

# A midwife's tale essay



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"A Midwife's Tale" is the story and accounts of Martha Ballard. Martha was very consistent with writing in her diary. Her diary is made up of different stories, baby deliveries, land disputes, gardening, weaving, and many other facets of life in rural Maine. There are very few historical documents that focus specifically on women and many times women of that era are forgotten about. Many women involved in medicine in the 18th century were not given much credit. Women were quite active and played an important background role in the practice of medicine in the town.

Ulrich considers such titles as domestic medicine, folk medicine, popular medicine, and lay medicine, settling finally on social medicine because it denotes the close though informal ties between the women healers and their community. While male physicians sought to avail themselves of every title and designation which would distance themselves from the community, achieving a superior, professional position over it. Women healers were such an inherent part of the community that they have been barely noticed by historians: "Social healers . . . were so closely identified with their public we can hardly find them" (61).

The healers administered medical care in a number of ways, especially in the form of midwifery: "A midwife was the most visible and experienced person in a community of healers who shared her perspective, her obligations, her training, and her labor" (64). However, she had no degrees on the wall, no titles, nothing like the income of a male physician, and therefore she has not been given her proper due in the historical records of a society which was so thoroughly defined and operated by powerful men. This exclusion of women

from the circle of recognized power in medicine was taken to great lengths by male physicians.

The same behind-the-scenes impact of women is found in the areas of social convention and economics. Women contributed mightily in both areas, but, again, are given little credit in most historical accounts of the period. As Ulrich writes in one passage focusing on Ballard's "Economic and social differences might divide a community; the unseen acts of women wove it together" (96).

Ballard herself is exemplary in adhering to the social conventions which held women as the glue holding society together behind-the-scenes, informally, unofficially. The foundation of social convention was the belief that women were, indeed, creatures meant to soothe and heal—quietly and unobtrusively. In other words, social convention held that men might be loud and contentious and overtly controlling of others, but it was the role of the woman to reduce or eliminate or prevent such contentiousness wherever possible, to set an example for other females and to hold up the veil of social unity and social harmony.

With respect to the role of women in the economic activity of the town and the era, Ulrich notes that of the economic-related entries in the diary of "the wealthiest man in town" (28), "Almost all, including those for the Ballards, are listed under the name of the male head of household. Male products—lumber, fish, and furs—dominate the credit side of the ledger" (29). We might assume, as Ulrich notes, after reading such information, "that . . . women had no role in economic life beyond their own households" (29).

The economy of the area and era was certainly male-dominated, but this does not mean that the women did not play a significant role in the functioning of the community's economic life. We should also note here that the full participation of women at the most fundamental levels of economic activity in the community once again also serves as social glue. Social convention prescribed that women do their quiet, harmony-creating work not only in soothing the contentiousness of men, but also in providing a context for productive activity in economic and other areas.

Ulrich refers to "an economy characterized by family production" (75). The unity and harmony of the community was advanced by the work of women in that economy. Ballard "not only employed her daughters . . . and her nieces, . . . but a succession of hired helpers. . . . [In addition,] she relied on married neighbors . . . to help her inexperienced girls warp the loom, the girls in turn weaving for other families. . . . The production of cloth wove a social web" (75).

The fact is clear that women played an important role in the carrying out of medical, social and economic activities. Without women and their significant contributions, the society of the era could not have existed and progressed as it did. At the same time, it is just as clear from the evidence presented in the diary that the roles of women were severely limited by social convention. They could not be doctors. They could not control the economic activity of the household or the town.

They could contribute greatly, but only in the categories prescribed by social convention, that is, by men. Again, however, within these defined limits,

women were able to take advantage of certain opportunities for gathering a quiet kind of power unto themselves. Women had such opportunities, and brave and determined women like Martha Ballard took advantage of them at every turn. Still, such opportunities were always presented in the context of a society dominated and defined by men.