

Droplets of Milk: Lactation and Midwifery

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Abstract:

For centuries, midwives and women have been put to shame by men and the Church. People were ignorant when it came to the biological functions of the human body. Faced with high mortality rates within an era of political unrest, the common folk desperately looked for someone to blame for the constant death both during and shortly after childbirth; as midwives were a common occupation in regions with little medical/economic support, one whose position often led them to witness death, midwives become the likely scapegoat for the high infant mortality rates. The contemporary social circumstances would be ripe for the people to turn on midwives due to a wild mixture of radical zealots, paranoid commoners, and oppressed members of the population. The feudal population would go even further by expanding their blame on mothers. So maddening was the craze to find a scapegoat, that mothers were condemned and accused of witchcraft should any form of perceived harm come to the child, whether or not they actually had any hand in the matter.

Keywords: midwives, women, Church, political unrest, scapegoat, witchcraft

Introduction

Medicine would not be the same without midwives and their treatments. For centuries, women were constantly looked down upon in the medical field. Physicians, primarily male, were the heroes and the only ones with the brains to heal anything, including childbirth. They were seen as the expert, “the shaman, in touch with the forbidden, mystically complex world of Science which we have been taught is beyond our grasp” (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 2). As more patients came to visit the wise physician’s clinic or hospital, some rebels started questioning the physician’s knowledge of women in labor. Pregnancy in the early days of medicine was viewed as a complex math equation. Physicians are questioning how the reproductive system works in a woman’s body and how a woman’s milk can affect her infant—of course, keeping in mind that these physicians from the Middle Ages are mostly male that still utilize medical books from centuries ago, such as Hippocrates and Aristotle. With the advent of the Renaissance, researchers turned towards the improvement of tools and medical knowledge to discover new treatments for the painful process of childbirth. In today’s modern world, giving birth can be much less painful due to the advanced technology and medications taken before

birthing. Nonetheless, these inventions, such as painkillers and treatments for childbirth, do not find their origins from the wise Renaissance physician but the midwives prior. However, many midwives found their names tarnished for the lack of understanding over child-rearing. Although contributing to increased comprehension and progress, the absence of understanding gave rise to fear surrounding them. For centuries, women's lactation and midwifery were blamed for the outcome of an ill infant and the practice of witchcraft perceived by the Church. Additionally, the practice of midwifery, which was traditionally carried out by women, became associated with occult practices due to its secretive nature and the perceived supernatural elements involved in childbirth.

Midwife Origins

The midwife is one of the oldest occupations as it is seen in Biblical times and the ancient world. In fact, midwives are mentioned multiples in the Bible. The Israelites had midwives attending and consulting women going in labor. In the Book of Genesis, amidst the tale of a woman in the throes of difficult labor, we encounter a poignant moment captured in the verse: "And it came to pass when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said unto her, fear not: thou shalt have this son also" (*Gen. 35:17*). In the Bible, Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was attended to by her midwife when giving birth to her second son Benjamin. Another well-known story in the Bible is about the two midwives that disobeyed Pharaoh's order to murder Hebrew infants (Meyers 2021). As it is shown in the Bible, midwives were the first to be contacted when involving childbirth due to the amount of experience and skills they had acquired for centuries. There is this belief that midwives metaphorically are God in Hebrew Bible (*Hos. 11:3-4* and *Isa 45:10-11*). Since God is the creator of life and always there for the weak, female midwives do the same; like God, midwives believe that they open women's wombs in hopes of becoming pregnant (*Gen. 29:31-32* and *Gen. 39:22*). They are there to assist and nurture newborns to attend to the poor. These skillful ladies are the helpers in delivering life to planet Earth.

