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# Louise Bourgeois and Her Revolutionary Approach to Medicine as a Midwife in Seventeenth Century France

Jaiden H. Eubanks  
*Clackamas High School*

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LOUISE BOURGEOIS AND HER REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO MEDICINE AS A  
MIDWIFE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE

Jaiden Eubanks  
Ms. Balzer  
Western Civilization  
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“They do as stablers do, put the good and bad horses together. The good are in no danger to be hurt by the Jades, but the Jades are in hazard of being kicked and spoiled by the good horses.”<sup>1</sup> In a letter to her daughter, Louise Bourgeois explains that the “good horses” were female midwives, such as herself, hoping to advance her profession. On the other hand the “Jades”, or bad horses, were male physicians and other individuals who believed that women should not hold prestige in the medical field. This metaphor shows her belief that if other midwives continued to further grow their profession, they actually could influence the “bad”. By standing up to the dominant paradigm they could help others view midwifery from a new perspective. Louise Bourgeois encourages her daughter to pursue this field and continue her studies while implying that regardless of the challenges, the good will ultimately prevail. During this time, France was an extremely patriarchal society and women were not given the same opportunities as men. Bourgeois unrelentlessly fought to repose this segregation and inequality. However, even with her confidence and efforts portrayed in her works, her attempt further in her career to allow women more opportunities eventually plays a role in ruining her reputation. Many historians believe that Louise Bourgeois’ undeniable voice led to her innovation regarding medical ethics, a more inclusive and science-driven era, and the advancement of women in midwifery, but while many of these arguments are true, it was this same strength of conviction which ultimately led to the end of her career.

Louise Bourgeois never planned to become a midwife. In 1590, the French Religious Wars between the Catholics and Protestants grew closer to Bourgeois’ home and her husband

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<sup>1</sup>Louise Bourgeois, *The Compleat Midwife’s Practice: Full Supply of Such Most Useful and Admirable Secrets* (London: Nath. Brooke at the Angel in Cornhill, 1656), 154.

was sent off to war as a surgeon.<sup>2</sup> Confronted by this newfound reality and worried about her family's lives, Louise, pregnant at the time, was forced to move her three children into the city for protection. As she left behind the majority of her belongings and found herself with no source of income, she became a seamstress to support her family. However she soon realized that this would not be enough and had to search for other work. Then a couple of months later during the birth of her fourth child, the midwife assisting noticed that Bourgeois was literate and told her that if she were to become a midwife she would be highly successful.

At first, Louise was embarrassed to even consider this career especially with “the loss of social status through working at an occupation as lowly as midwifery.”<sup>3</sup> The duties that midwives had to carry out, including carrying babies to the church to be baptized, were considered unsuitable for her class, especially for the wife of a barber surgeon.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore many midwives were looked down upon as the majority worked without being licensed or educated.<sup>5</sup> But as her family continued to struggle she realized that she had no other choice. Bourgeois began as an apprentice: mainly watching other midwives work while also studying her husband's medical text. After practicing for a couple of years she decided to become a “licensed midwife” to increase her salary and status.<sup>6</sup> But it was during this part of her journey that she

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<sup>2</sup>Mortimer Chambers et al., “Rivalry and War in the Age of Philip 11,” In *The Western Experience* 7th edition, ed. Jane E. Vaiciunas (Boston, IL: McGraw-Hill College, 2007), 508.

<sup>3</sup>Jean Donnison, “The Making of a Royal Midwife: The True Story of Louise Bourgeois,” *MIDIRS Midwifery Digest* 21, no.1 (2011): 33, <https://ill-lib-pdx-edu.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=491240>.

<sup>4</sup> Philip A. Kalisch, “Louyse Bourgeois and the Emergence of Modern Midwifery,” In *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* 26, no. 4 (1981): 3, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-2182\(81\)90141-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-2182(81)90141-5).

