The Conflict Between Science and Tradition in Midwifery during the Eighteenth Century

by Abby Miner

The conflict between science and tradition is present in today’s world as well as throughout history. These conflicts include the fine line between the male dominated public sphere, the female dominated private sphere and the genders associated with the fields of art and science. The sciences were a male dominated practice while traditional medicine and natural practice were the women’s domain. In the eighteenth century, the medical fields were seen as a man’s domain. The gender stereotypes of the medical field highlighted a dispute between tradition and science in the art of midwifery. Between the male education, based on science, and the female education based on tradition, men and women believed that their education was superior to the others. In addition to this, each sex brought with them different practices and methods in the field of midwifery. Women were not willing to accept the transition from female tradition and intuition to the scientific practices of eighteenth century men, which in turn helped to professionalize the field of midwifery.

The Enlightenment is historically a controversial time period between the 1600s and 1800s. There is also some controversy regarding what the Enlightenment was. Some say that it was a time of religious change, while others say it was a scientific change. For medicine and midwifery in particular, the Enlightenment was a time when superstition and tradition were being overtaken by the rise in new technologies.¹ Medicine in the 1700s saw the emergence of new technologies and experimentation. This transition from tradition to science can be seen when looking at the two different male and female dominated spheres of the time.
Throughout history there have been two spheres dividing men and women. Women resided in the private sphere while men resided in the public sphere. The public sphere was strictly dealing with social life and with public opinion, whereas the private sphere dealt with family life and female emotion.\(^2\) Traditionally, medicine along with midwifery was located in the private sphere and was dominated by women.\(^3\) This was because when someone in the family was sick, whether they were a son, husband, or daughter, they would usually be cared for by their mother, unless it was very serious. Midwifery was strictly for the care of women and was a medical profession that had been practiced throughout history. The practice of midwifery was a medical field that included providing care for pregnant women before, during, and after labor. When a woman became pregnant, she would go to a midwife, generally a woman, to ask for advice about what to expect. Later in the pregnancy, when the labor began, the midwife would be at the woman’s side to walk her through the birthing process and help deliver the child.\(^4\) Up until the end of the 1600s, men generally stayed out of the birthing chambers of women.\(^5\)

With the popularity of science and medicine beginning to grow during the Enlightenment, medicine began to shift to the male dominated public sphere.\(^6\) Because it was more acceptable for women to work inside the home than outside, women began to lose their traditional reputation in the practice of medicine to the male population.\(^7\) Typically during the eighteenth century, fields that resided in the male dominated public sphere included: apothecaries, physicians, and surgeons. But when men began to step into the field of midwifery, “lying in hospitals,” which were hospitals dedicated to birth, became more popular. One of the first lying in hospitals in London was established in 1739.\(^8\) This was a more controlled and public way to give birth which gave men a place to practice midwifery in the public sphere. However, midwifery was a field of medicine that was both in the female and male domain.
In the female domain, women practiced midwifery as a necessity, whether they were a practicing midwife, a mother, or a helpful neighbor. Most women had the knowledge and ability to assist a woman in labor. But some women practiced midwifery as a profession rather than just helping a fellow female in labor. To do this, they needed a better education which usually came in the form of an apprenticeship. This apprenticeship was more often than not an unstructured apprenticeship. Specifically, the knowledge was passed down from midwife to midwife or mother to daughter, utilizing first-hand experience. This traditional knowledge that women received was based on having the patience to let nature take its course. That is, they learned to let birth happen as it happened, rather than trying to hurry the situation by using unnecessary techniques.

