church and within Catholicism more generally. The other theme running throughout the book—the male appropriation of this female suffering—speaks explicitly to the operations of power within a gender analysis. Perhaps most importantly, the book moves the discussion about gender and religion well into the twentieth century, beyond the separation of Church and State in 1905. As a result, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood* offers a way to understand the enduring appeal of a culture of suffering within modern society, an appeal that many readers will no doubt find both incomprehensible and at times offensive.

This erudite, yet engaged, analysis of certain currents within Catholic spirituality uses biographical methods to provide texture and consistency to the lives of eleven women. Although not all were Catholic nor were they all properly speaking religious, their lives represent a radical form of feminine devotional practice known as "vicarious suffering" or "mystical substitution" that Burton argues was "the most publicized, if not the most generalized, expression of female spirituality in France" from 1870 to 1920 (p. xv). Counterrevolutionary writers as Joseph de Maistre, Louis de Bonald and Pierre Ballanche, provided the theological underpinnings for the doctrine of vicarious suffering that argued the belief that forms of individual martyrdom renewed and replicated the original sacrifice of Christ and had the potential to save not just the sufferers, but the entire French nation. For women, Burton argues, this doctrine not only gave meaning to the pain of their daily lives, "but also empowered them through the voluntary espousal of their powerlessness" (p. xvii). In practice, women's suffering frequently took the form of self-starvation or tuberculosis. While the first five women under consideration are presented in chronological order, the author then circles back in time to consider the lives of the remaining six. As a result, there is little attempt to understand an evolution in this form of devotional practice. Still the author does argue that the French defeat in 1870 provided a particularly fruitful context for the writings of ultra-Catholic intellectuals who found theological meaning in women's suffering. And it is these intellectuals' interpretations of women's experiences that constitute the core of this book.

A few of the women under consideration are well known—notably Thérèse Martin (1873-97), who became Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus and was canonized in 1925; Camille Claudel (1864-1943), sculptress, sister of the Catholic poet-dramatist Paul Claudel and lover of August Rodin; and Simone Weil (1909-43), the philosopher and radical political activist. Specialists of French Catholicism will be familiar as well with Mélanie Calvat (1831-1904), who witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1846 at La Salette, and with Raïssa Maritain (1883-1960), a Russian-born Jewish convert to Catholicism, whose husband Jacques Maritain reintroduced the Scholastic philosophy of Saint Thomas

of Aquinas and whose salon attracted a wide array of intellectuals between the 1920s and 1960s. Literary scholars will know, as well, Colette Peignot (1903-38), whose initial claim to fame was as the lover of the transgressive writer Georges Bataille, but whose brief life was then mythologized as “Laure” in Bataille’s and Michel Leiris’s writings, amongst others. But the remaining five women are far more obscure. Marthe Robin (1902-81), Pauline Lair Lamotte (1853-1918), who took on the name “Madeleine Lebouc”, Eva Lavallière (1866-1929), and Claire Ferchaud (1896-1972) are all presented in a chapter entitled “Fasting, Bleeding, Seeing: Extraordinary phenomena in France, c. 1870- c.1970,” and their lives exemplify their commitment to the doctrine of vicarious suffering. Although Anne-Marie Roulé (1846-1907) only appears in the final chapter, this erstwhile mistress and then mystagogue to Léon Bloy, the ultra-Catholic author of a great number of anguished spiritual novels, also experienced the sort of extraordinary phenomena detailed in earlier chapters, notably having visions. The social backgrounds of these women varied widely, including middle or upper-class intellectuals, such as Simone Weil and Raïssa Maritain, as well as simple peasant women like Mélanie Calvet and Marthe Robin. Most importantly, for the author’s analysis, however, most of these women’s lives are known not through their own writings, but through those of male writers, even though many of the women did in fact leave extensive writings of their own.

The author’s biographical approach offers both women and religious historians fascinating insights into the material, familial, and psychological context that helps to explain these eleven women’s attraction to a doctrine that brought for many unremitting suffering and often descent into insanity. Harsh mothers and tender feminized fathers seem to have played a particularly critical role in these women’s psychic development, none of whom achieved lives of personal autonomy. Unlike present-day anorexics, these women were not concerned about their outside appearance but sought through their self-deprivation a form of inner identification with the sufferings of Christ. Their commitment to lives of suffering generally occurred through some sort of conversion experience that led them to lives of voluntary or involuntary reclusion. While the premises of vicarious suffering or mystical substitution offer little apparent attraction to the contemporary reader, the author’s exploration of Theresian spirituality offers insight into its enduring appeal and to the influence it exerted on women at the time. In her autobiographical *Histoire d’une âme* (1898), Thérèse emphasizes the primacy of love over merit and on the need for “loving audacity” (*amoureuse audace*) rather than caution and restraint in dealings with God. Burton emphasizes her distance from expiatory suffering, which explains the enduring cult of Thérèse in Catholic circles (despite interpretations, such as that of Claudel, who read her life as one of vicarious suffering). The other women under investigation, however, had a far harsher vision of their relationship to God, which explains in many ways why this particular version of Catholic spirituality could only attract a minority. As Burton writes, while comparing Thérèse Martin with Raïssa Maritain: “Thérèse democratizes holiness; Raïssa restricts it to an elite [...] Where Thérèse almost completely escaped the sacrificial paradigm of relations with God, the Maritains—and Raïssa in particular—put it at the very center of their thought and existence: blood and tears, not smiles, were the currency in which she conducted her transactions with God” (p. 105).