<sup>5</sup> Philip A. Kalisch, “Louyse Bourgeois and the Emergence of Modern Midwifery,” 3.

<sup>6</sup>Jean Donnison, “The Making of a Royal Midwife,” 34.

witnessed firsthand the competition and corruption of the medical field. During her midwifery test, one of the judges, an older midwife, threatened her saying “she should ‘burn’ for ‘setting fire’ to others.”<sup>7</sup> Her judge stated that Bourgeois’ connections to male physicians would give her an advantage over other midwives in the field and jeopardize their chances of employment. After learning that Bourgeois’ husband was a barber-surgeon, she blamed it on her connections which she stated made Bourgeois untrustworthy and harmful to others in her field. This association was so threatening that her judge even attempted to fail Bourgeois during the test. However, during this time period it was common for practitioners to attempt to sabotage others. Many midwives purposely kept dying mothers waiting before calling for the help of less-educated midwives or physicians to redirect the blame. There were also many cases of both midwives and physicians hiding their knowledge to be more desired by clientele. For instance, in 1588, Peter Chamberlin created forceps to assist with birth.<sup>8</sup> This tool was effective at the time and with the new fame and revenue that this item brought, his family took precautions to make sure they were the only ones with it, “the mother was blindfolded, all birth attendants sent from the chamber, the room darkened.”<sup>9</sup> Like many other practitioners, the Chamberlins hid their discovery out of greed. But by hiding this information and insight, all of society suffered. Practitioners suffered by not advancing their own profession and the patients suffered by not

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<sup>7</sup>Bridgette A. Sheridan, “A Patronage and the Power of the Pen: The Making of the French Royal Midwife Louise Bourgeois,” *Early Modern Women* 13, no. 1 (2018): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2018.0051>.

<sup>8</sup>Amanda Carson Banks, “Childbirth, Midwives, Wetnursing,” *Encyclopedia of European Social History* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 428, <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/CX3460500208>.

<sup>9</sup>Amanda Carson Banks, “Childbirth, Midwives, Wetnursing,” 429.

having the most effective knowledge or tools available to treat them. This hindrance of new information not only restricted the growth of the medical field but proved how common malpractice was to protect one's reputation.

During this period there were no laws to prevent corrupt or selfish practices, but Bourgeois presented a new approach to midwifery and medicine that was ahead of its time. As she became more educated and experienced, she published, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice* which was later translated into four languages.<sup>10</sup> In this text she stated, "Hide none of those good receipts which thou knowest, either from Midwives or Physicians."<sup>11</sup> Louise Bourgeois advised future midwives and practitioners to never hide any information that could help other patients or physicians, regardless of the personal gain that could be achieved by them. She believed in sharing knowledge. A belief which was her inspiration behind publishing this book. "She never revealed the secretive, self-serving approach common among practitioners."<sup>12</sup> Bourgeois was more focused on the overall outcome than her own benefit, hoping to reach as many people as possible. She shared her personal experiences with the desire to influence others and if she "knew the formula of a helpful drug or a proven technique, she would invariably share it with readers."<sup>13</sup> Bourgeois was passionate about her career and her intentions introduced a practice of medicine that was more focused on healthcare and its potential to benefit the masses. Her

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<sup>10</sup>P.M. Dunn, "Louise Bourgeois (1563-1636): royal midwife of France," *Archives of Disease in Childhood. Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 89, no. 2 (2004): 185, <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/A114567808>.

<sup>11</sup>Louise Bourgeois, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice*, 152.

<sup>12</sup>Philip A. Kalisch, "Louyse Bourgeois and the Emergence of Modern Midwifery," 6.

<sup>13</sup>Philip A. Kalisch, "Louyse Bourgeois and the Emergence of Modern Midwifery," 4.

contrasting view with mainstream medical practices prove that she was working for the betterment and advancement of society. Even with the negligence common in the current medical community, Louise Bourgeois led by example, proving that she not only valued her own reputation but the reputation and respect for midwifery as a whole.

