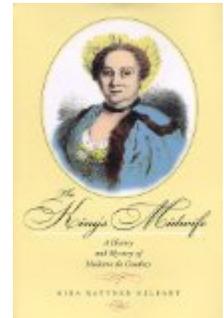


Nina Rattner Gelbart. *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998. xi + 347 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21036-3.



Reviewed by Patricia M. E. Lorcin

Published on H-Women (February, 1999)

Nina Rattner Gelbart's latest work will provide food for thought to followers of those recent historical epistemology debates, which focus on the blurring of boundaries between history and fiction and the role of biography in these arguments.[1] This stimulating book, the fruit of ten years of research, reconstructs the life of Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier, better known as Madame du Coudray. As the first full-length biography of this able eighteenth-century woman, it not only reclaims du Coudray from the historical limbo into which she was hitherto relegated, it also provides a well-documented social history of midwifery in the final decades of the Ancien Regime.

Gelbart begins with a description of du Coudray's portrait, which inspired in her the sort of immediate engagement with her subject usually associated with novelists. "I am dealing here with a singular phenomenon," she writes, who "from this first encounter seems to know I am spellbound" (p. 3). The attention to physical and sartorial detail, coupled with reflections on the impact of Coudray's demeanour which introduce

the reader to the subject in the opening pages of the book, heighten the impression of a novel in the offering. Furthermore, Gelbart's choice of the present tense increases the immediacy of the biography and implicitly suggests the post-modernist problematic of time, memory and narrative. Having set the stage with overtly novelistic techniques, Gelbart proceeds as the historian she is, by setting out aims, sources and methods of research.

She confirms the initial intimations of the fiction/history debate by referring to Hayden White's theories and engaging in a brief discussion on the interaction of fiction, history and biography. On the subject of time, Gelbart again concurs with recent trends.[2] The book is arranged by "pulses of time, turning points, epiphanies" and has "an episodic rather than a smooth structure" which she believes is "crucial to suggest that what happened in between, the connective tissue of reasons and motives, is often unknowable" (p. 11). These episodes and turning points in the life of du Coudray, to which Gelbart devotes separate sections, are nonetheless arranged chronological-

ly within the framework of a Prologue and six chapters. An Epilogue contains Gelbart's reflections on the follow-up of du Coudray's work and the implications for current historical debates on feminism and the medical profession, of the lives of du Coudray and her niece, who followed in her footsteps.

For all the allusions to fiction, the biography is nonetheless historical. The fictional embellishments which Gelbart makes are essentially descriptive extrapolations from sources, which she covered thirty-seven departments to obtain. In fact any real fictionalizing is left to the reader's imagination. The "mystery" of the sub-title refers to the considerable gaps in the sources which leave sections of du Coudray's life and motives in the dark. Rather than ignore these lacunae, Gelbart brings them to the attention of the reader in the guise of pertinent questions. "Might this be when the idea of leaving and setting out on her own first takes root in Le Boursier's mind?" (p. 44), she asks at the end of an early section devoted to the antagonistic relations between surgeons and midwives in Paris. While this device maintains the historical equilibrium, it also creates an aura of mystery which makes the book an excellent read.

In 1759, in an effort to stem infant mortality and stop what was perceived as the depopulation of France, Louis XV commissioned Madame du Coudray to travel throughout the countryside training peasant women in the arts of midwifery. For the next twenty-three years, from 1760 to 1783, du Coudray and her assistants, criss-crossed France from North to South and East to West carrying out her medical mission. During this time she trained an estimated ten thousand women (p. 277). To help her students understand and master the difficulties of childbirth, she produced an illustrated manual of lessons which was translated into several languages and she devised an obstetrical machine—hundreds of copies (p.62) of which were eventually made. The machine, which was

in fact a model of the pelvic region containing a uterus with an extractable baby, was accompanied by a table identifying its various parts by anatomical name. Illiterate or not, students received copies of du Coudray's lessons so that they, or a literate acquaintance, could review them when necessary. Her innovative teaching aids introduced students to the concept of delivering a child to safety, thanks to the techniques and practices they have been taught.

