Witchcraft and Midwives: The Fear Behind the Smoke

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Popular views today about the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance witch craze in Europe was that it was a result of dominant males feeling threatened by women. Among these women were healers, more specifically, midwives. Scholars such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, authors of *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, believe that it was the persecution of women in the field of medicine through the witch trials that led to midwives being pushed out of the delivery room. Yet David Harley in his *Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch* debunks the belief that there were a large number of midwives condemned for witchcraft. So what is the real story and what can be said about the effects the witch craze had on women in the field of medicine, more specifically midwives? Other scholars often find themselves in the middle between these views. There is no evading the fact that female healers and midwives were prosecuted as witches, regardless of the numbers, however it also was not the sole reason behind the decline of women in the birthing chambers and the rise of men who took their place. Women had been healers for centuries, and by examining the changing attitudes towards these women in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance in Europe, it becomes clear that the effects of the fear relating to witchcraft was a deciding factor in shaping the field of obstetrics and the decline of female midwives. It will be important in this essay to factor in different areas to find what could be the most important effect the witch trails had on pushing women out of the birthing room; that is fear. For a process which is already terrifying at any time, fear was one of the largest factors in the history of childbirth, and it was fear that ultimately decided the advancement of the field. This essay will seek to prove that the effects of witchcraft in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance did play a role in the decline of midwifery, not because of depletion of midwives but because of the fear it instilled on the masses, ultimately leading to the rise of the male-midwife and advancements in child birthing procedures.

Around the world women have always been healers, especially when it comes to childbirth. Ancient legends, folk tales, myths, and art are littered with examples of female healers with life giving skills. Over 30,000 years ago the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess was worshipped as the giver of all life who also had the destructive power of nature.¹ These images continued to evolve through time and cultures; including the “Mother Goddess” from ca. 7,500 BCE, **Çatal-höyük**, Mycenaean “Snake Goddess” ca. 1600 BCE, Isis the Egyptian mother goddess, the Greek mother earth goddesses Gaia and Demeter, and so on. These celebrated ancient women all had in common the aspect of motherhood or healers. For thousands of years these “wise women”² had been unlicensed doctors, pharmacists who cultivated healing herbs, and most importantly they were midwives.³ The practice of midwifery had been a strictly female procedure until the Renaissance⁴ when things began to change gradually and men became involved in the birthing rooms. Little is known about the actual practices of mid-wives because few kept records of their practice, instead they passed information through the generations by word of mouth. Women were also barred from the medical profession in general, as only men were allowed in universities, forcing women healers and midwives to rely on old practices. What is known about midwives in the Middle Ages comes from male writings or later manuals written by women.

At first midwives were trusted members of the community and made soon-to-be mothers feel safe. In many countries midwives came from the edges of society, meaning women that had to make a living for themselves which included widows, elderly women, or women that were alienated from their families.⁵ Generally these women were already mothers and had undergone the procedures of childbearing, which gave them firsthand experience in the birthing room. These women used natural remedies to

help with pregnancies, induce labour, induce abortions, and provide care for the mother and child after the birth.⁶ The primary responsibility of midwives was to provide care for the mother and child, and from this they also developed other skills that went beyond the birthing procedure itself. Midwives also became experts on most gynecological issues involving abnormalities in the menstrual cycle, uterine infections and diseases, as well as various problems that would inhibit conception.⁷

The first published work in English on the subject was the *Birth of Manynde; or, The Woman's Booke* in England 1540, which was continuously circulated until its last edition in 1654.⁸ Additional midwifery writings appeared before the 1700's including Jane Sharp's book *The Midwives Book, or The Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* which first appeared in May 1671.⁹ Writings such as these provide insight into the minds of midwives and show what knowledge they possessed. Sharp's series of books included a large range of topics on the subject, with in-depth information about the female anatomy, conception, medical aspects of pregnancy and labor, as well as diseases that could affect women and their children after labor.¹⁰ Although manuals such as Sharp's provide a wealth of information pertaining to the level of knowledge midwives did possess, the one thing that is lacking is the accounts of patients, leaving little knowledge of the actual procedures. Virtually no medical records were kept by midwives. It is unclear how many women were actually literate since many did come from the edges of society. In some cases, like that of Jane Sharp, there were literate midwives; however it is believed that the vast majority of them were illiterate.¹¹

