

INTRODUCTION

AUTHORS, DATES OF COMPOSITION, AND THE TEXT

The *De secretis mulierum* was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century by a disciple of the eminent thirteenth-century philosopher, theologian, and scientist Albertus Magnus. Although many manuscripts and editions name Albertus as the author, Lynn Thorndike has shown that the *Secrets of Women** is partly drawn from his genuine writings and partly modeled, somewhat faultily, after them.¹ Scholars have devoted much effort to discovering the identity of the author of this treatise. Besides Albertus, the names of Thomas of Brabant and Henry of Saxony have figured in a lengthy discussion about the correct attribution of this writing. Although Thomas and Henry have been ruled out, the question has not as yet been settled.

Brigitte Kusche has introduced another element into the debate: uncertainty over the text itself. Kusche has pointed out that the *De secretis mulierum* exists in a number of versions, and that scholars' different conclusions about authorship result from the differences in the texts they are analyzing. For Kusche the first question to address is not who wrote the *Secrets of Women*, but which text version is closest to the archetype, and indeed can an archetype be reconstructed from the many manuscripts that are available.²

The most recent study of the *De secretis*, Margaret Schleissner's 1987 dissertation, has identified 13 more manuscript copies of this treatise, bringing the count up to 83. The complicated codicological situation is matched by variations in the editions, of which over 50 were printed in the fifteenth century and over 70 in the sixteenth century.³ Some of the variant readings from these printed versions are found in the notes to this translation.

* The English title *Secrets of Women* and the Latin *De secretis mulierum* will be used interchangeably in this discussion.

Although close, textual study is certainly a priority before drawing conclusions about the author or date of composition, this volume does not deal with these questions. Presented here is a working text of the *De secretis mulierum*, a work that sets forth ideas about women and science that were part of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastic milieu. As the large number of manuscripts and editions demonstrates, the treatise was immensely popular and we can therefore conclude that the ideas it expressed were highly influential.⁴

The text used as the basis of this translation is the Lyons, 1580, edition. This edition presents a clear Latin text, which is an example of the most frequently published version of the *Secrets*, and, from spot checking, correlates well with other witnesses to this redaction. Further, as I shall demonstrate, the text is of interest as evidence of a widely circulating epitome of the sixteenth-century view of women that resulted in witch hunting. The Lyons edition is selected, then, for its clarity and for its influence.

In the present translation, passages that were unclear have been corrected by references to other editions and to the manuscripts. These are all indicated in the notes. Vocabulary has occasionally been modernized: the most significant example is the Latin word *vulva* which has been translated by the anatomical term indicated by the context.⁵ The last chapter, on sperm, is largely missing from this edition and is incomplete in some other editions. In this case, the text was established from two Munich manuscripts and corresponds, for the most part, with that of the Venice, 1508, edition.

In addition to the text of the *De secretis mulierum*, this volume contains selections from two commentaries by unknown authors.⁶ They were frequently printed with the text and exist in many of the manuscripts. Commentary A is based on the Lyons, 1580, edition, and Commentary B on the Venice, 1508, edition. It should be noted that there is also confusion in the manuscript tradition between text and commentary. For example, MS Paris B.N. lat 7148, which does not contain a formal commentary, nevertheless incorporates into the text material that is printed as part of Commentary B.⁷

The selections have been chosen to illustrate further ideas about women's "secrets" current among some thirteenth- and

fourteenth-century clerics. The commentaries are not translated in entirety, because large sections repeat the text, and others are filled with tedious scholastic disputation on matters largely unrelated to its central topic. For the most part, however, once a selection is made, everything in that section is included, even if it is not germane to the subject matter.

Nature of the Treatise and Commentaries

Natural Philosophy versus Medicine. Pseudo-Albert, as the author will be referred to (whereas the Latin form “Albertus” will indicate the Swabian doctor), states in the beginning of the *De secretis mulierum* that “its style is partly philosophical, partly medical, just as seems to fit the material.” By “philosophical” the author refers to natural philosophy, or natural science. Pseudo-Albert believed, as a follower of Albertus Magnus, that the study of nature as perceived through sense experience and then analyzed in a rational manner forms a single discipline through which we come to comprehend the universe in its corporeal aspects.⁸ Human reproduction, a main subject of this treatise, is one of these aspects, that nevertheless has repercussions for our understanding of the entire cosmos.

