María del Carmen Sáenz Berceo

Confesionario y poder en la España del siglo XVII: Juan Everardo Nithard. Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, 2014. Pp. 389. Pb, 18 euros.

Johann Eberhard Nithard (1607–81)—or Juan Everardo Nidardo, as he was known in Spanish—wore many hats during his consequential, though since neglected, career. Jesuit confessor to the Spanish queen, Mariana de Austria (1634–96), member of both the Council of State and the Junta de Gobierno, inquisitor general, Spain's interim ambassador to the Holy See, titular archbishop of Edessa, and, finally, cardinal, Nithard more than earned (and undoubtedly contributed to) his order's reputation for political maneuvering and influence. The aim of Sáenz Berceo's exhaustive biographical study is nothing less than to rescue Nithard, whom she describes in the book's introduction as "almost an unknown" [*casi un desconocido*], from undeserved obscurity (11). At this, she admirably succeeds, tracing Nithard's dizzying professional trajectory, from his role as the queen's unofficial "favorite" [*valido*] to his subsequent and humiliating exile to Rome, where he died separated from both the land of his birth (Austria) and the land of his choosing (Castile).

The book is divided into seven chapters, chronologically arranged, followed by an ample documentary appendix that includes correspondence between many of the principals of this story (a source upon which Sáenz Berceo particularly relies). Chapter One provides an overview of Nithard's early life in Austria and details his rise to power at the Spanish court. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1631 and soon became tutor and confessor to Mariana, the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III (r.1637–57). When the fourteen-year-old Mariana traveled to Spain in 1649 to marry her forty-four-year-old uncle, Philip IV (r.1621–65), Nithard accompanied her. But it was not until Philip IV's death in 1665 that Nithard's meteoric, if short-lived, ascent really began.

In January of 1666, the queen regent made Nithard a member of the Council of State, much to the displeasure of other notables who had themselves been expecting the nod. Next, the queen sought to install Nithard as inquisitor general. This appointment would also make him an *ex officio* member of the six-person Junta de Gobierno, the regency council set up by Philip IV to run the government during the minority of Charles II. There were, however, several obstacles to such a bold move. First, Nithard was a foreigner, and foreigners were—according to the explicit terms of Philip IV's last will and testament—legally prevented from assuming this position. A second obstacle was just as considerable: the opposition of the Jesuit superior general, Gian Paolo Oliva (1600–81), and of Nithard himself to the promotion as something contrary to

the distinctive Jesuit “way of proceeding.” Indeed, in a letter to Oliva, Nithard would describe this appointment as “a burden so heavy and alien to our way” [*carga tan pesada y ajena de nuestro instituto*] (314). Undeterred, Mariana disposed of both problems in short order. To comply with the letter, if not the spirit, of her late husband’s wishes, she first had Nithard naturalized as a Castilian in September of 1666. She then wrote directly to Pope Alexander VII (r.1655–67), asking him both to approve her choice of inquisitor general and to compel Nithard to accept the appointment, requests that the pope promptly fulfilled. By November of the same year, Nithard, now a naturalized Castilian, was also the inquisitor general of Spain, the first and only Jesuit ever to occupy this office.

Less than three years later, however, Nithard would be forced into exile. What happened to prompt such a dramatic change of fortune? In Chapters Two and Three, Sáenz Berceo focuses on Nithard’s precipitous fall and eventual expulsion from Spain, respectively. In short, the newly appointed inquisitor general was, from the beginning of his tenure, beset from all sides. In the area of foreign affairs, for example, he was blamed for Spain’s losing ground, literally and figuratively, to the France of Louis XIV. Within Spain, too, Nithard had no shortage of enemies. Of these, none was more determined and embittered than Don Juan José de Austria (1629–79), Philip IV’s illegitimate son, who referred to Nithard in a letter to the queen as “that poisoned basilisk” [*ese emponzoñado basilisco*], among other choice characterizations (84). Public opinion was little better, and credible threats against Nithard’s life soon surfaced. Ultimately, Nithard’s position became untenable, and the queen reluctantly acceded to the judgment of the Junta de Gobierno to send Nithard out of the country.

Chapters Four and Five deal with Nithard’s exile and transition to his new home. After a journey of several months, Nithard finally arrived in Rome in May of 1669, eventually lodging at the Jesuit residence of the Gesù. The Spanish queen, desiring a comfortable and honorable life for her beloved former confessor, named him ambassador extraordinary [*embajador extraordinario*] to the Holy See and, when the position of ordinary ambassador [*embajador ordinario*] became vacant, made him acting or interim ambassador of the Spanish crown, a position Nithard held until 1677.

Chapter Six recounts the additional honors bestowed upon Nithard while in Rome: being named the archbishop of Edessa (*in partibus infidelium*) as well as cardinal. Both were promotions vigorously pursued by Mariana, Nithard’s faithful advocate from afar. Finally, Chapter Seven describes the closing years of Nithard’s life, which he spent mostly out of the spotlight, devoting himself to writing his memoirs and discharging his duties as a cardinal (by mediating

occasional ecclesiastical disputes, for example). After a brief illness, Nithard died at the Gesù in February of 1681.

Sáenz Berceo's account of Nithard's life is meticulously researched. Her mining of the extant correspondence deserves particular praise, as it breathes life into political processes—the decisions of councils and *juntas*, for example—that might otherwise seem cold and perfunctory. Nithard, after all, was a controversial figure who aroused fierce passions, the filial love of a queen and the equally ardent hatred of countless rivals and courtiers. Ultimately, in the author's judgment (which I find persuasive), Nithard was a “perfect scapegoat” [*un chivo expiatorio perfecto*] (181). He was a foreigner given incredible authority over native-born Spaniards in an era of Spanish decline, a Jesuit who had rankled and displaced members of other religious orders (from which royal confessors and inquisitors traditionally proceeded), a man in many ways, for all his talents, out of his depth. Sáenz Berceo's book is recommended reading for anyone interested in the waning years of the Spanish Habsburgs or in the impressive presence and influence of the Society of Jesus at the various Catholic courts of seventeenth-century Europe.

Samuel García

Wesleyan University

sgarcia01@wesleyan.edu

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