

**SUPRA-TEXTUALITY IN *THE SEKENESSE OF WYMMEN*  
IN GLASGOW, UNIVERSITY LIBRARY,  
MS HUNTER 307 (Ff. 149v-165v)\***

LAURA ESTEBAN-SEGURA  
Universidad de Málaga  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7721-2210

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This chapter takes into consideration the witness of the gynaecological and obstetrical treatise known as *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* held in folios 149v-165v of Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 307, which is a translation into the vernacular of Gilbertus Anglicus's work. The main objective is to analyse supra-textual devices in the witness, including layout, decoration, marginalia, punctuation and other visual language in order to delimit how the information is organised and knowledge transmitted. This can shed light on the function and usability of the manuscript and can help to place it in its material and cultural context.

*Keywords:* GUL MS Hunter 307; *The Sekenesse of Wymmen*; Middle English; medieval medicine; supra-textuality.

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## 1. Introduction

The treatise known as *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* is a translation into the vernacular of part—that devoted to women's conditions—of the original Latin work *Compendium medicinae*, authored by Gilbertus Anglicus around 1240. The *Compendium* is regarded as one of the most important works of early English medicine in addition to being the oldest compendium on general medicine by an English author which has survived to this day. The *Compendium medicinae* was one of the standard references for physicians until the seventeenth century and also an academic text (see Handerson [1918] 2005; Esteban-Segura 2012, 17-23).

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The translation into Middle English was made around the year 1400 and reflects the importance that the vernacular had acquired, which came to be used for science to the detriment of Latin. Apart from providing an illuminating vision of the state of medicine of its time, the work also sheds light on the process of vernacularisation of science in medieval England. The study of utilitarian prose originally composed or translated into Middle English has witnessed an upsurge in the last decades, materialised in projects of digital editing of scientific manuscripts and the compilation of specialised historical corpora. A small part of this effort has been devoted to medical texts on women's health (Green 2002; Green and Mooney 2006; Ahvensalmi 2013), which thirty years ago, according to Green (1992, 53), remained "virtually unstudied." Although the situation is not as bleak as back then,<sup>1</sup> much work on medieval gynaecological and obstetrical writings is still in need. Therefore, the present chapter takes into account one version of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen*, namely that contained in Glasgow, University Library (GUL for short), MS Hunter 307 (folios 149v-165v), by examining supra-textual devices in the witness, including layout, decoration, marginalia, punctuation and other visual language in order to ascertain how the information is structured and knowledge transmitted. This can shed light on the function and usability of the manuscript and can help to situate it in its material and cultural context.

## 2. Medieval Gynaecological and Obstetrical Texts in English

Middle English manuscripts on gynaecology and obstetrics that are extant or known can be grouped according to two main traditions: (i) the translations of the Latin work *Trotula*; and (ii) Gilbertus Anglicus's *The Sekenesse of Wymmen*—the text under consideration conforms to the latter. A third group is composed of miscellaneous texts, including *The Nature of Women, Andrological, Gynaecological and Obstetric Treatise* and *Collections of Recipes* (see Green 1992; Keiser 1998, 3667-3669).

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1 For bibliography on the topic, see Green (2010).

The gynaecological, obstetrical and cosmetic Latin treatises under the title *Trotula*<sup>2</sup> were presumably written at the renowned medical school of Salerno in the latter half of the twelfth century. They were initially three independent works, i.e., the *Trotula major*, the *Trotula minor* and the *De ornatu*, which later merged. It has been pointed out that there are at least five independent English versions of the *Trotula major* and the *Trotula minor*, some of which include other material intertwined, such as the *Gynaecia* of Muscio (Green 1992, 63-64).<sup>3</sup>

Gilbertus Anglicus's *Compendium medicinae* comprised several chapters on gynaecology and obstetrics and *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* is believed to stem from their Middle English translation. Keiser (1998, 3668) maintains that the twenty chapters on women's diseases of the *Compendium* draw on the *Trotula minor* and the *Practica medicinae* of Roger Baron. *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* was disseminated in two major versions. The first one, which was the most popular of all Middle English gynaecological texts, contained the translation of "fifteen of Gilbertus's twenty-two chapters on women's diseases from book 7 of the Latin *Compendium medicin[a]e*"<sup>4</sup> (Green and Mooney 2006, 457) and was appended to the Middle English Gilbertus Anglicus in six manuscripts,<sup>5</sup> whereas in six further manuscripts it circulated detached from it.<sup>6</sup> This

