

Childbirth Rituals in Late Medieval England

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2023

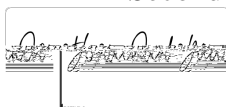
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in History

This Honors paper by Patricia Marie Wardlaw has been read and approved for Honors in  
History.

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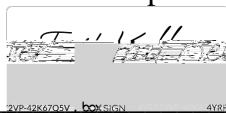
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many important people to whom the success of this project is indebted. Their assistance during both the research and writing stages are invaluable, and without their assistance, the project would not have been able to be completed. I would like to formally acknowledge the time dedicated by Professor Lori Garner to the project. Professor Garner dedicated multiple hour-long meetings and her expertise in Old English medical texts and remedies to the project. I would also like to thank Dr. Raymond Clemens, Curator of Early Books & Manuscripts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, for his advice and help prior to my research trip to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Dr. Clemens advised and guided me toward which manuscripts to consult, giving relevant information about each manuscript. I would like to thank the Ruyl Fellowship in Global History for funding my research trip to Yale University during the Summer of 2022 and for providing funds for the purchase of research materials.

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## ABSTRACT

## Childbirth Rituals in Late Medieval England

by

Patricia Marie Wardlaw

In late medieval England (ca. 1300-1500 CE), women utilized rituals during pregnancy and labor to assuage their anxieties and fears associated with childbirth. These rituals include birth girdles, medical practices, oral charms, and lapidary obstetrical  
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## Introduction

Greuaunces that wymmen han in beryng of their chieldren cometh in ij [ii or two]

1

Birth in 21st-century America is a sterile process, completed in a sterile hospital room filled with LED lights, doctors, nurses, men, and women. Right now, America is faced with crisis, division, and fear regarding birth. On June 24th, 2022, as I was researching medieval birth rituals in England ca. 1300-1500 CE, the United States obstetrics as valid medical fields, which were present in the late medieval period, still continue to this day. Birth rituals remain present in modern society: the taking of pregnancy tests, connecting the full moon with inducing labor, and more. Different cultures and regions across the globe have diverse rituals to induce labor, to determine the sex of the child, to announce the gender of the child in lavish manners, and to protect the parturient woman and the unborn child. Birth is a universal aspect of life, as everyone was born; even if you will not or cannot experience pregnancy and labor, you are a product of it. Birth creates life, yet it remains one of the riskiest and most harmful experiences for women; thus, there is a need for apotropaic rituals to ease the fears of childbirth.<sup>2</sup>

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*Sickness of Women*," in Monica H. Green, and Linne R. Mooney, "The Sickness of Women," in *Sex, Aging, and Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe*, edited by Mary Teresa Tavormina, (Tempe (Ariz.): Arizona center for medieval and Renaissance studies, 2006), 524.

<sup>2</sup> The term apotropaic will be used throughout the thesis to discuss the birth rituals. Apotropaic is defined as a ritual to ward off evil influence or ill







<sup>6</sup> Thus, one can interpret the high mortality of both infants and mothers, as well as the increase in population, that childbirth increased after the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, emphasizing the importa





during pregnancy and childbirth. Childbirth rituals were practiced during a specific

the rituals all have the intention of safeguarding either or both the mother and child during pregnancy and labor. I also prefer the use of ritual due to its palpable nature, emphasizing that it was performed and executed. Therefore, the thesis uses the term ritual in reference to the five childbirth rituals under discussion, despite their differences as types of magical practices. Ritual clarifies a holistic use, a process that further argues for the use of birth rituals in tandem with one another as a sort of birth remedy process.

### *The Childbirth Rituals*

Four main types of childbirth rituals were practiced during the period of c. 1300

mother.<sup>14</sup> Prayer rolls were often created by male professional illuminators and owned by a church or monastery; pregnant women essentially had to rent the rolls for their protective practices.<sup>15</sup> If women, or their husbands, were wealthy enough, they could commission a prayer roll to be made for them. The tradition stems from the assumption Belt, or the Sacra Cintola), to Saint Thomas. This girdle became an important relic within medieval Catholicism. The location of the Marian girdle Prato, Italy in the Cathedral of Prato became an important pilgrimage site for medieval women wishing to become pregnant.<sup>16</sup> Birth girdles often contain prayers or invocations to the Virgin Mary due to her immaculate conception and connection to childbirth and motherhood.

Medical rituals or remedies are described in medical compendiums such as the *Trotula* and the *Sickness of Women*.<sup>17</sup> Medical rituals can be any ritual that is medically prescribed. While the *Trotula*

vernacular text, emphasizing its importance to women and midwives in medieval England at the time of the study. It is significant that the *Sickness of Women* is in the vernacular as it increased accessibility amongst men and women in England at the time. Medical rituals or ritual prescription demonstrates the liminal space between obstetrical care and ritual during the time period and the validation of ritual as care for parturient women and unborn children.

Another material ritual aside from the birth girdle tradition is that of lapidary obstetrical talismans. Although stemming from a Classical and global tradition, lapidary obstetrical talismans were very much part of the medieval English childbirri g2poe-2(s)3e.





childbirth, which was later banned from practice. Thus, 1500 is a useful chronological cutoff for the study due to the religious shift in England leading to a decreased use and acceptance of many childbirth rituals in England; however, the demonstrated, continued use of the childbirth rituals despite the Dissolution illustrates the importance of childbirth rituals to pregnant women as a grounding tool.

### *Literature Review*

The scholarship of medieval magic and gender acts as a broad base for the thesis, as well as understanding the terminology of medieval magic in scholarly discourse.

*The*



Oral charms, remedies, and incantations have also been well-researched. The scholarship of Peter Murray Jones and Lea Olsan on birth rituals is crucial to the thesis scholarship focuses on performative or oral charms for childbirth in medieval England.

Childbirth in England, 900

<sup>29</sup> Olsan

includes a childbirth charm but also emphasizes the importance of an oral tradition in medieval Christian culture.<sup>30</sup> Further, Peter Murray Jones and Lea Olsan again partnered on an article in the *Routledge History*

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prayers used in medieval England for the purposes of childbirth.<sup>32</sup> Because of the liminality in medieval England between prayer and charm, it can be argued that these prayers are also charms. I hope to explore these blurred boundaries between religion and also be interpreted as oral charms spoken ritually. Scholarship on rituals and charms used in medieval England in general and for the purposes of childbirth is well researched. Interestingly, there is a hole in scholarship connecting childbirth charms and prayers to

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<sup>29</sup> Jones and Olsan, "Performative Rituals for Conception," 406-433.

<sup>30</sup> Lea T. Olsan, "Latin Charms of Medieval England: Verbal Healing in a Christian Oral Tradition," *Oral Tradition* 7 (1992): 116-142.

<sup>31</sup>

*The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, edited by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider, (London [England]: Routledge), Taylor and Francis Group, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Delores LaPratt, "Childbirth Prayers in Medieval and Early Modern England: 'For Drede of Perle That May Be-falle,'" McGill University.

the birth girdle tradition. Thus, the thesis will combine and analyze the traditions in tandem with one another.

Understanding the sta

England reveals the use and desire for childbirth rituals. The work of Barbara A. Hanawalt, Duncan Sayer, Sam D. Dickinson, and Fiona Harris-Stoertz on the social history of pregnancy and childbirth offers crucial context for childbirth rituals.<sup>33</sup> The scholarship forms an understanding of population growth, childbearing, death in childbirth, and pregnancy in medieval England. By analyzing the facets of pregnancy and childbirth in medieval England, the uses of childbirth rituals become increasingly evident: to assuage anxieties about death in labor, as well as infant mortality.

gynecology in medieval Europe.<sup>34</sup> Green

not only published an English translation of *The Trotula* but also has written considerable

*The Trotula*, as discussed earlier, is a critical

primary source to the project, as it

rituals or folk remedies in *The Trotula* also function as ritual practices for medieval

the gendering of healthcare in medieval EuropeW\*nBT/z( )-9(he)-3(a).



historical discourse in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Further, Lewis argues that emotional historians have successfully argued for their place in the historical discourse and the importance of emotional history as a subfield.<sup>37</sup> A seminal work in the field of emotional history is *The History of Emotions* by Rob Boddice; this is a survey work, discussing the use of emotions to further understand historical moments and historical

anal2(i)-G[(a)-3(nd t)-2(he)-3( i)7(m)-2(port)7(a)-3(nc)-3(e)-3( of)10( e)-3(m)7(ot)-2(i)e of emtory ofl

study. My thesis uses prayer rolls, medical treatises, images of loadstones, charms, and more to infer the emotional state of women utilizing birth rituals.

Many scholars on medieval birth rituals have taken a detached scholarly stance. Some of the studies focus on the religious aspect of the sources, getting very deep into the linguistics of the prayers included on the prayer rolls or in the charms. Emotions are lacking from the scholarship. Why do so many studies of birth rituals neglect to discuss the experience of the women who utilized them? Many scholars studying medieval birth rituals are themselves women, perhaps avoiding including emotional history in the discourse about birth rituals due to fear of criticism of including their own emotions about their own experiences into their scholarship. Criticisms of emotional history regarding birth rituals could emphasize that the women scholars are too connected to the subject and are thus using their scholarship as a method to express their own grievances. However, it is necessary to discuss emotion when discussing birth, as it is an emotionally and physically taxing process, which is represented in the rituals themselves and by the use of these rituals.

