

## Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France

**Review Number:** 1970

**Publish date:** Thursday, 11 August, 2016

**Author:** Cathy McClive

**ISBN:** 9780754666035

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Price:** £70.00

**Pages:** 280pp.

**Publisher:** Routledge

**Publisher url:** <https://www.routledge.com/Menstruation-and-Procreation-in-Early-Modern-France/McClive/p/book/9780754666035>

**Place of Publication:** New York, NY

**Reviewer:** Sarah Fox

Cathy McClive's monograph sets out to dispel the myth of what she calls 'menstrual misogyny' (p. 1). That is, the belief across early modern Europe that menses and the menstruating female body, were inherently toxic and polluting. In doing so, she challenges three dominant assumptions about sex, gender and reproduction: that menstruation was perceived negatively, that it was a clear and unambiguous signifier of womanhood, and that the interdependence of menstruation and reproduction was straightforward and widely understood. Her decision to focus on early modern France is justifiable on several levels. As she points out, debates on the nature of government, family, science, and religion flourished in France throughout the early modern period leading to competing discourses on medicine, rationality, and the primacy of Gallic or Roman law. Long periods of royal infertility led to wider anxieties about population decline, illegitimacy and patrilineal descent. Perhaps worthy of greater consideration, however, is the primacy of French physicians in the literature of early modern midwifery and reproduction alongside the extent to which these works were disseminated across Europe. These texts were part of European-wide discourses between eminent physicians, creating the potential to speculate on the influence of French theories on menstruation and procreation in a wider European context, and *vice versa*. Such speculation would be particularly interesting as McClive is explicit in her desire to 'counter the dominance of the English historiography' (p. 17) of menstruation. This, she argues, is biologically determinist and therefore reduces menstruation to an entirely female problem. Her discussion of the significance of Patricia Crawford's article 'Attitudes to menstruation in seventeenth-century England' (1) suggests that her historiographical challenge is rooted in the interpretation of the sources. Given that McClive relies upon medical texts that were popularly translated into English, along with biblical passages and the work of Aristotle, one would assume that similar attitudes to menstruation and procreation might be expressed in both countries however the lack of direct comparison leaves this issue a little murky. Whilst such a comparison could probably form the basis of another project in itself, a brief discussion of McClive's suppositions in this area would have enhanced the strength of her challenge.

McClive presents her case convincingly. Her suggestion that historians 'open up' (p. 1) their definitions of menstruation and the way in which it relates to gender creates an interestingly nuanced notion of what constituted male and female periodic bleeding. By using contemporary understandings of humoral medicine

as an analytical framework, she is able to discuss a number of menstrual variables based upon notions of personal balance rather than original sin and the narrative of pollution. The persistence and longevity of humoral theory despite theoretical and scientific challenges enables McClive to navigate a period spanning several hundred years though this does, at times, create a false sense of continuity across a large portion of history. That is not to say that McClive's argument for continuity is in any way flawed, rather that the comparison of texts and ideas dated 200 years apart raises questions in the reader about the context of that continuity. Were these texts tracing a continuous line of thought back to Aristotle, or had similar conclusions been reached via different methods of observations or philosophies? A little more exploration of these continuities would only have strengthened McClive's argument. That said, McClive has not set out to offer us a comprehensive compendium of early modern menstruation and procreation. Rather, she looks to question not only the way in which menstruation has been viewed throughout history, but also the way in which it has been historiographically constructed, in order to start new lines of enquiry into the way in which sex, reproduction and gender should be understood.

McClive begins her exploration of early modern menstruation and procreation with an examination of the Book of Leviticus. Her detailed deconstruction of the original text reveals a focus not just upon female bodily emissions, but also male. Not only were these bodily emissions often referred to gender-neutrally as 'genital flux', the requirements to cleanse and atone following contact with these emissions were similarly impartial. By considering menstrual taboos in Leviticus alongside seminal taboos, McClive suggests that proscriptions on sexual contact with menstruating women were not due to misogynistic ideas of the polluting female body, but rather about creating the optimum conditions for conception. Her analysis of the language – of both the original Latin and the vernacular French – is also revealing. By using French-language dictionaries she is able to show a 'slippage' in the way in which genital flux was discussed from the ritually loaded word 'unclean' to the more materially ambiguous term 'impure'. She documents the importance of this slippage through the attempts of dictionary writers to correct the alteration before increased prudishness at the beginning of the eighteenth century led to an increased tendency to use euphemisms. As a result, the nuances of the original translations were lost.

These nuances are vital to her argument, as the emphasis on ritual impurity in the original text enabled ideas of physical impurity to be avoided. This was important because the prevalent medical theory on the interplay between menstruation and procreation was that menstrual blood provided foetal nourishment. It could not, therefore, be inherently toxic. McClive examines the interactions between the medical and theological discourses on sex during menstruation and subsequent procreation to support her argument against 'menstrual misogyny'. McClive's research demonstrates that, in the medical literature, menstrual blood was actually compared to arterial blood as a pure bodily humour in its original state. Impurity was acquired by the menses as it cleansed the body of excess or corrupt humours in preparation for conception. A child conceived during menstruation would therefore be adversely affected by the corrupt humours that had not yet been purged from the body. As medical experts discussed the impact of menstruation (and involuntary seminal emission) on conception and the subsequent health of the infant, theologians considered the extent to which sexual contact during menstruation could be considered a sin. The potential sin, she concludes, lay in the creation of an ill or malformed foetus, not in contact with menses.