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- 2 These works have traditionally been attributed to Trotula or Trota, a Salernitan healer from the eleventh or twelfth century, who is considered to be the first person in the world to specialise in gynaecology and obstetrics. Green (1991, 5) has noted that the treatises belonging to the *Trotula* tradition have no direct relation to the woman healer. It has been argued that they were in fact written by male authors (see Keiser 1998, 3667).
  - 3 See Green (1992, 2002) for further details.
  - 4 According to Keiser (1998, 3668), the number of chapters on women's diseases of the *Compendium medicinae* was twenty.
  - 5 The manuscripts which include the Gilbertus Anglicus compendia are: (i) Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.9.37, ff. 126r-128v; (ii) Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 307, ff. 149v-165v; (iii) London, British Library, MS Sloane 5, ff. 158ra-172vb; (iv) London, British Library, MS Sloane 3486, ff. 140v-147v; (v) London, Society of Antiquaries, MS 338, ff. 76v-85v; and (vi) Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 178, ff. 140v-151r (Green 1992, 80-81).
  - 6 The manuscripts whose codicological contexts do not include the full *Compendium* are: (i) London, British Library, MS Royal 18 A.VI, ff. 35r-54r; (ii) London, British Library, Harley MS 2375, ff. 19r-29r; (iii) London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, Western MS 5650, ff. 41r-58r; (iv) Longleat House

version was made in the early fifteenth century. The witness in MS Hunter 307 pertains to this first redaction. The contents are as follows:

Description of menstruation and its function, the physiology of the womb, and gynecological diseases, each of which is discussed in detail, with appropriate remedies, in the remainder of the treatise: retention of the menses, scalding of the womb, excessive menstrual flow, suffocation (contraction) of the womb, precipitation of the womb (uterine prolapse, ano-vaginal fistulas), wind (swelling) in the womb, aposteme (abscess, inflammation) in the womb, wounds in the womb, cancer of the womb, ache of the womb (resulting from a still-birth or premature birth), grievance of the womb (resulting from misturning of the child during birth), retention of the placenta; post-partum bleeding (Keiser 1998, 3668).

The second (expanded) version was made around the middle of the fifteenth century and presented rearranged and additional information. It survives in four copies (Green and Mooney 2006, 458-459). Version 2 of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* incorporates a prologue stating that the intended audience of the text was women; such information does not appear in Version 1 of the treatise.<sup>7</sup>

As regards previous research on the copy of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* held in MS Hunter 307, Alonso-Almeida (2002-2003, 2005-2006) has addressed punctuation and other devices in several manuscript versions of the treatise, including MS Hunter 307, whereas Vega Déniz (2004) has assessed the dialectal provenance of the witness under consideration.

### 3. The Manuscript: GUL Hunter 307

MS Hunter 307 is a bound volume housed at the Archives and Special Collections Department of the University of Glasgow Library

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(Warminster, Wiltshire), MS Longleat 174, ff. 107r-115v; (v) New Haven, Yale Medical Library, MS 47, ff. 60r-71v; and (vi) Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lyell 36, ff. 128r-150v (Green 1992, 78-79; Green and Mooney 2006, 458).

7 See Green (1992) and Green and Mooney (2006) for further information on the intended readership/users of the text.

with the reference code GB 247 MS Hunter 307 (U.7.1). The personal collection of Dr William Hunter (1718-1783), who was an anatomist and Physician Extraordinary to Queen Charlotte from 1764, was bequeathed to the University of Glasgow, his alma mater. MS Hunter 307 belonged to Dr Hunter's museum—which included some 650 manuscript volumes—and has been in Glasgow since 1807. Dr Hunter himself makes reference to the treatise on women's diseases in the verso of a fly-leaf just before the first folio of the manuscript:

An old System of Physic in |<sup>8</sup> English; of which I have another |  
Copy. This is more compleat | by all that is said on female disorders  
in the end.<sup>9</sup>

The version of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* preserved in MS Hunter 307 dates from the early fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> It is fully written in Middle English and shows a careful and beautifully decorated text in some folios, such as the first one of the treatise (f. 149v), which is floreated. Decoration appears in the upper, lower and left margins in blue, red and gold, and in the four-line initial *a*, carefully decorated in the same colours (see Figure 1).<sup>11</sup>

8 The vertical bar '|' indicates a change of line in the text of the manuscript.

9 The other copy to which Dr Hunter refers is GUL MS Hunter 509, which has been extensively studied by Esteban-Segura (2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, among others).

