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# Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700 / Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp

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**Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp, eds. *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 354 pp.**

Reviewed by GLENN THOMPSON

“**T**his book emerges from a concern, shared by a number of medieval and early modern scholars across the world, that ‘blood’ was and is a word whose copious signifying capacities remain desperately underexamined” (1). So begins the book *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700*, a collection of essays culled and edited by Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp. This book represents one of the major products of the editors’ online website “The Blood Project,” which strives to “better understand the belief systems, rhetoric, and scientific conceptions that have contributed to the complex idea of blood.”<sup>1</sup> Yet this collection is not the first attempt to examine the fascination with blood in the early modern period. In fact, Johnson and Decamp reference not only previous blood scholarship, they recognize the debt that their field of study has to two specific scholars: Caroline Walker Bynum, author of *Wonderful Blood* (2007), and Gail Kern Paster, author of *The Body Embarrassed* (1993), who many of their predecessors turned to, and who many of the essays in this particular collection draw from. However, the editors also recognize, “recent scholarship on blood in the medieval and early modern periods is not in full conversation. The works mentioned [previously] are separated by both period and discipline” (2). Building upon that recognition, the very design of *Blood Matters* attempts to “draw together those scholars developing an expertise in the area who might otherwise not be in dialogue,” by bringing “fields as disparate as pedagogical theory, alchemical cultures, phlebotomy, wet nursing, and wine production” (2-3), as well as more into conversation with one another. It is the editors’ contention that “[*Blood Matters*] is offered as the first wide-ranging, interdisciplinary study of blood in Western Europe ca. 1400-1700, bringing together historians, literary scholars, and drama specialists” (2). In my assessment this book thoroughly succeeds in its efforts to meet that claim, and its success in doing so far outweighs any negatives I will mention hereafter.

Because of the editorial desire to offer such a wide-ranging conversation, the organization of the book is where the interdisciplinary desire shines most brightly. Each of the five sections (“circulation,” “wounds,” “corruption,” “proof,” “signs,” and “substance”) contains anywhere from three to four essays, with a total of sixteen overall. The editors note that each section “brings together work from at least two distinct specialisms and historical periods” (3). Indeed, in each section the reader will most consistently find at least one historical or medical chapter, one literary chapter, and one dramatic chapter. In some chapters these areas overlap based on the material covered by the author, but in no section does the selection of essays feel overwhelmed by an emphasis on any one area. As to

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how well the pieces converse with one another, the answer varies by author. In some cases, such as Dolly Jorgenson's chapter "Blood on the Butcher's Knife," she specifically points to other chapters in the collection within her footnotes. In other instances, such as Johnson's chapter "Blood, Milk, and Poison," her callbacks exist in her prose by sharing similar ideas voiced by other authors in the chapters that come before hers. This varied approach allows the book to avoid focusing microscopically on any one area, because the chapters themselves, while focused on a specific thesis, span into areas much greater than simply physical blood. Each author takes whatever thought is necessary to show how these different areas of research and thought interconnect without tedious over-repetition as the book progresses.

For example, "Was the Heart Dethroned" by Margaret Healy discusses how William Harvey's 1641 discovery that blood circulated created a framework for the political shifts his work would unintentionally affect. Katherine A Craik's "Sorting Pistol's Blood," which follows Healy's chapter, discusses the Early Modern belief that a person's class could be determined by their blood, and that writers like Shakespeare created characters like Pistol in *Henry IV and V* to challenge that notion. And then later in the book, Frances Dolan's "Blood of the Grape" discusses how English winemakers attempted to use the comparison of blood and red wine to create a sense of nationalism when trying to get English people to drink English-made wine, as it was argued that "those liquors produced from our natural growth...are far more agreeable to the Constitution of *English* bodies" (219). All of these chapters discuss either the political or societal implications that came along with invoking blood in discussion as the European world shifted from the medieval to early modern period.