One woman who was lucky enough to get a structured education was midwife Elizabeth Nihell. She obtained her education by attending a French lying in hospital, the Hôtel de Dieu. There, she learned the skills she believed were essential to becoming a good midwife. Although her education was more formal than the “word-of-mouth” experience most midwives had, it was still an education based on tradition and nature. Through years of being a midwife, Nihell developed strong opinions on how the art should be practiced. When men started stepping into the field of midwifery, Nihell took matters into her own hands and wrote *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* in 1760. This treatise gave the reader an inside look as to how Nihell believed a true midwife should practice the art. There was no place for science in her world of midwifery. In particular, *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* gave the reader a sense of Elizabeth Nihell’s strong feelings against the use of experimental instruments and the education of male midwives in general. She criticized the male’s theory-based education and experimentation. In particular, she criticized how male midwives taught and practiced her art of midwifery.
Men and women had different forms of education. While women’s education was based on the natural occurrence of labor, the male education was based on more than just the practice of midwifery. Not only were men educated in the art of midwifery, but they were also educated in a variety of disciplines. Their eighteenth-century education was based on theory, experimentation, and was meant to better the fields involving the sciences. In the male opinion, being educated was an essential part of becoming a “Gentleman” in the eighteenth century. Generally, the male education was a more formal affair. They would go to a university type setting where they would attend lectures. These lectures covered a wide variety of medical related topics including surgery and midwifery. The people who would give these lectures were not only just professors. These professors also practiced within the field they were teaching. Along with these lectures taught by male physicians, students would also attend labors being performed by “regular breed,” midwives. Male midwives used this traditional knowledge that women shared with them, but then tried to expand the field with their theory and experiments. Women commonly did not get this formal type of education, which included lectures and learning more than just midwifery.

One male midwife that received this type of formal education was Tobias Smollett. Smollett was the “jack of all trades” of his time. He became a male midwife and was educated under the male midwife William Smellie, who Elizabeth Nihell criticized in her *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery*. That treatise, coupled with Nihell’s criticism of William Smellie, sparked an argument with a male physician Smollett. He was the editor of *Critical Review*, where he wrote a response criticizing Nihell’s four-hundred page treatise. He believed that the woman’s way of relying on nature and the traditions, passed down from midwife to midwife, was useless compared to the advances that science had made for the art of midwifery. The people of the
eighteenth century had an important decision to make. They could either support the female education based solely on previous practice, the art of nature, and a deep seeded tradition, keeping women in the forefront of the practice. Or they could support the male driven transformation of midwifery which included new technology and experimentation.

In the female education, women often times were knowledgeable about child birth because of their own experiences with it. They would assist midwives in the labor of their families and friends. This was a type of apprenticeship for women. They would go with practicing midwives to labors, help them, and in doing so, learn about midwifery. Not only did women learn from experience and other midwives, they also learned from their mothers. The knowledge of childbirth was passed down from generation to generation. A lot of the medical knowledge in families was passed from mother to daughter; this was the tradition of the private sphere. Though it was rather rare during the time, some women were lucky enough to get an opportunity to have a more structured education, like Elizabeth Nihell. In the maternity ward at the Hôtel de Dieu, and other such lying in hospitals, Nihell and other lucky women were educated in the more natural practices of midwifery. One such practice was to use their hands for things such as turning babies inside the womb. At the Hôtel de Dieu, women were introduced to the art of midwifery in a hospital setting, even though it was still based on the traditional and unconventional apprenticeship between a woman and a practiced midwife, without male intervention. Child birth was considered a natural affair, and involved only women. In Nihell’s mind, women were born with the ability to deliver a baby and understand child birth in general. Men did not have this traditional and inherent knowledge that women had.

The male education gave men the opportunities that women did not have. Men in the eighteenth century were able to study in many different disciplines in university settings, under
the instruction of medical men. Men who studied the sciences often also studied the arts of physics, surgery, and anatomy. These disciplines were theory and experimentation based. Being educated in many different fields was believed to define a male as a gentleman. Tobias Smollett was a good example of someone who was considered to be a gentleman in 1760. This was because in addition to being a student of midwifery, he was also a student of anatomy, literature, general medicine, and surgery. When Tobias Smollett learned the art of midwifery, he was taught by the male midwife and physician William Smellie. In Smellie’s lectures, students learned the relatively new techniques of using instruments, such as forceps and crotchets, to aid in deliveries. This was unlike the female education.

