

THE "SEKENESSE OF WYMMEN" REVISED¹

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Just a year after the publication by Rowland (1981) of the first edition of a Middle English gynaecological text (from British Library, MS Sloane 2463, ff. 194r–232r),² M.-R. Hallaert (1982) published a transcription of a Middle English text in Yale Medical Library MS 47 (ff. 60r–71v) under the title *The "Sekenesse of Wymmen"*. This transcription, published with MS facsimiles on facing pages, not only includes a short medical background introduction, but also devotes a few pages to a description of the MS text and an account of its provenance.

Hallaert's transcription is taken as a leading piece of work among studies in medieval medical history, and many authors who describe mediaeval English gynaecological practice have referred to it. For instance, Rawcliffe (1995) consults it as a published primary source to illustrate certain aspects of her chapter "Women and Medicine: the Midwife and the Nurse". In addition, the editorial board for the *MED* counts on this transcription as a source in the process of compiling the dictionary. However, as we shall show shortly, *The "Sekenesse of Wymmen"* may benefit greatly from a revision because, despite the effort of the editor to present a neat transcription and description of the text, we have encountered some misreadings and omissions of words, letters, and graphics. Besides, Hallaert assigns an unacceptable source for her text in Yale MS 47, and ignores the *marginalia* contained in the MS, though they are of special relevance to the main text.

Taking all this into account, our objective in this paper is to review those aspects which remain unsatisfactory for the complete understanding of Hallaert's transcription. We shall begin by discussing the sources for Yale MS 47. After that we present Hallaert's misreadings, and, finally, we transcribe the marginal notes, indicating where they occur in the MS.

In addition to discussing the presumed sources of the transcribed text, Green (1992) offers a comprehensive discussion of known Middle English vernacular MSS on gynaecology, classifying them in relation to two main sources: (1) those MSS which constitute a translation from or are based on the tracts by the female Salernitan physician Trotula, and (2) those MSS which are copied from, translated from, or included within the *Compendium medicinae* by Gilbertus Anglicus. Thus, according to Green (1992, 72–79) the scribe of the text in Yale MS 47, ff. 60r–71v, follows the tradition of Gilbertus Anglicus and not that of Trotula, as claimed here by Hallaert:

It is beyond the scope of the present edition to carry out an intensive search for parallel versions or to trace a probable Latin or vernacular source which the scribe translated, copied or excerpted. Fortunately, the most likely hypothetical source, the first that comes to mind, proved to be the right one: the famous work of the mysterious Trotula ... (Hallaert 1982, 20).

Neither Rowland nor Hallaert provide reasoned arguments in favor of identifying Trotula as source of their respective texts, in contrast to Green who gives sound reasons for identifying Gilbertus Anglicus as the source in both cases. Also, both Rowland and Hallaert make no effort to identify the Middle English dialect of their respective texts; the dialect of the text edited by Hallaert from Yale MS 47 proves to be that of Leicestershire, according to McIntosh et al. (1986, 1: 166, 3: 240–41).

A closer comparison of the published facsimiles of the “Sekenesse of Wymmen” with Hallaert’s transcription also reveals some drawbacks in her own reading, which we summarize here and comment on in subsequent paragraphs, as follows: (a) dubious readings of the MS; (b) omissions of words, letters, and other symbols; (c) mistakes in reading the text; and (d) mistakes in the expansion of mediaeval abbreviations.

By dubious readings we refer to the alternative readings that some words may have due to confusing strokes, whereby we do not mean to reject Hallaert’s readings, but to suggest other readings for these words in a table below.

In her transcription of the MS text, Hallaert sometimes fails to be consistent with her initial rendering of a particular word or letter group when a new occurrence of the same word or letter group appears later in the text. Thus, what is at first taken to be a stroke over a vowel calling for expansion by *n* may later be treated as an otiose stroke over *n*. For example, the very same sort of stroke placement in the MS that early in Hallaert’s transcription elicits “complexioun”³ in line 10 and “precipitacyoun” in line 27, later in her transcription prompts “precipitacyon” (line 228) and “fumygacion” (line 532).

