

María Cruz de Carlos Varona.
*Nacer en palacio. El ritual del nacimiento
 en la corte de los Austrias.*

CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS EUROPA HISPÁNICA, 2018. 296 PP.

Emilie L. Bergmann

University of California, Berkeley

NACER EN PALACIO IS A MUCH-NEEDED contribution to scholarship on early modern Spanish women's lives and a gendered historiography of the Spanish Habsburg court. The confluence of social science, obstetrical practices, and history of art in this generously illustrated study of royal pregnancy and childbirth makes a compelling argument for maternity as a field of research in its own right, with the potential to change academic approaches to the history of the family as well as material culture and court ritual. The authority and physical activity of women as midwives and birth attendants in Spanish accounts and visual depictions of these events challenge the models of feminine silence and passivity in literary and didactic texts, as well as the commonly accepted view of antagonism between midwives and medical men in early modern Europe.

The author draws on documents in the royal archives, including letters, official accounts of religious observances during Habsburg pregnancies and births, and inventories of furnishings and religious objects brought to the queen's chambers in anticipation of the delivery. Among the portraits in chapter 1, "En busca de un heredero," are those of young women, some barely past puberty when the paintings were made, under consideration as possible progenitors of male heirs to the Spanish throne. Thus, verbal accounts emphasize their good health and disposition, the predominance of boy children born to their mothers and aunts, and measurements including the young women's height and the width of their hips. Objectifying as this process of selection was, de Carlos Varona's research also gives evidence of the emotional bonds between monarchs and their wives, citing, for example, Felipe III's grief at the death of Margarita de Austria.

The approach to royal childbirth as a cultural system is most evident in chapters 2, "El espacio del parto regio," and 4, "El espacio simbólico de la maternidad regia: el oratorio de la reina," addressing the material culture of royal childbearing. These are also the most relevant chapters for scholars of the *comedia*, as they address the ways in which royal pregnancy and

childbirths were framed as performances, with processions to chapels within the palace and in the surrounding neighborhoods and with religious objects placed in the queen's personal oratory. The liturgical texts and devotional practices, together with paintings, sculpture, and other religious images, symbolized the identification of the dynastic role of the queen's pregnancy and delivery with key moments in the life of Christ's mother. This link is made explicit in the celebration of the Nativity matins for each royal birth and in two paintings by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz: the *Annunciation* (ca. 1604), in which Margarita de Austria is depicted as the Virgin Mary, and the *Birth of the Virgin* (1603), in which the queen's mother is depicted as the midwife and Margarita's sisters as attendants. De Carlos Varona's discussion of devotional practices and religious images in the oratory of Isabel de Borbón demonstrates the consistency of rituals surrounding royal pregnancy and childbirth, aspects of which continued into the reign of Isabel II. The detailed color reproductions of portraits of princesses and queens allow readers to examine significant jewels worn by these women in the belief that they could ensure a healthy pregnancy and birth. Particularly significant among such objects are the marten's heads fashioned from gold and decorated with precious stones, described in inventories and visible in portraits of Isabel de Valois and her daughter Catalina Micaela. The marten, believed to conceive through the ear and give birth through the mouth, was associated with fertility and childbirth as well as with the Immaculate Conception. Margarita de Austria's death at age twenty-six after giving birth to eight children in ten years, of whom only half reached adulthood, provides context for the justifiable anxiety underlying the use of such elaborate amulets.

Another remarkable religious object accompanying royal pregnancy and childbirth was the figure of the Virgen de la Expectación, a polychrome sculpture whose belly was hollowed out, with a window to reveal the figure of a tiny infant. Although the one that belonged to Isabel de Borbón has been lost, de Carlos Varona provides an illustration of another, commissioned by the Condesa de Olivares, showing the hollow interior of the statue's abdomen and the interior niche where a kind of early modern devotional ultrasound was displayed. One of the volume's appendices reproduces a palace inventory from 1625 that documents the typical purchases of delicate silks used in bedclothes for the queen and cloths to wrap her newborn. De Carlos Varona cites male medical experts' instructions and opinions on the efficacy of amulets and relics to ward off "aojamiento o fascinio" (64); these are clearly visible in portraits of royal infants.

With regard to the physiological realities of childbirth and the practice of midwifery, chapter 3, "Honestísima arte: comadres y autoridad femenina en la corte española," gives important evidence of the distinct roles of doctors and midwives and cites the positive evaluations of midwives written by medical men, reproduced among the volume's appendices. This chapter also examines the images of midwives and attendants with sleeves rolled up for physical exertion in paintings depicting the birth of the Virgin in the Museo del Prado. Medical men were consulted on problems of fertility and pregnancy, but midwives were entrusted with the birth itself. De Carlos Varona was able to trace the careers of four royal midwives

between 1600 and 1660, finding that the official position of palace midwife brought prestige as well as a salary and other material rewards, along with the possibility of noble status for family members. The chapter's scope extends beyond the confines of the palace to the relationship between these practitioners and the communities that depended on their expertise as well as their discretion regarding the birth of children to unmarried women, including the king's mistresses. Accounts of complicated births suggest that royal midwives may have been acquainted with the protoscientific techniques and teachings of Louise Bourgeois Boursier, midwife to Marie de Médicis. The author, however, points out the limitations of the historical record regarding Spanish midwives' training, their practices, and the paths that led to their appointment as royal midwives.

María Cruz de Carlos Varona has made her extensive research accessible with a substantial scholarly apparatus containing appendices, an exhaustive bibliography including manuscripts in Spanish archives and scholarship on maternity in other European contexts, and a detailed index. The Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica (CEEH) is to be commended for the high quality of this volume, including its color reproductions. With its extraordinary visual appeal and scholarly rigor, *Nacer en palacio* is an essential resource for the study of court culture and the lives of early modern women.