And those chapters are just a few of the standouts I came across in this book. I found myself engrossed in Gabriella Zuccolin and Helen King's chapter "Rethinking Nosebleeds," as they disproved Thomas Lacquer's claim of non-gendered medical advice in the book's time period, and rather clearly demonstrated that gender specifically factored into Early Modern medical discussions and treatment. Then later I remained riveted by Decamp's "In such abundance . . . that it fill a basin" where she explores the very idea of the word "basin" in relation to blood-letting, and its dramaturgical implications in plays like *Titus Andronicus*. Once again, the chapters had a sense of conversation as they both dealt with blood leaving the body (in distinctly different ways), but neither chapter was in the same section. And both chapters examined the idea of corrupted blood without either being in the section on "corruption". This, to me, was a clear demonstration of the fluidity of this book.

I could continue and praise each chapter for its distinct discussion about how blood affected the political, scientific, societal, and artistic endeavors of European culture from 1400-1700, because in *Blood Matters* the contributors provide evidence of such shifts repeatedly. In this book, blood becomes political or religious clout, transformative fluid, and a force capable of good and evil. In this book, murdered bodies bleed, bloody cloths betray, and severed limbs have agency. And in all that discussion, this book is as varied and as wide-spreading as the editors hope it to be.

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But in such a wide-ranging discourse, there are bound to be issues. Because of the interdisciplinary approach this book strives to present, it stands apart from the typical essay collection a reader might expect to find. Instead of being a book specifically for medical historians, or literary scholars, or theatre makers, this is a book intended for all these people and more. Therefore, *Blood Matters* has a task that other essay collections with a more specific audience do not have. Each chapter's author must be clearer in explaining their topic than otherwise might be necessary, because it is no longer feasible to assume the reader has studied a chapter's source material. In this way the book falters at points. Especially in the literary or drama chapters (though not always), several authors seem to assume that their reader has read their source material, whereas in the more medical or historical chapters, the authors more regularly provide some context about their topics. However, this breakdown is not a hard and fast rule for the book, and in some cases such as Helen Barr's chapter "Queer Blood" which discusses *The Canterbury Interlude* by Chaucer (which I have not read), I found myself having no trouble understanding her discussion, because she offered a brief summation of the material covered in the story as it related to her point. And perhaps, were a reader to have more time, or a specific research goal, they could either read the source material or simply skip to chapters that fall within their interests. However, the latter option would defeat the hopeful intention of the editors and contributors who wished to converse with those people unlike themselves. Ultimately, I do not believe the authors who did not summarize their contextual material failed to write brilliant chapters. If anything became a sticking point for me, it was that even with my background in Early Modern theatrical studies, I still found some of the medical chapters easier to read and summarize than others within my field. However, as a sticking point, that one is small and ultimately surmountable.

*Blood Matters* takes a risk in pressing the previous boundaries of what an essay collection like this one could be, and in that risk it succeeds. The editors' hope of presenting the "first wide-ranging, interdisciplinary study of blood in Western Europe ca. 1400-1700" (2), is a hope well-met – one that left me both satisfied and wanting more books like this, ones that ask scholars and practitioners from all arenas to come together for the advancement and betterment of scholarship in all areas, not just the scholarship of blood. It is my belief that this book provides demonstrative evidence that such wide-ranging discussions are necessary in academia, because by asking scholars to step outside of their isolated areas of study, we can begin to see how far-reaching the impact of our field may be to areas of study we never considered.

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### Notes

1. The Blood Project, <http://www.thebloodproject.net/about-us/purpose/>

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**Glenn Thompson** is an actor, fight choreographer, scholar, and educator. He holds both an MFA and a Master of Letters in Shakespeare & Performance (in association with the American Shakespeare Center) from Mary Baldwin University in Staunton, VA, as well as a BA in Acting from Columbia College Chicago, with a minor in stage combat. Please visit [www.glenn-thompson.com](http://www.glenn-thompson.com) to learn more and to get in contact with Glenn.