

## Childbirth Prayers in Medieval and Early Modern England:

**“For drede of perle that may be-falle.”**

Delores LaPratt

Faculty of Religious Studies

McGill University

[delores.lapratt@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:delores.lapratt@mail.mcgill.ca)

A woman, when she travaileth, hath sorrow, for her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she thinketh no more of the anguish, for joy that man is born onto the world. I beseech thee therefore in the dangerous time of my travail, grant me speedie delivery, and joyful holding of my child.<sup>1</sup>

Such a prayer might be recited by a woman with child in early modern England before her ‘travail.’ Childbirth is an integral part of life but in medieval and early modern England, childbirth occurred within an almost exclusively female domain. It was a complex event involving a number of rituals, including the use of prayers and charms, a ‘lying-in’ period of confinement following childbirth, and a subsequent ‘churching’ of the woman as she was reintegrated into the broader community in a church ritual. Through a study of childbirth prayers and rituals, one may get an impression of how childbirth was viewed by, and experienced by, its participants. Childbirth prayers and rituals also reflect societal beliefs and ideology. Thus, in comparing childbirth prayers and rituals used in pre-Reformation England with those used after the Reformation, one would expect changes in the types of rituals and prayers performed. Despite many changes in official ideology during this period, an analysis of childbirth prayers will demonstrate that this change was not so easily implemented by the Church and was, at times resisted by lay participants. The final outcome was that there was some continuity

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bentley, *The Monument of Matrones: Containing Seven Severall Lamps of Virginitie, or Distinct Treatises: Whereof the First Five Concerne Praier and Meditation; The Other Two Last, Precepts and Examples, as the Woorthie Works Partlie of Men, Partlie of Women; Compiled for the Necessarie Use of Both Sexes Out of the Sacred Scriptures, and Other Aprooved Authors by Thomas Bentley of Graies Inne Student*, [1582]. (STC# 1892), 98. Nothing is known of Bentley other than that he was a student of Gray’s Inn.

of childbirth prayers and rituals from the late medieval world into early modern England, not the least of which was the association of the ‘travail’ of childbirth with the ritual of prayer.

Childbirth prayers and rituals from the medieval period and early modern era shall be analyzed and compared with childbirth prayers and rituals in post-Reformation England. Despite recent interest in what can be seen as women’s history, there are very few comprehensive studies comparing childbirth prayers and rituals from the medieval period into the early modern era in England. This may be because historians tend to specialize within a particular era, such as the medieval period or the Reformation. The goal of this paper is to better elucidate what the particular childbirth prayers and rituals were, what aspects changed and why during these two time periods. In doing so one may gain a better understanding of the complex interplay between individual and church, popular culture and official state religion.

## **I – Primary Sources**

An important source on childbirth for the medieval period is the *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health*, otherwise known as the ‘English Trotula.’ This extant version is an early fifteenth century English treatise on obstetrics and gynecology which was based on an eleventh century treatise by Trotula, an Italian woman.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the few primary sources on childbirth for the medieval era that was written by a woman. Another primary source by a woman is the late medieval text, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1430) written by Margery Kempe. This document contains only a few passages that refer to childbirth but its utility is in providing personal attitudes that mirror the ambivalence of the individual and society to childbirth.<sup>3</sup>

Another document which provides some details on childbirth rituals, but not prayers, is John Myrc’s *Instruction to Parish Priests*, written by a Canon of Lilleshall, in

---

<sup>2</sup> Beryl Rowland, ed., *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health* (Kent, UK: Kent State University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. W. Butler-Bowdon (London: Oxford University Press, 1936; reprint, 1954).

Shropshire, “not later than the year 1450.”<sup>4</sup> A key source is the *Sarum Missal in English*, a translation into the vernacular by the Catholic Church of the liturgy of the Mass and scriptural readings. It was first translated into English in 1526.<sup>5</sup> The *Sarum Missal* was common in the medieval era as a liturgical book in Latin containing instructions and texts necessary for the celebration of Mass. The 1526 English translation of the *Sarum Missal* contains two prayers for women in labor, and one prayer for churching.

An important primary source for childbirth prayers after the Reformation in England is *The Monument of Matrones: Containing Seven Severall Lamps of Virginitie, or Distinct Treatises: Whereof the First Five Concerne Praier and Meditation; The Other Two Last, Precepts and Examples, as the Woorthie Works Partlie of Men, Partlie of Women; Compiled for the Necessarie Use of Both Sexes Out of the Sacred Scriptures, and Other Aprooved Authors by Thomas Bentley of Graies Inne Student* (1582), one of the earliest and largest devotional works at over 1,500 quarto pages. The *Monument*, written by Thomas Bentley, contains prayers and meditations for different circumstances, extracts from the Bible, and brief lives of biblical and other exemplary women. Although the title states that it was “compiled for the necessarie use of both sexes,” almost all of the topics are directed toward women. It is an important source of information on women’s lives, particularly those of the upper class, in the early modern era. The *Monument* was, in fact, intended for use by upper class women.<sup>6</sup> The *Monument* is divided into seven “lamps,” or recitations, each dealing with the various stages in a woman’s life from girlhood, to motherhood and widowhood. Lamp Five is of interest because it contains 115 prayers, of which 38, or roughly one third of the material, deals with childbirth. The prayers are divided under two headings, “Praiers to be said of women with child, and in childbed, and after their deliuerie,” and “Thanksgiuinges for women after deliuerance of childe.”

