

Hello!

My name is Sumner Bridenbaugh and I am presenting my senior thesis project for the history major: *Owning the Birthing Room: Self Advocacy and Proof of Authority in Seventeenth Century Midwifery Manuals*.

I am super excited to share with you everything I found in my research.

In order to really talk about my thesis, we need to have a little bit of background information on midwives first.

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What does midwifery look like at this time?

Midwifery is one of the only professions a woman can legally hold independently of her husband in the seventeenth century. A woman could work with or under her husband and that was acknowledged as their career in the seventeenth century, but midwifery was the one professional path they were legally allowed to hold outside of their husband, completely independently.

the field was entirely conducted through experiential, hands-on learning. A young woman who was looking to become a midwife would be trained under a professional in her area in an unofficial apprenticeship-like program, for anywhere from seven to ten years, which was the accepted length of an apprenticeship at the time. Women could not enter into officially recognized apprenticeships, as they were usually recognized by a guild system and women could not join guilds, but this system was very similar to the methods a young man would use if he wished to become a surgeon.

Midwives and surgeons were considered to be around the same caliber of medical professional, with university-educated physicians above them.

However, all births are taking place at home in the seventeenth century, as birth was not really considered a medical issue in the way we categorize it today. The birth would happen in a bedroom or a place set aside to have the baby. This would be referred to as the birthing room and it would be the midwife's responsibility to ensure that this was a quiet and comfortable place for the mother to give birth.

Midwives were usually involved in the mother's life from the time she knew she was pregnant, which would likely be around the three months mark, and would be summoned if a woman believed she was entering into labor. Midwives were more than capable of handling a vast majority of these births, even with complications, and a doctor would likely not be present unless there was a case of extreme emergency where the mother's life was in danger.

In this time period we do see male doctors moving into this field, usually barber surgeons taking an interest in obstetrics and looking to broaden their area of expertise, and there is a theory in the historiography that there was some form of takeover, where the men pushed the women out of their field, but I am here to tell you that the amount of authority these women are able to push just in their manual writing shows that this was very unlikely to have actually happened.

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When I went to my thesis advisor and told her I wanted to do something involving early modern midwifery, she immediately pointed me to these two books so the main primary sources I used for my thesis are these two manuals, *The Midwives Book*, by Jane Sharp, who was an English Midwife, and *The Court Midwife*, written by Justine Siegemund, who lived in Brandenburg, or modern day Germany.

These manuals go above and beyond the early modern surgical treatise. They are collections of stories, examples, advice and are essentially the closest we have to a textbook on obstetric practice this early in the progression of the medical field.

Because these manuals have far more than just advice on birthing a child, although that does make up the majority of the manual. They also have tons of anatomical diagrams that would surprise you with their level of accuracy, as well as advice for becoming pregnant and important aftercare procedures for both the new mother and the infant.

Both of these manuals are excellent examples of texts written by women from the early modern period and both of them can show us the multitude of ways that midwives were able to assert their authority in a birthing room.

And it is using these manuals that I argue my thesis, which is:

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How were these women asserting their authority? What am I talking about?

The biggest one, in my opinion, is that they are actually controlling the environment in which childbirth is happening. The “birthing room” that I mentioned early was crucial to this world of childbirth midwives controlled. These women have the power to physically remove all men from the birthing room upon arrival. For a time in history, there were these scholarly men who were convinced that women were deliberately keeping these “secrets of childbirth.” I think it was more because men got in the way.

Both of the manuals I used, as well as multiple treatises written by men from the same time period discuss the sanctity of the birthing room and that the midwife is to be in full control of the room and that she is to be listened to above all else. There is no question in these seventeenth century texts that midwives are medical professionals, they are there to help and you need to get out of their way and let them do their job.

Another one that can really be seen in the texts is the amount of credentials that these women are able to cite and to really pull rank over anyone that would dare discredit them.

Siegemund is especially passionate about this, as she had no children of her own, so she is much more emphatic about her experience. She was responsible for somewhere over three hundred births in her area and was recognized as the official midwife for the court of Brandenburg. That is literally on the cover of her book, so it is hugely important to her that you know she is super experienced.

We know less about Sharp’s personal life, but we do know that she was a midwife for at least thirty some years before she wrote the book, and probably for many afterward. We can also tell from her

writings that she was very well experienced and well educated. She also advocates for herself and her ability to perform deliveries.

Authoring these midwifery manuals provided both Siegemund and Sharp the opportunity to educate younger midwives while also defending themselves and their profession from scrutiny in a world that was rapidly medicalizing childbirth.

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So why does this all matter, why did I research this, what is the take away?

We can see from these manuals that these women have agency and authority in their field, and they are not subtle or shy about expressing it in writing.

We can also see there was, in history, a field of medicine that was entirely run by women and well respected for the fact that it was run by women.

Despite the increase in male practitioners in the 1660s through the eighteenth century, there was no way the kinds of women who wrote these books would have allowed men to take over their field of medicine.

So these women are advocating for themselves and they are protecting their authority in their field.

Thank you so much for listening!