

1. THE PORTRAIT

Paris, Summer 1985

Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray fixes me with one eye, a direct stare. The other seems trained on the beyond. It is not just her gaze that captivates, half here, half elsewhere. She alone, as the extraordinary note beneath her portrait explains, is “pensioned and sent by the King to teach the practice of midwifery throughout the Realm” (fig. 1). Louis XV might have designated a whole corps of women to undertake this task of nationwide birthing instruction, but it was given only to her. I am dealing here with a singular phenomenon, the royally commissioned expert deliverer; you do not ignore such a person once you meet her.

She smiles slightly. From this first encounter, as she appraises me with amused interest, she seems to know I am spellbound. Well pleased with herself in her generously upholstered frame, she sits squarely, a person of large presence, double chin proudly high, forehead unfurrowed, decked in secular, feminine garb, velvet band about her neck, bow and flowers along her plunging neckline, fur ruff draped over her shoulder. This is how she, the artist’s consensual subject, chose to be remembered: corpulent, spirited, and sure of herself. She dressed up for the occasion! Most other midwives of her day looked grim and meek, as if reluctant to pose at all, somberly dressed and nunlike, hooded heads bent, almost apologetic expressions on their faces, eyes often averted. These diffident contemporaries of hers humbly thanked the Almighty, in poems and prayers beneath their portraits, for whatever skills he bestowed upon them. But du Coudray, the national midwife of France, requests no special blessings, shares credit with no god.

Evidently thriving in a big job in a man’s world, she does not look in this magisterial portrait like she has paid dearly, or even at all, for her unconventional life. There she sits in a frame rich with emblems: the fasces of power, the full heraldic crest with faithful hound, cornucopia, and jewels. Yet could things really have been as smooth as all that? I suspect not, and my curiosity surges. Something in the midwife’s candid solidity discourages worship. This is not a flattering likeness, but matter-of-fact and frank. Here is a robust *bourgeoise*, however adorned she may be with insignia and pageantry. I sense



Figure 1. This portrait first appeared as the frontispiece in the new edition of Mme du Coudray's textbook in 1769, by which time she was already a very important person.

from the first that she is beckoning her beholder to learn and tell her story, that she has designs on me. Above her picture is emblazoned the energetic command that animated her: "AD OPERAM," she seems to order me—"to work."¹

Actually, I already knew her a bit by reputation. She is featured in numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections on *femmes célèbres* that I consulted for my earlier work on female journalists. The short notices in these volumes all recount how Mme du Coudray had written a book about childbirth, had invented an obstetrical mannequin on which she demonstrated delivery maneuvers to facilitate instruction, had traveled throughout France teaching the art of midwifery to thousands of peasant women for over a quarter of a century as the monarchy's emissary, and had awakened and mobilized the nation in a fight against infant mortality. What a story! This woman, I remember thinking, must have played a major role in the dramatic demographic recovery of the second half of the eighteenth century. Surely a thorough scholarly biography of her had by now been written. . . .

But when I looked I found no full-length study about her at all. Instead I was strongly encouraged to write one myself. Shelby McCloy, in his work on public health in Enlightenment France, states, "Historians have little remembered the work that Mme du Coudray performed. Nevertheless, she charmed her contemporaries, and many an intendant [king's man] wrote eulogistically of her work. That there were still a large number of quack midwives on the eve of the Revolution reveals the magnitude of the task she faced." In a footnote McCloy remarks, "There appears to be no biography of her, not even an article in a learned journal."² These comments were made in 1946. Since then Mme du Coudray had been mentioned in some articles and a book by Jacques Gélis, but still, in 1985, no full-scale work on her had appeared.³ In 1982 Dr. Bernard This suggested that her journey must have been rife with excitement and romance, that the details "merit an exhaustive study. What novelist will be able to write this vibrant and passionate life?"⁴

Well, I thought, Mme du Coudray needs no novelist. She needs a historian. The tale of this seemingly indefatigable medical missionary and royal ambassadress did not sound to me like it required any fictional embellishment whatsoever. Hayden White might stress the porosity of the membrane between "facts" and authorial creation, and Roland Barthes might call biography a novel that dare not

speak its name, but I still sensed a distinction between these genres. I wondered what evidence remained of du Coudray's teaching stints throughout France, what archival sources I might mine. I contemplated setting out in pursuit of those numerous eulogies McCloy mentioned. But first, and easiest, I would examine her published textbook at the Bibliothèque nationale. And the day I did that I saw her portrait, the book's frontispiece, before I even glanced at a word she wrote. Her look, at once steady and searching, feminine yet framed in such formidable authority, reached me and quickened my interest. From that moment on I was committed to writing this book.

