

English Aristocratic Women's Take on Health: 1450-1630

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“God in Heaven, who gave me soul and body, reason and understanding, for which I have to thank him daily, gave me my skill at healing. I heal out of charity for the poor and needy...[as is] done by honorable women not only here but also in other cities...Such are fine things for women to do.”¹ In the years shortly before, during and after the reign of Henry VIII, aristocratic women in England were actively involved in the health of their families, friends, and communities. They created recipes for remedies, dressed wounds, and assisted in childbirth. One might ask how such activities can be proven. The answer is that luckily, some of the documents written by the female members of noble families have been preserved for posterity and are available for study.

Some questions that can be asked of such documents include: What were aristocratic women's responses to illness? How did they deal with sickness in the family and community? How did noble women come together in times of sickness or pregnancy? What knowledge did they possess about medicines and other remedies? Did men seem to appreciate women's help in health care? Found among the myriad of letters and other documents from these women, are letters to and from family and friends, diaries of health care activities, and recipes for medicinal concoctions. By looking at surviving letters and other documents written by aristocratic women who lived from the mid-1400s to the mid-1600s, one can examine their medical activities and the extent to which they cared for their families, friends, and communities.

Aristocratic Women and Healthcare

In the Early Modern Period in England, aristocratic women had many duties that they were expected to perform. As historian Barbara Harris points out, men in this era wanted wives who were “helpmates, fully capable of managing their families, households, and estates...[and] advancing their husbands' goals.”² Also, among their household duties was the expectation that these women would make sure that the members of their families remained in good health. One reason for the connection between healthcare and household duties was a certain sense of overlap. For instance, part of the skill set that these women had included the knowledge of herbs and how to combine them in order to make medicinal concoctions, such as the “water imperial”

¹ Elisabeth Heyssin, 1598, quoted in Mary E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 101.

² Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72-73.

for which Lady Honor Lisle was well-known.³ Cooking skills like distilling and weighing ingredients would have been helpful both in the kitchen and in the making of medicines. Plus, these women would have been aware that certain food items, like sugar, could be used both in cooking and medicines.⁴

Two women who exemplify these skills were Lady Margaret Hoby and Lady Grace Mildmay. Lady Hoby lived with her third husband in Yorkshire in the late-fourteenth- to the early-fifteenth-century, where she grew her own herbs. She used these medicinal plants in her cures and was known to hand them out to other women for making home remedies, such as she did on a certain day in 1601 when she recorded in her diary, “I went into the garden and gave some herbs unto a good wife of Erley.”⁵ She also made her own medicines and even distilled “Aqua: Vitae”.⁶ Likewise, Lady Grace Mildmay made her own medicines, such as laudanum, which she distilled from opium and henbane.⁷ Lady Grace was a noblewoman who resided in Northamptonshire and lived around the same time as Lady Hoby. Historian Linda Pollock describes Mildmay as a woman who was in many ways an “accepting product of Elizabethan society and in many others a quiet circumventer of the gender barriers,” and she also suggests that her papers “reveal that there was little difference between the care offered by a university-trained physician and that offered by a self-taught woman.”⁸ For Pollock, Lady Mildmay conformed to Elizabethan society by acting the role of the dutiful aristocratic wife and mother. At the same time, she might have circumvented gender barriers by her forays into alchemy and by giving professional physicians a serious challenge when it came to providing good medical care to the needy.

³ John Husee to Honor Lisle, 1535, in *The Lisle Letters*, ed. Muriel St Clare Byrne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), vol. 4, 30. This six volume set includes the extant letters written and received by members of the aristocratic Lisle family, and cover the years that Lord Arthur and Lady Honor Lisle resided in Calais, due to his appointment as Lord Deputy. Among these letters are many written by and to Lady Lisle that reference her and her fellow noblewomen’s medical activities.

⁴ Lynette Hunter, “Women and Domestic Medicine: Lady Experimenters, 1570-1620,” in *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, ed. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 98.

⁵ Margaret Hoby, “Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby,” in *English Women’s Voices: 1540-1700*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (Florida International University Press: Miami, 1992), 188. In her diary, Lady Hoby kept a record of all of her medical activities, including her work with the poor people of her neighborhood. She also mentions her herbal garden and the sharing of ingredients from it.

