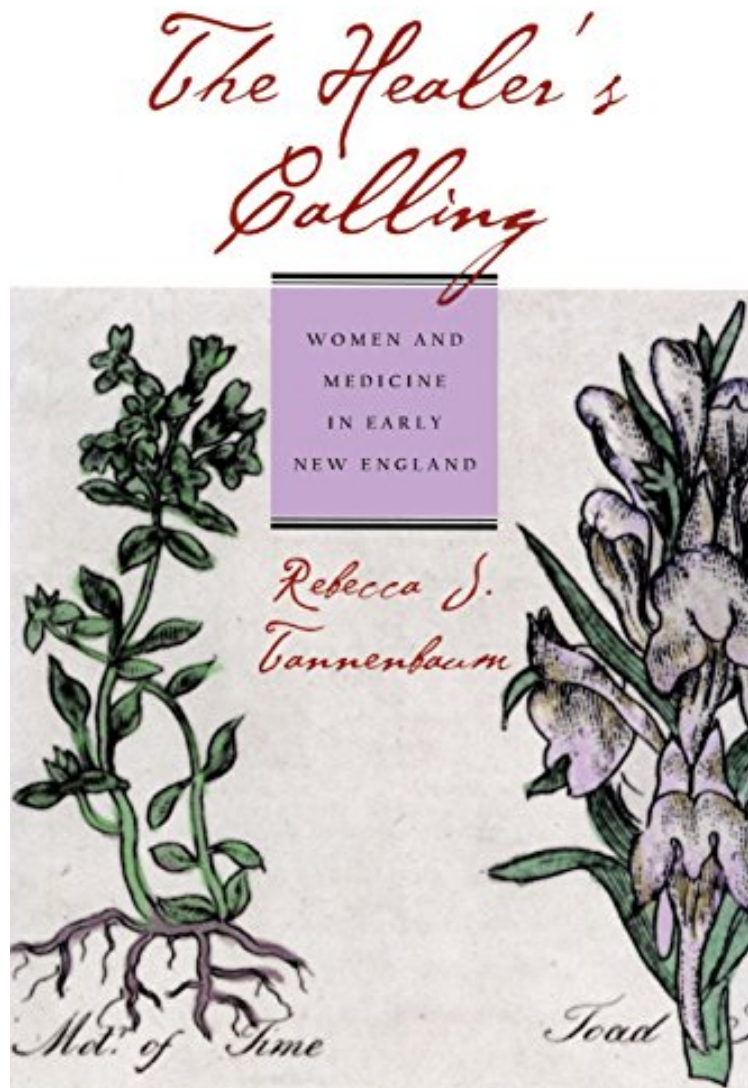


(Download pdf) The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England

# The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England

Rebecca J. Tannenbaum

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**Rebecca J. Tannenbaum : The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England:

This book, the first to describe women medical practitioners other than midwives in the colonial period, emphasizes that medical care was part of every woman's work. Using memorable anecdotes, engaging characters, and medical

oddties, *The Healer's Calling* tells the fascinating story of the practice of household medicine in early America. Rebecca J. Tannenbaum points out that housewives provided much of the medical care available in the seventeenth century. Elite women cared for the indigent in their towns and used medical practice to make influential connections with powerful men; "doctresses" or "doctor women" supported themselves with their practices and competed directly with male physicians; and midwives were crucial "expert witnesses" in cases of fornication, murder, and witchcraft. Yet there were limits to the authority of women's healing communities, with consequences for those who overstepped the bounds. By setting women's practice in the context of contemporary medicine, gender roles, and community norms, Tannenbaum also reveals the relationship between women's medical practice and witchcraft accusations. Tannenbaum examines colonial America's full range of medical options including the work of classically trained male doctors and male lay practitioners with a keen eye to the interactions and tensions between men and women in the realm of healing.

