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THREADS OF LIFE¹

THE GOLDEN AGE MIDWIFE AMIDST CLOTH, TISSUE AND ANTIQUE DEITIES OF FATE

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The importance of ritual as a ceremonial framework for childbirth, and its implementation through the midwife, provides a highly relevant angle to understanding assistance during childbirth in Golden Age Spain.² Throughout the ages, the central role of the midwife as ‘master of ceremonies’ has stimulated both spirituality and fantasy. Accordingly, Early Modern Europe frequently attributes divinized, and also demonized, representations to obstetric caretakers.³ The symbolic link to ancient birth deities here appears of special interest⁴, given that – as is the case with Juno or Lucina⁵ – the ambiguity that marks the Golden Age midwife’s existence at the time, finds a multi-layered resonance in the figures of the Roman *Parcae* or Greek *Moirae*.⁶

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² Aichinger 2018

³ Park 2010: 257

⁴ Filippini 2017:11

⁵ Fischer-Monzón 2018a/b

⁶ While this elaboration puts a distinct focus on ancient Roman and Greek deities, it may be noted that we find kindred manifestations like the Nordic *Norns* in cultures farther off the Mediterranean.

Tria Fata

Whereas in Antiquity's religious practice these goddesses remained marginal figures, their appearance in literature and art at the time promoted their image to such an extent that it transcended to the beginning of the modern age and beyond. As already described by Catullus and the Augustan poets, the divine sisters spin the threads of fate (*fatalia stamina*), pronounce destiny with their *carmen* at divine weddings or births, draw the fate of individuals on their iron boards, and determine the day of their death. Their names in Latin strengthen their consideration as not only deities of death and destiny, but also as natal goddesses: *Nona* and *Decima* refer to children of the ninth and tenth months, while *Parca* (midwife) derives from the Latin term *parere* (to give birth).⁷ Among the attributes of these goddesses, we find spindles and threads⁸, relating to a millennia-old symbolic intertwining of textile production and reproduction that highlights a particularly interesting angle for research on Golden age obstetrics and midwifery.

Antiquity and symbolical interrelations

Already in Bachofen's writings we find an argument for the symbolic connection between textile production and reproduction. In his work on mortuary symbolism, Bachofen elaborates on the metaphoric correlation of "the spinning and weaving" and "the creative, formative power of nature" through which crude organic matter is provided with "articulation, symmetrical form, and refinement". He describes natural processes of generation and formation that frequently resonate in textile crafts, and he recognizes "the twofold power of nature, the interpretation of the two sexual principles prerequisite to all generation" in the interweaving of threads.⁹

A further exploration of such intertwining between the making of fabric and reproduction in the ancient world delivers abundant results. Also Eileithyia, Greek antiquity's celestial figure who corresponds to the Roman Lucina and helps labouring women¹⁰, is described as "the fine weaver" by a poet from Lycia.¹¹ Accordingly, the goddess is given a rope by Leto as a plea for divine assistance during the birth of her child.¹² Beyond its reproductive connotation, handicrafts in ancient mythology often are instrumentalized to display notions of marital fidelity or sexual

⁷ Henrichs 2006

⁸ De Angeli 1991: 105-128, cited in: Henrichs 2006

⁹ Bachofen 1992: 56f

¹⁰ Willets 1958: 221

¹¹ see Schaus 2014: 247

¹² Bachofen 1992: 57

dominance, such as Penelope keeping her suitors at bay by pretending to weave¹³ or, on the other side of the spectrum, Herakles being dominated by the sovereign Omphale and forced to dress in female clothing and spin wool.¹⁴

An observation of popular traditions in Roman and Greek Antiquity strengthens the thesis of certain symbolic ties between reproduction and textile work in the hands of women. Whereas in ancient Greece it was, for example, custom to attach an oil wreath for boys to the front door after a successful delivery, a wool bandage indicated the birth of a healthy girl.¹⁵ Also, within ancient birth rites of passage, fabric played a vital part. Cloth, handled mostly by the midwife in the process of wrapping and swaddling the child, often served as a material element that helped overcome the liminal status between life and death.¹⁶ In sculptures of the Gallo-Roman tradition, the wrapped child is accordingly provided with objects that are supposed to attract good luck, among them a scroll¹⁷ that can be seen as direct invocation to the good favour of the Sisters of Fate and the decisions over future life they put down in writing.

The concept of a three-folded correlation between the Parcae or Moirae on the one side, and female manual work and the midwife in the Golden Age on the other side, finds its argumentation in the ambiguous societal assessment of these figures, certain time-patterns that structure their work, and their form-giving and, thus, destiny-shaping functions.

