Marie Gillain Boivin Biography

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Biography

Marie Gillain Boivin was considered to be the most outstanding obstetrician of the nineteenth century. Born in Montreuil, a suburb of Paris, she was educated by nuns whose order ran a hospital at Etampes, and married Louis Boivin at the age of twenty-four. After being widowed, she became a midwife in 1800, practicing in Versailles. When her young daughter was killed in an accident, Boivin returned to Paris where she worked at the Hospice de la Maternité under Maria Louise Dugès La Chapelle (1769-1821), another renowned midwife. Boivin soon became known for her obstetrical skill and knowledge, especially in difficult cases; the leading surgeon of the time said she had an eye at the tip of each finger. She was appointed codirector of the General Hospital for Seine and Oise in 1814, directed a temporary military hospital in 1815, and later directed the Hospice de la Maternité and the Maison Royale de Santé. The king of Prussia invested Boivin with the Order of Merit in 1814, and in 1827 she received an honorary M.D. from the University of Marburg in Germany, one of the few women so honored at the time.

Following her break with Mme. La Chapelle, Boivin turned down lucrative offers and worked instead for minimal pay at a hospital for prostitutes. Her pension was so small she died in severe poverty after one year of retirement. Boivin's contributions to the science of obstetrics included the invention of a new pelvimeter and a vaginal speculum, the use of a stethoscope to listen to the fetal heartbeat, and discoveries about causes of miscarriage and diseases of the placenta and uterus. She published a number of widely read treatises on obstetrics, including *Mémorial de l'art des Accouchements* in 1812, which became a textbook for medical students and midwives. Boivin's work on diseases of the uterus, published in 1833, was said to be as modern as was possible at the time.