In the ancient world, a women's profession was to assist other women in childbirth. It was required for a practitioner to be knowledgeable in their profession as well as emotionally and physically supportive. As seen in the Bible, Rachel's deliverance exhibits fear, and her midwife consoles her to feel relaxed and safe. In ancient Egypt, written texts explaining the rules and procedures for female midwives in obstetrical practice were passed down orally and written (Meyers 2021). There was not much information or details about the ancient world's healthcare system. Nonetheless, midwives were professional females with knowledge about the human body. Aristotle allude, "Births follow not according to Natures Order, but Children comes forth with their Feet straddling, their Necks bowed, and their Heads lying Oblique with their Hands stretched out, which greatly endangers themselves and the Mother, giving the Midwife great trouble to introduce them into the World" (1690, 17). In ancient times, midwives would deal with complicated deliveries that did not follow "Nature's order." They would train other women who got into the profession about treatments, remedies, techniques, and prayers for a safe delivery (*Isa. 46:16-18*). These experts are what made childbirth less frightening with a positive outcome until male dominance came along.

Midwives' Reputations

Female healthcare workers were largely focused on nurturing. For years, women were told they were biologically more nurse-like than doctor-like (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 2). This idea has often spread throughout society, giving male doctors an unsullied pedestal and reputation. Aristotle states, "that the woman generally is not so strong as a Man, nor so wise and prudent, nor hath so much reason, nor is so ingenious in contriving her Affairs" (1690, 5). Midwives, also known as women healers, were often criticized and ridiculed for their approach to treating patients. Since women healers were known to treat women and the poor, their approach was more humane and empirical regarding healing (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 3). As caregivers, they demonstrated an innate understanding of the nuanced needs and experiences of their patients. Their interventions went beyond the realm of mere physical afflictions; they recognized the interconnectedness of emotional and spiritual well-being with bodily health. This holistic perspective, rooted in empathy and observation, allowed them to offer care that was not only medical but also deeply compassionate. Nevertheless, women healers who had compassion for their patients did not have a pristine reputation, unlike their male doctor counterparts. Despite their valuable contributions, women healers also faced challenges. They were sometimes viewed with suspicion, especially by the medical establishment dominated by men. Accusations of witchcraft and sorcery were not uncommon, as their healing practices often intertwined with spiritual and mystical beliefs. In the 16th and 17th centuries, "the practice of the midwife seems to have concerned themselves more with her character than with her professional ability. Such concern was not unjustified" (Forbes 1964, 235). Childbirth increased in the hospital; there was a decline in midwifery due to an increase in their counterpart of man-midwives. Female midwives have always been in the process of women delivering. Nonetheless, the medical intervention and male dominance in society caused midwives to be diminished. From 1400 to 1800, midwives have always been active in their communities and were political figures for the invasion of male control. The division of midwives in the urban and rural areas was contrasted with one another. Some midwives who attended occasional childbirth were due to support their neighbors and female bonding. In contrast, others are midwives, their primary occupation who attend all childbirths to earn income for themselves. In 1660 and 1760, some midwives did not get licensed because it was too expensive. Instead, some would use their experience to gain support from their medical practitioners.

Midwives' roles were being diminished, which caused women across Europe to work together, "The town authorities and medical hierarchies of continental Europe recognized the need for trained and licensed midwives, fit and competent to practise, who were necessary for the maintenance of a healthy population. In Italy and Spain schools for midwives were established in the eighteenth century" (Marland 2016, 3). Nevertheless, the prevailing belief in Europe is that midwifery demands highly skilled women with extensive experience, a tradition worth passing down through generations. This notion paves the way for the consideration of establishing specialized schools dedicated to the practice of midwifery. Senior midwives support and train their younger midwives for their future. These female midwives are skillful and experienced women, and the more educated male midwives

are diminishing their roles. The men-midwives are more educated and have more excellent skills than the female midwives, which caused a massive gap between the patients and the midwives. The male invasion of midwives caused an uproar across Europe.

