Mary, Medb and the Menstruating Jew: Displacing Menstruation in *Ulysses*

As part of the litigated obscenity of *Ulysses*, menstruation has central to the novel’s reception. Menstruation emerged, comparatively late, as an explicit site of inquiry with Richard Ellman’s 1972 “Why Does Molly Bloom Menstruate?,” writing from the moment of second-wave feminism’s polemics against the cultural silencing of female bodies. The most recent work on this topic picks up earlier concerns with the discursive constructions and grounds them in specific cultural and historical contexts. This essay continues this work, synthesizing Mullin’s attention to female bodies with Brigg’s consideration of the figure of the menstruating Jewish man. I achieve this by reading the three menstrual figures of Gerty MacDowell, Leopold Bloom and Molly Bloom in terms of medieval treatments of menstruation and the Virgin Mary, the Jewish male, and Queen Medb. Read in this way, menstruation becomes legible as a site for raising and revising cultural constructions of the body across differences of gender, religion and nationality.

Reading *Ulysses* in these terms may initially seem arbitrary, but it works directly from the most recent explications of Joyce’s cultural contexts for considering menstruation. This recent work is symptomatic of a shift is one away from morally-oriented critical approaches engendered by *Ulysses’* obscenity trials (McCormack 17-39). Richard Ellman’s foundational question, “Why does Molly Bloom menstruate?”, can be understood arising from such post-obscenity concerns; since menstruation is obscene, its presence in the book must be justified by some larger literary, that is to say not obscene, purpose. In line with Judge Woolsey’s mitigation of controversial passages in light of the aesthetically justifiable whole, obscene details, like menstruation, must signify in some non-obscene manner. Essentially these readings are concerned with how the disturbing biological real of menstruation signifies within the symbolic
economy of the novel without considering the process of signification. Taking up Ellman’s question, as critics addressing menstruation in *Ulysses* inevitably do, Cheryl Herr, writing in the late 1980s, instead asked “Is Molly Bloom’s menstruation real?” (Herr 130). The answer is, of course, that it is not: it is a representation of menstruation, and moreover one constructed by an author necessarily unable to draw from bodily experience in constructing it. These readings mark a destigmatization of menstruation in critical discourse that opens up that fact of stigmatization for critical inquiry. For Herr and for the kind of discursive readings that follow, the question is not how to justify the presence of menstruation, but how to understand its representation.

Austin Briggs’s 2009 article “Why Does Leopold Bloom Menstruate?” is particularly interesting for the way it records this shift, drawing on the resource of Brigg’s own critical development. He begins by admitting to feeling, despite thinking of himself as not a prude, a “little shiver of male delicacy” in encountering the title of Richard Ellman’s “Why Molly Bloom Menstruates” in 1972. However, he assures us that he is now, in the 2000s, addressing the issue of Leopold Bloom’s menstruation with “no shivers” (Briggs 41). This shiver-free approach is a historicization of Bloom’s association with menstruation in terms of cultural discourses of masculinity, Jewish and Irish ethnicity, warfare and religious sacrifice. Katherine Mullin’s “Menstruation in *Ulysses*,” also 2009, examines how *Ulysses* repeats and thus exposes multiple and contradictory discursive constructions of menstruation, itself a key site for the construction the female subject. The impersonal neutrality that historicization invokes provides distance and purchase for readings that discard the moral policing of obscenity-influenced arguments.

Here I will focus on the medieval religious and mythic treatments of abject female excretion, of which menstruation is part, that both Briggs and Mullin draw on but do not make central. Underpinning this inquiry is Judith Butler’s distinction between “intelligible bodies,”
those constituted by discursive construction, and “unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies” (Butler xi). This discursive construction of the subject

requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex,”

and this identification takes place through a repudiation which

produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the

subject cannot emerge. […] Such] disavowed abjection will

threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed

object. (Butler 3)

Having thusly reformulated gender as an ongoing performative maintenance of subject-bodies through the policing action of abjection, Butler positions the properly resistant “task” as that of considering the “threat and disruption” of the disavowed abject “as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (ibid). Within these terms, we can understand Joyce’s obsessively inclusive palimpsestic writing, what Bonnie Kime Scott describes as “not one of simple static substitution or violent destruction of past forms” but rather a “process of collection, accretion, recovery” (Scott 201), as necessarily threatening the discursively materialized body. My project is to begin to approach how *Ulysses* revises the discursive body through its recovery and reworking of its historical construction within the larger frameworks of religion and nation.

