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A Queen’s Task: Violant de Bar and the Experience of Royal Motherhood in Fourteenth-Century Aragón

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A Queen's Task: Violant de Bar and the Experience of Royal Motherhood in Fourteenth-Century Aragón

Abstract
In a letter to Pere III dated 11 March 1381, the fifteen-year-old duchess of Gerona, Violant de Bar, joyously announces her first pregnancy: "notifich a la vostra senyoria per tal com se que n'auereis plaer que'm s6 feta prenyt, e'm trob be ab lo prenyat, grades ne vajen a Deu" (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 68<). So begins her procreative trial as wife of the king's first-born son, Joan, heir to the powerful Crown of Aragon. Fifteen years later, we find King Joan dead without a legitimate male heir and the process of his brother Marti's succession in great confusion because, according to historian E.L. Miron,

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... she was to taste, above all, the crowning bitterness and mortification of a Queen – of never having borne an heir who should have survived to wear his father’s crown.

(Miron 217)

1. Introduction

In a letter to Pere III dated 11 March 1381, the fifteen-year-old duchess of Gerona, Violant de Bar, joyously announces her first pregnancy: “notifich a la vostra senyoria per tal com sé que n’haurets plaer que’m só feta prenys, e’m trob bé ab lo prenyat, gràcies ne vajen a Déu” (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 68’). So begins her procreative trial as wife of the king’s first-born son, Joan, heir to the powerful Crown of Aragón. Fifteen years later, we find King Joan dead without a legitimate male heir and the process of his brother Martí’s succession in great confusion because, according to historian E.L. Miron,

Scarcely had Barcelona acclaimed the virtuous and popular Duchess of Montblanch Queen and Regent pending her husband’s [Martí] return from Sicily, than the widowed Queen [Violant]
announced that the kingdom might still expect the birth of a possible heir to the dead King’s throne. (235)

In his *Anales de la Corona de Aragón*, Zurita (libro X, cap. LVII, 769) relates that the new queen and regent, María de Luna, had heard from several sources that “la reina doña Violante, que afirmaba estar preñada, había mal parido...”. The use of the term “mal parido” suggests that a pregnant Violant had endured some type of bleeding which she chose to interpret as a false miscarriage. The question remains whether her claim was intended to deceive the new queen in order to stall the transfer of power, or whether Violant believed that she had a truly viable pregnancy.  

In either case, this was a serious claim that needed to be expeditiously resolved. The newly proclaimed queen sent royal counselors to ask Violant that “por amor de nuestro Señor y de la justicia declarase la verdad de aquel hecho” (Zurita 796). She responded to their plea stating that “aunque era así —que tuvo algunos señales de haber mal parido— pero en la realidad de verdad ella estaba preñada” (Zurita 796). According to Zurita, an emotion-filled Violant added to this declaration an indirect threat to the effect that “se podían mudar los tiempos y volver a su primer estado, que por aquel su preñado no valía ella menos en cosa alguna” (796). The queen’s counselors appointed four sage women to watch over Violant in order to confirm or discredit the pregnancy, to which the young widow cheerfully responded “que holgaría dellos y aun les requería que así se hiciese”. The pregnancy, however, never progressed, and the new queen soon turned her attention to more pressing matters (Zurita, libro X, cap. LVII, 797).

As is evident from these examples, the issues of pregnancy and motherhood tightly frame Violant’s public and private experience as wife of Joan I. That motherhood was central to the functions of the medieval queen there can be no doubt, for one of her primary and principal experiences was to produce a male heir to insure the continued endurance of the dynasty.

In recent years, historian John Carmi Parsons has rekindled scholarly interest in the study of queens and queenship in medieval Europe with a particular focus on queens in their familial context. As he states “the most positive images of medieval queens grew from their maternal role” (8), which was seen as divinely sanctioned and which constituted an absolute necessity given the need within royal households for numerous offspring and birth of heirs, given throughout medieval sources attest to a similar sentiment that to be queen consisted of a preñación intensivo de su acto posado para ésta”.