Handicrafts and moral

Similar to the *Tria Fata*'s double-edged assessment as figures of both birth and death, also the Golden Age images of female handcrafters and midwives prove to be ambiguous. Accordingly, these images are strongly accompanied by the attribution of vice and virtue. Like in Bocaccio's 'Book of Famous Women', the depiction of female handicrafts in Golden Age art often serves as a means of moral instruction and renders an ideal image of laborious virtue and grace in women.¹⁸ This virtuous notion of the occupation of both hands and the immobilization by sitting bound to the workplace in a narrow sphere, embodies both domestic discipline and female productivity. The motif can even be found in Golden Age pictures of ladies of the upper class who let

¹³ Broderson 2006: 423

¹⁴ Broderson 2006: 240

¹⁵ Broderson 2006: 202

¹⁶ see Dasen 2009 for birth rites of passage

¹⁷ Dasen 2011: 299

¹⁸ Jaeger 2006: 1102

themselves be portrayed while spinning or sewing.¹⁹

It is, however, that some positively evaluated qualities of female handcrafters' work, just as happens with the midwife's office in the Golden Age, also give room to their behavioural condemnation. Just like the Tria Fata's activity, both handicrafts and midwifery are of communicative and collaborative character²⁰, contributing to the group's persistence and "weaving communities together" over generations.²¹ Nevertheless – just as it happens with the often-criticized confidentiality between mother and midwife²² – this specific form of cooperation has often sparked the distrust of those that aren't part of it. It is for this reason that rural spinning rooms in the Golden Age, for example, were considered dangerous spheres of the unknown, dens of vice and loquaciousness. Just as the deities of fate are often reduced to their death-bringing qualities because they did not always deliver prosperous messages, we can see that both handcrafters and midwives in the Golden Age are prejudiced in a similar way for the information they share; a moral ambiguity that is echoed in popular proverbs of the Golden Age, such as "Las manos en la rueca, y los ojos en la puerta".²³

Rhythmization

The named symbolic triangle between the Tria Fata, the midwife, and the female handcrafter gains an interesting angle through the consideration of rhythm and time. Resonating with divine songs of destiny, female producers of fabric in the Golden Age used to not only chat but also sing during their work.²⁴ Suitably, also the Golden Age midwife's work was influenced and structured by collective prayers and chants.²⁵ While the Parcae's song predicts future life, the Golden Age handcrafter accompanies her work by singing and the midwife syntonizes the vocal scape during birth. Interestingly, just as we can observe a shift towards a more moderated auditive soundscape during childbirth in the Golden Age²⁶, we can also see the spinners' singing was, then, assessed more and more critically as a sign of exaggerated lightness and permissiveness.²⁷ The moral evaluation of these kinds of works here appears like

¹⁹ Türk 2000: 59ff

²⁰ Calero Fernández 1998: 46

²¹ Carrasco 2012: 80

²² "the semantic demotion of the term »godsibling« [godparent] to »gossip« indicates how in the discursive system that produced these works women's language was congealing into tattle, while men's attained the truth of 'observation' " (Wilson 1996: 133f, cited in Bicks 2017: 17)

²³ Correas 1627: 263

²⁴ Calero Fernández 1998: 47

²⁵ Aichinger 2018: 408; Gélis 1989: 159

²⁶ Aichinger 2018: 408

²⁷ Calero Fernández 1998: 47

a reoccurring pattern that seems of particular interest for a deeper investigation.

Additionally, just as pregnancy and childcare in the Golden Age frequently coincided with the colder seasons²⁸, the social time of weaving and spinning²⁹ followed similar rhythms over the year, month, and day. Both reproduction and handicrafts distinguished themselves by displaying a discontinuous and sometimes irregular character – discontinuous because both happened at the same time as other tasks, irregular because both kinds of activities were adjusted to agricultural activity.³⁰ The timing of textile labour, thus, adapted itself to the needs of the group just as childbirth and childcare were frequently tuned to natural rhythms.