---

<sup>4</sup> John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, Early English Text Society, 31 (1868, revised 1902; reprint, New York, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> *The Sarum Missal in English*, trans. Frederick E. Warren (2 vols, London: A.R. Mowbray & Company Limited, 1913).

<sup>6</sup> Colin B. Atkinson and William P. Stoneman, “‘These griping greifes and pinching pangs’: Attitudes to Childbirth in Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* (1582),” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXI (1990), 196.

## II – Secondary Sources

There are some secondary sources, mainly articles that deal specifically with childbirth prayers. An important article is Curt F. Buhler's "Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls" which reprints four Middle English religious texts. According to Buhler the religious texts would probably have been used as medical charms and supplications.<sup>7</sup> One such text is in the *Glazier MS. 39* which was written sometime after 1484 by a certain Percival who later became a canon of Coverham Abbey.<sup>8</sup> An article by L.M.C. Weston, "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," analyzes a number of prayers and charms found in the manuscripts usually referred to as *Lacnunga* (Harley 585) and *Leechbook* (Regius 12 D xvii) from the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>9</sup> Weston's article also discusses the origins of childbirth prayers and charms in England. The *Lacnunga* is a collection of miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon medical texts and prayers written primarily in Old English and Latin. *Leechbook* is an Old English medical textbook. Another important article on childbirth prayers is "'These griping greefes and pinching pangs': Attitudes to Childbirth in Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582)" by Colin B. Atkinson and William P. Stoneman. This is a detailed analysis of the subsection concerning childbirth in the *Monument*.

## III – Childbirth in Medieval and Early Modern England

Childbirth was more common and more dangerous in the period under consideration than in the modern era. It is believed that Margery Kempe was pregnant fourteen times: "If all fourteen children were carried full term. Margery would have been pregnant for a total of 126 months out of 240 months, or just over half of the time between her twentieth and fortieth birthdays."<sup>10</sup> Margery Kempe was from a well-to-do

---

<sup>7</sup> Curt F. Buhler, "Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls," in *Speculum* 39 (1964), 274.

<sup>8</sup> Buhler, "Prayers and Charms," 278.

<sup>9</sup> L.M.C. Weston, "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," in *Modern Philology* 92:3 (February 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Laura L. Howes, "On the Birth of Margery Kempe's Last Child," in *Modern Philology*, 90 (November, 1992), 224, n. 12.

family, and therefore reflects the higher birthrate of her social station. Nevertheless, her case gives an indication of the high number of pregnancies and births some women experienced. The chances of miscarrying and/or death of the mother and child were also higher due to the lack of medical expertise. In spite of these factors, Roger Schofield argues that childbearing was a “rather less mortal occasion than we may have been inclined to believe.” He suggests that the maternal mortality rate was 10 per cent, “as it was for much of the period before 1750.” Therefore, a woman on average would have run a 6 to 7 per cent risk of dying in childbed during her procreative years. For the 25-34 age group, however, 20 per cent of deaths were attributed to death in the childbed.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for a certain age group, death in childbirth was a relatively common occurrence. In addition, the communal nature of the birthing ritual meant that women would participate in a number of childbirths. Medieval and early modern women would have witnessed a number of childbirths and one wonders how many deaths they would have witnessed or been aware of. Sara Mendelson notes that, “Diarists [from the Stuart period, 1603-1714] often left accounts of those labors of relatives and friends whose lyings-in they were duty-bound to attend.”<sup>12</sup> All of these factors created a fear of childbirth and one must situate the use of childbirth prayers within this context.

#### IV – Childbirth Prayers and Charms

Childbirth prayers and rituals had a long history of use in England and were based on a number of diverse traditions. Weston states that Anglo-Saxon prayers and charms used in childbirth were based on Greco-Roman and Germanic, literate and oral, Christian and pagan traditions. In both *Lacnunga* and *Leechbook* the charms and prayers draw upon Alexander of Tralles, a physician born in Asia Minor around sixth century B.C.E. *Leechbook* also cites Pliny, the Roman naturalist and writer from the first century

---

<sup>11</sup> Roger Schofield, “Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in ‘The World We Have Lost,’” in ed. LLOYD Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson, *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 259-261.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Heller Mendelson, “Stuart women’s diaries and occasional memoirs,” in ed. Mary Prior, *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London: Methuen, 1985), 196.

