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MIDWIFERY AND RHETORIC: THE POWER OF RHETORIC IN INFLUENCING SOCIAL ATTITUDES ABOUT AUTHORITY IN FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE CARE

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The practice of midwifery and the general reproductive care of women was traditionally a female responsibility and remained so until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From then on, midwifery was gradually taken over by men. Medical men slowly subverted and replaced women in the birthing room, transforming midwifery from a highly nuanced, social, and traditional practice into a purely medicalized one. The transition of midwifery from a female-dominated to a male-dominated profession in western Europe was driven by the proliferation of sexist and gendered rhetoric contained in literature through the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries which undermined and called into question the authority of women. Nowhere are the effects of that rhetoric on the practice of midwifery more evident than in the reactionary works of midwives themselves, such as those of Justine Siegemund and Jane Sharp in the seventeenth century. Midwives Justine Siegemund and Jane Sharp are among those women who felt the heavy hand of competition with men in the mid-to-late seventeenth century, and whose writings consequently reflect their struggle to maintain authority. Publishing at a time when female-authored midwife handbooks were rare, these women provide unique insight into the changed dynamic of midwifery by expressing a desire to resist it. While Siegemund’s The Court Midwife of the Electorate Brandenburg is written with an attitude of self-preservation, Sharp’s Midwives Book has air of push-back—consciously adjusting metaphors in order to intercept gendered rhetoric as it referred to anatomy. The allusions to and adapted use of anti-female-midwife rhetoric in the works of Siegemund and Sharp conclude that the effect of literary rhetoric on attitudes towards midwifery was the primary cause of the male to female transition.

It is important to begin this survey by first establishing how traditional midwifery looked. The dynamic of the traditional
The birthing room is well-illustrated in a woodcut appearing in a midwife handbook written by Rueff in the sixteenth century. While women attend the laboring mother and help to physically deliver the child, the men stand with their backs to the scene, instead turning their eyes towards the heavens to perform the "intellectual labor" of determining the child’s future (see fig. 1, Tatlock 725-727). Before the transition to male dominance, midwifery in western Europe was considered to be an "all-female arena" (Thomas 117) in which those who claimed the title of "midwife" were women typically experienced in giving and aiding birth. Men, if present at all, played an only auxiliary position in the process. Midwives performed a number of roles beyond the actual delivery of a child, including acting as a witness of parentage, investigating cases of infanticide or sexual misconduct in the community, managing the birth chamber and its occupants, and baptizing infants (Thomas 119-120; Chalk 94, 107). Midwives before the seventeenth century enjoyed a little-contested authority in the area of childbirth and general female reproductive care, claiming that they had "a ‘natural,’ ‘innate’ authority over generative matters because reproductive knowledge derived from personal, subjective, bodily experience" (Cody 479). Along that strain, midwives tended to refer to their work as an "art" and a "mystery" to claim authority by appealing to a sense of midwifery as a craft learned by tradition, careful study, and divine revelation (Thomas 123).

The "innate" authority of a woman alone was not enough to qualify her to be a midwife, however. In order to perform well the many roles expected of her and to have them accepted by her community, a midwife required a good reputation. The success of a midwife depended heavily on a number of social factors. Her religious standing, social status, and manners acted as indicators of her qualification even more than did her practical skill and knowledge in the birth room (Thomas 119, 122). Midwives were, in general, well-respected and trusted by western European society out of necessity. As one researcher observed, “In performing these tasks, from calming a panicky mother to controlling quarrelling gossips, a midwife relied on her social authority and thus would have established a persona to augment that authority” (Thomas 119). Midwives leaned heavily on their social identities to establish a voice of authority in the birth room. If society’s opinion of particular midwife’s social standing was poor, then her success in her profession was likely to be small regardless of her technical skill. Anne Knutsford, an English midwife in the 17th century, is an example of such a failure. She was described as “a very good midwife... one of the best in these parts,” but she acted in a manner “unbecoming one of her sexe and profession,” (Thomas 119-120) and was consequently banned from practicing. It is not difficult to see, then, how literature which fostered a societal distrust of women—and specifically female midwives—would have been problematic for the profession.