Throughout the argument between male and female midwives, the use of instruments was a heated dispute. The use of instruments was a relatively new concept introduced by men during the Enlightenment. The use of these man-made tools was also a dispute during the time because the use of them was not an accepted practice for women. Therefore women such as Elizabeth Nihell did not learn how to use these tools, but men such as Tobias Smollett did. During the eighteenth-century there were a number of manuals printed to help midwives during the labor process. One in particular, which was based on the male version of the practice was, The Midwife’s Pocket-Companion, written by the male physician John Memis. Memis was a student of midwifery from Marishal College in Aberdeen. In his manual, Memis spelled out the proper use and proper time to use certain instruments. One of the instruments used in midwifery was the forceps. A set of curved forceps was created by William Smellie in 1720. Forceps in general were used to deliver a live child that was thought to be undeliverable. This tool was used to help maneuver the child around inside the womb when it was not in the correct position. It would be inserted one half at a time with the guidance of the midwives’ hands, and would be placed
around the ears of the infant.\textsuperscript{30} Often times these tools would be made from leather making them hard to keep clean. Not only could it cause infection, but it could also cause the pelvic bone of the mother to break and possibly cause uncontrollable bleeding. Along with this, the forceps were associated with crushing the skull of the unborn child.\textsuperscript{31} The use of this tool can be seen in Figure one below. Other tools in the midwife’s arsenal also included the crotchet and scissors, or perforator. The crotchet and scissors were used together to create a hole inside the baby’s skull and render the brain into a liquid. This would allow the skull to more easily collapse in on itself, making it easier to deliver the baby with forceps.\textsuperscript{32} The use of the crotchet can be seen in figure two below.

Yet another menacing tool was the wale-bone fillet. This tool was described by William Smellie in his book, \textit{An Abridgement of the Practice of Midwifery: and a Set of Anatomical Tables with Explanations}. He described that the fillet was used to try and maneuver the head of the child into the proper position for birth. The Fillet would be placed around the child’s chin and then the male - midwife would pull until the head was in the correct position.\textsuperscript{33} But often time it would be placed around the neck of the child rather than the chin, causing the child to be decapitated\textsuperscript{34} or strangled to death.\textsuperscript{35} Men and women had different opinion when it came to the use of tools in the practice of midwifery.
These differences in opinion stemmed from their different forms of education in the eighteenth century. Because of the differences in the midwifery education, both the male and female parties believed that they had the better education. One was based on science and the other was based on nature. Therefore, each believed the other sex’s practices of midwifery did not belong in the field. To Elizabeth Nihell, the use of tools showed that men were irrational and impatient. In *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery*, Nihell often mentioned the concept of nature. Throughout Nihell’s experience with men, she grew to believe men did not know how to deal
with nature. They were too impatient to let nature take its course. In other words, men were too eager to control nature with their theories and science. As a result, they took drastic and dangerous measures to quicken the labor process. Because of this impatience and eagerness to control nature, men such as William Smellie started introducing new instruments into the field of midwifery.

Nihell believed that William Smellie’s introduction of tools and the initial way he taught his students about child birth were barbarous. To Nihell’s knowledge, Smellie used a human sized wooden doll, with a leather bladder full of beer, to act as the mother in labor. William Smellie would then place a wax doll inside the bladder to represent the unborn child. To show that the “mother” was in labor they would uncork the leather bladder and let the beer fall out. Then the wax doll would be placed in different positions to signify different types of labor, such as when a baby was breach. This was done so the students could practice using the forceps to help deliver the child. In Nihell’s mind, this lecture was based on theory alone and not the practice of the skill in midwifery. There was no place for theory in Nihell’s real world midwifery. This showed Nihell that her education better prepared her for real situations. Because her patients at the Hôtel de Dieu were real women, Nihell was able to gain “real world” experience. She was able to have practical experience, and not just education based on theory. This was a core reason why she felt the female education of midwifery was superior. Female midwives believed that men did not have the proper education or general knowledge, and were too forceful to be in the field of midwifery.
Nihell did not believe in the practice of instruments because of her educational background in nature and tradition. She believed in, “giving nature fair-play, and when necessary, assisting her (nature) with the management of natural hands skillfully conducted.”

Because of her belief that men were too impatient to let nature take its course, she believed that if a male midwife thought that the birth was taking too long, they would take drastic and dangerous measures to speed up the birth. This included using those tools that Nihell did not believe in. Because these male midwives were too willing to try and augment the natural process of birth, Nihell believed them to be butchers and murderers of the innocent. Where a female midwife would take her time with the birthing process and do everything in her power to have a safe and natural birth be the outcome, a male midwife would use his vicious crotchets and forceps.

From reading pamphlets and other writings about midwifery, Nihell understood that even the men who developed these tools, with their superior education in science, could not decide whether or not the use of the instruments in birth was safe for the mother and child. Therefore she could not condone the use of them when the men who created them were uncertain as well. To her, the preservation of life was more important than trying to discover whether or not an experimental tool, that had already caused deaths, would actually better the field of midwifery.