⁶ Margaret P. Hannay, “‘How I These Studies Prize’: The Countess of Pembroke and Elizabethan Science,” in *Women, Science and Medicine*, 110.

⁷ Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman, Lady Grace Mildmay 1552-1620* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 103. Among the documents included in this volume are Lady Mildmay’s medical papers, which provide the reader with her thoughts on medicine, her recipes, and several correspondences that she received. These documents were left to her daughter, who had them published posthumously.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

Aristocratic women gained their knowledge of home remedies and healing skills from several different sources. The first was from female members of their families, like their mothers. Lady Mildmay claimed that her mother had “good knowledge in phisick and surgerie” and was able then to provide her daughter with a sound background in the medicinal arts.⁹ Later when she herself died, Lady Mildmay bequeathed some two thousand medical papers, all of her medically related books, and her still-room with its medical supplies to her daughter, thus passing along her medical knowledge to the next generation.¹⁰ However, mothers were not the only female family members to pass on medicinal knowledge. For instance, Lady Grace gained much of her medical training from her father’s niece, who let her read about herbs and surgery from noted authorities of the time.¹¹

A second source from which these women could gain medical knowledge was from guidebooks. Before the mid-1600s, most guides available to women were composed by men, and either written in Latin or the vernacular English because women were essentially shut out of the publishing world until the late 1600s.¹² The fact that not until the beginning of the Early Modern Period were the majority of the guides written in English reflects the fact that the literacy rate of upper-class women did not begin to increase until about 1475.¹³ Among the other aspects of education that aristocratic women learned, were the skills of reading and writing in English, and according to Harris, “[in] a society in which illiteracy was widespread, particularly among women, [these aristocrats] clearly benefited from their position as members of a privileged class.”¹⁴

In the remedy books that women were reading, the authors assumed that the women using them already had the skills to concoct medicinal recipes.¹⁵ Several examples of guides that were available to women between the mid-1400s and the mid-1600s are *A Booke of Sovereigne Approved Medicines and Remedies* from 1577, *A Treatise of the Plague* written by Thomas Lodge in 1603, and William Turner’s *A Newe Herball* that was published in 1551. Incidentally, this last book was the one from which Lady Mildmay’s aunt let her read, and was possibly where she came in contact with the traditional theories of Galen and the new theories of Paracelsus that were then entering English medical texts.¹⁶

Prior to the sixteenth-century, most medical practitioners came from the Galenic mold. Historian Linda Pollock writes:

⁹ Hannay, “‘How I These Studies Prize’: The Countess of Pembroke and Elizabethan Science,” in *Women, Science and Medicine*, 110.

¹⁰ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 102.

¹¹ Charlotte F. Otten, “Introduction: Women Taking Charge of Health Care,” in *English Women’s Voices: 1540-1700*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (Florida International University Press: Miami, 1992), 174.

¹² Suzanne W. Hull, *Women According to Men: The World of Tudor-Stuart Women* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1996), 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 34.

¹⁵ Hull, *Women According to Men*, 60.

¹⁶ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 97.

In medical treatment, the predominant theoretical framework was derived from the Galenic theory of humors which took a holistic approach to the body and medicine. This held...that bodies were composed of four humours – blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile...Four qualities – hot, cold, wet, and dry – [governed the interactions of the humours]...Health was dependent on the balance of the four humours and disease resulted from an imbalance. Thus the goal of medical treatment was to restore the equilibrium by determining which humour was over-abundant or deficient.¹⁷

Lady Mildmay was well aware of this theory of humors and recommended caution when trying to balance them, for “[it] is [a] dangerous thing to wear and distract the humours in the body by extreme purges or extreme cordials”.¹⁸ She then went on to demonstrate her knowledge of the humors and the remedies that would put them back into harmony. She wrote:

This is a rule, that sweating doth stay both vomit and superfluous looseness in stool...If there be obstructions in the stomach and bowels and rhume (mucus) in the head, then must the body be kept soluble. If there be obstructions in the stomachs and bowels by phlegm and gross matter therein contained and therewithal a great moisture in the sinews, then must the thick matter be prepared and purged with preparatives and purges proper and the sinews rectified by diet only.¹⁹

In other words, if a person was ill from an excess of phlegm or mucus in the body, then those humors must be liquefied and sweated out in order to restore balance. Also, Lady Mildmay made brief mention of diet as a way to harmonize the humors, which was an important aspect of Galenic theory.