Midwifery became a legitimate practice, though it was unglamorous and considered less-than-honorable in most cases, throughout Europe. The first of the countries to adopt a municipal plan for licensing midwives was Germany in 1452, where they also provided funds for midwives to attend the poorer patients of cities.¹² Even though the civil legislation had begun, it was the Catholic Church that had the final say in who was given legal credentials.¹³ At this time the Church was still responsible for enforcing the laws along with local governments, but they had a religious duty to women during childbirth since it was so dangerous. Midwives were given the power to perform baptisms and last rites during the birthing procedures in case of infant mortality or the death of the mother.¹⁴ Midwives also had to be monitored by the Church since they were privy to sins, including abortions and the concealing of illegitimate or unwanted children, as well as having direct access to fetal tissue which could be used in magical charms.¹⁵ Though it was not an honorable job it was a job that had a lot of power, and was therefore seen as dangerous in the hands of women, and had to be strictly monitored. More countries began legitimising the practice as a way to monitor midwives. In England the first recorded attempt to licence women began around 1550, where midwives had to show their good standings by taking an oath to serve God and the poor.¹⁶ Providing prerequisites for their practice that showed their training and experience were not requirements to obtain a license, however having some experience was preferable.

The Church kept a close watch on midwives mainly because of their potential for witch-craft, especially during the witch-craze between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Women, more generally, became the main targets of witch-hunters because "all wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman."¹⁷ This quote taken from the *Malleus Maleficarum* was originally written in 1486 and first published in Germany in 1487 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprender.¹⁸ The book's original goal was to prove the existence of witchcraft and why it existed, while providing guidelines to magistrates on how to identify, interrogate and convict witches.¹⁹ More specifically, in *Question VI* of Part One, the authors dealt with why women are more prone to witchcraft over men in the first place. Firstly, women were simply inherently evil, as evident in the Old Testament of the Bible, secondly women were weak-

er and therefore more impressionable and easily influenced by the Devil. Lastly women had “slippery tongues”²⁰ and are unable to hide their craft which in turn infects more women since they again are highly impressionable.²¹ It was also believed that the Devil works specifically through women because it was women who would have sexual intercourse with the Devil and in doing so also made pacts with him.²² Women who made pacts also participated in the Sabbath, where they would come together in groups to worship the Devil and engage in sacrilegious activities and rituals. One of these rituals was the sacrificing of infants to the Devil and in some cases the drinking of their blood.²³ The *Malleus Maleficarum* explains that the Devil wanted children because it was by obtaining these children that the Last Judgement²⁴ would be delayed.²⁵ Unbaptized babies were also preferred so then they could be baptized in the name of the Devil.²⁶ As a result of these beliefs midwives came under great suspicion because they had direct access to children. There are many cases of midwives being persecuted as witches for various practises during the witch craze.

During the Renaissance it was believed that one in five children would not make it past the first few months of their lives.²⁷ It was therefore easy to accuse a midwife of witchcraft if the infant died, and in some cases it was the accumulation of infant mortalities relating to a single midwife that would bring her under actual prosecution, not just suspicion. In one such case, a Hungarian midwife in 1728 was charged with baptizing 2000 children in the Devil’s name.²⁸ Another example of a midwife tried as a witch for the killing of children is found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, where she confessed that she was compelled by the Devil to kill more children than she could count.²⁹ Other evidence that led to the accusation of midwives as witches was that they used ointments or herbal remedies. In 1560 Giovanni Baptista della Porta in his *Lamiarum unguenta*³⁰ gave detailed descriptions of how midwives, who had access to infants and placenta, would create ointments particularly out of the babies fat, which created powerful hallucinations and a stasis of a happy limbo.³¹ It was often the case that witches were accused of transporting a person elsewhere, while in reality it was merely an hallucination brought about as the result of the ointment.³² Many tests done on subjects resulted in them entering a dream like state, and when they awoke they described being transported somewhere else.³³ Creating and using ointment to relieve pain during childbirth was also frowned upon by the Church. It was seen as a direct affront to the divinely ordained pain of childbirth that was stated in the Bible. Although there are few cases of women being prosecuted for solely these types of ointments, they were viewed suspiciously and could be used in tandem with other charges. Lastly, midwives were also prosecuted as witches because they were seen as worshipers of the old religion, or pagan faiths. Since women could not learn their skills from universities they relied on old methods that came out of the old religion. Many women invoked past fertility gods or goddesses especially during particularly difficult births where usual methods did not seem to work.³⁴ Female healers and midwives were drawn to the past because it gave them power. These women were also on the fringes of society and would come together to share ideas and practices, which in the eyes of the Church was seen as heresy, condemning them as witches.³⁵

The belief that large numbers of midwives were persecuted as witches is widespread in the history of witchcraft and medicine. Scholars such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, authors of *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, believe that it was the persecution of women in the field of medicine through the witch trials that led to midwives and women healers being pushed out of the delivery room and the field altogether.³⁶ Yet other scholars such as David Harley in his *Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch*, believe that these numbers were widely exaggerated, Harley, who published his work in 1990, believes that midwives were generally immune from witch-craft prosecution because, as previously discussed, these women were generally trusted members of the community.³⁷ If it is the case that there were not enough midwives persecuted as

witches to directly impact the decline of female midwives, than what could be the reason? There is no doubt that during this time period a significant decline in the numbers of midwives was experienced and the rise of male-midwives became apparent in the 1700's, the last hundred years of the witch-craze.³⁸ If this phenomenon was not a result of the physical depletion through prosecution as a witch, as Harley suggests, than the fall can be attributed to the social factors of fear associated with the midwives as a direct response to the witch craze of the time.

