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Wounds, Flesh, and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century England

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Wounds, Flesh, and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century England is a wide-ranging study that examines the metaphor of woundedness within and across political, legal, religious and literary texts. By bringing a variety of materials together, Covington traces images of brokenness, disorder and permeated boundaries to illuminate the expansive character of wound imagery at work in 17th-century writings. Covington argues, moreover, that in an age of upheaval and violence wound metaphors were not only an appropriate means of articulating the turbulent circumstances of civil war, images of woundedness themselves provided a means through which the self and the nation could be re-imagined during a period of unprecedented crisis.

Throughout *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor*, Covington carefully demonstrates how traditional representations of woundedness and the body are drawn upon in order to highlight the flexible and charged symbolisms of woundedness that are particular to 17th-century writings. The first chapter of the book examines the use of wound metaphors within representations of the body politic. Through the close analysis of political polemics, Covingtion observes the transformation of a conventional political metaphor as it assumed a ?wounded? condition in royalist and puritan writings. While it is perhaps unsurprising that the idea of woundedness is ?well-suited for an age of crisis and violence, with writers repeatedly expounding on the ?broken? body politic?, Covington?s close analysis of the permutations of wound imagery across political polemics identifies the important function of the metaphor in imagining the political situation (p. 2).

Covington draws attention to similar thought processes at work within parliamentarian and royalist writings, whereby political tracts identify the source of the wound that afflicts the body politic and uses the notion of woundedness to articulate the means of remedy. Furthermore, the different approaches that political writings exhibit in the placement of blame and the imagined cure are shown to increase the imaginative scope of the metaphor of the body politic. Covington, for example, traces how political polemics began to imagine a more tangible distinction between the natural and metaphorical body of the king as they explored the question of who had wounded whom and presented various accounts of the relationship between king and state.

Although the first chapter of *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* makes use of many political writings from the 17th century, the chapter presents a particularly compelling reading of Charles? self-construction as wounded in *Eikon Basilike*. Covington observes how *Eikon Basilike* uses traditional ideas of martyrdom to create its vision of the wounded king. The text is found to transform notions of the king?s ?two bodies?, moreover, as it draws upon the king?s political symbolism while highlighting the personal suffering of Charles during the civil war. Covington carefully unpacks the representation of the king, who bears the sins of the nation in a manner that at once reiterates ideas of divine right while diminishing the untouchable position of the king that traditionally accompanied such ideas.

There is, however, perhaps an opportunity missed in Covington?s discussion of the language of woundedness in *Eikon Basilike*. Covington notes that Milton?s *Eikonoklastes* provides a ?point-by-point? response to *Eikon Basilike* in order to suggest the powerful nature of Charles? self-construction as wounded (p. 40). With such a clear example of dialogue between texts, the fluidity of political metaphors might here have been examined in far greater detail precisely *because* Milton places the rhetoric of *Eikon Basilike* under scrutiny. Issues of representation within this particular instance of textual interplay can be seen to become a central part of political polemic. Of course a chapter can only pursue so many lines of thought and this chapter does provide many fascinating observations about uses of wound imagery in political writings. The way in which Milton engaged with the construction of Charles in *Eikon Basilike* could, however, have provided an especially valuable addition to Covington?s argument.

The second chapter of *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* moves on to explore the disruption of boundaries, or ?breakages?, apparent within early modern legal discourses. Using the legal writings of Edward Coke and John Selden, Covington analyses uncertainties within the language of the law. Focusing its analysis upon definitions of the crime of treason, where the individual might ?wound? either king or state, the chapter offers an insightful development of ideas considered in chapter one. Cases of treason are examined to reveal the expansive nature of the crime, with the particular case of the Earl of Strafford?s treason highlighting an especially new formulation of the treasonous act. Condemned to death for his role in Charles? personal rule (1629?40), Strafford?s case is found to reshape the terms of treason, which Covington here describes as destroying ?loyalty between the king and his people? (p. 66). By tracing the meanings of treason in legal discourse, Covington suggests how language can itself be reshaped by historical circumstances.

