



Sarah Covington. *Wounds, Flesh, and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. x + 252 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61601-1.

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A Wounded Nation

In this engaging and erudite study, Sarah Covington examines the metaphoric and symbolic use of wounds in seventeenth-century England, focusing on the period from 1640 to 1660. While woundedness has a long history as a metaphor, it is perhaps not surprising that it had particular appeal in a country struggling with civil war and its aftermath. As Covington's discussion reveals, a predominant expression of this world "turned upside down" was "the metaphor of physical and symbolic woundedness and its related themes of brokenness and fragmentation, all of which reached obsessive levels of interest and mention across every range of discourse, from the law through theology, politics, and war" (p. 2). Covington argues persuasively that writers appealed to the imagery's rich historical resonances while also transforming its meanings to reflect their own projects and anxieties.

Covington tracks the metaphor's development over a wide range of discourses, beginning in chapter 1 with "The Wounded Body Politic." The idea of a unified and ordered "body politic" was challenged by the events of the Civil War—if the king was the head or heart of the nation, how could the body politic survive his execution? Covington shows that the reimagined image of the "wounded" body politic was flexible enough to be used by polemicists on all sides of the conflict.

The second chapter examines two uses of the metaphor of woundedness in legal discourse: first, Covington looks at discussions of the "wounding" crime of treason in the work of legal theorists from Edward Coke to John Selden. The second part of the chapter takes on the use of (literal) wounding in the performance of law. Beheadings, lashing, and mutilations could serve to reinforce the law's authority, but bodily wounds could also be subverted by victims into symbols of injustice or martyrdom.

Covington's third chapter examines the representa-

tion of war wounds in a variety of genres, including battlefield reports, medical texts, and epic poetry. She pays particular attention to the "mutual reciprocity that existed between the real and the imaginary, the reality of the battlefield and its literary representations, actual wounds and their mythologization" (p. 17). Although wounds continued (even in self-styled "plain" or factual reports) to be accorded symbolic significance, Covington argues that new, devastating military technologies and forms of conflict strained traditional modes of writing.

Turning from the physical to the emotional realm, chapter 4 discusses the representation of love as a "wounding" force. Even if deeply personal, expressions of love reflected the social and historical context, as seventeenth-century writers showed a preoccupation with love as a force that could injure or break apart a once unified self.

The book's final chapter examines the imagery of woundedness as it appeared in three sorts of religious narratives: puritan conversion stories, Catholic devotional texts, and accounts of religious despair. By exploring the use of woundedness in descriptions of different sorts of religious experiences, the chapter "argues for the centrality of psychological, physical, and spiritual fracture and suffering in seventeenth-century religious narratives" (p. 146).

This wide-ranging analysis contributes to two scholarly discussions: first, as Covington sets out in her introductory material, there is a long-standing debate over what (if anything) metaphors have the potential to "do." In the seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes and John Locke argued that metaphors are a deceptive use of language, and that truth is best expressed in plain language. More recently, literary theorists such as Paul Ricoeur have argued that metaphors can both convey ideas and be productive in the creation of social bonds. Covington ably takes Ricoeur's side of the debate. She argues

particularly persuasively that “the image of a wounded nation (or soul, or law)” could be “productive in the process of self-definition” (p. 2). Wounds (literal and symbolic) could serve to define and reform identities in a time of fracture and fragmentation: a soldier could frame his wounds as “honourable” and England could reimagine itself as a “broken” nation. Covington also emphasizes the paradoxically curative implications of the metaphor: by identifying a wound and “diagnosing” its source, a writer might point the way to its remedy. A wound is an injury, but a wound can also, perhaps, be healed.

While contributing to metaphorology, *Wounds, Flesh, and Metaphor in Seventeenth-Century England* also offers a vivid and novel perspective on the revolutionary years in England. By focusing on a metaphor that was crucial to so many discourses, Covington provides a unified yet multifaceted and nuanced account of how English writers perceived their own troubled era. As she concludes, “through England’s wounds, seventeenth-century writers asked their contemporaries to remember the times; and it is by their wounds—these abject, bloody, and redemptive conduits—that we should remember them too” (p. 179).

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