In this essay I address the growing body of work dealing with the noted exception to the writings of Violant that appear, in an indirect procreator as pious images and references to children, sentiments seldomly expressed.

2 Historians tend to see some deception in Violant’s claim, either as Bisson does when he refers to “Yolande’s claim to be pregnant” (126), or more negatively as Tasis i Marca does, calling the matter “aquesta ficció interessada de la vidua de Joan I” (195).
The birth of a mercy offspring. Needless to say, “obsessive attention focused on the birth of heirs, guarantee of the integrity and continuity of the realm” throughout medieval Europe (4). Historians Maria and Pedro Voltes attest to a similar state of affairs in medieval Iberia when they contend that to be queen of any one of the medieval realms “constituía una dedicación penosa y arriesgada”, in great part because of “lo obligatorio e intenso de su actuación procreadora en una época tan precaria y arriesgada para ésta” (142).

In this essay I hope to contribute some small piece of evidence to the growing body of studies regarding medieval motherhood by bringing to light references to maternity and motherhood as they appear in the writings of Violant de Bar. My intention is not to deliver an exhaustive analysis of the data, but rather to comment on a few of the themes that appear, in an effort to show that she did, indeed, see her role as procreator as pivotal to her position as wife and queen, and that these images and references reveal a genuine maternal concern for her children, sentiments seldom thought typical in the medieval world, and even less seldomly expressed from a woman’s viewpoint.

2. Medieval Motherhood

Motherhood in the Middle Ages, despite scholarly advances in recent years, is a vastly understudied theme, particularly for medieval Iberia, with the noted exception of Voltes’s Madres y niños en la historia de España. While it is evident that in the Middle Ages women were favored and trusted most in their maternal role, modeled on the Christian image of Mary, mother of Christ, very little is known about the mother-child relationship at any class level. The school of thought founded by historian Philippe Ariès, author of Centuries of Childhood, asserts that medieval mothers did not experience deep love for their children because of the unfavorable living conditions that were all too common. When the high infant mortality rate led to constant pregnancies, parents, according to Ariès and his followers, became hardened to and emotionally detached from their offspring. As Shari Thurer acknowledges in her study, The Myths of Motherhood, there is very little published data to support this or any other

3 See Prince (1994) for a richer examination of the life of Violant de Bar, the scope of her extant correspondence, and her legacy in medieval Iberian history.

4 See the volumes by Atkinson, Thurer, Voltes, and Shahar for more information on medieval experiences of motherhood. The two studies by Parsons (“Family, Sex, and Power” and Medieval Mothering) focus on motherhood from the perspective of the medieval queen.
hypothesis regarding maternal love in the Middle Ages, although many recent historians are skeptical of the severity of Ariès's judgments (Thurer 85-95). Hard data regarding medieval motherhood is difficult to come by since diaries and letters, in which references to children were most frequent, were late medieval and Renaissance literary developments cultivated primarily by the nobility. As Thurer concludes, “The information necessary to arrive at the truth [regarding motherhood in the Middle Ages] always proves to be incomplete; every point of view, no matter how persuasively argued, collapses for lack of some crucial piece of evidence. To date, all views are partial and reductive, and fail to do justice to the full complexity of motherhood” (84).