C.E.. Some magical formulas even invoke both Christ and Woden in the same incantation.<sup>13</sup>

Weston argues, however, that Anglo-Saxon metrical childbirth charms also had their origins in a female oral tradition and a female medical tradition. This female medical tradition of healing, especially for managing childbirth, “constituted less a professional specialty than an inseparable part of everyday domestic duties and participation in the community of women.”<sup>14</sup> Each of these charms was seen to be a source of empowerment for the childbearing woman and the female community to which she belonged. In using these charms the woman took responsibility for her own healing because she spoke words no one else could speak for her. These childbirth charms are exceptions in the magico-medical manuscript tradition which was primarily the domain of males but eventually, even these oral and female healing practices would be appropriated by male authorities.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of childbirth charms and prayers, however, were used by a community largely separate from male domain. Through the correct recitation of Anglo-Saxon childbirth charms the female speaker brings about the desired situation for herself. The charms are made powerful through alliteration and repetition. In vernacular manuscripts, these charms often appeared in Latin, especially, when in connection with childbirth.<sup>16</sup> This suggests a belief that the charms were made even more powerful by the use of Latin. The birthing charms, rituals and the person aiding the woman to give birth would remain primarily in the female domain for some one thousand years.

One is able to discern a difference in healing practices when the vernacular charms from the Anglo-Saxon era *Lacnunga* are contrasted with the Latin childbirth charm found in the mid-eleventh century manuscript *MS. Junius 85*. In *MS. Junius 85* someone else – maybe a priest – was to write magical words upon virgin wax; the

---

<sup>13</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 279.

<sup>14</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 281.

<sup>15</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 281, 283.

<sup>16</sup> Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s*, 31.

resulting amulet was then bound under the mother's right foot. Such an authority using the *Junius* text, translated here from Latin, would invoke biblical models for safe deliveries:

Mary, virgin, brought forth Christ; Elizabeth, sterile, brought forth John the Baptist. I adjure you, infant, whether you be masculine or feminine, by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that you awaken, and move, and no longer do any injury for foolishness. Amen. The Lord, seeing the sisters of Lazarus weeping at the tomb, wept in the presence of the Jews and cried out: Lazarus come forth. And he came forth with hands and feet bound who had been four days dead.<sup>17</sup>

The charm in the *Junius* text is similar to prayers of the later middle ages and the early modern period. It appeals to the Christian god and a literate, male authority is the agent for his patient. The "charm grants the power of the priest's male world" to the woman and yet it reinforces the priests exclusion from the female realm, because "he enters the birth chamber only through the proxy of the talisman."<sup>18</sup>

A commonly held belief prior to the Reformation was that suffering might be alleviated by God through Christ or the intercession of the Saints. While prayers said outside of the church were private and unofficial, they placed the woman within a larger Christian community. Layfolk and practitioners alike frequently resorted to the use of prayers and incantations. Most medical writers included at least a few prayers and incantations in their textbooks, and collections of domestic remedies are replete with prayers and incantations in late medieval England.<sup>19</sup>

Whether the prayers are Anglo-Saxon, later medieval or early modern, certain themes are constant. One such theme is the belief that one needed to pray for pregnant women to protect them and the unborn children from the perils of childbirth. In an earlier medieval version of the *Sarum Missal*, Pope Celestine made provisions for the insertion of a "Mass for a pregnant woman."<sup>20</sup> In Myrc's *Instructions for Parish Priests* (ca. 1450),

<sup>17</sup> Weston, "Women's Medicine," 292.

<sup>18</sup> Weston, "Women's Medicine," 292.

<sup>19</sup> Carole Rawcliffe, *Sources for the History of Medicine in Late Medieval England*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 90.

<sup>20</sup> *Sarum Missal*, vol. 2, 136.

priests were instructed to tell “Wymmen that ben wyth chy[l]de. . . wherne here tyme ys neghe y-come” to go to confession and receive holy communion “for drede of perele that may be-falle, in here trauelynge that come schalle.”<sup>21</sup>

There were special prayers to be said by the pregnant woman, herself. Bentley’s *Monuments* (1582) contains several prayers “to be used of a woman with child.” One such prayer begins:

Almighty and merciful father, which of thy bountiful goodness has fructified my womb, and of thy gracious blessing, hath created in me a reasonable creature, I most heartily thank thee, not only for this thy gracious gift, but also that thou hast at all times, since I conceived, preserved me from all perils both of soul and body, and hast so moderated all my nips, pinches and pangs, that I have hitherto right well escaped them.<sup>22</sup>

These prayers hint at another major constant theme in medieval and early modern England – the hardships of childbirth and fears of a difficult labor. In Anglo-Saxon England a pregnant woman might have recited the following incantation three times as she stepped over the grave of a dead man to ward off a difficult childbirth or even death of herself and her child:

This is my remedy for hateful slow birth,  
this is my remedy for heavy difficult birth,  
this is my remedy for hateful imperfect birth.<sup>23</sup>

After she performed this ritual she then performed the second part of the charm which involved stepping over a living man (her husband) as she said:

Up I go, step over you  
with a living child, not a dead one,  
with a full-born one, not a doomed one.<sup>24</sup>

When the mother felt that the child was alive, the mother, now named ‘*seo modor*’ rather than ‘*paet wif*,’ went to the church. As she stood before the altar she announced, “By

---

<sup>21</sup> Myrc, *Instructions*, lines 77-84.

