Louyse Bourgeois Biography

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Contents

Louyse Bourgeois Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Louyse Bourgeois was the most famous midwife of her time. As one of the first educated, literate, and medically trained female midwives, she raised her profession to a new level of professional competence and promoted the spread of that competence through her widely read books recounting her observations and experiences.

Bourgeois, a woman of the middle class, acquired her medical knowledge from her husband, an army surgeon. As one of the first graduates of the new school for midwives at the Hotel Dieu hospital in Paris, where she may have studied under the pioneering surgeon Ambroise Paré. Bourgeois developed a very large and successful practice, especially among the French aristocracy. She attended the birth of the future King Louis XIII--reportedly saving the newborn from asphyxia--as well as the five other deliveries of Marie de Medici, wife of Henry IV.

The popularity and reputation of Bourgeois were tarnished when she was accused of responsibility in the death of the queen's daughter-in-law, the Duchesse d'Orleans, from peritonitis following delivery in 1627. Nevertheless, Bourgeois remained influential and successful, although she never received the pension King Henry had promised her.

Bourgeois especially advanced obstetrical knowledge with her observations about detachment of the placenta. She may have been the first midwife to write books about her specialty, the most important of which was *Observations diverses sur la stérilité*, published in 1626. She certainly accustomed child-bearing women to expect a new and higher degree of competence and knowledge from their birth attendant.