The following chapters consider the regularity of menstrual bleeding and the way in which this enabled bodies (particularly female bodies) to be 'read' by observers. In doing so, McClive highlights the difficulties of reconciling the ideal menstruating body with women's experiences. Her examination of medical texts sets out the ideal of a regular, monthly menstruation of a moderate flow. She looks at the way in which women were expected to manage and record this knowledge of their bodies and how it could then be used by medical practitioners. The emphasis, she notes, was firmly on regularity, with this being considered a sign of a disciplined and ordered body. McClive's examination of elite women's letters, however, shows an awareness of variables in the menstrual cycle, such as personal history, illness, and the temporary disruption that could be caused by upset, sexual activity and lactation. This gap between the ideal and the actual menstruating body is also evident in McClive's subsequent exploration of the links between menstruation and pregnancy using judicial records. McClive demonstrates that the cessation of menstruation was not in

itself considered proof of pregnancy, and suggests that this forms an implicit recognition by both medical and judicial authorities that menstruation was neither regular, nor was its cessation a clear signifier of pregnancy.

In examining the links between menstruation and reproduction in judicial records, McClive unpicks the way in which the actual menstruating body challenged the medical establishment. How did obstetricians explain bodies that bled throughout pregnancy? What was the impact of such bleeding on the foetus? How could they differentiate between menstruation in pregnancy and a fatal detached placenta? Crucially, what was the link between menstruation and pregnancy? How did the variables of irregular menstruation and an uncertain gestation period interact? She highlights the dispute amongst high-profile medical men about the period of human gestation, and how anomalies were explained through disparities in the lunar and solar month, or maternal miscalculation. The judicial sources that McClive uses in these chapters are diverse and, whilst this enables her to draw wide-ranging conclusions, it raises questions about the impact of socio-economic status on the way in which menstruating bodies were read and understood. Her sources include the legal declarations of pregnancy made by single women to avoid charges of infanticide should the infant die during, or soon after, the birth; criminal assault cases in which pregnancy of the victim was alleged; and an eighteenth-century legitimacy suit. Whilst she touches on the impact of socio-economic status on the way in which the cessation of menstruation might be interpreted in her case studies, McClive leaves space in the historiography for an in-depth discussion of the social perceptions of menstruation and pregnancy. As she suggests, elite women looking to provide their husband with an heir perceived (and therefore treated) disruption to their menstrual cycle much differently to young single women facing the stigma of illegitimacy. In doing so, she perceives scope for further study of this subject. Prior experience of pregnancy and birth might, for example, have an impact on the way in which the menstrual cycle was understood and experienced amongst women at all social levels. The way in which others perceived menstruation and pregnancy may also alter the way in which it was approached and understood. McClive briefly mentions the way in which Marie-Antoinette's menstrual cycle was discussed amongst courtiers (p. 142) in anticipation of her pregnancy in 1778. In a lower social context, for example, this could be widened out to include neighbours, lodgers and even family members.

McClive's final chapter looks to unpick the impact of our modern, gendered approach to menstruation using humoral theory. She considers periodical bleeding in men and 'ambivalent bodies' as a way of accessing the 'exceptional normal' menstruating body (p. 196). If, as she argues, menstruation was simply a matter of humoral make-up then it was an issue of sanguinity, rather than gender. To reinforce her argument, she points out that early modern recipes to cure immoderate periodical bleeding were similar for both men and women, implying that causality in male and female bodies was essentially the same. McClive's examination of menstrual bleeding and reproduction in hermaphroditic bodies shows the intricacy of the association between menstruation, gender and reproduction. Hermaphrodites, she suggests, offered an insight into the way in which gender was understood throughout the early modern period as the authorities looked to assign them a place within the dominant binary gender system. That very little consideration was given to the presence (or absence) of periodic bleeding in these cases suggests that it was not thought to determine biological gender without other physical indicators such as the size and functionality of their reproductive organs. Just as the cessation of menstruation did not necessarily indicate pregnancy, its presence was not necessarily evidence of womanhood.

*Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France* offers the reader a novel insight into the way in which gender and procreation were understood historically. By removing her scholarship from gendered notions of pollution, McClive is able to argue convincingly for the 'opening up' of our cultural understanding of menstruation. The creative inclusion of judicial records in her source material adds an extra dimension to her meticulous analysis of biblical and medical texts, highlighting the tensions between medico-legal ideas of 'normal' menstruation and the 'reality of exceptions'. As must be expected from an exploratory work, this book is not comprehensive. Instead, it encourages the reader to challenge their own assumptions about menstruation and the gendered body, raising questions and opening up new avenues of potential scholarship. McClive's approach reminds us that as scholars we must be careful not to impose our

own cultural restrictions upon our subjects. As she concludes: 'early modern French medical practitioners, casuists, biblical translators, dictionary authors, jurists and lay men and women embraced the ambiguities of menstruation, menstrual blood and the menstruant, and so, as historians, should we' (p.231).

## Notes

1. Attitudes to menstruation in seventeenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 91 (1981) 47–73.[Back to \(1\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1970>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/158333>