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## The Indexing of Medieval Women: The Feminine Tradition of Medical Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon England and the Metrical Charms

Keri Elizabeth Sanburn



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE INDEXING OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN:  
THE FEMININE TRADITION OF MEDICAL WISDOM IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND  
AND THE METRICAL CHARMS

By

KERI ELIZABETH SANBURN

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Keri Elizabeth Sanburn defended on June 18, 2003.

David Johnson  
Professor Directing Thesis

Marcy North  
Committee Member

Eugene Crook  
Committee Member

Approved:

David Johnson, Director of Graduate Studies

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my fiancé, Chris Behre, for his unending love and support, his willingness to listen to hours of medieval magical/medical babble, and his eagerness to bring me takeout food at all hours of the day and night so I would not have to leave the computer; and to my sister, Vanessa Sanburn, for her sympathetic long-distance listening skills.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
1. A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RIGHTS OF ANGLO_SAXON WOMEN.....	5
2. THE CHILDBIRTH CHARMS: BY WOMEN, FOR WOMEN .....	17
3. UN-INDEXING MEDIEVAL WOMEN .....	28
CONCLUSION.....	38
REFERENCES .....	41
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	44

## ABSTRACT

This thesis opens for speculation the idea, largely neglected in scholarly research to this date, that women were instrumental in creating and administering the basic and complex magical/medical procedures in Anglo-Saxon society, not just for themselves and their children, but also for their husbands, male relatives, neighbors, and friends. It begins with an in-depth study of the position of Anglo-Saxon women in their culture, and continues with an examination first of the childbirth charms and then of the other charms within this context. I hope to show strong evidence for the possibility that Anglo-Saxon women, unlike American women, were active, if not primary, initiators and exactors of their system of health care.

That women's history is often seen as a niche of medieval history is addressed, and the argument that an integrated perspective that acknowledges that medieval society consisted of women and men is called for. Though it seems that comprehensive works about the metrical charms have been accomplished, the works lack any real consideration of the part women played in medicine. A line or footnote admitting that there is no real reason to believe that women did not participate in the charms' creation or administration is not enough, for it does not truly attempt to consider the perspective of women. This is the task I have attempted to undertake.

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Godfrid Storms opens Anglo-Saxon Magic, his authoritative reference work on the Anglo-Saxon charms, with a discussion of medieval magical beliefs and practices in which he mentions that “great powers of divination” are attributed to the women of the Germanic tribes (1). Immediately following his comment about women, he translates the Old English word *læce* as “leech or doctor, i.e., a medicine-man” (1). He continues with a very informative and seemingly exhaustive study of Anglo-Saxon magical practices, but refers repeatedly and exclusively to the “medicine-men” who would have passed along the material within the *Leechbook* and other charm-containing manuscripts in order to administer them for healing and protection. He never again mentions women in this process of magic transference except as the recipients of fertility and childbirth charms. The assumption of the medicine-man is not restricted to Storm’s work—it can be found in virtually every comprehensive work on the metrical charms. Edward Pettit, in his excellent new two-volume reference work Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga (without which my much smaller project would have been exceedingly more difficult), spends a footnote in his introduction commenting that he does not doubt “that many women in Anglo-Saxon England—as in other societies and ages—would have had knowledge of herbal medicine using native plants” and that it “seems likely” that they would have been involved in the “production and/or prescriptive use of Anglo-Saxon MSS” (1). While this is a commendable consideration of women’s authorship, it is regretfully not carried over into his analysis of the charms.

Fred C. Robinson addresses gender and authorship in his article “Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship.” He points out that

The vast majority of Old English verse is anonymous and will forever remain so. We shall never know who composed the poem *Judith*, the whimsical riddle-poems of the *Exeter Book*, the Old English poems in which the speaker is a woman, and the various liturgical poems and religious meditations in Old English verse. But we should not pretend to know that women did *not* write them and

continue to read these poems with the tacit assumption that they are all the products of male authorship. The evidence surviving from Anglo-Saxon England and from the Germanic cultures in general suggests that there is reason to believe that women may have played as much of a role in Anglo-Saxon literary production as they have in the later periods of English literature, and it is perhaps time that our literary histories and our literary interpretations should begin to acknowledge this possibility. (Robinson 168-69).

In this thesis, I open for speculation the idea, largely neglected in scholarly research to this date, that medicine-women were every bit as—if not more than—likely the ones *authoring* and *administering* the basic and complex magical/medical procedures in Anglo-Saxon society, not just for themselves and their children, but also for their husbands, male relatives, neighbors, and friends. I begin with an in-depth study of the position of Anglo-Saxon women in their culture, and continue with an in-depth look first at the childbirth charms and then other charms within this context. I believe that I show strong evidence for the possibility that Anglo-Saxon women, unlike modern western women, were instrumental, if not primary, initiators and exactors of their system of health care.

The fact that women's history occupies only a niche of medieval history necessarily presents a problem. If we are to have a whole picture of Anglo-Saxon society, which consisted of both men and women, a different view must be taken. However, it is uncommon for an historian to mention women unless women are the subject being written about. This is evidenced by the fact that when doing research on medieval women, one usually looks for "women" as an index entry (usually with a couple of references), whereas an index entry of "men" would obviously be ridiculous to include because the pages would be so numerous. Adding to the reasons for segregation of men and women in academic scholarship are the assumptions placed by academics on a distant culture that is in many ways unlike that of the early modern period forward. In this paper, I use the information which medievalists specializing in Anglo-Saxon women have uncovered in order to establish that scholars have made inaccurate assumptions that Anglo-Saxon culture is similar to modern western culture in its treatment of women in medical professions and that those assumptions have severely clouded the ways and the perspectives from which scholars have viewed and interpreted the contributions of Anglo-Saxon women to their time period's medical wisdom.



It is my position that most scholars of the metrical charms will readily concede this point, for I believe it has been neglected not for lack of evidence, but because of a traditional oversight of women's perspectives in historical studies except by those who specifically consider themselves feminist historians. On one hand, it is this oversight that I have intended to refute with my scholarship on the charms. However, my reasons for focusing on the charms are twofold: In addition to disputing the aforementioned traditional oversight, I believe that it is meaningful to modern women to know about the medical practices our medieval counterparts partook in, especially if they played, as I believe, a larger part in medicine than women today do.

In Chapter 1, I review the literature dealing with the rights of women in Anglo-Saxon England between 450 and the end of the eleventh century, the time period on which my research of the metrical charms focuses. I discuss manuscript and archaeological evidence in order to develop a clearer picture of sexual difference in pre-Norman conquest England. I demonstrate that though we are dealing with a patriarchal society, the roles and positions women held, as well as the ways in which they were oppressed, are very different than those of women today. Then, in order to trace the history of women in England and to show that often the assumptions placed upon the study of medieval women are derived from later events, I briefly trace the history of women in England through the post-Norman conquest years to the beginning of the early modern era with the dawn of capitalism. I hope that this shows the modern and capitalistic assumptions that scholars inadvertently bring to medieval texts.

In Chapter 2, I use the charms known as "for a delayed birth" as an entry point into the study of Anglo-Saxon women and the metrical charms. I use L.M.C. Weston's "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," in which she suggests female authorship of the childbirth charms, as a starting point to discuss the cultural context of medicine and magic (simultaneous concepts to medieval peoples). I have researched birthing rituals and practices to see what, if any, evidence exists to support female- or male-authorship of the charms. Then, I explore the medical needs of women and children and make the conservative assertion that, at the very least, women must have been knowledgeable enough to treat the ailments of each other and their children.

In what I hope is my strongest chapter, Chapter 3, I expand upon the research from Chapters 1 and 2 in order to solidly demonstrate that women were more than likely authors and administrators of at least many, if not most, of the metrical charms beyond the "for a delayed

birth” charms. I refer to information about gender roles discussed in Chapter 1 to show that women would have had duties and responsibilities more conducive than those of men to learning about native plants and preparing the recipes in the *Lacnunga* and *Leechbook*. I consider the information about the cultural context of medicine from Chapter 2 and expand it from the narrow view of women and children to the reality of men, women, and children as a cohesive and interactive whole. Additionally, I cite evidence from the sermons of Ælfric and other documents to show that Anglo-Saxon men had a custom of going to women for healing which the Church was trying to combat.

In the Conclusion, I review the evidence I have presented and suggest that women have been severely overlooked in this department of medieval studies. I hope this will prompt scholars—especially those who don’t necessarily identify themselves as feminists—to incorporate a balanced study of women into the many other sub-disciplines of medieval history and literature: in other words, to “un-index” medieval women. This is necessary because the information that we have regarding the position of women in Anglo-Saxon England has not pervaded the breadth of Anglo-Saxon studies; if it had, scholars would already be doing this and the segregation that is so apparent would be fading away.

## CHAPTER 1

### A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE POSITION OF ANGLO-SAXON WOMEN 450-1100 AND BEYOND

In his early second-century ethnographical treatise *Germania*, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus writes about the position of women in Germanic culture:

These are each man's most sacred witnesses, these are his greatest supporters: it is to their mothers and to their wives that they bring their wounds; and the women do not quake to count or examine their gashes, and they furnish sustenance and encouragement to their fighters. (Ch. 7)

He continues, recording that women are highly respected by men for their history of restoring broken battle lines and helping with strategies, and that men “even think that there is a sacred and prophetic quality in women, and so they neither reject their advice nor scorn their forecasts” (Ch. 8). My purpose in visiting this passage is not necessarily to imply that Germanic culture in England would have been a replica of Germanic culture on the mainland, or to overstate the importance of Tacitus' observations, but instead to emphasize the powerful cultural traditions which preceded Anglo-Saxon culture.