The figure of the menstruating Jew, as Briggs demonstrates, is clearly invoked in the novel’s several references to Bloom as menstrual. Attending to the historical construction of this type, formed at least in part by polemic debates over the abjection of the Marian womb, it becomes clear that Bloom’s menstruation is inextricable from that of Gerty MacDowell. As well
as ventriloquizing popular, commercial discourses of femininity,¹ Gerty symbolically functions as a version of the Virgin Mary, as identified in the Gilbert schema. A Jewish man attributing menstruation to a woman associated with Mary reenacts “Jewish arguments against the incarnation” which “focused on the abdomen of Mary as a place rendered unclean by menstrual blood, excrement, urine and semen” (Cuffel 117). This construction of an abject Marian womb drew on those same “theories about menstruation [that] can be traced back to Jewish and classical antiquity” that Mullin identifies in Ulysses (Mullin 498). These polemics in turn prompted retaliatory constructions of abjectly feminine Jewish male bodies: “In their counterattack Christians punctuated their ‘dialogues’ with crass bodily epithets to suggest that Jews were far dirtier than Mary and Jesus could ever be according to Jewish interpretations of the incarnation (Cuffel 117). Through an analysis of a depiction of the anti-Semitic Marian miracle “The Miracle of the Boy Singer,” Tom Blake clarifies these counterattacks are not simple reflexive name-calling, but rather part of a process of displacement, where the Marian womb is rendered clean and ‘masculine’ by transferring its excremental abjection onto male Jewish bodies (Blake).²

Traces of this process of displacement can be discerned in the anti-Semitic rhetoric of “Cyclops.” Moving from a discussion of messianic birth, the citizen responds to J.J.’s legalistic

¹ Due to constraints of time and space, I am bracketing these discourses. However, in a more expanded version of this, I believe it would be very productive to pursue the commodification and mediatization of menstruation through Gerty, Bloom (especially given his work in advertising), and Molly. The interaction between the emergent commodification of menstruation, through products like patent medicines and specialized undergarments, and the residual taboos that I trace here seems like a very promising avenue of inquiry.

²I would like to acknowledge Tom Blake for generously sharing his notes and manuscripts with me, as well providing the genesis for this approach in alerting me to the relevant passages in the Tain discussed below.
association “En ventre sa mere” with the apparent non sequitur: “Do you call that a man?” (Joyce 338). Paternity and Bloom’s capacity to sexually perform the act of insemination are at issue here. As the text moves into the narration the citizen again, he clarifies that Bloom is “one of those mixed middlings” – one whose sexual identity is ambiguous. (Gifford and Seidman 368). The citizen then cites, as evidence of this, a story of Bloom “[l]ying up in the hotel […] once a month with a headache like a totty in her courses” (338). The menstrual association is strengthened by the citizen’s use of the intensifier “bloody” in conjunction with “sea” two sentences later, looking back to “Proteus” and forward to “Penelope” in its association between the sea and menstrual flux. Although the precise nature of the association remains unclear, maternity, gestation and menstruation play around the fixing of Bloom as a “perverted” – that is to say feminized – Jewish male.

