

# ‘I beg your grace that you suppress this chapter or else allow it to be written in secret letters’: The emotions of encipherment in late-medieval gynaecology

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## Abstract

The Voynich illustrations feature hundreds of naked women, some of whom have objects adjacent to or unambiguously pointed towards their genitalia. Taking its prompt from these illustrations, this paper investigates the obscurantist emotions evident in self-censorship, erasure, and encipherment in gynaecological and sexological texts and manuscripts. These subjects were often referred to as ‘women’s secrets’, particularly in Germanic cultural contexts, where the Voynich manuscript may have originated. Examples of encipherment, erasure, and self-censorship in gynaecological or sexological texts will be explored. Dr Johannes Hartlieb (c. 1410–1468), for instance, consistently obscured matters relating to coitus, women, and plants throughout his oeuvre, and called for encipherment of methods for contraception, abortion, and sterilisation. Luke Demaitre observed that some Germanic authors considered women’s sexual anatomy alluring but dangerous. It is possible that the Voynich authors were motivated by similar emotions relating to women’s secrets.

## Keywords

Voynich manuscript, women’s secrets, gynaecology, emotions, sex

## 1. Text

The Voynich manuscript’s illustrations give historians a lot to work with. The most important illustrations are those that are most specific and unambiguous, and which can offer clues to provenance and/or subject matter. Many aspects of the manuscript offer clues to geographical provenance in the southern German or northern Italian cultural regions. There are four instances of marginalia in an unknown German dialect. ‘rot’ and ‘r’ appear in plant roots (4r, 29r), and it seems unlikely that a non-author would make such annotations. The final word of the charm on 116v is ‘maria’ with a superscripted cross between ‘a’ and ‘r’, which—in addition to the cross on 79v—indicates a Christian context. The Zodiac illustrations bear well-known parallels with southern-German manuscripts, which do not need repetition here [1]. The crown on 72v1 resembles crowns of the Holy Roman Emperors and other Austrian royals, including a c. 1350 reliquary bust of Charlemagne possibly made for Charles IV; an archducal crown on a painting of Rudolf IV, duke of Austria (d. 1365); the imperial crown buried with Friedrich III (d. 1493) observed using an endoscope; a coin of 1484 depicting Sigismund, archduke of Austria; and a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer depicting Maximilian I (d. 1519) [2]. The swallowtail merlons on the Rosettes castle and city walls tie the manuscript to southern-German or northern-Italian contexts, where such merlons predominated. Swallowtail merlons also appear in documents made in early fourteenth-century Venice, 1340s Zürich, Sankt Peter an der Schwarzwald in 1487, Nürnberg in 1493, and another catalogued as 1300s ‘probably German’ [3]. There are likely others, but these are the ones of which I am aware.

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International Conference on the Voynich Manuscript 2022, November 30–December 1, 2022, University of Malta.  
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CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)

Aside from the plants, the illustrations that are most specific and unambiguous concerning the manuscript's subject matter are the women pointing objects towards their genital areas. One woman on 80r, for example, holds a phallic object with a flared handle oriented towards her genitalia. The flared handle can only have been intended to prevent the item from getting stuck inside. The object was therefore designed for insertion; insertion could be intended for sexual pleasure, gynaecological treatment, or both. Similar illustrations include two depictions of a clyster or enema sometimes called 'the thing' (80v, 82r) and an object too small to identify, but oriented towards the genitalia (76v). One woman has her hand adjacent to her genitalia, next to which is an erasure (80v). Another is suggestively leading a man by the hand (80r). Another has something falling from her genital area (72r1). A naked man looks like he might have an erection (72r2). These illustrations cross medieval lines of taboo.

Taking its prompt from these depictions, this paper investigates the emotions involved in late-medieval gynaecology and sexology. Luke Demaitre notes that referring to gynaecological literature as 'secrets of women' was popular in Germanic contexts, and that some physicians in these regions considered the hidden anatomy and physiology of the female body monstrous, alluring, frightening, or dangerous [4]. Monica Green writes that German gynaecological traditions were 'uniformly male-oriented', that is, written by men for men [5]. Fifteenth-century German aristocrats and urban bourgeois commissioned or produced vernacular translations of sexological texts, the extent of which is an object of ongoing research. In the context of this movement, part of what William Eamon calls the 'domestication of secrets' [6], that is, the increasing popularity of books of secrets in aristocratic households as opposed to monasteries and universities, the question then becomes: did concerns about women's secrets, or particular aspects thereof, manifest in encipherment? The answer is yes.

