

The Schematic Clinic: Gendered Gynecological Healthcare Practices in the Wellcome Apocalypse Manuscript

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Introduction and Background

Women in the medieval period had limited access to medical texts about their bodies. Midwives, often of lower social standing and without Latin literacy, relied on oral teaching. The Wellcome Apocalypse (MS.49) (fig. I), an apocalyptic manuscript unusually rich in medical images, includes scenes of childbirth, consultation, cesarean section, and disease. These illustrations are rare evidence of how male clerics communicated women's medicine to midwives. They reveal not only didactic function but also the shaping of gendered medical authority.



Fig. I Source: Wellcome Collection.



Fig. II Source: Wellcome Collection.

Analysis

The medical section of the Wellcome Apocalypse features the following original illustrations:

- Cesarean section performed by a male physician (fig.IV)
- Consultation between a midwife and patient (fig. II)
- Midwife speaking with a physician (fig. III)

These scenes do more than record practice. They schematize the female patient into controlled visual types: veiled, nude, reproductive, or diseased. Such typologies flatten lived experience while dictating the circumstances in which midwives or physicians could act. For illiterate midwives, images served as mnemonic and instructional tools, but their placement within a clerically owned codex subordinated oral traditions to textual authority. Ambiguities, such as the blurred distinction between vulva and cesarean wound (fig. II), enabled clerics to represent reproductive functions while avoiding explicit depiction. In this way, the manuscript simultaneously enabled access to knowledge and reinforced clerical oversight.

Methods

- Close visual analysis of the Wellcome Apocalypse's medical illustrations
- Contextualized within clerical involvement in women's medicine, following scholarship by Monica Green, Almuth Seebom, and Ruth Evans
- Focus on:
 - How illustrations schematized women's bodies into types
 - The role of clerical ownership in controlling interpretation
 - Intersections of oral, visual, and textual traditions



Fig. IV Source: Wellcome Collection.



Fig. III Source: Wellcome Collection.

Conclusion

The Wellcome Apocalypse illustrates how medieval medical images were never neutral. They conveyed obstetrical knowledge while embedding clerical control over women's health. By schematizing the female patient into fixed visual types, the manuscript enabled midwives' learning yet reinforced male authority, shaping cultural narratives of women's bodies and medicine.

References

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