Shaping destiny

In resonance with Bachofen's understanding of handicrafts that symbolically shape life, the conception of the midwife as the earthly equivalent to the Sisters of Fate, as the one who designs the destiny of the child, finds its argumentation in the different manual dimensions of her office. The metamorphosis of tissue is subject to her responsibility, just as the prosperity of future life lies in her hands at the very moment of its beginning. Just like the Parcae or Moirae, the midwife cuts the thread of life (the umbilical cord) and thereby ends uterine life. Just like the natal goddesses, the midwife finds herself in the position of judging over life and death, not least by carrying out emergency baptisms.³¹ Furthermore, there is a sense in which the midwife – like the deities – actively measures and shapes future life through her traditional practice of swaddling, bathing and clothing the child after birth. The midwife's manual task is to give form to the new-born body, to firm it up³², and through this, to straighten the new citizen of the earth, not only in a physical but also in a moral sense. Through her hands, the midwife renders work that, thus, does not only contribute (supposedly) to the physical wellbeing of the newborn, but also symbolically favours human identity in its development.³³ Finally, like the *Tria Fata*³⁴, the Golden Age midwife has an impact on the destiny of an unborn through the production of (oral) text. The Parcae predict the future by writing human destiny on their boards and by singing their *carmen*; the midwife tells stories to mothers about successful births and role models and, thus, encourages a good unfolding of the birth

²⁸ Jaeger 2011: 720

²⁹ see Thompson 1984

³⁰ Ortega, Morant 2006: 246

³¹ see Aichinger, Dulmovits 2020

³² Dasen 2009b: 204

³³ Gourevitch 1994, cited in: Dasen 2009: 206

³⁴ Schröder 1969: 524-563

process.³⁵ Summing up, we find all of the Fates' duties combined in the figure of the Golden Age midwife: it is her who spins, measures and cuts the thread of life and thereby shapes future life. Accordingly, clothing – as the produce of the handcrafter's work – has throughout the ages contributed to the construction of the self and hence contributed to forming individual destiny.³⁶

Embarking on the quest

The consideration of the midwife as equivalent to these divine instances on the one hand, and female textile labourers on the other hand, sparks curiosity and demands further investigation of these symbolic correlations in Golden Age culture.

In fine arts, we find a wide range of resonances in works like Guido Reni's painting 'Virgin Mary sewing' (1615-1640) or Pietro Bellotti's 'La Parca Lachesi', often translated into English as 'The »midwife« Lachesis'. Also, prominent works like Velázquez' 'Las Hilanderas' promise to render interesting insights, given that an early interpretation of the spinning women as manifestations of the *Tria Fata* was already offered by Ceán Bermúdez in 1825³⁷, echoed by Ortega y Gasset in the 20th century, but has been passed over ever since.³⁸ Naturally, the considerations presented also ask us to delve further into the mythological plays of Calderón and Lope de Vega. Whereas the deities in these works have been primarily investigated in regard to their nefarious character³⁹, an exploration of their representation with links to reproduction promises to render new results. As an example, the investigation of the *Parcae*, their cave (a symbol for the uterus since ancient times), and their role in announcing the birth of Cupido in Calderón's 'La fiera, el rayo y la piedra' appears especially interesting. Also, a first study of Fernando de Roja's 'La Celestina' proves to be fruitful in terms of expressions that tighten the symbolic knot between handicrafts and sexual or reproductive notions. The term *el primer hilado*⁴⁰, describing the first sexual encounter, or the expression *vender hilado*⁴¹, metaphorically referring to a woman's body and prostitution, spark interest for a more thorough investigation of de Roja's work and the popular usage of cloth-bound terminology within. In line with these observations, it will also be highly interesting to broadly search for proverbs like 'Pie en la cuna, las manos en la rueca; hila tu tela

³⁵ Aichinger 2018: 403

³⁶ Jaeger 2007: 749s

³⁷ Bermúdez 1825: 733-735

³⁸ Ortega y Gasset 1999: 58s

³⁹ see e.g. Trambaioli 2014

⁴⁰ de Rojas 2011: 99

⁴¹ de Rojas 2011: 116

y cría tu hijuela”⁴² that strengthen the proposed triangular connection between fate, reproduction and handicrafts.

Within further investigations of the matter, also the representation of the umbilical cord comes into the spotlight. Who cuts the umbilical cord and thereby acts as Parca in theatre, prose or poetry? Which depictions do we find of these measuring and cutting hands? Also, the social differentiation emanating from different fabric productions promises to render valuable cues as to how Golden Age society evaluated the midwife. Finally, etymological considerations should not be overlooked when embarking on such an investigation. The origins of the Spanish term *linaje* (kinship) and its ties to the greek λίνον (linen⁴³) or latin *linea* (line, thread) appear of special interest here, just as the linguistic connection between text (bound to the latin term *texere*, to weave) and text qualities such as cohesion (lat. *cohaerere*, to be tied together) are. These observations give way to an investigation of the Golden Age midwife as the creator of text, rendering a particularly interesting angle to these upcoming studies that will focus on the stories she tells during and after parturition, spinning thereby narrative threads for generations to come.

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⁴² Correas 1627: 394

⁴³ According to Homer, the thread spanned by the goddesses of fate was made out of linen. (Brodersen 2006: 334)

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