Line(s) ⁴	Hallaert 1982	Our reading
6	purgacyoun	purgacyon
10	complexioun	complexion
11	lyuoun	lyuon
27	precipitacyoun	precipitacyon
55	bey bringes	bey bring (otiose mark)
261	comfort	counfort
532–33	oxedryt	oxe dryt
614	hefy	hesy
671	yvys	yvye

As regards the omissions of words, letters, struck-through words, and other symbols, a small number of them could allow us to consider them as accidental. However, contrary to our expectations we have encountered a large number of them, as can be seen in the following chart:⁵

Line(s)	Hallaert 1982	Our reading ⁶
23	<u>bat</u> ... we calle	<u>pa</u> ^t <i>he</i> we calle
183	...	∃(scruple)
220	wyndnes	wyndenes
243	and ... tokens	and <i>he</i> token <u>ns</u>
306	of ... popy	of <i>daycy</i> popy
331	and ... all	and <i>a mong</i> all
356	flux ... be	flux <i>hey</i> be
394	<u>bat</u> ... from	<u>pa</u> ^t <i>passep</i> from
417	seme <u>pe</u> ... of	seme <u>pe</u> <i>replete</i> of
464	se <u>pe</u> ... in	se <u>pe</u> <i>hem</i> in
540	ix ... houres	ix <i>dayes</i> houres
554	put ... in	put <i>yt</i> in
555	gedre ... <u>bat</u>	gedre <u><i>pa</i></u> ^t <i>pees</i> <u><i>pa</i></u> ^t
581	seuey	<i>senu</i> ey
582	wombe ... doune	wombe <i>well</i> doune
592	fy	<i>fyre</i>
735	<u>and</u> ... arogon	& <i>wi</i> ^h arogon
787	bape ... of	bape <i>anoynt</i> of

There is a number of what we consider inappropriate readings of the MS. More specifically, there are some readings that do not fit the original, and this fact often produces a change in the meaning of the original text. Such alterations, which can be regarded as obvious mistakes in reading the MS, are the following:

Line(s)	Hallaert 1982	Our reading
19	myche	<i>mych</i>
20	cometh	<i>comyth</i>
77	malecoly	<i>malycoly</i>
80	metys	<i>motys</i>
90	flemme	<i>fleume</i>
121	weynes	<i>veynes</i>
122	colre	<i>solre</i>
123	openynge	<i>oponynge</i>
134	hyghly	<i>lyghly</i>
138/206/280	sche	<i>scho</i>
166-67	amoynte	<i>anoynte</i> ⁷
188	be fore <u>u</u>	be <i>sore</i> ⁷
194	townecrase	<i>townecrase</i>

194	sorowe	corowe ⁸
201	em <u>per</u> ycon	em <u>per</u> icon
215	as	ad ⁹
229	holdinge	haldinge
242	coleryk	soleryk ¹⁰
259	here	hir
267	renynge	ernynge
282	scha	sche
284	fyfþe	fyrþe
295	ma <u>tes</u>	me <u>tes</u>
296	blede	blode
318	þissle	pissle
332	ryes	ryse
335	maxtix	maxstix
361	fyfþe	fyeþe
366	hote	hoet
384	greu <u>the</u>	greueþe
387	swollen	swollon
400	þrust	þrast
412	smyteth	smyteþ
425	receyve	receyue
443	fumigacion	fumygacion
446	snese	fnese ¹¹
449	gode	goode
452	þe	þo
463	undure	vndur
487	man	men
503	to be	tolde
512	wrongen	wrongon
530	a 3eyn	a 3eyne
538	bynde	hynde
547	let	clet
555	broken	brokon
565	schappe	schap
571	greueþe	groueþe
606	swollen	swollon
617	þa	þe
648	broken	brokon
656	centory	centey
682	pylliall	pyllyall
682	calament	calamynt

710	þe	be
724	hace	face
748	dronken	dronkon
779	whether	wech ¹²
808	if	yf

Abbreviations should not be randomly expanded, as Hallaert seems to have done on several occasions, since this practice inevitably leads to misinterpretations in a transcription. When expanding abbreviations, it may be wise to follow some recognized conventions, which can certainly facilitate a transcriber's work.¹³ Moreover, a common editorial practice is to skim through the complete text in order to find the same word when it appears in full so that its abbreviation can be expanded in accordance with the scribe's spelling.

In Hallaert's transcription, the following misinterpretations of abbreviations are found:

Line(s)	Hallaert 1982	Our reading
40	tokens	tokenns
104	membre	membre
132	a boue	a bouen
160	purgacioun	pu'gacion
161/367	et certum	& etc.
170	fynger	fynger
259	þing	þing
329	glowyng	glowyngē
334	recipe	res
338	hare	hare
348	womanys	wommanys
352	vynegre	vynegre
357	woman	womman
358	a	an
365	blak	blake
369	drinke	drinke
444	smellyng	smellyngē
460/546	gynger	gynger
670	a bouen	abouere
738	pore	por
772	matrice	matricis
811	ouer	ouer

Written in Latin as well as in English, the *marginalia* associated with the transcribed text have an important function, for they reveal the scope and organisation of the text and thus facilitate its consultation. It is therefore surprising that they are neither alluded to in the transcription nor shown on the facsimile pages that accompany it. Because of this

omission the transcribed text is not adequately presented as the practical manual that it was intended to be. The following observation by Keiser (1995, 207) certainly applies here:

Those medieval vernacular writings in which the need to locate specific material would seem most obvious are such practical works as remedy books, that is, treatises on medicine made up primarily of numerous recipes.