## *II. Global*

The birth rituals stem from a rich global tradition, with a particularly strong connection to the Arabic medical tradition that was being developed in the Islamic world concurrently. The origins of many medieval European magical traditions stem from the translation projects of Alfonso X of Castile to Constantine the African.<sup>41</sup> A popular ritual amulet, loadstones, were a classical tradition and have been found in Cyprus, Africa, and

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<sup>41</sup> Jones and Olsan, "Performative Rituals for Conception": 406-433.



the Middle East.<sup>42</sup>

Although the texts were often written in their original Arabic context as medicinal or scientific texts, through translation and interpretation in medieval English contexts, the texts were understood through the lens of ritual, in addition to science and medicine. The

### *III. Holistic*

As discussed in the literature review, birth rituals have often been studied as unique and individual occurrences. Birth girdles have been studied as a distinct birth girdle tradition. The

of birth girdles. Due to the varying accessibility of the rituals as well as the multi-faceted use of the rituals, it is necessary to understand how the rituals work in use with each other, as this understanding will elucidate the experience of late medieval childbirth.

### *New Additions*

My thesis incorporates all three of the previously outlined methodologies: it adopts the framework of understanding the global origins of birth rituals, analyzes the emotional impacts of the childbirth rituals on women, and offers a unique discourse by studying the rituals in tandem with one another. The project takes into account that birth rituals were accessible to women of varying social strata. Overall, the project assesses the influence, and religion through the comprehensive study of multiple childbirth rituals. By placing the thesis in a global framework, a new understanding of childbirth rituals in late medieval England emerges. The goal is to understand the birthing experience of late medieval English women through an emotional history, as well as to understand the combination of rituals used and how those rituals inform the scholar about the emotions of parturient women of the

and taking it out of its traditional therapy context. Moreover, a holistic study of the rituals portrays a new avenue of study for birth rituals and cements birth rituals as a tradition rather than just understanding birth rituals as individualized phenomena. The global framework is necessary to break down the myth of England as insular and to further contribute to increasing scholarship on the global Middle Ages, attesting to the interconnectedness of the medieval period. Thus, the study of late medieval English birth rituals elucidates not only the emotional experience of medieval women but also cements birth rituals as their own subfield and asserts the need to keep the global Middle Ages at the forefront of scholarly discourse.

Although the thesis focuses on three main goals and methodologies, it also studies two main sub-themes throughout its analysis of the four main childbirth ritual types: accessibility of rituals based upon varying socioeconomic status and the continued usage of childbirth rituals over multiple time periods to demonstrate the importance of the rituals for women. By showing that price, availability, and literacy affect the accessibility of different childbirth rituals, I clarify how the use of these rituals depends on the

the chapters, I aim to represent that the childbirth rituals did not just pop up in 1300 and disappear in 1500, but rather demonstrate the origins of each tradition, as well as the lasting impacts of the tradition. In demonstrating that the rituals were often practiced far into the Early Modern period, even after the Dissolution of the Monasteries and shift to Protestantism in England, the rituals still maintained relevance for parturient women, illustrating a continued solace found in the rituals by pregnant women. Moreover, in demonstrating that the rituals often came from earlier contexts and time periods, it

demonstrates that women had needed childbirth rituals prior to the period of study, showing that women have always needed something supernatural to promise protection in the perilous experience of childbirth.

While the thesis attempts to make new additions to the field, I admit that I cannot research medieval birth rituals in their entirety. The goal of the thesis is not to understand the religious impacts of the rituals, nor is it to fully understand medieval obstetrics. I will not be analyzing the birth girdles from a religious perspective, nor will I be fully analyzing the prayers and imagery included, as well as the many nuanced religious inclusions on the prayer rolls. Most importantly, that scholarship has been done by Mary Morse and others who are interested in analyzing the prayers included on the prayer rolls. Further, I am not a medical historian; thus, I will not be fully analyzing the history of English obstetrics from 1300 to 1500. The goal of the thesis is to understand medieval birth rituals in terms of new methodologies, building upon older scholarship and discourse in holly nBT[0( t)-2S7J5 Tm0 gieval

## Midwifery & Birth in Medieval England

In order to understand the emotional impact of rituals throughout the following chapters, this chapter describes midwifery, the feminine space of the birthing chamber, childbirth, quickening and abortion, and cesarean sections. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the experience of women in late medieval England during pregnancy, but especially during childbirth, testifying to the painful and traumatic experience of childbirth. By understanding the traumatic experience of childbirth more holistically, the need for childbirth rituals, which promised protection from the many perils discussed in this chapter, is uncovered.

Scholars such as Alaya Swann, Carmen Caballero Navas, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, and Carla Spivack have published important works discussing the childbirth experience of medieval women. Alaya Swann provides valuable insight into the connections between midwifery and Christianity in late medieval England.<sup>1</sup> In both her dissertation and her article, Swann emphasizes the connection between midwifery and the religious tradition in England, with midwives acting as intermediaries in the birthing chamber and process. Carmen Caballero Navas discusses the Jewish midwifery tradition in medieval Europe, discussing the interreligious role played by midwives during the period.<sup>2</sup> Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski studies the cesarean section in medieval Europe, acknowledging the global origins of the cesarean section, as well as noting that it was not

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<sup>1</sup> Alaya Swann, "By Expresse Experiment': The Doubting Midwife Salome in Late Medieval England," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 1 (2015):1-24; Alaya Swann, "Childbirth and Midwifery in the Religious Rhetoric of England, 1300-1450," PhD diss., (Arizona State University, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Carmen Caballero Navas, "She Will Give Birth Immediately. Pregnancy and Childbirth in Medieval Hebrew Medical Texts Produced in the Mediterranean West," *Dynamis* 34, no. 2 (2014): 377-401.





pregnancy, and childbirth?<sup>6</sup>

thirteenth-century Latin encyclopedia of Bartholom the Englisan6hm-2(a)-3( n (wi)-0(l)-3(hi w)3a an6







medical practitioners, abortion happened naturally between months seven and nine of the pregnancy, emphasizing the conflation between miscarriages and abortions, for which the *Trotula* provides an herbal remedy.<sup>22</sup> Similar to abortion or miscarriages, cesarean sections also dealt with the loss of life during the birthing process; however, they were performed in instances when the life of the mother could not be saved.

Debates regarding the legality of abortion were present throughout medieval Europe, especially starting in the 12th century. Abortion was first deemed a criminal offense in Bologna under Roman law.

external aggressors and granted women aggrieved by the violent termination of their pregnancies the right to press felony <sup>29</sup> Trials for the loss of the unborn child, done by someone or something outside of the mother, acted as a space for the mother to grieve and gain justice for the unborn life.

Debates emerged in the early 14th century about the ability of doctors and <sup>30</sup> However, in England, unborn fetuses were not considered living and able to have souls until birth, so it was not a crime for medical professionals to remove the fetus to save the life of the pregnant woman. Even though this ruling about the life of a fetus being official at the

or indictments concerned with the sla <sup>31</sup> Until the *Les plees del corone* in 1557, abortion remained unpunished by royal justices in England.<sup>32</sup>

Midwives, or wise-women, proved essential to the development and understanding of the use of plants for abortive measures. Müller enforces the concept of









quickenings and abortion, and finally, to understand the ideologies and practices regarding

## Medical Rituals

- Somedays (a natural period pain relief company)<sup>1</sup>

As I was writing this chapter, I received the above email tagline in my inbox.

ive

pain with a ritual rings true from the late Middle Ages to the 21st century. Medical birth rituals present a continuity in history. It is very easy to feel disconnected from history, especially from history that happened almost 500 years ago; however, subtle reminders in our pop culture, media, vernacular, and habits remind us that modern women, with regards to birthing anxieties, differ little from medieval women. Medieval women, although they had access to different forms of medicine, were still navigating the pain and trauma of birth and menstruation in their own ways. To this day, the method of medical rituals in order to soothe pain and anxiety remains relevant, as seen by the email I received on Thursday, September 22, 2022 at 11:43 AM CST.

The project draws on the long history of women as healers and begins to explain

2

*Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* provides crucial scholars

the medieval period, women were seen as objects to be studied, rather than capable of their own ability to perform and study medicine, further destabilizing and restricting

wave feminist movements.<sup>4</sup> The shift to a focus on women follows wider transformations within medieval history to study women from a revisionist perspective, as the scholarship had primarily emphasized men or exceptional women. Thus far, medical and medicine and the medical tradition, rather than in the context of a more broad, social history and the effect on women in the period.

-growing, but relatively small niche

<sup>5</sup> Green takes a markedly feminist perspective in

were licensed women medical practitioners throughout Europe, as well as vouching for the treatment, by midwives, of non-reproductive issues and even remedies geared towards men in the *Trotula*

collaborative article with Green, Linne Mo

*Sickness of Women*

provides critical insight into English medical treatises in the vernacular, as well as their prescribed rituals.<sup>6</sup> The work of these two scholars independently and in their joint article

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<sup>4</sup> An example of earlier scholarship can be found in Wilfrid Bonser, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study in History, Psychology, and Folklore*, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Library, New Ser, 3, (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> Monica H. Green, "Gendering the History of Women's Healthcare," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (11, 2008): 487-518; Monica H. Green, "Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe," *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 434-73; Monica H. Green, *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts*, (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000); Monica H. Green, Introduction to *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, edited by Monica Helen Green, (Philadelphia: PENN, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1-63.

