

The Birth of Gossip

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This image is a panel from the frontispiece of *The Compleat Midwife's Companion: Or, the Art of Midwifery Improved* written by Jane Sharp, a 17th century English midwife. She published *The Midwives Book: or the Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* in 1671 and was the first English woman to publish a book on midwifery. Our image this month is a panel from the updated 1724 edition. It also serves as the illustration leading into Book IV; Chapter I, entitled "Rules for Women that are come to their labours." In her book, Jane Sharp combines the medical knowledge of the time with personal anecdotes and states her belief that the profession of midwifery should be reserved for women. Jane Sharp was directly in conflict with the more modern physicians, "man midwives," of the time with their technology-driven approach to childbirth. The book is still in print as a primary source of information about women, childbirth, and sexuality during the Renaissance.

The engraving shows a woman lying-in in her chamber attended by three other women—the gossips. In Early Modern England the word "gossip" referred to companions in childbirth, not limited to the midwife. Giving birth used to be a social (women only) event, for which a pregnant woman's female relatives and neighbours would gather. As at any social gathering there was chattering, and this is where the term gossip came to mean talk of others. Gossip also became a term for women friends generally, with no derogatory connotations. The first use of *gossip* as a verb describing the act of assisting in childbirth is in Shakespeare's play *All's Well That Ends Well*—perhaps a fitting distinction.

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