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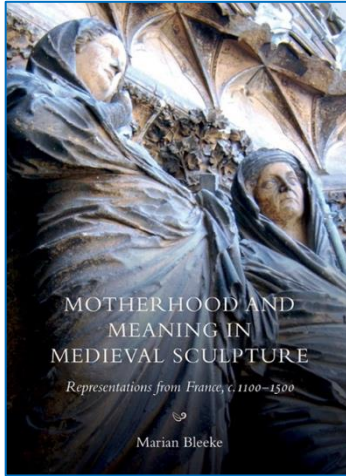
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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Book Review: Marian Bleeke, *Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture: Representations from France, c. 1100-1500*, Boydell Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture (Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 216 pages, 4 color, 43 black & white illustrations.

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Marian Bleeke's series of extended meditations on motherhood speculates about the ways medieval women may have experienced visual culture. This series of commentaries addresses not sculpture, but primarily how *women who were mothers* may have received sculpted representations of women (presumably produced by men) during the later Middle Ages. The author explains that sections that have been published elsewhere are expanded here and portions that have been presented at conferences are made available as well. Despite some slips in text-editing (such as the inaccurate spelling of *Contrapposto* in the first sentence on the first page of the Introduction) and the overly long and complicated sentences, one might recommend the book to students as a useful guide to recent theoretical interpretations of images of the later Middle Ages.

Beginning with the Introduction, "Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture," Bleeke provides a fine review of the literature. These reflective essays, loosely connected by themes of bodily functions, fecundity, pregnancy, birth, purification, and mothering, are perhaps most useful in encouraging questions. Bleeke leads the reader through the resources that were used as she produced her speculations; she carefully attributes all

sources. Each chapter contains extended explanations of the literature upon which arguments are based. The work of Barbara Abu-el Haj and Asa Mittman's idea of the Monstrous inform Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. In Chapter 3, there is an extensive rehearsal of Linda Seidel on *Eve*. Bleeke lays out the arguments and models of interpretation. This might offer a viable introduction to the use of research material, laying out one side of scholarly interpretation and demonstrating how the author made use of an understanding of a number of other art historians. Most of the speculative interpretation concerning reception by "medieval beholders" depends upon her revisions in the dating of monuments and assumptions that conform to modern sensibilities regarding the perceptions of literate women, market-women, beguines, Cistercian nuns, and others. In Chapter 4, the scholarship of Rachel Fulton, Marina Warner, Barbara Newman, Theresa Krier, and others provides the foundation for an understanding of devotion to Mary over the centuries.

Though each meditation begins with a description of the damaged remains of sculpture in what is now France, the meditations are interpretive, entirely focused on the possible narrative content of images and Bleeke's literal (21st-century) notions of a mother's response to that iconography rather than formal, stylistic, or the possible significances of the carvings. By Chapter 4, conventional scholarship, though not denied, is replaced. In addition to work produced in France, additional images of sculpture and a few paintings, from Germany, Italy, and eastern Europe are used to extend discussion.

Chapter 1, "Motherhood as Transformation: From Annunciation to Visitation at Reims," considers some west façade sculptures from Reims Cathedral (usually dated individually between 1235-1255) as naturalistic tableaux composed in 1240 (**Fig. 1**). The sculpture provides a springboard to discuss social and historical Reims. The subordination of women and the practice of "Churching" are carefully elucidated, with scant attention given to the physical sculpture. The description of represented textiles is limited to a formal analysis of the surface lines pointing to the womb or the space between

Mary's thighs, and evidence for the original colors of the sculpture at Reims goes unremarked.



**Figure 1** The Annunciation and Visitation. Jamb sculptures at the central portal of the west façade, Notre-Dame Cathedral of Reims (Photo: Janet Snyder).

In Chapter 2, “Motherhood as Monstrosity: The Moissac *Femme-aux-serpents* [1110-1130] and the *Transi* of Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendome [16<sup>th</sup> century],” Bleeke is “establishing the possibility of laywomen becoming beholders of this sculpture.” She proposes that women may have looked and considered the risks of motherhood as they combined the monstrous, long-legged, pot-bellied demon she equates with the Annunciate angel, the 16<sup>th</sup> century *transi*, and the lepers who might have been encountered on the porch at Moissac. Maternal pain and suffering are discussed through

editorial comments about the words of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kemp, considered to provide hope for salvation.

Although the jumping-off point for the longer meditation in Chapter 3, “Resurrecting Lazarus: The Eve from Saint-Lazare at Autun,” is the *Eve* (c. 1130) fragment of the north (termed “eastern” in this meditation; the portal is north-eastern, in the way that Chartres’s is north-western) transept portal, Bleeke proposes that the fragmentary figures of Mary and Martha from the tomb of Lazarus in the choir (not built until 1170-1180) were products of the same campaign. She emphasizes that facial features, shapes of eyes, and hand gestures were intended to identify Mary Magdalene with Eve. Bleeke calls attention to scholars’ determination that Christ calling Lazarus from his sepulchre in fifteenth-century Lazarus plays of England and France parallels the *peperit* charm to relieve difficult childbirth. Bleeke says evidence is slight for pilgrimage to Autun, though historically the north-east porch at Autun was the entry point for pilgrims seeking a cure for leprosy. Drawing upon many other authors writing about many other locations, Bleeke repeatedly speculates what female members of society might have seen, might have thought, might have felt, might have done, etc., at Autun, whether in emotional response to a lost tympanum of the resurrection of Lazarus, or the miracle cures of drowned children for which, she readily points out, there are no accounts.

Inspired by fifteenth-century free-standing sculptures of northeastern France, in her meditation of Chapter 4, “Visualizing Parturition: Devotional Sculptures of the Virgin and Child,” Bleeke takes the opportunity to set her voice in opposition to traditional scholarly studies of sculpture, repeating that “as in the rest of this book, my interest lies instead in their reception by medieval beholders and in particular by medieval women.” She explains how the sculpted draperies make meaning in relation to the process of bringing forth young, and in medieval women’s relationship to Mary and her Son. An extended rehearsal of the history and development of devotion to Mary is presented, using rhetorical questions for which answers are provided in summaries of recent

scholarship. Early Renaissance textile metaphors and donations are pointed out: “Medieval women’s ability to use clothing as a motor for identification with the Virgin...” Bleeke’s study of the movement of girdle, mantle, and veil in various examples illustrates her preference for iconographical interpretation.

Following these chapters comes the Afterword, “Motherhood and Meaning: Medieval Sculpture and Contemporary Art,” a meditation on the work and lives of 21st-century artists who are mothers. Bleeke reflects on the meanings that motherhood holds for contemporary women as expressed through their powerful, if painful, bodies of work. She ultimately asserts that [all] women are “capable of creating the meanings of these experiences for themselves.”

Perhaps the title of Marian Bleeke’s *Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture: Representations from France, c. 1100-1500* is misleading. Throughout the book, Bleeke is unabashedly less interested in the sculpture and more interested in interpreting possible reception by medieval beholders. Her summaries and condensations of contemporary theory make a significant contribution to the discussion. To appreciate this work, it is essential for any reader to be engaged by the extensive supporting materials for Bleeke’s reading of medieval interests as “reconstructed in this book.” The author presumes her readers accept her 21st-century understanding of a medieval women’s priorities, values, and comprehension. 🐼