<sup>22</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 288.

<sup>24</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 288.



Christ, I have said, this is manifested.” The Anglo-Saxon birthing rituals concluded with the churching at the end of her confinement.<sup>25</sup>

In the medieval period, childbirth charms and prayers combined Christian and pagan elements and often were written in a mix of Latin and the vernacular. Saints were commonly invoked in charms and prayer during difficult labor. One of the most popular charms listed famous biblical births.<sup>26</sup>

In the English translation of the *Sarum Missal* (1526) one finds a “Mass in honour of the glorious Virgin. On Behalf of women labouring with child.” The mass would begin with an entreaty to Mary:

Kind virgin of virgins, holy mother of God, present on behalf of thy devoted handmaidens their earnest prayers to the Son, thou are the benign assister of women in travail.<sup>27</sup>

The *Monument* (1582) contains several prayers for women “in long and dangerous travail of child to be used either of the woman herself, or by the women about her in her behalf.” In one such prayer, the woman in labor is to recite the following prayer:

Have mercy upon me, O Lord, have mercy upon me thy sinful servant, and woeful hand-maid, who now in my greatest need and distress, do seek thee: behold, with grievous groans & deep sighs, I cry unto thee for mercy.<sup>28</sup>

According to Bentley, the Lady, Francis Aburgauennie prayed:

Arm me, Oh might God with perfect patience, joyfully to bear thy correction, and in the midst of these sharp and bitter brunts of grief, give me grace to call upon thee. Strengthen me a poor wretched woman, give me comfort and heavenly consolation from above.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 289.

<sup>26</sup> Fiona Harris Stoertz, “Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth,” in ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Sarum Missal*, vol. 2, 161.

<sup>28</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 106-107.

In Stuart England (1603-1714), women's anxieties about pregnancy and childbirth appear in various guises in their diaries and memoirs.<sup>30</sup> They express their apprehensions about the pain of labor. The Countess of Bridgewater beseeches the Lord to "have compassion on me in the great paine I am to fele in the bringing forth of this my child . . . lay no more on me than thou wilt enable me to beare."<sup>31</sup>

Alice Thorton in Stuart England (1603-1714) relates the following account of the breech birth of her fifth child. She had been in labor for three days already when she fell into, "exceedingly sharp travail" so that the midwife thought she was ready to deliver, "But loe! . . . the child staied in the birth, and came crosse with his feet first . . . at which time I was upon the racke in bearing my childe with such exquisitt torment."<sup>32</sup>

Death in childbirth was a common occurrence, for both mother and child. After a prolonged, difficult breech delivery, Alice Thorton's child was born "half-strangled" and lived only half an hour.<sup>33</sup> There were prayers and charms to prevent and deal with such an outcome. In an Anglo-Saxon childbirth charm for a woman who did not bring a child to term due to a stillbirth, she was to take some earth from her own child's grave. Then, she was to wrap the earth in black wool and sell it to a merchant. As she did this, she was to recite the following prayer "I sell it, you buy it, this black wool and this sorrow's seed."<sup>34</sup> Weston suggests this ritual returns the woman "to potent possibility."<sup>35</sup>

One also finds prayers for the death of the mother in childbirth in the *Monument* (1582). One of these prayers thanked Jesus Christ for delivering "this woman our sister, out of the woeful miseries of this sinful world."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Mendelson, "Stuart women," 196.

<sup>31</sup> Countess of Bridgewater, *Meditations*, BL MS Egerton 607, ff. 111-112, quoted in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 196.

<sup>32</sup> A. Thorton, *The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thorton*, ed. C. Jackson, (Surtees Society, LXII, 1875), quoted in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 196.

<sup>33</sup> Mendelson, "Stuart women," 196.

<sup>34</sup> Weston, "Women's Medicine," 290.

<sup>35</sup> Weston, "Women's Medicine," 290.

<sup>36</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 150.

## V – Childbirth rituals

Childbirth was a communal event with associated rituals. These rituals included the ‘lying-in.’ The lying-in was a period of confinement, usually for one month, which took place after the birth of the child. During this time the mother remained in her birthchamber but friends and relatives were duty-bound to attend. This period of confinement ended with the churching of the woman and child.