<sup>6</sup> Monica H. Green, and Linne R. Mooney, "The Sickness of Women." In *Sex, Aging, and Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe*, edited by Mary Teresa Tavormina, (Tempe (Ariz.): Arizona center for medieval and Renaissance studies, 2006), 455-



*The Trotula*

The *Trotula*,

The compendium is a curation of three medical texts, one or more of Arabic  
the time period.<sup>12</sup> The twelfth century in Salerno proved to be a critical time period for  
ise that was  
to make this new Arabic medicine truly functional in the West by fusing it with the older  
<sup>13</sup> In a monastery in Monte Cassino  
northwest of Salerno, translation projects from Arabic into Latin occurred between 1070-  
1090.<sup>14</sup>



of gynecology, informed by the medical writings of Galen of Pergamon (ca. 130-ca. 215 CE).<sup>18</sup> His writings were transferred into the Arabic world through the spread of Islam in Asia Minor in the 7th century.<sup>19</sup>

Hippocratic gynecology before it, the basic physiological process unique to the female

<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Arabic and Greco-Roman medical traditions

continued to develop in the ancient period and into the medieval period.<sup>21</sup>

In *Conditions of Women*, the section of the *Trotula*

pregnancy, and other issues, rituals and charms are present stemming from the tradition

of the sato()10(mEMC /Span <1 0 0 1 1 81/F2 6a 0 0 1 108.r44>3004F>20048>300b t)-6(he)-3( s)4(a)-3(t)

While the *Trotula*

*Book on the Conditions of Women*, includes birthing rituals. In other sections of the *Trotula*, remedies are included for other illnesses and maladies – for lice in pubic regions, a recipe for ointment for sunburn, a remedy for stench of the mouth, and a remedy for warts to name a few.<sup>25</sup> ... likely relegated to birth, pregnancy, and menstruation. However, birth is a focus of the *Trotula*. The

[91] Treatment. [...] Let sneezing be provoked with powder of frankincense placed in the nostrils. [...]

[92] And those men who assist her ought not look her in the face, because women



how joyful, is a traumatic, dangerous, and harmful process for the expectant mother. The *Trotula* depicts the physical harm of b

anus, as well as what to do when the womb falls out of the mother.<sup>30</sup> The use of the word

further elucidates the known danger and peril of the birthing experience, and hints at the anxieties experienced by women who went through such a dangerous process.<sup>31</sup> Similar to surgically stitching up the ripped vagina today,

tween the anus and the vagina in three or four places with

<sup>32</sup> The remedies themselves depict the lived experiences of medieval women and the trauma experienced during birth.

focation of

joined to the knees, and she lacks vision, and she loses [sic] the function of the voice, the nose is distorted, the lips are contracted and she grits her teeth, and the chest is

body towards the lungs. The belief stems from the idea that the womb is located between the chest and the pelvis, and that it can fall out of the mother during birth.

accounts for the accompanying worries, anxieties, and fears felt by the same women.

Even more importantly, the medical rituals in the *Trotula* highlight the emotional reassurance that could be provided to parturient women who followed the rituals that promised to ensure their safety.

*The Sickness of Women: An English Vernacular Gynecological Text*

*Sickness of Women*, similar to the *Trotula*, is another important gynecological text for the women of late medieval England; however, this text is significant because it was







themselves. During birth, the expectant mother was overcome with emotions: excitement about the impending child, fear of death (both of the child and themselves), and apprehension regarding the ease of labor. The experience of birth was filled with struggle, physical violence for the mother, suffering, dread, concern, and distress. During labor. The rituals appeal to medieval women, as they offer extra protection against a known process that often led to death, loss, and physical repercussions. The rituals, birth girdles, and jasper referenced in the *Sickness of Women* provided comfort, assuaged anxieties, and soothed. Midwives and pregnant women believed in the rituals because of the overwhelming risk of childbirth during the period. When fear and anxieties are present, hope and belief in a higher power often help to calm those anxieties. The use of apotropaic rituals in gynecological treatises demonstrates the need for higher powers to intervene in the dangerous process but also the promise that if a parturient woman does an action, says words, or carries a stone to ward off peril, it will soothe the expectant mother.

### *Conclusion*

In the late medieval period, medicine and ritual were at a crossroads, where both were considered valid forms of gynecological remedies. The prescription of both medicine and medical rituals in tandem fashioned a gynecological tradition practiced by women for women, which worked to assuage anxieties of the traumatic birthing process. To understand the need for rituals in medical practice, one must fully grasp the anxiety-inducing nature of the birthing process for medieval women in England. The gynecological treatises and medical compendiums give a glimpse into the physical harm



## Lapidary Obstetrical Talismans

*On the Regimen for a Woman Giving Birth*

[...]

[118] Likewise, it should be noted that there are certain physical remedies whose power is obscure to us, which are helpful when done by midwives. Therefore, let the patient hold a magnet [loadstone] in her right hand and it helps.<sup>1</sup>

During the late medieval period in England, pregnant women used lapidary talismans and amulets as grounding and calming tools during the childbirth process. The stones were first associated with childbirth during the Classical period in both lapidaries and encyclopedias, one *Naturalis historia* [*Natural History*], which includes two books on stones. Women utilized eagle stones, loadstones, jasper, and red coral, to name a few, as lapidary talismans and amulets for the childbirth process. The apotropaic qualities of the stones were remarked upon by intellectuals from the 4th century BCE through the 17th century CE, demonstrating a long-lasting tradition of stones being used as a birth ritual in many different contexts. The incredible endurance of lapidary talismans is reflected by a similar endurance of women wearing or holding an amulet during pregnancy and childbirth is probably as ancient as

<sup>2</sup> There is an undeniable connection between lapidary amulets and emotional reassurance during childbirth. The remarkable physical,

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<sup>1</sup> *Trotula*, 105-107. The magnet referred to i, l-





and stones were used in the medieval and early modern period medicinally, disagrees with Pliny the Elder

that people in the medieval and early modern periods viewed the stones as possessing supernatural qualities beyond those which are found in nature. Harris makes a distinction between medical and ritual, categorizing the stones as mostly medical; however, I argue that the stones are strictly ritual in nature, Harris is one of the most recent scholars to



-lore -



white, round stone in streams. In its hollow centre is a stone known as the  
*'callimus* -stones, wrapped in the skins of  
animals that have been sacrificed, are worn as amulets by women or four-footed  
creatures during pregnancy so as to prevent a miscarriage. They must not be  
removed except at the moment of delivery: otherwise, there will be a prolapse of  
39.85 Tm(e)-3( a)-3(02 6Qq0.00000912 0 612 792 re2 798. OJET0.00000912 oe)-3(nt)-2( of)r3(r

abominable falsehoods of the Magi since in very many of their statements about gems they have gone far beyond providing an alluring substitute for medical science into the

14

*magu* (or

*magush*), a term which was used to refer to a

<sup>15</sup> However,

Pliny supports the idea of ritual by doing what he scorns; in his statement about eagle-stones, he in the very nature of stating that the stone can draw out an unborn child and

rovid[es] an alluring substitute for medical science

<sup>16</sup> In the section about the *sandaistros*

tones can act as apotropaic ritual objects despite his objections to the

<sup>17</sup> Pliny firmly begins the tradition of using eagle-stones as amulets and talismans to safely and painlessly birth a child.

Apart from the eagle-stone, Pliny draws connections between other stones and

<sup>18</sup> Thus, the

Like the eagle-stone, other stones are described as having prophylactic effects regarding labor and pregnancy. Pliny remarks on the abilities of malachite, cystitis, and paenis and

*Malachite* is

an opaque stone of a rather deep green shade and owes its name to its colour, which is

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<sup>14</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume 10: Book XXXVII*, 205

(Masters Thesis, The University of British Columbia, 2007), 16-52.

<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume 10: Book XXXVII*, 205.

<sup>17</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume 10: Book XXXVII*, 245.

<sup>18</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume 10: Book XXXVII*, 321.



wear the stone as an amulet, tied around the left arm and, later, the thigh. The *Trotula* will later state that the stone should be tied to the right arm, but most literature on the eagle-stone asserts that it should be tied to the left arm.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Dioscorides, Damigeron does not mention tying the stone to the thigh;

*De*

*virtutibus lapidum*

pregnant women, for if tie

However, it is very useful to a speedy delivery. For if, when a woman is in danger it is ground up and brought and placed on her loins, she will be freed of her child

<sup>24</sup> Damigeron is the first to mention grinding the stone up and placing it on

lapidary, it is evident that the stone was believed to possess apotropaic qualities outside of those which are natural; the stone can heal and aid outside of a natural ability.

During the Classical period, the works of Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder, and Dioscorides firmly established the tradition and use of lapidary amulets and talismans for pregnancy and labor. The tradition of lapidary amulets for childbirth continued into the 18th century in England and throughout Europe. Such a long-lasting tradition illustrates the importance and continued impact of the lapidary rituals. During the classical period, lapidary talismans were associated with birth in lapidaries. This demonstrates that

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*and the Secular in Medieval Healing: Sites, Objects, and Texts*, compiled by Barbara S. Bowers and Linda Migl Keyser, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2016), 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Trotula*, 105-107.

<sup>24</sup> Damigeron, *De virtutibus lapidum: The Virtues of Stones*

pregnant women experienced a similar emotional and physical struggle during pregnancy and childbirth, leading to the creation of rituals to ground and soothe the pregnant woman. The discussion of these in lapidaries and encyclopedias shows the need for birth rituals in the classical period; the continued use of the rituals in the medieval period into the early modern period shows the utility of lapidary amulets for midwives and parturient women. Lapidary obstetrical talismans were compelling because of their abundant and common nature and relatively affordable cost, further lending themselves to a successive existence as a ritual. The classic pedigree of lapidary obstetrical talismans, alongside their established and longstanding use as a childbirth ritual, allowed for their continued and almost 2,000 year use.

#### *Medieval Uses*

During the medieval period, lapidary talismans maintained their relevance as apotropaic birth rituals. During the classical period, fewer lapidaries were written than in extant new lapidaries from the period between the seventh and eleventh centuries, and medieval author

After the pause in lapidary literature, there was a burst of new lapidaries in the post-11th century medieval period, all of which discuss lapidary obstetrical talismans and amulets. Some of the most important lapidaries of the medieval period include: Isidore of

provided them during the childbirth process, as well as for the supposed supernatural abilities the stones possessed.