Along with her influence in the practice of midwifery, Louise Bourgeois' studies and approach represent the beginning of a more inclusive and science-driven era. Previously the Church, which created the majority of medical centers in the middle ages, had control over licensing midwives and supervising their activity.<sup>14</sup> Restricted by the clergy, midwifery licenses were provided based on how dedicated a woman was to her religion instead of her medical abilities. The church dictated the course of medical treatments and education was often neglected. This led to a decrease in medical knowledge and expertise in the field while careless mistakes during childbirth became more common.<sup>15</sup> Then in the seventeenth century, with the introduction of the scientific revolution, churches slowly began to lose their grip on the health sciences, "Medicine was freed...from the confines of religious orthodoxy concerning illness and health."<sup>16</sup> The Catholic church exacted less sway in certain matters regarding medicine and practitioners gained a new perspective of the scientific method. Louise Bourgeois exemplified this change with her emphasis not only on science but on the education gained from other sources as well. She writes in her book, "Daughter if the excellence of what is to be known in

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, eds., "Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages," *York Studies in Medieval Theology III* (New York: York Medieval Press, 2001), 11, <https://books.google.com>.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, eds., "Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages," 4.

<sup>16</sup>Amanda Carson Banks, "Childbirth, Midwives, Wetnursing," 431.

this world are to be found not in one, but in several countries, certainly they are most able to instruct who have had the greatest experiences and longest travel.”<sup>17</sup> Here Bourgeois acknowledged the presence of information outside the beliefs of her nation and the beliefs of the church. Once again she emphasized that new education and knowledge should be valued and each experience should be treated as a lesson. She pushed her followers to search for knowledge outside of what they already knew regardless of differing cultures. In juxtaposition to her predecessors in this field, Bourgeois was open to new knowledge gained from travel and experience. She believed that it was crucial to deliberately search for new information, which would result in making medicine more reliable. This statement highlights the idea that there is no definite end to knowledge. She proceeds to present this innovative and worldly mindset to improve education. Bourgeois promoted a more inclusive and science-driven era while reminding her readers that knowledge is not with one person, group, or nation, but can be found anywhere.

Following the idea that knowledge is not bound by finite limits, Bourgeois epitomized the potential that women had in midwifery and society. In this century, France was an extremely patriarchal society and because of this women were often discriminated against both in education and professions. As a practicing midwife Bourgeois was most likely a victim of also being underestimated and unappreciated by male practitioners. But as she became more well known and one of the top midwives in France, she began to show midwifery in a higher light. She influenced other midwives, including her daughter, to study midwifery and strive to become licensed and educated in the field. This led to more women attempting this career and growing

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<sup>17</sup>Louise Bourgeois, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice*, 153.



midwifery as a whole.<sup>18</sup> With her field becoming more reputable and more opportunities presenting themselves, mainstream medical began to push back, “doctors began to question the role and ability of midwives.”<sup>19</sup> This was most likely an attempt for physicians to take over midwifery as well and reap its new benefits. In an extremely patriarchal society, these practitioners were believed to be superior and were even trusted more with midwifery responsibilities. They tried to use their higher knowledge and education to push women out of their field. But Louise did not allow this to influence her. She showed her associates that she should be considered just as qualified and capable as them and would even “use the terminology of the physicians, refusing to be excluded from the domain of academic medical language.”<sup>20</sup> Bourgeois did not allow these individuals to make her feel inferior or inadequate in her practice and wanted to show them she could still be a part of this field and find success. Her determined and courageous stance, which was “a most unusual phenomenon” during this century, further demonstrates Bourgeois’ tenacious and courageous nature.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to her defiance of being educationally and socially excluded, Louise Bourgeois continued to acknowledge this issue in her writing with advice directed towards all fields of medicine, “Be always humble for those that are proud and obstinate never gain upon the

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<sup>18</sup> Martha M. Houle, “Navigating a Woman’s Profession in Early Modern France: A Study of Louise Bourgeois Boursier’s *Instruction à Ma Fille* (1617).” *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 26, no. 1 (2004): 3 <https://doi.org/10.1179/c17.2004.26.1.1>.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Carson Banks, “Childbirth, Midwives, Wetnursing,” 432.