10 The manuscript has been dated to the fourteenth century in Young and Aitkens's catalogue (1908, 245), which is the date of creation found in the online record of the item on the website of the University of Glasgow (available at <<https://www.gla.ac.uk/collections/#/details?irn=296678&catType=C&referrer=/results&q=MS+HUNTER+307>>). However, this date was revised by Ian Doyle in 1954 in an annotation made to the original catalogue kept in the Special Collections Department of Glasgow University Library (Cross 2004, 24). The fact that the codex also contains a Middle English text of the *Circa instans*, whose English version is attested from the early fifteenth century, corroborates its assignment to the fifteenth century. Green and Mooney (2006, 456) have also claimed that the English translation was produced early in the fifteenth century.

11 The images supplied in this essay are reproduced by kind permission of the Archives and Special Collections Department of the University of Glasgow Library.

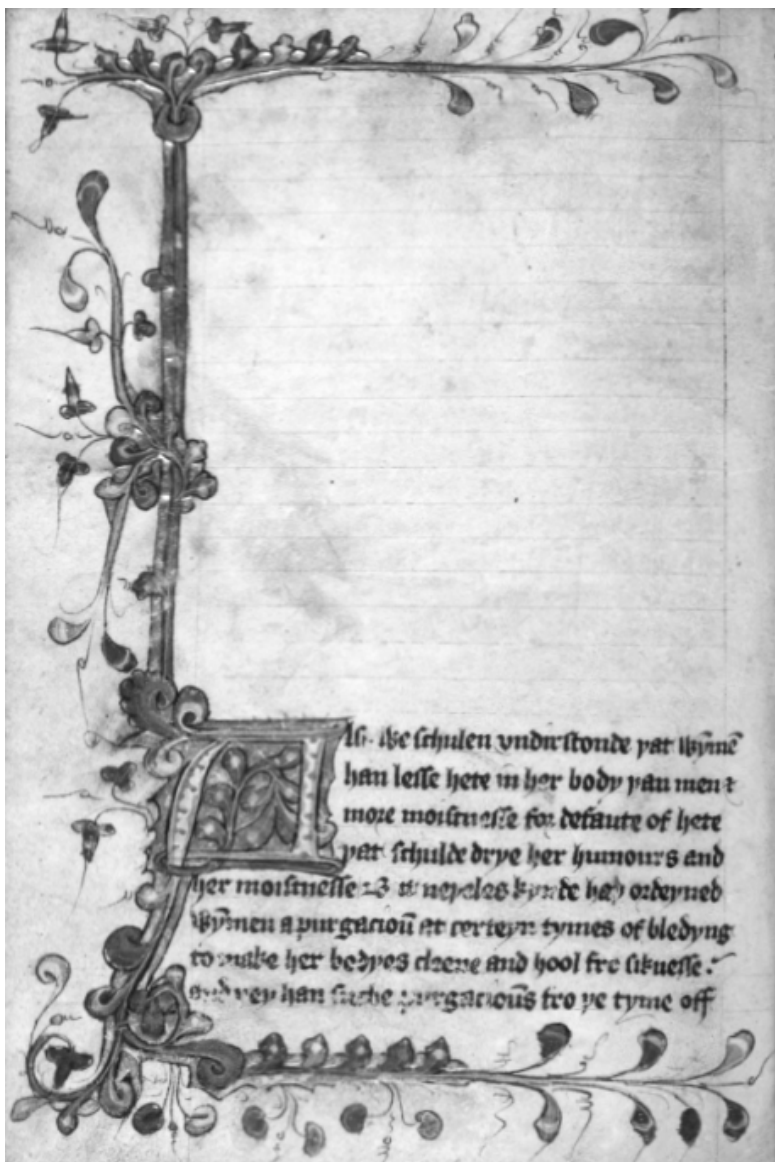


Figure 1. Example of decoration (f. 149v)

The text is in a clear and concise Middle English style. The translation into Middle English subsumes fifteen<sup>12</sup> of the original twenty chapters from the Latin version (Keiser 1998, 3668). As indicated above, they discuss menses, pregnancy, childbirth as well as general diseases specific to women and their treatments. Remedies usually involve the use of herbs, spices and oils. The treatise is impregnated with concepts from medieval science, which was dominated by the theory of the four humours, also known as humoral theory or humorism. An illustration of this emerges in the first paragraph that opens the treatise:

Als[o] we schulen vndirstonde þat wymmen | han lesse hete in her body þan men and | more moistnesse for defaute of hete | þat schulde drye her humours and | her moistnesse / (f. 149v) [‘We shall also understand that women have less heat in their bodies than men and more moisture due to the lack of heat, which should dry their humours and their moistness’].

