
H-France Review Vol. 12 (April 2012), No. 55

Cathy McClive and Nicole Pellegrin, eds., *Femmes en fleurs, femmes en corps. Sang, santé, sexualités, du Moyen Âge aux Lumières*. Saint-Étienne: L'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2010. vi + 364 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and figures. 23 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-86272-539-0.

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The study of women in history seems to have taken a backseat. The end of that sentence could be “lately” or “yet again.” Either ending might apply, depending on one’s perspective. To be sure, more studies of society and culture in the past take women into account, and both syllabi and course offerings include women’s history at the college and university level. But it seems—I have no data but a great many anecdotes—that women’s history has stagnated. Perhaps we need some new controversies, whether of the more contemporary variety (like the Sex Wars^[1]) or historical (such as the companionate marriage thesis).^[2] This collection of essays does not quite aspire to controversy, but it does aim to initiate further and new conversations about the history of the body in general and the history of the female body in particular. Many of the essays accordingly revisit familiar themes and theses, but the collection does move discussion forward in several areas, largely on the strength of its focus on the life cycle of female embodied experience. Raging arguments it does not produce, but lurking in several of the essays are possibilities in that direction.

The notion of the “femme en fleurs” divides the book into three sections—“Préserver sa fleur,” “Fleurir,” and “Perdre sa fleur”—that focus on the relationship of women to their bodies. The somatic conceit plays on the association of flowers with menstruation and fertility. “Preservation” entails health and beauty on the one hand and the effects of clausturation on the other. Laurence Moulinier-Brogi examines the rise of uroscopy in the Middle Ages, especially as it was understood to provide a way to look into the (female) body. Experts debated whether male and female urine could be distinguished, with the answer usually that gender difference was believed to be visible. Because they were colder and moister according to the theory of the humors, women had distinct properties in their urine. Some claimed visual inspection of urine could reveal pregnancy and whether a woman was sexually virtuous.

While it is easy to dismiss this sort of urine analysis as medically dubious, the larger issues of attempting to examine women while accepting the cultural need for female modesty and the efforts to do practical pathology are significant. Where Moulinier-Brogi’s subject is health, Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore’s is beauty. Debates over beauty were especially complicated because notions of the female as a failed or improper version of the male body competed with ideas that women enjoy perfection in themselves because nature makes nothing in vain.^[3] Neoplatonic notions of the body reflecting the divine, political theory ideas about the body as a figure for the well-ordered republic, and complaints about beauty as illusory and even diabolic all shaped the discussion. Although never fully resolved, interlocutors in the beauty debates reached some consensus in the end that order is reflected in the body, and the beautiful body indicates proper hygiene, both corporeal and spiritual. While the association of women with beauty is not new, Berriot-Salvadore situates the early modern iteration of concerns about female beauty in

contemporary discussions. Even more, her essay and Moulinier-Brogi's together invoke the problem of women as embodied subjects in the world. Modesty and beauty are not opposites, but they are points of anxiety that might be put into direct conversation with each other.

The notion that bodies, especially female bodies, were subject to social disciplining is not surprising, and less so in the context of the convent and religious practices aimed at the body. Nonetheless, Marie-Élisabeth Henneau's essay, which follows the female life cycle in the convent, indicates the constant and extensive efforts that began as soon as a woman (or more often, a girl) entered the convent and continued until her death. Corporeal discipline invoking *imitatio Christi* is a recurrent theme, along with efforts to subdue the body, and exhortations toward self-mastery. As Henneau notes, the complicating factors—the language of sensuality around nuns as brides of Christ and the presumptive non-fertility of nuns in a world that defined women largely by their fertility—helped to deepen and extend the discipline of the nun's body. Nicole Pellegrin's essay moves away from actual bodies for the most part to argue that stigmata and other marks on the body, or in the body in the case of internal stigmata, are a form of spiritual writing. The gradual prevalence of the idea of internal marks of sanctity in the eighteenth century, Pellegrin maintains, reflected the move toward interiority of belief. It is apparent that religious precepts and convent practices exerted tremendous pressure to produce conforming bodies. Similarly apparent was that women were active and complicit in these disciplinary processes. But what if it is not or not only the threat of unruly female bodies that is at work? What if the threat is from the virtuous? By the terms of the deal, so to speak, the virtuous woman in the convent embodied the values of her society outside the usual corporeal economy. What might that do to or say about that economy remains an open and intriguing question.

The virtuous woman who does what she is supposed to do but does not take part in heterosexuality and marriage leads to the second set of essays, "Fleurir," which addresses the female reproductive body. For Helen King, the 1559 French translation of Jacques Dubois's gynecology text, *Gynaeciorum libri* by Guillaume Chrestien, reveals much about the construction of sexual identity and the role of women in matters of health in Renaissance France. Inverting the order of the original Latin text, Chrestien puts the procreation section in front of the discussion of menstruation. The text was also aimed at women—he pointedly wanted to improve their knowledge of gynecology—and dedicated to Diane de Poitiers, who had helped Queen Catherine de' Medici get pregnant. The female body, King emphasizes, was seen as specific and specifically reproductive. This last point is supported by Eugénie Pascal's analysis of the discussions of pregnancy and related issues in the letters of elite women.