Despite popular cultural notions, which tend to hold that today's women's rights are a product of culminating progress, women of the middle ages actually enjoyed rights comparable, though not directly correspondent, to those enjoyed by women in western culture today. While I am far from the position that the pre-Norman Conquest years (450 to the end of the eleventh century) constituted a golden age for medieval women, women in Anglo-Saxon England were granted many of the rights that were virtually unheard of for women until very recently. However, this idea goes largely neglected in medieval scholarship. For example, excellent works about the metrical charms have been published, but these works focus primarily on the charms as though they were written by men and lack any major treatment of women except an occasional line or two conceding the possibility that women partook in the administration and

authorship of the charms. Often, the authors return to the gender-centric studies as if women had never been considered, no longer including a woman's historical view. This is neither accurate nor adequate, for though I am sure these scholars would not deny the role women have always played, and continue to play, in medicine, much can be gained by looking at these issues from a more comprehensive feminist perspective.

Feminist history has attempted to balance this deficit with an equally gender-centric historical point of view, only it is at least excusable much of the time considering the huge discrepancy feminist historians are trying to fill. Unfortunately, this has led to the creation of feminist history as one of many subsets of the rest of male-centered history in general. If we are to develop an accurate picture of history, integration is critical. Edith Whithurst Williams, in her article "What's so New About the Sexual Revolution?: Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes Toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles," believes that historical changes relegated the English woman "into a fragile doll apparently not endowed with the full complement of anatomical features" (46), i.e., less than a whole person. There is evidence that women in Anglo-Saxon England enjoyed a myriad of rights in the general society. Unfortunately, those scholars who have worked on specific areas—in this case the charms and medical wisdom—have not applied that evidence specifically to their work, but instead merely conceded that it is possible in a line or footnote in an entire work. Scholars have been willing to concede women's rights in the general sense only—when it comes down to specifics, considering and recognizing women requires changing one's world view, which is a much more intensive act. It is arguable that scholars of Anglo-Saxon medical practices have not thoroughly explored the possibilities that women were involved in healing because they are used to a medical system in which three-quarters of physicians are men. Evidence that 1000 years ago women may have been the ones primarily practicing medicine in Anglo-Saxon England would certainly be meaningful to women today.

A brief review of what we know about the rights of medieval women in Anglo-Saxon England is called for. First, to deny that Anglo-Saxon England was both patriarchal and sometimes—even often—oppressive of women as we understand and believe today would be irresponsible, and I will not attempt to do so. As Helen Jewell, in her book Women in Medieval England, puts it: "the ways in which men and women actually coexisted in English medieval communities were preconditioned by human physiology, by prehistoric practices which lingered

on, by moral principles devised on the Mediterranean world, and by law influenced by the jurisprudence of the sophisticated Roman State” (21). However, it is likely that gender roles were, to the Anglo-Saxons, primarily loose distinctions applied for the purposes of efficient division of labor. According to Christine Fell, in Women in Anglo-Saxon England, “Anglo-Saxons distinguished male and female roles as those of the warrior or hunter and of the cloth-maker” (Fell 40). To presume a misogynistic fear of women onto these people, however, is to project what we know of later medieval and early modern gender politics, and has no empirical basis. The power differences between men and women had more to do with physical strength and Germanic tradition than the fear and oppression we see after the promulgation of the church, and even then we have to be careful in projecting the attitudes espoused by the leaders of the church onto the common Anglo-Saxon man.

It seems logical to begin with a discussion of Anglo-Saxon marriage laws and practices, and it is important to remember, in doing so, that the distinction between public and private life was an early modern phenomenon, unknown to the Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, marriage and “home life” would be considered just as public and just as much the business of the community as any other matter about which laws were written. From the evidence we have, it is clear that the communities felt it was in their interests to prevent forced and thus unhappy marriages. Æðelbert’s laws were clear that a woman had the right to abandon a marriage that she found displeasing (Fell 57). The Law of Cnut stated: “neither a widow nor a maiden is to be forced to marry a man whom she herself dislikes, nor to be given for money, unless he chooses to give anything of his own free will” (qtd. in Jewell 28). Most marriage contracts were clear that it was the woman accepting the marriage offer herself as opposed to a kinsman accepting for her (Fell 58). Despite the church, “from the ninth to eleventh centuries the Anglo-Saxons went on following their relatively lax rules about divorce” (Jewell 50).

Seventh-century Kentish laws detail the much older custom of the *morgengifu*—a gift, often a substantial amount of land and money for the class and wealth of a man, given by the husband/groom to his new wife (Jewell 27). The gift was considered entirely the property of the wife (whereas the husband’s property once they were married was considered to be owned jointly by the husband and wife) and she was permitted to sell, give away, or keep it as she pleased (Fell 56-7). The reasons behind the *morgengifu* are not entirely clear, but given the aforementioned emphasis on the community’s interests in women leaving marriages in which

they were unhappy, it would seem to promote a woman's ability to return to her kin and therefore prevent forcing women to remain in unhappy marriages for dependence purposes. It is a tidy cultural way to make sure that men do not mistreat their wives, and, in the case that they do anyway, to provide for the women's well-being when they leave.

A discussion of several Exeter Book riddles serves two purposes at this point: to show evidence for the argument of Anglo-Saxon women's sexual freedom and to illustrate the ease and with which scholars can make culturally-centric assumptions about medieval texts. Williams addresses the issue of Anglo-Saxon women's sexuality in depth. In her article, she contends that the riddles tackle female sexuality "in a frankly enthusiastic and descriptive manner" (47). She posits, through analysis of riddles 25, 45, 61, and 91, that "sexual pleasure clearly lay within the province" of Anglo-Saxon women and that "there was no sanction against this pleasure, since women are not portrayed as degraded nor exploited in this context" (47).

Riddle No. 25 has a surface meaning of "onion" and an "obscene" meaning of "penis." The object says it is "a joy to women," and that "[s]ometimes a very beautiful daughter of a freeman, a proud-minded woman, ventures to get hold of me, rushes upon me" (qtd. in Williams 48; hereafter all Exeter Riddles are Williams' translations). The woman in this case is portrayed as a free, proud, enthusiastic participant in the sexual act, and the object is defined by the "joy" it gives to her (48-49). Furthermore, the poem describes her "braided locks," a trait which laws of the period verify as a sign of freedom (49-50). Fell contributes that riddle 25 "suggests a rough good-humor in the attitude toward domestic relationships, balancing the formal stereotypes of the aristocratic poetry" (71). Similarly, riddle No. 45 has a surface meaning of "dough" and an underlying meaning of "penis." It describes the participating woman as "a bride, elated in mind, the daughter of a prince" (49). Williams points out that "[t]he narrative content of these two poems demonstrates a completely unselfconscious approach to a sexual situation on the part of women. Nothing indicates that the poet equates his joyous account with the lechery so dear to the hearts of the patriarchs and to the later Calvinists" (Williams 49).

Riddle 61 has a surface meaning of "helmet" or "shirt" and an underlying meaning of "vagina." It refers to "a comely woman, a lady" (50), in a positive sense and refers to her "great modesty which is set aside only in the proper circumstance" (51). Riddle No. 91 is often treated as difficult and interpreted as "key/penis," but Williams believes that "keyhole/vagina" is a more appropriate interpretation (54), making an excellent argument that the reason for the difficulty is

the riddle's previous interpreters' reluctance to see its author as a woman (54). Fell adds that riddle 63 uses "the vocabulary of romance in describing ... [the] delight of both participants" (Fell 71). Each of the above mentioned poems demonstrates the women's "completely unselfconscious approach" to sex (Williams 49).

Interestingly, the fact that the underlying meanings of each of these poems was considered too obscene to write about in academic literature shows us how, through the lens of their era's morality, the Victorians were unable or unwilling to read the sexuality of women: "[a]pparently it lay beyond the limits of decency for the nineteenth century readers to admit to certain clear implications; they skillfully sidestepped primary meanings of words, choosing innocuous synonyms, and major elements in the poem were sacrificed in the process" (52). Williams maintains that values regarding women and sexuality "have been shunted off and distorted with the infusion of other streams of culture from the continent" (Williams 46). She emphasizes the changeability of what is considered obscene and how this affects the way primary texts are treated by scholars (47). In a broader sense, this is indicative of the influence our context, as scholars, has on our interpretations of works and is symptomatic of the reason women are all too often overlooked as authors of medieval texts.

Because procreative sex necessarily requires a woman in conjunction with the male "subject," it seems reasonable to state that in patriarchal cultures, the degree to which sexuality is considered obscene correlates directly with the degree to which women are viewed as dangerous, or feared as powerful. In other words, it is one of the few functions in which men must admit they need women—the more obscene a patriarchal culture finds this, the more misogynistic the culture may be considered. Indeed, in her entire article, Williams artfully avoids ever using the words "vagina" and "penis," for, though she is eschewing such an idea as categorical decency, it would seem that she is still uncomfortable using such terms in academic literature. I believe this bespeaks our culture's (but not Williams') misogyny. The fact that the Exeter Riddles show a willingness and comfort in dealing with women's sexuality speaks volumes for the culture's feelings toward and treatment of women. Riddles admittedly deal with aspects of culture that may not be seen as appropriate in "higher" literary endeavors; however, I think the fact that women's sexuality is dealt with respectfully yet playfully in even this context is quite significant.

In marriage, Anglo-Saxon women were generally expected to cooperate with their husbands. Because of this, medieval laws provided for a wife's innocence in the case of her

husband committing a crime: “Cnut specified that a wife was not guilty if property stolen by her husband was found unless it was under her lock and key: ‘she must look after the keys of the following: namely her store room, her chest and her coffer’” (Jewell 34). Additionally, Cnut’s laws specified how women were to be cared for in the case of their husbands’ death. If a woman had no children, she was entitled to at least one-third of the marital property, plus her *morgengifu* (Fell 59), an amount that could have equaled half or more of the marital property. If she had a child (or, presumably, multiple children), she might choose to keep the child with herself and her kin or allow the child to be brought up by her husband’s kin. If she chose to keep the child, both the child’s paternal and maternal kin were to contribute (two-thirds and one-third, respectively) “6s a year maintenance, and a cow in summer, and an ox in winter, the relations being responsible for keeping up the home until the child reached maturity” (Jewell 34) at which point the wife might choose to return to her kin or stay with her husband’s.