*Mineralia*

*Naturalis historia*, as it goes in depth

on where to find the eagle stone, as well as its uses and virtues. On the eagle stone,

Magnus claims,

Take the stone which is called Echites, and it is called to some Aquileus, because

medieval Iberia to safeguard pregnancy and labor.<sup>31</sup>

*Lapidarios*

<sup>32</sup> In *fol. 114-bc* *geza (calcedonia)*

chalcedony, which is a type of silica stone, is described as being wrapped in the hair of a pregnant woman, drawing the child out of the womb, and helping the pregnant woman.<sup>33</sup>

Although the geza is not tied to the arm or thigh, it is similarly tied and placed on the



arm or thigh but maintains the norm that it should be tied to the left side. Not only is jasper prescribed here, but also milk, honey, and oil, making the stone part of a larger childbirth ritual and remedy. Jasper, as characterized by the *Sickness of Women*, is apotropaic qualities and emphasizing its abilities, and thus its value to the parturient woman. The stone carries a significant emotional valence for the parturient mother, as it promises to deliver her of child, even in the worst of scenarios.

Another jasper birth talisman is included in St

*Subtilitates*. St. Hildegard writes:

And when the woman bears her child, from that hour when she conceives it until she delivers, through all the days of her childbed, let her have a jasper in her hand, so that the evil spirits of the air can do so much the less harm to the child meanwhile, because the tongue of the ancient serpent extends itself to the sweat of the infant emerging from the mother's womb, and he lies in wait for both mother and infant at that time.<sup>35</sup>

St. Hildegard claims that jasper in the hand of the parturient woman throughout the pregnancy will ward off malignant spirits. Her claim of the apotropaic powers of jasper to ward off evil spirits inherently validates the supernatural abilities of lapidary talismans. Here, jasper acts beyond natural abilities by warding off evil spirits and protecting both the mother and child. Jasper acts as another lapidary obstetrical talisman, providing emotional and physical support for pregnant women by protecting them and their child throughout the dangers of labor.

Like the *Sickness of Women*, the *Trotula* *On the Regimen for a Woman*

*Giving Birth*," prescribes stones and coral for a woman in labor. The two medical

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<sup>35</sup> St. Hildegard of Bingen, *Subtilitates*, in Thomas R. Forbes, "Chalcedony and Childbirth: Precious and Semi-Precious Stones as Obstetrical Amulets," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 35, no. 5 (April 1963): 390-401.

treatises, in prescribing lapidary obstetrical talismans and amulets, emphasize the believed efficacy of the stones and the believed apotropaic powers of the stones. The

*Trotula* prescribes,

[118] Likewise, it should be noted that there are certain physical remedies whose power is obscure to us, which are helpful when done by midwives. Therefore, let the patient hold a magnet in her right hand and it helps.

[...]

[120] Coral suspended from the neck is good.<sup>36</sup>

The *Trotula* ascribes an obscure power to the loadstone, emphasizing the non-natural and supernatural attributes of the loadstone in medieval beliefs. The *Trotula*

The importance of tying lapidary talismans to arms, thighs, and hips has been established throughout the lapidary birth ritual tradition; thus, amulets worn lapidary obstetrical talismans are crucial as ritual objects in childbirth. Eagle stone and loadstone amulets are seen from the 7th century to the 17th century.<sup>39</sup> Amulets demonstrate that the stones were worn and viewed as precious objects, as some of the amulets were mounted in silver. The amuletic display of loadstones and eagle stones implicates them as devotional, ritual objects for childbirth.

#### FIGURE 4.1<sup>40</sup>

Iron ore (Figure 4.1) amulets from ca. 500s to 600s CE are categorized as loadstone amulets. These are some of the earliest amulets of lapidary obstetrical talismans that are available to be viewed. There were possibly earlier amulets that either no longer exist or

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<sup>39</sup> Because of the dark brown color of eagle stones, Bromehead issues a plea for people who may have eagle stones in their personal collection, as family heirlooms, or may have discarded them, as he states that they resemble oak galls. Thus, there may not be many existing eagle stone and loadstone amulets because, especially eagle stones, do not 52 1785(11)-6or people who may haver neets be2(r)-4T nor neets be2(r)-4T nor neetss family h



FIGURE 4.3<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the third amulet is an eagle stone amulet (Figure 4.3) and was sold by an auctioneer to a private collector in the United Kingdom. It was sold from a collection in Norfolk to a collection in Oxfordshire and the auction website notes that it is of Northern European origins, potentially English origins, making Figure 3 the only potential example of a mounted English eaglestone. The dimensions of the amulet are as follows: 2.8 cm tall and 2.1 cm wide.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, if other stones followed similar sizing, they were very small and easy to carry and wear for medieval women. The practice of mounting emphasizes the preciousness of the lapidary obstetrical amulet, perhaps a way of beautifying the ritual, demonstrating the perceived importance, and keeping th q0.00004cs5 q0.000en./0 0



Harris notes that the stones could be shared and passed along, emphasizing the long tradition of communal and generational care between women. Although this inventory is from the early modern period, it can be assumed that eagle-stones and loadstones were similarly accessible and affordable in late medieval England due to their continued popularity and use in the early modern period. Similarly, there is evidence of medieval women owning eagle stones, specifically the wife of the Earl of Hereford of Herefordshire, England. The couple owned three eagle stones in 1322.<sup>46</sup> Lapidaries discuss the prevalence of loadstones and eagle stones as natural materials, often citing where to find them in nature; thus, it does not appear that loadstones nor eagle stones were a scarce resource for medieval women. The affordability and accessibility of loadstones and eagle stones as a lapidary birth ritual allowed medieval English women of varying social strata to access birth rituals and soothe themselves during the tumultuous birth process.

Lapidary talismans and amulets possessed a physical, tangible, and earthly aspect that differentiated them from other rituals, specifically oral charms. Although birth girdles and textual amulets of the oral charm tradition have physical aspects as well, the lapidary obstetrical talisman tradition is solely physical, and uniquely natural, sourced from the earth. Loadstones and eagle stones, along with other stones, would be tied to the body or worn as an amulet as a physical reminder of the ritual and apotropaic powers of the stone. The stones were relatively small and easy to carry; they could be ground up and made into a paste. Lapidary talismans were diverse in their use and application to the parturient woman. It was not hard to access the stones; as discussed earlier, they were

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<sup>46</sup> Bromehead, "Aetites or the Eagle-stone": 21.





17th century. The stones provided emotional support for women during childbirth and labor; lapidary obstetrical talismans and amulets promised ease of labor and safety of both the child and woman, all of which were the most uncertain and ambiguous during the childbirth process.

### *Early Modern Continuities*

The Dissolution of the Monasteries came after King Henry VIII created the Church of England in 1539. The Dissolution of the Monasteries specifically targeted and destroyed relics and objects related to female saints and housed in monasteries. Many objects were burnt and destroyed, including vellum prayer rolls.<sup>50</sup> Female saints were associated directly with Catholicism, and thus, relics related to them had to be destroyed for the new, Protestant Church of England. However, stones were harder to destroy and

version of *A Directory for Midwives*

hold a Loadstone in her hand, or tie it to her navel, or wear an Eagle stone under her arm-

lapidary talismans for childbirth during this time.<sup>52</sup> In addition to lapidary talismans,

Culpeper cites birth girdles as another bi

<sup>55</sup> The magnetic nature of the loadstone

Loadstone the North- <sup>56</sup> In the classical period, the unexplained and fantastical

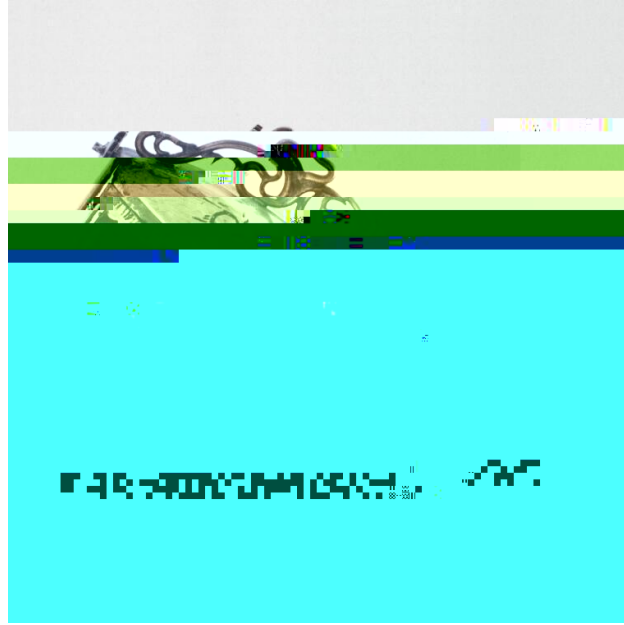


FIGURE 4.4 <sup>58</sup>

The use of lapidary talismans for childbirth by two prominent queens of England emphasizes the importance of the ritual in English culture, as well as a demonstrated need for childbirth rituals for women, which transcends time and social strata.

### *Conclusion*

The lapidary obstetrical talisman in relation to childbirth is unique as one of the longest-lasting childbirth rituals approximately 2000 years. The stones provided women comfort. Further, the physical reminder of the amulets, tied to the arm or thigh, functioned as a tangible reminder for women of the apotropaic powers of the stone. As stated earlier, the stones were accessible to a wider swath of women, perhaps increasing obstetrical talismans and amulets provided comfort and reassurance to women for

<sup>58</sup> *Copy of Lodestone Believed to Have Been Used by Queen Anne*, Photograph, (Science Museum, London). <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ywax8ehp>.

fears. The stones offered a solution and solace to the birthing process by grounding and calming anxious pregnant women.