In a case that Nihell heard of and recorded in *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery*, a birth was taking too long, and a male midwife proved to Nihell that male midwives were too impatient and reliant on their tools. In this case, the male midwife told the mother to be that the child had died. He then stressed the urgency of delivering the child because it posed a fatal risk to the mother. Because of the immense labor pains clouding her judgement, the woman in labor agreed with the male midwife. Only when the midwife used his scissors to stab a hole into the child’s head,
making the head softer for delivery, did the mother realize the lie. The woman in labor realized the midwife lied because of the kick the baby gave when the male midwife inserted the scissors. Nihell believed that this act killed the child instantly, and that it was not already dead like the male midwife had claimed.43

In another case Nihell recorded, a child’s head was severed from its body inside the womb by a male midwife. The male midwife might claim it was a common occurrence, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it, as they do with many other “accidents”.44 But Nihell attributed the accident to tools. She used this to strengthen her argument that men should have never been introduced in the field of midwifery in the first place.45 In Nihell’s argument, the only time a male should be called to help in a birth, was when the mother or child were already dead. In Nihell’s mind, male midwives and the tools they employed did more harm than good. Not only did the instruments Nihell protested against cause the death of the child, but they could also cause the death or mutilation of the mother. Infections and other injuries, such as hemorrhaging because of tearing, were common occurrences when tools such as forceps were engaged in the birthing process.46 Because men invented the instruments they used, Nihell believed that they were using them more as an experiment than as a helpful tool during childbirth. These tools men invented were meant to help deliver undeliverable babies, or to be used in cases where the mother or child were already deceased.47 But too often, men used them when they were not needed. Male midwives used the tools under “false pretenses”48 and at too high a frequency. Nihell considered a natural birth the best route in many cases where males would use tools. However, because many males used tools, people began to believe that they were using them too better the field of midwifery. Nihell believed this to be a lie.49 In Nihell’s mind, all they were doing was making the field more dangerous.
Along with their murderous tendencies in the name of science, men did not comprehend the concept of bedside manner. A female midwife would assist in the birth, while comforting the mother through the process. According to Nihell, the male midwives had no sympathy for the women and just wanted the process to be done with as soon as possible. To Nihell, this illustrated another fault possessed by males practicing midwifery. They were not able to offer the same level of care that a female midwife could. According to Smollett, men believed they were bettering the field of midwifery and could offer something that women could not. Meaning, male midwives could offer a new, enlightened, and scientific approach to midwifery that was better than the old traditional female practice.

In Nihell’s argument, she wrote that a female midwife would be willing to help the mother for as long as needed. This included holding the uterus in a suitable position during a natural birth, for up to eighteen hours if needed. She claimed that a female midwife would insert her hands into the woman’s vagina to hold the proper position. To Nihell, this process was less dangerous and more natural than a male midwife’s metal and “blind tools” that would only injure the woman. Nihell believed male midwives should never be called on, or employed to deliver a child. Men did not have the best interest of the mother or child in mind. Conversely, the female midwife greatly valued the safety of both mother and child. More and more women and unborn children were falling victim to male experimentation in the name of science. As she wrote in A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery, “in the notion of improvement, what lives must be lost, what tortures endured, in the experiment!” Nihell believed that men did not care how many mothers and children they lost as long as they were able to experiment with their tools. The male’s scientific and theory based practice of midwifery was a danger to all midwives, unborn children, and women in labor.
Tobias Smollett had a rebuttal to Nihell’s beliefs that tools were unnecessary in the birthing processes and that men did not have the well-being of women and children in mind. In *A Critical Review*, he wrote that every “honest doctor has said that instruments are rarely needed,” but nature does not always work. Sometimes, nature needed assistance and Smollett believed that men had the ability and knowledge to assist when needed. Therefore, Nihell’s argument that instruments should not be used, and that the only reason men used them was because they did not have the patience to let nature take its course, was not based in fact. In Smollett’s mind, if Nihell truly believed that tools could be replaced by patience and the “sensitive fingers of the midwife,” then she and all the other female midwives like her were ignorant, and did not belong in the field of midwifery at all.