The notion that widows were well provided for is backed up by every mention of widows in the Domesday book (Jewell 35). Laws protected women in other ways as well: rape was treated as one of the most serious offenses to the law, and, with the exception of the rape of slaves it was considered to be an offence against the woman raped instead of an offense to her father or husband (in the case of slaves it was considered an offense to the woman or man who owned of the slave). Depending on the circumstances, the penalties ranged from sixty shillings paid to the offended to castration (Fell 64). This is a reminder that the importance of class in Anglo-Saxon culture must not be forgotten. Anglo-Saxon society was very hierarchical, and class “proved more a significant factor than gender in many a situation” (Jewell 30). Additionally, the issue of women being treated as property proves to be an issue of class as opposed to sex; both men and women were held as slaves and treated equally poorly (Fell 62). Clearly, the Anglo-Saxons respected the right of a free woman, if not all women, to have sex with only whom she chose.

In addition to being protected by laws, Anglo-Saxon women often held positions of power. Many large estate holders were women; Fell claims that owners/masters of estates were “just as likely to have been female as male” (Fell 48). More than one quarter of Old English wills that survive are those of women (sixteen out of sixty, according to Jewell (29), and all of those bequeath substantial amounts of land (Fell 95). Furthermore, in addition to their involvement with estates and inheritances, ample records of women involved in legal



transactions exist (Fell 98). Fell found that “wills and charters ... make it equally clear that a statistically significant proportion of donations and bequests are made by both man and woman” (Fell 57). The abundance of references to land “sold by women, given away by women, inherited by women or in some other way under their control make it clear that they moved in the world of landed property with as much assurance and as full rights as the men of their family” (Fell 94-95).

Beginning in about 630 and lasting until the middle of the eighth century, women even held positions of relative freedom and leadership within the church. Pre-Viking monasticism operated on a double-house system with separate living quarters, but not segregation, of the nuns, monks, and priests who inhabited them. In England, these houses were under an abbess’s control, and “an abbess like Hilda or Ælfflæd was an important executive figure of considerable influence in the world, not just within the walls” (Jewell 46). Bede said that “so great was her prudence that not only ordinary folk but kings and princes used to come and ask her advice in their difficulties” (qtd. in Jewell 64). Karen Louise Jolly, in her book Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context, contributes that the religious significance of women is confirmed by the “prominence of abbesses (many times princesses or former queens) in dual-house monasteries and later in the missions of Boniface to the continent (Abbess Leoba, for example). These queens and abbesses functioned as missionaries and as partners with the monks, endeavoring to teach [and] set an example” (44). Robinson further points out that “[n]ot only were women described as leaders in learning in the religious houses; they were themselves instrumental in setting up the monastic centers” (167).

In order to trace the history of women in England and to show that often the assumptions placed upon the study of medieval women are derived from later events, I will briefly trace the history of women in England through the post-Norman conquest years to the beginning of the early modern era with the dawn of capitalism. I hope that this will show the modern, and capitalistic assumptions that scholars inadvertently bring to medieval texts. Relatively little is written about the position of women with respect to the introduction of Norman feudalism to England. We do know that after 1066, “the development of feudal land tenure made it more important to keep land in male hands and secure its descent to the eldest male heir” (Jewell 33). Frank Barlow, in his book The Feudal Kingdom of England 1042-1216 contributes that “in the eastern parts of England estates were consolidated and manors created by finishing the process of

changing commended men into tenants, by turning all personal [bonds] into tenurial bonds” (119). In this process, women landowners were subordinated under their husbands, either immediately or eventually.

Williams asserts that the Normans introduced “the ‘chattel’ concept of women” to the Anglo-Saxons (46). In her book The Law of the Father?: Patriarchy in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, Mary Murray argues that, while Anglo-Saxon women prior to the Norman invasion could simultaneously be equal sister and subordinate daughter and wife, post-conquest women were relegated to the roles of subordinate daughter and wife only because of the de-emphasis on kinship ties once a woman was married (99). Because in pre-conquest Anglo-Saxon England a woman’s blood kin remained largely responsible for her even after her marriage (Murray 100), a husband’s responsibility for and thus power over his wife was limited. However, “in the post-conquest period husband and wife formed one unit of legal responsibility” and “a wife’s legal existence was suspended or incorporated into that of her husband” (Murray 103). This gave husbands increased responsibility and power over their wives, and new laws weakened the legal and social ties married women had with their families. According to Murray, “by the post-conquest period the juridical functions of kinship expressed in wergild had disappeared. As women were no longer supported through this mechanism by their natal kin groups, married women became instead dependent upon their husbands, who were now liable for their debts and wrongs” (105). This represents a drastic change from the laws and customs of pre-conquest Anglo-Saxon society.

In Women’s Work, Men’s Property Historians Coontz and Henderson elucidate that the establishment of the individual household as the basic social unit of state society increased the power of the husband as the family’s public representative and deprived women of a second place of reference and refuge in their natal kin groups. The diffused authority that had allowed women in even patrilineal kinship societies to sometimes gain maneuvering room between the spheres of the husband’s and the father’s authority was gone. Especially as the household began to be seen as a microcosm of the social order, male authority within the household was reinforced ideologically and even legally. (156)

The Anglo-Saxons permitted married couples to divorce at the will of either the wife or the husband on many grounds, including mistreatment of the wife by the husband or perceived

infertility on the part of the wife. Post-conquest, however, the church was building up a landed endowment and stood to gain from the prohibition of divorce since, in the case of infertility, it might leave a landed family without any viable heirs (Murray 117). This prohibition prevented women from being able to divorce a husband who was mistreating them and contributed to the erosion of women's power in the household.

Murray concurs that "as the nuclear family/household became more clearly separated from the wider kin group through the processes of class and state formation, any pre-existing tendency towards gender inequality would be exacerbated" (105). Indeed, if patriarchy is generally suspicious of women's reproductive capacity, then the reasons for fearing and controlling it in feudal patriarchy are greater by many fold. It is easy to trace the increased commodification of women, their sexuality, their reproductive capacity, and their labor from the feudal period forward.

Similarly, the paradigm shift from traditional feudalism to agrarian capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created a new world of instability for women and families of the lower classes who were dependent upon small plots of land for their livelihood. According to Murray, "the middle-class ideology of female domesticity, demands for a family wage and the explicit political disenfranchisement of women, all of which were associated with the development of capitalism, intensified patriarchal power" (110). The difference between the traditional feudal lords, who had to live near, interact with, and protect their peasants, and the "new" capitalist landlords, who had impersonal and self-gain-focused relationships with their tenants, was drastic (Sullivan 234-236). Increasingly, new practices of land surveying and map-making (with actual lines and borders rather than natural landmarks like streams) made it more practical and desirable for landowners to live away from their land. Furthermore, the lines between classes began to blur more than they ever had before, making it not uncommon for some of the wealthier members of the middle class to have substantial land holdings, and, conversely, even less uncommon for previously solidly middle-class citizens to find themselves in complete landless poverty. This yields a scene typical of the early modern period for its tumultuousness: a widening gap between what is "ideal" and what is typical in the household and a system of handling land that is going through all of the problems inevitably brought about by drastic change without regulation. All this contributed to an even greater emphasis of the importance of

the household as a miniature kingdom, with the husband in control and the wife and children subservient.

As the power of the patriarchy grew, the fear of women's power did too. Not surprisingly, things were beginning to change within the home as well. The family structure was nuclear: two parents and two or three children, very seldom more because of the high infant death rate. Children of middle-class households were typically sent away from home to be apprenticed or go into service between the ages of seven and fourteen (Briggs 56). The household was supposed to be a sort of sanctuary, and it was frequently analogized to the commonwealth, making order within it very important. Women, as the center of the household, were crucial to this order; therefore, it can be concluded that men had strong interests in keeping in check all of these women upon whom so much depended. Customs for the appropriate behavior of women were stricter than ever before, with a myriad of pamphlets and other printed materials instructing "good wives" to be always deferential to their superior.

But as this ideal was being espoused by the government, the church, and the vast majority of husbands, certain people and ideas began to challenge the place of women and the traditional order of the household. Margaret Tyler and Daniel Tuvil, to name just two, wrote in avocation of equality for women and criticized traditional beliefs that men were superior and that women's interests were trivial (Wright 116, 218). Gynecological pamphlets written by women, for women, proliferated. Needless to say, these were seen as very dangerous developments, especially from the viewpoint that the household was a small version of the commonwealth, and engendered a lot of fear of women's subversiveness—thus the common morality pamphlets about how to be a good wife and operate an ideal household. As Williams points out, the intensified oppression of women came paired with the "potentially subversive possibilities inherent in capitalist social relations" that provided women with "the basis from which to challenge their subordinate status" (110).

The English statute of Petty Treason, effective between 1352 and 1358, "established husbands as petty sovereigns—domestic monarchs" (Murray 104). It states "if any servant kill his Master, any woman kill her husband, or any secular or religious person kill his Prelate to whom he owes Obedience, this is treason" (qtd. in Dolan, "Subordinate('s) Plot" 317). Men convicted of petty treason were hanged, while men convicted of high treason were mutilated, disemboweled, and decapitated. Women, however, were sentenced to the same punishment

regardless of whether they committed petty or high treason: burning at the stake, “since killing a husband or master challenged patriarchal, hierarchical social order as killing a wife or servant did not” (Dolan, “Subordinate(’s) Plot” 317). For women, then, because their existence in the commonwealth was limited to vicarious participation through their husbands, these crimes were not merely similar, but identical. Betrayal of one’s husband was betrayal of one’s king because women’s households were their countries. This view is evidence for the widespread fear of women’s subversiveness: in “Home Rebels and House-Traitors: Murderous Wives in Early Modern England,” Dolan points out that “[t]he very need to define such a crime, and the fairly regular opportunities to see or read about the offenders who committed it, suggest the pervasive fear that wives and servants could and would rebel; they might not acquiesce to their subordination, which was achieved by a complex network of constraints and coercions, a network that could break down” (5). Of course, all of this was interpreted as a sign not only of the violence inherent in women but also of the breakdown of social structure apparently allowed by the masters of such households: “the story of petty treason focuses on the contradictions and fragilities of social status as seen in weak, flawed, or absentee masters *and* in rebellious subordinates” (Dolan, “Subordinate(’s) Plot” 319).