Inevitably, such innovative theories and practices caused a variety of reactions. Gelbart skilfully brings to life the clashes between du Coudray and dissenting opinion, be it that of officials from the provinces she traveled through, of village women wedded to traditional childbirth practices or of physicians scornful (or resentful) of women's encroachment in their domain. Far from being cowed by such opposition, du Coudray's indomitable spirit drove her on towards what she considered to be her patriotic duty to make her expertise more widely available. Her personal status was enhanced as she manipulated, accommodated, placated or successfully quashed her detractors. In the process, Gelbart argues, she was transformed from a humanitarian player on the eighteenth century stage into a political one, who reframed the concept of birthing along political lines, making it "a matter of state."

Conscious of the need for continuity in teaching the arts of midwifery, du Coudray ensured that her knowledge was passed on to two able assistants, Monsieur Coutanceau and her "niece" Marguerite Guillaumanche du Coudray, later Madame Coutanceau. One of the intriguing "mysteries" of the book is how this young woman, born to illiterate parents and orphaned early, became accepted as du Coudray's "niece" and "only family" (p. 58). However it occurred, she was close enough for du Coudray to consider her as her heir. Professional concerns were paramount and to assure her succession, and du Coudray managed to secure her niece an official appointment

as her assistant, thus creating what could possibly evolve into a family tradition.

Gelbart draws attention to the differences in style between du Coudray and her "niece," who was more frank and assertive in the public arena. As a medical role model, though, du Coudray served her "niece" well. The sound grounding in midwifery given from her aunt led to the establishment of her own hospital where she improved existing techniques and moved on to cover new ground, reflecting progress in the field (p. 280). As the century drew to a close du Coudray was overtaken by events. The Revolution swept away the monarchy and its institutions and du Coudray, the representative of the monarch, found herself out of tune with the times. Although "the cahiers de doléances of 1789 were full of complaints about childbirth practices and pleas for better training" (p. 263), midwifery was not a priority of the successive Revolutionary regimes. Du Coudray disappeared from the limelight and died during the Terror. Her "niece," who was better versed in the arguments of the Revolution, was able to navigate the political terrain more easily and survived the turmoil, going on to practice her profession until her retirement in 1822. She died three years later.

Gelbart argues that the impact of these two women was considerable. She suggests that the long-term success of du Coudray's mission was a contributing factor in the population surge in France which started in 1750 (p. 277). Du Coudray and her disciples elevated midwifery to a respected discipline. They transformed the role of midwife from an attendant at the birthing process to an active assistant trained to prevent the gruesome deaths which so often accompanied ignorant practices.

Gelbart is particularly good at evoking the atmosphere of the century. Whether it is her descriptions of Paris in the opening chapters, the crude practices and superstitions of childbirth, the innovations du Coudray introduced, or the "gender politics" of the time, the result is palpable

and convincing. If too much licence appears, on occasion, to have been taken in the speculative passages, Gelbart makes no pretence at providing definitive answers. It is a narrative device to engage readers intellectually and draw them more decisively into the historical period. A few niggling questions do persist when it comes to figures. How, for example, did Gelbart come by the figure of "an estimated ten thousand women" (p. 277) trained by du Coudray, using the hundreds of obstetrical machines she produced (p. 62)? Such questions do not detract unduly from the overall impression of creative use of the sources available. In the process of this clever reconstruction of du Coudray's life, Gelbart has also produced a living portrait of the times.

Notes:

[1]. See for example : AHR Forum, "Histories and Historical Fictions" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol 103, no. 5, 1998, pp. 1502-1529 which includes articles by Margaret Atwood, Lynn Hunt, Jonathan D. Spence and John Demos.

[2]. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse : Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 Joan W. Scott, "Border Patrol" in *French Historical Studies*_ 21, 1998, pp. 383-97.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Patricia M. E. Lorcin. Review of Gelbart, Nina Rattner. *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2779>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.