“To Women This Is Not To Be Told”

Secrecy in Contraception and Abortion in late Medieval Scandinavian Medical Texts

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Abstract
In reproductive medicine in late medieval Scandinavia, different kinds of secrecy are a through line. Secrecy can indicate privacy or propriety – elements of the reproductive process that are concealed from view out of shame and social taboo. Secrecy can also indicate the illicit nature of fertility management that is concealed to avoid punishment or stigma. Yet another facet is not secret in this sense of unknown or guarded knowledge, but instead indicates something that is known but ought not to be spoken about openly. Tension between the inaccessibility of reproductive matters to men, and those men’s suspicion of women’s motives, creates an uneasy push and pull between discovering women’s reproductive secrets and keeping them hidden. This dynamic plays out in surviving late medieval medical texts, in which reproductive knowledge and control are assigned to women, but also, paradoxically, concealed from them.

Keywords: Abortion, contraception, medicine, women’s health, secrecy, hidden knowledge

Contraceptives and abortifacients exist in several late medieval medical compendia from Scandinavia, which express varying attitudes towards their use. Some evince sympathy for women who might be afraid to undergo pregnancy and birth, others a suspicion that control over their own reproductive lives might enable women to commit, or conceal, sexual transgression. This anxiety around concealment is one of the common threads in discussions of contraception and abortion in medical texts in this period. Karma Lochrie comments that the power of secrets is not in the actual content of knowledge per se, as it is “a manner of rhetoric, and

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its power lies less in what is kept hidden than in the dynamic between the 'knows' and the 'know-nots'" (Lochrie 2012:93). This dynamic is complex in late medieval Scandinavia, with suspicion of women's motives on the one hand, and the desire to maintain concealment of reproductive matters, which were traditionally within the feminine sphere, on the other, often in tension.

These cultural tensions are especially clear in medieval medical texts, here defined as medieval manuscripts that self-identify as containing healing knowledge, for example through claims that a particular herb or remedy "heals" or "helps" the body, which encode expectations about women's bodies, desires, and practices. Monica Green (2008:11) writes that medical manuscripts are "crafted documents meant to serve specific, historically contingent purposes" and that they should therefore be analysed using the skills we apply to literary documents. Medical manuscripts, as crafted documents, can be understood themselves as a kind of performance. Naomi Preston writes of the culinary and medical compilation of Anne de Croy, that the "collection should not be viewed as a straightforward instruction manual for the preparation of everyday medicines and culinary concoctions, but should be understood as a memorialisation, a performance of knowledge" (Preston 2024:209–10). As documents, they represent the owner and compiler's erudition, access to different forms of knowledge, and authority. Their relationship to actual medical practice, particularly folk medical practice, is murky and difficult to determine. However, even though medical texts cannot be said to accurately represent women's reproductive medicine in this period, the texts are written on a shared cultural understanding of who uses contraceptives and abortifacients, when, and why. The kind of healing performance expected is implied in the text, even if it was not instantiated.

In a discussion of how folklore's concentration on performance can be valuable to medieval studies, Lindow (2018:4) compares manuscripts to "scripts," writing that

> we have the scripts, and sometimes through other documents or archaeology an idea of what the theater was like, but we missed the performance. It is easiest to stick to analysis of the script – in this metaphor the manuscript text – but we owe it to ourselves to get an idea of what people did with the script: how actors might have declaimed the lines and what the interaction with the audiences might have been like.

If we imagine medical texts as a script of healing, we can learn about expectations of the performance. Who the abortionist and patient are presumed to be, when such procedures are imagined to be used, and when they are appropriate.

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There have been several studies on abortion and contraception in medieval and early modern Europe, especially in the legal sphere. Wolfgang Müller (2012), for example, traces the ways the legal codes developed over time in their approach to abortion. Sara M. Butler (2011) discusses "abortion by assault" in late medieval English legal cases. In a medical context, Jennifer Evans (2014), in her study of aphrodisiac medicine, discusses contraception and the role aphrodisiacs play in fertility management. Maeve Callan (2012) also explores the phenomenon of divine abortion and the disappearance of foetuses from the womb in medieval Irish penitentials. In works on medieval Scandinavia, however, the focus of research on medieval women's reproductive health has tended to be on childbirth. There have been studies, for example, on the archaeological evidence for infanticide and death in childbirth (Wicker 2012; Sellevold 1989), descriptions of birth and parental relationships in religious and miracle texts (Cormack 2008; Fröjmark 2012), the role of magic in birth (Mundal & Steinsland 1989), depictions of birth in artworks and ballads (Møller-Christensen 1944), or, as in the case of Grethe Jacobsen's 1984 survey of possible sources for childbirth, all of the above. However, less attention has been paid to women's medicine in the medieval medical texts, perhaps because, as Jacobsen (1984:95) notes,

> With few exceptions the study of gynaecology and obstetrics was in the hands of male thinkers whose ideas and concepts were based on the classical philosophers, not on empirical study. Their writings reveal little about women's physical and social conditions but quite a lot about men's ideas concerning women and reproduction.

