Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).

Despite the fact that Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray's name appears regularly in bibliographies of eighteenth-century medicine, she has remained rather much of a mystery to scholars. She is best known for her textbook, *Abrégé de l'art des accouchements*, which went through six editions between 1759 and 1785, but the story of how she used this manual in a thirty-year campaign to improve the state of midwifery in the French countryside has been largely untold. Most of the details of her story are to be found not in printed sources, but in the hundreds of letters exchanged between du Coudray and the kings, ministers, intendants, subdelegates, parish priests, county matrons, doctors and surgeons who contributed sometimes to furthering her mission and sometimes to obstructing it.

The bulk of the correspondence resides in more than thirty-five departmental archives located in cities spanning the length and breadth of France: from Lille in the north to Toulouse in the south, from La Rochelle in the west to Grenoble in the east. Over the course of an eleven-year research project, Nina Gelbart has done a masterful job of retracing Mme du Coudray's journeys from 1767-1783. While in pursuit of the paper trail, Gelbart has strolled through the neighbourhoods where du Coudray stayed, explored the interiors of churches where du Coudray participated in the baptism of babies, enjoyed the same regional delicacies. I can think of no other monograph which conveys as effectively as this one the joys and frustrations of archival research. Just as impressive as her twentieth-century reconstruction of Mme du Coudray's travels is Gelbart's ability to recreate a physical and emotional landscape that has long since faded away: the sound of horsedrawn carriages on rutted roads; the sight of grave diggers scavenging bones for anatomical demonstrations; the seasonal rhythms of labour and rest characteristic of the agricultural cycle; the conflicted emotions midwives must have felt as they watched malformed newborns die soon after birth.

The medical context in Paris when du Coudray began her career as a midwife is well documented. An aspiring midwife received her education largely through a three-year apprenticeship to a practicing midwife, after which she was required to pass qualifying exams administered by a panel of deans, surgeons, and midwives at the College of Surgery. Midwives had been admitted to classes at the school of surgery since 1733, but when surgeons separated from barbers and wigmakers in 1743, lessons for midwives ceased. The midwives turned to the surgeons' age-old rivals, medical doctors, for help and a struggle ensued over who would exercise authority over the midwives. Du Coudray was an early signer of a petition to the doctors for instruction. Gelbart notes that the petition showed little sense of sisterhood, complaining as it did about female quacks who practiced blind, murderous routines.

By mid-century, the situation in Paris would become even more difficult for midwives, as the *Encyclopédie* published defamatory articles highlighting the barbarism and inhumanity of midwives in contrast to surgeons and concluding that it would be better for women if there were no midwives. Further demarcating midwives from surgeons, the Parlement of Paris ruled in 1755 that midwives could not use obstetrical forceps. At this time, du Coudray left Paris for Thiers-en-Auvergne in response to the appeal of a wealthy philanthropic seigneur seeking someone to instruct peasant women in the art of childbirth. Even stays of three months in Paris had proved too stressful for these women and so the plan was to bring instruction to the countryside. Gelbart speculates that du Coudray, seeing her colleagues in Paris belittled and diminished, resolved to create a device of her own which women could use, making the forceps monopolized by men unnecessary.

The device chosen was the obstetrical mannequin or "machine" which du Coudray invented as a prop for her courses in midwifery. Gelbart's book analyzes the varying strategies du Coudray employed to gain government support for her initiative and reveals the impact on her mission of changing political regimes as one controller-general was replaced by another or supporters rose or fell from favour or local officials variously advanced or resisted royal initiatives. In the face of numerous mishaps beyond her control, du Coudray remained adaptable and resourceful. She managed to carve an independent space for herself while obtaining the support of the patriarchal establishment. Writing at the time of the Seven Years War when France was concerned about a plummeting population, du Coudray gained support by emphasizing the service she was doing to the country by rescuing infants from death. Du Coudray's focus of concern was not the suffering of mothers but the survival of infants and it is revealed visually in the illustrations from her manual which foregrounded the male infant and reduced the mother to an objectified pelvis. In contrast, her niece and successor, Marguerite Coutanceau, writing on the eve of the Revolution, would attune herself to the Revolution's arguments about civic, republican motherhood, identify her assistance to mothers with the interest of the state, and argue that the modesty of women required that men be excluded from midwifery.

The fact that du Coudray did little to champion the cause of women even as she ceaselessly promoted herself is something to which Gelbart returns again and again. Throughout her book, Gelbart posits the struggle for authority between surgeons and midwives in gendered terms and the fact that du Coudray didn't vehemently defend her sex puzzles and disturbs Gelbart. Did du Coudray's ambition for personal success compromise her sense of charity and devotion to improving the lot of women? That question remains a puzzle, partially resolved by reference to Caroline Heilbrun's observation that "Exceptional women are the chief imprisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their

uniqueness among men, that no other woman will."[1] Gelbart concludes that although du Coudray's method guaranteed the subordination of midwives to surgeons, du Coudray did enable her students to move from marginal means of subsistence to greater financial security and social esteem.