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Perkins, “Midwives Versus Doctors: The Case of Louise Bourgeois,” *The Seventeenth Century* 3, no.2 (1988): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117x.1988.10555279>.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Perkins, “Midwives Versus Doctors,” 137.

hearts of those that are knowing in secrets.”<sup>22</sup> This statement, presented to midwives and physicians, was more directly guided towards the current male physicians. These practitioners always had more influence over women in society, especially in medical professions. Bourgeois’ statement acknowledged the discrimination they had imposed and informed them that if they were interested in working in the same field, they should experience a midwife’s work and learn from them. Her suggestion that men should be taught by women was most likely viewed as absurd in society’s eyes. Still, she voiced her belief that women in this field should be given the same opportunities and further “advocated better education for midwives”.<sup>23</sup> She understood the conflict and animosity that would arise with her tenacious attitude, but she proceeded to publicly voice her opinions regardless of the consequences. Louise Bourgeois proved that her courage to stand as a feminist inspiration and to express these futuristic ideals, in the face of adversity, was unwavering.

The revolutionary approach that Louise Bourgeois had on medical ethics, the inclusion of females in science, and the growth of medicine as a whole is undeniable. She was a trailblazer for new advancements and an inspirational force in society. However, her career came to an end after Marie de Medici, the queen of France, died in childbirth. Bourgeois was the attending midwife and had been the midwife for six of King Henry IV’s children.<sup>24</sup> But even with her almost perfect record Marie de Medici passed. Following the King’s request, an autopsy was

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<sup>22</sup>Louise Bourgeois, “The Compleat Midwife’s Practice,” 154.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Benedek, “The Changing Relationship Between Midwives and Physicians During the Renaissance,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 51, no. 4 (1977): 552, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44450467>.

<sup>24</sup>Jean Donnison, “The Making of a Royal Midwife,” 33.

ordered on the same day and ten famous male physicians and surgeons were granted this responsibility.<sup>25</sup> They later released a record stating their observational findings. The physicians noted that there was evidence of gangrene from a bacterial infection and that a piece of placenta was left behind after birth. These practitioners did not mention Bourgeois by name or even state a definite cause of death. Yet in fear of her reputation, Bourgeois accused them of attempting to sabotage her. She worried that the declared piece of placenta left over, which was extremely rare, would be traced back to her and she would be responsible for the queen's death.<sup>26</sup> She responded immediately after the report was released in a letter titled *Apologie*, "By your report you make yourself fairly cognizant that you hear nothing at all in the back and the womb of a woman...which you tacitly claim to be the cause of death."<sup>27</sup> Even though the queen's cause of death was left open, she immediately asserts that these physicians had no knowledge of female anatomy and therefore would be ignorant of the truth. Bourgeois continued to argue that they did not have the right to be leading the autopsy and should not be trusted to make claims in this area, primarily using her letter to attack the physicians.

Regarding this public dispute, there has been a common characterization of events among current historians who believe that Louise Bourgeois was framed by these practitioners. Philip A. Kalish referred to this event as, "her eventual fall from prominence, due to attacks by physicians and surgeons."<sup>28</sup> He implies that the male physicians leading the autopsy were the sole reason for

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<sup>25</sup>Wendy Perkins, "Midwives Versus Doctors," 135.

<sup>26</sup>Andrew D. Weeks, "The Retained Placenta," *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 22, no. 6 (2008): 1103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2008.07.005>.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice*, 153.