3. Violant as mother

Harsh is the judgment of historian Tasis i Marca, in his study of the dynasty of Pere III and his sons, that Violant de Bar was a disinterested, and perhaps unloving, mother. He states that “Violant de Bar posava, doncs, el seu paper de reina abans que el de mare. Els fills estan sempre lluny d’ella, que s’estima més de seguir els viatges del seu marit” (155). One wonders on what evidence Tasis i Marca bases his criticism. It is no secret that Catalan historians have shaped an image of Violant, through parliamentary proceedings, royal documents, correspondence, and literary works, as an aggressive foreigner “que s’interessava molt pels afers de l’estat i volia tenir sempre al seu costat, valent-se de les arts d’una dona que se sap estimada, el seu marit” (Tasis i Marca 154). Vain, frivolous, immoral, ambitious, and intelligent, are the historical depictions of this woman who sought to extend her influence, and that of her husband, by involving herself in every manner of political affair. Historian Lois Huneycutt points out the paradoxical nature of misogynistic portrayals of the type cited above, since while “qualities such as capriciousness, physical weakness, lust, instability, lack of intelligence, irrationality, and a tendency toward duplicity” were often attributed to the female sex by medieval scholars, noblemen entrusted their female kinsfolk with critical tasks in their absence, among them to “manage and defend their estates, raise their children, and further their familial goals” (189). As Huneycutt further documents, “royal and noble women were present at and expected to participate in political councils, and their advice was often sought and considered in planning familial strategies and alliances” (189-90). As duchess of Gerona and later queen of Aragón, Violant would have been expected to accompany her husband in his official travels around his realm to produce and receive the weight

Si era mulle: al duc de Gerona, al ensenyador de la ciutat, y del So-

Violant's maternal histories of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries are either harshly critical, as seen in Miron and Roca, or positive, as in the case of Violant's role as the mother of Pere III. In the following section, I will present some of the more recent studies of which I have grown convinced, that cover Violant's role in infancy, baptism and nursery

Motherhood for Violant was exception to this trend of childbearing. In the sixteen years of his reign, Violant bore eight times. Among the offspring born during early infancy and at the age of eight months: Antonia, born March 1384 and stillborn in May, died in infancy; Antonia, born January 1394, died in infancy; Elionor, born January 1396 and Elionor, born January 1396 and

& Violant d’Aragó, with whom she had five children of Charles VII of France.

5Violan
A Queen’s Task

Violant’s maternal role is very rarely mentioned in the numerous histories of the late-fourteenth century, and where it is discussed, it is either harshly criticized as in Tasis i Marca, or overly sentimentalized, as in Miron and Vielliard. A more objective and complete picture of Violant’s role as mother can be culled from her written correspondence. In the following examination of Violant’s writings, I will touch upon some of the more recurrent themes and images regarding motherhood which I have grouped into the categories of: pregnancy and childbirth; infancy; baptism; early childhood; and mourning a child’s death.

Motherhood defined a medieval woman’s life, and Violant was no exception to this rule. Since wealthy women did not nurse, they tended to conceive at shorter intervals, and to produce many children. During the sixteen years of her married life, Violant conceived and gave birth eight times. Although medieval chroniclers often failed to record the births and deaths of royal children because of the many who died in early infancy and who were therefore politically insignificant, Violant herself maintained records of her children’s births in her correspondence: Violant d’Aragó was born August 1381; Jaume, el delfí, was born March 1384 and died at the age of four; a premature son, Carles, was stillborn in May 1386; Ferran was born March 1389, and lived seven months; Antonia was born September 1391, and lived eight months; Elionor was born January 1393, and lived six months; Pere was born January 1394, and lived four months; finally, Joana de Perpinyà was born January 1396 and lived eight months. Only the royal couple’s firstborn child, Violant d’Aragó, survived into adulthood.5

5 Violant d’Aragó later married Louis II d’Anjou, King of Naples and Jerusalem, with whom she had three children: Louis III, René d’Anjou, and Marie d’Anjou, wife of Charles VII of France.
Violant and Joan’s firstborn son, lived until the age of four, giving some hope of dynastic survival, but he became ill and died in 1388. A stepdaughter, Joana, product of Joan’s first marriage to Matha d’Armagnac, also lived into adulthood and was married to the count of Foix. Joana was always treated by Violant as if she were her own flesh and blood, and the warm relations were mutual, if we are to judge from their correspondence.