Like Grace Mildmay, Lady Honor Lisle was not unfamiliar with the humors of the body. Between the autumn of 1537 and the spring of 1538, she suffered from an illness, from which she was unable to cure herself, and was thus forced to consult a professional doctor. Such an action was usually the next step if a female health care giver could not find a solution to a medical problem herself. In a letter to Lady Lisle, her physician stated the cause of the illness as being a gathering of “many or diverse cold and sleymsh humours within your body, which giveth...clearly to be known by the short breath whereof ye do complain” and recommended a small purge and a very specific diet to bring the humors back into sync.²⁰ Although she was not the one diagnosing the problem or the one to prescribe the remedy, Lady Lisle would certainly have understood the doctor’s reasoning for his recommendations for her health.

¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁸ Grace Mildmay, 1622, quoted in Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman, Lady Grace Mildmay 1552-1620* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 110.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110-111.

²⁰ Le Coop to Honor Lisle, 1537-1538, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 4, 169-167.

In the 1500s, the theories of Galen began to be challenged by those of Paracelsus, and as Pollock suggests, “[by] the 1590s...almost every well-informed person in England came to know at least something about his [Paracelsus’] method of medical treatment”.²¹ Paracelsus differed from Galen by looking at disease as a reaction between chemicals in the body, which could be treated by medications made from minerals and chemicals. For instance, gold was believed to have had excellent medicinal properties and mercury was then in use against syphilis.²² Also, unlike Galenists, Paracelsus viewed purges, blood-letting, and sweating as imperfect forms of remedies.²³ The documents of Lady Mildmay demonstrate that she knew of these new theories and was willing to incorporate chemical based medicines into her remedies. For example, she concocted an oil of antimony for back pain, a tincture of gold for a weak stomach, and a remedy of flowers in sulfur and antimony to heal fistulas, which “requireth a great while to make...in that perfection that Paracelsus hath set down in his book of surgery.”²⁴

Remedy guidebooks, popular (cutting-edge scientific) medical theories, and female family members were not the only influences on the acquisition of medical knowledge. For example, the women of the Paston family were not averse to getting medical help and supplies from leeches and apothecaries. For instance, the leech of Orwelle was asked to help Agnes Paston with a persistent ailment and an apothecary in Norwich provided the family with medicine when one of its members suffered from a broken hip.²⁵ Likewise, aristocratic women were known to share their medicinal recipes and herbs with one another. Evidence of this can be found in several letters where Margaret Paston recommended a fellow healer as a good supplier of herbs and where she received sorely needed medicine from a female friend.²⁶ Lady Mildmay also corresponded with other health care providers, both male and female. She received several recipes for medications from her colleagues, such as one for an oil of cinnamon from a Mr. Harris, a “medicine for the Falling sickness taught by Mrs. Stacey”, and a “good receipt against the Jaunders [jaundice], taught by olde Mistress Bash.”²⁷

The Practice of Medicine

Once these English noble women gained their skills, they then began to practice what they were taught. Among those who received the benefit of this knowledge were their family members, their household servants, friends, and people in their wider communities. For instance,

²¹ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic* 95.

²² Hull, *Women According to Men*, 61.

²³ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 95.

²⁴ Mildmay, quoted in *With Faith and Physic*, 132-134.

²⁵ Elaine Whitaker, “Reading the Paston Letters Medically,” *English Language Notes* 31, no. 1 (1993), 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁷ Harris to Grace Mildmay, 1598, in *With Faith and Physic*, 141-142; in “‘How I These Studies Prize’: The Countess of Pembroke and Elizabethan Science,” in *Women, Science and Medicine*, 110.

in 1473 Margaret Paston wrote a letter to the family chaplain stating that she had heard that a cousin of hers was ill. She entreated the chaplain to give her relation her “white wine, or any of my medicinal essences...that may give him comfort.”²⁸ Similarly, in 1478, Dame Elizabeth Stonor sent a powder containing nutmeg to her husband William, which he was to drink for relief from an illness that he had sustained from a fall. In the letter, she also chided her husband for not having written to her sooner, so that she could have been taking care of him before then.²⁹ Besides helping their family members, these women had no qualms about self-medicating, such as Lady Hoby who on May 9, 1601, “took phisic” for a terrible pain in her teeth that had kept her awake the entire night before.³⁰