In fact, the codex in which the witness of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* under analysis is found contains an anonymous Middle English treatise on humours, elements, uroscopy, complexions, etc. (ff. 11r-13r), proving the importance of the above-mentioned theory both because of the text’s inclusion in the volume and because of its position at the beginning of it. MS Hunter 307 also houses the Middle English Gilbertus Anglicus (ff. 13r-145v); an anonymous Middle English treatise on buboes (ff. 145v-146v); Guy de Chauliac’s treatise *On Bloodletting* (ff. 165v-166v; see Esteban-Segura and Soriano-Jiménez 2023); and a Middle English version of the *Circa instans* (ff. 167r-172v; see Esteban-Segura 2015). Thus, MS Hunter 307 represents an excellent example of a Middle English medical compendium, which has been labelled *System of Physic* (Young and Aitken 1908, 245-246; Cross 2004, 24-25). *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* in MS Hunter 307 consists of thirty-three folios (taking into account rectos and versos).

12 In MS Hunter 307 fourteen chapters have been demarcated by means of initial letters. Green (1992, 74) has pointed out that the Middle English translator of Version 1 fused Gilbertus’s two chapters on uterine prolapse into a single one.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

According to Ahvensalmi (2013, 15), “the presentation of a text forms a vital part of its meaning, affecting the interpretation and use of the text,” hence shaping readers’ perceptions. Kostelnick (1996, 10) has argued that the supra-textual level “entails the global design of the document [...], providing a top-down, global perspective of the document.” Supra-textual elements are a type of visual language that appear in three modes: textual, spatial and graphic (Kostelnick 1996, 11).

Supra-textuality in the treatise will be analysed by assessing the layout, decoration, marginalia and punctuation. In terms of Kostelnick’s modes (but adapting them to a medieval manuscript), the layout would correspond to the spatial mode, decoration and marginalia to the graphic one, and finally, punctuation to the textual mode.

##### 4.1. Layout

The volume is compact, not very large: the measurements of the binding are 200 mm x 140 mm, the spine measures 42 mm and the dimensions of folios are 190 mm x 130 mm.<sup>13</sup> The written space measures 147-150 mm x 90-95 mm. The folios which hold the treatise are well-preserved and do not show any signs of wear. The text is written on vellum in a single column and shows good handwriting.

Foliation—by means of Arabic numerals—is found at the top right-hand side of rectos (see Figure 2). It seems to be later than the writing of the manuscript. The number of lines per folio is twenty-six, except for folio 149v, which is comprised of eight lines. Folios in the treatise are ruled in order to help the scribe keep the lines straight and frame ruling is also employed to delimit margins (see Figure 2). Both line and frame ruling succeed in providing a structurally and stylistically neat and tidy arrangement. They also prove that the manuscript is a formal copy.

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13 Mr Robert MacLean, Assistant Librarian of the University of Glasgow Library, deserves special acknowledgement for his kind help with the manuscript’s measures.

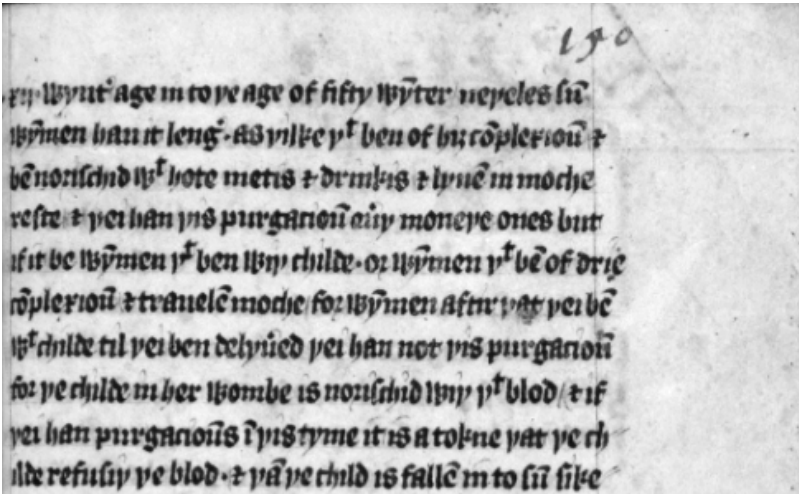


Figure 2. Example of foliation and ruling (f. 150r)

The script shows features from the Gothic *textura* book hand, which by the mid-fifteenth century was mainly limited to formal codices. Both the layout and the script in the treatise demonstrate that it belongs to a high-grade manuscript.