“Nausikaa,” then, reconsidered in the context of these residues of religious polemic becomes legible as the reinscription of the Marian body as menstrual, essentially rewinding the transference of medieval anti-Semitic rhetoric. Within the episodic structure borrowed from The Odyssey, “Nausikaa” functions as a recuperative safe haven following the anti-Semitic attack of “Cyclops.” Contemporary attention to sexual politics would suggest that this recuperation is predicated on reaffirming masculinity through the visual sexual objectification of a young woman. While this is no doubt correct, such a reading does not account for Gerty MacDowell’s premenstrual state. That this state is something Bloom is able to somehow intuit or divine marks menstruation as somehow significant to the episode. Bloom casually notes: “Near her monthlies, I expect, makes them feel ticklish” (368). The phrase “I expect” places his assertion under the mantle of received commonplace, of depersonalized ideology. Bloom’s attribution of menstrual function onto Gerty’s body pushes the excremental abjection of menstruation, deployed in the
anti-Semitic discourse of “Cyclops,” back onto the female Christian body, thus rendering Bloom’s body correctly male again. The emission of semen – considered a superior and purified masculine version of menstrual flux in medieval physiology – underscores this point.

The violation that Bloom inflicts on Gerty is not simply one of sexual voyeurism, as “Circe” clarifies. Gerty MacDowell’s appearance in “Circe,” is an enigmatically charged moment, rehearsing and enacting the subtext of the earlier encounter between her and Bloom. This subtext is, again, obviously sexual. Her presence is activated by the bawd’s hawking of a virginal girl, which apparently triggers the recollection (either by Bloom or the text) of the virginal (according to Bloom at least) Gerty. However, it functions also in terms of the displacement of abject feminine excretion I have been discussing. This double functioning is permitted by a localized ambiguity inflected by the context of Gerty’s prior presence in the novel. In her guise as one of the hallucinatory projections of “Circe,” Gerty is introduced through this “stage direction: “Leering, Gerty MacDowell limps forward. She draws from behind ogling, and shows coyly her bloodied clout” (442). The clause “she draws from behind” seems to omit objects for the verb and the preposition: What does Gerty draw, and from behind what?

One ambiguity at the level of the referent is whether the blood is hymenal or menstrual. In context of the bawd’s offer of a virgin girl, it seems clear that the dominant meaning of Gerty’s bleeding here is loss of virginity. For Henke, this gesture signifies purely in terms of defloration (Henke 168, 185). However, given the emphasis on Gerty’s menstruation in “Nausikaa,” the blood also registers as menstrual: a reading collaborated by Schutte’s listing of these lines under the heading of “Gerty MacDowell – Menstruation” in his Index of Recurrent Elements in Ulysses (Schutte 311-333). Gerty accuses Bloom of seeing “all the secrets of [her] bottom drawer” (442), and these secrets are not solely sexual. The “that” that Bloom “did to”
Gerty is, at least in part, an undoing of the denial of corporeal feminine abjectness. He, the Jewish man constructed as improperly masculine through the attribution of menstruation, reasserts her abject feminine physicality, made startingly visible in the bloodied clout that she holds out to him.

The reading thus far provides a satisfying sense of closure, a neat undoing. Molly Bloom’s menstruation must, however, be accounted for. More explicit, graphic and extended in its representation than that of Gerty MacDowell, and emphasized by its position and the end of the novel, Molly’s period must be central to any understanding of menstruation in *Ulysses*. Within this framework of medieval menstruation, Molly is connected to Medb, the Irish folk heroine/goddess (see, for example, Tymoczko). More specifically, Molly’s mixed urination and menstruation in “Penelope” (770) evokes Medb’s copious outflowing at the end of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*3 (Tymoczko 111):

> Then her issue of blood [fiúal foca] came upon Medb and she said:
> ‘O Fergus, cover the retreat of the men of Ireland that I may pass my water.’ ‘By my conscience,’ said Fergus, ‘It is ill-timed and it is not right to do so.’ ‘Yet I cannot but do so,’ said Medb, ‘for I shall not live unless I do.’ Fergus came then and covered the retreat of the men Ireland. Medb passed her water and it made three great trenches in each of which a household can fit. Hence the place is called Fúal Medba. (O’Rahilly 269)

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3 This incident also recurs in the prankquean section of *Finnegans Wake*. For a discussion of this, see Faith Steinberg. "The Prankquean, She Rain, Rain, Rain." *James Joyce Quarterly* 39.4 (2002): 829-36. Print.
In response to this specific passage, Faith Steinberg uncritical reproduces Theresa O'Connor’s reading of Medb’s menstruation, in relation to Molly’s, as “a vivid symbol of female creative power” (qtd Steinberg 832). However, Peggy McCracken, reading this passage in context of cultural understandings of gendered bleeding in the medieval period, sees it in starkly opposing terms. McCracken notes that this scene is unique among medieval romances for representing menstruation on the battle and then points out that it “associates women’s biology and the incapacity to engage in battle” (McCracken 25). Since Medb’s biological imperative to excrete – the linguistic distinction between urination and menstruation, as McCracken notes, is unclear here – marks her body as unsuitable to socially powerful position of warrior.

