



García Santo-Tomás, Enrique. *Signos vitales: Procreación e imagen en la narrativa áurea.* Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2020. Pp. 364. ISBN 978-8-491-92169-1.

Signos vitales is the second in a trilogy of studies on Early Modern Spanish literature and science by the award-winning scholar Enrique García Santo-Tomás. It analyzes in depth the many issues surrounding the act of giving birth and how authors of fiction during the years 1500–1698 approached this human experience to craft amusing and astounding plots. It is

amply illustrated with twenty full-color reproductions of European art and contains a brief index plus three separate bibliographies, one of background material, and the others of primary and secondary sources.

The first chapter provides a historical overview of the roles of midwives and wet nurses during the European Middle Ages and Renaissance with eight reproductions of the Virgin Mary as a nursing mother. García Santo-Tomás draws on numerous studies of various aspects of medicine in Early Modern Spain, emphasizing that midwives and wet nurses were intimately and uniquely involved in the private lives of the people they served.

The second chapter surveys both medical manuals and literature about the roles of midwives and wet-nurses from antiquity through the early sixteenth century. With his analysis of *La Lozana andaluza* García Santo-Tomás weaves the literary depiction of the roles of these women with historical documents in his discussion of their diminishing role in Spanish society, especially after the arrival of the printing press and its subsequent control by the Inquisition.

In the next chapter, García Santo-Tomás examines the influence of Erasmus on Antonio de Guevara's preference for mothers' breast feeding their own babies in lieu of using wet nurses. He enhances the fictional portrayal of this belief with information from treaties and other contemporaneous documents and shows how colonial expansion at that time, along with preoccupation about "limpieza de sangre," further affected negative attitudes towards wet nurses and midwives. Furthermore, an impressive number of examples from Juan de Timoneda's works of fiction display a variety of possible disasters at a child's birth (death, miscarriage, and relocation of the infant, for example).

In chapter 4, García Santo-Tomás focuses on the role of the midwife and the delivery of babies, especially under unusual and at times comical circumstances, as handled in Comedias by Tirso, Calderón, and Lope. He also examines the metaphorical use of the parturition motif, especially as it applies to the creative process when the printing press, viewed as midwife, mutilates texts. So, too, do midwives unwittingly harm babies.

In the fifth chapter the analysis turns to the theme of incest in novels by Juan Pérez de Montalbán and by Luis de Guevara. We learn that their plots are highly complex, filled with intrigue, disguise and deception, elements that captivated and delighted their readers.

An in-depth analysis of Cervantes's novela ejemplar, *La señora Cornelia*, is the highlight of chapter 6. For García Santo-Tomás the child is central to an appreciation of this complex story. A key scene involves a mother who tries to nurse what she thinks is another woman's baby (but is really her own) even though she cannot do so, because she has just given birth and has not yet produced her milk, a problem that reveals Cervantes's familiarity with the medical beliefs of his times.

In chapter 7, as the book's chronological analysis plunges us deeper into the Baroque period, we find an intriguing summary of the novel *Don Diego de noche* by Salas Barbadillo, where not only does a woman give birth by accident in a cemetery and the unwanted baby is rushed away to a wet nurse (for starters) but the owner of the house next door is robbed and the satchel of his treasures is also passed from person to person. García Santo-Tomás observes that the commercialization of milk ("los pechos que se venden") in society is emphasized in this story with the simultaneous searches for milk for the newborn and for money to compensate the victim of the robbery.

In the last chapter, Francisco Santos's various portrayals of midwives and wet-nurses reveal how decadent and corrupt life in Madrid had become by the end of the seventeenth century. Here García Santo-Tomás focuses on Santos's depiction of society through his detailed, moralizing descriptions of the sordid and violent aspects of life in the Spain of his times. In these little-known but important novels, we find a plethora of shocking episodes replete with prostitution, adultery, bestiality, and more. Santos writes about how midwives carried out many shady tasks in secret, even helping sterile women appear to give birth. Santos associates giving birth with vipers and

García Santo-Tomás extends this metaphor as a comment on the overall decadence of Spain at that time.

Overall, *Signos vitales* is scholarly, with ample footnotes revealing García Santo-Tomás's in-depth command of his subject. Especially welcome are his complete bibliographical citations in the footnotes, conveniently located on each page. Nevertheless, there are several problems with his bibliography. For example, his recent edition of Salas Barbadillo's *Hija de la Celestina* is missing. Curiously, too, four of García Santo-Tomás's own recent articles are absent, even though they are listed on page 29 (footnote). There is also an occasional typo such as "worlds" instead of "words" (339). Additionally, in the index, two entries are out of alphabetical order (362). But fortuitously these minor problems are compensated by the overall excellence and meticulous scholarship displayed throughout the rest of *Signos vitales*.

This masterful work of scholarship is best appreciated by specialists and advanced graduate students of Early Modern Spanish literature, history, medicine and culture. To use one of García Santo-Tomás's favorite expressions metaphorically, this book is an "abanico" of insight and observation on the roles of women involved in childbirth and breast feeding in Early Modern Spain. Readers are encouraged to open the pages of this book the way they would open a fan and watch as their minds are exposed to a new, refreshing way of looking at literature that enriches and deepens their own understanding of life in Early Modern Spain.

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