

Marian Bleeke, *Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture. Representations from France, c. 1100–1500*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. xii+200pp. £60.00. ISBN 978-1-78327-250-1

Marian Bleeke's latest book examines the interactions between medieval women as beholders and a range of French sculptures which depict women as mothers. This collection cohesively draws together concepts of medieval motherhood, through the combined lenses of emotional history and art history. The first two chapters focus on pregnancy and childbirth. The third and fourth chapters investigate relationships between mothers and children in infancy. The range of artwork used includes works from the Romanesque and Gothic periods, with several images throughout to demonstrate in particular the *contraposto*, or counterpoise, stance which is utilised in the depictions of the Virgin Mary. Bleeke proposes that instead of the medieval population being portrayed as viewers of the sculptures, they instead should be seen as beholders due to seeing being a physical, encompassing process (6).

This volume is part of a growing trend focussing on medieval motherhood and, refreshingly, addresses both French lay mothers as well as beguines. Chapter One examines two sculptures of the Virgin Mary at Reims Cathedral, one of the Annunciation, the other of the Visitation, both from the 1240s. Bleeke argues that the two Mary sculptures present motherhood as a process of transformation to medieval beholders in Reims (20). Her statement that motherhood had the potential to be an empowering experience is convincing. The examination of the experiences of medieval women as they fulfilled economic roles whilst remaining legally restricted is useful as it broadens our understanding of medieval women as beholders, and how they reflected upon the two sculptures. Bleeke's discussion of the churching ritual and the female community at Reims is also insightful, as is her analysis of the beguines as a separate group of viewers.

What is discussed next are depictions of motherhood as a monstrosity through the sculptures of the *femme-aux-serpents* at the church of Saint-Pierre at Moissac, and the *transi* of Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendôme. Perhaps one of the most common tropes, Bleeke argues that women beholders may have viewed the monstrous representations of motherhood to make their experiences of maternal pain and suffering more meaningful (56). Although the *femme-aux-serpents* is typically associated with the sin of lust, Bleeke's reinterpretation of the figures brings a new understanding of how these sculptures could be used as a means of salvation for women who had undergone pain and loss as part of their role as mother. The re-evaluation of monstrous motherhood through the angle of artistic representation using the above sculptures is very welcome.

The *transi* of Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendôme represents another form of monstrosity: that of decay (70). The *transi* was a result of Jeanne's patronage, and her choice to self-represent through a monstrous maternal form is of great interest. Bleeke demonstrates that Jeanne's experience of loss may have influenced her decision (76). The examination of monstrous mothers here is a much-needed addition to understanding representations of lay mothers in this period, and their experiences as beholders.

The second half of the book changes theme through its focus on mothers and children, by interrogating the statue of Eve at the church of Saint-Lazare at Autun and the story of the Raising of Lazarus. The change of focus brings in further historiography concerned with the history of emotions. It enhances our understanding of why medieval women would have made pilgrimages to this site, and the association of loss that the statue of Eve could have evoked (119). This part of the book also contains a wider array of sculptures.

Statues of the Virgin Mary and Child are the primary focus of the final chapter, with a critical examination of the draperies and how these represent different relationships between mother and child (123). The links between the Virgin Mary and medieval mothers are closely drawn, in both

literal and metaphorical terms. The examination of the multiple depictions of the Virgin Mary in sculpture shows the various ways in which mothers could be represented, and that a medieval lay mother would have empathised with through the growing distance between herself and her child (70).

This monograph brings together a mix of emotions associated with motherhood: grief, anxiety, loss, separation, and a desire to protect and nurture the child. Through a thorough and evocative examination of several medieval French sculptures, Bleeke highlights the many ways in which motherhood could exist, and how medieval women, particularly as beholders, could understand and empathise with a mother's lot, be they mothers or not. Overall, this is an interesting, well-written, accessible work with a highly impressive range of images to demonstrate the multiple depictions of motherhood in medieval France.

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