For studying the reality of women's reproductive lives, these sources are problematic, however studying the "men's ideas concerning women and reproduction" can still be illuminating because they demonstrate the cultural circumstances in which women pursued fertility management strategies.

In this article, I am not focusing on the moment of abortion or contraceptive use, but on the ways that medical texts contribute to and reflect beliefs and assumptions about fertility management, beliefs that affect men's and women's response to abortion and contraception. Specifically, I will examine how silence, suspicion, and perceptions of secrecy operate in cultural ideas about the prevention and ending of pregnancy.

I begin with the legal context, examining how the law codes can reveal the kinds of taboo that surround contraception and abortion and prevent open discussion of these matters, and then move to discussions of contraception and abortion in late medieval Danish and Swedish medical texts. I draw on three main manuscripts for this discussion: Upps D600, a Danish

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compilation of medical texts and herbals from around 1450; NKS 66 8vo, a manuscript from fourteenth-century Denmark containing a collection of works attributed to Henrik Harpestreng, the famed thirteenth-century doctor; and X 23, a Swedish manuscript containing a translation of *Liber Herbarum*.

Legal Context

Abortion was not specifically prohibited in any of the Swedish, Danish, or Norwegian secular laws until the early modern period, but is discussed in the context of laws on slander or in regulations for religious penance. For example, Anders Suneson, the thirteenth-century Archbishop of Lund, wrote on abortion: "On abortion. If a woman has committed abortion, and it can be proven that the foetus was ensouled, the mother and father shall be punished with the same penance which is the custom for manslaughter" (*Danmarks Riges Breve* 1938:92).

The connection between abortion, at least after the ensoulment of the foetus, and murder or manslaughter should be understood in the context of European legal thought. Müller (2012: 2) comments that the legal theories of Italian jurists such as Azo and Gratian characterized the killing of a foetus in the womb as homicide after the ensoulment of the foetus – which occurred "forty or eighty days into the pregnancy, depending on whether the expected baby was a boy or a girl" (Müller 2012:2). The difference in gender came from Aristotle, who believed that male and female foetuses formed their bodies at different rates. This reasoning was particularly widespread in ecclesiastical sources and "[b]y 1250 it must have been known all across the Latin Christian world, from Portugal and Ireland in the extreme west to Poland and Hungary in the east" (Müller 2012:2). In Sunesen's statute, we can see this idea spread to Scandinavia some decades earlier, at least in learned ecclesiastical circles, likely due to his studies abroad in "theology and law in France, Italy and England" (Murray 2017:99).

Notable in Sunesen's statute is that although he attributes the action of abortion entirely to the woman, he punishes both the mother and the father of the foetus, identified not by their relationship to one another, but their relationship to the child. The implication is that the abortion was partially caused by the actions of the father, perhaps by refusing to take responsibility for his child. The statute, by always imagining some culpability resting with the father of the foetus, assumes that the proximate cause of an abortion is likely to be the difficult and unsupported circumstances of the mother. This, however, does not seem to be typical

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in medieval Scandinavia. Heinonen (2024:10) notes that infanticide and abortion were strongly linked to women in the medieval law, writing that "Since pregnancy, giving birth, and childcare belonged to women's area of life, the crime of killing a child was strongly linked to femininity."

Abortion is also discussed in the first book of *Yngre Västmannalagen* in Chapter 25 (*Vm bælgmorþ*): (1838:109–110): "A woman is accused of intentional abortion. If there are witnesses and certain testimony, whether it is seen on her nipples or [alternatively] women are witnesses to the fact that she was pregnant, she is fined six marks." As was often the case in the medieval period, acquittal or conviction relied on personal reputation. As can be seen in the text, physical evidence is required, but only of the fact of pregnancy. Witnesses comment on her *spinom* or nipples, or bear witness that she was pregnant (*haffwande*). The collection of facts (used to be pregnant; no longer pregnant) and the general view of the community determines whether an abortion occurred, presumably depending on beliefs about the kinds of social circumstances that will result in a woman seeking to terminate her pregnancy.

Crucially, it is women who must bear witness to the pregnancy. It could be the case that the law is referring to proto-midwives (these laws were from before the institution of midwifery) or helping women of the kind that appear in Danish law to examine women claiming to be pregnant after the death of their husband: "If a wife says she is with child after the householder is dead, then she shall keep her property undivided for twenty weeks. Thereafter good women shall see to and decide what the case is" (Tamm & Vogt 2016:244). "Good women" appear in several of the medieval Danish laws to examine women on reproductive matters, suggesting reputable matrons in the community. However, an examination by a "good woman" after an abortion would have been little use in determining whether she had once been pregnant.

It could also be the case that the pregnancy was generally known and observed by the community, yet the law requires witnessing by women. In this case, it may be that even if the same information is available to both men and women, the law assumes special knowledge in women. Alternatively, even if the same information was available to both men and women, the law may instead be reflecting a norm of who was considered qualified to notice a pregnancy. Secret knowledge is then not actually made secret by who knows it, but rather who is allowed to speak it.