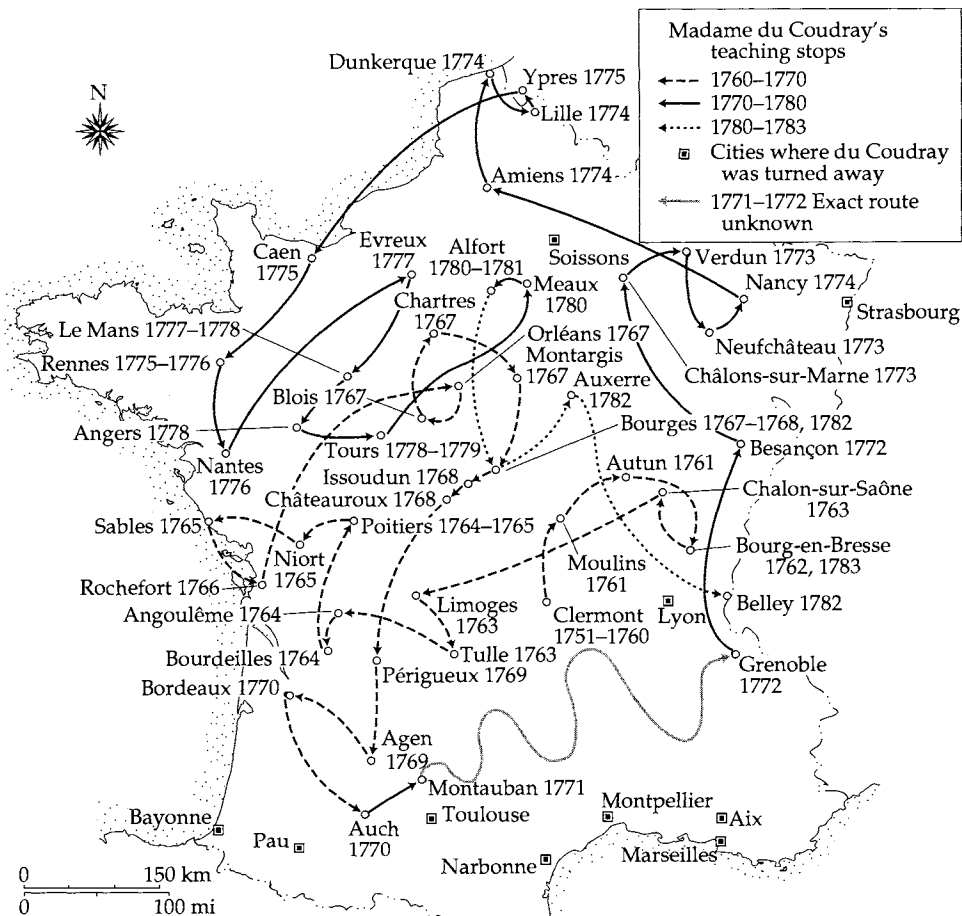
So I began. First I sent letters to the ninety-odd departmental archives of France, explaining that I hoped to reconstruct my midwife's voyage. (Yes, I already thought of her as mine.) I knew that correspondence between the minister of finance and the royal intendants, men chosen by the king and stationed throughout the country to implement his bidding, can be found in the C series of ancien régime provincial records, and I asked the archivists to check inventories for any dossiers on du Coudray's teaching in their region. Many of the replies were positive. Yes, they said, she was here. Some even suggested other municipal or communal documents I might consult, as well as records of provincial academies, agricultural societies, medical schools, local parishes, and philanthropic organizations. I was particularly excited to discover that hundreds of letters by du Coudray herself still exist, and of course numerous others to her and about her. Because each archival response I received told me either the dates of du Coudray's stay in areas where she *did* teach or that she did *not* go to certain other areas, I was eventually able to rough out an approximate map of her route.⁵

The vision that emerged was astounding. For nearly three decades she systematically covered the nation, skipping only the Midi, the Pyrenees, the outer reaches of Brittany, and Alsace. In all, she taught at more than forty cities (see map). As a portrait sitter du Coudray may be immobile, but as a biographical subject she rarely stayed still. So if I was going to follow her trail I had my work cut out for me.