Smollett believed that female midwives did not agree with the use of the tools, such as forceps and the crotchet, because they were not educated in the use of them. They were only educated in the out-of-date practice of midwifery, letting nature take its course. This type of out-of-date practice that female midwives implemented was not enlightened for its time. To Smollett, a practiced and knowledgeable midwife could not deny something altogether when they did not truly know what it was. When it came to the eighteen-hour holding of the uterus in the proper position needed for a natural birth, Smollett believed that Nihell was being unrealistic; there was no possible way a woman could withstand that type of pressure. The patient would surely die and the midwife would become exhausted. He wanted the reader to imagine their wife or daughter in that situation. He wanted to know how Nihell could claim the male midwives were cruel and dangerous when female midwives practiced a birth that seemed even more dangerous and cruel. There were better and more up-to-date practices in the field and this unenlightened practice should not have been needed anymore. Using forceps to aid in this type of labor would
reduce the pain for the woman, and help to quicken the birthing process. Smollett did not see the
negatives that Nihell did. The differences in the practice of midwifery between male and female
midwives heightened the dispute within the medical practice. Nihell believed that the male
scientific and theory based practice of midwifery was a danger to all midwives, unborn children,
and women in labor. Smollett believed that women needed to accept the new and better
technologies available in the practice of midwifery.

Tobias Smollett thought his education was superior to Nihell’s. He believed that women
did not have the capability to be good midwives because women were not educated in the use of
tools, which he held central to the practice. Therefore, women were ignorant in the importance
and reliability of those tools. Smollett also saw women’s education of midwifery as inferior
compared to men’s because it was based on nature. In his mind, letting nature take its course did
not always work. Along with not being educated in the use of tools, most midwives were not
educated in anatomy. To Tobias Smollett and other male midwives, anatomy was an
experimental based science that was needed to properly understand the human body.
Smollett, unlike Nihell, spent time with real human skeletons and bodies, and had studied the
female pelvic bone. Therefore, he believed Nihell could not technically call herself a midwife
when she only “half learned the profession.” According to Smollett, anatomy, along with the
use of tools, was an essential part of delivering a child safely. Without seeing a skeleton,
Smollett thought the female midwife could not say that she had the practical knowledge needed
to practice midwifery properly. To Smollett, midwifery was not an art; it was a medical field that
needed to be professionalized and made better. Nihell’s education at the Hôtel de Dieu was not
reputable at all in Smollett’s mind. He believed the Hôtel de Dieu to be one of the “dirtiest,
indecent, shocking places for the sick in all of Europe.” The knowledge obtained in a formal
university type setting, which taught the students the theory needed in the medical field, was superior to Nihell’s traditional education of midwifery. Because of their different beliefs about nature and theory, male and female midwives believed that the other did not have the proper education or knowledge needed to succeed in the field. The controversy over the use of instruments was an essential part of the argument between male and female midwives.

The science and new technologies that made men more reliant on their new tools, and the women’s reluctance to accept these changes, made each group have different opinions on labor practices in general. Not only did men and women have different opinions on how the practice of midwifery should be performed, they also had different opinions on what was considered to be a “hard” labor. Where women would still use their traditional education of using hands and patience to aid in the birthing process, men would use their new medical tools. From Smollett’s education he learned that during a hard labor, such as when the head of the child left no room for even a finger, it was necessary to employ the smaller forceps to try and help the delivery of the large child. In Nihell’s point of view, this type birth was just nature taking its time. In this case, she would let nature take its course and use her patience, that men did not have, and hands when she was able to assist in the birth. In this case, men and women believed that they had a better way to adapt to tough situations compared to the other sex. Men were capable of adapting to these hard births because of their medical advances during the time of Enlightenment. On the other hand, women believed that their more traditional practice could handle this type of hard labor.

In another argument between the new medical advances that Smollett believed in and Nihell’s natural based beliefs, Smollett asked Nihell, in his review, about a case where he did not think it was possible for nature to cope on its own. Smollett questioned how a child with a five -inch
head could fit through a pelvic opening that was two inches in diameter. Smollett believed that this type of situation was impossible to rectify without the use of medical instruments and that in order to save the mother, the child’s head would have to be “compressed.” In Smollett’s experience, this was a situation where the new technologies of midwifery had to aid nature. If he were to let nature take over, both the woman and child would have probably died. But according to Nihell’s point of view, that type of situation did not happen. She claimed that the difference in size between the head of the child and the pelvic bone opening would never be that great.