4.2. Decoration

As far as decoration is concerned, the beginning of a new chapter is indicated with two-line blue initials with red gestures in the initial and all along the left margin (see Figure 3).

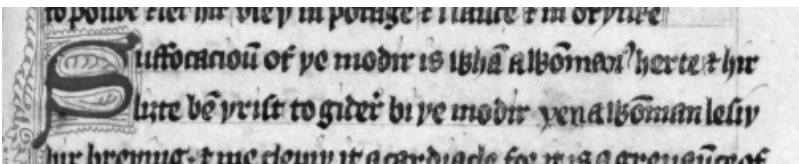


Figure 3. Example of initial letter (f. 157r)

The paragraphs marks used in the treatise are paraphs, which will be discussed later, and they appear in blue and red ink alternately (see Figure 4). Line fillers are a device employed to decorate the last line of a paragraph to the right margin (see Figure 5). Their function is to create complete lines in order to provide balance and symmetry on the folio<sup>14</sup> and also to help differentiate new chapters from previous ones. Different patterns in red and blue ink in combination or only red ink are used for them.

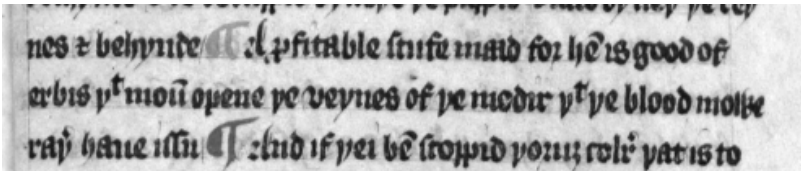


Figure 4. Example of paragraph marks (f.152r)

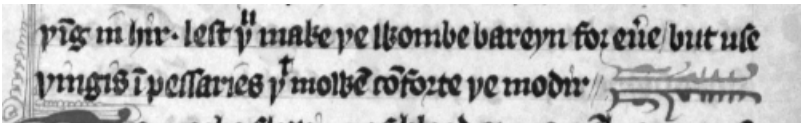


Figure 5. Example of a line filler (f.154v)

Most illuminated manuscripts are religious since illumination was a visual recourse to emphasise the importance of the word of God. It was not so common to find decorations in medical codices as their function was rather practical. This indicates that the manuscript under consideration is undoubtedly in the higher-quality end of medical ones.

#### 4.3. Marginalia

Marginalia involve manual insertions of comments, notes, marks, etc. in the margins. Marginal notes, quite usual in medieval medical

14 In Treharne's (2021, 142) words, line fillers "regulate the edges of the text in manuscripts."

texts, thus proving their practical function, are not frequent in the treatise. They are only found on two occasions. On folio 153 recto, the phrase “to cause | delyuery of | a dead | childe” is found (see Figure 6). It is in modern English, and consequently a later addition. The note “for broken | veines,” also in a later hand, appears on folio 155 verso (see Figure 7). These annotations give clues that the manuscript passed through several hands as they were most likely made by owner(s) and/or user(s) of the manuscript.

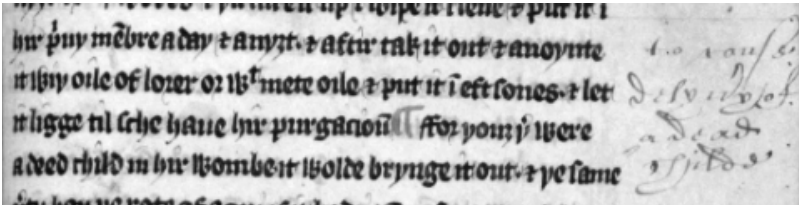


Figure 6. Example of marginalia in right margin (f. 153r)