The practice of churching had a long tradition from the medieval into the Early Modern period. After childbirth, the woman remained secluded within a female-dominated world until her ‘churching.’ Churching was an official ecclesiastical ceremony performed by the priest giving thanks for a safe childbirth. The prayers said inside the church were public and official and served to re-integrate the woman back into the community as a whole.<sup>37</sup>

The *Sarum Missal* had a prayer for the “Blessing of a woman after childbirth before the church porch.” In this prayer the priest recited psalms and spoke of deliverance from the peril of childbirth. The priest prayed, “Oh God, who hast delivered this woman thy servant from the peril of childbirth, and hast made her to be devoted to thy service; . . . etc.” after which he sprinkled holy water on the woman before saying, “Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop.” He then led her by the hand into the church, saying, “enter into the temple of God” wherein he spoke of the prospect of eternal life.<sup>38</sup> In traditional Catholic practice the woman who was to be churched wore a white veil, carried a lighted candle and was accompanied by two married women, but these were not formal requirements.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 287-289.

<sup>38</sup> *Sarum Missal*, vol. 2, 164-165.

<sup>39</sup> David Cressy, “Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England,” in *Past and Present* 141 (November 1993), 118.

In Bentley's *Monument* (1582), there are a number of prayers of thanksgiving to God to be "used of women in child-bed, after their travail and deliverance and at their churching or purifying (as they call it)." One such prayer begins:

O My Lord God, I thank thee with all my heart, wit, understanding, and power, for thou hath vouchsafed to deliver me out of this most dangerous travail, and hast sent unto this world out of my woeful womb this child. . . for which I am not worthy. . . . to give thee condign thanks, praise, honour and glory."<sup>40</sup>

Thus, even after the church was reformed in England the long tradition of the churching ritual continued for some time.

## VI – Analysis of Childbirth Prayers and Rituals

In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas sees a split between the post-Reformation church and the populace. The official position of the church was "to treat the ceremony as one of thanksgiving" whereas to the populace "churching was indubitably a ritual of purification closely linked with its Jewish predecessor."<sup>41</sup> Popular superstitions, "taboo" and "magical elements" in the ceremony, and post-Reformation Puritan objections to the ecclesiastical service, suggests that churching was a ritual of purification. According to Thomas, "resistance to churching or to wearing the veil became one of the surest signs of Puritan feeling among clergy or laity in the century before the Civil War."<sup>42</sup>

Despite some resistance to the churching ritual, the Church of England retained the ceremony but they preferred to label the service a thanksgiving. The thanksgiving ritual announced the woman's deliverance and preservation from 'the great danger of child-birth.' These words are very similar to those spoken in the churching ceremony in the *Sarum Missal*. However, the thanksgiving ceremony included a passage from Psalm 121 - "I have lifted up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." This would suggest that the thanksgiving ritual had more to do with survival than purification.

---

<sup>40</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 38, 59-61.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, *Decline of Magic*, 59-61.

David Cressy argues that the retention of this ritual in post-Reformation England may have “come from women’s delight in the social and religious attention they received at their churching, rather than from male or clerical anxieties about unpurified women.”<sup>43</sup> One such case of a woman insisting on the maintenance of the traditional ritual despite church opposition involves the case of the wife of Richard Chaw of Elstow, Bedfordshire, who was presented to the archdiaconal court in 1617 “for churching herself.” The court heard “that she coming to the church to thanksgiving, and the minister having warning overnight and not coming to church accordingly, she did take the Book of Common Prayer and read the thanksgiving herself openly in the church.”<sup>44</sup> It can be argued that the churching ritual and the later thanksgiving ceremony contained elements of both purification and thanksgiving. Rituals are complicated social interactions steeped in layers of symbolism and meaning.

Childbirth prayers were part of a long tradition of Christian magic. The efficacy of childbirth prayers was not only based on its oral and performative power but also in its use as a medical charm. In the Anglo-Saxon period, the medical charms were inscribed on parchment, cloth or wax; the text of which constituted *materia medica*.<sup>45</sup> This practice continued throughout the medieval era. Popular medical texts sometimes included prayers or incantations to be recited or written and tied to the body.<sup>46</sup> A prayer would be inscribed on parchment by a priest and then wrapped around the expectant mother as a ‘birth-girdle.’ Buhler suggests that the late medieval *Wellcome roll* may have been utilized in such a manner as a birth-girdle. Similar versions of the following prayer in *Glazier MS. 39* which also appear in the *Rotulus Harley 43 A 14* and *Rotulus Harley T 11* Middle English scrolls were all likely used as charms.<sup>47</sup> This version, from the late medieval religious scroll *Glazier MS. 39*, reads:

---

<sup>43</sup> Cressy, “Purification,” 119.

<sup>44</sup> Bedfordshire Record Office, Bedford, Archdeaconry Court, A.B.C. 5, p. 247, quoted in David Cressy, “Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England,” *Past and Present* 141 (November, 1993), 130.