However, if the situation did arise, the female midwife would employ her patience to remedy the situation. Nihell believed that if the male midwife was to let nature take its course, they would have seen that a child’s large head was capable of molding itself to the passage; this was considered the natural miracle of childbirth. If the male midwife would have let nature take its course, rather than trying to control it, they would have had a better understanding of childbirth.

Women practiced midwifery as an art and a necessity. They believed that there was one way to practice the art of midwifery, and that was the way of the traditional knowledge passed down from mother to daughter, generation to generation. On the other hand, men wanted to better the field and make it into a profitable business. Because of the strong belief that men were only trying to gain wealth from her beloved profession, Elizabeth Nihell thought that the male practitioner did not have the wellbeing of women in labor, or their unborn child, in mind. She believed that the art of midwifery was not an art that could be used to make a profit; it should have been used to help keep the human race going. It should not have been bettered by science because it was an ancient art that had been practiced the same way, or so she believed, for centuries. The male practitioners were using the field of midwifery to experiment with the tools
that they invented. Nihell believed that men were lying about their intentions to clients regarding the purpose of instruments. She strongly believed that “public interest was being sacrificed for male interest under false pretenses.” Male midwives told clients that the use of instruments was safer and done for the betterment of the field of midwifery, but she was not convinced of this lie.

Elizabeth Nihell also believed that not only were the male practitioners using tools and lies to gain access to the field of midwifery, but they were also “usurping” the field of midwifery for their own personal financial gain. They wanted to monopolize the practice for themselves. She believed that men were able to do this because of their theory based education and their lies about the medical instruments they invented. Male midwives claimed that the instruments were being used for the betterment of the practice. In Nihell’s traditional practice, the introduction of instruments was corrupting the practice of midwifery. She believed that sticking with tradition was safer for mother and child.

The introduction of male practicing midwives was also making it harder for female midwives to uphold their good reputation and find good jobs. Female midwives did not have the reputation that male midwives had, because they did not have the same formal qualifications. This shows that people of the time were beginning to want more proof of the education and more reliability in their medical professionals. As such, female midwives mostly tended to the poor, low paying families in England, while the males tended to the middle and upper classes. This was because people of the eighteenth century had more money to spend than in previous times. By having these more reputable jobs with more influential clients, the men were able to expand their practice and obtain even more work.
The male midwife was able to charge more for his services than the female midwife. This was because male physicians had already sustained a good reputation in the community which they served. The higher education and better social status was being sought in medical professionals by the people of upper classes. This good reputation came from their “gentlemen” status and their good education pertaining to medicine in general. This gentlemen status and higher education was beginning to replace traditional expertise. Furthermore, the gentlemen lifestyle required substantial funds. In order to earn money, men became interested in midwifery, because they believed it was a field in which they could sustain a good lifestyle.74 Becoming a male midwife had more added benefits than just earning money. Recent scholars have suggested that male midwives began to crop up more frequently because men could gain more clients for their general medical practice through practicing midwifery. The practice of midwifery gave the male practitioners the opportunity to show their skills in the homes of people who may need a doctor in the future. Being a midwife gave the male practitioner the ability to become the family doctor.75 Not only were they the person who could gain the trust of the mother giving birth, but they could also become the doctor that the whole family would go to for medical advice. Families would pay more for male midwives because they believed that they were paying for a better, more educated and updated service. The male dominated medical fields, such as surgery and apothecaries, were gaining popularity all the time. These fields were also based off experimentation and theory. It is through this increasing popularity that medicine evolved into what is known now in the twenty first century.

The introduction of Lying in Hospitals also helped to increase the popularity of science in the art of midwifery. Though Nihell and Smollett argued that the male and female forms of education were so different, this was not necessarily true. Most men were educated in a
university type setting and women were educated through apprenticeships. However, some of the education male and female midwives received came through the introduction of the Lying in Hospital. Lying in Hospitals were put into place in London by men\textsuperscript{76} to assist pregnant women.\textsuperscript{77} This fact weakened Nihell’s argument that men did not have the wellbeing of women in mind. In addition to this, Lying in Hospitals kept the traditional female midwife as the main person to deliver children naturally, as well as only used the male midwife to assist in difficult labor.\textsuperscript{78} The overall purpose of establishing the Lying in Hospital was not so that men could take over the field of midwifery, but to transfer the female midwife from the private sphere into the public sphere. In creating Lying in Hospitals in London, women and men alike were educated in the art of midwifery.\textsuperscript{79} Not only did these facilities educate men and women alike but they also brought about the professionalization of midwifery. No longer did women stay at home to give birth with the traditional midwifery, they now ventured outside the private sphere to the public to give birth.