It is out of the atmosphere of capitalist oppression—which came with the opportunity for subversion—that the current women’s movement arose, and it is this atmosphere of oppression that I think medievalists too often inadvertently attribute to Anglo-Saxon patriarchy. While it is not my intention to deny or downplay the very real oppression that pre-conquest Anglo-Saxon women sometimes endured, I do think it is important from a feminist standpoint not to deny the respect and rights given to these women and to recognize that what we do know may not lend itself to a pattern of women’s oppression that is the same as or even strikingly similar to the one which we are used to.

For decades, our assumptions reached through experience in the modern world have been thrust upon the evidence that we have about Anglo-Saxon culture. As scholars, the struggle to eschew assumptions is an ongoing and difficult change of perspective. For example, when beginning this chapter and the discussion of medieval women’s rights, I was first inclined to discuss women and marriage, or women and the home, and then move to a discussion of woman and the public sector. It seemed initially the most logical way to proceed. However, I was overlooking the important fact that the notions of “private” contrasted with “public” were

fashioned in early modern England, long after the Anglo-Saxon communities about which I am writing had diminished and disappeared. Therefore, it would be misleading to talk about “Anglo-Saxon women and private life,” since the Anglo-Saxons likely had no comparable notion of privacy that we know of. The trap of assumptions, perspectives, and medieval women is very similar. I do not wish to deemphasize the recognition of the oppression of women that feminists have fought to gain. Rather, I would like to restore to Anglo-Saxon women the rights that belonged to them, and also to empower modern women with the information that medicine has not always belonged to men.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CHILDBIRTH CHARMS: BY WOMEN, FOR WOMEN

The *Lacnunga* contains three charms created specifically for problems women may encounter while pregnant or after recently having delivered. These charms are unique because they are the only extant charms that are written solely for women. There is a “lost chapter” of the *Leechbook*, referred to by Pettit as “chap. lx” (V2 317), which contained “remedies for women’s complaints (wiþ . . . wifa tyndernessum)” (V2 317). The loss of this chapter is deeply regretful for the additional insight it might have lent into the topic of the interaction of the sexes within the medieval medical community. Thankfully, however, the charms from the *Lacnunga* are rich with such insight. I will refer to these as the “childbirth charms.” Though they have previously been given the title “for a delayed birth,” recently many scholars have made the argument that the latter is an inappropriate name since the three charms are now understood as being for more ailments than simply delayed birth. They have also often, though not quite as often of late, been treated as a single charm rather than three separate ones despite the fact that they each begin with a capital letter. I accept the idea of Pettit and others that they are separate charms but keep with the tradition of discussing them together.

Before the dawn of modern medicine, childbearing was carried out by means of a ritual created and maintained by the women of England (Weston 287). Marie Nelson suggests in her article “A Woman’s Charm” that these charms could have been used by a “patient faced with the necessity of preparing *herself* for the experience of giving birth” (3, emphasis mine). I agree fully: the charms are clearly written for a woman who is expected to perform actions and chant words on her own, without a medical intermediary. The absence of the intermediary is very telling, for it signifies two important aspects of women’s medicine: one, that unlike many of the other “ailments” for which charms were created, birth was not seen as an outside affliction that would require the skills of one more powerful in the ways of magic than the one undergoing it; and two, that the power for giving birth had not yet been appropriated by men. The absence of

the need for a more powerful intermediary suggests that the woman giving birth, perhaps because of her gender, was as qualified as anyone else to deal with her situation. Some might see this as evidence that women were seen as better qualified for the position of charm-wielder in cases that did call for an intermediary.

I believe it is more significant, however, that birth had not yet been appropriated, especially in light of current feminist criticism of modern western medicine: “[m]edical schools train physicians to focus on risk and pathology; to view childbirth as a dangerous, unbearably painful, and messy process, ‘managed’ only in hospital settings with a wide array of tests, drugs, and technologies, most of which have never been proved to be safe or beneficial” (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective 434). The appropriation of the power of mothers to give birth can be seen even in the expression of a doctor who “delivers babies.” What we see in the childbirth charms and information about Anglo-Saxon birthing rituals is a culture in which women delivered their *own* babies, with the help of their mothers, sisters, and friends—a culture in which men had not yet appropriated that power.

I will now briefly examine each childbirth charm. The first charm is directed at a woman who is undergoing a difficult pregnancy:

Se wifman se hire cild afedan ne mæg: gange to gewitnes mannes birgenne 7  
stæppe þon(ne) þriwa ofer þa byrgenne, 7 cweþe þon(ne) þriwa þas word:

þis mē tō bōte þære lāþan lætbyrde;

þis mē tō bōte þære swærtbyrde;

þis mē tō bōte þære lāþan lambyrde’.

7 þon(ne) þ(æt) wif seo mid bearne 7 heo to hyre hlaforde on reste ga, þon(ne)  
cweþe þon(ne) cweþe heo:

‘Ūp ic gonge, ofer þē stæppe

mid cwican cilde, nā lāes mid swe[l]endum,

mid fulborenum, nā lāes mid fægan’.

7 þon(ne) seo modor gefele þ(æt) þ(æt) bearn si cwic, ga þon(ne) to cyrcian, 7  
þon(ne) heo toforan þan weofude cume cweþe þon(ne):



‘Criste, ic sǣde, þis gecyþed’. (qtd. in Pettit V1 112; hereafter all full childbirth charm quotes and translations, unless otherwise noted, are from Pettit V1)

‘The woman who cannot rear her child: let her go to a dead man’s grave and then step thrice over the grave, and then say these words thrice:

This (is) my remedy for the loathsome (?)slow birth;

This (is) my remedy for the grievous black birth;

This (is) my remedy for the loathsome misformed birth’.

And when the woman is with child and goes to her husband in his rest [*or* bed], then let her say:

Up I go, over you I step;

With a living child, not with a dying one,

With a child brought to full-term, not with a doomed [*i.e.* premature] one.

And when the mother feels that the child is alive, then let her go to church, and when she comes before the altar let her say:

(?)To Christ, I have said, this is made manifest.’ (113)

The meaning of “afedan” has been greatly disputed, with possible meanings as disparate as “to nurture, rear, nourish, feed, suckle” (Pettit V2 318), but it refers in a general sense to a woman’s ability to keep an unborn child alive. The charm instructs her to step three times over a dead person’s grave, repeating thrice a chant affirming her power to cure or remedy the slow birth, the blue (or black) birth—stillbirth, and the misformed birth. Nelson posits that “in addition to its possible transference value” this combination of actions and speech “communicates a defiance with death and says, in effect, ‘I do not fear death.’” (3). She adds, “[t]he woman might well feel her confidence increase as she performs such a gesture” (3). The performer/recipient is then to step over her sleeping husband, repeating yet another affirming chant. Then, when the child kicks she is to go to church and speak an affirmation of her child’s life to Christ. This charm infuses the performer/recipient with confidence, and thus strength and power, to overcome the birth that approaches. The use of the words “þis mē tō bōte” emphasizes the purpose of this charm to help the woman face her difficulties with courage as she repeats three times: “this is my cure for...” (my trans.). The emphasis of the first person functions similarly with the words “Ūp ic gonge, ofer þē stæppe” as the woman says “Up I go, I step over you” (my trans.) to her sleeping

husband, as if to emphasize the unique position she has as a woman to deal with childbirth. Each of these elements—the defiance of death, the affirmation of the child’s life, and the use of the first person to emphasize that the woman is accessing her own power—are designed to empower the one who is pregnant to overcome her own anxieties.

The next charm is very similar, beginning identically:

Se wifmon se hyre bearn afedan ne mæge: genime heo sylf hyre agenes cildes  
gebyrgenne dæl, [w]ry æfter þon(ne) on blace wulle ȝ bebicge to cepemannu(m) ȝ  
cweþe þon(ne)/:

Ic hit bebicge, gē hit bebicgan,

þas sweartan wulle ȝ þysse sorge corn’. (112)

‘The woman who cannot rear her child: let her take part of her own child’s grave,  
the wrap it in black wool and sell it to traders and then say:

I sell it, you sell it!

This black wool and grains [*or seed or source*] of this sorrow.’ (113)

The woman who feels she is unable to keep her child alive is instructed to take a part of her own child’s grave (presumably this charm is directed at women who have previously experienced the loss of a pregnancy), wrap the dirt in black wool, and sell it to traders while speaking a chant acknowledging the carrying away of her sorrow and anxiety. The black wool would likely have been of the nicest quality the woman could acquire and may have symbolized a kind of shroud for her sorrow (and if it was valuable it helpfully explains why a merchant would have wanted to purchase wool with dirt in it). According to Nelson, “the woman rids herself of the negative force that would deny life and growth by selling its representation to a merchant who will carry it far away” (5). From a medical perspective, the preoccupation of worry about the previously lost pregnancies would create a great deal of stress for the woman, thus the series of actions and words that she is to perform and speak on her own to symbolize the transference of her stress is potentially very powerful. Again, we see the use of the first person: “Ic hit bebicge,” and again the woman’s ability to rid herself of the sorrow and doubt that is believed to endanger her current pregnancy is emphasized as she says “I sell it” (my trans.). From a psychological perspective, the community’s belief that the woman had the power to rid herself of such damaging energies without an intermediary is an impressive statement about their commitment to empowering women through their pregnancies.

The final of the three charms deals specifically with the mother's ability to feed her newborn:

Se man se n[e] mæge bearn afedan: nime þon(ne) anes bleos cu meoluc on hyre handæ 7 gesupe þon(ne) mid hyre muþe, 7 gange þon(ne) to yrnendu(m) wætre 7 spiwe þa meolc, 7 hlade þon(ne) mid þære ylcan hand þæs wæteres muð fulne forswelge; cweþe þon(ne) þas word:

‘Gehwēr ferde ic mē þone mæran maga þihtan.

