

Kirk D. Read. *Birthing Bodies in Early Modern France: Stories of Gender and Reproduction*.

Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xiv + 206 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6632-5.

Birthing Bodies is an eclectic, stimulating analysis that unpicks a plethora of associations made with the idea of childbirth in early modern France. Kirk Read's corpus of primary texts is highly diverse, comprising medical treatises, poetry, prose narratives, satire, and travel writing. Read's objective is to reappraise the idea of fertility and reproductive capacity in a variety of contexts that have been the sites of enthusiastic critical interest in terms of gender and sexuality in the last thirty years. He postulates that in early modern France diverse social and intellectual groups had a vested interest in appropriating the concept of the birthing body, so that it was repeatedly repositioned with relation to its normal, female context, with some startling results. In each of his chapters he subjects a key text or topos centred on questions of reproduction and gender to his own brand of repositioning, by pairing it with texts that may challenge some of its central assumptions.

Chapter 1 treats the topos of postpartum lying-in and its long-standing misogynistic associations with dangerous or risible female gossip through *Les Caquets de l'accouchée*. Here Read introduces recent criticism on male menses and on the salon to suggest that both bodily and socially the interloping male narrator feels compelled to share in, rather than simply deride, the curative properties of this female space. Chapter 2 builds on the ambiguous figure of the authoritative midwife, prominent at the end of the *Caquets*, by paralleling Rabelais's fictional account of matronly incompetence at Gargantua's birth with Louise Boursier's experience-based dramatization of her role in the delivery of Henri IV's children. Chapter 3 takes the contested association of hands-on obstetric experience and power a stage further by focusing on two textual accounts of the ancient female obstetrician Agnodice. While the doctor Jacques Guilleméau uses the figure to discuss the problem of shame and touch in the delivery room — unlike Agnodice, male practitioners are forced

to “grope[] around blindly in the dark” (92) — unmarried poet Catherine des Roches links Agnodice’s capacity to see and touch taboo areas with women’s taboo appropriation of the right to generate words. Developing the textual brainchild theme, chapter 4 reexamines Pléiade poets’ fondness for birth and breast feeding metaphors by juxtaposing these self-styled “masculinized mothers,” rather smugly rejoicing in hermaphroditic self-sufficiency (104), with contemporary empirical texts that articulate the importance of gender hierarchy in nature, predicated upon the model of the male norm. Chapter 5 explores unnatural, fear-inducing hermaphroditic forms (the effeminate courtier; monstrous gender anomalies), drawing on previous scholarship examining the troubling associations of masculinity with what is bodily other (parturition, gestation), before changing tack again and introducing practitioner accounts that reveal signs of sympathetic treatment of gender indeterminacy in early modern medical and legal practice. Chapter 6 tackles French missionary accounts of the custom of the *couvade* (postpartum lying in by fathers) in New World tribal societies, building on the scholarship that identifies the parturient male as the ultimate signifier of unpatriarchal exoticism for these writers, but finding faint signs of admiration and envy in some contemporaneous pictorial and textual allusions to the practice.

Read is particularly concerned, then, to reexamine the binary models of gender that have percolated from past to present: the bad/good dichotomy that has set normative against a concomitant abnormal in both the early modern imaginary — where weakness is conceived as female, queer, monstrous — and in modern criticism that feeds on the interrogation of this assumption. He challenges these tendencies not by unearthing new texts (most of the primary works considered have been the subject of modern reeditions) but by adopting the role of a curator reassembling largely familiar objects in order to stimulate new paths of inquiry. Transgender theory assumes an increasing importance as the work progresses, and Read uses its repudiation of binary categorization to support his project to unearth what he calls “generous” approaches to the treatment

of gender revealed in what might be considered counter- or pluricultural inclinations in writers and thinkers both past and present. The work is written in a lively, engaging style: Read often raises questions in the manner of an enthusiastic class teacher, and some material will certainly be accessible to undergraduate students. Researchers, meanwhile, will find themselves refreshingly challenged to recognize and reconsider the labile properties of the early modern pregnant body and its adjuncts.

CATHY HAMPTON

University of Warwick