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## Impure Blood: The Menstrual Taboo in the Christian Church During the Thirteenth Century

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Impure Blood:

The Menstrual Taboo in the Christian Church During the Thirteenth Century

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The sneaking, the hiding, the embarrassment. The dread of social confrontation, and—most significantly—the pain. From Ancient Greek Aristotelian literature to Mayan mythology, menstruation and the monthly shedding of blood has caused anxiety and uncertainty within communities. Especially from the mid-thirteenth century to the beginning of the Renaissance, the stigma surrounding menstruation was heightened with the introduction of new medical research of the human body. Intellectual and scientific advancements among European theologians, like Albertus Magnus, significantly contributed to increased religious and social based stigmas that contributed to the isolation and devaluation of menstruating women within the medieval community. As exemplified in religious doctrines and letters, such as Pope Innocent III's (1198 to 1216) letters to his clergy, as well as numerous medical texts compiled by medical theorists, “the Curse of Eve” became a stigma that influenced the societal perception of women in Christian Europe, and led to cultural taboos and shame. The Curse of Eve—the menstrual process—as portrayed by both medical and religious texts, represents a fundamental example of how religious, and therefore cultural values impacted European women's social position and place from the mid-thirteenth century; contributing to a stereotype that women were physically and emotionally handicapped by the menstrual cycle.

In thirteenth-century Europe the Roman Christian church dominated all aspects of societal organization, from commerce to cultural expression. Emerging religious movements and Aristotelian ideas, newly translated and widely read, introduced new philosophical ideas and social norms pertaining to morality, which in turn influenced the social relationships of ordinary individuals, and suggested that the world “could transform itself into a truly Christian

community.”<sup>1</sup> The Church’s doctrine impacted the cultural perception of women, specifically producing stigmas surrounding the feminine body and beliefs regarding the menstrual cycle.

Aristotle, whose ideas were so important on menstruation in medieval thought, established a categorization for life in his *Metaphysics*, written around 360 B.C.E. *Metaphysics* was the general study of being; through it Aristotle incorporated varying opinions on ethics, social, legal, and political matters.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle’s ideological hierarchy of men and women originated in the Greek language. The word “sperm” comes from the Greek meaning ‘race,’ ‘origin,’ or ‘descent,’ conveying that biological creation is derived from male virility.<sup>3</sup> However, Aristotle’s principles regarding the position of women in society were, however, heavily biased and based in the traditional Greek belief that women’s souls possessed less energy than their male counterparts. In *The Metaphysics*, Aristotle attempted to create a conceptual understanding of how men and women were both needed in relation to the conception of a person. Aristotle established that to create a child, both form and matter must be donated. The form, as the most important aspect of human creation, dictated the shape of the matter. However, he eventually concluded that “menstrual blood has no vital force.”<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s writings on metaphysics experienced a resurgence of interest during the late Middle Ages, with the translation and interpretation of classical Greek texts in European universities. His positions were adopted in

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<sup>1</sup>“Decameron Web,” Decameron Web | Religion (accessed November 29, 2017), para. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Hiltman, “Menstruation in Aristotle’s Concept of the Person,” in *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 25-37.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (<http://arpast.org/newsevents/articles/article47.pdf>), 28.

medieval works such as Albertus Magnus's (1200-1280) *Secrets of Women*,<sup>5</sup> and his philosophy was perpetuated from the thirteenth century, especially as medieval physicians tried to interpret menstruation.

Judeo-Christian ideas surrounding menstrual blood also emphasized its unholiness and uncleanliness. The very concept of a menstrual rag, or any method associated with sanitary precautions, resulted in disgust and discrimination from the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis.<sup>6</sup> The rules and guidelines outlined in Leviticus dictated the understanding of mensuration in the Christian world for centuries afterwards.<sup>7</sup>

If you touch any object she has sat on, you must wash your clothes and bathe yourself in water, and you will remain unclean until evening. This includes her bed or any other object she has sat on; you will be unclean until evening if you touch it. If a man has sexual intercourse with her and her blood touches him, her menstrual impurity will be transmitted to him. (Lev. 15:22-24)

The specifications in the Old Testament established the prejudices evident in the New Testament. The prejudice that menstruating women were ritually unclean is demonstrated in this passage from Luke: "And a woman who had a hemorrhage<sup>8</sup> for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, came behind him [Jesus] and touched the border of his garment, and immediately her issue stopped."<sup>9</sup> Although, Jesus demonstrated mercy towards menstruating women during

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<sup>5</sup> Monica H. Green, "Flowers, Poisons and Men: Menstruation in Medieval Europe," in *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 51-64.