4. Pregnancy and childbirth

Pregnancy, a theme of limitless concern to Violant, aids in giving shape to her maternal voice. Friends, servants, neighboring monarchs, even the pope, receive letters in which Violant speaks of her pregnancies in joyful, yet cautious, tones, since these pregnancies were clearly matters of state. She makes such an announcement in 1388 to Luis de Monjoy, papal ambassador, saying that “per gràcia de Nostre Senyor Déu entenem ésser prenyes” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 76r); or in another letter to the count of Roda, she recounts “com sia cosa en que, segons sabets, prenem plaer ... que per gràcia del Spirit Sant som prenyes” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 79r). Her correspondence with both males and females witnesses a vocal pride in her fertility and the potential to provide the kingdom with a male heir.

Physical and emotional symptoms of her pregnancies are often recounted. Nostalgia for all things French appears to be one of the typical emotional symptoms of her pregnancies, provoking her to ask messengers and friends to bring to her all news of the king of France, of her siblings, and any and all other gossip “per raó del prenyat”. More physical discomforts are recounted with unbridled frankness to men and women alike, as she complains to the count of Roda in September 1388: “com axí destençada... ns’hà fort desmenjada e provocada a gran vomit, e finalment portada a açò que no volríem fer sino jaure, e per consequent havem mester confort de coses qui’ns placen, entre les quales és oir e saber moltes bones novelles” (ACA, reg. 2053, fols. 79r-80r). There is a certain intimacy of detail reserved for women, as can be seen in a letter to her mother-in-law Queen Sibilla, in which she expresses hope for a painless delivery. She says: “e’m trob bé ab lo prenyat, gràcies en vajen a Ell. E confiú de la sua misericòrdia que mijant lo present mes, serà lo temps del meu encaure e de aquell, sens afany e gran dolor, me deliurarà: axí li placia que sia” (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 98r).

5. The first weeks

As was customary that survived birth did not always become handed over to a wet-nurse or another church, wet-nursing was not an act of parenthood, more the employment of wet-nursing in pregnancies. Nursing prevented the onset of the “painful discomforts” that have longer intervals between pregnancies. Although nursing is beneficial to women and mothers, the family name or that of the child. In addition, pregnancy could not afford to wait. Violant's correspondence with both males and females witnesses a vocal pride in her fertility and the potential to provide the kingdom with a male heir.

Violant gives much thought to her children, since “per gràcia de Nostre Senyor Déu entenem ésser prenyes” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 76r); or in another letter to the count of Roda, she recounts “com sia cosa en que, segons sabets, prenem plaer ... que per gràcia del Spirit Sant som prenyes” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 79r). Her correspondence with both males and females witnesses a vocal pride in her fertility and the potential to provide the kingdom with a male heir.

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6 For a more thorough study see the excellent study of Shah and Traverso.
5. The first weeks of infancy

As was customary among wealthy medieval families, those children that survived birth did not stay long with their parents, but were promptly handed over to a wet-nurse for care. Although discouraged by the church, wet-nursing outside the home appears to have been a harmless convention, much as formula-feeding was in the 1960s and 1970s, and not an act of parental indifference. One of the main reasons for the employment of wet-nurses was apparently the issue of frequency of pregnancies. Nursing after childbirth tends to delay—and in some women prevent—the onset of regular menstrual periods. Nursing mothers, then, have longer intervals between pregnancies than those who do not nurse, although nursing is by no means a reliable manner of contraception. Noblewomen who were charged with producing male heirs to inherit the family name or the crown were thus reluctant to nurse, since they could not afford to wait two to three years between each pregnancy. In addition, pregnancy during nursing was considered harmful since it was thought that a woman’s best blood was used as food by the fetus, while whatever remained of lesser quality was converted into milk for the nursing child (Shahar 70).