This becomes evident particularly in the treatment given to astrological influences on the developing fetus. Pseudo-Albert begins his discussion by outlining how the sphere of the fixed stars confers upon the fetus various virtues, and moves back and forth from particular celestial effects to a general treatment of prime matter and the intelligences. Natural philosophy, then, involves the study of all parts of the natural world, although in this treatise (as in the authentic writings of Albertus) we see the emphasis placed upon investigation of living things. In the *De secretis mulierum*, the author treats human nature, the influence of the planets on the developing fetus, spontaneous generation, monsters in nature, and the generation of sperm.⁹

Medicine is the other discipline included in this treatise. We come upon evidence of the author’s awareness of the distinction between philosophy and medicine in his first chapter, where he sets down without comment the differing opinions of Aristotle and “the doctors” on the participation of male and female seed

in generation of the embryo.¹⁰ Although pseudo-Albert goes on to raise a number of properly medical topics—nature of the menses, period of gestation, birth complications, signs of conception, etc.—he treats most of these in a cursory manner. The menses are dealt with by posing and answering a few questions on their nature, and the signs of conception, of whether a male or female is in the uterus, of corruption of virginity, and of chastity are listed in a very abbreviated fashion. Pseudo-Albert gives slightly fuller treatment to suffocation of the womb and to impediments to conception, but in none of these cases does he present us with anything like his in-depth discussion of how celestial bodies influence terrestrial events.

Pseudo-Albert's sources are also more philosophical than medical. Besides Aristotle, his main authority, our author relies heavily on Avicenna and Averroes, but, for the most part, he chooses their metaphysical and not their medical works. The development of the embryo is one of the main topics in the *De secretis mulierum*, and natural philosophy was much more significant than medicine in the embryological tradition from which pseudo-Albert drew.¹¹ To give just one example, Giles of Rome, writing on the same subject in the *De formatione corporis humani in utero*, perceived himself as working in a specialized branch of what he called *philosophia naturalis*, and instead of using Latin versions of Arabic translations of Galen, other Greek medical writers, and commentaries on them, drew upon Aristotle on most occasions.¹²

It is significant that one of pseudo-Albert's commentators also perceived this distinction. Explicating the chapter on infertility, Commentator B attempts to make clear the reasons why tests for whether a woman is carrying a male or female child work. Before he begins his exposition, however, he states, "Now it is time to bring up the topic of how to assist a mother in childbirth, but this subject is a medical one, and so is omitted here."¹³ It is clear to the commentator that information that the blood and milk of a woman carrying a boy are well digested and thickened is appropriate to the treatise, for it addresses the question of the composition of the natural world, while directions for the midwife belong in a properly medical writing.

Pseudo-Albert's command of medicine is also less than impressive; on more than one occasion we see him demonstrate

his ignorance of some basic medical facts. In his exposition on the menstrual period, for example, he explains that menses is superfluous food that is purged monthly, and that the amount and time of the flow vary from woman to woman. He then goes on to pose and to answer some questions on the nature of the menses, one of these being whether they flow out through the anus with solid waste, or through the vulva, with the voiding of urine. Although he asserts correctly that the menses flow through the vulva, he clearly thinks that urine does, as well. It is true that ignorance of body parts was characteristic of the middle ages, however medical writers normally had a better idea of basic anatomy than pseudo-Albert demonstrates here.¹⁴

Another example of unorthodox, and somewhat inept, discussion of a medical topic is found in pseudo-Albert's passage on a problem faced by one of his comrades. The author states that he was asked during confession why a young man should have found himself covered with blood after sexual intercourse. Instead of an explanation of what might cause this discharge in the woman—menstruation, or a humoral imbalance—as one would be likely to find in a medical text, pseudo-Albert says simply that the flow was excess seed.

