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Lianne McTavish, *Childbirth and the Display of Authority in Early Modern France*. Aldershot, U.K. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005. xiv + 257 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl); ISBN 0-7546-3619-4.

Review by Julie Hardwick, University of Texas at Austin.

Early modern midwives have perhaps received more scholarly attention in the last thirty years than any other single occupational group. They have become moreover the focal points of broad interpretations of major trends, such as the professionalization of the medical profession or the exclusion of women from high status work. Lianne McTavish's new book adds to this literature and seeks to explore by now hoary questions from a fresh perspective. This book looks at male midwives (*chirurgiens accoucheurs*) as well their female counterparts and, with an art historian for an author, interrogates the evidence of images as well as texts included in contemporary medical writings. McTavish is modest in her claims, noting for example that her "goal is not to displace other accounts of early modern midwifery, but to add another layer to them" (p. 13). Nevertheless, her careful and thoughtful readings of this source material present a nuanced and significant contribution to the existing scholarship.

McTavish's research focuses primarily on twenty-four obstetrical treatises written in France between 1550 and 1730. These medical treatises contained extensive texts and a large number of fascinating images: of their authors (often male midwives engaged in self-promotion), of surgical tools, and of women and fetuses at various stages of pregnancy. Many of these are nicely reproduced in this book, offering readers valuable opportunity to examine the images first hand, while teachers will find rich pedagogical material to illuminate class discussion. Twenty-three of the treatises examined were published. They include a few already very well known ones, such as the work of the seventeenth-century midwife Louise Bourgeois, and others that are much more obscure.

Although McTavish occasionally seems to be making claims about the possible impact of the treatises on their audiences, she generally stays on the firmer ground of exploring the goals of the texts and their authors, which she defines primarily as their desire to establish the authority of the medical care provider. McTavish chooses to focus relatively narrowly on the transitional period of the seventeenth century, when the outcome of the competition between male and female midwives as obstetrical providers was not yet clear, rather than on a longer period. In doing so, she aims to avoid imposing the 20/20 perspective of hindsight (and men's success in securing a near monopoly over deliveries) on what was in fact an uncertain moment. In fact, one of her laudable goals throughout here is to embrace the complexity and ambiguity of the process by which men replaced women as deliverers of obstetrical care.

Like other recent historians of midwifery, such as Mary Lindemann, McTavish is skeptical about the validity of an English model for all of western experience. In England, she points out, the transition from female midwives to male doctors as labor and delivery supervisors was quicker overall and in specifics (for instance, the acceptance of the use of forceps) than in France or most likely other continental countries. While she is unusually open about the contemporary political underpinnings of her historical project, which she locates in her participation in the efforts of pro-choice groups to safeguard access to abortion, her cautious interpretative style is the antithesis of the model that imposes big arguments on material.

The book's introduction and five primary chapters concentrate on the analysis of the text and images with regard to the portrayal of male and female midwives. In particular, McTavish argues in successive chapters that the often-cited male gaze oppressive to women was only one of the forms of spectatorship involved, and so to isolate that one oversimplifies the dynamics of the situation in misleading ways. She points out that not only were female patients also watchers of male midwives, but that self-conscious presentation of self for display was a critical element of many aspects of early modern French culture, especially in the seventeenth century.

McTavish's comparison of texts by and about male and female midwives allows her to complicate the frequently articulated men versus women dialectic in the debate over who was fit to deliver obstetrical services. The gender of authors did make some difference in orientation. Female midwives insisted, for example, that they could handle all deliveries no matter how difficult, whereas male midwives insisted that they alone should handle complicated (or "unnatural" as they said) childbirths. Even here, though, men accepted women as deliverers of routine cases, and many similarities of perspective existed. Male and female midwives invoked multiple sources of authority, from formal training to personal experience. Her discussion of how male midwives deployed their wives' labor experiences to balance the claims of lived experiences by female midwives is a very interesting example of this overlap. Male midwives certainly criticized their female contemporaries, but they criticized each other too. Ideals for male and female midwives were strikingly similar: virtuous, patient, able to keep secrets, and so on. McTavish argues in fact that the ideal male midwife took on feminine qualities in some important ways. He was to be clean shaven and gentle, to dress modestly, and to have small hands. She concludes that "descriptions of the ideal man-midwife reshaped accounts of the exemplary female midwife to associate feminine accounts with male bodies. According to male authors, the consummate surgeon man-midwife embodied all the positive qualities of the traditional female midwife, while avoiding the negative ones" (p. 123).

A final chapter engages a different question in seeking to explore the significance of the way fetuses were represented. Here McTavish argues against a recent wave of work highlighting the isolation of fetuses in such imagery and with it the consequent elision of the mother's person and rights. As McTavish notes, Karen Newman has argued that the history of disembodied fetal imagery is centuries old, and thus far precedes the recent and now ubiquitous sonogram-produced images that she and others have argued are key in the establishment of the idea of the fetus as a discrete rights-bearing individual. McTavish identifies similar images in the seventeenth century but argues that the meanings attached to particular representations at particular moments are specific to that culture and place. In early modern obstetrical texts, therefore, she argues that these images placed along side texts detailing male doctors' efforts should be read as attempts to legitimate male medical authority rather than to assert fetal rights.

McTavish's primary contribution in some ways is to establish how highly contested and malleable representations of midwives, male and female, were in early modern images and texts. This unstable model of the ideal childbirth facilitator highlights how misleading the more usual and simple model of clear cut gender based opposition is. In this regard, McTavish joins the considerable body of recent work that moves gender from being the central distinction to being an important but not singularly determining factor.

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