The concerns of these women were for the most part familiar: they considered pregnancy to be something of a vocation, they worried about sterility, and they wanted to have male children. Most women were not effusive about pregnancy, reserving emotional attachments for children who survived, and many women, while they did complain of the discomforts of pregnancy, did not regard it as an affliction. Above all, they understood their part in the production of members of the family lineage. Pascal's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pregnant women probably utilized many of the same methods identified in Elizabeth L'Estrange's essay for ameliorating pregnancy in the Middle Ages. Techniques such as popular devotions, pilgrimages, prayers, special foods and drinks, baths, magic formulas, and amulets, remained the common modes for dealing with pregnancy until modern medicine started offering alternatives. Echoing Pascal's findings, L'Estrange notes that women did not accept the claim that Eve's sin had relegated them to accepting suffering.

In different ways, the last two essays of the section focus on women's responses to female sexuality and fertility. Lianne McTavish takes issue with the focus on accounts of the female

body that emphasize female sexuality in pejorative terms. She argues that the attention to references to the “parties honteuses” in various forms ignores the praise for female reproduction, and for the uterus in particular. Lisa Wynne Smith approaches pregnancy from the perspective of women who failed to achieve it. The blame fell on women, and communal gossip about sterile women made matters worse. The surveillance of pregnancy (or non-pregnancy) was a potent mode of controlling women, and women did most of it.[4]

The role of men appears most obviously in aspects of the essays in Part III, “Perdre sa fleur.” Susan Broomhall explores notarial registers to understand how illiterate women got themselves into sexual relationships (and often found themselves pregnant), and how they regarded the process of pregnancy. Broomhall’s findings about the centrality of sexual honor and the desire to avoid scandal are not surprising, though some of the areas of female knowledge are. Women used presumptions of ignorance to demonstrate that they were assaulted, and they often knew with some certainty when they became pregnant and usually by whom, even when circumstances might look ambiguous. As in the work of Elizabeth S. Cohen[5], Broomhall indicates a sense of agency even for illiterate and impoverished women. On the other hand, Stéphanie Gaudillat Cautela finds that the lack of definition of the term “rape” meant there was scant legal protection from sexual assault. Honor was again the key issue in rape cases, while the “victim” was the father or husband as the man whose “property” was damaged by assault. Cautela’s contribution to our understanding of this dismal history is in revealing how cultural products such as songs and stories depicted women as weak and easily seduced, but nonetheless at fault when they were assaulted. The final essay in the section and in the volume addresses menopause. As Cathy McClive notes, men who did most of the writing often did not discuss the aging female body. Despite the comparative silence, McClive demonstrates that menstruation was central to beliefs about health and fertility, and the associations of the cessation of menstruation with aging make it an important, if elusive, topic.

Collectively, these essays invoke the ways that the female body has been seen in polarized terms—women are good or evil; women are victims or agents—in order to complicate the binary tendencies. Complication is not as dramatic as controversy, but the density of discussion about the female body points to a new understanding of body politics as a mode of social intercourse. More than cataloguing or keeping score, the idea of sociality and intellectual transaction around the female body promises to invigorate the study of women anew.

NOTES

[1] See for instance Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture, Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[2] Lawrence Stone, *Family Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977) was in many ways the starting point. The literature is vast but recent contributions particularly relevant to France include Jeffrey Watt, *The Making of Modern Marriage: Matrimonial Control and the Rise of Sentiment in Neuchâtel, 1550-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) and Maurice Daumas, *Le Mariage amoureux: histoire du lien conjugal sous L’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004).

[3] The classic account is Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). Among the critics of his thesis are Katharine Park and Robert A. Nye, “Destiny is Anatomy.” *New Republic*. February 18, 1991, pp. 53-57 and Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[4] Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

[5] See especially Elizabeth S. Cohen, "No Longer Virgins: Self-Presentation by Young Women of Late Renaissance Rome," in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 169-91.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Cathy McClive and Nicole Pellegrin, "Preface"

Laurence Moulinier-Brogi, "Virginité, maternité et maux du corps féminine au prisme du l'uroscopie médiévale"

Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore, "De l'ornement et du gouvernement des dames: esthétique et hygiène dans des traits médicaux des XVIe et XVIIe siècles"

Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, "Corps sous le voile à l'époque moderne"

Nicole Pellegrin, "Fleur saintes. L'écriture des stigmates (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)"

Helen King, "Engendrer, 'la femme': Jacques Dubois et Diane de Poitiers"

Eugénie Pascal, "L'Attente de l'héritier. Désir d'enfant, grossesse et délivrance dans les lettres de princesses (1560-1630)"

Elizabeth L'Estrange, "'Quant femme enfante...': Remèdes pour l'accouchement au Moyen Age"

Lianne McTavish, "L'Ambivalence du corps féminine en France au début de l'époque moderne"

Lisa Wynne Smith, "La raillerie des femmes? Les femmes, la stérilité et la société en France à l'époque moderne"

Susan Broomhall, "Le prix de l'amour: les négociations nées de relations sexuelles et de grossesses illégitimes à Paris au début du XVIe siècle"

Stéphanie Gaudillat Cautela, "Le corps des femmes dans la qualification du 'viol' au XVIe siècle"

Cathy McClive, "Quand les fleurs s'arrêtent: vieillesse, ménopause et imaginaire médical à l'époque moderne"

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ISSN 1553-9172