Mid þisse mæran maga þihtan

þo[ne] ic mē wille habban 7 hām gān’.

þon(ne) heo to þan broce ga, þon(ne) ne beseo heo no, ne eft þon(ne) heo þanan ga, 7 þon(ne) ga heo in oþer hus oþer heo ut ofeode, 7 þær gebyrge metes. (113)

The woman who cannot feed her child: let her take milk of a cow of one colour in her hand and then sip it with her mouth, and then go to running water and spit the milk therein, and then scoop up a mouthful of the water with the same hand and swallow it; then let her say these words:

Everywhere I have carried the glorious, strong son.

By means of this glorious, strong food

I will keep him ((?) for myself?) and go home.’ (115)

It instructs her to take the milk of a solid-colored cow in one hand and then drink some, and then spit the milk into a body of running water. She is then to use the same hand to scoop a mouthful of fresh water and swallow it, after which she is to speak a verse affirming her success at carrying the child through the pregnancy. She is then to leave the brook without looking back and proceed to a house other than her own to be fed. The mingling of the running water and the milk assures the mother that her body is capable of feeding her newborn child: “she must transfer milk, of which she may fear to have an insufficient supply, to a running stream, and then take sufficiency from those same running waters” (Nelson 6). Nelson also contributes that this charm, “with its final directions that point to the reunification of mother and child (in suckling) and to her support by the community [...], seems to have been designed to help the patient with this, as well as with the other aspects of the life experience in which she is engaged” (6). The words with which the performer/recipient begins her speech—“Gehwēr ferde ic mē þone

māran” —emphasize her success in carrying her child, empowering her to continue her ability throughout her child’s infancy. The final line of her chant, translated by Nelson and Pettit respectively, reads:

“then I wish to own myself [have control of my body] and go home” (Nelson 5)

“I will keep him ((?) for myself?) and go home” (Pettit V1 115).

Though markedly different, each translation serves potentially the same empowering purpose for the mother. Nelson’s translation emphasizes the woman’s control of her own (as yet strong and successful) body, and is almost self-congratulatory, as though the woman is telling herself that the worst is over and feeding the child will be easy compared to the birth. Pettit’s translation emphasizes the mother’s affection for her new baby. This, taken after the previous lines reasserting her competence, is easily interpreted as a joyful resolve to continue her strength for the child. Then, the community’s ability to care for her is reinforced and analogized to her ability to care for her child when the woman goes into the house of a neighbor to eat food. This act has a possible strong correlation with modern medical groups such as La Leche League, which provide support and advice to lactating women, especially as they wait for their milk to come in several days after giving birth. Each of the elements in each of the charms is consistent with the idea of a medical community where women were participants and administrators more often than they were patients or recipients.

When I first encountered L.M.C. Weston’s article I was thrilled to learn that the question of authorship and administration had hitherto been asked of these charms. Weston presents convincing evidence that the childbirth charms were women-authored and -administered medical practices. She contends that the *Leechbook*, compiled by the male doctor Bald from his two predecessors Oxa and Dun, documented medical practices which were more a part of a professional, scholarly specialty than the day-to-day dealings with ailments and sickness that were a part of the community of women (Weston 281). Similarly, according to Weston, the *Lacnunga* is a male-voiced work, “except in its metrical childbirth charms,” known as ‘For a Delayed Birth,’ where, “as nowhere else, a woman speaks on her own behalf.” I will discuss her ideas about the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga* in the next chapter and for now focus on Weston’s powerful assertions about the childbirth charms. She suggests that Anglo-Saxon women had the “primary responsibility for healing, and most especially for managing child-birth” (280-81).

What implications does this information have for our knowledge and understanding of Anglo-Saxon medical practices?

Until the dawn of “modern medicine,” the process of childbirth in the western world was patterned after a ritualistic setting that was created and followed by the women of medieval England:

The actual birth was an exclusively female ceremony: the mother-to-be selected a number of women to attend her under the direction of the presiding midwife. Their preparation of the lying-in chamber re-created it as a sacred space. The caudle (a mixture of ale, milk, honey and herbs effective in inducing labor and easing pain) provided a sacred drink. The woman remained secluded within this female-constituted world until her ‘churching,’ an official (and male-dominated) ecclesiastical ceremony. (Weston 287)

The church treated this all-female ritual with suspicion and imposed a ritual cleansing upon the woman who had recently undergone childbirth and her female attendants. This cleansing ritual “had its liturgical roots in Leviticus’ injunction that the childbearing woman needs ritual purification: birth renders her impure and therefore dangerous or (from a different perspective) powerful” (Weston 288). Judging from the readiness with which women adopted this ritual cleansing, and from what we know about the unique ability of the church to recognize opportunities for assimilation, and from the fact that the childbirth charms are uniquely female-voiced, it seems reasonable to assume that pre-Christian birthing practices were the same traditionally all-female affairs as the ones discussed above, and that ritual purification was the church’s reaction to the threat of this. I believe that the church’s motives were, in effect, to demonstrate that they did not want to take part in the ritual in the first place because it made those present impure and untouchable until they had been cleansed. These ideas support the case for women’s authorship of the childbirth charms: the established patriarchy could not, and would not, take part in this ritual; therefore, those who had experienced childbirth—mothers, midwives, and other women in the community—were the ones who had the authority to create the practices carried out by pregnant women.

In her extremely helpful dissertation, “Women ben purifyid of her childeryn: the Purification of Women After Childbirth in Medieval England,” Becky R. Lee gathers together and compares the scattered but relatively abundant references to ritual childbirth purification in

Medieval England. These documents are important because they represent much of the written evidence surrounding the series of childbirth rituals in which medieval women participated. Additionally, they reveal the church's reaction and adaptation to the all-female birthing rite. Lee reveals that "[a]ll four versions of the rite of purification available to us present the same basic elements" (14). First a priest, with his assistants if necessary, meets the new mother at the door of the church where she is waiting with the women who attended her birth (14). What follows is a series of prayers requesting mercy and protection and a ritual sprinkling of holy water "after which he leads her into the church by the right hand" (Lee 16). Some versions of the rite also include a prayer entreating God to "mercifully allow this woman, who has been purified after giving birth" into his presence (Lee 17). One version, the Sarum Manual, "prescribes the postures of the two main participants: the woman is instructed to kneel down in some convenient place" and the priest is to stand beside her (Lee 30). In most areas, women were expected to undergo ritual purification for every child they had, male and female, while in others, there are only records of purifications of the mothers of female children (31).

The ritual seems to reinforce the passive role of women in the society which is in direct contrast with their active role in childbirth: "[p]ost-partal purification, like all rituals, both defined its participants and their world as they interpreted and elaborated the rite" (Lee 34-35). One of its purposes was to "restore" the woman to God and the church (Lee 36). Several versions include a prayer of absolution at the end of the rite, suggesting a cleansing of re-acquired baptismal sin and that the new mother was possibly "considered a danger to the community" (Lee 37). The priest's use of his left hand to grasp the new mother's right hand "signified the priest's power to purify and to protect others from the dangers she posed in her unpurified state" (Lee 37), and the white veil she was mandated to wear in some parishes suggested the white penance garment (Lee 28). Though the rite also contains elements of "transition" and "thanksgiving," these elements of purification "reinforce an image of the post-partal woman as impure and dangerous" (Lee 38).

The very idea of the necessity of a purification ritual suggests that the elite men who ran the church—and those to whom the authorship of all the metrical charms are attributed—felt they had reason to fear the ritual of childbirth, making it highly unlikely that they would have had reason to write charms to assist in dealing with it. The very act of reintroducing post-partal women back into the church bespeaks an institutional distance from childbirth that is far from

intimate. Those who would have had intimacy, interest, and reason to create such remedies were the women who had experiential authority with the anxieties of giving birth or those who had assisted with one or many births. This is not to say, however, that all men of the community were completely prohibited from participating in childbirth. I believe that the rite was traditionally female for reasons of pragmatism, and that if there was a man in the community—perhaps a husband or son of one of the attendants—who was known for his skill with herbs, for example, or his powerful protection incantations, those attending the birth would have had no qualms about consulting him or asking him to participate.

Monica Green sheds light upon the medieval culture of health care with respect to women with her article “Women’s medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe.” She points out that

[r]eproduction was one of the most taxing labors a women’s body had to bear, and it brought with it all manner of risks of infection and other complications. Even women neither gestating nor lactating—whether for reasons of age, infertility, circumstance, or personal choice—may have been subject to innumerable afflictions of the reproductive organs, including menstrual difficulties, infections, cancers, all of which might be further complicated by malnutrition [...] [a]nd all women, of course, may have been subject to the same general diseases and injuries that afflict men and children. (435)

That women made up a large group—possibly even more than half—of those needing medical care further supports the argument that women who were considered experts in the field of childbirth and other women’s reproductive issues were a necessity to Anglo-Saxon society. Yet historical research rarely mentions or considers this aspect of medicine because our preconceived notions about medicine rarely let us see through the surface of the evidence we do have for a drastically different way of dealing with women’s medicine.

As Jolly aptly states, the metrical charms “cross the boundary between popular and formal religion, and they show the interaction between clergy and laity, doctrine and practice, written and oral, and doing and knowing” (96). The childbirth charms are uniquely helpful when examining women’s medical history because reproduction is the essence of sexual difference. As Weston points out, part of the reason for the difficulty in researching the history of women in medicine is that we are dealing with texts that are necessarily removed from their original oral

contexts: “[t]he very presence of oral ‘texts’ in a manuscript marks them as appropriated” (282). Navigating oral culture through manuscript sources presents a myriad of problems: how are we to glean an accurate picture of an event for which all the evidence we have is layers removed from its original context and format? However, this is where the importance of these three charms becomes apparent. Unlike many texts, which “escape their original gendered social context once they are transcribed into a manuscript,” the metrical childbirth charms, by incorporating ritual and requiring performance, “retain more of their gendered speaking voice and their connection to an oral tradition” (Weston 282). We have a representation of the actions a woman who was preparing for a birth would have taken and a transcription of the words she may have spoken. Thus these charms allow us a window into the oral culture of childbirth that other appropriated texts may not.

Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford discuss the importance and appropriation of the oral culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women in Women in Early Modern England: 1550-1720. Much of this text is nonetheless relevant despite its disparate time period, for the questions the authors pose and the insight they provide are applicable in a similar way to the oral culture of the medieval period as they are to that of the early modern period. Mendelson and Crawford provide a valuable perspective of the “female life of which we can have very little direct knowledge” (217):

women were repositories of oral traditions of all sorts: literary, musical, poetical, magical, pragmatic, mythical, and historical. Such tales, songs, and apothegms have come down to us in forms that trivialize their value. [...] Speech was the primary medium for transmitting not only superstitions and magical lore, but collective feminine experience about housewifery, medicine (particularly gynecology and obstetrics), gardening, cookery, childcare, textile and other work skills, and a host of philosophical as well as practical concerns. (217)

It is almost certain that a feminine oral culture existed around the event of medieval childbirth. The fact that the metrical childbirth charms from the *Lacnunga* reflect the ideals of a culture which empowered women to actively carry themselves through the event demonstrates their connection with that feminine oral culture and separates them from the patriarchal medical culture of the elite.



The assumptions we have derived from our own experiences with childbirth dominated by modern medicine are strikingly inappropriate when imposed upon the study of Anglo-Saxon childbirth, for the cultural climate could not be more dissimilar. By today's hospital standards, a midwife-assisted birth is considered frighteningly nontraditional, and nurse-midwives, the only very slightly more traditional alternative, usually practice in male-dominated hospitals and must work under the supervision of a physician, often male, as detailed in The Boston Women's Health Collective's Our Bodies, Ourselves: "[p]hysicians assist at 95% of births in the U.S. [...] though most obstetricians are not trained to deal with normal labor" (454). The authors claim that upon entering hospitals, women become anonymous: "[w]e are immobilized, hooked up to fetal monitors and IVs. Each stage of labor is allotted a certain amount of time, and no more [...] Even now, many hospitals do not allow food or liquids during labor, so that we become hungry, weak, our contractions slowed and our health endangered" (469). Unlike the supportive group settings in which Anglo-Saxon women gave birth, women in our medical system often "are left completely alone for long periods of time—in no other culture are laboring women left so alone" (469). Additionally, we are used to a medical model that sees men's bodies as the norm and sees women's bodies and childbirth as dysfunctional and abnormal: "Nursing and medical students rarely, if ever, see a normal spontaneous labor and birth. To most of them, labor consists of a woman lying on her back, hooked up to a monitor and IV, her bag of waters broken artificially, her cervix ripened with prostaglandin gel, contractions 'accelerated' with Pitocin, and her body immobilized by an epidural" (469). In short, we live in a culture where birth has been appropriated by a hierarchical medical system designed for efficiency and profit—a model that sees childbirth as one of many disease-like afflictions that women undergo.

Despite the inappropriateness of our assumptions, which tempt us to imagine a history of women's medicine that was simply a less-developed version of our own, it is difficult to leave them behind. The medical model with which we are familiar has ingrained itself in our culture through every possible avenue. The task when dealing with Anglo-Saxon gynecological history is to suspend our current idea of medicine and look at the evidence without preconceived notions of who created medical protocol and why it was created. When we do this, we find a medical model for childbirth which had motives not of profit and control, but in which woman-created practices fostered confidence, power, and skill in other women. That this is no longer the norm is more of a surprise than the fact that it once was.

## CHAPTER 3

### UN-INDEXING MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Thus far, I have examined the cultural climate in which Anglo-Saxon women lived and used my research, along with that of Weston and others, to show that the metrical childbirth charms were part of an oral medical culture created and practiced by and for women. I believe, however, that Weston's argument is not extended far enough—for whether we accept the notion that male and female cultures were as separate as Weston believes or we accept that men and women lived a more integrated lifestyle, we must believe that information about medical ailments other than childbirth would be necessary and critical for women to know.

Weston makes the argument that the *Leechbook* documented medical practices which were more a part of a professional, scholarly specialty than the day-to-day dealings with ailments and sickness that were a part of the community of women and that the *Lacnunga* was male-voiced except for the childbirth charms (281). Though this may seem to be a sound observation, I do not believe it to be the case. The “male voice” to which she refers may simply be that of the scribe, or it may be a generic mode of expression—Fell contends that in writings of the period “‘men’ is more likely to mean people in general than males” (32-33). Furthermore, Jolly helpfully contributes that these books are important exactly because they “show us not just the ways of the literate minority who followed a Latin tradition but also local, native practice as recorded in the vernacular” (104). She adds that the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga*, unlike more scholarly texts such as the *Herbarium Apuleius*, the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, the *Peri Didaxaeon*, or the *Handbook of Byrhtferth*, are “more practical and instructional in their organization and suggest some lay origins [...] from a variety of sources” (106). These lay origins were just as likely women as men. Additionally, the *Lacnunga*, which contains the childbirth charms, “reflects more of actual practice *because* of its diverse mixture and simple approach to medicine. It is much more representative of Anglo-Saxon medicine, if what you want is the whole society and not just the narrow tradition of copied texts” (Jolly 107). I believe

that women were the authors and administrators of at least many, if not most, of the metrical charms beyond the childbirth charms. The possibility of the position of women as authors of these charms has been conceded by many but explored by few. I intend to remedy this.

Evidence that the Anglo-Saxons attributed magical properties to women is apparent in their language. Though grammatical gender is not necessarily consistent with physiological gender, the following correlations are nonetheless worth mentioning. Fell contributes that the words *wicce* and *hægtesse* (which appear in modern English as “witch” and “hag”) are used by Anglo-Saxon scribes to refer to both mortal women and the immortal *Parcae*, the Fates. Either way the words could not have meant anything as trivial and debased as their modern equivalents (Fell 30). Furthermore, Fell suggests that the compounds in *–rune*, *helrune*, *heahrune* and *brugrune* are similar, since the root *–rune* “is feminine and implies ‘one skilled in mysteries.’” (30-1). She posits that the power and skill implied by the word was thus thought of as supernatural (31).

Concurrently, Crawford refers to the word *run*, which she translates as meaning “secret mystery,” as being the core of scholarly knowledge about Anglo-Saxon magical practices (157). Because the compounds in *–rune* or *run* are feminine, we can feel relatively safe in the assumption that in the Anglo-Saxon pagan religions of pre-Christian civilization there were priestesses or prophetesses skilled in mysteries (Fell 30). L. Eckenstien writes in Women Under Monasticism that this Germanic culture’s “inclination to hold women in reverence remained, and found expression in the readiness with which they revered women as saints” (qtd in Crawford 168). Revering women as saints bespeaks a longstanding tradition of seeing women as spiritual. I will visit the issue of the Christianizing of pagan ideas in slightly more detail later.

Many other references in Anglo-Saxon literature confound the lines between human and supernatural women: “*Helrunas* may be human sybils or evil spirits. *Burgrunas* may be wisewomen of the community, but they may also be supernatural guardian spirits. Human *wicce* may possess inherent, possibly hereditary magical powers; or they may simply practice sorcery. Then again, they may be fully supernatural hags” (Weston 285). That a word like *heahrune*, (used to describe Biblical characters possessing divination capabilities) survived bespeaks cultural familiarity with the notion of women who prophesy (Fell 31). These bits of linguistic information support the view of women that was offered in Tacitus’ work.

Barrie Ruth Straus' article "Women's Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in 'The Wife's Lament'" examines instances in Anglo-Saxon literature which demonstrate the people's reverence for the women's ability to use language. She claims that "[b]y directing attention to what the speaker of 'The Wife's Lament' is doing with words, speech act theory helps us see how by uttering her song, the speaker of 'The Wife's Lament' both utters and avenges" (281). She expands

The speaker in 'The Wife's Lament,' like the Wife of Bath, much later, shows us how female strength goes beyond endurance and how women act by using words as weapons. In a culture where heroism is closely tied to fame and shame (witness the critical disputes about Beowulf's fame), a narrative which allows an awareness of the patriarchal order as a curse of the unhappy fate of women and which ends with a curse heaping woe on the specific males who perpetuate that order is a surprisingly strong weapon. (281)

Similarly, she contends that in Beowulf, "Wealtheow's brief appearances are memorable mainly because of her skill and power with words ... [her] careful choice of the right words at the right time shows a recognition of her responsibility to speak out. Wealtheow is immediately concerned with her children's fate. She acts by uttering words to try to control that fate. She reminds Hrothulf and the court of his obligation to look out for her sons" (Straus 280). Both of these examples show that this culture did not trivialize, but rather respected, women's ability to use speech in order to create the results they desired—whether those results were to avenge (as in these cases) or, perhaps, to heal.

Weston boldly suggests that

[d]espite the masculine ordering principle responsible for the preservation of the medical remedies as we now have them in the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga*, and despite the identification by name of three physicians, all male, it seems at least possible that women contributed much to medical wisdom, with the metrical childbirth charms being only the most obvious instance. We may, indeed, go so far as to suggest the existence of an identifiable female medical tradition, one which came to be partially appropriated by male authorities even as it was viewed with suspicion. (281)

The possibility that a great deal of the charms contained in the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga* were created by women and passed from mother to daughter in an oral tradition until compiled and transcribed by Bald, Oxa, and Dun is strengthened by Weston's suggestion; even Grattan and Singer, in *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, assert that "*Lacnunga* contains much purely pagan material and is packed with passages that are but superficially Christian" (7). If we accept that Germanic pagans had an oral, feminine healing tradition, then it seems quite possible—nay, likely—that many of the metrical charms were derived from this tradition and that the Anglo-Saxon women were the primary keepers of these charms until the books were compiled, signaling the tradition's appropriation. Jane Crawford, in finding that the body of material in the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga* cannot be regarded as traditional Anglo-Saxon medical practices because "any lingering traces of native traditional lore" contained within them "are embedded in a Greco-Roman medical tradition" (155), mistakes much of the valuable (and scientifically sound) herb-lore for the more "scientific" Greco-Roman tradition. Furthermore, the relationship between science and magic as related in the charms is "more complex and less clear than the modern perception of charms as representative of a kind of magic left behind in our progress toward rationalism" (Jolly 101). Crawford fails to grant adequate credit to the medical abilities and knowledge of these women. As Weston explains, "Women—at least some of them—could have gained the kind of common sense [...] from experience with health problems, in the same way that they learned, for example, the unfortunate consequences of using an iron pot to preserve fruit or the necessity of using one if onion skins are to yield an olive green dye" (281-82).