Following are the marginal notes of MS Yale 47 (ff. 60r–71v) passed over in silence in Hallaert's transcription (with those in Latin marked with parenthesized "L"):

60v: signa generalia (L) — 61r: cognicio vrine (L) — 61v: A gode stwe — 61v: A noþer stwe — 62r: Bona medicina (L) — 62r: Suppositorium (L) — 62r: aliud — 62v: Aliud (L) (2 times) — 63r: ffor to here the medynwefe for hi' <...> (later hand) — 63v: A gode stwe — 63v: suppositore — 63v: (bottom) Unreadable strokes which form part neither of the *marginalia* nor of the text. — 63v: Signa (L) — 65r: dieta (L) — 65r: medicina (L) — 65r: alia medicina (L) — 65r: alia (L) (5 times) — 65r: Alia medicina (L) — 65r: Excellens medicina per fluxu sangu'neo viri & mulieris (L) — 66r: A gode medycyne — 66r: Alia medicina (L) — 66v: Alia medicina (L) — 66v: Alia (L) (2 times) — 66v: bona fumigacio (L) — 66v: medicina (L) — 67r: Cibi nociui (L) — 67r: paraliser (L) — 67v: Remembre hi' <...> (later hand) — 68r: dieta (L) — 68r: x — 68r: To help wymmen — 68v: Alia medicina (L) — 68v: cognicio vrine (L) — 69r: for to helpe wymmen of þis sekenesse — 69r: Aliud emplastrum (L) — 69r: Aliud (L) (3 times) — 69v: ycchyng of þe moder — 69v: for brennyng and schaldynges — 69v: Medicina (L) — 70r: Alia medicina (L) — 70r: Medicina (L) — 70v: signa mortui pueri in ventre (L) — 70v: Ars obstetricis (L) — 70v: Balneum (L) — 70v: Vnguentum (L) — 70v: pro paupercula muliere bone medicine (L) — 70v: Ad liberandum a matre puerum (L) — 70v: potus veruene (L) — 71r: Signa puerperij (L) — 71r: Medicina (L) — 71r: Alia (L) (3 times) — 71r: ars obstetricis (L) — 71v: Alia (L) (2 times) — 71v: ffleobothomia (L) — 71v: medicina (L) — 71v: Alia (L)

Besides the omission of the *marginalia*, there is omission of one catchword by Hallaert on f. 64v showing the beginning of a new quire: "rennyng watre".

In summary, the published transcription of Yale Medical Library MS 47 (ff. 60r–71v) by M. R. Hallaert (1982) is marred by errors on every other page. Those errors can be classified into two main categories: (1) deficient readings of the MS, and (2) lack of rigour and consistency in expanding the abbreviations. Furthermore, Hallaert ignores the numerous *marginalia* appearing in the transcribed portion of the MS.

Admittedly, Hallaert's readings show an attempt at emendation of scribal mistakes, though we miss an introductory note advising the reader of this intention. Used with appropriate caution in view of the aforesaid, the text as presented by M. R. Hallaert counts as a helpful source both for the history of medicine and for historical studies of the English language.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Dr. Jeremy Smith and Dr. Mercedes Cabrera for their painstaking reading of earlier drafts of this article.
2. Transcription reviewed by Stannard and Voigts (1982).
3. Underlining shows the expansion of abbreviations.
4. Although we will follow the line-numbering given by Hallaert, we disagree with that numbering, since she considers some headings to be in infralinear position.
5. Observe that the opposite also occurs, i.e. the insertion of words that do not appear in the MS, e.g. "make" (332) and "ys" (455).
6. Italics are used to indicate words omitted by Hallaert.
7. Note in the following transcription that the wrong reading of the word "sore" as "fore" has led to an obvious change in meaning: "... it woll make hyre a noon to hafe purgacyoun / and if the membre be fore with in forthe of pese suppositories ..." (lines 187-88).
8. Rare forms deviating from "expected" words ("sorowe" and "coleryk"), which seem to have been emended by Hallaert.
9. Probably a scribe's mistake: "and".
10. See n. 8.
11. OE "fneosan" ME "fnesen"/"snesen".
12. Again, a wrong reading of a word, this time of "whether" as "whether", has led to an obvious change in meaning: "... for febulnes of þe moder þat comeþe of mych fastyng, / or of gret angure, or wrath or of smytyng, or of longe flux / of þe wombe. Whether þinges oft on slethe a childe in þe moder / wombe ..." (lines 777-80).
13. For a list of these conventions see Johnson and Jenkinson (1915) and Petti (1977).

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