The second chapter also considers how far the law had control over the wound imagery that it invoked. In particular, Covington highlights the performative nature of a legal system where punishments are framed as a reciprocal wounding: the criminal who has wounded the state will themselves be wounded. Through bodily harm (whether disfigurement or execution) the presence of the law is supposedly marked upon the individual?s body in a process that threatens the erasure of identity. But, as Covington astutely observes, the wound might also register the transgression of boundaries (of the law and the body of the criminal) in a way that elevates the individual, whose wound may be used to redefine the self using the rhetoric of martyrdom. Within this chapter Covington poses important questions about the symbolic weight of the wound inflicted by the state upon the subject. Does the mutilated body of the criminal represent the law?s strength or magnify the individual?s resistance to state authority?

Chapter three examines the representation of war wounds in historical and literary accounts. Central to this chapter is the relationship between the personhood of the soldier and his wounded body. Familiar codes of honour and shame are used to situate interpretations of war wounds. Once again particular examples are used

to illustrate the importance and flexibility of wound imagery in determining notions of personal honour. Covington provides an interesting discussion about how the location of the wound on the body could be used to signify identity. Of particular interest are Covington?s observations about wounds to the back, which would typically signify the soldier?s flight and thus identify him as a coward. In her analysis of the narrative of the Earl of Northampton?s wounding, Covington demonstrates the flexibility of such tropes of woundedness: in this instance the wounds to Northampton?s back still suggest shameful behaviour, but his wounds do not indicate his own dishonourable conduct, they reflect the dishonour of the adversaries who attack the Earl as a group. Throughout Covington?s chapter, the wound metaphor is shown to be fluid but central to constructions of the soldier?s identity. Representations of Cromwell?s battle wounds in royalist and puritan accounts, for example, transform the meaning of wound imagery to represent Cromwell respectively as both a coward and a hero.

Within this third chapter, Covington also explores how social rank and economic position could inform interpretations of wounds, and consequently the selfhood of the wounded individual. Covington suggests how the wounded soldier, who returns from war unable to work, could be subjected to an evaluation of his ?worthiness? that assessed his wounds in terms of honour and economic burden. Such focused attention upon the individual?s wounds as a means of defining the individual could, as Covington eloquently argues, lead to a devastating erasure of identity. The richness of the wound metaphor, however, is again articulated by Covington. Through a particularly interesting discussion of the meanings attached to scars, Covington suggests how the scar represents both a breached bodily boundary (the scar provides evidence of past violence) while providing evidence that a process of healing has taken place. Covington thus argues that the scarred body might be interpreted in various ways: Milton?s scarred Satan might bear the mark of his irreligious acts, but elsewhere scars might be a source pride, signaling the individual?s survival through violent times.

In her fourth chapter, Covington turns to the psychological woundings associated with love. Here *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* considers the now familiar idea of love being a disruptive force, linked with madness and the disordered self. The chapter discusses notions of Neoplatonism and Stoicism in relation to early modern constructions of love. Ideas are eloquently articulated, although several of the ideas that are put forward in this chapter have been preempted and discussed in greater depth by Lesel Dawson in her recent study of lovesickness in early modern literature.(1) The chapter provides some interesting observations about literary representations of love in the work of Marvell, Lovelace and Davenant. For example, Covington recognises the subtle transformation of literary modes as Lovelace converts his devotion for his lover into loyalty to the king, while Marvell?s pastoral poetry is disrupted by the intrusions of war. Although literary critics have noted such details in these poems before, within the context of Covington?s study the observations further suggest the scope of wound metaphors in the seventeenth century. It is suggested that the articulation of the emotion of love (and perhaps the emotion itself) is influenced by historical circumstances, at least in the poetry of the period. One might say that Covington reveals how romantic love is itself wounded as it becomes displaced within literary representations.