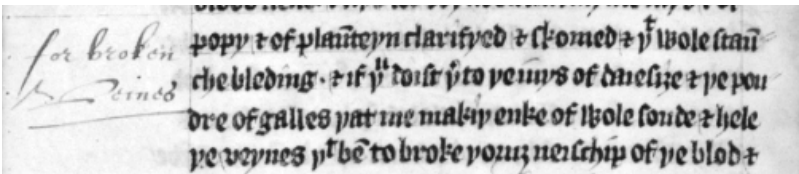


Figure 7. Example of marginalia in left margin (f. 155v)

Running titles at the top of folios, which are used for quick reference, underlining and other types of visual referential techniques are wanting in the treatise. This suggests a non-clinical interest in the text by the owner(s) and/or user(s) of MS Hunter 307.

#### 4.4. Punctuation

Traditionally, medieval punctuation has been considered arbitrary and inconsistent (Jenkinson 1926; Heyworth 1981), and the uses of signs overlapping (Lucas 1971). A distinction has been made between grammatical and rhetorical punctuation: the former provides syntactic

sense and is used to mark structural relations among sentence constituents; the latter, on the other hand, helps to signal necessary pauses in an oral exposition. Both types of punctuation may coincide since the pauses made when speaking normally take place at the end of a syntactic unit. Recently, however, a more fluid view of medieval punctuation is held, which rejects this binary division and where “[...] grammatical and rhetorical modes of punctuation can be seen as a continuum: these two modes function together and represent different perceptions of the text, rather than two opposing modes” (Ahvensalmi 2013, 49).

The inventory of signs in the treatise consists of 842 punctuation marks, which include the punctus (319×), the single virgule (293×), the double virgule (154×), the paraph (71×), the punctus elevatus (3×) and the colon (2×). In order to obtain the data, the text had been previously transcribed and then lemmatised and POS-tagged by the author of this chapter. The main functions of the signs found in the text at different levels will be explained and illustrated with examples in the following subsections.

#### 4.4.1. The punctus

The most recurrent punctuation mark in the treatise is the punctus, which appears in raised position. It has a number of different uses to signal sentential, clausal and phrasal relationships. The punctus at the sentence level is employed to link structurally independent units. Its main function is to flag coordinate clauses introduced by *and* (example 1),<sup>15</sup> *but* and *or* (example 2).

(1) · **and** *in* þe tyme of hir purgacioun þei | *ben* delyuered of litil mater · **and** þat is medlid wiþ malencolie (f. 151v) [‘And at the time of their menstruation, they are discharged of little matter and that is mixed with melancholy’].

(2) *or* make aplastre of þe | mele of lynseed or of femygreek medlid *with* lie · **but** let | not þe lie be ful strong · **or** medle wiþ sich lie barli mele (f. 162r) [‘or make a plaster of the flour of linseed or of fenugreek

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15 The emphasis has been added in this and further examples for the sake of clarity.

mixed with lye, but do not let the lye be full strong or mix with such lye barley flour’].

In subordinate clauses it is used to separate it from the main clause, in adjectival clauses (example 3) and in adverbial clauses of time (example 4) and condition (example 5).

(3) Sleyng of þe modir comeþ of a kene | colrik humour · þat cleueþ aboute þe modir wiþin/ (f. 154r) [‘Necrosis of the uterus comes of a sharp, choleric humour that adheres around the uterus within’].

(4) · and whan sche goiþ out | of þe styue · let plastre þe erbis on þe modir (f. 154r) [‘And when she goes out of the steam bath, let the herbs be plastered on the uterus’].

(5) and if þe modir smerte wiþ inforþe for keneschip | of þe cockil · **anoynte** it with oile of roses or of violet (f. 154r) [‘And if the uterus smarts on the inside due to the sharpness of the corn cockle, smear it with oil of roses or of violet’].

The punctus is employed at the clause level to mark off the coordination of phrases:

(6) · and þis siknesse | comeþ of dyuerse enchesouns as of wiþholding of blod þat þei | schulde be purgid of · or of sum corrupt humours and venemouse | þat ben in þe modir · or of corrupt seed þat is aboute þe stones | of þe modir · (f. 157r) [‘And this sickness comes of several causes as of retention of blood of which they should be cleansed, or of some corrupt and venomous humours that are in the uterus, or of corrupt seed that is around the ovaries of the uterus’].