<sup>45</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 279. *Materia medica* is a medical term for the body of collected knowledge of therapeutic properties of a substance used for healing.

<sup>46</sup> Stoertz, “Suffering,” 105

<sup>47</sup> Buhler, “Prayers and Charms,” 274.

This crose .XV. tymes metyn is the trew lenth of our Lorde Ihesu Criste. And that day that thou lokes on it er beris it a-pone the, that day sall no wekid sprete haue pouer to hurte the. . . And if a woman trawell of childe, take this crose and lay it one hyr wome and she shalbe hastely be delyuerede with joy wit-outen perell, the childe to haue Cristendom and the moder purificacion of Haly Kirk.<sup>48</sup>

Other charms based on the measurement of the length of the body of Christ have been found from Iceland to the Balkans and Germany, as well as Italy. There is also a Celtic version of the text.<sup>49</sup>

However, the magico-religious use of prayers in such a manner ceased with the Reformation as Reformers tried to rid the reformed church of such magic. While this was the official stance, how quickly it became a reality in practice amongst the populace is another matter. As will be demonstrated, efforts to alter ancient traditions were met with resistance.

One example of resistance to the reformed church's efforts to remove ancient traditions involves the use of the birth-girdle. Prior to the Reformation, birth-girdles were kept by churches and monasteries and were sent for when needed and then returned. A priest was also needed to make a new birth-girdle so one needed the cooperation of the Church for the maintenance of such a practice. Despite the post-Reformation church's efforts to stop the use of childbirth girdles, their use continued into the nineteenth century, often passed down from generation to generation in a family.<sup>50</sup>

The efficacy of childbirth prayers did not consist wholly in the belief in and service to supernatural or godly powers. The use of prayers was one aspect of a larger, complex and pervasive ritual of childbearing. The birth itself was an exclusively female ceremony: the expectant mother selected a number of female attendants under the direction of the presiding midwife. Weston sees their preparation of the lying-in chamber as a "sacred space." The "caudle (a mixture of ale, milk, honey, and herbs effective in

---

<sup>48</sup> Buhler, "Prayers and Charms," 275.

<sup>49</sup> Buhler, "Prayers and Charms," 273.

<sup>50</sup> Rowland, *Medieval Woman's*, 32.

inducing labor and easing pain) provided a sacred drink.” The woman remained secluded within this sacred female dominated world until her churching ceremony.<sup>51</sup>

Most of the charms used in late medieval England were religious in nature. One would call upon the help of Christ, the Virgin, or some appropriate saint or martyr whose physical ordeal corresponded to that of the patient.<sup>52</sup> Many charms involved the recitation of specific prayers, the words of which were holy. Many involved a specific number of recitations, which added power to the words. Or, one might add the sign of the cross, made over the patient to drive away evil and encourage the healing process.

Many of the rituals had pagan origins that were appropriated by Christianity. Their Christianization was a practical way for the Church to deal with deeply entrenched pagan practices. As Rawcliffe states, “In the early Middle Ages a good deal of ‘white’ magic had readily been absorbed by the ecclesiastical authorities in a spirit of compromise designed to eliminate far more sinister activities.”<sup>53</sup> Many church authorities were concerned about pagan aspects of resorting to latent spiritual forces. Ecclesiastical courts had little success convincing ordinary men and women of the errors of their belief in the healing power of magic and the use of amulets, talismans, and incantations. However, from the surviving records, it appears that the majority of wise-women and faith healers relied upon Christian prayers and symbols.<sup>54</sup>

The Church, whether the Catholic Church or the Protestant Church, waged an ongoing battle against the use of charms and other “superstitions.” In Pre-Reformation England in 1481, Agnes Marshall, alias Saunder, was arraigned in a York visitation for using incantations in childbirth. With the advent of the Reformation, “charms, sorcery, enchantments, invocations, circles, witchcrafts, soothsaying, or any like crafts or imaginations invented by the devil, and specially in time of women’s travail” were

---

<sup>51</sup> Weston, “Women’s Medicine,” 287-288.

<sup>52</sup> Rawcliffe, *Sources*, 90.

<sup>53</sup> Rawcliffe, *Sources*, 91.

