

H-France Review Vol. 20 (January 2020), No. 3

Louise Bourgeois, *Midwife to the Queen of France: Diverse Observations*. Ed. Alison Klairmont Lingo; trans. Stephanie O'Hara. Other Voices in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, vol. 56. Toronto: Iter Press and Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017. xx + 451 pp. Figures, glossary, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-86698-576-5.

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This wonderful edited translation of a singular midwifery text from 1626, Louise Bourgeois's *Observations diverses*, is a welcome addition to the literature about women, medicine, and autobiography in early modern France during the Scientific Revolution. The rendering into English by Stephanie O'Hara skillfully captures the flavor of the original. Her translator's introduction points out that even in French, no full scholarly edition of Bourgeois's three-volume work exists. It also provides helpful guidance for navigation through what is a lengthy, complex primary text. Alison Klairmont Lingo's enlightening editor's introduction is broken into subheadings titled "The Writings," "Life and Times," "Reception and Afterlife," and "Louise Bourgeois's Approach to Health and Disease." Lingo's extensive footnotes throughout the text are illuminating and thorough, often taking up half or more of a page. Everything is scrupulously documented, giving the reader many opportunities to pursue matters further. Other editorial assistance takes the form of a glossary of *Materia Medica*, a chronology, and three appendices, the first providing some material from an earlier edition of Bourgeois's text for comparison, the second showing examples of various seventeenth-century instruments used in obstetrics and gynecology, and the third displaying images of contemporary birthing scenes, including a color plate of Rubens's stunning "Birth of Louis XIII," which took place at Fontainebleau on September 27, 1601 and was presided over by Bourgeois herself.

In her introduction, Lingo explores such topics as the intended audience and vision for the midwifery text, the context of the famous *Querelle des femmes*, and the education and training of midwives in general before and during this period. She then examines how Bourgeois discovered her calling during the religious wars, her firm belief that God had chosen her to serve in this capacity, the rivalries and the inevitable competition the famed midwife faced, her triumphant elevation to royal midwife, and her eventual fall from grace. Lingo underscores Bourgeois's characteristic candor but also her self-promotion and hyperbolic tendencies, as when she linked herself to both real and mythic female greats of antiquity, the Greek healer Phaenerete, mother of Socrates, and the Roman goddess Lucina, protectress of women in labor. The court poet Hacquin did his share in making the midwife larger than life as well. Lingo analyzes the

iconography of Bourgeois's frontispiece portrait and delves into the symbolism of the work's title page.

Louise Bourgeois was born in the Faubourg St Germain, but eventually moved into the city to rue Saint-André des Arts, where she developed a thriving practice, claiming to have delivered around 2,000 children before becoming royal midwife to the Queen. Her relationship with male medical practitioners was complicated. She knew and respected the great surgeon Amboise Paré, with whom her husband Martin Boursier worked for decades, and through this family connection, was influenced by many of Paré's ideas. But in general she believed that women's minds were as good as men's if, as she warned, they could manage to keep their emotions under control. It enraged her that men disparaged midwives as ignorant, when in fact it was the accusers who knew little about childbirth, teaching nothing of practical use, referring to female genitalia as the "shameful parts," and spreading nonsensical ideas. Her description of these detractors foreshadows the hidebound university-trained doctors so mercilessly satirized a few decades later by Molière in *L'Amour médecin*. Midwives, Bourgeois argued, already knew a great deal just from their own experience, far more than the book-learned men trying to usurp the field, but she also believed midwives should be allowed to attend anatomy lectures and dissections. In her estimation, women were ready, willing, and able to learn the science of the body; they simply lacked the opportunity. Married to a surgeon, Bourgeois herself had learned anatomy and had even attended postmortem examinations, but the vast majority of practicing midwives were not so fortunate. She made an unprecedented push for them to have this kind of education and to learn from autopsies, but male obstetricians, eager to take over this professional turf, refused to allow it. The famed midwife Mme. du Coudray would still be fighting the same battle over a century later.