Finally, the punctus is used at the phrase level to circumscribe words, such as numerals (example 7) and apothecaries’ weights (example 8). This sign acts here as a linking device and also as a way to avoid confusion.

(7) and let hir vse of hem · ij · or · iij · at ones / (f. 156r) [‘and let her use of them two or three at once’].

(8) and tak of | mummye and of saundragoun ana · ounce · j · and brenne hem in an erþene pot (f. 157r) [‘And take mummia and dragon’s blood in the same amount, one ounce, and burn them in an earthen pot’].

#### 4.4.2. The single virgule

The single virgule or oblique stroke is the second most frequent mark in the treatise. It is employed at the sentence level with functions similar to that of the punctus. Thus, it is used to connect paratactic clauses with *and* (example 9) and *or* (example 10) and in subordinate clauses to separate it from the main clause, specifically adjectival ones (example 11).

(9) / **and** þe iuys of rewe *and* of mugwort makȳ a | womman be soone delyuered of child þouȝ it be deed in hir | wombe/ **and** it is profitable to make hir fnese *with* þe poudre | of peper *and* of castorie cast *in* to hir nose · (f. 164v) [‘And the juice of rue and of mugwort makes a woman be soon delivered of child, although he/she be dead in her womb. And it is profitable to make her sneeze with the powder of pepper and of castor cast into her nose’].

(10) / **or** for þe blod is vndefied *and* rennyng | *and* þinne as watir/ **or** it is of feblenesse of þe womman (f. 154v) [‘Or because the blood is not transformed and is flowing and thin as water. Or it is of feebleness of the woman’].

(11) / dropesie of þe modir comeþ neuere | but for feblenesse of þe modir/ **þat** is not myȝty to defye | fleume (f. 154r) [‘Dropsy of the uterus never comes unless for feblenesse of the uterus, which is not capable of transforming phlegm’].

At the pragmatic level, the single virgule is employed to separate independent sense units and it is normally followed by a paraph. This supra-textual function overlaps with the syntactic one since the mark also signals syntactic relationships, separating independent sentences (example 12).

(12) ¶ But for ache þat comeþ aftir þat a womman haþ bore child · tak rewe *and* mugwort *and* camphore *and* stampe hem to gidere wiþ oile *and* piliol *and* hete it wel on þe fier *and* wrappe it wel *with* a cloþ fro þe nauel down/ ¶ (f. 163r)

[‘But for ache that comes after a woman has given birth: Take rue, mugwort and camphor and pound them together with oil and pennyroyal. And heat it well on the fire and wrap it well with a cloth from the navel down’].

#### 4.4.3. The double virgule

As regards the double virgule, it is mainly found at the word level to indicate that the word at the end of the line continues in the following one (example 13).

(13) *and oþerwhil al þe wombe meuiþ up to þe stomak and makip a wom//  
man haue greet wil to caste/ and þer is moche hardnesse abo//  
ute þe navel* · (f. 164v)

[‘And sometimes all the womb moves up to the stomach and makes a woman have great will to excrete/vomit. And there is much hardness around the navel’].

In eight instances the double virgule is used at the pragmatic level to mark off the end (example 14) or beginning (example 15) of a new chapter.<sup>16</sup>

(14) *þing in hir · lest þou make þe wombe bareyn for euere/ but use  
þingis in pessaries þat mowen comferte þe modir //  
To moche flowing of blod at þis membre comeþ in  
many maneris as gret plente of blod þat is in wommen* (f. 154v)

[‘thing in her lest you make the womb barren for ever. But use things in pessaries that may strengthen the uterus. Too much flowing of blood at this limb comes in many manners such as great plenty of blood that is in women’].

(15) // *And if it be in þe sixte maner þe blod comeþ contynuely and  
with greuauce and oþerwhil it haþ his kyndly colour · and oþerwhil  
it haþ not but comeþ out corrupt in þe maner of quytour/* (f. 155r)

[‘And if it is in the sixth manner, the blood comes continually and with pain. And sometimes it has its natural colour and sometimes it has not but comes out corrupt in the manner of pus’].

#### 4.4.4. The paraph

The type of paragraph mark found in the treatise is the paraph. Paraphs stand out on the page thanks to the use of blue and red ink,

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16 One of these eight instances does not mark a new chapter, but a new paragraph and another one is used at the end of the treatise.

which are generally found alternating, although not always. In fact, there are twenty-nine paraphs in blue and forty-two in red. They are used to separate independent sense units. Forty-six of the paraphs are preceded by a single virgule in the same line, probably as a visual reinforcement to mark off different units (see examples 12 and 16). The sequence of a virgule and a paraph has not been considered one punctuation symbol since its function is similar to that of the paraph on its own.