For centuries, midwives were persecuted by the Church and society for supposedly involving themselves in witchcraft and satanic rituals. The misogyny of the Church and manipulation of twisting the Bible led to a witch-hunt craze in the 14th century. Falsely accusing innocent women healers and burning them at stake became a norm in society. The Church, for years, had always been concerned about the practice of midwifery. Once an infant is born, it must baptize by a priest. If the infant is not baptized, “should it appear that the baby might die before the priest could perform the baptism, the midwife was obliged to conduct the rite, and it was of course essential that she do so correctly” (Forbes 1964, 236). There was suspicion that midwives were working for the devil by taking unbaptized infants to their Master for their souls. Since witches were accused of kidnapping and murdering children, the midwives were no exception. Nevertheless, baptism by midwives can be seen back to 1303 (Forbes 1964, 236). It was described that midwives, before being licensed, must obtain a professional degree and know how to baptize a child correctly. If the baptism is performed incorrectly and the child is pronounced dead, then the midwives will be the ones to blame. Under Henry VIII, an “Act was passed which permitted representatives of the Church to grant licenses for the practice of medicine and surgery to persons who had first been examined by the Bishop of London or the Dean of St. Paul’s” (Forbes 1964, 237). Midwives would be licensed if they passed all examinations without error. It was common for a physician to leave instructions and manuals for midwives to follow when delivering a child. Since technology is not as advanced as it is today, early medicine was sometimes ineffective for childbirth. Instead, mothers sometimes ended up losing their child's life and on rare occasions, a defect in the infant. Such tragic outcomes emphasized the critical importance of proper training for midwives. Consequently, regulatory bodies began to enforce stricter guidelines to ensure the safety and well-being of both the mothers and their newborns. As medical knowledge advanced and educational standards improved, the role of midwives evolved, reducing the occurrence of these unfortunate events and promoting better maternal and neonatal care.

Witch-Hunt Craze

The phenomena of the witch-hunt craze deal with the church twisting and manipulating the word of the Bible. With the help of the royalties in medieval times, the Church had much power over education and medical practices. For the Protestant and Catholic Church, witches threatened them politically, religiously, and sexually (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 6). Across Europe, the concept of witches instilled fear and scorn in the general population. In a bid to rid themselves of paranoia, Europeans would turn to hunting down anyone who appeared to be associated with witchcraft, and these hunts often resulted in execution. Most of these victims were women, so there was a lack of women in each village. In the Church's perspective, witches were to be blamed for everything, such

as harming people's health, sex crimes (associated with the devil), murder, magic, male penises disappearing or impotent, etc. (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 10). The influence of *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer in 1486, showcased how to hunt and judge hidden witches. The witch-hunt was not a vast suicide by insane women, but a well-organized campaign executed by the Church. The *Malleus Maleficarum* explains in detail how to make a person confess using various kinds of torture. This sadistic instruction book influenced the campaign to be terrorizing. As a result, the methods employed became increasingly cruel and unsettling, leaving a trail of fear and trauma in its wake.

What allows these women to get so much hate and be accused of various crimes? The Church and upper class would often accuse women of their female sexuality, being too organized, and having magical powers to harm and heal (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 9). The *Malleus Maleficarum* would influence men and their education on female sexuality being taken advantage of against men. The medieval Catholic Church would argue that when a female is pregnant, their homunculus is held captive for nine months without interacting with the mother in the womb. It was only safe once the infant was held in men's hands and baptized. Another argument the Church claims is that females infect men through pleasure after getting pleasure from the devil. Since men are to be pitied for, "discovery of those many evils and inconveniences that men are drawn into by the attractive power of women" (1653, 3). From the Church's perspective, the female power derives from her sexuality rather than her abilities. Since in the garden of Eden, the serpent conveys Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, it is now believed that the devil acts through a woman (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 11). In the "Devil's party," these witches, primarily female, are very organized and act independently to damage the community. They would gather in groups to discuss or act on their next plan. A comparison can be made with the gathering of midwives seeking to protest their work being pushed aside by the Church and male dominated society. Their gatherings would work against them, further tainting their image and tying their medical identity to that of the unholy manipulation. Consequently, public trust eroded, and their reputation became irreversibly entwined with the very practices they sought to distance themselves from.

