

*Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France.* Cathy McClive.  
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*Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France* is the first major study of the representation of menstruation in sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Europe. Through readings of a rich array of medical, theological, and legal texts, put into

dialogue with specific case studies drawn from personal, medical, and judicial sources, Cathy McClive argues against the reductionist view of early modern attitudes toward menstruation as misogynistic. Her highly convincing, original analysis exposes and embraces the complexities of early modern discussions of menstruation and the varied meanings attributed to it, linking them to larger concerns about procreation and gender identity.

Chapters 1 and 2 take on the commonly accepted idea that early modern medical theorists and moral theologians saw menstruation as monstrous and polluting. The first chapter analyzes sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic and Protestant translations of Leviticus to show how theologians emphasized protecting procreation rather than stigmatizing the menstruating woman. Placing these translations in parallel with contemporary dictionary definitions, McClive reveals how similar words became conflated and fed the popular imagination, no longer reflecting the original theological interpretation. Chapter 2 examines debates over the appropriateness of sex during menstruation. Here McClive demonstrates how moral theology and medical theory, which shared common goals of optimizing procreation and encouraging healthy progeny, influenced each other. She argues that the majority of these writers did not oppose sex during menstruation because they considered menstrual blood to be toxic. Instead, doctors believed fetal health could be compromised by the presence of too great a quantity of blood at the time of conception. Theologians struggled to resolve the contradiction between the biblical injunction that spouses fulfill their conjugal duty and warnings against intercourse during a woman's menstrual period. Their discouragement of sex during menstruation was not based in a belief in the menstruating woman's uncleanness, but in the medically grounded unlikelihood of it resulting in pregnancy and the possible harm to the fetus.

Chapters 3 through 5 examine the question of menstrual time, exploring the fundamental importance and meanings early modern doctors, theologians, jurists, and ordinary women attributed to the regularity of the menses for determining health, fertility, and the length of pregnancy, as well as the implications of the unreliability of menstrual regularity. Chapter 3 examines competing definitions of menstrual norms, their importance for reading female bodies, and their larger cultural significance. McClive's analysis underlines the difficulties of determining menstrual time and the crucial role of observation and self-observation in defining it. Chapter 4 looks more closely at the relationship between menstruation and procreation, exploring the role menstrual norms played in the detection and proof of pregnancy in the medical and judicial contexts, and the uncertainties generated by menstrual irregularities. Chapter 5 examines the larger sociocultural consequences of menstrual time, analyzing civil disputes over late births where doctors and jurists were called upon to make decisions regarding legitimacy, paternity, and fetal viability, pitting women's own understanding of their bodies against doctors and jurists who sought to control them. McClive demonstrates that while jurists proved to be rather flexible in practice, basing their decisions on a range of factors, medical doctors often used menstrual irregularity to cast doubt on women's claims and to prove their superior knowledge.

Finally, chapter 6 troubles neat sex and gender binaries regarding menstruation by examining cases of “Bleeding Hermaphrodites and Menstruating Men.” Moving beyond the restrictions of Thomas Laqueur’s one-sex model, McClive shows how physicians and jurists consistently recognized the ambiguities surrounding menstrual bleeding and its relationship to embodied identity. She argues that in debates over how to assign sex or gender to ambiguous bodies, menstruation alone did not make the woman, nor did its absence clearly determine masculinity.

This impeccably researched and beautifully written book makes a vital contribution to the histories of medicine, the body, women, and gender that will be of great interest to scholars and students across the disciplines. McClive’s study creatively and effectively debunks long-held assumptions about early modern views on menstruation that have continued to dominate its scholarly treatment. By focusing on the fluid physiological processes of menstruation and procreation and the complex problems surrounding the negotiation of their meanings rather than on anatomy, McClive substantially enriches and complicates our understanding of early modern constructions of sex and gender. Finally, her analysis of early modern French sources also offers a welcome and essential complement to the preponderance of scholarship on England for the period, extending analysis to a larger European context and raising crucial questions about how histories of the body and gender are written.

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