(16) ¶ Jt it be of colre þat is a hoot humour *and* drie · he haþ þese for//  
 seid toknes · but þei *ben* more violent þan blod / ¶ Jf it is  
 of fleume þat is a cold humour *and* a moiste · sche felip boþe  
 greuauce *and* heuynesse in þe modir / *and* her vryn is trobly  
*and* febely colourid · *and* of þe colour of axen vndir þe sercle / (f. 161v)

[‘If it is of choler, which is a hot and dry humour, it has these afore-  
 said symptoms, but they are more violent than blood. If it is  
 of phlegm, which is a cold and moist humour, she feels both  
 pain and heaviness in the uterus and her urine is turbid  
 and feebly coloured and of the colour of ashes under the upper layer’].

#### 4.4.5. The punctus elevatus

As for the punctus elevatus, it is employed between coordinate clauses (example 17) and in a temporal adverbial clause to separate the subordinate from the main clause (example 18), a function overlapping with one of the punctus.

(17) / But neþeles kynde haþ ordeyned | *wymmen* a purgacioun at  
 certeyn tymes of bledyng | to make her bodyes cleene and hool fro  
 siknesse ⁑ | *and* þey han suche purgaciouns fro þe tyme off (f. 149v)  
 [‘But nevertheless nature has provided women with a purgation of  
 bleeding at certain times to make their bodies clean and whole from  
 sickness. And they have such purgations from the age of’].

(18) / *and whan* sche comeþ out of þe baþ ⁑ *make* a plastre | of peritorie  
 al *and* lei to hir wombe/ (f. 161r) [‘and when she comes out of the bath,  
 make a plaster of pellitory of the wall all and lay to her womb’].

#### 4.4.6. The colon

The colon, with just two instances, functions at the sentence level to juxtapose two sentences (example 19) and in a temporal adverbial clause to separate the subordinate from the main clause (example 20), a function coinciding with that of the punctus and the punctus elevatus.

(19) · þer ben many dyuerse toknes to knowe þe oon fro | þe oþere · for þis swellyng comeþ sodenly : þe oþere doiþ not | so/ (f. 153v) [‘there are many diverse symptoms to distinguish one from the other, for this swelling comes suddenly and the other does not so’].

(20) *and* | **whan** þe modir is yn : **tak** þe poudre of gallis notemugis | spikenard *and* clowes *and* tempre þat poudre wiþ piliol oile (f. 160r) [‘And when the uterus is in, take the powder of oak galls, nutmegs, spikenard and cloves and mix that powder with pennyroyal oil’].

### 5. Concluding Remarks

In order to fully understand the significance of any given medieval text and manuscript, we need to look at their global framework. The treatise under consideration is evidence of the importance of the vernacular since it does not contain any Latin, which points to the fact that the intended readership did not have to know the classical language. The codicological context in which *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* is found in MS Hunter 307 (along with the Middle English Gilbertus Anglicus and other medical treatises) evinces that the intended readership was male, as this sort of ensembles was usually directed to surgeons and physicians.

The examination of physical features of the manuscript in which the treatise is held suggests a careful and well-planned piece of work, which has survived in very good condition. The supra-textual devices analysed—layout, decoration, marginalia and punctuation—help to structure the text. Moreover, the illumination, type of script, the use of colour for paragraph marks and initial letters as well as the lack of marginalia, running titles, underlining, etc. seem to indicate that this was a quality copy and that the function of the volume was not practical. Even though punctuation in early English has been traditionally

regarded as inconsistent, individual texts seem to follow specific punctuation practices that are systematic, as is the case of the treatise under consideration.

Finally, the study of this valuable primary source—a precious material for understanding “medieval views of the female body, childbirth, and generation” (Green 1992, 54)—may be of interest to researchers in the field of language and linguistics, medieval codicology and palaeography, gender studies, as well as in other areas of the Humanities and disciplines, such as the history of medicine, natural sciences, etc. Further research on other witnesses of both versions of *The Sekenesse of Wymmen* from different perspectives is thus mandatory to comprehend the scope of the work and to shed more light on medieval language, science and culture.

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