The fact that du Coudray herself never makes this case, but that Gelhart as her advocate does, raises an important historiographical question: How far should a biographer go in identifying with her subject? This biography is of course a study of du Coudray and it begins with an analysis of a magisterial portrait that du Coudray had commissioned in midlife, but it is just as much a story of the relationship between the biographer and her subject. Following the description of the portrait is a detailed discussion of Gelbart's response to the portrait and the remark that du Coudray seemed to be beckoning Gelbart to tell her story. Even as Gelbart seeks to know the real woman behind the image, du Coudray proves elusive, playing a hide-and-seek game, having self-consciously crafted a public image which may or may not be truthful and having concealed any evidence of her private self.

Although A. Delacoux, the author of a book on celebrated midwives, mentioned in 1834 that he had seen a collection of numerous documents left by Mme du Coudray and gathered by her niece, Gelbart was never able to unearth them. As a result, Gelbart was confronted with numerous silences regarding du Coudray's inner self. She exposes these silences, and then proceeds to fill them in with speculations, many of which seem probable, but not certain. For example, nothing is known of du Coudray's origins, and so Gelbart speculates that she might have been one of the 40% of children abandoned by their parents in eighteenth-century France. This secret might explain du Coudray's particular sensitivity to the indigent and to unwed mothers. When du Coudray's adopted niece marries, du Coudray has nothing to say about the event. Indeed, she might not even have attended the wedding. In the face of du Coudray's silence, Gelbart presumes that du Coudray must have felt ambivalent about the marriage, resigned to it but not rejoicing over it. She had remained single throughout her life and succeeded; why couldn't her niece? At another point in the narrative, du Coudray disappears from public view for over a year. Gelbart speculates that, rejected by the conservative *pays d'état* to the south, du Coudray must have been gravely wounded but refused to complain.

One of this book's great strengths is Gelbart's ability to give flesh and blood to her historical figures by imagining what must have been. Her depiction of a birthing scene based on du Coudray's manual is a tour de force, so moving is it, yet the people described with such verve and verisimilitude are fabricated entirely firm Gelbart's imagination. Every speculation that Gelbart engages in seems plausible, but because she provides only one possible account, it becomes the authoritative one. When confronted with silence and ambiguity, Gelbart always offers a definitive answer. Unlike Laurel Ulrich

who, in *A Midwife's Tale*, emphasizes how remote she is from her eighteenth-century subject, Martha Ballard, Gelbart identifies with her subject to such an extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish the biographer from her subject.

When one lives with a subject for such a long time, identification is natural. It becomes problematical, however, when the biographer becomes advocate to such an extent that the reader wonders about the biographer's ability to evaluate accurately. Gelbart concludes her book with the observation that although the French believed their country was being depopulated in the eighteenth century, in fact the population rose from 20 million to 27 million. She notes that 1750 was the beginning of this transformation as infant mortality declined considerably and attributes this shift in no small measure to the success of du Coudray's mission. She estimates that du Coudray and her disciples trained an estimated ten thousand women.

Evidence for such a claim is ambiguous. Gelbart frequently paraphrases from du Coudray's correspondence and from that of various officials, parish priests, and surgeons. Most often, du Coudray vaunted her successes, though at one point, when she sought governmental support to continue her work, she lamented the lack of staying power of her courses. In the face of such contradictory self-presentations, which is one to believe? Gelbart chooses the former, despite the fact that there is ample testimony of resistance to du Coudray from surgeons and from rural women themselves. When presenting Dr. Nicolas of Grenoble's denunciation of du Coudray's students for their insolent and dangerous confidence or the Parisian surgeon Le Has's complaints that mannequins are just as adroit for training midwives as the theater or the opera are for training soldiers and sailors, Gelbart dismisses their concerns as just another example of the gender conflict between male medical practitioners and female midwives.

Yet such concerns do seem valid. How could a two or three-month course during which students practiced on mannequins possibly replace professional training in midwifery which traditionally took three years? How much could du Coudray's students glean from the manual she left behind when many of them were illiterate? Even du Coudray's niece, though designated by the government to carry on du Coudray's work, preferred the idea of establishing a permanent maternity hospice in Bordeaux because she believed that there was no substitute for practicing on live women.

By eclipsing the distance between biographer and subject, Gelbart has created an engaging and fascinating portrait, Still, in her quest to reduce the opacity between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, Gelbart runs the risk of distorting our perception of the past. Undoubtedly gender conflict and professional rivalries characterized the medical scene in the eighteenth century, but the panorama was more complex than that. Le Bas and du Coudray were rivals, but Le Bas is a more complicated figure than he is presented to be in this account. In the debate over late births of the 1760s which Gelbart does

not mention, Le Bas sided with the woman who claimed to have experienced a prolonged pregnancy rather than with the collateral heirs, If he had been ruled simply by considerations of gender conflict, he would have taken the other side. Stark categories of opposition lose their explanatory power in the face of a real human being.

There is room for criticism of this book, but to her credit Gelbart provides her readers with all the evidence they need to question and challenge her interpretations. This is a marvelous book, truly daring methodologically, destined to serve as a model for future biographers grappling with how to bridge the distances between past and present, the public self and the private self, fact and fiction.

Lindsay Wilson
Northern Arizona University

[1] Caroline G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York 1988), 121, 81, 23.