Restrictions on speech also feature in the last form of law in which abortion appears: laws against slander. For example, in the *Äldre Västgötalagen* (1919:63), a regional Swedish law from the thirteenth century, the *firnær orþ* (abusive words) are accusations that "a woman has had sex with her father, has aborted her child, or has murdered her child".

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It is notable that, in this case at least, *Äldre Västgötalagen* distinguishes between the killing of a pre- and post-delivery child, although it considers the two equally serious. Mitchell (2011:151) writes that these accusations "conjure in gendered terms the most despised and serious vices the medieval Nordic mind could imagine." Yet, at the same time, silence is to be maintained about these sins, which are a matter for private consultation with priests, not for public discussion. In this case, the inflammatory nature of the accusation and a desire for public peace is the reason for the rule, rather than a general prohibition on speech in this area. Yet prohibitions on speech for reasons of public peace can also apply to more informal social restrictions on speech that cause distress or discomfort.

The lack of speech and secrecy concerning the loss of pregnancies or infants, deliberate or accidental, is a thread that runs through many of the accounts examined in this chapter. This secrecy is double-edged. Harris-Stoerz (2012:266) identifies "a pervasive fear of what evil women might do through their control of the birthing process. Women were portrayed as untrustworthy tricksters, apt to take advantage of any special concessions granted to them, or to falsify pregnancies, or to foist bastard children on their husbands, or even to kill their own children."

Yet fears of sexual transgression such as fornication and especially adultery did not always simply manifest as action against abortion by men. Sara Butler (2011:792) in her study of abortion by assault in late medieval England, points out that in many cases "abortion by assault" seemed to be perpetrated by lovers and even husbands. She asks: "How often did suspicions of a wife's adultery lead a husband to turn to abortion? The medieval world's censorious stance on the female sexual nature must have egged on some husbands' fears when informed about an unexpected pregnancy." It is likely symptomatic of the suspicious attitude of many medical texts and accounts of infanticide that this element of abortion, despite being common in legal records in Europe, does not seem to feature much in the Scandinavian imagined practice of abortion in medical texts.

Substances to decrease desire were often accompanied by an underlying assumption in medical texts that it would be men, not women, who would administer them. Cultural assumptions in medical texts therefore resemble the legal situation, where sexual behaviour – marriage, seduction, sexual assault – is portrayed as being under male control. Miscarriage, abortion, and infanticide, however, occur in a reproductive context where men traditionally have no access. Jacobsen (1984:109) comments that the man was "given control over the social and economic conditions governing reproduction; but he was also excluded from the greater part of the process, especially the culmination, the birth itself." This ambiva-

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lence can be seen clearly in the laws that struggle to maintain a veil over women's matters while simultaneously trying to police them.

This is reflected in medical texts, which, unlike cures aimed at lust, tend to assume that abortifacients are administered by women. Contraception, however, is between the sexual encounter and the reproductive process, and therefore in an ambiguous area of knowledge and control. That ambiguity results in remedies in medical manuscripts that do not necessarily present contraception as knowledge belonging to, or even accessible to, women. This is unlike the presentation of, for example, abortifacients.

At the same time, however, the choice of whether or not to use contraceptives is still not always presented as belonging to men. Choices in women's fertility are therefore understood as more complex in these manuscripts than existing within the spheres of masculine or feminine control. Knowledge about reproductive control is therefore a site of negotiation. There is tension between the desire to shroud the mysteries of women in secrecy for the sake of decency, and the desire to penetrate the secrets of women out of suspicion, for fear that they were misusing their limited control over the reproductive sphere.

Contraception

Prescriptions for both contraception and abortion appear in Danish and Swedish medical manuscripts. In this section, I will analyse two contraceptives, both from the manuscript Upps. D600. One from the text *Liber Herbarum*, and one from an unnamed medical text, which for ease I will refer to as D600 here. Both texts include comments from the writer speculating on the reasons for a woman to consume them. Grethe Jacobsen (1984:92) comments that women were unable to control when they got pregnant in the Middle Ages and "[p]reventive measures were known but neither effective nor safe in this period." While this may have been true in reality – Riddle (1999) has a higher opinion of the efficacy of these kinds of remedies – nonetheless the medical manuscripts themselves evince a belief that contraception can prevent pregnancy. The claim to efficacy may, of course, have been an exaggeration or a convention of the genre to bolster the authority of the text, but the focus of my analysis is not on the use of the remedies themselves, but what the commentary reveals about who was assumed to be using contraception and why.

In *Liber Herbarum*, a herbal treatise attributed to Henrik Harpestreng, a compilation of different medical texts, the eighth virtue of *Galanga* (probably *Alpinia officinarum*) is listed as: "if a woman holds it in her mouth, chewing, and has sex with a man, she will barely be able to con-

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ceive, but to women this is not to be told." The perspective of this cure is clearly masculine. Despite the fact that the contraceptive action is actually performed by the woman in this sexual encounter, it is the man who is presumed to have the knowledge and the ability to direct her to do it. However, unlike the aphrodisiacs in the previous chapter, where the decision to administer cures for lust is assumed without controversy to be in the hands of a male figure, this text demonstrates anxiety about the information getting into women's hands. The assumption seems to be that if women were told how to prevent conception, they would misuse the information. Although many contraceptives also had an anaphrodisiac effect, they may also have had a socially aphrodisiac effect in that they gave women license to have sex without fear of the consequences, undermining social control over sexual behaviour.