<sup>6</sup> Delaney, 37.

<sup>7</sup> See Leviticus rules outlined in the Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> "an escape of blood from a ruptured blood vessel." This quote is about menstruation.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 8:43-44.

several encounters,<sup>10</sup> the underlying stigma of menstrual uncleanness discussed in the Bible remained present in thirteenth-century perceptions of menstrual blood as vile and polluting.<sup>11</sup>

The thirteenth century saw the development of new texts which depicted and investigated the nature of man. Around 1215, after the Fourth Lateran Council<sup>12</sup> the wider church community experienced a reform directed toward the improvement of clerical education and support of universities.<sup>13</sup> With the Church providing the sponsorship and interest in new medical advancements, the knowledge and perception of female anatomy, and more specifically menstruation, were elaborated upon. Traditional texts, including Galen, Aristotle and the Roman naturalist Pliny, presented an ideology that emphasized male superiority, especially when considering biological qualities between male and female reproductive systems. With dissection and research of the human body—especially with the female body—such a taboo subject, the medical view in the thirteenth century of female anatomy was structured around the concept of menstrual blood.<sup>14</sup>

The debate over the nature of blood in Christian dogma celebrates both the figurative and literal connotation of the blood of Christ. During the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the standardization of the Church's values were written into law: all clerics associated with the Catholic Church were prohibited from contacting any other blood besides that of the Eucharist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John 4:1-42.

<sup>11</sup> Bildhauer, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Rider, "Medical Magic and the Church in Thirteenth-Century England," *Social history of medicine: the journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine / SSHM*. April 01, 2011.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., para 4.

<sup>14</sup> Green, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Norman P. Tanner and Giuseppe Alberigo, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 1:244 (Canon 18).

This created both a gendered hierarchy as well as promoting the supremacy and power of the church. The church justified their position on menstruation using biblical references. Throughout Leviticus and Genesis, rules pertaining to menstruating women in society are proposed,<sup>16</sup> presenting the popular belief that women are unclean pollutants that should be kept from entering sacred temples and places of ritual.<sup>17</sup> Clerical authorities in the Christian church were united in their conviction that menstruating women were unclean, and argued that ‘Eve’s curse’ even argued that Eve’s Curse affected women who did not menstruate, such as women experiencing menopause, pregnancy, and girls who had not started to menstruate.

This discussion regarding the material and purpose of menstrual blood was heightened during the fifteenth century due to the introduction of the printing press and the influence of education of the clergy and merchant class.<sup>18</sup> With translations of Aristotle’s *The Philosopher* which circulated along with increased copies of Bible, now accessible to the general public, the stigma surrounding the inferiority of women and the impurity of female menstruation was continually perpetuated. An example of Biblical reasoning that justified the belief that Eve and Adam had never been equal was that Eve represented the flesh, while Adam represented the spirit—this was proven in the Garden of Eden when Eve committed the Original Sin, and she and all her descendants began to menstruate as penance.<sup>19</sup> Thus a stereotype was created, a

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<sup>16</sup> Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, they will be unclean till evening (Leviticus 15:21-23).