A good illustration of the difference between the *De secretis mulierum* and a properly medical text may be found in the chapter entitled, "On a Defect of the Womb." This defect, known as suffocation in the medical literature, has a long medical history. Dating back at least to the Egyptian papyri, the idea that a woman deprived of sexual intercourse suffers "suffocation" in which the womb either wanders around the body in search of moisture or stays put and poisons the other organs is standard in medieval medical literature.¹⁵ Pseudo-Albert introduces the topic, and takes the position that the womb actually becomes displaced. He then repeats a story from Galen about a woman who was suffering from this disorder, but he leaves out the graphic description of how manual manipulation of the patient's genitals led to orgasm and an abundant flow of poisonous sperm.¹⁶ The most pseudo-Albert can bring himself to do is to recommend that young women have regular sexual intercourse in order to avoid this malady, and he quickly tells his readers that this practice (presumably, sex outside of marriage) is against the custom of the time.

If we look at a typical medical treatise, such as the *Treatise on the Womb* by the fifteenth-century Italian physician Anthonius Guainerius, we see a much more detailed, treatment-oriented approach.¹⁷ The Italian doctor explains that suffocation is caused by the retention of menses or of sperm, and that the vapors produced by this corrupt matter compress the heart, deprive the woman of sense and motion, and sometimes cause death. Signs of the malady are pain in the head, vertigo, difficulty in breathing, weakness in the legs, and pain in the umbilicus. The physician should determine whether retention of menses or of sperm is causing the malady; and Guainerius outlines the signs of each. Among the indications of suffocation caused by retention of sperm is the absence of male companionship in the life of a woman who was accustomed to it.

The cure for this malady is also treated in detail. The extremities should be rubbed with salt and vinegar; the woman should be bound up with cloth, and a foul-smelling substance should be applied to her nose. The reasoning here is that a horrible odor will excite the animal spirit within her which the illness has put to sleep. The author includes a prescription for the suggested foul-smelling substance. Another procedure is to anoint the mouth of the vulva with a different odiferous material, for which the prescription is also included, and to rub it into the neck of the womb as well. The rubbing, which should be done with the midwife's finger, will cause the womb to expel the sperm or corrupt humors and free the patient from disease.

Although there are no substantial disagreements in the two treatises, Anthonius Guainerius' chapter is obviously written for physicians. He is concerned with identifying the illness, noting its cause, and prescribing a cure. The author of the *De secretis mulierum*, on the other hand, describes suffocation of the womb as a phenomenon that occurs in nature. His aim is simply to tell us about one of the "accidents" that a womb might suffer; he is not attempting to make diagnosis possible, nor is he prescribing any cure more specific than that women should have intercourse regularly. Although the treatise is "partly philosophical, partly medical," then, medicine actually plays a minor role in pseudo-Albert's method.

Intended Audience. The intended audience of the *De secretis mulierum* remains almost as much a puzzle as the identity of the author. Of the many theories that have been advanced, the one that has the most evidence behind it is that the treatise was associated in some way with the monastic milieu. The *Secrets* is dedicated to a *dilecto in Christo socio et amico...clerico* and contains more than one reference to *fratres* and *socii*.¹⁸ As noted above, pseudo-Albert tells us about his experience hearing confession from one of his companions, and his awareness of theological matters is made evident throughout the treatise. For example, our author states that he will refrain from giving too many details about how evil women set out to harm male organs because he fears his creator, evidently indicating that he believes it would be a sin to do so.¹⁹ The commentators are also aware of the necessity to keep theological truth in mind. In the chapter on astrology, discussed below, we find a clear consciousness of doctrinal correctness, and a remark like Commentator A's statement that "we read that a universal flood took place because of the evil of men, however this has nothing to do with our subject because we are speaking in a natural manner" signals to us that religion is always in the back of the writer's mind.²⁰

The thirteenth century was, of course, dominated by theology, and religious awareness does not demonstrate a writer's monastic affiliation. Nor, indeed, do references to "brothers," and "companions" constitute definitive proof that the author inhabited a Dominican cloister. Lynn Thorndike has warned that similar allusions in the *Alkiminia minor* ascribed to Albertus Magnus name the Dominican order (*frater ordinis praedicatorum*), and we find none of that specificity here.²¹ Nevertheless, origin in a religious community is likely for this text, given the internal evidence.

