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Review of "Blood Work: A Tale of Medicine and Murder in the Scientific Revolution"

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In Blood Work, medical professor Holly Tucker traces the history of blood transfusions under the backdrop of the murder case of a Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Denis, who performed an animal-to-human transfusion on a madman in Paris. Tucker reveals how deeply intertwined political conflicts, religion, and science were during the Renaissance in France and England. She argues that “political struggles, religious controversies, and cutthroat ambitions” (pp. 227-8) were at the very heart of the debates surrounding blood transfusion during the Scientific Revolution.

Tucker begins with the story of Jean-Baptiste Denis, who used a variety of animals to experiment with blood transfusions in France. Once he felt confident, Denis began experimenting with animal-human transfusions. Denis chose a mentally unstable Parisian as his subject. Within a short time, the patient was dead, and Denis was charged with his murder. The subsequent trial brought to light political and religious debates that would affect the future of blood transfusions.

Tucker then focuses on how the developments and experiments of blood transfusions were part of a bigger competition between European countries such as England and France. Tucker deftly weaves historical descriptions of the power struggles of absolute monarchs, religious developments in the Reformation, and key developments in the Scientific Revolution with the specific concerns regarding transfusions. For example, she explains how Christopher Wren created city plans for London based on perceptions of circulation. She also describes how the Academy of Sciences in France benefitted from the opulent lifestyle of Louis XIV. When exotic animals died on the grounds of Versailles, the carcasses were shipped to the Academy for experimentation. These state-supported research efforts illustrated the political rivalry between these two nations.

Moreover, Tucker utilizes extensive research from diaries, sketches, and broadsheets to show the strong religious concerns about transfusions as well. She shows just how close religion, superstition, and science were during this time, as each was seeking to define itself. Protestant countries, such as England, which had shrugged off the power of the Catholic Church, were especially interested in scientific change like blood transfusion that might challenge Church authority. Supporters of transfusions used Biblical rhetoric to justify their actions, citing phrases like “Lamb of God, Blood of Christ.” These historical and religious influences helped shape the arguments surrounding blood transfusion.

This book would fit seamlessly into an advanced level European history class as well as biology, physiology, or health class. It would be an excellent work to use in an interdisciplinary setting, allowing for discussion in both a history and a science class. It also illustrates how influential history and science are on each other. As the history of science continues to develop, this is an essential read.

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