## Oral Charms, Remedies, & Incantations

Oral charms, remedies, and incantations provide a more accessible birth ritual

charm themselves without any male interference, as often a man would write the charm down, which would then become the amulet. Charms acted as a potent emotional tool for parturient women, as the charm was spoken aloud, often repeated, and even bound to the the childbirth charm once spoken into existence.

support and claimed apotropaic abilities to protect the woman and child. Sources include the Old English metrical charms and later medieval charms sourced from herbal remedies, medical treatises, and prayer rolls. Through the study and analysis of these oral charms, the thesis discusses the tradition of oral charms, the changing autonomy of women who practice oral charms, and the emotional effect of the charms on parturient women as a grounding tool. I analyze oral charms, remedies, and incantations using their modern English translations, to understand how reciting them and the text of the charm provided emotional relief for women in labor.

Scholarship on Old English metrical charms asserts the importance of orality to the charms and the significance of the parturient woman reciting the charm. L.M.C.

rical Childbirth

in

regard to Old English childbirth charms.<sup>4</sup> Weston analyzes the charms from a clear gendered perspective, emphasizing the importance of orality and the recitation to the parturient woman. But, Weston leaves room for future scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

Scholarship regarding late medieval English birth charms is most notably informed by the work of Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan, published in 2015.<sup>6</sup> Jones and Olsan specifically research rituals and charms for childbirth in England during the period of study. Their scholarship is relatively recent and is therefore focused on gender

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<sup>4</sup> L. M. C. Weston, "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," *Modern Philology* 92, no. 3 (1995): 279-293.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Professor Lori Ann Garner for telling me about the following scholars in order to get more background on Old English charms: Debby Banham, Ciaran Arthur, Leslie K. Arnovick, and of *Hybrid healing: Old English Remedies and Medical Texts*.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan, "Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900-1500," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 3 (2015): 406-433.



and the impact of the charms on women; however, they reiterate the liminality between charms and prayers throughout their essay. In addition to Jones and Olsan, Katherine

s in Late-Medieval

efficacy of the charm.<sup>7</sup>

her sections on childbirth charms depict the importance of binding the charm to the parturient woman, as well as demonstrate the breadth of other charms circulating in late medieval England.

*Old English Metrical Charms*

While the tradition of childbirth charms is certainly not isolated to England, the Old English metrical charms, incantations, and remedies demonstrate the beginnings of the childbirth charm tradition in England and the earlier charms utilized by women in England prior to the main period of study. The *Lacnunga*, *the Herbarium*, *Leechbooks*, and remedies found in marginalia mostly comprise the known corpus of Old English metrical charms. Old English metrical charms, incantations, and remedies form the bas

seen to be a source of empowerment for the childbearing woman and the female

<sup>8</sup> A common feature of the Old English metrical charms is both alliteration and repetition, emphasizing the orality of the charms, while later medieval charms lose the emphasis on meter and spoken form, although they are still recited.<sup>9</sup> Most notable to the Old English metrical charms is that the parturient woman performed and recited the charm herself; the performance of the charm not only healed, but also gave autonomy to the performer the pregnant woman.

The first childbirth charm from the *Lacnunga* requires three separate acts for the ritual to be completed.<sup>10</sup> The first charm includes repetition of both word and action, especially repeating the number three throughout; there are three separate oral components. The oral components also often include repetitions of three in their formulaic designs. The woman is required to step over the grave of a deceased man three

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<sup>8</sup> LaPratt, "Childbirth Prayers," 74.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that alliteration is a major feature of Old English verse in general, but can also be seen throughout the Old English metrical charms as a characteristic.

<sup>10</sup> L. M. C. Weston, "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," *Modern Philology* 92, no. 3 (1995): 288.



with a living child, not a dead one,  
with a full-born one, not a doomed one.]



child. The charm allows her to take milk and associate it with another life-giving liquid water. The woman recites the following:

Se wífman, se ne mæge bearn áfédan, nime þonne ánes bléos cú meoluc on hyre handæ and gesúpe þonne mid hyre múþe and gange þonne tó yrnendum wætere  
 es  
 múð fulne and forswelge. Cweþe þonne þás word:

þonne ic mé wille habban and hám gán.

Þonne héo tó þán bróce gá, þonne ne beséo héo, nó ne eft þonne héo þanan gá,  
 and þonne gá héo in

[Let that woman who cannot nourish her child then take the milk of a cow of one colour in her hands and then drink it with her mouth, and then walk to running water, and spit the milk into it, and then ladle a mouthful of that water with that same hand, and swallow it all. She should then say these words:

Everywhere I carried with me the famous strong  
 son, with this famous strong meat,  
 then I want to possess myself and go home.

Then she must walk to that brook when no-one can see her, nor [see her] when she returns from there, and then she must go into another house than the one she departed from and bury the food there.]<sup>23</sup>

child, and

by transferring the milk to the water she physically enacts the desire that milk will flow

autonomy over her own body and breast milk production.<sup>25</sup> The charm allows her to take charge of her physicality through oral recitation.

The power and autonomy of the parturient woman is emphasized throughout the

spoken or recited by a priest or other figure. Enforcing the reliance on a priest or outside figure, the charms most often used in the medieval period for childbirth usually invoked figures related to the Christian faith such as the Virgin Mary, God, Pope Leo, Saints, Angels, and other figures important to Christianity. The charms or prayers are important because they gain their efficacy when spoken; their power stems from their orality. Even in manuscripts in the vernacular, childbirth charms especially were often written in Latin, associating Latin with power.<sup>27</sup> The slow switch from Old English vernacular to Latin which significantly restricted the number of women who could fully understand later



women. However, one can also not assume that their use continued into the later medieval period. Moreover, the Old English metrical charms demonstrate an earlier English oral charm tradition aimed at easing childbirth fears in parturient women; thus, a need for childbirth rituals is demonstrated through the early presence of childbirth charms in England pre-Norman Conquest. The transition period of the Norman Conquest during the 11th and 12th centuries is important to the study of charms. With the introduction of French high culture, the Old English metrical charms seemed to wane in popularity in favor of more explicitly religious, Christian-based, Latin charms. Therefore, the Norman Conquest led to a slow and eventual shift in the types of childbirth charms being used in medieval England.<sup>29</sup>

When discussing charms, especially later medieval charms, that are seen in manuscripts which instruct the charm to be written down to create a textual amulet, it is iteracy. Although the charms were often written on mallow leaves, virgin wax, or other materials to create amulets, they were also read aloud. Male practitioners or religious officials could have written down the charms and then the charms could have been recited by the parturient woman or her non-male attendants, relegating the oral aspect of the charm to the woman.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, it is still

teracy and the Limits of Reading: Women and the

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<sup>29</sup> For more on the importance of the 11th century, see Debby Banham, "A Millennium in Medicine? New Medical Texts and Ideas in England in the Eleventh Century," in *Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Cyril Roy Hart*, edited by Simon Keynes and Alfred P. Smyth, (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006), 230-42.; Debby Banham, "England Joins the Medical Mainstream: New Texts in Eleventh-Century Manuscripts," in *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent*, edited by Hans Sauer, Joanna Story, and Gaby Waxenberger, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 341-50.

<sup>30</sup> Jones and Olsan, "Performative Rituals," 419.

medical treatises; however, this applies to charms, as many are found in medical treatises and religious documents, which are both often written in Latin.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Green

assume that medicine and especially texts having to do with women's particular conditions <sup>33</sup> However, it is critical to understand the spread of oral knowledge. It is unknown whether and how frequent these charms were passed down generationally as a type of oral knowledge, either from mother to child, from midwife to patient, or from woman to woman. Perhaps, if charms were commonly spread between women, especially within the non-male space of the birthing chamber, then charms would act as an accessible birth ritual, being spread by women for women, acting as an oral tradition.

There are many different ways to interact with charms which render them effective; for example, charms may be recited, written down, and tied to the pregnant woman, or even written down on foodstuffs and consumed.<sup>34</sup> Hindley breaks down the should make and use each charm permit us to study the materiality of such texts and to consider how aspects of their physical construction might have contributed to their

woman, as in the *Trotula*, it is written on butter. It is uncertain who exactly writes the charm on the butter; however, it can be assumed that perhaps a literate midwife or attendant wrote the charm, or a literate man wrote the charm on butter, but was not allowed into the birthing chamber.<sup>36</sup> Hindley connects the butter to the breast milk that the mother will soon create, but also acknowledges that the item must be edible since the woman must eat it for the charm to work.<sup>37</sup> When charms are directed to be bound to the

st is  
mallow leaves[...]. The second writing surface is parchment. The third is a single example

<sup>38</sup> Thus, both the charm and the material it is written upon are equally important in late medieval England.

The charm text of MS Junius 85 demonstrates the shift to a majority of charms being written in Latin, the illustrates loss of autonomy for women in practicing charms, and acts as a typical identifier for other childbirth charms of the later medieval period. MS Junius 85 is a mid-11th century manuscript from England which includes seven sermons. The following childbirth charm can be found in the manuscript. MS Junius 85 is referred to as a peperit charm.<sup>39</sup> Jones and Olsan emphasize that the charm includes four elements which are key to identifying medieval childbirth charms:

exorcism; (3) the acco

to be tied to the right foot of the woman.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jones and Olsan, "Performative Rituals," 419

<sup>37</sup> Hindley, "The Materiality of Manuscript Charms," 86.

<sup>38</sup> Hindley, "The Materiality of Manuscript Charms," 86.

<sup>39</sup> Jones and Olsan. "Performative Rituals": 415.