Giovanni Romagnoli has analyzed the *De secretis* in terms of its Dominican affiliation, comparing it to three other writings on female matters emanating from the order: the works of Thomas of Cantimpré (also known as Thomas of Brabant), Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and the French cardinal Vital du Four. According to Romagnoli, it is significant that all four treatises present gynecological material useful in actual practice. Thomas of Cantimpré, he points out, sets forth practical chapters on obstet-

rics taken from the sixth-century translator Muscio, which are important here particularly because Thomas was a Dominican and Albertus Magnus's disciple.²² Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Romagnoli claims, was well informed on anatomy and physiology, and therefore makes a valuable contribution to gynecological and obstetrical questions. Vital du Four's treatise is encyclopedic in nature, with gynecological material contained in an alphabetical arrangement of subjects. Finally, Romagnoli sees pseudo-Albert's treatise as belonging to the genre of popular medicine; he claims that it is a practical work designed for use by midwives.²³

I have discussed above the medical content of the *De secretis mulierum*; it seems to me impossible to maintain that pseudo-Albert has written a practical medical treatise. Similarly, I shall demonstrate below that the *Secrets* has little to do with the encyclopedic tradition. Nevertheless, the connection between medicine and the cloister is not to be dismissed lightly, nor is Romagnoli's contention that popular medicine has an important place in the treatise. With regard to the first point, Monica Green, in her 1985 dissertation, demonstrates that male monastic culture was primarily responsible for the transmission of gynecological literature, and asserts that this material was actually being used, although, as she states, "we cannot tell if 'used' means to satiate monkish curiosity about female nature or to serve as the basis of real medical practice."²⁴

Similarly, Romagnoli's point that pseudo-Albert's chapter on the signs of whether a male or female is in the uterus has some connection with popular medicine is well taken, although he perhaps does not realize to what extent these signs had become incorporated into learned medical texts.²⁵ Further evidence of popular material in the treatise is found in MS Paris B.N. lat. 7148 of the *De secretis mulierum* where the author tells a story about a good and honest woman relating to him in "social confession" that she observed on more than one occasion that if a man ejects his urine under the rays of the moon and then has sexual intercourse with a woman, she will conceive a fleshy mass instead of a human being, and she will labor just as much as with a normal fetus.²⁶ Traces of popular conceptions are found throughout the *De secretis mulierum*, although the overall character of this treatise is scholastic.

If we survey the various genres of learned writings to which the *Secrets* has been compared, we find that although it shares much material and some methodology with all of them, pseudo-Albert's book cannot be placed neatly into a single category. Our author draws on "question," "secrets," and "problem" literature, and many of the topics he handles are found as well in medieval encyclopedias. Yet despite an affinity of style and content when he writes about the female body, pseudo-Albert distinguishes himself from contemporaries by his treatment of celestial influences on the developing fetus. The *De secretis mulierum* attempts seriously to grapple with some of the philosophical issues involved with astrological determinism. It is true that the treatise does not reach the level of philosophical sophistication that we find in his Arabic astrological sources, and the overall level of discourse in no way approaches that of contemporaries like Giles of Rome or, indeed, Albertus Magnus himself. Nevertheless, pseudo-Albert's extended treatment of planetary effects on the developing embryo, and his attempt in this section to transcend formulaic statements and to address the mechanism of celestial influence sets him apart from other thirteenth-century compilers.

Let us look further at some of these compilers, especially the Dominicans discussed by Romagnoli. Thomas of Cantimpré has the greatest significance here, for the authorship of the *De secretis mulierum* has been attributed to him. Christoph Ferckel, the editor of gynecological sections from Thomas's encyclopedic writing *De naturis rerum*, completed in 1240, maintains that the two works are not connected, although they treat much of the same subject matter.²⁷ We do find in the *De naturis rerum* similar, brief discussion of topics like female breasts, the penis, and the impregnation of the woman; in this sense, the writings are similar because identical subjects are dealt with in the same cursory fashion. However, Thomas provides some recommendations for treatment for retention of menses and for suffocation of the womb in the form of medical recipes, and he inserts as well a short chapter on childbirth and the obstetrical art, both of these in the manner of properly medical writings. Similarities between Thomas and pseudo-Albert have little significance beyond the possibility of their sharing a common source, or of pseudo-Albert engaging in direct borrowing from Thomas.

Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* is even less likely to emanate from the same tradition as the *Secrets*. This encyclopedic writing, composed in the 1230s, treats everything from God and the angels down to stones, plants, colors, and smells. The author includes a chapter on the creation of the infant (Book 6, Chapter 3), which gives a brief account of human generation, citing Galen, Constantine, Aristotle and Hippocrates.²⁸ As we shall see below, pseudo-Albert's treatment of this topic does not rely primarily on medical sources and is of a different nature.