Outside of the family, servants and friends received the benefit of these women’s medical knowledge. In her diary, Lady Hoby made many references to the care she provided for her servants, such as on January 31, 1599 when she “went about the house and dressed two that were hurt.”³¹ Likewise, Lady Lisle was known to send herbs or other medicinal remedies to her friends and acquaintances. In a letter dated September 26, 1534, Thomas Leygh thanked Lady Lisle for the cramp rings (precious objects that were “blessed” by the king), which she had sent him before his journey to Flanders.³²

A final group that received the benefit of these noble women’s skills was the poor people in their communities. Lady Margaret Hoby kept a diary for six years in which she carefully detailed her medical work. Her document reads almost like a log book, and gives one the impression of a country doctor seeing patients at his home office or visiting them on his rounds.³³ Throughout her diary, Margaret Hoby routinely documented the various poor people to whom she ministered, such as on February 4, 1599 where she noted, “...at 5 o’clock I dressed my patients...” or on February 10th of that same year, “I dressed other poor folks...” or on the twenty-sixth day of 1601, “I went to church, and after sermon, I dressed a poor man’s hand”.³⁴ Lady Mildmay also attended to people in her neighborhood. For instance, she once helped a maid with apoplexy by

²⁸ Margaret Paston to probably James Gloys, 1473, in *The Paston Women: Selected Letters*, ed. Diane Watt (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 108. This collection of letters includes various ones written by the Paston women, namely Elizabeth, Agnes, and Margaret. Among these letters can be found snippets of the medical knowledge that these women possessed and who actually benefited from their expertise.

²⁹ Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1478, in *Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483*, ed. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford and Christine Carpenter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45. The Stonor family was a typical gentry family that lived in England during the late-Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period. As editor Christine Carpenter notes, an impressive aspect of the Stonors was their ability to survive this era. Among the letters are those written by the main female members of the family, most importantly Dame Elizabeth, who sprinkled her writings with bits and pieces of the medical knowledge that she possessed and used for the benefit of her family.

³⁰ Hoby, “Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³² Thomas Leygh to Honor Lisle, 1534, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 2, 265.

³³ Otten, “Introduction: Women Taking Charge of Health Care,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 176.

³⁴ Hoby, “Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 186-188.

first applying a “plaster of mithridate and oil of mastic” to her back and then having her drink a concoction that contained mugwort.³⁵ These women probably did not have much competition from the professional physicians in providing care for poor people, since the poor would have been unable to pay for medical services. Lady Hoby and the rest did not charge fees for services rendered. Their work was strictly charitable.³⁶

The care that these women provided to their families and communities was diverse. Historian Charlotte F. Otten describes Lady Hoby as “representative of the females who were the primary health caregivers in their day.”³⁷ Hoby did everything from dressing wounds to helping to deliver babies. For example, on January 30, 1599, she recorded, “After I had prayed privately I dressed a poor boy’s leg that came to me...after that I dressed one of the men’s hands that was hurt.”³⁸ Another example of Lady Hoby’s work was in 1601 when a man in the neighborhood cut his foot with a hatchet. She dressed the severe wound and continued to care for the man for the next week.³⁹

Interestingly, Margaret Hoby was one of the few women health care practitioners who was willing to attempt what would have been considered major surgery in the Early Modern Period, and on an infant no less. Even Lady Mildmay would not perform the duties of a surgeon that involved any type of cutting and sewing, except for bleeding a patient to realign the humors.⁴⁰ Lady Hoby recorded her surgical efforts thus:

[This] day in the afternoon, I had had a child brought to me that was born at Silpho, one Talliour son, who had no fundament, and had no passage for excrements but at the mouth. I was earnestly entreated to cut the place to see if any passage could be made, but although I cut deep and searched, there was none to be found.⁴¹

Thus, although she bravely tried to help the poor child, her lack of success was not due to any lack of skill. Even though she was unable to help her tiny patient, the fact that the parents sought out her help shows that her community trusted her medical skills.