The viability of a longstanding oral tradition among medieval women is supported by Clifford Davidson in his article "Erotic 'Women's Songs' in Anglo-Saxon England," in which he discusses "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer," as women's songs. He claims that in 789, "Carolingian nuns were prohibited from writing *winileodas* or love songs. Such a prohibition is a certain sign that they were in fact composing amatory and erotic songs of a popular nature" (452). He maintains that the presence of these songs in the manuscript of the *Cambridge Songs* in England reveals that an essentially Germanic culture "could indeed be receptive to a theme and form which have been discovered to be nearly universal" (453). A comprehensive study of the women's songs presents the same difficulties as the comprehensive study of oral medical tradition: "[s]ince we are dealing here with *popular* song passed on normally by *oral* tradition, we should also not anticipate an abundance of poetic records"

(Davidson 455). His theory that “the cultural milieu of women, distinct from the men’s warrior world as represented in the heroic poetry of the age, was sufficiently separate to generate popular patterns of cultural expression along other than masculine lines” (Davidson 455) supports the atmosphere of a feminine oral medical tradition similar to the women’s song tradition discussed here.

Certainly, perhaps even reasonably, much of the established patriarchy would have felt threatened by the magic lore and skill attributed to these women. Some of the charms, such as “Against a Sudden Stitch,” even oppose specifically female magic: “the mana (*mægen*) of certain potent (*mihtig*) women told about [...] malefic supernatural beings, perhaps to be viewed as dark elves or the like” (Magoun 36). Of course, such magical practices as the use of amulets (unless attributed to a saint) and the devising of potions from herbs, especially by women, were discouraged by the church, which became less and less tolerant of traditional pagan practices as Christianity’s hold on the islands became stronger and more certain. Charm-singing was forbidden by the edicts of the council of Cloveshoe in the mid-eighth century, and witchcraft was explicitly outlawed by the end of the ninth century in English civil codes, equating women with evil spirits in more than one instance (Crawford 159-64). In his homily “On Auguries,” Ælfric condemned “the pernicious habit of devising aphrodisiacs and urge[d] Christian men to shun such *hægtessan* and heathen practices and devil’s delusions, offering a neat Christian alliterative conclusion linking the *hægtesse* with both paganism and the devil: ‘and forhogian þa hæstan and ðyllice hæðengyle / and þæs deofles dydrunga” (Fell 34)—which, by my translation, reads: “and despise the heat, and such heathen-gold, and these devils’ delusions.” In the same sermon, Ælfric criticizes the practice of consulting women for healing and encourages his listeners to obtain their cures from god instead:

Us is to secenne. gif we geswencte beoþ  
pa bote æt gode. ne æt þam gramlican wiccan. (qtd in Crawford 165)  
‘It is for us to seek if we grow gloomy  
the remedy by god, not by grim witches.’ (my trans.)

Yet, if this practice was threatening enough to be criticized in a sermon, certainly it was more common than Weston and Crawford claim, suggesting that perhaps men went to women for healing regularly. If we are careful not to over-interpret the views expressed in the above laws and sermons to apply to all men of Anglo-Saxon culture (for it is at least possible that they

belonged only to the few who preached them), then the idea of such a practice does not seem surprising in the least, especially in light of earlier accounts of men's respect for women's magical capabilities. Barlow contributes that "[t]he popular religion [...] was informed by pagan festivals and deeply coloured by superstitions with which the church had compromised. It is likely, indeed, that many men were not even nominal Christians, but the church was not strong enough to compel, and the pagans felt no active hostility towards it" (Barlow 26).

There is some evidence of women acting as healers in later medieval England. While my focus is a bit earlier, I think it is very significant that female healers existed even after Christianity became fully established. Stanley Rubin, in Medieval English Medicine, briefly mentions four figures: a woman named Matilda from Wallingford, Berkshire; another named Agnes from Huntingdonshire; Katherine from London; and an unnamed woman from Worcestershire. Matilda, referred to as "Matilda la leche" or "sage femme," practiced circa 1232. Records indicate that she was highly respected, leading Rubin to believe that her practice was a successful one (186). Agnes practiced circa 1270 and was highly regarded by her neighbors (186-7). Katherine is referred to as "la surgiene" in records circa 1286, and all that is mentioned of the Worcestershire woman is that she healed in a way that made others suspect her of practicing witchcraft (187).

Green cites records of eight women medical practitioners in England between the eighth and sixteenth centuries: "six identified as physicians, or more literally, 'healers' (medica or leche), one as a surgeon (*la surgiena*), and one as a midwife (*obstetrix*)" (440). In London, records circa 1560 (admittedly this is also much later than my focus, but it nonetheless bespeaks a tradition of female practitioners that continued even through feudalism) show approximately sixty women practitioners in the city at one time (Green 445). None of the documents suggest that these women concentrated only on "women's diseases" (441).

Green refutes the prevalent assumption that medicine in the Middle Ages was characterized by "sexual division of medical labor so absolute that men did not concern themselves with women's medical conditions [...], nor did women medical practitioners concern themselves with men" (435), presenting a far less gendered and more integrated picture than the majority of those available. She maintains that gendered assumptions are damaging because they "have rendered this fundamental aspect of women's history into a topic so trivial as to be unworthy of critical investigation" (436-7). While acknowledging that simplistic assumptions

about gender and medieval medicine are enticing, she points out that “it is astounding how little historical evidence has been brought forth to substantiate them” (435)

It is important to acknowledge the role medium plays, since written historical record—legal documents, wills, property and court records—traditionally underrepresents women. The question of method is also important:

[t]he absence of women may also be due to the parameters by which some researchers themselves have chosen to define their investigations. Focusing on the upper echelons of ‘learned’ medicine, sometimes to the complete exclusion of empirics and other healers on the legal and social fringes of medical practice (where most women would have been found), these studies by their very nature offer limited hope of documenting the existence of women practitioners. (Green 444-5)

In England in 1421 a petition was put before parliament to prohibit the practice of medicine by women (Green 449). Women began to be marginalized even more with respect to their access as practitioners, except in their positions as midwives: “once we move beyond a reductive focus on the birth event, we see [...] a world where women practitioners were gradually being restricted to a role as subordinate and controlled assistants” (Green 472). While this does not at first glance seem directly to support the idea of a longstanding medical tradition in England, it is highly unlikely that a medical practice would have commenced and developed among women during the preceding two centuries which I believe I have shown to have a harsher environment for women’s rights—both medically and politically. The very fact that there were attempts to control and regulate women’s practice of medicine means that it was viewed by some members of the developing western medical tradition as threatening. Very likely, the tradition of women healers was far older, and its persistence was much stronger, than we previously thought. In order to understand this, we need “to raise questions of power, of economic rivalry, of literacy and the control of knowledge” (Green 446).

It is my opinion that Weston and Crawford, and even Rubin, too-easily dismiss Tacitus’ and others’ accounts of the Anglo-Saxon’s regard for women’s magic, reducing Anglo-Saxon culture to a misogynistic foreshadow of the early-modern period that is unfair based upon all we know about the culture’s treatment of women. To argue that women participated in healing practices only involving each other and their children is to ignore ample evidence from other



sources that women were still regarded by most members of the culture as magical and as healers, even if not officially recognized by the church or the official “men’s hall patriarchy” as such. I contend that instead of dealing only with ailments and sickness that were a part of the community of women, as discussed in Chapter 2, these women dealt with the medical needs of the community as a whole.

Weston distinguishes between women healers and shaman, claiming that while the liminality of the women may seem similar to that of the shaman, the women’s was “constant rather than transitory, literal rather than metaphorical” (284), to demonstrate women’s marginality in Anglo-Saxon culture and healing practices. Alas, though, if their existence was perceived by men as “liminal” as Weston contends (and I agree that it almost certainly was), this would give the community even more reason to look to them as authorities on curing ailments that were supposed to come from the unknown and thus dangerous land of the faeries, elves, dwarves and spirits who were believed to cause all kinds of sickness and disease.

In her study of Anglo-Saxon burial practices, reported in A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rites, Audrey Meaney has discovered that among the personal objects with which a deceased person would have been buried were jewelry (17, 42, 49), amethyst, amber, paste, and glass beads (15, 42, 52), crystal balls (63), and billets of bronze (63). Fell speculates that “[I]t does seem quite reasonable to assume that many of the single beads, perforated boar’s tusks worn as pendants, crystal balls, and cowrie shells were thought of as having some kind of magical or protective or healing power” (33). These types of objects are found most frequently in women’s graves, whereas men were more frequently buried with knives and warriors’ weapons (Meaney 17). As Christianity became more prominent, pagan belief was slowly marginalized into what began to be regarded (primarily by the church) as “superstition,” and eventually such burial practices gave way to Christian burials: “Amulets found in graves belong to the pagan period, when graves were furnished; but later literature suggests that they continued to be worn” (Fell 34). Fell emphasizes that

[t]his may, of course, simply mean that women were more superstitious, but it has been suggested that the rock-crystal ball in particular was used in healing rituals and may have symbolised [sic.] the woman’s role as guardian of her family’s health. [...] [I]t is not impossible that these represent the graves of women who

were thought to have, or claimed to have, healing and prophetic powers, and might properly be considered as *burgrunan*, ‘wise women of the community’ (34). Indeed, the historical, linguistic, and literary evidence seem to agree that women *were* perceived as wise in the ways of magic and healing.