The female midwives slowly lost popularity as the Enlightenment went on. The time for experimentation and the betterment of medical fields was advancing. Because the female midwives were tending to the poor women in the community, and offered the traditional practice of the field, they were becoming less frequent in the community. This was partly due to the fact that because people during the eighteenth century had more money, they were willing to spend more money on male midwives. The female midwife was falling out of popularity with anyone that could afford the male midwife.\textsuperscript{80} The “fashion” of using the new “safer” tools of midwifery was making it hard for women to get a foot hold in a practice that used to be full of only tradition and women. However, Nihell still claimed that the fashion of the time would pass and nature would always win. “Nature destroys the fictions of opinion,”\textsuperscript{81} meaning that someday the hype of
the new technologies introduced in her field would die down. Midwifery would eventually resort back to the natural and traditional practices that female midwives were educated in.

Elizabeth Nihell was correct in saying that the fashion of male midwifery would waver. Though it took some time, through the following decades male midwives shifted their opinions and began to agree that there was too much reliance on the tools they had invented. In 1777 William Moore wrote, *Elements of Midwifery, or The Arcana or Nature*. He was in agreement with Tobias Smollett that a good midwife whether male or female, needed the knowledge of anatomy as well as surgery. But he also believed that understanding nature was important to truly understanding the science of the profession of midwifery. Although Moore believed that understanding nature was important in the field of midwifery he also believed that the use of tools was sometimes unavoidable. Through his work he instructed his reader on the proper use of instruments such as the filet, crotchet, and forceps. Though Moore instructed his readers on the use of the tools, he also stated that the tools should only be used as a last resort when nothing else could be done. He even acknowledged that society would fight against his suggested use of such tools, but called these people ignorant. Through his work it can be seen that the opinion on the use of instruments was changing. The use of these tools was still practiced but it was better understood that nature should be given a proper chance before trying to give her assistance.

In 1783 a surgeon named William Dease published *Observations in Midwifery*. It is clear through his work he believed that men entering into the field of midwifery had brought about many advances but that some of the instruments invented by men were “absurd.” The instruments also resulted in “destructive methods of accomplishing the delivery.” Dease even went so far as to say that some of these tools, such as the crotchet, were “obsolete.”
also in agreement with Nihell that William Smellie encouraged other male midwifes to use the forceps too often.  

Though forceps were still in use for difficult labors, Dease believed that because they were used to often without real cause it was true to say “that they have done more harm than good.”

As a result of this shift in opinion, instruments began to “rust in their cabinets,” as the male midwives started to learn to let nature take its course. In 1792 a surgeon by the name of William Osborn wrote about his knowledge of midwifery. Instead of believing that midwifery should be a male dominated field involved in science, the field he knew as midwifery was in co-operation with nature. Labor was not something to be rushed and the natural course of labor should only be assisted when absolutely necessary. When labor was assisted at the wrong time or to quickly there was more chance of danger for the women and the child. If nature was left to its own accord, the midwife would often find that “she, (meaning nature) accomplishes birth slowly, but with perfect safety.”

Yet another surgeon, John Boys, strongly agreed that male midwives often acted without the proper understanding of labor. He wrote a letter to Sir James Earle that was later published. This letter went into detail about three instances where a labor resulted in the death of the mother because they were in the hands of an ill-educated male midwife. These men were too impatient and ignorant for the art of midwifery. In this case Boys was calling for a reform of the field of midwifery. He thought that midwifery should be more regulated when it came to who was allowed to practice in the field. Boys was concerned that men were losing what really mattered in the field of Midwifery, the safety of the patient.