Violant gives much consideration to the choice of a wet-nurse for her children, since “children were thought to exhibit characteristics reflecting the physical appearance and personality of their milk source” (Thurer 127). According to Voltes, procuring a suitable wet-nurse fell to the child’s father, who negotiated with the husband of the wet-nurse, but Violant did not follow this practice. In a letter to the men of the city of Huesca, she writes in 1387:

Como nós, por procurar e haver algunas buenas amas o nodriças que havemos menester por el infant que dentro breus dias speramos haver, Dios queriendo de la prenyada que sortamos, embiens en exas partidas el fiel físco del rey y nuestro, maestre Ramón Carol, presentador de la present, bien informado sobre aquesto de nuestra intencion e voler. (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 94')

The number of letters addressing the search for a wet-nurse show Violant to be the decision maker in this process. This commanding style is evident in a letter dated 1384 from Violant to her brother-in-law, Martí, duke of Montblanc, in which she informs him of her gratitude to a family
who has served her children well in the matter of nursing: "E nós siam tenguda fort al dit Pere [Scuder] per los serveis que'ns ha fets e fa, axí lo dit Francesch [Scuder] com la muller sua, la qual ha nodrit e nodrex de let axí com ama de nostrres cars fills e filla" (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 172v).

Children nursed for several years and in one letter, dated 25 April 1384, Violant is concerned about a wet-nurse who was nursing both her ill three-year-old daughter, Violant, and her newborn son, Jaume, at the same time. Violant ultimately considered this dangerous for her son, as she tells her physician, Bernat Oriol:

per rahó del accident que nostra molt cara filla, la infanta, ha, cové de festar la ama que aleyte nostre molt car fill e a ella. E per consequent, és dampnos al dit infant axí que volríem que per algun temps haguesem al dit infant ama que sie jove e de bona compleció e tal que sie bé apta per aleytar aquell. (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 161v)

In Violant's correspondence, formal written birth announcements are most frequently found in the earlier years of her marriage, when the experience was new. The typical birth announcement is brief and copies are sent to a lengthy list of relations and friends. Upon the birth of her first child, Violant sends notices to many, with the conspicuous exception of her parents, the duke and duchess of Bar. To them she writes only after more than two weeks, and any serious complications, have passed in order to prevent further worry on their part. She writes that she has had a daughter, and takes pains to describe her easy delivery: "así ab bon part de dins dues hores fuy deliurada e fora de perill. E despues", she continues, "molt car pare e senyor, havem abdues stat e stam bé". Violant even includes the following observation on the minor discomfort she experienced during the onset of lactation, stating: "e a mí que no ha fet la let algun afany, mercé de Nostre Senyor Déu" (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 101v).

Upon the birth of her firstborn son Jaume in 1384, Violant announces "com sabem que n'haurets goig e pler, signifícam a vós que vuy, data de la present, mijançant la gracia de Déu, del qual tots bens procixen, havem haut fill, e nós som bé deliurada" (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 158v). Letters are immediately sent to the King of France, the count of Valois, the duke and duchess of Borgunya, the duke and duchess of Berry, the duch and duchess of Bar, the duke of Borbon, the lord of Cossi, the count of Foix, and the duke and duchess of Brabant announcing the arrival of the new heir to the Aragonese throne.

6. Baptism

Due to the high mortality rate, two-thirds of all infants were not baptized until after the sixth month of life, when the original sin and sin of Eve had been expiated, or even held the belief that people would be condemned for the family simply for the baptism of one of the family. After choosing a name for her son, Joan were given the name of the new baby. A theologian held mass and more elaborate ceremonies. She chose the right people to act as sponsors of one of her favorite children, the Pope in 1387, she states:

com per gràcia del nostre senyor Déu e hage gran de batajar l'infant que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà en nom de rey, e altre frares als quals frares e altres frares, nada de les dit sponsors.

After choosing a name, choosing the officiant, Violant expresses her annoyance with the preparations for the baptism of baby Ferran by sending a letter notifying the queen of her annoyance. She states: "hie siats alguna, car no la deurets e suer e ser e ser una missa, e hage gran de batajar l'infant que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà que ella volrà en nom de rey, e altre frares als quals frares e altres frares, nada de les dit sponsors."