<sup>54</sup> Rawcliffe, *Sources*, 92.

frequently condemned.<sup>55</sup> In 1538, every curate was advised by Nicholas Shaxton, Bishop of Salisbury, to charge midwives not to use “girdles, purses, measures of our Lady or such other superstitious things” so as to persuade a woman in childbirth that her labor would be easier.<sup>56</sup> The earliest example of the midwives’ oath, which dates from 1567, includes the promise to not use sorcery or enchantments during labor. The only ritual officially permitted during labor was to baptize the child when death seemed likely, but as noted previously, the use of birth-girdles continued into the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

In late medieval England the church prayer for a pregnant woman involved prayers to the Virgin Mary, “the benign assister of women in travail.”<sup>58</sup> Mary and certain female saints, especially Anne and Margaret, were believed to have special powers over family and household matters. One would pray to them in childbirth. Although the official church doctrine of the reformed church of England did away with the veneration of saints and rituals that were seen to be magical, one wonders how rapidly prayers to saints stopped outside the church, and how quickly the belief in their efficacy stopped? In an inquiry in Kent in 1576, officials were still trying to eradicate such beliefs and practices. People were asked:

whether there be any among you that use sorcery, or witchcraft, or that be suspected of the same, and whether any use charms or unlawful prayers, or invocations in Latin or otherwise, and, namely, midwives in the time of woman’s travail of child, and whether any do resort to any such help or counsel, and what be their names.<sup>59</sup>

One of the beliefs that many women and men held in the early modern era concerned the birth of a deformed child. Many believed the birth of a deformed infant represented not only a physical but a moral reflection of the parents. It was thought that an infant’s malformation was a punishment for the sins of their parents.<sup>60</sup> Thus in Stuart

---

<sup>55</sup> James Raine, *Fabric Rolls of York Minster*, quoted in ed. Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health* (Kent, UK: Kent State University Press, 1981), 31.

<sup>56</sup> W.H. Frere, ed. *Visitations*, vol. II, 59ff, quoted in ed. Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health* (Kent, UK: Kent State University Press, 1981), 31.

<sup>57</sup> Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s*, 32.

<sup>58</sup> *Sarum Missal*, vol. 2, 161.

<sup>59</sup> W. Nicholson, ed. *The Remains of Edmund Grindley*, quoted in ed. Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health* (Kent, UK: Kent State University Press, 1981), 31-32.

<sup>60</sup> Mendelson, “Stuart women,” 196.



England, Lady Bridgewater begged that her child might be “borne without any deformity, so that I and its father may not be punisht for our sinnes, in the deformity of our Babe.”<sup>61</sup> In Bentley’s *Monument* (1582), there are references to such a fear. In one prayer, the mother begs the Lord for forgiveness of her sins and worries: “Shall I be the grave of my child? Shall I give death the fruit of my body, for the sins of my soul, and my spirit . . . for the transgressions of my youth?”<sup>62</sup> In another prayer the words echo those of Lady Bridgewater. The woman beseeches, “O Almighty and merciful God. . . grant. . . that my child yet unborn, may come into this world sound and perfect without deformity.”<sup>63</sup>

In the medieval and early modern eras, there was ambivalence toward women and childbirth. In the Catholic tradition children were sometimes seen as the product of sinful lust, one of the ‘curses’ of Adam and Eve. In a prayer for the pregnant woman in the *Sarum Missal* (1526), one finds references to the supplicant being a “poor sinner” and “the heavy cloud [of sin] of our first parents Adam [and Eve].”<sup>64</sup> From within this viewpoint, childbearing was played down and neither man nor woman’s salvation were influenced by his procreative ability. Indeed, celibacy was the highest calling.<sup>65</sup>

One finds such ambivalence in the late medieval text, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1430). When compared to childbirth prayers one sees similarities in that both the prayers and Margery Kempe reflect the fears women had towards childbirth. One also sees the dichotomy and ambivalence in church and society to children and childbirth, wives and mothers. One passage in particular reflects this ambivalence. When her husband tells Margery, “Daughter, thou art with child.” Margery’s response is unenthusiastic, “Ah! Lord what shall I do for the keeping of my child?” She complains, “It is to me great pain and great dis-ease.” He responds that childbirth is “no sin to thee, daughter, for it is rather to thee reward and merit, and thou shalt have never the less grace, for I will that thou bring Me forth more fruit.” Further along he states,

---

<sup>61</sup> Bridgewater, *Meditations*, f. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 115.

<sup>63</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 99.

<sup>64</sup> *Sarum Missal*, vol. 2, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 58.

I love wives also, and specially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will and do their business to please Me as thou dost; for, though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet, daughter, I love thee as well as any maiden in the world.<sup>66</sup>

The response of Margery Kempe's husband reflects the church's ambivalence to women and childbirth, but ultimately, his response demonstrates a positive attitude toward motherhood and childbirth.

It has been argued that church and society in England after the Reformation exhibit a change in attitude toward marriage and procreation. According to Merry E. Wiesner, "One of the key ideas of the Protestant Reformation was the denial of the value of celibacy and the championing of married life as a spiritually preferable state."<sup>67</sup> While there still are references to the "sinful transgressions" of Eve in childbirth prayers from the Reformation, marriage was now held in high esteem, and men and women could attain salvation through procreation. In Bentley's devotional work, *Monuments*, one finds numerous references to such beliefs throughout its prayers. One such prayer asks "oh most dear father" for assistance "with thy most cheerful present" and thanks Him for "this most honourable state of matrimony."<sup>68</sup> And yet, childbirth could also be held in high regard in the late medieval era as seen in the husband's response to his wife's pregnancy in *Margery Kempe*.