<sup>40</sup> Jones and Olsan. "Performative Rituals": 415.

Thus, MS Junius 85 acts as a formula and basis for identifying other medieval childbirth charms. Interestingly, MS Junius 85, calls for a physical aspect of the charm similar to lapidary obstetrical amulets requiring to be tied to both the left and right arms and thighs. Moreover, the birth girdle tradition requires the prayer roll to be wrapped around the womb of the parturient woman in order for the girdle to be efficacious. Therefore, the charm emphasizes the physical aspect of birth rituals, perhaps acting as a grounding tool; when the charm, stone, or girdle are tied to the parturient woman, it is a constant and connected reminder of the apotropaic effects of the ritual. The charm is as follows:

Maria uirgo peperit Christum  
 Elizabet sterilis peperit Johannem Baptistam.  
 Adiuro te infans si es masculus aut femina per patrem et filium et spiritum  
 sanctum  
 ut exeas et recedas ultra ei non noceas neque insipientiam illi facias amen.  
 Videns Dominus flentes sorores Lazari ad monumentum lacrimatus est  
 coram iudeis et clamabat  
 Lazare, ueni foras  
 et prodiit ligatis manibus et pedibus qui fuerat quatruiduanus mortuus  
 Writ ðis on wexe ðe næfre ne com to nanen wyrce and bind under hire swiðran  
 fot.

[The Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ  
 Sterile Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist  
 I adjure you, infant, whether you are male or female,  
 through the Father and Son and Holy spirit that you go out and depart  
 in addition may you [demon] not harm this one [the mother?]  
 nor cause that one [the child] to be senseless amen.

s at the tomb

in the presence of the Jews and shouted:

he who had been four days dead. Write this on virgin wax  
 and bind on her right foot.]<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the Old English metrical charms, it is evident that the parturient woman is not speaking the charm, nor tying the virgin wax to her own foot; she is no longer the actor.



come out + Christ conquers + Christ rules + Christ is lord + may Christ defend  
you from every evil amen + Michael + Gabriel + Raphael + come to his aid.]<sup>45</sup>  
The charm emphasizes that an amulet must be bound below the knee of the woman, but  
also, for the charm to be successful, it must be recited in addition to being bound to the



spoken, may have been that a male religious or medical authority could write it and give it to the female or females who were attending during the actual delivery, who would

<sup>51</sup> The parturient woman could still be afforded the opportunity to orally recite the charm herself or by her non-



[To make a woman to be delivered of child write in virgin wax these names put them in her bosom and she shall be delivered. Maria gave birth without pain. Christ born, Christ suffered. Christ calls you to be born].<sup>53</sup>

Similar to

to the parturient mother. The charm legitimizes the pain of childbirth, thus affirming the woman's physical and emotional suffering. The goal of the charm is to help the woman del

54

childbirth charm.<sup>55</sup> The ongoing use of childbirth charms depicts the importance of the charms to parturient women, as they provided comfort and emotional reprieve, no matter the religious context or time period.

Childbirth charms remained relevant in their use despite the period; they also remained relevant in their use, but transitioned to a more textual context, often seen on birth girdles Takamiya MS 56 and Wellcome Collection MS 632.<sup>56</sup> However the charm in question derives from the tradition of Heavenly Letters.<sup>57</sup>

instances of the charm seen in the two birth girdles.

On the Wellcome 632 dorse, another childbirth protection linked to the Charlemagne c

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53

Charms," : 95.

54

Charms," : 95.

55

Charms," : 95.

<sup>56</sup> "Wellcome

Manuscript Library, in Morse, "'Thys Moche More Ys Oure Lady Mary Longe'," 202.

57

Letter Charms in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 1(Lo)11(n)-11(g)12(e)-5(')5(",)-4( 202.)] TJETQq0.00000912 n 0 0 1 286.17 85.



Charm is a charm, it also acts as a prayer, and is most often seen written on birth girdle manuscripts, clearly indicating that a prayer roll is a birth girdle.

The distinction between prayers, oral charms, and textual amulets is quite dim, as textual amulets include charm-like aspects of orality, often directing the user to recite the prayers or charms written on the manuscript. The text does not have apotropaic powers unless the text is read aloud orally. Birth Girdles especially occupy this liminal space, as the girdles contain many written prayers and charms, yet are a material object, which also gain apot

womb. Thus, the birth girdle occupies two categories: both prayer roll and oral charm, or

<sup>62</sup> The next chapter will analyze birth girdles as their own distinct ritual; however, it is important to acknowledge the overlaps between oral and written charms on birth girdles, which seemed to become more frequent in use and production during the later medieval period.

### *Conclusion*

Charms o

orally between women. Later medieval charms demonstrate the liminality between charm and prayer, ritual and religion during the medieval period, as many of the charms appeal to religious figures. Compared to the Old English metrical charms, the charms in the late medieval period demonstrate a slow shift towards a tradition of textual amulets, or writing down the charm and binding it to the pregnant woman. Although a man would often create the amulet, either the pregnant woman or one of her non-male attendants would recite the charm, still emphasizing the gender barriers and the feminine space of the birthing chamber. Charms offered emotional assurance to parturient women, because they invoked religious figures and higher powers, often allowed women to take an active role by saying the charm themselves, or even provided a physical reminder of the efficacy of the charm as it was bound to their bodies.

## Birth Girdles

Parturient women, during the late medieval period and into the early modern period in England, utilized birth girdles to both ground and calm themselves during the childbirth process.<sup>1</sup> The girdles acted as intermediaries between the parturient woman and the divine, as the birth girdles included invocations in both prayers and charms. Unlike

them. In addition, the sources will be used to understand what differentiates a birth girdle from a prayer roll. Finally, I analyze birth girdles by how they occupy a liminal space of both textual amulet and oral charm as well as both a religious and magical object.

Although there is extensive scholarship surrounding birth girdles, especially that of Mary Morse, it focuses primarily on the religious aspects of the rolls, rather than the emotional or ritual aspects. Mary Morse has published several crucial articles, two on Takamiya MS 56 and one on STC 14547.5, between 2012 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> Lea Olsan has also extensively studied Wellcome MS 632 and is considered an expert in the study of birth girdles, inspiring the scientific study on Wellcome MS 632.<sup>4</sup> The discourse regarding birth girdles is still open and evolving. Exciting new scientific discoveries were published recently in March of 2021, proving that cervical fluid was located on Wellcome MS 632.<sup>5</sup> This new scientific information emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of the study, as well as calls for increased interdisciplinary study in future historical work.

Katharine Storm Hindley published an extensive study on prayer rolls and birth girdles, arguing for them to be considered for other uses aside from just birth girdles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Morse, "Two Unpublished English Elevation Prayers in Takamiya MS 56," *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History*



Finally, the chapter explores how birth girdles aided medieval women emotionally throughout the childbirth process, acting as a calming ritual.

*Defining Rolls: Prayer Roll Versus Birth Girdle*

To study birth girdles is to study prayer rolls in medieval English devotional culture. Out of all of the birth rituals I have studied, birth girdles demonstrate the closest association with Christianity and religion, as they are technically Catholic devotional objects. Prayer rolls, long and thin pieces of elaborately illuminated vellum or parchment, provided the religious practitioner protection from certain harms; while birth girdles, specialized prayer rolls, protected women during labor and the pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> Not all birth

iron, parchmen

9

rolls were believed to act as protective devices, as well as healing objects. Birth girdles are a subset of prayer rolls, as they offer protection to women during childbirth. The girdles were wrapped around the abdomen of the expectant mother.

The format of the prayer roll lends itself to the use of the birth girdle, as the shape and thus prayer rolls, contained prayers in Latin, some with prayers in Middle English as well. Prayer rolls were often created by male professional illuminators and owned by a church or monastery; pregnant women essentially had to rent the rolls for their protective

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<sup>8</sup> Katherine Storm Hindley, "'Yf A Woman Travell Wyth Chylde Gyrdes Thys Mesure Abowte Hyr Wombe': Reconsidering the English Birth Girdle Tradition," *The Courtauld*.  
<https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/research->



practices, although very wealthy lay people could commission birth girdles.<sup>10</sup> Both men and women could use prayer rolls, while birth girdles were used by women during their pregnancy and labor.<sup>11</sup> Prayer rolls could be used for any variety of reasons, specifically warding off harm or evil. The birth girdle tradition was situated firmly within the Catholic tradition in late medieval England; however, they stem from classical and









girdles.<sup>31</sup> Wellcome Collection MS 632 has the most obvious signs of use; however, when studied together, all three form a fuller picture of the diversity of girdles available to parturient women, as

could be blood stains where the roll is very worn, but laboratory work will be required to make certain.<sup>35</sup>

For the woo after the birth: take yolkis of eyren soden in water and grounde cera  
& oleo & succo archimesie et cimino



Moreover, the roll contains imagery that is as

of which MS 632 contains an elaborately illuminated side wound which is also heavily rubbed away.<sup>44</sup>