Like the epic proportions of Medb’s flows, Molly’s menstrual flux and flow of urine are marked as copious. Referring to her menstrual flux, she notes: “O patience its pouring out of me like the sea” (769). Her urination, like Medb’s, is giganticized through association with large bodies of water:

> oh God I remember one time I could scout it out straight whistling like a man almost easy O Lord how noisy hope theyre bubbles on it for a wad of money from some fellow Ill have to perfume it in the morning dont forget O Lord what a row youre making like the jersey lily easy O how the waters come down at Lahore. (770)

The Molly-Medb figure, urinating and menstruating copiously, once again displaces the abject incontinence that threatened Bloom’s Jewish masculinity back onto a female body.

This is not, however, a simple repetition of the earlier scene: it raises the difference between the explicitly menstrual, excretory body of Medb and the anxiously “purged” body of Mary. At this point, the Jewish Bloom becomes legible as a mediating body between the pre-
Christian Irish construction of the female body found in Molly, and the Christian Marian body of Gerty. The mode of this mediation is a chiasmic movement backwards and forwards through the archaeology the feminine abject: in “Cyclops,” “Nausikaa” and “Circe” the interaction between Bloom and Gerty temporally reverses the displacement of menstruation from the Marian body onto the Jewish male; in “Penelope” the normative historical flow reactivates, having been rerouted into a different course, that of Irish mythology’s discourses of female excretion. Such a chiasmic patterning of history calls to mind the curious backwards and forwards motion of the 1132 A.D., 566 A.D., 566 A.D., 1132 A.D. moment in *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce 13.33-14.15). Here the historical record runs back to a point marked as “(Silent),” where “parently, in the ginnandgo gap between antediluvious and annadominant the copyist must have fled with his scroll” (14.6, 14.16-18), before turning, like the tide, to run forwards again to its starting point, same but not same. What marks, in *Ulysses*, this silent transitional moment is the abject feminine function of menstruation: marked throughout by indirect reference and euphemism, it is, like the paradoxical “(Silent),” an absence that announces itself.

This historic recoding implicates the gendered and religious displacements of Gerty-Bloom in the colonial concerns of English and Irish cultures. Read through colonizing roles that demand absolute patriarchal control, Bloom the cuckold is a comic figure, eminently unsuitable as a hero. However, as Tymoczko shows, it is possible to read Bloom’s attitudes towards Molly’s sexual behavior as aligning him with Irish folkloric heroes (Tymoczko 119ff). It is important that Bloom can only function in this way in relation a specifically mythologized female figure. This relationship only emerges in “Penelope,” marking Bloom not as always already the Irish hero, but only provisionally so when he is placed alongside Molly.
Menstruation specifically and female excretion more generally function as a site for articulating the way in which the female body’s discursive construction is a battleground for these co-implicated power structures. Joyce’s work with menstruation in *Ulysses* winds back displacement of the menstrual from the Virgin Mary to the Jewish man, and then moves forward to retransfer this menstrual function onto the Irish goddess figure. This is simultaneously a movement backward and a movement forward, a kind of deconstructive chiasmus that revises Bloom’s subject position as feminized, abject scapegoat figure of menstruating Jewish man, ultimately presenting in him a recovery of Irish modes of masculinity, other to the colonizing English tradition. This revised and reconstructed masculinity should not be conflated with progressive, pro-feminist models of gender that refuse hierarchy and oppression: Bloom’s redemptive mythic identity is won not by transforming negative discourses regarding female bodies, but by displacing them back onto biologically female bodies that function as discursive playing fields.
Works Cited