Midwife Magicians

These so-called witches, also known as the wise woman, created remedies that have been tested for centuries for their purpose of use on patients. Midwives would also practice abortion, which has been seen since ancient times. Aristotle claims, "Medicines will cause Abortion, to pleasure those that have unlawfully, conceived, which to do, is a high degree of wickedness, and may be ranked with Murder" (1690, 96). In ancient times, midwives were debarred of their practice and continued to use their skills to make the labor as easy as possible for the mother and child. In modern pharmacology, these remedies that midwives created are still in use. They obtained painkillers, digestive aids, anti-inflammatory agents, and ergot for pain in labor. The origins of drugs used in labor and childbirth recovery, such as ergot, are still used in labor today. These witch-healers also had belladonna, which is

used as an anti-spasmodic for uterine contractions or miscarriage threats (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 13). However, the Church discouraged these drugs because the pain in labor is God's punishment for Eve's sinning. The midwives are empiricists and rely on senses rather than doctrines, unlike their male counterparts. These "magicians" are what allowed many mothers and infants to be alive in harsh conditions in earlier days, as men in the medical field used doctrines and faith to cure patients. Midwives would use their experiences and skills to fightback to various diseases.

For centuries, midwives remained a powerful force in the field of medicine as physicians kept away from the science of childbirth. During the Renaissance, barbers and surgeons joined forces because of the similarity of their tools. These were the men whom midwives turned to under great duress. In the following 17th and 18th centuries, barber-surgeons foresaw a profitable profession in the field of childbirth. Before long, men began entering the field of childbirth with enhanced tools through the help of the Church which sought to weaken the grip of midwives for child-rearing practices. Despite holding profound medical knowledge themselves, the church sought to push aside the midwives in favor of the male dominated physicians and barber-surgeons. Medical students studied doctrines, Aristotle, Plato, and theology in medieval times. Very, few medical students read or study these old practices; instead, they focused on the works of Galen and ancient Roman physicians. Various physicians studied the works of Galen to learn how to cure disease and help with childbirth. The physician would instruct midwives to follow these instructions. While these students studied hard on these works, there was hardly any practice or experimentation. It was common for the patient not to see or interact with the doctor since they rely on superstition to cure. While surgery remained an option through a third-party barber-surgeons, surgery was not generally encouraged due to being considered degrading to the body, which was long taught to be a temple of God. However, leeches were commonly used on the patient when bleeding was involved, such as in an open wound. Amidst these medical practices, the suppression of all women, upper and lower class, to establish a profession in the medical field was challenging. The licensing laws prohibited universities from accepting women to study. In the case of Jacoba Felicie in 1322, she was charged for curing a patient without university training and being a woman (Ehrenreich & English 1973, 17). In the 14th century, male physicians won and took over the medical field against upper-class female midwives, who were eventually eliminated; even though these midwives had been around for centuries and cured, many patients still lost against the male invasion in the medical field. (Cellier 1688, 3-4). This historical struggle highlights the enduring challenges faced by marginalized groups in pursuing recognition and respect within the realms of medicine and society at large.

Blame The Women

Women were blamed for various reasons when their child was not born healthy and normal, ranging from the first few months to two years of age. Generally, if the mother could not breastfeed their infant, then the husband would decide how the child would be fed... Mothers were expected to follow a healthy diet for the child to obtain all the nutrients it needs inside the womb. In the

Middle Ages, breastfeeding was hardly spoken about or touched on by medical historians (Fildes 1986, 45). Nonetheless, for infants with fevers and whose teeth were not growing correctly, the mothers were often blamed. In fact, it was believed that fever came from choler and corrupted milk (Pechey 1697, 24). Since the fever comes from choler, then the mother or nurse whoever oversees the infant must be treated with “Lettice, Endive Sorrel, an Emulsion of the four greater told Seeds, and a Ptisan of Barley, and the Mother or the Nurse must abstain from Wine” (Pechey 1697, 25). Wet nurses were commonly used and became very wealthy when the mother could not breastfeed for various reasons. However, wet nurses were expected to treat the infant as if it were their own for the infant to grow up healthy and strong. A mother's milk was thought to be essential even though it is not commonly spoken about; in fact, many believed that the quality of the mother's milk affected the child's growth. This perspective, however, was not without its complexities. Fildes refers to “The idea that the mother's first milk or colostrum is a 'bad' substance which should be expressed and discarded before the child is allowed to suck” (1986, 81). It was believed that a mother's first milk could be dangerous for the infant due to texture and color. Usually, they would make the mothers wait until their milk is usually such as the color should be white and pleasantly sweet for the infant to suck. Infants with fever are believed, “are seldom troubled with convulsions; yet they are sometimes destroyed by a Flux of the Belly and Watchings” (Pechey 1697, 24). As the milk continues to be corrupted, the child will be in danger and probably not live for long. Evil women were often persecuted ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. It is believed, “Which well may appear in this first woman, who (being deluded by the subtile serpent, that enemy of mankind) drew also Adam unto disobedience, and so reduced him unto his first principle, as part of that earthly masse from whence he came, and we all return” (1653, 1). Eve who happens to be a woman, made Adam become corrupted by eating the fruit. The woman should be at fault since the man seems unable to reject an offering (Fournacre 1992, 154, 159). However, such a simplistic view fails to consider the broader societal dynamics and power structures that shape these interactions.