Even though the carbon dating of the Voynich manuscript almost certainly excludes Dr Johannes Hartlieb (c. 1410–1468) from the possibility of involvement in the manuscript's authorship, he nevertheless provides good evidence for the emotions underpinning gynaecological encipherment in the southern-German cultural milieu. Hartlieb was personal physician to Duke Albrecht III of Bavaria-Munich (d. 1460) and then his son Siegmund (r. 1460–1467). Hartlieb wrote an illustrated herbal, Bavarian translations of the Latin *Secrets of Women* and *Trotula* (written 1460–65), a book ostensibly condemning sorcery, a book on baths, and manuals on memory, chiromancy, geomancy, onomancy, and astrology. Duke Siegmund commissioned Hartlieb's gynaecological translation, and a copy was later made for Emperor Friedrich III. Siegmund had several mistresses and extramarital children [7]. This was extremely common among perialpine aristocrats, so much so that the fifteenth century has been called 'the golden age of noble bastards' [8]. I am aware of eight aristocratic men reported to have had extramarital children. Sigismund, archduke of Austria (d. 1496) reportedly had more than 40 [9]. The lustfulness of male authors, readers, and/or commissioners may help explain the abundance of naked women on the Voynich manuscript.

Hartlieb expressed profound anxiety that his translations could be used to support adulterous couplings. He is known among historians for treading a fine line between obscurity and revelation, and he warns his commissioners at length not to misuse his work, or God would punish him and them [10]. His fears culminate in a call for encipherment in a chapter of his *Trotula* concerning contraception and abortion: 'Most gracious lord, I beg your grace that you suppress this chapter or else allow it to be written in secret letters of which I have provided many to your noble grace' [11]. This chapter was cut from one later manuscript (Mgf 928), but remains fully legible in another (Cgm 261). The position of the call for encipherment at the end of the chapter may mean it was intended merely for self-protective authorial posturing. It seems unlikely a cipher ever eventuated. If it was ever made, at around six manuscript pages, it would have been the longest-known definite case of encipherment of women's secrets (excluding the Voynich manuscript, if it indeed is an example of such). Throughout his oeuvre Hartlieb obscures or expresses fears about matters pertaining to magic, plants, women's pleasure during coitus (believed necessary for conception), women born under Saturn, women birthing animals, ointments to treat vaginas torn in childbirth, correct coital positions, plants used by sorcerers and prostitutes, use of plants for menstrual alteration, and so on [12].

Hartlieb was not the only person to obscure gynaecological or sexological information. Table 1 lists known examples of erasure, and Table 2 lists known examples of encipherment.

**Table 1**  
Examples of Gynaecological or Sexological Erasure

Manuscript Identifier	Provenance	Nature of Obscuration / Encipherment
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, photocopy of Breslau M 1302 ('Salernitan codex'), 142r.	Twelfth-century Italy	Recently rediscovered manuscript. Approximately ten words erased from gynaecological recipes of unclear purpose.
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Lat. quart. 674.	Early thirteenth century, Trier / Rupertsberg / nearby	Copyist of Hildegard of Bingen's <i>Lingua ignota</i> leaves blank spaces in place of the words for male and female genitalia [13].
Speyrer Arzneibuch', Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cpg 214, 59r.	Speyer, 1321	Ingredient in an abortifacient recipe scratched off.
Wolfsthurn Castle, private collection of Sternbach family, Ms 1.	Wolfsthurn (southern Tyrol), 15th century	Menstrual magic annotated as 'practically heresy' in a later 15C hand (75v). Removal of half of folio 122 adjacent to magical recipe for reducing excessive menstruation [14].
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Mgf 928.	Bavaria, 1467–9	Erasures concerning abortifacients and contraceptives, women's hair and breath management, make-up and spot removal, a vaginal fumigation causing sterility, vaginal tightening, and medical masturbation to reduce excessive female sperm, believed to cause uterine suffocation [15].
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Mgf 1069.	Alemmanic, 1474–9.	Gynaecological recipes on 196r and 203r have words struck through. A quarter of folio 84 cut, near which a 16th century hand wrote: 'such things are banned'. Fol. 86 cut. Recipes for toothache, invisibility, death prognostication, and menstrual alteration struck through [16].

