

BOOK REVIEW

Signos vitales: Procreación e imagen en la narrativa áurea. Enrique García Santo-Tomás. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2020. Pp. 364.

From the trove of knowledge about reproductive medicine contained by the set of texts edited by Monica H. Green under the title of *Trotula* (2001) to the advice about menstrual pain given by Celestina to young sex worker Areúsa, premodern archives do not lack in examples of the forms that knowledge developed around the maintenance of women's health. And yet, the study of women's health and reproductive medicine—often adjacent subjects, but, importantly, not necessarily—still constitutes an under-represented part of the debate about Iberian early modern scientific practices. For this among other reasons, it is refreshing that Enrique García Santo-Tomás has decided to focus his recent scholarly volume about the relation between medicine and Spanish early modern literature, *Signos vitales: Procreación e imagen en la narrativa áurea*, specifically on the importance of reproductive medicine.

Already in the introduction the author gives us significant information about how this book places itself in regard to both literary studies and history of science. First, it considers a dialectic relation of sorts between both fields. This is not a book that mines literary fragments in order to build a narrative of scientific innovation, but it is not a book that treats science like a theme present in a literary archive either. Instead of these things, the book considers the epistemological implications of writing about reproductive labor and then studies how the figurative language present in this writing shapes the literary imagination of early modern Spain. Second, it places itself consciously as the midpoint within a trilogy. García Santo-Tomás has already written a book called *La musa refractada* (2014), published in English by the University of Chicago Press as *The Refracted Muse* (2017), about optics

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and astronomy and their relation to early modern Spanish literary culture. In the prologue, he announces a third one on mechanics that would complete a project based on a unique mapping of disciplines of knowledge—astronomy, medicine, and mechanics—and its relation with literature.

The book is divided into three parts: “Contexts (1500–1586),” “Interventions (1580–1670),” and “Images (1613–1698).” The first focuses on the forms of knowledge associated with professions developed around reproductive and care labor in early modern Europe, particularly that of midwives and wet nurses. In the second part of the book, García Santo-Tomás observes that the social relevance of the labor done by these figures results in them becoming powerful cultural metaphors. It is particularly interesting that these metaphors specialize in the task of cultural mediation. Even though the book focuses on the presence of this field of metaphors in narrative fictions, it devotes in this section some interesting passages to the way playwrights, such as Lope de Vega, used the language of conception and nursing and raising children to talk about bringing text to the stage. Lastly, the third part theorizes the family as the basic constitutive piece of the body of society associated with the emergence of the discursive power of concepts such as lineage. In this context the roles of midwives and wet nurses become indispensable as agents that facilitate these fictions of the family.

Cleverly, *Signos vitales* incorporates details from the biographies of writers such as Miguel de Cervantes, Alonso Jerónimo Salas de Barbadillo, Francisco Santos, and Juan de Timoneda in order to interpret fictions built around ideas of reproductive labor and parenthood that ultimately serve these authors as launching pads to talk about the intersection of class and gender, even of projects of religious and ethnic purity. The volume also includes analysis of images of different natures, from religious paintings to mythological scenes and scientific engravings. The visual archive contributes to the book insofar as it informs the initial debate about medical culture and the way many of the keywords of such debate become cultural metaphors. The fact that the book studies the way scientific and medical culture appears in the literary archive with a focus on reproductive and care labor allows García Santo-Tomás to diverge from many other works dialoguing with history of science. Instead of exclusively focusing on the epistemological side of the dialogue between scientific writing and literary form, he also wants us to pay attention to the social implications of this dialogue. A perfect example of this is his reading of Cervantes’s story “La señora Cornelia” (from *Novelas ejemplares* [1613]). This story allows him to establish a connection between the social necessity of determining legitimate fatherhood linked to issues of lineage and blood and the displacement of professional women as experts in reproductive labor in favor of men, physicians and theologians, particularly.

Ultimately, *Signos vitales* constitutes an important contribution to a field that still feels like an emergent one, focusing on the place of the Iberian archive in the development of premodern science. The oblique ways characterizing literary and artistic close reading allow García Santo-Tomás to have a completely unique take on this field. This book is neither trying to create a counterhegemonic exaltation of Spanish science nor a new thematic approach to Spanish literature; instead, it theorizes science as relation between text, image, and a series of social agents. The conclusion points to an interesting observation: we might approach texts with a preconception of a normative order of things (academic formation of knowledge vs. popular practice, male public spaces vs. female domestic spaces), but a closer examination of the texts reveals a far messier and more complex reality. It might be precisely the dynamic nature of baroque aesthetics that illuminates this complexity. Future studies following the path this book opens can explore this topic, among the many that *Signos vitales* leaves for further research.

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