In rare cases, usually mothers, deformed children, or what they perceived as not usual were accused of witchcraft. People that were narrow-minded and did not believe in miracles or the possibilities automatically blamed deformity on witchcraft. Aristotle claimed, “Now a monstrous Habit or Shape of Body, is contracted divers ways, as from Fear, sudden Frights, extraordinary Passion, the influence of the Stars, the Mothers strange Imaginations, and divers Phantasms, which the Mind conceive, deform the Body” (1690, 43). Mothers having or involving themselves with strange imaginations and sights were believed to cause the infant to have a deformed body. Usually, the mothers were found at fault for deforming their child's body by involving themselves in events that they are not supposed to be in, whether it is fear or witchcraft; women are the leading cause of how the infant will be born. Monstrous births were not positively accepted in society,

That Monsters and Prodigious births have been frequent in each Age none that are wise will deny though some are such nullifidians as not to believe any thing which they do not see with their own eyes, and such persons we may perceive are the most easy to be deceived in any thing they see which

is above their vulgar apprehension; thus when they see those whom we call Juglers or Hocus Pocus do rare feats by slight of hand, they presently count it Witch-craft (*The strange monster...* 1668, 1).

These rare cases caused some people to believe witches were involved in these monstrous births. In 1613, during the reign of King James, a maiden child was born having one head with two faces, four arms, four legs, and two bellies joined to one back (1668, 6). Several cases of deformed children in the early 1600s caused controversy in England. Nevertheless, religion helped and opened people's minds, realizing that these "monstrous births" are still God's children. Everyone is born unique and born in the image of God, "refusing according to the Levitical Law, to taste of any Swines flesh, it pleased God not long after he had a Child born with Hair and Bristles like to a Hog" (*The strange monster...* 1668, 6). These infants, "Nashe's images of monstrous authorial reproduction, when examined through the lens of early modern depictions of monstrous birth, offer a deeply complication and vexing portrayal of authorship that is inextricably reliant on past authorial conceits to express present authorial concerns" (Guy-Bray 2013, 98). Breaking off this trend of monstrous births to being viewed as horrible creatures, people would not fear these children since they are humans like us all.

Conclusion

In early medicine, midwives were often accused and shamed for being a woman. Professionals would go against female midwives in the medical field to ban them from practicing or curing patients. Whether the midwife is from the upper or lower class, they would still be blamed and accused of witchcraft and murdering infants when everything goes wrong. Midwives have possessed various skills and experience in treating diseases. Nonetheless, being a woman and having the ability to heal patients is a threat to the Church. With the help of the Church and upper class, the male invasion in the medical field caused midwives to work in hidden areas to earn income secretly. Those caught practicing without a license or training were accused of being a witch. The Church creates lies and manipulates its people into believing female midwives are why infants are dying and men are infected. It caused the midwives to gather in groups to work and support one another which got them to give the Church another reason why they were witches for being too organized (Fouracre 1992, 157). As midwives getting accused, pregnant females or mothers are no exception from being accused of harming their infant if they have a defect or disease. Having "bad milk" causes infants to be born with a defect or disease, which is always the mother's breast to be blamed. As can be seen for centuries ago, females, in general, are constantly being blamed for every little action they make. In comparison, men will always be clean from any mistakes they have made.

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