Among aristocratic women’s duties was the making and providing of medicinal remedies to their patients. The largest category of remedies was herbal in nature, and as has already been mentioned, many of these women were well versed in the art of mixing herbal concoctions. Margaret Paston recommended that mint or milfoil (yarrow) essence was good to drink in order

³⁵ Mildmay, quoted in *With Faith and Physic*, 116.

³⁶ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 97.

³⁷ Otten, “Introduction: Women Taking Charge of Health Care,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 177.

³⁸ Hoby, “Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 186.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴⁰ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 101.

⁴¹ Hoby, quoted in “‘How I These Studies Prize’: The Countess of Pembroke and Elizabethan Science,” in *Women, Science and Medicine*, 110

to tolerate food.⁴² Elizabeth Stonor prepared for her husband a “bladyr with powdyr to drynke when ye go to bede, ffor hit is holsome ffor you.”⁴³

Responses to Illness

During the era in which the women in this study lived, there were many illnesses with which they had to deal. These illnesses included smallpox, plague, typhus, and the normal aspects of bad health such as colds, fevers, wounds, and broken limbs. By reading their letters, the historian can try to determine what aristocratic women’s responses to ill health would have been. One response that can be gleaned from their letters was an expression of deepest concern. For example, Margaret Paston wrote to her eldest son, John II, on January 28, 1475, and in her letter she inquired about his health, namely an “affliction that [he] had in [his] eye and [his] leg.”⁴⁴ She went on to suggest that “if God will not allow you to have health, thank him for that and endure it patiently” and recommended that he come home to live with her so that she could take care of him.⁴⁵ Another example is that of Dame Elizabeth Stonor, who wrote to her husband in 1476, saying that she had heard her daughter-in-law was ill with some sort of ailment of the neck. She was very concerned and recommended that he send their daughter-in-law to London (where Dame Stonor was living at the time) so that she could try to cure it.⁴⁶

The letters of noblewomen of this era were peppered with anxiety about family and friends living or staying in areas that were riddled with sickness, especially the plague. Women in these families were asking constantly for reassurances that loved ones were not travelling to plague afflicted towns. On September 12, 1476, Elizabeth Stonor wrote another letter to her husband in which she expressed her sincerest concern for his well-being and her desire to be near him:

Also, gentyll Cosyn, I understonde that my brother and yowris is sore sick of the poxes: wherfore I am right hevvy and sory of your beyng there, ffor the eyre of poxe is ffull contagious and namely to them than ben nye of blode. Wherfore I wolde praye you, gentyll Cosyn, that þe wolde come hedyr (from Stonor to London), and yif hit wolde plese you so to doo, &c. And yif that hit lyke you not so to doo, Gentill Coysn, lettith me have hedyr some horsis I pray you, and that I may come to you, ffor in good faith I can fynde hit in my herte to put my self in jubardy there as ye be, and shall do whilst my lyffe endureth to the pleasure of God and yours.⁴⁷

⁴² Margaret Paston to probably James Gloys, in *The Paston Women: Selected Letters*, 109.

⁴³ Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476, in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, 271.

⁴⁴ Margaret Paston to John Paston II, 1475, in *The Paston Women*, 109.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476, in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, 266.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476, in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, 266-267. A modernized version of this quote might read as: “Also gentle husband, I understand that my brother and yours, is sore sick of the poxes: wherfore I am right heavy and sorry of your being there, for the ire of pox is full

Noblewomen also responded to illness by writing about their own personal ailments, to their husbands, to their other relatives, or to their friends. One way to deal with ill health is to talk about it in order to relieve the mind, get support, or just to complain to somebody else about one's own misfortune. On March 7, 1477, this last suggestion is exactly what Elizabeth Stonor did. At the very end of her letter to her husband, she remarked that she was "crassed in [her] baket," possibly suggesting that she was suffering from some sort of ailment such as that her back had seized up.⁴⁸ Likewise in a letter dated November 5, 1536, Anthoinette de Saveuses, informed Lady Lisle that she had been suffering from a catarrh, or chest infection, for the past three weeks, and two years later, she wrote another letter stating that she was once again sick with a catarrh.⁴⁹