2. BIOGRAPHY AS HISTORY AND MYSTERY

Los Angeles and France, 1986–1996

Sabbaticals, leaves, summers, spring breaks, a stolen week here and there. Countless trips during these ten years to libraries and archives



This overall map of Mme du Coudray's teaching travels is divided into three parts: 1760-1770, when she covered much of the center of France; 1770-1780, when she taught mostly in the periphery of the country; and 1780-1783, when she hoped to get the go-ahead to finish the areas she had not yet "done." Because a number of cities in the south turned her away, her exact whereabouts between mid-1771 and mid-1772 are unknown.

in the provinces of France, in Bourges, Caen, La Rochelle, Besançon, Périgueux, Tours, Bordeaux, Rennes, Châlons-sur-Marne, Nancy, Clermont, Rouen, Epinal, Poitiers, and on and on, piecing together bits of Mme du Coudray's works and days. Not a picture, but pictures; not a story, but stories take shape.

She was a bold pioneer in obstetrical pedagogy in the service of France, tirelessly promoting the interests of the government that dispatched her. She was a curse visited upon the traditional village matrons who practiced time-honored ways of birthing and wanted no "help" or instruction disrupting their lives. She was a female upstart usurping the turf of doctors and surgeons who had traditionally presided over all examinations and degree-granting ceremonies for midwives throughout the country. She was a wondrous, brilliant phenomenon. She was a virago. A loyal patriotic servant. A fraud not to be trusted. An ingenious inventor. An outrageous, pretentious quack. A self-sacrificing, devoted teacher. Feminist role model. Traitor to her sex. Savior of the French population. Mere flash in the pan. Boon to humanity. Royal (literally) nuisance. Any and all of the above, depending on your point of view.

I worked through roughly a thousand documents and letters in the official records concerning du Coudray's mission. Her contacts range from lofty—Turgot, Necker, Calonne, and other ministers of Kings Louis XV, Louis XVI, and the empress Maria Theresa—to lowly—obscure country matrons and parish priests—and these exchanges are preserved, along with a massive diffusion of correspondence between her and the royal provincial administrators. There are discussions of her in the letters of her medical contemporaries, references to her in almanacs of the day, petitions and certificates and contracts she signed. I found, in short, an overwhelming amount of material about her ambitious *deeds* in this paper trail.

What I did not find were any personal papers, anything introspective at all. No diary, no *journal intime*, no self-referential writings. In 1834 A. Delacoux, the author of a book on celebrated midwives, mentioned that he saw a collection of "numerous documents left by Mme du Coudray and gathered together by Mme Coutanceau," her niece.¹ Delacoux dismisses these documents in a few offhand sentences, but his comments are enough to reveal that the collection included things that have never been preserved elsewhere and have not been seen since. Perhaps they showed a gentler, less guarded side of her, because Delacoux revised her portrait, divesting her of

her masterful frame and credentials, softening and rounding off her edges (fig. 2). Where is that packet of papers now, with its possible clues about du Coudray's interior life? I wrote to three hundred or so Coutanceaus presently living in France in the wild hope that, eight or nine generations later, some distant descendent might still be a keeper of this family flame. To no avail.

But of course, my inability to learn private details about du Coudray was not due entirely to the loss of these papers. It had at least as much to do with her conscious attempt to construct her own reputation, leaving out the personal, concealing her inner self. It is as if she made a bargain with herself to mute the feminine core of her being in exchange for appropriating the prerogatives of male behavior. She tailored, in other words, her own official story, which was one of stunning achievements. Another scholar might find this perfectly satisfying; yet it was only part of the story *I* wished to tell about her. Stubbornly perhaps, I was looking and listening for *her*, refusing to let her get lost within the neat narrative she offered to contain and hide life's chaos. She gave me her doings, but I also sought her feelings. So from the start, because this very public woman was so maddeningly private, we were in a struggle, she and I. This gave rise to several kinds of reflection: on the nature of the historian's craft in general, on the relationship between biographer and biographee, and on my particular subject, a woman who left behind a record at once so full and so spare.

For centuries history was written in an authoritative, detached voice, communicating an illusion of logical progression, objectivity, completeness. It claimed to have discovered "how things really were," to be scientific and factual, and to present a linear, seamless tale. Recently such empiricist presumptions of certainty in the discipline have been attacked; recovery of the past once and for all, the "whole story," now seems a naive and strange conceit. Feminist and post-modernist critics in particular have fought to turn old historical accounts on their ear, to "bring the margin to the center," to "problematize" age-old assumptions, to expose the futility and bankruptcy of searching for absolute answers. Such energetic challenges bring to the field tremendous new vitality and interest, but also considerable discomfort. If we acknowledge that our understanding is at best partial, that our views, far from being objective, are inescapably colored by the concerns of our present vantage point, that evidence itself is subjective, serendipitous, and fragmentary, that our