In order to examine properly the thirteenth-century encyclopedic tradition in relation to the *De secretis mulierum*, we must look at the *Speculum naturale*, composed by another Dominican, Vincent of Beauvais, in the mid thirteenth century.²⁹ This majestic opus gives full treatment to aspects of the natural world, and therefore provides us with enough material for a more extended comparison between the two genres.

Vincent of Beauvais deals at great length with human sexual reproduction; he includes chapters on the definitions of male and female seed, causes of erection of the penis, nocturnal pollution, and sterility. His treatment is more extensive than pseudo-Albert's, and he uses medical sources much more freely. However, pseudo-Albert and the encyclopedists have very different approaches to nature. While pseudo-Albert separates natural philosophy from theology, Vincent, like Bartholomew, integrates the two. The thirty-first book of the *Speculum*, "On Human Generation," begins with a discussion of Cain and Abel; chapter one is entitled "Glossa super Genesim." In his second chapter, "On the Nature of Coitus Which Brings About Human Generation," Vincent begins by quoting Augustine's *City of God* and moves right into Constantinus Africanus, Hippocrates, Galen and other medical sources. For Vincent, theology and science are one and the same.

Although this encyclopedist may identify sacred and profane science in his discussion of human nature, however, he is aware of differences of orthodoxy among the scientists, points them out to his reader, and takes a conservative stand. He is also completely open about his sources. Unlike pseudo-Albert, Vincent names the Arab astrologer Albumasar as his source when presenting his opinion on the influence of the constellations on the developing fetus, drawing his information from the twelfth-century poet

Helinandus. The *Speculum naturale* states, nevertheless, that authority and reason, Augustine and the natural philosophers, contradict Albumasar's opinion that the gender and other properties of the fetus are determined by the constellations.³⁰ Pseudo-Albert, as we shall see below, conceals his use of Albumasar but accepts the Arab's opinions on planetary influence.

Another difference in methodology between Vincent and pseudo-Albert is that although pseudo-Albert's treatment of many topics may be abbreviated, Vincent's own discussion is even less extended. The *Speculum naturale* is mostly an extensive collection of quotations from authorities, with a short paragraph interspersed here and there by the author himself. Pseudo-Albert, on the other hand, writes his own treatise, and, in doing so, allows us to glimpse his weaknesses and some of his personal experiences.

Therefore, although pseudo-Albert and the encyclopedists overlap in their subject matter, they belong to very different traditions. Encyclopedists give a sweeping view of the world, including God and the angels in their purview. They draw indiscriminately from theological, philosophical, and medical sources, and have no sense of writing within a specific discipline. Pseudo-Albert, on the other hand, is clearly a natural philosopher who deals with other disciplines only peripherally. Although he is interested in doctrinal correctness, he is writing later than the others and must therefore keep in mind the condemnations of 1277 (in which 219 propositions, based largely on Aristotelian ideas and Arab astrology, were censured by Etienne Tempier, the bishop of Paris). Because of this concern, he is much more circumspect in his treatment of Arabic astrological source material.

Another genre with which the *De secretis mulierum* shares some affinity is the "questions" and "problems" literature. Brian Lawn has pointed out that Aristotle was the first to systematize the question and response method and used it for demonstrating all kinds of scientific and medical problems, many of which have survived in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastic *quaestio* or disputation eventually supplanted the older question-and-answer technique, but the traditional material continued to form the basis for this form of scientific instruction.³¹ The "question" literature, therefore, has a

long history, and pseudo-Albert undoubtedly was familiar with this tradition.

The *De secretis mulierum* treats two subjects by means of these *dubia*: the menstrual period and the effects of lightning on the developing fetus. These topics are included in the Salernitan material described by Lawn, and it is certainly possible that pseudo-Albert drew on this source in these chapters.³² The pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, composed in the first century B.C. and translated by Bartholomew of Messina around 1260 also belong to this genre.³³ The author of the *Problems* poses and answers questions about different parts of the body, and, once again, deals with many topics treated in the *Secrets*.³⁴ Although pseudo-Albert may have engaged in direct borrowing when discussing these two topics, however, the bulk of his treatise bears no relation to Salernitan or later questions.