With their success being largely dependent on social regard, midwives were subject to changing cultural ideas about women and midwifery. One of the most influential works on attitudes pertaining to women and midwifery in the early modern period is the Malleus Maleficarum, also known as the Hammer of Witches, which was first published in 1487. This highly sexist manifesto declared that “All evil is small compared to the evil of a woman” (qtd. in McKay 164), and that midwives especially “surpass all others in evil” (McKay 160). The author also adds that women are more prone to evil than men because it is in
their nature to be believing, to flux (change mind and mood frequently), and to have loose tongues (McKay 164). The author pulled heavily on scriptural and anecdotal references to support his claims, which became a popular strategy amongst male authors for touting their superiority over women. The emergence of the comic/buffoonish midwife trope that emerged at the end of the sixteenth century presented further declamation against the abilities of female midwives, introducing the image of a midwife as an old, portly, drunken, and foolish woman (Chalk 110-112). One author wrote the following of Terence’s Andria and the popularization of the midwife trope:

First translated into English in 1520, Terence’s comedy introduces the midwife that we have come to expect—drunken, boisterous, and suspect… “a fuddled, muddled wretch, / . . . Her boozing-fiend, that’s what she is. Let’s hope / G[o]d gives a good birth here and leaves her scope / For practising her errors elsewhere rather.” (Chalk 111)

Scientific articles and midwife handbooks authored by men also echoed this misogyny. Many operated under the assumption that women were “universally as all men know (for the most part) unlearned, any further than to understand their own native language” (Rueff 3) and appealed to men’s supposedly superior rationale and knowledge. The highly patriarchal language in medical pamphlets and journals sought to transfer midwifery into the scientific medical sphere that they might claim authority in female reproductive care through virtue of reason and scientific education (Thomas 126-128). Their descriptions of female anatomy were androcentric; medical men, “mapped it and named it for themselves” (Tatlock 733) by prescribing to the ancient Galenic model of female reproductive organs as a mere inversion of male organs (Bicks 2). Attaching male characteristics to female anatomy provided a ground on which men could claim intimate knowledge over reproductive care and allowed them to put female reproductive care and midwifery within the realm of the medical and scientifically-understood—that which rhetoric had ascribed to the men’s domain. This medicalization of midwifery also served to undermine the sense of “art” and “mystery” to which midwives had appealed, further diminishing their authority in the field. Keeping this extensive anti-female-midwife literary tradition in mind, Siegemund’s and Sharp’s efforts to resist the stigma become more comprehensible.

By the time Siegemund published The Court Midwife in 1690, she had served as midwife across all classes from peasantry to nobility (Tatlock 744). Her position as midwife at the Brandenburg court (Germany’s monarchical household) put her in a position of high visibility—one in which her adherence to expectation and the desires of the royal family in the matter of administering midwifery services would determine her continued employment. Acting as midwife to the queen, she would have been subject to all the prejudices and pressures on midwives of the day, thus she is an appropriate source to look to in gaining a glimpse of whether or not the rhetoric of past and contemporary works was affecting social attitudes towards female midwives.

The Court Midwife begins with a number of letters from the very highest persons in western Europe (including the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold himself) each providing approval for the work and their protection against piracy of it. Siegemund then provides an introduction explaining not only how she came to be a midwife, but also her reason for writing her book. Claiming God as her ultimate inspiration and as the especial instructor of her practice, she identifies herself as one particularly skilled at
midwifery and one therefore suited to teach and enlighten other midwives (Siegemund 53). Siegemund provides that instruction primarily through a part-autobiographical, part-fictionalized question-and-answer dialogue between two midwives, Christina and Justina, who discuss in detail how to treat difficult births.

There are a number of elements that demonstrate the reactionary nature of Siegemund’s work. One of the most significant of these elements is the extensive energy the author spends in providing proof of her legitimacy and authority. Siegemund included an extensive collection of testimonials from court pastors, medical faculty, and former patients on her competence and correctness. In reference to those legitimizing strategies, one author commented that “The Court Midwife bespeaks an unusual anxiety of authorship” (Tatlock 754). The anxiety Siegemund apparently felt in establishing her claim to authority is evidence of a general lack of confidence that society had in the female midwife figure. Her desire to prove that her work has the approval of medical and religious men speaks of a cultural suspicion specifically relative to the spiritual and rational strength of women—an attitude built around the sexist rhetoric of midwife-related literature. In order to defend herself against that rhetoric, Siegemund took, “pains to ally herself publicly with reason and thus with those men who represent reason” (Tatlock 751), utilizing the appeal to reason men so often used in literature as a way to bolster her claim to authority. In her introduction, she wrote:

I want to make this clear from the start to the know-it-alls because they think a woman who herself has never been in labor could not write a thorough account of difficult deliveries and perilous labor, and thus fancy my manual is not well-founded and indeed dare to convince others of it. But whosoever examines this reproach with his reason will easily divine that it stems either from ill will or irrationality. (Siegemund 45-46)

Siegemund’s method of claiming authority here is curious, as it would seem to suggest that if personal experience in giving birth is not necessary to providing insightful and accurate information about midwifery, then surely men too could declare the same expertise as she had claimed. Siegemund, however, appears less concerned about disputing men’s claims than she is about establishing her own legitimacy as an individual midwife. Thus, it is significant that she follows her message to the “know-it-alls” with the assurance that her work is based in rationality and reason. Using her logical reasoning ability as a ground for her legitimacy, she addresses the cultural doubt in her rationality as a woman and makes her stand against it.