Bourgeois set her sights on plying her trade at court, and Lingo traces her strategy and tactics for getting there. Eventually, the ambitious midwife was chosen to assist King Henri IV's Italian-speaking queen, Marie de Medici, with all the royal births. Concerned at one point that Bourgeois would not comprehend her heavily-accented French, the monarch appreciated the midwife's patience. Together they surmounted this barrier, and considerable trust developed between them. Bourgeois delivered the first Bourbon king's first legitimate son, the future Louis XIII, and all of his royal siblings, and later, after Henri's death, she assisted other women of the court in childbirth. Bold and confident, the midwife stood up to jealous male doctors and *accoucheurs* bent on damaging her reputation and threatening the lofty position her skill had enabled her to achieve. But she had her inevitable moments of insecurity and worry, which Lingo discusses with nuanced insight.

For whom was Bourgeois writing her *Observations diverses*? This remarkable work is quite personal, but also meant for public consumption, so its rhetorical style is idiosyncratic. Her book includes numerous case histories that mingle anecdotal with technical medical detail, and she uses these particular instances to generalize, making each case broadly relevant. She communicates precise lessons in midwifery, of course, but she writes on another, more prescriptive level at the same time, presenting her own philosophy of life. She tells her readers repeatedly that there is always more to be learned and that we must remain open to new experiences in order to enhance and enlarge our understanding.

Despite this sincere humility about the vastness of the still unknown, Bourgeois advises every midwife, for her own sake and for the good of her patients, to work with confidence and self-

possession, not to betray alarm or appear at a loss, because such states of mind could upset the birthing mother. It was essential to establish trust so that if, in the throes of labor, the mother should develop some strange ideas or desires that would not be in her best interest, the midwife would be able to reason with and guide her patient toward behaviors, foods, and positions that would ensure a safer delivery. This was always a delicate negotiation, as birthing required not just dexterity and expertise but emotional aplomb.

Volume one of the *Diverse Observations* opens with a remarkable poem titled “To the Slanderer,” a shot aimed at someone who had attacked Bourgeois’s earlier ventures into publishing. “Jealous one, if you have the audacity / To attack my writings, / Show me where / You have done better than I tell of doing. / My practice is not empty words; / It is true results. / It amounts to shipwrecking in one’s port, / To talk without getting down to facts” (p. 87). Having thus established her right to the territory, she plunges in. The topics in the table of contents reveal how comprehensively she covers not only obstetrics but gynecology, too, and sometimes even beyond that to general medicine. She begins with a long chapter on why some women are unable to conceive, fertility being the prime concern of any married woman. Next come discussions of miscarriage, premature delivery, how to deal safely with twins, how to deliver the afterbirth (placenta), and then topics such as hemorrhage, washing (astonishing, as most of Bourgeois’s contemporaries did not see the importance of this), milk supply, and how to select a good wet-nurse if the mother’s milk is inadequate. Attention turns next to possible problems experienced by the newborn baby, but then quickly returns to focus on the mother: uterine prolapse, bladder problems, stillbirths, postpartum madness, and the consequences of the overeating of sweets. Chapter seven is of particular interest to modern readers, as it deals with complicated presentations for which “version,” the skilled turning of the child in utero, is necessary. In the western world of today, when C-sections are performed with abandon, it is awe inspiring to see Bourgeois describe the twelve kinds of manipulations that she and her colleagues do to navigate a mal-presenting baby to safety. She presents the maneuvers in a matter-of-fact way, for of course there was then no viable alternative. In those days before anesthesia and antisepsis, cesarean sections were almost always fatal to both mother and child.

Volume two continues with detailed cases, and then an interesting chapter called “How I Learned the Art of Midwifery” (pp. 233-237), followed by a long account of the births of the royal children of France, and how the queen had dismissed another woman who sought the honor of assisting her, preferring Bourgeois instead and proclaiming that “no midwife will ever touch me except her” (p. 243). This section contains many personal confessions and also conversations that Bourgeois could not possibly have witnessed, between the king and the queen for example, all of which show the author’s considerable flare for dialogue and her confident exercise of poetic license. In this volume, Bourgeois also corrects some points in her first volume, in line with her conviction that there is always more to learn and that keeping current is key to success.