**Table 2**  
Examples of Gynaecological Encipherment

Manuscript	Provenance	Nature of Obscuration / Encipherment
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin— Preußischer Kulturbesitz, photocopy of Breslau M 1302 (‘Salernitan codex’), 142r	12th century Italy	Recently rediscovered manuscript. Karl Sudhoff estimated the cipher obscured abortifacients [17]. In fact the 26-line cipher obscures superstitious recipes involving demonic invocation to combat falling sickness and to compel coitus from a woman.
Yale Medical Library 10	13th century, Italy	Cipher obscures ‘menstrua’ and ingredients mallow and scamonee in an emmenagogue recipe [18].
British Library, Royal 12 E VIII, 221b	13th century, probably English	One enciphered word in a recipe for expelling a <i>mola uteri</i> , with Latin instructions below in Hebrew script (two lines): ‘two parts to be rubbed all over, the third part in a clyster’ [19].
Oxford, Bodleian, Digby 69	c. 1300 England	Alchemical terms and the word ‘vulva’ twice [20].
Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 405, 175v	Alemannic, 1389	Three enciphered words in recipes treating deafness, labour pain, and breast pain.
London, British Library, Harley 3 (copy of John Mirfield’s medical compendium).	England, late 14th century	Recipes for contraceptives [21].
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin— Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Lat. fol. 88, 59b2	Northern Italy, late 14C/ early 15C.	21-line cipher hiding recipes of gynaecological usage (‘for the womb’, ‘for the foetus’, ‘for the menses’, etc).
Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ms 444	Dutch, 1405	‘explkckt sfcrtxm mxlkrks’ (‘explicit secretum mulieris’).
Cambridge, Trinity College R.15.21 (John Foxton’s <i>Liber cosmographiae</i> )	York, c. 1408	Cipher hides ‘coitus’, ‘semen’, ‘spermata’, ‘secundinam’, ‘orificium’, ‘menstruato’, and matters pertaining to anatomy and interpretation of chiromancy for women’s sexual matters [22].

Most of the ciphers obscure taboo words or phrases; only a few obscure entire recipes. Each is unique according to what its author(s) felt necessary to encipher. Another medical cipher (Prague XXIII.F.29, from Upper Germany, 1475–1500) uses Scandinavian runes to hide instructions for sorcery, including summoning Satan, but leaves gynaecological texts unenciphered. None are on the scale of the Voynich manuscript. Many concern gynaecology in addition to subjects such as magic, alchemy, or demons. Magic for and against fertility was recognised practice that crossed taboo lines. Petrus Mamoris believed it acceptable to use sorcerers to remove barriers to conception, while Pietro Decembrio includes astrology, divination, and magic in his book on human birth [24]. These subjects were not so neatly divided then as now. They were also sometimes an object of fear even at the highest echelons of the late-medieval social hierarchy. Upon consummation of his marriage to Eleanor of Portugal, Emperor Friedrich III feared her maidservants had performed magical incantations and fumigations upon her bed, so he demanded they consummate in his instead [25]. There was perhaps good justification for this kind of fear; the *Picatrix*, of which Hartlieb had seen a copy, includes magical suffumigations composed of hallucinogenic and/or deadly plants [26].

Voynich quire 13 contains illustrations that can be read as anatomical and/or balneological. Physicians were involved in the transmission of both genres in the fifteenth century [27]. Some baths were notorious for libertinism in the fifteenth century. Hartlieb's bath book translates from a Latin book by the jurist Felix Hemmerli (1450/52), who condemns the lascivious activities in Bad Baden im Aargau, about 25km north-west of Zürich. In 1416, an Italian, Poggio Bracciolini, visited Kaiserstuhl about 25km north of Zürich and observed nude mixed-sex bathing and games involving the private parts. Bracciolini expressed his embarrassment about the baths in a letter to a friend; his German bathing experience was not in keeping with his bathing experiences in Italy. In 1463, Bishop Burkhard von Konstanz gave power of attorney to the local priest in Baden to arrest clergy who participated in such activities, which took place several times [28].