Fear was felt by all involved with the childbearing process; including the midwives, the patients, the family, and the Church. Patients and the Church had fears about the lack of education among midwives. Since women were barred from universities they had no professional medical education, not only this, but as seen before, many midwives came from the fringes of society and would have been illiterate. If they were illiterate they would be unable to study the few works that were written on the subject. This was a cause of great fear because it was widely believed that if their knowledge did not come from the Church or the universities, than it had to come from the Devil. Their knowledge did not come from the Church or universities; it came from old practices and natural remedies which were linked to sorcery and potions. Midwives were under suspicion because they had access to placenta one of the most sought after ingredients for potions. Patients then feared being taken advantage of during this vulnerable time. There were other cases of women simply with potions, or herbal remedies, who were tried as witches, even if they had nothing to do with ingredients that came from childbirth. Charms and potions for any purpose were altogether outlawed in Scotland in 1678 because the Church believed that they could not be made at all without the Devil's help.³⁹ In 1591 Ewfame McCalzane was put on trial for witchcraft in Scotland, mainly under the charges that she was consorting with a known witch, who was a healer, for pain relief during pregnancy and at the time of birth.⁴⁰ This meant that both midwives and patients could be considered witches for any use of ointments, herbal medicine, or other concoctions, broadening the circle of those who could come under scrutiny and lessening the demand for both midwives and their skills.

Many soon-to-be mothers did not just fear being associated with witches, but thanks to gossip and cases such as the witch tried in Strasburg for killing children, they feared for the lives of their children as well as their child's immortal soul. Midwives were being prosecuted to some degree, constantly running the risk of being persecuted because of their methods, gossip, or if the infant died. One of the main reasons behind accusations of witchcraft was due to the loss of the infant during birth, making the midwife an easy scapegoat upon which to lay blame.⁴¹ The accusations against midwives sacrificing children to the Devil or baptizing it in the Devil's names was a fear experienced by even well-respected midwives. *Chapter XIII* in Part Two of the *Malleus Maleficarum* illustrates a women in the town of Zabern that was about to give birth.⁴² This woman was offered help from a midwife who had a bad reputation, so she sought help from a second midwife. This offended the first and made her angry, causing her to curse the new mother.⁴³ Although there were only a few of these cases, any rumors about midwives in relation to witches became a great fear for many expecting mothers, a fear that was evident in the town of Zabern.

Childbirth was still a constant factor of life and did not stop because women were fearful of midwives; instead they sought other help from professional male physicians, who had medical training from the universities. Not only did they have more medical knowledge, they also had tools that a midwife did not.⁴⁴ One such breakthrough tool was the forceps, which was invented by Peter Chamberlen the Elder (1560-1631) who kept it a family secret until 1728.⁴⁵ This became a popular tool because it was advertised as a safer and less painful way of giving birth, and it was only used by male-midwives

because they had received the proper training for the use of such tools in universities.⁴⁶ Male physicians were also quick to blame the midwife's lack of education if something did go wrong in the birth. At this time there were still very few male-midwives, however this is the beginning of their appearance in the field. Before the witch-craze midwifery was seen as a strictly female practice, while laws were put in place against men, barring them from the bedrooms. After the witch craze a door was opened for men to enter into the practice.⁴⁷