The fifth chapter of *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* considers spiritual woundings in puritan conversion narratives, Catholic devotional writings and accounts of spiritual despair. Covington examines how the image of the wounded, open body could be used to articulate a spiritual accessibility by which conversion and salvation might be achieved. The chapter explores how narratives of conversion make use of traditional ideas of redemptive suffering to articulate a painful experience of bodily openness that results in spiritual wholeness. Covington argues, moreover, that Catholic wound imagery was of a different character to that of puritan writings, taking on a particularly physical focus. Covington suggests that while puritan writings tend to dwell upon a spiritual and metaphysical wound through which spiritual wholeness might be achieved, Catholic writings emphasise the role of the material body, focusing upon Christ?s wounds and the martyred saints who suffered particularly painful deaths and bodily disfigurement. As well as devotional writings, Covington?s sources include reports of executions of Catholics, where crowd members preserved the blood and parts of the mutilated body. Through her sensitive analysis of such texts, Covington identifies the body that had suffered for its spiritual convictions as a focus for Catholic expressions of faith. The poetry of

Crashaw is skillfully handled in this chapter to suggest how spiritual ecstasy could be achieved through contemplating the wounded body of Christ and the saints. In keeping with book?s exploration of an expansive and flexible metaphor, moreover, the chapter also demonstrates how the openness of the wounded body might threaten to allow sin and despair to enter the self and threaten spiritual dissolution. Wounds once again provide a means of either imagining personal strength that enables spiritual completion or a means of articulating a selfhood that has been devastatingly breached.

Throughout *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* Covington?s strength rests with her compelling textual readings of historical and literary texts. On the whole Covington?s interdisciplinary approach and her engagement with literary criticism leads to a successful and thorough treatment of literary texts alongside other texts. The treatment of Crashaw in chapter five, for example, is developed with sensitivity to Crashaw?s language and the observations of literary critics. Some concerns remain, however, in the study?s use of its literary sources. A consequence of the breadth of this study are instances in *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* where literary texts receive limited attention, which can in turn result in a misleading representation of the text in question. In chapter three, for example, Covington discusses Marvell?s ?An Horatian Ode? and suggests that Marvell represents Cromwell as wounding the land. While the reading is a possible one, the treatment of Marvell (and consequently the poem?s language) is here worryingly reductive. Covington states that Marvell was a royalist ?at least in inclination, before 1650? to frame her reading of the poem (p. 107). Covington?s references for this statement, however, do not draw upon recent literary criticism that has emphasised a far less certain position for Marvell, who was associated with parliamentarians like John Hall as well as royalists like Lovelace and Stanley from as early as the 1640s. Nicholas McDowell?s recent publication, *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit*, for example, explores a more fluid relationship between Marvell?s political allegiances and his poetry.(2) Although Covington makes an effort to engage with literary criticism throughout her study (and even here observes that Marvell?s poem is recognised by scholars as ambiguous), the single (albeit lengthy) paragraph dedicated to ?An Horatian Ode? in this chapter fails to articulate the richness of the metaphors at work in the poem or the particular readings that literary critics have produced concerning the representation of Cromwell. As the significance of metaphors have long been central to criticism of literary texts, it feels odd when such criticism is not incorporated in Covington?s readings of literary sources. For example, references to the wounded body in Shakespeare?s *Coriolanus* in chapter one would benefit from engaging with Cynthia Marshall?s well-known discussion of the play, the relevance to this particular study being suggested by its title of ?Wound-man: *Coriolanus*, gender, and theatrical construction of interiority?.(3)

Covington?s book remains, however, an important interdisciplinary study. At its simplest level, the breadth of *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century England* allows the reader an opportunity to encounter a range of texts in order to appreciate the frequent and widespread usage of wound imagery in writings of this period. This book achieves its most important contribution to scholarship of the early modern period, however, in what is generally a highly sensitive analysis of ?the myriad journeys that one metaphor took across political, legal, military, psychological, and religious writings?, which illuminates processes of re-evaluation and self-fashioning at work through language itself in seventeenth-century England (p. 3). *Wounds, Flesh and Metaphor* identifies the presence of wound imagery in a variety of 17th-century writings to suggest the ways in which compelling wound metaphors were being used to explore and understand a turbulent period in English history.

Notes

1. Lesel Dawson, *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford, 2008).Back to (1)
2. Nicholas McDowell, *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit* (Oxford, 2008).Back to (2)
3. Cynthia Marshall, ?Wound-man: *Coriolanus*, gender, and theatrical construction of interiority? in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dympna Callaghan (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 93?118.Back to (3)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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