Siegemund takes her appeal to reason a step further by turning the rhetorical argument about women’s irrationality to her advantage as she condemns other midwives’ ignorance and superstition while simultaneously removing herself from it. Speaking of a discussion that had taken place with midwives who had obviously not known what they were doing, Siegemund wrote, “Because I was angered at hearing such stupid things, I wanted to write this manual… so midwives like that would realize they had not yet acquired sufficient knowledge and would be all the more desirous of researching the proper fundamentals” (Siegemund 57). The inclusion of such anecdotes which contrasted the shortcomings of other midwives with her own abilities allowed Siegemund to adapt the rhetoric of men to her own purposes, distinguishing herself as one of authority by virtue of her superior reason and knowledge. In doing so, she also declared herself as different from the “traditional” female midwife, which, by the seventeenth century, had come to mean one which was uneducated and naïve.
Siegemund’s writing points to social attitudes and ideas identical to those introduced by the rhetoric of anti-female-midwife literature—as exemplified by the Malleus Maleficarum and the midwife trope—and suggests the real and lingering effect of such rhetoric on the culture of midwifery. With the success of a midwife—especially of one in such high standing as Siegemund—being so dependent on public approval, a midwife’s attitude and presentation would have needed to be reactionary and constantly adapting according to social attitudes. In the case of Siegemund, the importance of this manifested itself in a spirit of anxious self-preservation. This reflects not only her difficulty in establishing legitimacy as a midwife, but also expresses a desire to break away from the negative image of traditional midwifery which had been built by misogynistic rhetoric. That manifestation demonstrates the reality of the effect of rhetoric both on social attitudes surrounding and on the actual practice of midwifery.

The realization of the effects of rhetoric is evident in Jane Sharp’s Midwives Book as well, but whereas Siegemund’s reaction was one of self-preservation, Sharp’s response was much more that of protest. Sharp demonstrated familiarity with male-authored midwifery texts, alluding to and directly referencing common tropes and language used among them. Using those allusions to her advantage, she emphasized the rhetorical methods and metaphors of male authors she had borrowed from and altered in order to “reconfigure [midwifery] as a naturally female act” (Bicks 9). This borrowing of recognized rhetoric also serves to establish her work both as a direct reaction to the sexism and negative social attitudes directed at midwifery and as an attempt to interrupt it and reclaim female authority over female reproductive care.

One of the rhetorical methods Sharp “flipped” in favor of female authority was the gendered discussion of the human body. Rhetoric had before positioned male bodies as the standard for discussion of anatomy, but Sharp issued a female standard by turning common metaphors on their heads, calling men’s “stones” or testicles “like to the kernel of womens paps” (i.e. breasts; qtd. in Bicks 2). She also took advantage of the scriptures often quoted by male practitioners as an argument against midwives by re-contextualizing them, setting women as the “anointed ones for carrying out the vital mission of saving mankind” (Bicks 8). Her book is presented overall as a work of authority, referencing well-learned sources and years of extensive experience. She, like Siegemund, declares the purpose of her writing to be the instruction of other less experienced midwives. Also like Siegemund’s The Court Midwife, Midwives Book is full of reactionary elements which make evident the reality of social attitudes adopted from earlier rhetoric. One of these is the apparent disdain with which she wrote about “men-midwives”. In one such instance, Sharp wrote, “the Art of Midwifery chiefly concerns us, which, even the best Learned men will grant, yielding something of their own to us, when they are forced to borrow from us the very name they practise by, and to call themselves Men-midwives” (Sharp 4). In this statement, Sharp claimed authority in two fashions: first, by virtue of midwifery chiefly concerning women (and is thus best known and understood by them; i.e. an appeal to reason and expertise), and then by an appeal to tradition, or rather to the idea that men are infringing upon a practice which has functioned for many centuries under female care. The very appearance of such a term as “men-midwives” is indicative of the competition which had arisen between men and women in the birthing room, which itself speaks of the changing cultural
attitudes about what constituted appropriate authority. Sharp mentions these men-midwives on a few occasions, all of which as part of explanations as to why women should be granted ultimate authority in female reproductive care.