Contraceptives and abortifacients were by no means unknown in the medieval period, but some were clearly written about with ambivalence. Monica Green (2008:222) cites an example of a warning that a contraceptive is not to be revealed to all women. She also comments that "contraceptives were eliminated from most of the vernacular translations of the Trotula addressed to women" (Green 2008:177), despite the fact that the knowledge of contraceptives was often attributed to women, specifically sex workers. Nevertheless, Green (1990:60) also claims that "the Constantinian corpus displays no signs of wholesale adaptation to the moral dictates of Catholicism on issues of sexuality or, consequently, of contraception." Efforts at censorship were not universal by any means.

Despite the suspicion of this warning in *Liber Herbarum*, however, D600 (196–230) in the same manuscript presents the fear of the reproductive consequences of sex much more sympathetically: "Those women who do not wish to become with child because they are afraid to die or for other reasons then shall she eat the bone which is in the heart of a hart." The woman is instructed to eat a bone from the heart of a deer and carry the uterus from a goat that has had a kid. Evans (2014:118) includes both harts and goats in a list of animals considered particularly lecherous. In this cure, particularly, the goat is also noted as already proven fertile. It is surprising that these objects should be talismans against conception when each of them has such a clear link to sexual fertility. As Norrman and Haarberg (1980:131–132) comment: "Such is the psychological mechanism at work that it is precisely on the most specific level that variations occur, however strange this seems when it involves diametrical oppositions and inconsistencies."

The last part of the cure at first glance seems more straightforward in its promotion of infertility. Smearing or stepping over women's blood could perhaps have a symbolic emmanogogic function: preventing con-

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ception by provoking menstruation. However, as Cathy McClive (2016) has shown, as least in the early modern period, while the connection between cessation of menstruation and pregnancy was understood, it was not considered absolute proof of pregnancy, since some women could be pregnant and still menstruate, or become pregnant never having menstruated. Evans (2012:4) has also argued that emmenagogues were also considered fertility enhancers. The cure could, however, simulate miscarriage, given the blurred line between contraception and abortifacient especially in a context where quickening is the most reliable method of confirming pregnancy, and abortion before the point of ensoulment was not considered punishable. It may be the case that, rather than writing off the power of the goat uterus as simply having a sexual connotation that might work equally well for fertility and infertility, we should consider the significance of a womb that has once been occupied, now being empty. Perhaps both the latter cures are in fact promoting infertility in the same way. Rather than prevent conception, they prevent a continued pregnancy.

Clearly, there were differences in how different people approached the topic of contraception in this period, but one key element of both texts – the more suspicious and the more sympathetic – is in the tension between the designation of reproductive concerns as women's business that ought to be kept concealed from the public eye, and suspicion of women that leads to the desire to penetrate that secrecy for fear that it is misused. That is, the tension between propriety and suspicion.

In the case of D600, the writer offers one reason that a woman might choose to use contraception – fear of death – but then, evincing little concern, adds "for other reasons" without seeming to be as worried as the writer of *Liber Herbarum* about the appropriateness of those reasons. In *Liber Herbarum*, however, it is clear that the writer is so suspicious of the motives of women that the knowledge of contraception should be kept from them entirely. It suggests that there is no valid reason for a woman to take a contraceptive, or at least, that arming women with that knowledge would be more dangerous than any possible benefit. It seems, then, that *Liber Herbarum* included the cure so that men could control their own fertility, but included the warning to prevent women's control of their own fertility in situations in which it might conflict with their partner's wishes. Alternatively, the property could have been included for no practical reason at all, but simply out of a desire for scholarly completeness, reflecting the late medieval interest in generation (Green 2008:205). Certainly not being allowed to inform a woman why she should have to continually chew galangal during a sexual encounter might have made practical implementation of this cure difficult, perhaps suggesting it was

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never intended for actual use.

This "virtue" is absent in an earlier, related manuscript, *The Danish Herb Book*, which notes that Galanga is good for cold stomachs, increasing lust, and swollen testicles, with no mention of a contraceptive use at all. At first, this suggests that there may be some mediation occurring. Perhaps the writer of *Liber Herbarum* believed that contraceptive information that should be concealed from women could be added safely in Latin, which women were less likely to be able to read than the vernacular. However, the same contraceptive information can be found in a Swedish manuscript that translates and mixes both *Liber Herbarum* and *The Danish Herb Book*, from the manuscript X23, dated to around 1500. This manuscript was first associated with Olaus of Torpa, but shortly after its creation, it was owned by Christina Månsdotter, an aristocratic woman from Sundby, and is now called Christina Månsdotter's Leechbook. This version of *Liber Herbarum* gives a slightly different warning: (The seventh [virtue] is that if a woman has it in her mouth, chewing with wine, and courts with a man at night, she shall scarcely become pregnant. And this shall the man not explain to the woman, but keep it secret" (Klemming 1883:72–73).