<sup>28</sup>Philip A. Kalisch, "Louyse Bourgeois and the Emergence of Modern Midwifery," 6.

the end of her career. In the article by P.M. Dunn, he also states that she was the leading influence for medicine and women at the time, but during this situation it was actually the male physicians who were “to blame.”<sup>29</sup> Without providing more insight of this event, these historians believe that the record of the remaining placenta was an attempt to sabotage Bourgeois because she was just too powerful for the physician’s comfort. But while many parts of these arguments ring true: as there was a considerable amount of competition and tension in the field and male practitioners were most likely very intimidated by her, it was ultimately Bourgeois’ strength of conviction that led to further conflict. Her defensive nature is reflected in this particular quote and reveals her human flaw. Furthermore, it is the publication of this flaw that eventually leads to her injured reputation. This public rebuttal of the attending physicians did not have the desired effect. By attempting to humiliate and degrade these respected practitioners, she showed a more impulsive and negligent side of herself. The pressure from the queen’s death and the male practitioners was overwhelming and it was her reaction that made her seem even more guilty in the public eye.

Additionally, Louise continued to blame the physicians lack of knowledge in the *Apologie* by stating that the conclusion they reached was, “a fact fairly well known than your intention, by publishing your own report was to charge me with all the blame to put you in cover.”<sup>30</sup> She also proclaimed that their ulterior motives were in response to feeling threatened by her. Louise further increased the tension between her and male practitioners, as she turned this tragedy back on them. She described them not only as uneducated but as corrupt and

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<sup>29</sup>P.M. Dunn, “Louise Bourgeois (1563-1636): royal midwife of France,” 185.

<sup>30</sup> Louise Bourgeois, “The Compleat Midwife’s Practice,” 154.

attempting to falsify an autopsy report to push a female out of their profession. Louise Bourgeois was not afraid to stand up for what she believed in. However, her hasty and combative response was flawed. She became desperate as “she tried to redirect their gaze once the autopsy report is out, but it is too late, and her corrections are seen for what they are: corrections and criticisms.”<sup>31</sup> She continued to remind them of her credentials and extensive experience, but her severe criticisms “were not taken lightly by her male colleagues.”<sup>32</sup> Following these accusations, an anonymous letter called the *Remonstrance* was publicized and directly exposed her faulty accusations in *Apologie* along with her unprofessional insults towards these physicians. These criticisms and her own arrogance ultimately led to her rejection from society. As the public began to see her actions and arguments in a more negative light, Bourgeois chose to stop publishing her works and retired from midwifery. Her husband continued to work as a barber surgeon and three of her children decided to pursue careers in the medical field as well, but her reputation had been stained. Although the patriarchy and gender barrier did play a role in the downfall of her career, it was ultimately her strength of conviction and human reaction that ensured her exclusion from society.

Louise Bourgeois showed an innovative approach to the advancement of medical ethics, education, and women’s freedom. She was a role model for women entering a career in an extremely patriarchal society while proving her undeniable voice and courage to fight for her beliefs. Furthermore, she worked for the greater good and showed that her revolutionary approach to medicine and societal trends were ahead of her time. Not only was Bourgeois a

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<sup>31</sup> Wendy Perkins, “Midwives Versus Doctors,” 45.

<sup>32</sup> Wendy Perkins, “Midwives Versus Doctors,” 139.

powerful force in the medical field, but she was also an influential feminist. While the tension between the physicians and Bourgeois may have played a role in the end of her career, it was instigated by this letter which presented her in a more uncertain and negative light to the public. Her desperate and flawed response showed her insecurity which ultimately ruined her reputation.

While many historians may disregard this matter in order to maintain her pristine character, this would be short-sighted. This insight could be used to further understand this particular time period and the considerable amount of pressure that a female midwife faced in such a male-driven society. By acknowledging and expanding research on Louise Bourgeois' career, we can recognize the significant changes in medicine and society that she inspired in this century and better understand the constant struggles women faced working in male dominated professions.

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