Another example of Sharp’s criticism of men-midwives focused on re-contextualizing scriptural anecdotes which male authors had used to justify their claims to authority. Medical men who cited scripture often referred to the first part of Exodus 1:17 which reads, “But the midwives feared God,” claiming by that passage that women should humble themselves and submit to those who knew better—those who were men (Bicks 7). Sharp, however, contextualized this verse by quoting almost all of Exodus 1:17-21, which includes the blessings that God bestows upon the midwives for their refusal to obey the wicked commands of the king. Using that passage, Sharp argues that midwives must go so far as to disobey men in order to perform midwifery with the best and most righteous practices (Bicks 8). This lent itself to Sharp’s argument against men-midwives:

Though we women cannot deny, that men in some things may come to a greater perfection of knowledge than women ordinarily can, by reason of the former helps that women want; yet the holy Scriptures hath recorded Midwives to the perpetual honour of the female sex. There being not so much as one word concerning men-Midwives mentioned there that we can find, it being the natural propriety of women to be much seeing into that Art. (Sharp 2-3)

Sharp’s argument and inclusion of scriptures regarding midwives is another example of the general suspicion of women’s strength and abilities which were hinted at in Siegemund’s work. Sharp’s book is certainly more direct in addressing the lack of confidence and suggests that such claims against the spiritual power and general knowledge of women were a prevalent criticism of midwives that she felt the need to confront it directly.

The directly confrontational spirit of Sharp’s work is part of what makes it such powerful evidence of rhetoric’s effect on the practice of midwifery. Sharp did not ignore the attitudes of society based on rhetoric, but rather announced an awareness of current feelings and effectively declared her intervention of them. In one particularly cutting passage, Sharp wrote:

I shall proceed to set down such rules, and method concerning this Art… as plainly and briefly as possibly I can, and with as much modesty in words as the matter will bear: and because it is commonly maintain’d, that the Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine, though perhaps when men have need of us they will yield the priority to us; that I may not forsake the ordinary method, I shall begin with men, and treat last of my own sex, so as to be understood by the meanest capacity. (Sharp 4-5)

In referring to the prevailing social attitude as an idea “commonly maintain’d” but of the “meanest capacity”, Sharp suggested something of a mob mentality in regard to such antagonistic feelings. She acknowledged the wide proliferation and acceptance of the rhetoric of men who argued for male authority over female reproductive care by superiority of sex, but communicated her belief that such feelings were not based in high reason. In doing so, she affirmed that sexist rhetoric was to blame for society’s negative opinion towards midwives, thereby positioning it as the enemy she fought against to establish her authority in the field.
The writings of both Sharp and Siegemund paint the picture of a midwife’s world in seventeenth century western Europe as one threatened by a social preference for the abilities of men. Sharp’s work makes the critical connection between rhetoric and feelings towards midwives to help us to better understand the implications of the attention given by both women to establishing themselves as authoritative speakers on the topic of their profession. The sense of midwives as wicked, uneducated, buffoonish, and unreliable clearly informs both women’s books. Furthermore, it accounts for their preoccupation with presenting themselves as being as capable as medical men in instructing and administering in female reproductive care, as well as accounting for the rhetorical tools that they utilized to do so. Taking advantage of the same rhetorical methods which had been used to undermine them, Siegemund and Sharp turned their works into a resistance against negative attitudes towards female midwives. Indeed, it is surely evidenced by their feeling the need to do so that a subversion of female midwives was occurring and that men were eagerly seeking to claim their place by means of gendered rhetoric.

The examples of Siegemund and Sharp using rhetoric as ground for influencing public opinion is a testament to the power of language. While it is true that many other factors (social, economic, religious) were involved in the change of midwifery practices, the works of Sharp and Siegemund communicate a profound preoccupation with rhetoric. The prevalence of rhetorical discussion, both explicitly and implicitly contained in their works, leads me to believe that midwives themselves viewed rhetoric as a root factor of the changes occurring in their industry. Their works illustrate the extent the language and manner in which we write or talk about any subject influences how we think and feel about it and how that rhetoric translates into attitudes and practices. Gaining a consciousness of the power of rhetoric is the key to enacting social change—it had the power to change the gender and social dynamic of midwifery, and also, surely, has the power to change it back. The example of rhetoric’s effect on the way midwifery and midwives were discussed and presented is one which may teach us that language is a veritable weapon in the determination of social attitudes. Rhetoric is a weapon, however, over which we have great control. Let us therefore use it wisely.


Fig. 1 Jobst Amman, *De conceptu et generatione hominis (On the conception and generation of mankind)*. 1554, woodcut. *The Midwife Book*, by Jakob Rueff.