While the manuscript does not say anything about its own production, we can see an imagined context of use in the phrasing. Hellwarth (2013:45) argues that women could belong to "textual communities" which allowed for the sharing of texts:

> These communities could, and did, use their shared "literacy" to interpret, perpetuate, and rebel against the cultural structures that defined women and their relationship to God, to men, and to mothering. They did this through dissemination of knowledge, through oral transmission (reading aloud, gossiping, teaching), and through private and public reading.

However, this is not precisely the form of public literacy imagined in the text. Rather, the phrase "women are not to be told" implies a literate man sharing the knowledge in the text orally with a woman. The writer clearly centres a (literate) male figure, who disseminates secret information to women who cannot access it on their own. The context of that dissemination is not clear from the text, but the impersonal language in the Latin contrasts with the warning in the Swedish. Unlike the Latin, the Swedish uses the definite article, meaning that the person who might tell the woman is in fact the same person as the man she "courts with at night". The Latin cure might indicate a textual community centred around a treacherous man, but the Swedish cure clearly identifies the sexual context in which it expects men to communicate this contraceptive to women.

Although *Liber Herbarum* and this Swedish translation seem to imagine

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this knowledge spreading to women through men, at least for the Swedish translation, we have evidence that this was not the case. The manuscript was known to have been owned by Christina Månsdotter, a (presumably) aristocratic woman from Sundby, who may have been the same Christina Månsdotter who later become a nun in Vadstena and helped to write A 80 (Birgitta Andersdotter's breviarium and prayer book), a book in Swedish and Latin. She was known to have owned the book before 1519, which means that she received the book shortly after its creation. The warning in the Swedish failed to prevent women's access to this information. A man (the scribe) did, in fact, communicate information about contraceptives to a woman. The act of writing the contraceptive in *Liber Herbarum* facilitated the translation of it and allowed a confirmed case of a woman having access to it.

The ease with which the contraceptive ended up in the hands of a woman and the possibly sexual context of imagined use may have created some anxiety in later readers of *Liber Herbarum* about the misuse of the information. The warning on its own, and the possible protection of the Latin language was no longer understood as sufficient, because the explanation of the contraceptive use was crossed out. This section is the only part where some of the text is crossed out. In fact, both sexual uses of Galanga (the other one being an aphrodisiac) were crossed through. This could be understood in two ways: the first is that this was an attempt to prevent this dangerous information from being read; the second is that the crossing out was supposed to indicate disapprobation without actually removing the information. The text is still legible. Adams (2015:192) suggests that a code in a different manuscript, NKS 66 8vo, a version of *The Danish Herb Book*, may also not have been actually intended to conceal the meaning of the sentence. He notes that a key added to the end of the manuscript that lists various gynaecological cures includes a line in code: "A simple key (a = 1, e = 2, i = 3, o = 4, u = 5), is all that is required to decipher the text as 'prouocat foetum', which leaves us wondering whether this is a genuine attempt to disguise the words, or whether the scribe simply could not bring himself to mention induced abortion explicitly."

In both cases, it may be that the point is to make a show of concealment to indicate that it ought to be concealed, without actually concealing the information.

If we do understand this as an attempt to delete this material, there is yet another possible method of mediation here, representing not just a desire to conceal the information, but anxiety that the methods already employed were not sufficient. This could mean either that it might still be possible for women to access the text, or simply that they thought that any audience for these cures was dangerous. Unlike the exhortation

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not to tell women, however, this method of mediation is not necessarily gendered. The later reader who crossed out this section of the text may have felt not just that it was unsuitable for women's eyes, but also that it was unsuitable for men. This is made more likely by the fact that the sixth virtue of galangal is also crossed out. That property is: "that if someone eats it morning or night and holds it in the mouth when he has sex with a woman, he does not lose his powers and his love will please women greatly." Although this cure does discuss women's sexual enjoyment, its focus is not on female sexual behaviour, but instead on male. The man in the cure is pleasing women in the plural, clearly extramaritally. Unlike the contraceptives and abortifacients in extended versions of the Trotula that Monica Green (2013:222) describes, this property is aimed at improving male sexual performance.

The inclusion of this remedy in the text demonstrates a perspective that may explain the difference between the contraceptive in *Liber Herbarum* and in D600. The contraceptive in D600 appears between cures for a suffocating womb and tapeworms. While the cures in *Liber Herbarum* are focused on masculine enjoyment, the imagined women of D600 are themselves the patients.

Abortion

Texts such as *Liber Herbarum* and D600 demonstrate very different underlying assumptions about the purpose of contraceptives. Neither text, however, includes explicit abortifacient recipes, although they include remedies that may have been understood to provoke miscarriage. Sara Butler (2011:782) acknowledges that many of the cures written down that claimed to aim at curing menstrual irregularities, among other things, likely were responding to a real need, but points out the necessity of understanding that some remedies may have had multiple purposes, and that illicit aims such as abortion may have been understood to result from remedies to purge dead foetuses and cure menstrual irregularities while "masking the intent".