<sup>17</sup> Janice Delaney, et al. *The Curse: a Cultural History of Menstruation* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Delaney, 724.

stereotype that was at the forefront of medieval sexuality stigmas surrounding women, some of which lasted until the early twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> This also contributed to the overarching concept that the blood of men did not equal female blood. “Menstrual blood was not believed to concoct blood of the same degree of cohesion as men did, so that it would regularly seep out.”<sup>21</sup>

Menstruating women were also believed to be responsible for any deformities or malformations associated with a child; including if the child were female.<sup>22</sup>

The stigma of menstruation was so deeply rooted in medieval culture that the Christian church, primarily starting with Pope Innocent III, attached menstrual taboos to entire groups of people. The concept of male menstruation had been first introduced by Salernitan medical physicians in the twelfth century who believed, much like the menstrual cycle, that the regular bleeding of men “release[ed] excess corrupted humors that could not otherwise break free.”<sup>23</sup> The social stigmatization of menstruation was perhaps most strikingly conveyed through the example of Jewish male menses. Many theological texts, including letters from Pope Innocent III to his clergy, as well as Albertus Magnus in *Secreta Mulierum*, stated that Jewish men could menstruate. Three separate causes of Jewish menstruation were identified.<sup>24</sup> The first was derived from medical texts<sup>25</sup> that claimed depression was associated with an influx of blood; the second stated that astrological texts implied that Jews were identified with melancholy; and the

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<sup>20</sup>Charles T Wood, “The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought,” *Speculum*, vol. 56, no. 4 (Oct. 1981), 710–727 at 711.

<sup>21</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, “Blood in Medieval Cultures.” *History Compass*, vol. 4, no. 6 (2006); 1049–1059, at 1051.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1051.

<sup>23</sup> Green, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Green, 61.

<sup>25</sup> The text did not specify which medical texts contained this information.



third reinforced the ideals that Jews suffered intense bleeding and menstruation as punishment for their position in the death of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Anti-Semitism at the time was rampant, and Innocent's pontificate was a turning point, especially since Judaism was considered a threat to the 'social body' of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> The canons of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which required Jews to wear identifying clothing were paralleled by anti-Jewish sentiments that Pope Innocent III conveyed through his letters,<sup>28</sup> which stated that he believed Jewish males menstruated. Jewish discrimination is further highlighted by Thomas of Cantimpre's<sup>29</sup> thirteenth-century *Miraculorum et exemplorum memorabilia sui tempora libri duo*, which stated that the "impious Jew cried out: His blood is on us and on our children (compare Matt: 27:25)."<sup>30</sup> Cantimpre's message reinforced the notion that for the spilling of Christ's blood, the Jews were cursed and then suffered menstruation which was "ritually reenacted every Easter, with blood that flows incurably from Jewish men."<sup>31</sup> This exemplified the Church's negative position on menstruation, and contributed to a social structure that created a fixed boundary between religion and also gender.

The medical treatment for menstruation paralleled the uneasiness authorities felt towards monthly bleeding. Both women and men went to extensive lengths to find a cure for

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<sup>26</sup> Green, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Bildhauer, 1052. Jeremy Cohen, "Pope Innocent III, Christian Wet Nurses, and Jews: A Misunderstanding and Its Impact," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 107, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 113-128.

<sup>28</sup> Especially in his letter: *Esti non displace eat Domino* to the King of France.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas of Cantimpre was a theologian in the thirteenth-century, whose work was widely accepted in his community. Around 1212 he was elevated to a priesthood, and began theological and philosophical writings.

<sup>30</sup> Irvin M Resnick, "Medieval Roots of Jewish Male Menses," *Harvard Theological Review* vol 93, no. 3 (2000): 241-263.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

menstruation, thus suggesting that menses was both dreaded and feared in medieval society. In the translation of an English Trotula manuscript (Ms. Sloane 2463), a medieval medical treatise, the treatment of menstruation elaborates on how to cure the “disease” through humoral adjustments such as bloodletting.<sup>32</sup> For example, in the Trotula’s first chapter—which was considered an objective and empirical text<sup>33</sup>—it suggests that “there are corrupt humors in the womb outside the veins in the hollowness of the uterus, and they hinder women in purgations. And there are three humors that occur in the uterus, such as phlegm, bile, and black bile.”<sup>34</sup> This passage insinuates that menstrual blood was a topic of mystery and speculation, associated with the dark and unknown aspects of the humoral system. Likewise, menstruation and blood were associated with rapidly changing emotion. This belief is found to be the most clearly established in Albertus Magnus’s *De Secretis mulierum*, which was revered by theologians of the time and emphasized the impurity and inferiority of a menstruating woman.<sup>35</sup> This stigma was perpetuated in the writing and publishing of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*, 1484), a widely read widely read manual on witch hunting.<sup>36</sup>