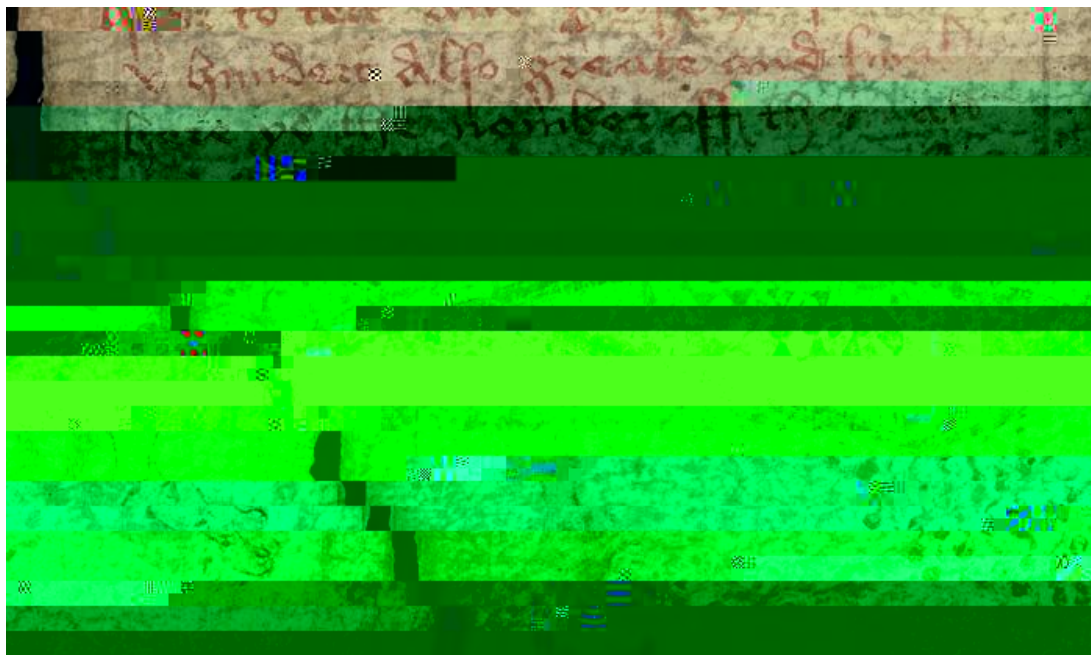


FIGURE 6.1<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, MS 632 invokes Saints Quiricus and Julitta with the following prayer and

travail [wyth?] chylde lay thys crosse on hyr wombe and she shall be safe delyuerd

<sup>43</sup> Morse, "'Thys Moche More Ys Oure Lady Mary Longe'," 202.

<sup>44</sup> Skemer, *Binding Words*, 263. See figure 6.1.

<sup>45</sup> "Wellcome Collection MS 632," Wellcome Collection in Lea Olsan, "Wellcome MS. 632: Heavenly Protection during Childbirth in Late Medieval England," Wellcome Collection.

<sup>46</sup> Morse, "'Thys Moche More Ys Oure Lady Mary Longe'," 202.

<sup>47</sup> Saints Quiricus and Julitta are firmly associated with childbirth within



and its apotropaic and supernatural elements.<sup>52</sup> Unlike other birth girdles, Takamiya MS 56 is the only birth girdle to specifically unroll in length to the exact, supposed, height of











FIGURE 6.3<sup>73</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The three girdles have obvious similarities, with Takamiya MS 56 and Wellcome MS 632 being the most similar of the three. STC 14547.5 stands out with its marked differences, as it is the successor to the manuscript tradition of Takamiya MS 56 and Wellcome MS 632. Wellcome MS 632 stands out among the birth girdles with its proven use during birth, along with its demonstrated presence of other substances, honey and

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a, and Mary Morse, "A Birth Girdle Printed by Wynkyn de Worde," *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 13, no. 1 (2012): 34.



the mother and child, easing their anxieties and fears. The girdles straddle the boundary therefore, enough overlap between textual amulets and charms that birth girdles could be categorized as both.<sup>75</sup> Use of birth girdles is most evident with Wellcome MS 632, which proves most useful for this study, as it has marked signs of wear through devotional rubbing, kissing, touching, along with scientific discovery of cervical fluid and foodstuffs prescribed in medical compendiums. Therefore, birth girdles act as a soothing ritual for medieval women during the tumultuous process of childbirth because they appeal to higher powers, include physical devotional aspects, and physically protect and guard the womb through girding.

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<sup>75</sup> Morse, "'Thys Moche More Ys Oure Lady Mary Longe'," 219.; Blackard, "Delivered without Peril," 26-27.

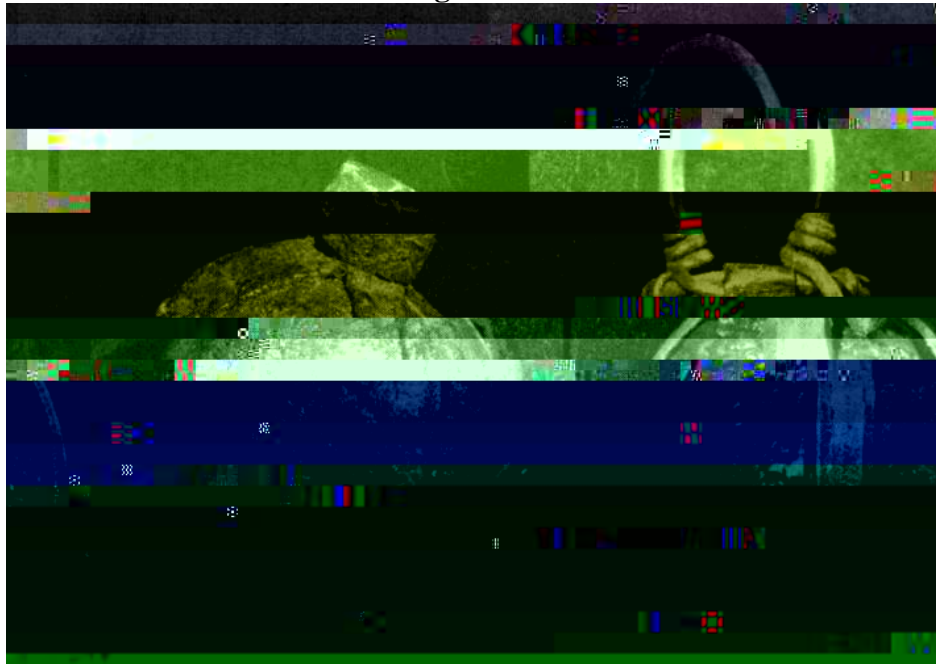


Throughout my thesis, I have developed a cohesive understanding of the childbirth ritual tradition. The study of each childbirth ritual on its own, chapter by chapter, and through a study of them together in the greater context of the thesis, has demonstrated a larger childbirth ritual tradition in late medieval England. Moreover, the thesis depicts the fluidity of rituals in practice, analyzing the breadth of rituals available to parturient women during the period. Although it cannot be proven, it can be presumed that parturient women in late medieval women did not practice just one of these rituals, as evidenced by the milk and honey remains on Wellcome Collection MS 632, demonstrating the use of multiple rituals simultaneously.