However, even if the texts of Upps. D600 do not include explicit abortifacients, both *The Danish Herb Book* and *The Stone Book* do. *The Danish Herb Book* and *The Stone Book* are two of three texts in the manuscript NKS 66 8vo which were attributed to Henrik Harpestreng. Both texts were marked as being copied by the scribe Knud Jul (Kanutus Yuul), who was associated with the Cistercian monastery in Sorø in the early fourteenth century. This section will focus on two abortifacients in these two texts.

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In *The Stone Book*, a text based on *De lapidibus,* a twelfth-century text by Marbode of Rennes (Bullitta 2017:6, ft. 26), in turn largely based on Damigeron's work on stones (Duffin 2007, 326), we have the following entry on *Orites*:

> Orites is the name of a good stone and it is three-natured. One is black. If it is blended with the oil of olives then it heals stings and bites. The second is green and protects from evil animals and serpents. The third has a colour like iron and is one way smooth and the other sharp. It causes women not to get a child. If it is also hung on a woman who is with child, then she loses the child.

Orites is found in both Marbobe and Damigeron and "is the same as *sideritis* or 'mountain stone' and its qualities are like iron. Possibly it was confused with magnetite or some black ore but the insistence by Damigeron and Pliny that it is round makes identification uncertain" (Riddle 1977:79).

This quality of Orites is found in much the same language in *De lapidibus*: "Wearing this stone a woman will not become pregnant/Or if she is already pregnant, she procures an abortion" (Riddle 1977: 80), except that the directions are reversed. For a contraceptive property, the Latin text directs the reader to hang or suspend the stone, but in the Danish hanging the stone provokes a miscarriage. The difference, if it appeared in earlier versions of the text, may simply be attributed to porous lines between early miscarriage and contraception. The stone is clearly generally anti-fertility, perhaps connected to its efficacy against snakes and snake bites. Mitchell (2019:121) comments that women are often depicted in religious literature as "condemned to nurse serpents in Purgatory/Hell, because they have refused to care for orphans, or, in other instances, their own children" or as "a punishment for lust and debauchery". A woman, through the use of this stone, seems to avoid both caring for her child and, depending on how one views childbirth and motherhood, a punishment for lust and debauchery.

The second abortifacient, this time recorded in *The Danish Herb Book*, is in the entry on *pulegy* (pennyroyal, *Mentha pulegium*): "Women with child eat it often. Then she/it will get a dead child." The she/it could refer to the herb itself or the woman. Both use the *hun* pronoun in Danish. Pulegy has long been known as an effective (and very dangerous) herbal abortifacient, with its use documented even today (Feng et al. 2023:43). Unlike other cures in this text, which offer instructions on how to use the herbs, this entry offers a description of use. It also, unlike abortifacients in other manuscripts, does not pretend to be providing this information for the prevention of miscarriage. It seems that the wording of the cure

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is distancing itself from this practice by describing the use of the herb without actually recommending it. *Pulegy* is also native to Europe and therefore would be relatively accessible, perhaps suggesting widespread use, as implied by the text's use of the word "often." The word "often" also appears in *De viribus herbarum*, one of the sources of the text, but in a slightly different context: "Often this herb if a pregnant person takes it up will miscarry" (Macer Floridus 1506:26). In this case, the action is what "often" results in abortion, not that women often take it to cause an abortion. Given the wide use of *pulegy* throughout history, however, it seems likely that both could have been true. Though the text itself does not explain why women "often" use this herb, reading the medical text in conjunction with other medieval sources demonstrates the expectations of the social circumstances of women seeking abortions. Although in the modern era, abortion is largely understood as the deliberate ending of a pregnancy by the pregnant person, the medieval attitude to pregnancy loss and prevention had porous boundaries where "attempts to kill an unborn baby through medication or mechanical means do not dwell on delivery as a crucial juridical or medical marker" (Müller 2012:168–169). It is therefore useful to turn to two discussions of infanticide.

In Vadstena in 1416, the general suspicion of women's "secret" action was illustrated in a letter from Vadstena Convent to the Bishop of Hammer, asking him to pardon a pilgrim called Ingerid, who was under a five-year penance. The letter explains the circumstances of her penance:

> She claimed to have conceived by her lawful husband, and, before the due time, gave birth to a miscarriage in the forest, which was soon taken away by a fierce bear, following its nature, it buried the remains in a hole which it made further away. For this reason, perhaps, the suspicious rarity of a case of this kind and the defective evidence of the said woman, obliged your reverend fatherly care to impose upon her a five-year penance (*Diplomatarium Norvegicum* 16:71).

From the explanation of the letter, we can see both the circumstances that caused the Bishop to impose the penance in the first place, and also cultural factors that the letter writer thought might persuade him to reconsider.