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6. Baptism

Due to the high infant mortality rate (some estimate that nearly two-thirds of all infants died within the first year of life), babies were baptized almost immediately after birth to provide absolution from original sin and salvation, should their fate be an early death. Some even held the belief that baptism could protect an infant from fatal illness. Since an unbaptized child could not enter Heaven upon his death, he would be condemned forever to the quasi-purgatory of Limbo, creating for the family an additional catastrophe to the death itself (Shahar 46). For this reason, Catholic baptism was traditionally performed one week after the birth of the child.

Upon the occasion of their baptism, the children of Violant and Joan were given time-honored, family names (Jaume and Pere), and honored with noble godparents. Violant shows herself concerned with the preparations for the baptism, ordering "robes blanques" for the infant and more elaborate dresses for herself. Once queen, she takes care to choose the right person to perform the baptism, preferably a member of one of her favored religious orders. In a message to be related to the Pope in 1387, she requests that her emissary explain that:

"com per gràcia de Nostre Senyor Deus la dita senyora sia prenys e hage gran devoció al orde de Cartoxe, puxe elegir e haver a batajar l'infant que Deu li comanarà qualsevol frare del dit orde que ella volrà de qualsevol monaster de la senyoria del senyor rey, e altre frare a ésser son compare en lo babtisme del dit infant, als quals frares, ço és a cascú segons és damunt espressat, sia donada de les dites coses plena licencia." (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 83r)

After choosing a name, the appropriate baptismal clothes, and a reputable officiant, Violant extends invitations to those relations, friends, and political allies who owe homage to the newborn infant. In a feisty exchange of letters with the count and countess of Urgell in 1389, Violant expresses her annoyance with the countess who declines to attend the baptism of baby Ferran because she herself is pregnant. After receiving two letters from the countess and one from the count resisting her demand, the queen allows their absence from the baptism so as to avoid any danger to their unborn infant, "com lo volguessem esquivar axi com lo nostre propi". She does insist to the countess, however, that "al exir nostre a missa ... hic siats ensembs ab lo comte .... E en aço no posets escusació alguna, car no la us en pendríem per tal, car serets en temps en lo qual deurets ésser e serets, Déu volent, refermada de vostre prenyat" (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 97r). Evidently, no one was excused from showing homage.
7. Early childhood

Notarial evidence seems to confirm the notion that having one’s child under the parental roof was not a medieval priority. Frequent separations of mother and child, the use of tutors and nurses, and early entry into adult roles are all hallmarks of medieval royal childhood (Huneycutt 307). Parents were often desperate to ensure the well-being of their offspring by providing them with other adult protectors. When a male child was seven, his education began outside the home; the son of a noble or of royalty was likely to be placed in the household of a loyal lord or noble where his training was primarily in horsemanship and the martial arts. Girls of the nobility were also sent away from home: some were sent to nunneries where they were educated; others were sent to the homes of their future husbands for rearing by his family. By seeing to the proper upbringing and grooming of her children, Violant, like all medieval parents, clearly believed that she was securing them a proper place in society, and supplying them with a profitable means of survival (Huneycutt 308).

As the consort of Joan I, Violant saw herself obliged to accompany him in his travels throughout the kingdoms of Aragon, Catalunya, and Valencia, journeys which were not in the best interest of the health and safety of her children. Contrary to Tasis i Marca’s opinion, the children’s distance from their mother did not signal her lack of interest in them, but rather her concern for them.

In a letter to the children’s nanny, madona Constança de Perellós, in 1384, Violant writes to explain why she and her husband must delay their arrival home, and asks to be kept informed of the children’s health: “Per ço com ara se són reptats devant lo senyor rey dos franceses, lo senyor duch e nos haurem a retardar nostra partença. Perquè us pregam que entretant scrivats a nostre soven de Ia sanitat de nostre molt car fill, l’infant, e de nostres filles, les infantes, car pler gran nos en faretz” (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 163r). When in 1387, Violant is traveling alone to the monastery of Montserrat to give thanks to the Virgen for her miraculous interventions on behalf of the king’s health, she writes to the king’s physician, Guillem Colteller, concerned at the lack of news from home:

