

BOOK REVIEW

## Rebecca Whiteley, *Birth Figures: Early Modern Prints and the Pregnant Body*

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In her 1690 obstetric book, *The Court Midwife*, Justine Siegemund proclaimed, 'I had the pictures of the postures of birth engraved and printed out of the love of my neighbour at my own expense, so I could ... leave to the world the enlightenment in this art and the experience that God gave me' (quoted on p. 137). Although originally published in German, the midwife's visualization of the pregnant body and baby developing in the womb reflected a pan-European tradition that rendered the mystery of birth accessible and labour an experience with which others could assist.

In *Birth Figures: Early Modern Prints and the Pregnant Body*, Rebecca Whiteley historicizes the engravings that midwives like Siegemund fought to include in their early printed books. Almost anyone who has studied premodern European history of medicine will know what a 'birth figure' is, even though it was Whiteley who named the category; they are the visions of male baby bodies floating in the womb, like the one Leonardo da Vinci sketched in his famous study of a baby ensconced in a uterus-as-seed. In an evocative turn to historical actors' categories, Whiteley borrows 'birth figures' from the first midwife manual published in England (p. 14). She leans into its multiplicity – the *figure* as both a likeness of a person and an illustration, or the process of *figuring* something out – to cast a wide net for the visual displays of the presentation of the foetus living, growing and ready to be born from a pregnant body.

Whiteley's narrative proceeds chronologically, and the book is divided into three temporal sections: 1540–1672, 1672–1751 and 1751–74. After she gestures toward the ancient history of birth figures as an image form, Whiteley winnows her study down to the appearance of printed birth figures in English publishing in 1540 with the translation of Eucharius Rösslin's *Rosengarten* through William Hunter's *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* in 1774. These printed bookends have the benefit of containing this capacious topic. Nonetheless, as Whiteley notes, birth figures still shape how we think about gestation today, as a quick web search for 'fetal presentation' reveals (p. 216). In future explorations of this topic, scholars might move beyond English print culture to model the influence of continental European authorities on the visualization of birth.

At its best, Whiteley's writing draws the reader into the birthing process, jockeying between birth figures and the existential stakes awaiting birthing bodies. Chapter 1 opens in the seventeenth-century lying-in chamber, complete with a respected local woman acting in the role of midwife. With generous citations of a rich historiography, Whiteley encourages the reader toward a middle path, away from tired debates about the extent to which male physicians intruded on women's authority in midwifery.

Instead, she centres the use of birth figures by early modern readers, as midwives employed them to ‘picture the specifics of the living body in labor’ (p. 50). Chapter 2 embraces plurality, thinking through how the birth figure evoked an entire world or the heavens, ‘a summation of the microcosmic worldview’ (p. 53). Verdant natural things, round-bottomed glasses used in diagnostics, cupping vessels and alchemical flasks also symbolized the womb. Despite these many inanimate analogies, Whiteley cautions against what she calls the theory ‘maternal erasure’. She notes that past scholars – especially feminists from the 1970s to the 1990s – have dismissed birth figures as graphically rubbing away the female body to deny women’s agency. Whiteley resists this theory, its presumption that the foetus is a political object, pitting men against women in the division around midwifery. Instead, she argues that ‘birth figures, by focusing only on the womb and the fetus, provided a kind of window into the physically present but opaque pregnant belly ... these images did not deny women’s agency but instead enhanced the viewer’s knowledge of women’s bodies and mollified fears about labor’s outcome’ (p. 69).

Chapter 3 marks a change, as in the late seventeenth century birth figures came to include other anatomy around the balloon-like womb, and the practitioners’ hand often appeared manipulating the body. Whiteley argues that professionalized midwife–authors transformed the images into visual experiments that reflected individual priorities. On one hand, she acknowledges the gendered power dynamic in the history of midwifery. On the other hand, however, she recentres the conversation around book use (not gender) and engagement with new, textual practices that characterized a split in the profession between ‘regular’ and ‘emergency’ practitioners (p. 91). Chapter 4 contributes to lively conversation about the interplay between visual and haptic knowledge, as Whiteley follows the work of expert hands, and even forceps, in the womb, or the midwife’s touch of the cervix to assess dilation. Chapter 5 concludes with the legacy of William Hunter in the eighteenth-century history of midwifery, and the overlap between these images and those commissioned by William Smellie and John Burton. For them, the birth figure did not become obsolete, but rather became a tool of pathologizing visual culture (p. 215).

For anyone teaching the top debates in the history of women’s medicine, Whiteley’s intervention is a must-read. Her vocabulary of ‘birth figures’, ‘maternal erasure’, and the gendering of midwifery are welcome additions to the conversation.