Müller (2012:222) comments that "Because a woman's ability to hide unwanted offspring increased exponentially if she lived with relatives intent on preserving family honor, judges of the Ius commune were bound to investigate socially marginalized suspects far more often than well-established ones" but adds that the greater frequency of prosecutions of "the unwed and downtrodden" does not necessarily mean that in reality abortion or infanticide was less likely among wealthy married women.

However, as the story of Ingerid's lost child demonstrates, there is a

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cultural perception that women who are married and pregnant by their husband would have no reason to kill their child. This assumption can be seen in reverse in Magnus Eriksson's *Landslag*. In the manuscript B 68, at the beginning of *Högmålsbalken* is an image of a woman stabbing an infant. The infant in the image calls out "Dear mother", but the mother responds, "If I let you live, then I will be called a loose woman." This caption demonstrates the cultural assumption that infanticide is connected to illicit sex. The motive for ending a pregnancy or killing a newborn is to prevent a reputation-damaging act from becoming widely known.

The letter also cites the elements of the story that would be suspicious to ecclesiastical authorities, which are illustrative of beliefs about infanticide in the period. The letter refers to the unusual circumstances and "rarity" of the event, but it also comments on her "defective evidence". That is, presumably, the lack of witnesses. A similar problem with lack of witnesses is detailed in a case that Peter Biller (1986:42) analyses: A woman gives birth alone deliberately, without calling any attendants, so that the birth will not be known and she can act secretly. So unusual and suspect was the idea of giving birth alone that Christian V's law in the early modern period actually ordered that women who give birth in such a manner with miscarriage or stillbirth as the result be charged with abortion or infanticide:

> Some loose women become with child, and with their childbirth in secrecy wilfully evade and do not use the properly orderly aids, who could help her and the foetus in such a case, and the same child disappears, or is unjustifiably born dead, or in other ways destroyed, then she shall be considered as if she had deliberately killed her foetus (*Kong Christian den Femtis Danske Lov*:16).

Notably, however, the law again uses the word "loose". There is an underlying implication, as in the letter about Ingerid's situation, that women who have a reputation for sexual transgression are more vulnerable to accusations of abortion and infanticide.

The fact that being alone without witnesses is a suspicious element in Ingerid's story reveals another facet of the concept of secrecy in the context of reproductive health. Childbirth was not open to men and thus was in some ways not a public event, and therefore facts that are verifiable are important to male adjudicators who could not have been present at the birth. The secrecy of childbirth itself is not penetrated, but the externally visible elements of childbirth, such as who attended, can still be used to police reproductive choices. Likewise the externally visible reputation and social circumstances of women can be used to judge whether or not she is likely to commit abortion or infanticide, possibly offering an expla-

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nation for the variance between texts in the concealment of information on abortion and contraception.

Unlike other texts that discuss the prevention or end of pregnancy, the texts in NKS 66 8vo evince much less concern about the secrecy of the knowledge they contain. Perhaps the context of the manuscript offers some explanation. As the text was copied in a Cistercian monastery, it was unlikely that women or lay men would have had easy access to it. Cistercian monasteries, however, were known to provide health care to lay people. The responsibility to care for the sick and poor and also the institution of the *infirmarium pauperum* was included in the Cistercian statutes and the monastery at Sorø is known to have included two infirmaries (France 1992:227). The medical knowledge in texts like the *Stone Book* and the *Danish Herb Book* was therefore likely not intended for use by the person reading the text, but rather a second person seeking treatment. Although invisible in the text, lay men and women attempting to access knowledge about medicine would necessarily have a layer of mediation between them and the text. The monk copying the text at the monastery may therefore have felt that information about abortion and contraception could be safely included in the texts without fear of misuse. In this case, the texts exist in a restricted sphere. Therefore, although the texts seem to be communicating reproductive information without concealment in the text itself, nevertheless the context of manuscript production means that the information is not actually being communicated openly. The later additions to the manuscript where abortion is mentioned in code may therefore represent a later, more openly accessible, context for the manuscript.

However, this interpretation is undercut by the fact that the Swedish manuscript that combines and translates both *Liber Herbarum* and *The Danish Herb Book* includes the same information about pulegy as *The Danish Herb Book*. The earliest associated person with the manuscript, according to the Kungliga Bibliotek ("Kungliga biblioteket, X 23" 2020), is Olaus of Torpa. Perhaps the original writing of the manuscript did reflect circumstances of restriction, even if that was shortly no longer the case, or perhaps, in some cases, the act of writing rather than speaking imposes a sense of restriction to educated people. Although the Swedish manuscript was clearly not created in a context that prevented women's access to the material, given that Christina Månsdotter acquired it soon after it was made, the wording of the cures in the manuscript suggest that its creator assumed that any readers would be men. The difference in the accessibility of the information is therefore not necessarily just about a lesser anxiety over women's access to knowledge about contraception and abortion but could also have been about the writer's (incorrect) estimation of the likeliness of female readers. Alternatively, just as perspec-

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tives and attitudes towards the reasons for contraceptive use among women vary in their tolerance, perhaps this manuscript represents a greater tolerance for more open speech on abortion.

