

Heather Meek

ANG 6530 - Blood in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Medicine

### **Descriptif**

Influenced at once by seventeenth-century physician William Harvey's monumental discovery of the circulation of blood, by archaic humoural theories of the body, and by the plethora of figurative meanings of blood that exist to this day, doctors, writers, and laypeople of the long eighteenth century understood blood as both substance and signifier. Blood, it was believed, was governed by mechanical forces and propelled through the body by means of the machine-like pump of the heart. However, an enduring faith in pre-Harveyan models meant that understandings of blood varied widely and depended, among other factors, on its location in (or out of) the body, and on the habits, health, and humoural constitution of the body through which it moved. Blood could be wholesome and generative, but it could also be soiled, excessively abundant, imbued with disease, and in need of expulsion through the dubious, yet ever popular practice of phlebotomy. Blood carried with it considerable metaphorical weight: it was a bearer of life; a vehicle of one's essential being; a determinant of character; and a marker of age, rank, race, and gender. This course will consider scientific and symbolic depictions of blood through readings of a range of eighteenth-century texts. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of blood will allow us to consider the overlapping and oftentimes contradictory definitions, theories, metaphors, and ideologies that surrounded it, while also respecting the porous disciplinary boundaries of the eighteenth century. We will investigate representations of blood as they appear in medical and scientific treatises, in periodicals, and in fictional, poetic, dramatic, and autobiographical works. We will discuss blood as a signifier of gender, family, race, and guilt, and we will think about blood in relation to issues ranging from circulation, phlebotomy, and transfusion; to illness, disease, and death; to menstruation, reproduction, and childbirth; to animals, vampires, wounds, and sex.