While the church and the country adopted the Book of Common Prayer, one wonders what the women thought of the change in childbirth prayers, from the use of charms and prayers, and the veneration and the supplication of female saints to the absolute saving grace of God. What we know are the official viewpoints, the devotional works for the layperson, the bible, but what of the woman's viewpoint? The historical record provides few sources left by the women themselves. The study of women's

---

<sup>66</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 62-63.

<sup>67</sup> Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58.

<sup>68</sup> Bentley, *Monument*, 103-104.

journals and personal diaries from Stuart England give one insight into what a specific woman thought of childbirth but in the passages read for this paper there were no comments on childbirth prayers themselves. Unfortunately, many women “destroyed their own manuscripts when the danger of childbirth or serious illness made them apprehensive of a posthumous discovery.”<sup>69</sup> It has been shown that some women resisted the removal of the churching ceremony and the use of the birth-girdle so one suspects that changes to other birth rituals may have been met with resistance.

## VII – Conclusion

An analysis of childbirth prayers and rituals in the medieval and early modern eras illustrates a long history of rich, complex traditions that evolved as society and religion changed in England. In the medieval and the early modern period pregnancy was feared and the chance of dying was much greater than today. Women, husbands, and the broader community readily embraced and maintained the use of childbirth prayers and associated rituals. Women had pre-eminence in this domain even when they were not fully in control of all the prayers and other childbirth rituals. Whether due to psychological, social or divine agency, childbirth prayers and rituals helped deal with the stresses and dangers of childbirth. The efficacy of childbirth prayers and rituals needs to be examined within this context. Childbirth prayers demonstrate the coexistence of popular traditions within Christian orthodoxy. In the use of childbirth prayers, it is difficult to determine where magic ended and religion began even if the Church, whether Catholic or Protestant, believed it could separate the two and attempted to foster its dogma on the mother and the populace, in general.

---

<sup>69</sup> Mendelson, “Stuart women,” 184-185.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Bentley, Thomas. *The Monument of Matrones: Containing Seven Severall Lamps of Virginitie, or Distinct Treatises: Whereof the First Five Concerne Praier and Meditation; The Other Two Last, Precepts and Examples, as the Woorthie Works Partlie of Men, Partlie of Women; Compiled for the Necessarie Use of Both Sexes Out of the Sacred Scriptures, and Other Aprooved Authors by Thomas Bentley of Graies Inne Student*, [1582]. STC# 1892.

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. W. Butler-Bowdon. London: Oxford University Press, 1936; reprint, 1954.

Myrc, John. *Instructions for Parish Priests*. Edited by Edward Peacock, Early English Text Society, 31. 1868, revised 1902; reprint, New York, 1975.

Rowland, Beryl, ed. *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health*. Kent, UK: Kent State University Press, 1981.

*The Sarum Missal in English*. Trans. Frederick E. Warren. 2 vols. London: A.R. Mowbray & Company Limited, 1913.

### Secondary Sources

Atkinson, Colin B., and William P. Stoneman. "‘These griping greefes and pinching pangs’: Attitudes to Childbirth in Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582)." *Sixteenth Century Journal*, No. XXI (1990), 193-203.

Buhler, Curt F. "Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls." *Speculum*, Vol. 39 (1964), 270-278.

Crawford, Patricia. "The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England." In *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, pp. 3-38. Edited by Valeri Fildes. London: Routledge, 1990.

Cressy, David. "Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England." *Past and Present*, Vol. 141 (November 1993), 106-146.

Howes, Laura L. "On the Birth of Margery Kempe's Last Child." *Modern Philology*, Vol. 90 No. 2 (November, 1992), 220-225.

Itnyre, Cathy Jorgensen, ed. *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996.

- Macfarlane, Alan. *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Mendelson, Sara Heller. "Stuart women's diaries and occasional memoirs." In *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, pp. 181-210. Edited by Mary Prior. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Pollock, Linda. A. "Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early-Modern Society." In *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, pp. 39-67. Edited by Valeri Fildes. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Prior, Mary, ed. *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Rawcliffe, Carole, ed. *Sources for the History of Medicine in Late Medieval England*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995.
- Schofield, Roger. "Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in 'The World We Have Lost.'" In *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, pp. 259-261. Edited by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Stoertz, Fiona Harris. "Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth." In *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, pp. 101-120. Edited by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996.
- Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.
- Weston, L.M.C. "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms." *Modern Philology*, Vol. 92 No. 3 (February 1995), 279-293.
- Wiesner, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Wilson, Adrian. "The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation." In *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, pp. 68-107. Edited by Valeri Fildes. London: Routledge, 1990.