There was a great outpouring of sexological writing throughout late-medieval Europe, beneath which is a consistent vein of obscurantism. The *Trotula* received an abbreviated version with contraceptives removed [29]. A late thirteenth-century French encyclopedia called *Placides et Timeus* describes coitus but cuts short at orgasm, which Karma Lochrie calls a 'textual *coitus interruptus*' [30]. A fifteenth-century Dutch *Secrets of Women* mentions abortion, but changes the subject quickly [31]. In England, someone removed two penile recipes from a head-to-toe book of medical recipes [32]. The German author of the Latin *Secrets of Women* encourages his readers to keep the text away from children 'of age or manners'. He cuts himself off—'because I fear my creator'—in his discussion of 'certain whores' who allegedly placed iron in their vaginas to wound penises [33]. Thomas of Cantimpré has embryological and obstetrical sections in his natural encyclopedia, but does not write about the genitals 'because of the shame of them'; 'it is not useful to read or hear about such things' [34]. Konrad von Megenburg omits even the obstetrical and embryological material [35]. Hartlieb calls women's secrets 'rightly hidden' and worries that God will punish anyone who reveals them [36]. In his herbal, written between 1435 and 1450, Hartlieb quotes Morigines (an alchemist) to justify his obscuration of the secrets of verbena from 'street-runners' i.e. prostitutes: 'whoever reveals, uncovers, and exposes the secrets, God will hate them and not allow the levity to go unpunished' [37]. He used similar quotations from Morigines in his *Art of Memory*, probably written in 1430, and *Secrets of Women*, written between 1460 and 1465 [38]. The quotation was enduringly valuable to him over many decades as a justification for his deep-seated fears about the propagation of secrets. Hartlieb mentions women who give birth to 'many + kinds of animals'. The '+' represents the physician crossing himself to avert horror, and he leaves out the discussion 'for the sake of women' [39]. He also obscures 'for the sake of women' midwives' ointments to heal vaginas torn in childbirth [40]. A Dutch *Trotula* begs women 'not to curse me... for I have not written this to harm them but for their benefit' [41]. Hartlieb mentions methods for attaining permanent sterility for women; 'some desperate and despondent women certainly enquire about them', but Hartlieb will not record the recipes 'on account of immoral people and so that no harm will

result' [42]. He may have been influenced by his university study. Michele Savonarola was professor of medicine at Padua until 1440, where Hartlieb received his doctorate in 1439. Writing before 1440, Savonarola says in a discussion of the necessity of female pleasure for conception that he 'will not hesitate to describe what is useful for procreation even if it does not seem decent', but he relies on 'the doctor's prudence' for 'what he cannot set down in writing' [43].

Concerns about taboo subjects need not be the sole motivation for the Voynich encipherment, as they can co-exist with proprietary concerns and anxieties about physical danger or death of patients, and the spiritual punishment of careless physicians. Some abortifacient recipes, for example, seem to have operated on the principle of bringing the woman almost to the point of death, just enough to kill the foetus but not the woman. One of Hartlieb's abortifacient recipes, for example, instructs the woman to drink the water in which blacksmiths have placed their tongs [44]. Many of his other abortifacient recipes are superstitious, often involving animal parts, which were common medical ingredients and which do not appear in the surviving Voynich illustrations.

The cases of erasure, encipherment, and self-censorship presented above, while very different in scope to the Voynich manuscript, prove that amid the abundance of sexological writing in late-medieval Europe generally, many physicians independently considered particular aspects of women's secrets worthy of obscuration, particularly those relating to coitus and genitalia. What that might mean for the woman on 80r pointing an object towards her vagina, and many other illustrations on the Voynich manuscript besides, is worth contemplating.

## 2. Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the receipt of funding from an MQRF scholarship from Macquarie University. The author would like to express his gratitude to Michelle L. Lewis, who has been a helpful and open-minded sounding board, fellow researcher, and emotional support throughout this process. Much of the discovery in this paper belongs to her.

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