"In this succinct but carefully documented book, Rebecca Tannenbaum dispels conventional images of medical practice in colonial New England by focusing on the essential role played by women. . . . This is a book that will be valuable for readers and students seeking a more accurate picture of colonial medicine, for women's studies classes, and for more general readers whose understanding of colonial women's lives will be greatly enlarged by it." Amalie M. Kass, *Journal of the History of Medicine*, July 2003

"In highlighting the importance of women's work as healers, Tannenbaum reminds us that we still have much to learn not only about the history of medicine but also about the nature of colonial gender relations. . . . *The Healer's Calling* points the way to a new and exciting area of investigation." Marylynn Salmon, *Isis*

"As medicine became increasingly professionalized and male during the 1700s, women's roles changed. . . . Attempts to exclude women totally from professionalized medicine failed: by the late 1840s, Elizabeth Blackwell began to study for a medical degree. Rebecca Tannenbaum, with elegant prose and deft analysis, has done a fine job explaining who paved her way." Theresa Kaminski, *Journal of American History*, September 2003

"In *The Healer's Calling*, Rebecca J. Tannenbaum has provided both scholars and students of early American history with an informative and insightful account of female medical practitioners in New England. . . . Tannenbaum recovers the neglected history of women's contributions to the practice of medicine in colonial America, as well as the surprising degree to which women could exercise power through this practice within a society dominated by men. . . . Erudite and lucidly written, Rebecca Tannenbaum's *The Healer's Calling* is required reading for anyone interested in the history of gender in early America." John Donoghue, *Itinerario*

"The author describes community networks that developed from women's healing work and how women derived authority as healers, witnesses, and medical experts in a patriarchal society. She emphasizes the rewards and dangers women faced as midwives, nurses, and doctresses women who practiced medicine like male doctors, charging fees for their service. She also considers the role of 'high-ranking' women as healers and the social implications involved." *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, April 2004

"In *The Healer's Calling*, Rebecca J. Tannenbaum seeks to reconstruct and analyze this world of colonial women healers and their medical networks. This is an ambitious undertaking for a short (152 pages plus notes) and highly readable book, an undertaking made more challenging by the apparent paucity of primary sources. Yet Tannenbaum succeeds in ways to make hers a book worthy of attention. . . . Tannenbaum's exploration of women's medical communities begins with the little commonwealth of the family and expands outward. Every colonial wife was obligated to provide medical care for her household, so knowledge of herbs, processing skills, and the ability to diagnose ailments were standard domestic requirements. All women shared in a common medical culture that may have included, on the margins, magical cures and some use of abortifacients. Groups of female neighbors who assisted in each other's childbirths or family sicknesses coalesced into larger female medical networks, usually led by elite women. . . . Rebecca Tannenbaum has launched a welcome discussion of a too-long neglected aspect of colonial history." James J. Allegro, *New England Quarterly*, March 2004

"*The Healer's Calling* is an engaging and persuasive account of women's healing networks in colonial New England. Rebecca Tannenbaum has succeeded in bringing to life a dimension of early American women's history that we have not fully appreciated before." Susan Juster, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

"This is a masterful account of women's healing practices in colonial New England. In the tradition of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* and Judith Walker Leavitt's *Brought to Bed*, Rebecca J. Tannenbaum's book illuminates and transforms our understanding of the healer's calling. Beautifully written and researched, the book explores the complex ways that gender and rank informed the experience of illness and healing. Tannenbaum's use of legal records is especially valuable. *The Healer's Calling* is a major contribution to the history of medicine and to the history of early American culture." Nancy Tomes, State University of New York, Stony Brook

"*The Healer's Calling* is a graceful and elegant book. The writing is lively, respectful, sharp-edged, and funny. The book offers fresh insights to the scholarly specialists as well as a delightful read for the student or amateur history enthusiast." Jane Kamensky, Brandeis University

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About the Author  
Rebecca J. Tannenbaum is Lecturer in the Department of History at Yale University.