The menstrual period and other topics related to human generation are also treated in a question-and-answer format in Albertus Magnus's *Quaestiones super De animalibus*. This writing treats many of the same topics as the *De secretis mulierum*, but here the questions are posed and responded to in a lengthy, scholastic manner with the author presenting all possible objections and resolving them in line with Aristotle's doctrines. The *Quaestiones* by Albertus are relatively sophisticated examples of this genre, and ask about the menstrual period, for example, whether it is necessary for generation, whether only women suffer it, whether the moon dominates it, whether it is a sudden flow, whether it causes infection, and whether it accelerates old age.³⁵ Many of the same topics are treated in the *Secrets*, although those presented in the *dubia* format center around very basic knowledge of the female cycle.

Judging simply from its title, we would expect the *De secretis mulierum* to belong to the genre of medieval "secrets" literature, represented by the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* and Michael Scot's *De secretis naturae*, among others.³⁶ The first of these is an Arabic writing cast in the form of a supposed letter from Aristotle to Alexander. It is designed to present scientific information which the young prince should know, and concentrates on medicine and physiognomy.³⁷ The text gives a little bit of everything: qualities of kings, the four seasons of the year,

how to eat and sleep, pharmaceutical recipes.³⁸ Like the treatises described above, the *Secretum secretorum* resembles the *Secrets of Women* only insofar as it gives summary treatments to many overlapping subjects.

Michael Scot's *De secretis naturae* is closer to pseudo-Albert's treatise, and, indeed, shares the same volume in the Lyons, 1580, edition. Like the *Secretum secretorum*, Michael's writing contains medicine, natural philosophy, and physiology, although the medicine is much more like pseudo-Albert's: descriptive instead of prescriptive. The *De secretis naturae* contains extensive information on the harmful effects of menses, and ties them in with the motion of the moon. Michael Scot also recognizes the value of astrology, stating that a woman ought to take care to note the exact time of coitus so that the astrologer can make accurate judgments about the nature of the offspring, and he traces the effects of the planets on the developing fetus.³⁹

What sets the *De secretis mulierum* apart from the *De secretis naturae*, and, indeed, from all the thirteenth-century writings discussed so far, is pseudo-Albert's approach to the science of the stars. The *Secrets of Women* not only sets down standard astrological information (e.g., Saturn coagulates the matter of the fetus; the child born under Jupiter is beautiful and of fine temperament), but it attempts to explain how this happens and to relate this explanation to the philosophical ideas of Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes. Vincent of Beauvais and Michael Scot may note some of the celestial effects, but pseudo-Albert addresses himself seriously to the problem of how they come about, and this effort forms the major thrust of his writing. Although the *De secretis mulierum* names women's secrets as its subject matter, if we weigh the length and the level of discourse we can almost consider this to be an astrological treatise.

Pseudo-Albert's philosophical passages on the effects of the celestial bodies, although impressive in relation to the earlier popularizers of science whom we have just examined, in no way reach the level of his contemporaries. The *Secrets of Women* raises a few metaphysical issues, but the author's philosophical skills fall far below those of his master, Albertus Magnus, or of other late-thirteenth-century natural philosophers like Giles of Rome. Both of these writers also quote Aristotle, Avicenna, and

Averroes, but they are able truly to penetrate the thought of these authorities, and to grapple with problems raised by them. Pseudo-Albert's philosophy is less sophisticated; he has learned some important concepts and introduces them into his treatise, but does not take his discussion as far as it might go.

The *De secretis mulierum*, then, contains a mixture of scientific vulgarization and serious speculation. Although the title places it in the category of popular "secrets" literature, we have seen that the author has a clear notion of working within the discipline of natural philosophy, and that his discussion of astrology is reasonably complex. Having established that pseudo-Albert's treatise is in a class by itself with regard to thirteenth-century scientific literature, we are still left with the question of its place in contemporary intellectual life. Who read the *Secrets of Women*, and what significance did it have for them?