Finally, this volume ends with the great midwife’s “Advice to my Daughter” (pp. 266-283). This is, I believe, the most fascinating section in a generally fascinating work. Bourgeois tells her daughter, Antoinette, an aspiring midwife, to be as kind to the poor as to the wealthy highborn, and not to accept any payment at all, in fact to donate some money if the family is impoverished (p. 269). Her reputation will be based on such kindness, but also on her competence and frankness. “Talk freely about what you know and explain your reasoning” (p. 268). Her daughter must avoid troublesome patients and women of ill repute, favoring instead respectable clients, those whose morals are correct and not too “free.” Bourgeois provides information about the internal

workings of the houses to which midwives are called, how the servants and masters interact, how many of the maids do double duty as wet-nurses, but she cautions her daughter to be prudent and not to get personally involved in such domestic dynamics. She warns her that their profession is “held in contempt” by many (p. 276), but that she must keep her head high in spite of this, for she knows her worth. Echoing Hippocrates, Bourgeois counsels respect for nature’s ability to repair and heal, but notes that occasionally some help is warranted. With regard to her clientele, her daughter must remember that because it is impossible to please everyone, that should not be the goal. Many women are ungrateful, so friendships should be cultivated with the appreciative ones (pp. 277-281). Loyalty to one’s patients in the city is essential, and her daughter must never forsake them by traveling to more lucrative births on country estates. Most of these moral precepts are relayed in the form of stories, very colorful ones at that, often involving animals to teach life lessons. But the overarching advice from the older to the younger midwife is to be honest: “Since the world was made, there has always been great discord between truth and lies, but whatever subtle stratagems lies may bring against truth, truth has remained victorious, even if lies have often brought truth low for a time, thinking they could strangle it. But like a heavenly body, truth has always risen again in the end and appeared high above earthly lies, all through the grace of God, into whose hands you will commit and entrust all you do” (p. 283).

Volume three is the shortest of them all, probably because in it Bourgeois advocates oral instruction, arguing that observation, experience, and practice are far superior to any book learning or theory, which would seem to obviate the need to go on writing. But she ends with a flourish. Remedies for blood loss, hemorrhoids, worms, hernias, diarrhea, pleurisy, gout, inflammation, colic, dropsy, and vomiting are included in this last volume, displaying Bourgeois’s talent not only as a midwife but more broadly as a knowledgeable healer. Despite the brevity of this last volume, she signs off staking her claim as a medical authority.

Bourgeois wrote at a time when men were increasingly bent on wresting the field of childbirth from women and monetizing it, seeking fame and profit. Throughout Europe they denigrated midwives, accused them of witchcraft, and did everything in their power to besmirch their reputations. The Chamberlen family was about to invent the obstetrical forceps with the explicit proviso that no woman should be permitted to use this purportedly advanced instrument. An earlier midwifery text written by a German and translated by an Englishman as *The Byrthe of Mankynde* enjoyed great popularity, numerous editions, and even supplementary chapters by other male authors over the course of the seventeenth century. But such books lacked the intensity of Bourgeois’s text, which pulsed with deep understanding of women’s bodies and decades of direct, hands-on experience. She had no intention of allowing men to displace her or her teachings, regarding herself and the wisdom she could pass on as invaluable for medicine writ large. As a female author, she was certainly fighting the tide, but she fought mightily, and her book was translated into several languages. She also inspired other midwives in France, England, and Germany to write treatises on their subject before the century was over.

Bourgeois came close to founding a medical dynasty. Her first daughter married a physician who served Henri IV and later the wife of Charles I. Her eldest son served Louis XIII, a second son became an apothecary, and the last daughter married a doctor and, as we saw, became a midwife herself and was the designated recipient of her mother’s sage advice.

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ISSN 1553-9172