E meravellants-nos com del estament del senyor rey... despuys que partim d’aquí no’ns havets certificada ... e ensemblement estamos ab ancia del estament del delfi de Gerona e de les infantes, fills nostres molt cars; vos pregam que continuaren en què està l’estament del dit senyor, nos continuets l’estament dels dits delfí e infantes, e encara de la ciutat, com està de les ypidemies qui ara novellament hi són començades. (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 34v)

The health of the children was of great concern to Violant. In another instance, she writes to her bride of fifteen, Exemeno de Vast, duchess that “sentats certa, e volem aquells
The health of her children is a recurrent and frequent theme in Violant’s letters. Illness, medicine, and seasonal outbreaks of plague are all of immediate concern. Sudden fevers and bouts of dysentery seem to be the most common ailments and it is with regard to the former that in 1383 she writes to Joan of eight-year-old Joana, stating that the child was feverish:

la infanta dona Johana, hagué haude febre, la qual hora de ves-pres encara no la havia laguida; e sus ara, senyor, que la present letra fu scrita, venguernen las fissichs veure la dita infant, e reconeguda aquella, senyor, dien que és, la mercè de Déu, sens tanta febre e ha fort bon pols e no haurà, Déu volent, altre. (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 103r)

In another instance, she writes to procure a barrel of vinegar for the caretakers of her daughter, Violant, who need it to administer to the three-year-old child her daily medication. She warns the king’s sotsboteller, Exemeno de Villamia, in 1384 that “[lo varral] no sie massa gran a la dita nostra filla” (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 142v).

Fatal, and of the utmost worry to the royal family, are the seasonal outbreaks of glanola or plague in the region. Whenever she is traveling without the company of her children, Violant orders them to be moved to whatever part of the kingdom is untouched by illness, as in 1383 when she writes to madona Elisen de Servello, one of the children’s nannies, that: “Nos havem deliberat que rna cara filla, la infanta dona Yolant, partesque de continent de Barcelona per tal com hi comencen alcunes glanoles” (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 108v).

Elisen de Servello is told by the duchess that “ab la dit infanta ensemps e lo dit mossen Thomas vos en vingats a nós a la ciutat de Leyda” (ACA, reg. 1817, fol. 110v).

On occasions, Violant apparently feels the need to have her children with her, for no reason other than their company, as is observed when in 1380 she tells Pere d’Artes to bring her stepdaughter, Joana, to her: “Nos desigam que nostra molt cara filla, la infanta dona Johana, fes ab nós. E lo senyor duch ... mane per ses letres ... que anets a la dita infanta e que la acompanyets vinents-vos en direct camí al dit senyor e a nós” (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 51r). This gesture—when Violant is a new bride of fifteen, and Joana only five—reveals a real tenderness that rarely allows itself to show in her correspondence.7

Further proof of Violant’s affection for the young Joana, is evident in a letter she addresses to her in 1380 concerning items the child or her attendants had requested: “E siats certa, molt cara filla, que nós havem per recomanada a vós e tots vostres affers, e volem aquells pendre axí com los nostres. E per la gran afectió que us havem, en
Regarding her son Jaume, lo delfí, (1384-88), heir to the throne, Violant takes on the role of protective mother, aware of the power of which he would assure her. In a letter to the queen of Navarra, Violant tenderly reflects on the beauty of her young son and his rapid growth in the summer of 1387: “E mes vos certificam que vostre car fill e nostre, lo delfí, és fort bó infant, e creix bé, e nós quin fem bé pensar per tal que abans sia gran” (ACA, reg. 2053, fols. 24r⁵). By his fourth year, Violant wants him recognized as heir to the Aragonese throne, and encourages her noble subjects to swear an oath to the effect, as she communicates to a local countess: “Axí mateix havem sabut per letra del vezcomte, fill vostre, com ell, seguint les petjates dels altres barons e nobles del regne, e faent ço que deu e és tengut per naturalesa, vol jurar lo delfí primogènit del senyor rey e nostre ...” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 58r). As mother, Violant is a protective nurturer of her offspring, while staking out their—and her—future role in the political future of the kingdom.