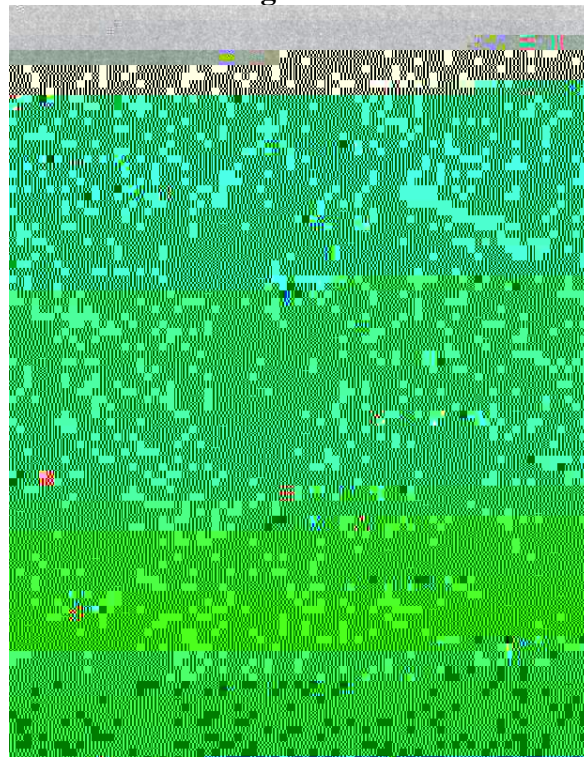


IMAGES

**Figure 4.1**



**Figure 4.2**



**Figure 4.3**



Figure 4.4

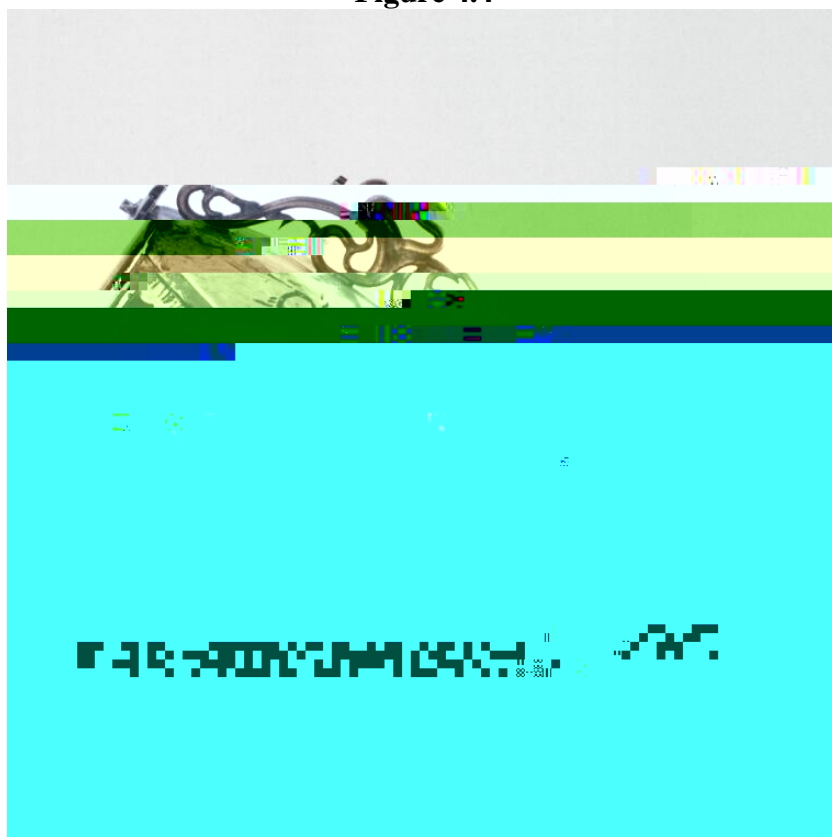




Figure 6.1

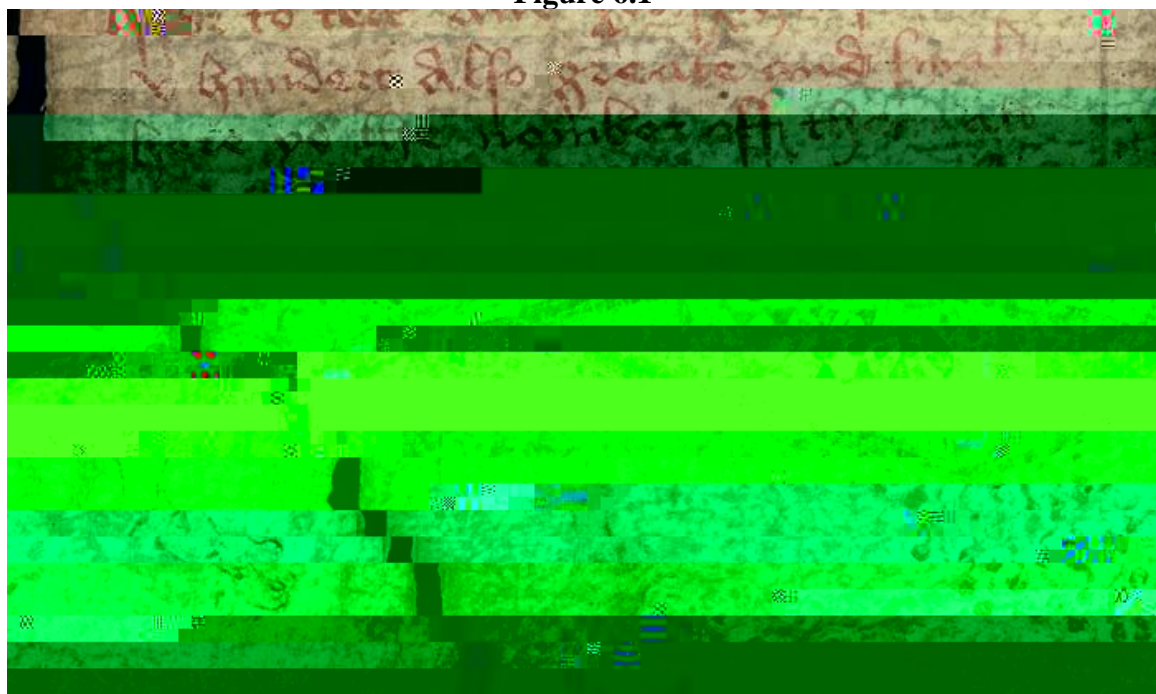


Figure 6.2

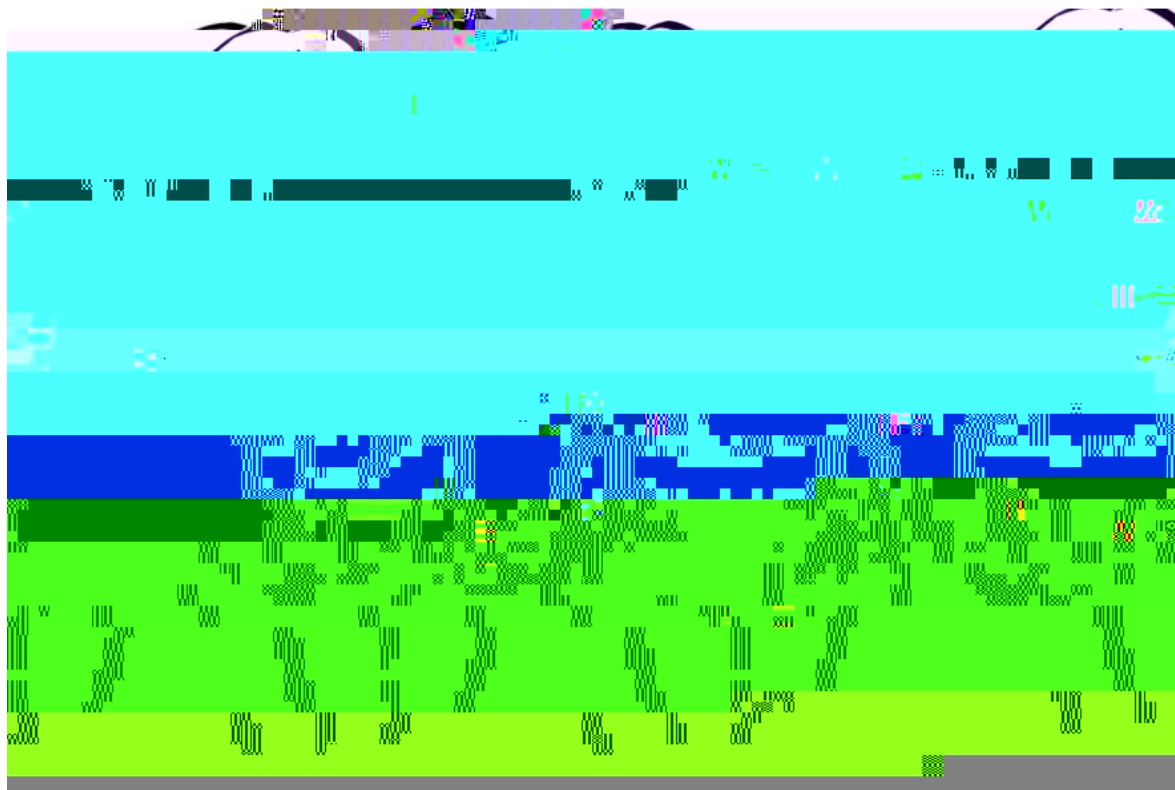
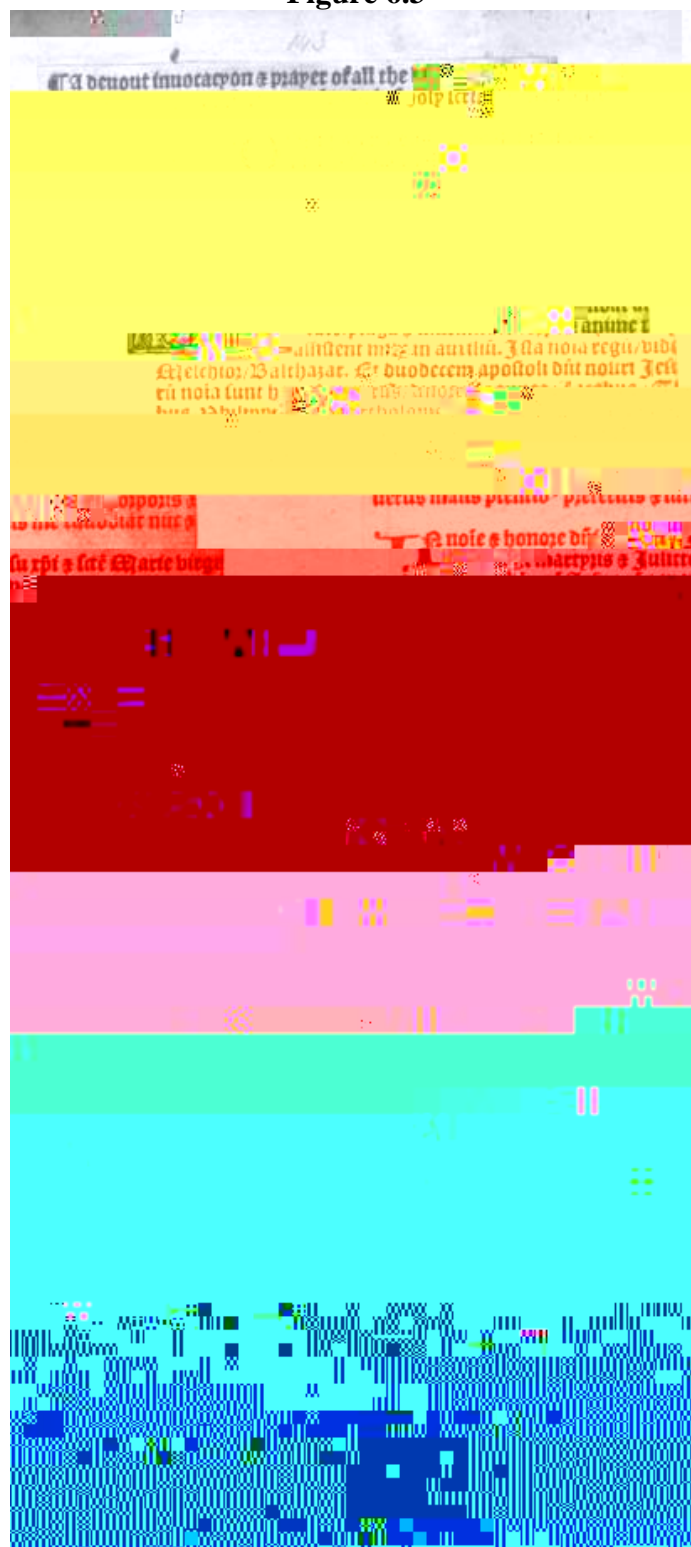


Figure 6.3



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