As a literary scholar, Burton relies primarily on literary texts to reveal the spiritual focus on blood and tears that runs throughout the book. And, as he argues from the outset, these texts were primarily written by men about women. Paul Claudel, Jacques Maritain and Léon Bloy, all ultra-Catholic intellectuals of the post-1870 period, wrote extensively about women’s faith and suffering. The three authors wrote, for example, about Mélanie Calvert and the apparition of the Virgin Mary at La Salette. For Bloy, the message of La Salette was evidence “that it is absolutely necessary to suffer in order to be saved” (p. 11). The drama and pathos of many of these women’s lives, who often died young of tuberculosis, provided the material for a great number of theological and fictional writings. Paul Claudel’s best-known play, *L’Annonce faite à Marie* (1912), was all about atoning self-sacrifice where the female characters suffer while men reap the benefits of their sufferings. Overall, the reader learns a great

deal about the cultural and intellectual life of an ultra-Catholic milieu during the Third Republic--writers, philosophers and theologians who Burton situates on the political far right.

The individual life stories that structure the first six chapters of the book reveal the centrality of self-questioning in the lives of the women under investigation, but the relationship with Catholicism is not always uppermost. Camille Claudel, for example, became anti-religious after her first Communion so that her relationship to Catholicism and to the doctrine of vicarious suffering only emerges in the writings of her brother, Paul. Similarly Colette Peignot's relationship to Catholicism was far from straightforward, although Burton argues she remained "imprisoned within a Catholic worldview even as she sought to negate and transcend it by sacrilegious inversion" (p. 150). Again, however, her relationship to the sacred assumed coherence only in the writings of George Bataille. Still, all of these women--be they practicing Catholics or not--unquestionably suffered during their lives and it is this suffering that provides the central focus to the book.

Women's relationship to religion and Catholicism has received a great deal of historical attention in the past twenty years and Burton situates his book from the start within an intellectual discussion about the feminization of religion. The final chapter seeks to draw together the different strands of his analysis in an extended reflection about what lay behind these different women's quest for the sacred. The author situates the fascination for these women's experiences within the context of what he terms the "culture wars" of the late nineteenth century that were "in a very real sense, about the meaning of the ordeal of any number of fasting, bleeding, and otherwise suffering Catholic women" (p. 188). His discussion ranges then from the meanings attached to "mysteria" (collective and individual manifestations of religious hysteria), to "holy anorexia," attitudes toward dying and dead bodies, the androgynous Church, the relationship between passion and pain, precious tears, the figure of Mary Magdalene, and finally the significance of hair, holiness and sacrifice. As this list of themes suggests, Burton's intellectual curiosity is wide-ranging and his analysis often takes unexpected directions, such as when he moves from an analysis of representations of these women's hair to that of three close-cropped writers (Baudelaire, Genet and Leiris), to Foucault's bald pate, the Tour de France as the *Tour de souffrance* and finally the significance of *les tondues* (the shaved women of the post-Second World War period). Historians may find some of these leaps difficult to follow but they all suggest the importance of understanding the relationship between women and Catholicism in a corporeal sense and taking the physical, be it hair, blood, or tears, as essential, not contingent, manifestations of this relationship. For historians of women, and particularly historians of women and religion, this book goes against the grain of a burgeoning scholarship that seeks to situate women as actors within an admittedly patriarchal Church. The focus on male writers portraying female suffering inevitably contributes to a far more passive representation of these women, an issue that Burton highlights in his conclusion. "Politically and ideologically, the Brides' willingness to suffer with and for, and to subordinate themselves to their mystical Bridegroom reinforced the patriarchal principle in operation both in the Church and, more loosely and less obviously, in French society at large" (p. 249). Fortunately, Catholicism produced other, more widespread, forms of devotional behavior that led women into public, practicing charity, for example, or opening schools throughout the world. But this is a different story from the one recounted in *Holy Tears, Holy Blood*.

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