Conclusion

Secrecy has multiple facets when it comes to pregnancy, either in its prevention or in its loss. Secrecy can indicate privacy or propriety – elements of the reproductive process that are concealed from view out of a sense of social taboo. Secrecy can also indicate the illicit nature of fertility management that is concealed in order to avoid punishment or social stigma. Still another facet is not secret in this sense of unknown or guarded knowledge at all, but instead indicates something that is known but ought not to be spoken about openly.

All of these kinds of secret knowledge interact in pregnancy loss and prevention. Tension between the feminine sphere of women's health that is supposed to be inaccessible to men, and the suspicion of women's motives creates an uneasy push and pull between illuminating women's secrets and keeping them hidden. This push and pull plays out in our surviving medical texts, in which reproductive knowledge and control are both assigned to women, but also, paradoxically, explicitly concealed from them.

The reasons for this suspicion can be seen in the type of women who are imagined to be likely to use contraceptives, abortifacients, to commit infanticide, or even to have a miscarriage. That is, "loose" women, to use the term from the early modern period – unmarried or adulterous women. As can be seen in the history of some of the medical texts, the letter from Vadstena convent, and the infant burials in church walls, where imagined constructions of women and their use of fertility management confront reality, there are often mismatches. Nonetheless, the ways in which contraception and abortion are constructed in medical texts, laws, and other normative texts would have been an important facet of women's access to reproductive health and medical care, and whether punishment followed. The fact that Ingerid did not fit the construction of a woman who would commit infanticide won her the support of a letter from Vadstena convent. Likewise, a woman's standing in the community could insulate or expose her to accusations of abortion or infanticide. Much like the contraceptives and abortifacients in manuscripts, women's reproductive choices are caught between required concealment and transparency.

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[1] "Om abort. Hvis nogen kvinde har frembragt abort, og det vil kunne godtgøres, at fosteret var besjælet, skal moderen og faderen straffes med samme bod, som er sædvanen ved manddrabere."

[2] "Vvites cono bælgmorþ æro til wittne oc full skiæl annatigge synes a spinom hænnar æller oc ær quinna witne þær til at hon war haffwande hæte wiþ marcom sæx."

[3] "kono hauæ at faþur sin ællær strukit hauæ barn sit fra sær ællær hauæ myrt sit barn."

[4] "si mulier eam masticatam in ore tenuierit et cum viro coierit vix concipere po-terit sed mulieribus non est dicendum."

[5] "Hwilken qwinne som ey wil worde meth barn forthi at hwn rædes at døø eller for andre

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sage tha skal hwn edæ thet been som j hior te hiærte ær / ffore t s d om quinne bær hoos sigh kot moder aff geedh ther hawer kydh fangetffore t s d om quinne goor ower andre quinne bloodh eller smør sic ther mæth."

[6] "Siwnde är om quinnan haffuer hona i mwnnenom tuggada mz wiin oc hoffuerar mz manne om nattena hon skal naplika warda haffuande Oc thz skal mannin ey oppebara för quinna wthan wel löna."

[7] "6ta virtus est quod si quis eam de mane vel vespere eam commederit et in ore eam tenuerit quandocunque cum mulier coierit vires suas non perdit et amor eius mulieribus multum placebit."

[8] "Orites hetær en goth . sten . oc ær thrinnækyns . En ær swart . Of han blændæs with oli af oliuæ . tha helær han styng oc byt . Annæn ær grøn . oc gømær fra ondæ diur . oc ormæ . Thæn thrithi hauær lyt sum iærn . oc ær annæn wagh slæt . oc annæn wagh hwas . han gør at konæ fangær æi barn . Warthær han oc . a . thæn konæ hængdthær ær mæth barne . tha tapær hun barnæt."

[9] "Hic facit appensus ne fiat foemina prægnans/Si fuerit prægnans mulier cito fundit abortum."

[10] "Ætær konæ mæth barnæ hænnæ oftæ . tha ma hun fangæ døt barn."

[11] "Sepi hāc herbā si p̄gnās sūat abortit."

[12] "asserebat se de viro suo legitimo concepisse et ante tempus debitum abortiuum in nemore peperisse quem mox ablatum vrsina seuicia sue nature sequens vestigia in fouea quam fecit remocius sepeliuit. Pro quo facto forsitan huiusmodj casus suspiciosa raritas et dicte mulieris probacio defectiua quinquennem sibi peniten-ciam reuerendam paternitatem vestram jniungere coegerunt."

[13] Thank you to my anonymous peer-reviewer, who drew my attention to this image.

[14] "kiara mother"; "vil iak thiit lyff vnna tha kallas iak drauls kona."

[15] "Vorder noget letfærdigt Qvindfolk med Barn, og med sin Barnefødsel i Dølsmaal omgaar, og ikke bruger de ordentlige beskikkede Midler, som hende og Fosteret i saadant Tilfald kunde betiene, og samme Barn borte bliver, eller paaskydis at være døt født, eller i andre Maader forkommet, da skal hun agtis saa som hun sit Foster med Villie hafde ombragt."

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