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## *Book Review*



Enrique García Santo-Tomás, *Signos vitales: Procreación e imagen en la narrativa áurea* (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2020), 364 pp., €29.80 (paperback), ISBN 978 8 49192 169 1.

The book *Signos vitales: Procreación e imagen en la narrativa áurea* (“Vital signs: procreation and image in the golden age narrative”) by Enrique García Santo-Tomás is the second part of a planned trilogy on the fictionalisation within Spanish Golden Age literature of three important fields of knowledge in the early modern period: astronomy, medicine, and mechanics. After the first volume, published in 2014, dealt with the importance of optics for astronomical studies (*La musa refractada: literatura y óptica en la España del Barroco*), the focus is now on a specific area of medicine, obstetrics or on “La musa encinta” as the first part of the Introduction is entitled. The author is concerned not only with the study of birth, but also, in his own words, with “gestation and pregnancy, breastfeeding and, in general, the construction of the maternal as a vital experience, [...] also as a fertile tool of figurative language.” (p. 14) Based on an in-depth study of medical history, García Santo-Tomás addresses both the fictionalisation of obstetric knowledge in narrative and dramatic texts, while also repeatedly considering the metaphorical dimensions of the semantic field of motherhood in its widest sense in the works of the selected authors. Of particular interest are the figures of the midwife and the wet nurse, who are seen figuratively as mediators, and are examined in this broader symbolic dimension. The study is divided into three parts, which not only mark a chronological sequence, but also a thematic one, namely: “Contextos (1500–1586),” “Intervenciones (1580–1670),” and “Imágenes (1613–1698).”

The first part begins with a presentation of early modern obstetric texts and an examination of the problematic status of midwives in this period (“I. Prácticas”). Here, the author not only looks back to the Middle Ages, but also includes non-medical text material in the analysis, such as Leon Battista Alberti’s *Libri della famiglia*, which treats of the importance of mother’s milk

for the development of children. After a historical contextualisation of the midwife's social role, the second chapter, "II. Mediaciones" concludes by quoting a birth narrative from the perspective of the new-born from Antonio Enríquez Gómez's *Vida de don Gregorio Guadaña* (1644) as an example of a rare kind of testimony from the Golden Age; "testimonio que resulta poco frecuente en las letras áureas por la gran cantidad de datos y detalles que se ofrecen al lector." (p. 105) The third and last chapter of the first part ("III. Nacimientos") deals on the one hand with the debate of renowned humanists on breastfeeding in the broader context of their discussion of marriage and the nature of the perfect wife; on the other hand, it treats of Juan de Timoneda, an author who fictionalises in his narrative work several questions of interest to García Santo-Tomás.

The theatre is the focus of the second and shortest part of the volume, which begins with a chapter entitled precisely "IV. Dramatizaciones," in which not only Lope and Calderón are examined but also playwrights like Luis Quiñones de Benavente, Juan de la Cueva, and Pedro Francisco Lanini y Sagredo. In this section, however, García Santo-Tomás also deals with the metaphorical use of male pregnancy, birth, and the midwife to depict the writing and reading process, as he exemplifies in Luis Vélez de Guevara's *Diablo Cojuelo*. Chapter "V. Impresiones" returns to narrative literature and is dedicated to the "escritura del incesto," which – according to the author – has not been comprehensively studied either as "logro narrativo" or as "estrategia editorial." (pp. 174–175) García Santo-Tomás examines the topic of inbreeding, the sanctioning of which is traced back to the Council of Elvira (around 300), in novels by Alonso Pérez de Montalbán and Luis de Guevara.

The third part is structured according to the ages of human beings and deals with childhood under the heading "Maternidades," using as an example Cervantes's *novela ejemplar* "La señora Cornelia," while Alonso Jerónimo de Salas Barbadillo's "Don Diego de noche" was chosen to illustrate youth under the title "Paternidades." The exploration of old age using the example of Francisco Santos's "La Tarasca de parto en el mesón del infierno" is under the motto "Celebraciones." The author highlights the increasing importance of the monstrous and the proliferating, using the example of multiple births.

The volume presently under review is rich in a multitude of different aspects that can hardly be considered within the framework of this summary. The author of this extremely suggestive study is to be greatly commended for encouraging his reader to reflect on pertinent questions that have been unjustly neglected by the research. Perhaps the most impressive description of lactation in Spanish literature comes from the pen of Emilia Pardo Bazán, who in her story "La Advertencia" emphasizes the great "placidez física" of the young mother while the baby is feeding at her breast. While this Galician naturalist

does not fall within the period under study, her example is striking insofar as it highlights the fact that, the subject matter notwithstanding, all of the selected authors are male. Female narrators such as María de Zayas or Mariana de Carvajal are only mentioned in passing (respectively, at pp. 104, 245, 251, 255, 292 and pp. 196–197, 203) and the question inevitably arises as to why women writers of the Golden Age did not leave behind stories of motherhood worthy of analysis. It is also conspicuous that none of the selected authors practised a medical profession as was the case with François Rabelais, who presented one of the most startling nativity stories in world literature with Pantagruel's delivery out of his mother's ear. These reflections point to the specificity of Spanish birth narratives and should not be read as a criticism of the author of the monograph under review. *Signos vitales* is a book well worth reading that will definitely provide important impetus for further discussion of the fictionalisation of issues surrounding birth and reproduction.

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