Other responses that noblewomen, and other members of the English society of this time period, had to illness were religious in nature. From the above letter of Margaret Paston to her son, one can see that a person was to bear his or her sickness patiently. Another religious response to ill health was that it was the will of God. According to Lady Mildmay, if every remedy was tried and nothing had worked, then God had willed that the illness was incurable. She wrote, "So that the physic which bringeth the body and parts thereof into an union in itself...worketh the most safe and effectual operation to the preservation thereof, without any danger and with the greatest hope to cure any disease in the end, except God determine the same to be incurable."⁵⁰ Similarly, in a letter dated September 19, 1538, Lady Lisle informed her friend, Madame de Bous, that her daughter was ill: "She hath been sore sick for more than five weeks of a fever, the which taketh her still each day. We neither know nor can find remedy to heal her thereof, which shall be when it please God."⁵¹ Thus, in the end, the cure for Madame de Bous's daughter was in God's hands.

A final response that people could have had to sickness and/or death was that it was a punishment from the Almighty for some sin or wrongdoing. Grace Mildmay provided examples to this precept, such as "an over-indulgence in food and drink (gluttony) accompanied by

contagious and namely to them [that have] been near blood. Wherefore I would pray you, gentle husband, that you would come here (from Stonor to London) and if it would please you so to do...And if that it like you not so to do, Gentle Husband, let me have here some horses I pray you, and that I may come to you, for in good faith I can find it in my heart to put myself in jeopardy there as ye be, and shall do whilst my life endures to the pleasure of God and yours."

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476, in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, 279.

⁴⁹ Anthoinette de Saveuses to Honor Lisle, 1536, 1568, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 3, 181, 194. For an interesting discussion of catarrhs see: Nancy G. Sirasi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: an Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 115-116. In chapter five, "Disease and Treatment", Sirasi discusses the treatments that Peter the Venerable used to try and eliminate his annoying catarrh.

⁵⁰ Mildmay, 1622, quoted in *With Faith and Physic*, 110.

⁵¹ Honor Lisle to Madame de Bous, 1568, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 5, 215.

constipation led to bodily indisposition.”⁵² Another example comes from Lady Hoby, in which she wrote that in the late summer of 1603, the plague had once again hit England. She recorded in mid-September that “we heard that the [plague] was spread...and that ther died at London :3200: a week...[God] in his mercie pardon our sinnens.”⁵³ Thus, she possibly felt that God had sent the plague to England as punishment for the sins of His people. Incidentally, sometimes there was the hope that God would forgive the person’s sins through the penance of the illness. Anthoinette de Saveuses echoed this sentiment when she wrote in a letter detailing her recurring catarrh, saying “I pray God that the pain I suffer may be had in remission of my sins”.⁵⁴

Thoughts on Pregnancy and Childcare

One of the most important duties of women in the Early Modern Period was to bear children, preferably sons. As historian Mavis E. Mate has stated, “For married women the bearing and raising of children occupied much of their time and energy”.⁵⁵ Women knew their duty and most looked upon children as gifts from God. However, they also knew of the dangers of birth, and “were acutely aware of prolonged labor, breech birth, stillbirth, deformed children, and of the possibility of dying.”⁵⁶ In their letters to one another, women sometimes discussed their joy and also their concerns about childbirth. In the late autumn of 1535, the big news between Lady Lisle and her friends was the impending birth of Madame de Riou’s child. These women were concerned for Madame de Riou’s health as she neared her confinement and Anthoinette de Saveuses offered a prayer that God would grant her friend “a gracious travail, and to her child a name and baptism.”⁵⁷ Thus, from such letters one can see that women were concerned for one another and that they were acutely aware of the possibility of the child not surviving the ordeal of birth.

Besides giving birth, English noble women also had to think about providing care for their children, such as whether or not to breast-feed their own child. The prevailing argument in Early Modern England was that women of the aristocracy should not breast-feed, but have their children sent to wet nurses. Contrary to this notion, there was at least one noblewoman who advocated for women to breast-feed their own children. She was Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, who bore eighteen children, and who, ironically, did not breast-feed any of them. The

⁵² Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 99-101.

⁵³ Hoby, “Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 189; Margaret Hoby, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady: the Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605*, ed. Joanna Moody (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1998), 191-192.

⁵⁴ Anthoinette de Saveuses to Honor Lisle, 1538, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 3, 195.

⁵⁵ Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows After the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 182.

⁵⁶ Otten, “Introduction: Women Describing Childbirth, Sickness, and Death,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 221.