The thirteenth century experienced a growth in intellectual inquiry that sprung from universities and the adaptations and interpretations of texts such as Avicenna’s *Canon* and Galen’s *On the Natural Faculties*. The presentation of empirical and scientific data became

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<sup>32</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: the First English Gynecological Handbook*. (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, xiii: “Its author was intent on demystifying concepts of women’s ailments, [...] the treating was to serve as a handbook for midwives and perhaps for self-help.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Helen Rodnite Lemay, and Albertus Magnus, *Women’s Secrets: a Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

apparent in new medical and scientific texts.<sup>37</sup> However, it is Albertus's *Secrets of Women* that displays the most pronounced and influential beliefs towards women in the thirteenth century. His position on women is most closely associated with Aristotelian philosophy, and he had been commissioned by a priest to write a medical text that outlined the physical nature of women.<sup>38</sup> Albertus begins his text by emphasizing the natural hierarchy of gender.

Since nature never does anything in vain, as noted in the first book [Vincent of Beauvais'] *On Heaven and Earth*, and because the heat in women is weaker than that in men, and all their food cannot be converted into flesh, nature takes the best course. She provides for what is necessary, and leaves the excess in the place where the menses are kept.<sup>39</sup>

Albertus continues to demonstrate the importance of the sperm and the impact of menstruation. He describes menses as being filled with pollution that corrupts the fetus and tortures male souls, especially during intercourse.<sup>40</sup> For example, having intercourse with a menstruating woman produced "leprous and fragile" fetuses.<sup>41</sup>

Albertus's writing on menstruation became a crucial tool in the medieval gender system.<sup>42</sup> Hundreds of manuscripts have been documented of *The Secrets of Women*, and many other authors embraced Aristotle's metaphysics through Albertus's writing, and wrote texts that

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<sup>37</sup> An example of this would be William of Saliceto's treatise named *Summa conservationist et curatonis*, whose texts features a purely objective tone regarding the topic of the female body and purgation.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Magnus, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Magnus, 77.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, "The Secrets of Women (c. 1300): A Medieval Perspective on Menstruation," *Menstruation: a Cultural History*, edited by Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 65–75, at 65.

contributed to medieval attitudes towards women.<sup>43</sup> According to Helen Lemay, “A strong subtext of the *Secrets*... is the evil nature of women and the harm they can cause on their innocent victims [...] [this is] a tradition that extends back in Christianity to second-century misogynist writings.”<sup>44</sup> Women were perceived as merely a vessel responsible for carrying the male seed, and they were degraded and diminished in the bedroom, in the church, and in the community. Menstrual blood carried disease and further perpetuated the ‘Curse of Eve.’<sup>45</sup>

Despite the popularity that Albert the Great’s medical texts generated, the thirteenth century was also beginning to experience a more empirical form of research. Biases and opinions were widely left out of medical texts, and there are many examples of physicians developing research that was completely separate from the oversight of the Christian church. In the thirteenth century there was an explosion of new sources in medicine and natural philosophy. For example, the detailed account of menstruation by Bernard de Gordon (fl. 1283-1308),<sup>46</sup> discussed the importance of menstruation as merely a monthly purgation that was instrumental to a woman’s health, and was an important function in biology.<sup>47</sup> Bernard covered the symptoms of menstruation, as well as the female reproductive system with a scientific perspective that was reflective of thirteenth-century medicine. Bernard’s teachings also reinforced source material from Galen and Avicenna which demonstrated a sympathetic approach to women’s health.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Lemay, 66.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Other examples of a contrasting view regarding female menstruation can be found in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1098-1179). Her work *Causae et Curae* details numerous medical remedies, and emphasizes the feminine biological struggle without the additional stigma of menstrual impurity.