The metrical charms themselves offer verification that the Anglo-Saxons had little to do with forming the idea that women were dangerous because of their superior magical abilities. Charm No. 8, also known as the acer-bot charm, illustrates this idea:

Nu ic bidde ðone waldend se ðe ðas woruld gesceop  
þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwidol wif, ne to þæs cræftig man  
þæt awendan ne mæge word þus gecwedene. (qtd. in Storms 176)  
‘Now I bid the ruler who created this world  
that no woman will be to that extent eloquent, no man to that extent skilled,  
that they can change the words thus spoken.’ (my trans.)

That no particular emphasis is given to *cwidol wif* (eloquent woman) over *cræftig man* (crafty man) suggests that “as yet the Anglo-Saxons were without the concept of especially evil women magicians” (Crawford 160). To Anglo-Saxon men, women were certainly perceived as magical and powerful; I have, however, come across no compelling evidence that they would have perceived them as evil *or* particularly dangerous or malicious until ecclesiastical Christian writers and leaders began to claim so. This suggests to me that men would have been quite a bit more likely to seek out women for issues of medicine and healing for their primary medical care than they would have been to seek out an elite physician of the emerging Greco-Roman tradition.

Most probably, ordinary women, through oral traditions passed down from their pagan ancestors, were the true “practitioners” of medicine in Anglo-Saxon society, while physicians functioned as the scribes/priests who dictated the writings and performed limited rituals. R.A. Buck, in “Women and Language in Anglo-Saxon Leechbooks,” demonstrates that because of the very few physicians in Anglo-Saxon England relative to the enormous numbers of sick people, “[t]here is no doubt that folk medicine persisted alongside the emerging medical tradition of the tenth century” (Buck 44). While Buck does not speculate as to the nature of this folk medicine, she does offer that “[f]rom the later Middle Ages throughout Europe, we find illustrated manuscripts containing images of women performing and assisting in healing functions and reading medical recipe books” (49).

I would like to further assert that Crawford's pronouncement that Christianity "imposed itself" upon German paganism without great difficulty by "incorporat[ing] and adapt[ing] pagan materials among the doctrines and prayers of the church" (169) does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the Anglo-Saxon people completely abandoned their former beliefs in order to embrace all aspects of Christianity. On the contrary, it suggests to me that the reason for Christianity's success is that it allowed for some overlap of practices and beliefs. It seems very probable that the feminine tradition of healing would have continued to exist in the form of the strong oral tradition passed from mother to daughter even after its appropriation by Christian medics. Furthermore, depending on the community, women would likely have been revered as experts in the magical uses of herbs and chants. Interestingly, while cooking was a task just as likely to be done by men as women, it is only women who "were associated with both the serving and the preparation of drink" (Fell 49). Considering that most of the charms that involve herbs require a drink or tincture to be prepared, this information uniquely points to women, who would have had experience with drink-brewing, as the experts in creating recipes for and preparing such solutions.

This is a subject that is overflowing with possibilities for intensive research, perhaps by further investigating the cooperation or competition of physicians versus traditional women healers. The medical tradition upon which the charms of the *Leechbooks* and *Lacnunga* were based was at least partially created by Germanic women and continued to exist, in a less patriarchal form, alongside the emerging Greco-Romanized tradition recorded in the books. Much like today's nurses and mothers, Anglo-Saxon women provided the majority of medical care, especially the day-to-day ailments and mundane necessities of health maintenance.

To argue that Anglo-Saxon women were not marginalized to some extent in their culture would be contrary to what we know; similarly, to claim that they were complete "others" in regard to the workings of society is both to downplay some very compelling evidence that exists to the contrary and to subsume the attitudes of all Anglo-Saxon men under the preachings of a very select, elite few who felt threatened by the potential for power that they perceived in these "magical" women.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that women have been severely overlooked in the study of Anglo-Saxon medicine. I do not wish to make the argument that medieval women authored all of the metrical charms; simply that it is certain that they wrote some of them and overwhelmingly likely that they wrote around half of them or even the majority of them. As Jolly thoughtfully observes, “we can best understand the remedies by taking into account the early medieval context of beliefs about medicine, magic, and religion, rather than categorizing these beliefs according to post-twelfth-century or modern definitions of these concepts” (98). Anglo-Saxon culture was strikingly different from modern western culture in its treatment of women in medical professions, and assumptions to the contrary have clouded the ways in which scholars have viewed and interpreted the contributions of Anglo-Saxon women to their time period’s medical wisdom.

My purpose with this project has been to attempt to correct this oversight. Additionally, and as importantly, I believe that it is meaningful and empowering to modern women to learn about the medical practices our medieval counterparts partook in, especially if they played, as I believe, a larger part in medicine than women today do. I will not attempt to deny that Anglo-Saxon England was both patriarchal and oppressive of women in some areas. I will, however, say that it is patriarchal and oppressive to keep women out of history because it requires work to put them back in.

Currently, women’s history is seen as a mere niche of medieval history. An integrated perspective acknowledges that medieval society consisted of women and men and recognizes that, even if the society was often segregated, the two parts are equally important to a true understanding of the culture. Academic scholarship has overlooked this largely due to assumptions inappropriately placed on a time period too early to accommodate them. Though it seems that comprehensive works about the metrical charms have been published, the works lack a truly thorough consideration of the part women played in medicine.

Feminist history has admittedly taken an opposite, but equally gender-centric historical perspective, in an attempt to balance the common male historical perspective. I believe this is a necessary reaction, but think that it is unfortunate that it has led to the view that “feminist history” is just one of many subsets of history in general, the rest being male. Scholars have been willing to concede women’s rights in the general sense only; true willingness to consider the history of women and write it into the history of men requires a much more intensive examination of one’s world view. If a more accurate picture of history is desired, integration is critical.

The metrical childbirth charms were created for a woman to perform and chant on her own, without a medical intermediary. This supports the idea that women were seen as powerful and competent in at least this aspect of medicine and demonstrates that the power to control birth had not yet been appropriated by the male doctors of the emerging tradition. This is particularly telling when contrasted against the health care system and method of childbirth with which we are familiar, in which over three-quarters of physicians are male, and those doctors who are women are underpaid and underrepresented. In sharp contrast, Anglo-Saxon women delivered their own babies, with the help of their mothers, sisters, and friends. This suggests an entirely different medical philosophy.

The church was suspicious of the primarily female birthing ritual mistrusting of women’s reproductive autonomy and used the rite of ritual cleansing in order to demonstrate that birth was an impure act not attended by clergy for reasons of safety. This further supports the case for women’s authorship of these charms: only those who had experienced childbirth would have had the authority to make medical recommendations about the procedure. Women had the authority to create such recommendations were the women who had experienced the anxieties of giving birth and those who had assisted with one or many births. I do not believe, however, that men would have been excluded from participating on the basis of their sex—simply that it was common and useful for childbirth to be handled by women.

Women constituted at least half of those needing medical care in Anglo-Saxon England. This sustains the argument that there must have been women who were considered experts in the field of childbirth and other women’s reproductive issues. A feminine oral culture did exist around the event of medieval childbirth. The fact that the metrical childbirth charms from the *Lacnunga* focused on the ability of a woman to carry herself through the birth event

demonstrates their connection with women's oral culture and separates them from the patriarchal medical culture of the elite.

The observation that the Anglo-Saxon charms are "male-voiced" and separate from any oral culture has limited empirical basis. The charms consist of information that would have been readily available to women, especially considering all the evidence we have concerning division of labor. Furthermore, information about medical ailments other than childbirth would have been necessary and critical for women to know. I believe that women were the authors and administrators of a great deal of the metrical charms beyond the childbirth charms.

If the practice of going to women for healing was threatening enough to be criticized in a sermon, certainly it was a fairly common practice, suggesting that perhaps men went to women for healing regularly. Remembering that the views expressed by the church possibly belonged only to the leaders of the church and not the husbands, brothers, and sons of women who knew about healing, it seems overwhelmingly likely that this practice continued even under the church's disapproval. The tradition of women healers was perhaps older and stronger than we may have imagined. The position that women's role in healing was restricted to themselves, each other, and their children is, among other things, an unintegrated, gender-centric view. Even if the church spoke against it, women were still regarded by most members of the culture as magical and as healers. Furthermore, I believe that men would have been more comfortable seeking magical and medical remedies from the women with whom they were familiar than from any of the church's elite "learned" medics. I contend that ordinary women were Anglo-Saxon medicine's true "practitioners" while such medics functioned as the scholars who dictated the writings and priests who performed limited rituals.

If the position of Anglo-Saxon women has been ignored in this sub-field of Anglo-Saxon studies, then I believe that the rights of medieval women in other aspects have been conceded on a general basis only. If scholars of women, rather than Anglo-Saxon scholars in general, are the only ones to address this evidence then clearly there is a problem with the way history is treated in academia. It is my hope that scholars—especially those who don't necessarily identify themselves as feminists—will begin to incorporate a balanced study of women into the many other sub-disciplines of medieval history and literature: in other words, to "un-index" medieval women. This is necessary because the information that we have regarding the position of women in Anglo-Saxon England has not pervaded the breadth of Anglo-Saxon studies.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Keri Sanburn was born in Wichita, Kansas on June 10, 1978. She received her B.A. in English Language and Literature from Wichita State University in May 2000 and her M.A. in English Literature from Florida State University in August 2003. Her presented papers include “Magical Women: The Feminine Tradition of Medical Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon England,” from which this thesis grew, at the Southeastern Medievalist Association Conference in 2002. She also had her paper “A Marxist View of Angela’s Ashes” printed in the Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery Conference Proceedings in 2001. She served as secretary to the FSU Medieval Studies Students’ Association from 2002 to 2003 and is a Member of the Southeastern Medievalist Association. She has a golden retriever named Pixie.