WITCHES AND WORKING WOMEN
HOW THE “MYTH” OF THE MIDWIFE-WITCH GAVE BIRTH TO MAN-MIDWIFERY

a presentation by Jennifer Sveda
INTRODUCTION

- European Witch-Hunt, 1450-1750 C.E.
- Decline of Female Midwives
  - Man-Midwifery
- Impact of stereotypes, internalized beliefs, and cultural myths

Sarah/Sairey Gamp

- Character in *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens
- Drunk and incompetent

"Lowly she may have been, and inept she often was...Her not very clean hands guided countless millions of babies into the world; her eventual emancipation from ignorance, incompetence, and poverty...is a chapter of medical history that has been much neglected."


Image from http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02121/sarahgamp2_2121921b.jpg
THE MIDWIVES OF EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

- **Literacy**: midwife manuals, witnesses and expert testimony
- **Experience**: licensing, apprenticeship
- **Skills**: knowledge of the body, played role before, during, and after birth
- **Character**: good temper, clean, healthy, and strong
MIDWIFERY AND WITCHCRAFT: THE EUROPEAN WITCH-HUNT

- Stereotype of witches
  - Anti-witch literature
- Cultural practices
  - Maleficia vs. diabolism
- Trial records
  - Ursula Kemp, 1582

Image from http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-PjKeuwJ6txo/VQaPFy0NpEI/AAAAAAAACqk/YUtCQMTb_4/s1600/Witches%27Familiars1579.jpg
THE RISE OF THE MAN-MIDWIFE

- Mid-to-late-eighteenth century
- Lacked association with witchcraft
  - More desirable alternative for mothers
THE MAN-MIDWIVES OF EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Experience:
- difficult births
- midwife manuals

Improvements:
- new tools
- better survival in difficult births

Character:
- piety, honesty, trustworthiness

Criticism:
- lacked diabolical elements
- crimes not associated with witchcraft
CONCLUSION

Midwife-witch: powerful cultural image

Emphasis on social expectations and shifting perceptions of female midwives

Under-explored theory in the field


W.W. 1582. “A true and just Recorde of the Information, Examination, and Confession of all the Witches, taken at St. Osyth in the County of Essex; whereof some were executed, and some others entreated according to the determination of law.” In *The Witchcraft Papers*, ed. Peter Haining. New Jersey: University Books, Inc. 1974. 43-57.