⁵⁷ Anthoinette de Saveuses and Madame de Bours to Honor Lisle, 1535, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 3, 151-153.

Countess declared that her inaction was wrong and regretted her decision ever after. She also claimed that her dereliction of duty was not entirely her own fault and that she had been given bad advice and was “overruled by another’s authority,” possibly a male family member.⁵⁸

However, Lady Clinton was not averse to stating her opinion, writing a tract published in 1622 to one of her daughters-in-law who was breast-feeding a child at that time.⁵⁹ According to the Countess, it was disobedience to God in refusing to breast-feed one’s own child. He had provided women with milk and they were expected to use it.⁶⁰ She stated her point thus:

The mothers then that refuse to nurse their own children, do they not despise God’s providence? Do they not deny God’s will? Do they not as it were say, I see, O God, by the means thou hast given me, but I will not do so much for thee. Oh impious and impudent unthankfulness; yea monstrous unnaturalness, both to their own natural fruit born so near their breasts and fed in their own wombs, and yet may not be suffered to suck their own milk.⁶¹

To further her point, Lady Clinton turned to the Bible and cited such notable women as Eve, Sarah, and the Virgin Mary as examples to follow. She claimed that Eve “saw it was her duty; and...had a true natural affection which moved her to do it gladly.” Sarah, she said, “put herself to this work when she was very old, and so might the better have excused herself, than we younger women can, being also more able to hire and keep a nurse than any of us.”⁶² In other words, if women like Sarah, who was at least a hundred years old when she gave birth to Isaac, could suckle their children, then there was no reason the aristocratic women of England in the 1600s could not also do so.

After making her arguments in favor of aristocratic women breast-feeding their own children, Lady Clinton went on to examine reasons women might give for not doing so and summarily debunked them. This list of reasons included: “that it is troublesome, that it is noisome to one’s clothes, that it makes one look old (a very great fear)” and perhaps the fear that they would be too weak to do it.⁶³ According to the Countess these were lies, and she countered that God provided women with the strength to care for their children and that mothers who breast-fed were always neatly dressed and actually aged as well as mothers who did not breast-feed. A final critique Lady Clinton had of non-breast-feeding mothers was that it was mostly the “sin of the

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Clinton, “The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery,” in *English Women’s Voices: 1540-1700*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (Florida International University Press: Miami, 1992), 216. Lady Clinton composed this small work in order to get the word out to fellow noblewomen about breast-feeding their own babies.

⁵⁹ Otten, “Introduction: Women Taking Charge of Health Care,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 181-182.

⁶⁰ Clinton, “The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 212.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 216.

higher and richer sort than of the meaner and the poorer”. In her mind, this inaction of the nobility set a bad example for the lower ranks of society.⁶⁴

Men’s Attitudes to Women’s Role in Healthcare

In the Early Modern Period in England, there were mixed reactions from men in regards to the involvement of women in health care. They were either seen as valuable healers, tolerated, or seen as a threat. As has been mentioned before, sometimes female healers of the nobility were tolerated because they could take care of poor patients, where professional physicians either would not or could not do so. As the years went on, this professional class began to see anyone who practiced medicine without a license as a threat, however.⁶⁵ Gervase Markham, a writer of guidebooks for housewives in the early 1600s, went so far as to warn women to not overstep their authority when providing health care.⁶⁶ Part of the reason for this animosity was the changing nature of the medical profession, especially after the Reformation. In 1518, the Royal College of Physicians was given its blessing by King Henry VIII and began slowly to act as the controlling head of the profession. Under the Royal College, the newly licensed physicians attempted to bar many of the traditional healers from practicing medicine, by determining that they were unqualified due to a lack of college education.⁶⁷ Accordingly, aristocratic women were now to be found among this new category of “quacks”, but as has been shown, these women were not about to give up the healing arts. The professional male physicians could complain as much as they wanted, but as historian Linda Pollock suggests, “Even in affluent households, lay medical care was often the system relied upon. Community care and expert care were intertwined in Tudor-Stuart England and the professionals rather than the amateurs may have been regarded as the interlopers on the scene”.⁶⁸

Scholar Elaine Whitaker concurs with Pollock, in stating in her study of the Paston family that “the final authority for health care appears to have rested with the family’s women, traditional healers who viewed the physicians of London as their adversaries”.⁶⁹ So, it would seem that this distrust was a two-way street. On June 8, 1464, Margaret Paston entreated her husband, “Also, fore Goddys sake be ware what medesyngs ye take of any fysissyanyngs in London. I should never trust to [them]”.⁷⁰ Thus, Margaret was as suspicious of the professional

⁶⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁶⁵ Hunter, “Women and Domestic Medicine: Lady Experimenters, 1570-1620,” in *Women, Science and Medicine*, 99.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁷ Hull, *Women According to Men*, 56.