In Europe the practice of male midwifery varied slightly from country to country after the witch craze. Generally these men were still looked down upon, but not to the same extent as female midwives. The process of giving birth had not changed in this time period and it was still seen as very unglamorous work. Male midwives started their medical practice as surgeons, however the field would later develop into the field of obstetrics and by professional physicians trained in anatomy.⁴⁸ One of the best known cases of male midwives is Francois Mauriceau (1637-1709) who was a surgeon in the France court of Louis XIV who, in 1633, attended the king's mistress during a difficult birth.⁴⁹ Male midwifery was very popular in England between 1720-1770, however it made slow progress in France.⁵⁰ Male midwifery was generally only found in wealthy families and there are virtually no accounts of them in poor, rural areas. Regardless of its rising popularity, in Eighteenth century France female midwifery had a comeback. Despite the promise of the new, safer, less painful profession of obstetrics, these male midwives were often viewed as the "doctors of death."⁵¹ Complicated births often resulted in the death of the infant or mother, and in some cases both. Since males now advertised that they were more equipped to handle difficult births they became associated with pain, for example, if in cases where the fetus had already died inside the mother, the male midwife would perform an embryology.⁵² This was the process of removal of the fetus through needles, scissors, or hooks, which was often extremely painful.⁵³ Male midwives held on to their profession by continuing to play off the fear of the past three hundred years, not by accusing female midwives were witches, but largely arguing that they were ignorant and could not handle difficult births. In 1872 the physician J.H. Aveling dedicated his book *English Midwives* to "arouse an interest in the midwives of this country – to show what misery may result from their ignorance."⁵⁴ In his first chapter Aveling addresses female midwives, giving examples of how they obtained licences and seemed professional, but instead were ignorant and incompetent. In his second chapter he begins exploring the rise of the male midwife and the need for their knowledge. He explains that had women had the proper training from their male counter parts, they would not have been so incompetent, but since they were incapable of doing this, more males must enter the profession.⁵⁵ Once men had their foot in the door they began to push women out by playing on the fear and ignorance that had originally developed in the witch-craze. By the nineteenth century it had become the fashion, at least for those who could afford it, to be attended by a man during childbirth.

There were a lot of factors that pushed women out of the medical profession altogether. Male physicians gradually pushed women out of the birthing room to lessen woman's power, obtain their jobs, and to dominate in all aspect of the medical field because of better education and improvement in tools only available to men. The persecutions during the witch-craze can be seen as the beginning of the male-midwife because they were needed to fill the void left by the decline of the female midwife. This decline was not because midwives were eliminated as witches, but because the witch craze created a "fear-craze" perpetuated by the church, and individuals such as Kramer and Sprender, who went to great lengths to denounce their healing powers as witchcraft. Midwives were scared to practice and patients were scared of the ones that did, thus leading to their decline, while leaving the door open for men to emerge as the educated, trained attendant in the birthing chamber.

Notes

- 1 Johanna H. Stuckey, "Ancient Mother Goddesses and Fertility Cults," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, Vol.7, no. 1, 2005, <http://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/4952/4146>.
- 2 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. (2nd ed. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 2010), 1.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Jeanne Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 124. Little is known about the exact dates; however it appears that they first showed up in the early Renaissance.
- 5 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 119.
- 6 Ehrenreich and English, 2010, 12.
- 7 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 118
- 8 Philip K. Wilson, *Midwifery Theory and Practice*, (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), Xv. Contains the "Byrth of Mankynde" essay by J.W. Ballantyne, first published in 2005. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=0b2wJbU6RCIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- 9 Jane Sharp and Elaine Hobby, *The Midwives Book, Or, The Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xxxvii.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 122.
- 12 Ibid, 119.
- 13 Ibid, 122.
- 14 Thomas Rogers Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1966), 119.
- 15 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 122.
- 16 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 123.
- 17 Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. Reverend Montague Summers. (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2007) 43.
- 18 Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, xiii.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Meaning more prone to gossip to other women.
- 21 Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 43-44
- 22 Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*. (Second ed. London: Longman, 1995), 38.
- 23 Ibid, 39.
- 24 According to the MM at the Last Judgement the devils would be condemned to eternal torture.
- 25 Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 140.
- 26 Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 140.
- 27 Ibid, 139.
- 28 Ibid, 140.
- 29 Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 141.
- 30 Meaning "Witches' Ointments"
- 31 Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch*, 120.
- 32 Ibid, 121.
- 33 Ibid, 122.
- 34 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 96.
- 35 Ibid, 97.
- 36 Ehrenreich and English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, 18.
- 37 Wilson, *Midwifery Theory and Practice*, 99. Contains *Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch*, essay by David Harley first published 1990 by "The Society for the Social History of Medicine".
- 38 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 124.
- 39 Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch*, 125.

- 40 Ibid, 126.
- 41 Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 139.
- 42 Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 140.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Little did they know about the complications and the deformities that these tools could cause. Analysis on these type of tools came much later as the profession continued to develop.
- 45 Achterberg, *Woman as Healer*, 126.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid, 124.
- 48 "Science Museum. Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine." Man-midwives. 2015. <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/people/manmidwives.aspx>.
- 49 J. Drife, "The Start of Life: A History of Obstetrics." *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, (2002, 311-15), <http://pmj.bmj.com/content/78/919/311.full>.
- 50 Diana Maury Robin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance Italy, France, and England*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 262.
- 51 Arch 125
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 J.H. Aveling, *English Midwives: their History and Prospects*, (London J. & A. Churchill, New Burlington Street, 1872), Preface.
- 55 Ibid, 22.