As time went on midwifery was molding into something new. Instead of men introducing more instruments that were seen as dangerous by female midwives such as Elizabeth Nihell, men
were seeing the error of their actions with the tools. Practicing male midwives were more concerned with the well-being of the mother and child, than about making the field better with their scientific experiments. They thought that the practice still benefited from their presence, but that midwifery should adopt science and nature in cooperation. This is in line with William Osborn’s suggestion that the two must co-operate for success of the practice of midwifery.\textsuperscript{99} As a result of men stepping into midwifery, the field became more professional. Today, the field of midwifery is better known as Obstetrics. Even though men are still involved in midwifery, 75\% of the obstetricians are women.\textsuperscript{100} This is mostly due to the fact that female patients prefer to see female a doctor, and male patients prefer to see male doctors. As Nihell suggested, female medicine should be left to female doctors. Female midwives were and still are more sympathetic than male midwives and this is a quality which women desire.\textsuperscript{101}

The traditional women who practiced midwifery during the time of Enlightenment were not ready to accept the new enlightened field of midwifery that men had to offer. They were not ready to accept the new science and experiment based tools and practices that the general population was willing to accept. This is common with anything new in the time of the Enlightenment. Whether it was new religious thoughts, new beliefs about religious tolerance, new education for women, or new hospitals being introduced, the time of Enlightenment was a time for the new to take hold and for the old to fall out of favor. There has always been a conflict between the new and the old, but just like everything that is new, the new medical practices of midwifery began to stick, and some of the tools introduced in the eighteenth century are still used today. However, they are much more advanced in the twenty first century than they were in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{102}
Throughout history, there have always been trends that take hold, whether it is in a medical field or something as simple as clothing. The dispute between the male and female practices of midwifery, and whether it should be based on tradition or science, gives us an inside look at how the Enlightenment shaped the medical field. New tools and experiments were being developed, and women were being pushed out of their jobs because their traditions were becoming out-of-date. With the Enlightenment, men began to step into fields that were traditionally meant for women, and it was more expectable for the public sphere to venture into the private. The lines between the two were becoming blurred just as the lines between the science and the art of midwifery became blurred. In today’s world, there are always people who are trying to control nature and there are always those who feel that nature should be allowed to take its own course.

Notes

4 Ibid., 268-270.
10 Ibid., 151.
34 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 401-402.
35 Ibid., 490.
36 Elizabeth Nihell, An Answer to The Author of the Critical Review: For March, 1760 Upon the Article of Mrs. Nihell’s Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 9.
37 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 83.
38 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 51-52.
39 Ibid., 307.
40 Ibid., 23.
41 Ibid., 18-19.
42 Ibid., 23-24.
43 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 32.
44 Ibid., 415-416.
45 Ibid., 16.
46 Mary Lindemann, Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 268.
47 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 170.
48 Ibid., 17.
49 Ibid., 219.
50 Ibid., 19.
52 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 123.
54 Elizabeth Nihell, A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery (London, 1760), 124.
55 Ibid., 109.
56 Ibid., 398.
59 Ibid., 204.
60 Ibid., 204-205.
62 Ibid., 202.
63 Ibid., 204.
65 Ibid., 204.
70 Ibid., 17.
71 Ibid., 398.
72 Ibid., 51.
77 Ibid., 146
78 Ibid., 153-154
81 Ibid., 218.
83 Ibid., 246.
84 Ibid., 243.
85 Ibid., 104.
86 Ibid., 104-108.
87 Ibid., 104.
88 William Dease, *Observations In Midwifery, Particularly on the Different Methods of Assisting Women in Tedious and Difficult Labours: to Which are Added Observations on the Principal Disorders Incident To Women and Children* (Dublin, 1783), 8.
90 William Dease, *Observations in Midwifery* (Dublin, 1783), 14.
91 Ibid., 18.
92 Ibid., 22.
93 Ibid., 22.
95 Ibid., 59.
96 John Boys, *A Letter on the Practice of Midwifery, Addressed to Sir James Earle, Surgeon Extraordinary to the King and Surgeon to St Bartholomeus Hospital Occasioned by and Including an Account of a Late Unfortunate case with some Observations and Reflections on the Subject* (London, 1807), 28.
97 Ibid., 37.
98 Ibid., 39.
101 Ibid., 235.

**Bibliography**

Boys, John. *A Letter on the Practice of Midwifery, Addressed to Sir James Earle, Surgeon Extraordinary to the King and Surgeon to St Bartholomeus Hospital Occasioned by and Including an Account of a Late Unfortunate case with some Observations and Reflections on the Subject*. London, 1807.


Nihell, Elizabeth. *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery: Setting Forth Various Abuses therein, Especially as to the Practice with Instruments The Whole Serving to put all Rational Inquirers in a Fair way of Very Safely Forming their own Judgment upon the Question; which is best to Employ in cases of Pregnancy and Lying-in, a Man-midwife or a Midwife*. London, 1760.