⁶⁸ Pollock, *With Faith and Physic*, 97.

⁶⁹ Whitaker, “Reading the Paston Letters Medically,” 20.

⁷⁰ Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 1464, quoted in “Reading the Paston Letters Medically,” 19. A modernized version of this quote might read as: “Also, for God’s sake beware what medicines ye take of any physicians in London. I should never trust to them.”

doctors in London as they were of women like her, and she stated her desire of being the sole health care provider for her husband.

Unlike the rising professional class of healers, not all men looked down upon lady health care givers. For instance, Juan Luis Vives, noted Humanist and adviser to Queen Catherine of Aragon, defended elite women in their practice of the medicinal arts:

Because the business and charge within the house lyeth upon the woman's hand, I would she should know medicines and salves for such diseases as be common, and reign almost daily, and have those medicines ever prepared ready in some closet wherewith she may help her husband, her little children, and her household meny [menial], when any needeth, that she need not oft to send for the physician, or buy all thing[s] of the apothecary.⁷¹

Thus he seemed to say that gentle and noblewomen were perfect for providing domestic health care and that it was also a natural part of their household duties.

Another proof that not all men were against women healers can be found in the collections of letters of aristocratic families that have been preserved, such as those from the Lisle family. Lady Honor Lisle was a prestigious woman, who “could through her influence over her husband exercise considerable power.”⁷² She received an enormous amount of letters with people, predominantly men, petitioning her for favors while asking for advice and help in health care. For instance, in the mid-1530s, Lord Edmund Howard wrote to Lady Lisle in order to thank her for some medicine that she had sent him to pass his stone. He wrote, “Madame, so it is I have this night after midnight taken your medicine, for the which I heartily thank you, for it hath done me much good, and hath caused the stone to break, so that now I void much gravel”.⁷³ Several years later, Lord Lisle also wrote to his wife to thank her for saving the lives of two people. Again, the remedy that she had prescribed was her powder for breaking up kidney stones.⁷⁴ Lady Lisle thus justly maintained her reputation as an expert in the medicinal arts, while at the same time gathering political favor and encouraging valuable alliances for her family.

Conclusion

From the mid-1400s to the mid-1600s, aristocratic women in England had many duties, the most important, many could argue, was the running of their large households. The family's main residence/great estate was their dominion and as Charlotte Otten states:

⁷¹ Juan Luis Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, 1529, quoted in *Women According to Men*, 59.

⁷² Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows After the Black Death*, 188.

⁷³ Edmund Howard to Honor Lisle, 1535?, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 2, 499.

⁷⁴ Arthur Lisle to Honor Lisle, 1538, in *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 5, 298.

Home. The place where females participated more intensely than males in the life-death cycle. Females were born there, and they married, conceived, miscarried, gave birth, and died there. There they attended their families in sickness, often seeing their children die from smallpox, measles, plague, worms, tetanus, accidental overlying— from ‘the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.’ There women experienced firsthand the destructibility of human life.⁷⁵

They saw the “destructibility of human life” and they tried to minimize it. They learned as girls the skills they would need later as women to maintain the health of their future families. They recognized that health care was part of their duty and some women jumped headlong into the task, by extending their circle of patients beyond their families and domestic servants. They also cared for friends, acquaintances, and the needy people of their communities. However, not all aspects of their domestic medical practice were gloomy. There were some instances of joy, such as the birth of a child or the satisfaction of restoring a loved one to good health. From the evidence provided above, one can see that aristocratic women in the Early Modern Period in England were very much active in the medical practice, and that at times they were looked to for cures more so than the rising professional class of physicians.

⁷⁵ Otten, “Introduction: Women Describing Childbirth, Sickness, and Death,” in *English Women’s Voices*, 221.

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