The blood in every human being increases and diminishes according to the waxing and waning of the moon... When as the moon waxes, the blood in human beings is increased, then both men and women are fertile for bearing fruit—for generating children—since then, the man's semen is powerful and robust; and in the waning of the moon, when human blood also wanes, the man's semen is feeble and without strength, like dregs... If a woman conceives a child then, whether boy or girl, it will be infirm and feeble and not virtuous.<sup>49</sup>

Her text, although misinformed about the biology of menstruation, did not include any information that indicated discrimination against women's biology. Her outlook was purely positive and incorporated the religious perspective by stating that menstruation was the only way a normal female could function outside of paradise. Moreover, according to Hildegard, men experienced suffering that was equivalent to women's pain during menstruation.<sup>50</sup> Hildegard's work was widely read in the scientific community in the late twelfth century, and many of her views were upheld in the natural science of the thirteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 142.

<sup>50</sup> Lemay, 41.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

“Both men and women saw at once that women’s blood set women apart from man in a mysterious magical way.”<sup>52</sup> The notion of blood in culture has been a prominent factor in dividing genders and upholding patriarchal authority. Historically, men have believed that menstrual blood is a mysterious substance, and this belief has been projected into political, religious, and social institutions. The taboos associated with menstruation were systemized and perpetuated in Christian Europe, and specifically during the thirteenth century due to the rise of scholasticism and influence of writers like Albertus Magnus. During the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Innocent III declared that Judaism was an inferior religion to Christianity and needed to be regulated. This perception of Judaism paralleled Pope Innocent’s belief that Jewish men menstruated. This association furthered the stigma surrounding menstruation.

The ‘Curse of Eve’ kept women from being portrayed as reasonable, intelligent citizens of society. Ever since the philosophy of Aristotle women were associated with the earthly and carnal, while men were associated with mind and spirit. This system of belief was again perpetuated when Albertus wrote and published—under Church authority—*The Secrets of Women*. Throughout the text, women are continually stigmatized, and the construct of menstruation is explained in accordance to Aristotle’s original ranking of souls. Thus, the standard view of conception and menstruation in the thirteenth century was that menses were an expulsion of useless matter that had not yet received its ‘seed’ that would enable it to grow into an image of man. Aristotle’s philosophical writings largely dictated the perception of female menstrual blood, and outweighed contemporary scientific knowledge.

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<sup>52</sup> Delaney, 3.

It was in the thirteenth century, that the most far-reaching stigma of feminine subjugation began. It was through Albertus Magnus's *Secrets of Women* and other texts like it later influenced the witch trials in the fifteenth century. The stigma of menstruation, and bleeding, became etched into society creating a lasting taboo. Unfortunately, this discrimination in late thirteenth-century Europe parallels the popular sense of unease and discomfort surrounding menstruation still experienced in society today.

## Appendix

Leviticus 15:19-31.

19. Whenever a woman has her menstrual period, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean until evening. 20 Anything on which the woman lies or sits during the time of her period will be unclean. 21 If any of you touch her bed, you must wash your clothes and bathe yourself in water, and you will remain unclean until evening. 22 If you touch any object she has sat on, you must wash your clothes and bathe yourself in water, and you will remain unclean until evening. 23 This includes her bed or any other object she has sat on; you will be unclean until evening if you touch it. 24 If a man has sexual intercourse with her and her blood touches him, her menstrual impurity will be transmitted to him. He will remain unclean for seven days, and any bed on which he lies will be unclean. 25 “If a woman has a flow of blood for many days that is unrelated to her menstrual period, or if the blood continues beyond the normal period, she is ceremonially unclean. As during her menstrual period, the woman will be unclean as long as the discharge continues. 26 Any bed she lies on and any object she sits on during that time will be unclean, just as during her normal menstrual period. 27 If any of you touch these things, you will be ceremonially unclean. You must wash your clothes and bathe yourself in water, and you will remain unclean until evening. 28 “When the woman’s bleeding stops, she must count off seven days. Then she will be ceremonially clean. 29 On the eighth day she must bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons and present them to the priest at the entrance of the Tabernacle. 30 The priest will offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. Through this process, the priest will purify her



before the LORD for the ceremonial impurity caused by her bleeding. 31 “This is how you will guard the people of Israel from ceremonial uncleanness. Otherwise they would die, for their impurity would defile my Tabernacle that stands among them.

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