8. Mourning a child’s death

In pre-industrial Europe, only half of every 1,000 infants reached the age of five, while 20-30 percent died within the first year of life because of malnutrition, disease, and war (Shahar 149). Parents were clearly aware of the high mortality rate. According to Shahar, churchmen expected parents to accept birth and death as proof of their belief in the Resurrection. These same churchmen criticized their excessive mourning as a sign of faithlessness. As the examples provided by Shahar illustrate (150-52), medieval parents were not dissuaded from vocally and visibly expressing their sorrow and grief.

In the volumes of correspondence I have consulted, I have discovered no mention of the deaths of any of Joan and Violant’s children, except for that of four-year-old Jaume in 1388, which devastates the entire royal family. Joan is left without an heir to the throne upon the death of lo delfí. A grief-stricken Violant writes to the viscount of Rocaberti and his wife asking that “fets nos saber quin continent o comport se’s fet aquí de la mort de nostre molt car fill, lo delfí, de la qual no sens gran raó nós som romase deconsolada greument, beneyt sia de tot Nostre continent reebuda la dita letra, fem ab lo nostre dispenser que hac recapte de tot ço de que’ns havets scrit Miquel Peres de casa vostra, per lo qual vos trametem una peça de drap d’aur e una fobradura de lenzes que vistats per amor de nós ...” (ACA, reg. 1821, fol. 51r). Senyor Déus” (ACA, Villena she contim)

The most telling example of the death of Jaume is provided in the king’s papal letter regarding his death. Violant feels compelled to respond to the pope’s letter, de nostre car fill, i eran a carrech” a her emissary, the effective and

9. Conclusion

From her first letter to the queen and through her letters, Violant’s married life provides a rare glimpse into the experiences of medieval women and their role in family and society. Her letters. They offer a rare look into the life of a woman from a contemporary perspective.
Senyor Déus” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 76v). In a letter to the marqués of Villena she continues to lament:

Creem fermament que vós, entre les altres, no solament per los grans deutes qui us hi obliguen e deven moure cordialment, mas encara per vostra molt piadosa humanitat, havets participat e participats ab nós en lo greu desplaer e transcendent dolor que havem de la mort de nostre molt car fill, lo delfí. E açò e lo savi e sá consell que’ns donaus, vos regraciam molt, del qual, empero, encara bonament usar no podem, com per nostra fragilitat constreneyent ley de natura no’ns puscam de tanta e tan greu separació consolar de tot. Sia loat Nostre Senyor Déus, al qual placia per la sua clemencia infinida, que’ns en vulla dar aquella consolació que’ns és mester e fer la bona esmena de que vós pregats. (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 75v)

The most telling sign of the distress with which Violant reacted to the death of Jaume, however, is gleaned from a letter sent in 1389 to the king’s papal emissary, Pere de Barga. Enclosed in the missive is “la letra regraciatoria al Pare Sant del troc de la ver creu que’ns ha tramesa”. Violant feels compelled to explain the uncharacteristic delay in her response to the pope, saying: “la tarda de la letra escusam per la mort de nostre car fill, que no attenem a semblants cases ne a altres qui’ns eran a carrech” (ACA, reg. 2053, fol. 90v). Judging from her words to her emissary, the death of the young Jaume caused her such trauma that she effectively shut down and retreated from her royal duties.

9. Conclusion

From her first pregnancy in 1380 to her final miscarriage in 1396, Violant’s married life was framed and deeply affected by the issues and experiences of motherhood. I have documented a only a dozen or so examples of the images of motherhood as they manifest themselves in her letters. They are notable and worthy of deeper analysis insofar as they offer a rare glimpse of the realities of medieval royal motherhood from a contemporary female perspective.

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