The existence of at least two commentaries on the *Secrets*, which are found in numerous manuscripts, demonstrates that some readers took it seriously. Since the commentary was the basis of teaching at the university, Lynn Thorndike has suggested that the *De secretis mulierum* served as a text for instruction, and that it may be included in the fourteenth-century bibliography of writings by Dominicans in Paris.⁴⁰ I have not found it mentioned in any of the published collections of university statutes or lists of *exemplaria* copied for the universities, and, if we consider the internal evidence, its origin in a religious community and references to confession render it unlikely that this writing was composed originally with university instruction in mind.⁴¹ Further, the variant level of discourse and the philosophical limitations just described argue against a serious place for the *De secretis mulierum* in early-fourteenth-century university life.

Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the *Secrets* served as the basis of university lectures, and that the two commentaries excerpted here represent this tradition. Not every medieval university reached the high intellectual level of Paris, the leader in European academic life, and not every course was taught by masters like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. In the undergraduate colleges (or the faculty of arts) a more elementary form of instruction was given, and certainly these courses varied in sophistication from school to school. Perhaps pseudo-

Albert's treatise made its way into some of the lesser European institutions and provided an introduction to one branch of natural philosophy.

It is interesting in this regard to consider the lectures on the pseudo-Boethian *De disciplina scolarium* composed in 1309 by William of Wheteley, the headmaster of the grammar school at Stamford in Lincolnshire, England. The *De disciplina* originated in Paris around 1230, perhaps to provide a pretext for teaching Aristotelian natural philosophy after it was banned from the university in 1215, and later, when Aristotle was reinstated, became incorporated into the curricula of the grammar schools. Michael Johnson, who is in the process of editing these lectures, has described the passages dealing with human sexuality in a recent article, and William's treatment of sperm and menses bears significant resemblance to pseudo-Albert's.⁴² William even tells his pupils how menstruous women poison babies by their infected glance, a theme from the *De secretis mulierum* discussed in more detail in the section entitled "The Secrets of Women." From Johnson's account, William of Wheteley's lectures are considerably less sophisticated than those of Albert's commentators, and yet they made their way into medieval teaching, although on a more rudimentary intellectual level.

Of the two examples, Commentary B most resembles university material. Its author explicates pseudo-Albert's text in the same manner that lecturers normally used to treat an authoritative source, and the character of his discourse is decidedly scholastic. This means that he attempts to follow the rules of Aristotelian logic, that he aims for precise definition of terms, and that he habitually explores and refutes possible objections to each point made. Although Commentator A adopts this style as well, the author of the B version goes much further. He repeats pseudo-Albert's statements, and in analyzing them seeks constantly to make distinctions. For example, in answer to the question whether male or female has more pleasure in sexual intercourse, he distinguishes between pleasure understood intensively, extensively, principally, and executively. Commentator A is generally more straightforward in his exposition.

Nevertheless, whatever the eventual fate of the *Secrets of Women* may have been, from the internal evidence it does not

seem that undergraduate instruction was pseudo-Albert's original intent. The references to "brothers" and "confession" that signal to us a clerical author, yet supposing for the treatise an origin in a religious community indicate that his purpose was narrower: he wanted to give instruction to his peers. Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset have connected the *Secrets* with the expansion of political and economic importance of the clergy in the second half of the thirteenth century, due to the increased literacy of this group. With a new sense of power and expanded duties, pseudo-Albert and his contemporaries are nevertheless ignorant of the reality of human sexuality. They treat this topic clumsily, using their authority to create in men a fear of the dangers of union with women.⁴³

The *De secretis mulierum*, then, was designed to be used within a religious community as a vehicle for instructing priests in natural philosophy, particularly as it pertains to human generation. Pseudo-Albert composed the treatise to present to his brothers a survey of this important subject, which would be useful to them in both their general education and their pastoral activities. A strong subtext of the *Secrets*, however, is the evil nature of women and the harm they can cause to their innocent victims: young children and their male consorts. Clearly, then, another purpose of this treatise is to malign the female sex, a tradition that extends back in Christianity to second-century misogynist writings.

SOURCES

Pseudo-Albert, like most authors of his time, relied heavily on other ancient and medieval writings in composing his treatise. Because the scholastic method included the premise that the works of authorities contain truth, he cites liberally from these texts throughout the *Secrets*. If we examine these citations carefully, however, we see that not all sources named are actually used by our author, and that indeed he sometimes misleads the reader as to the origin of a particular statement or passage. The same is true of the commentators, who are even more enthusiastic in buttressing their statements with the authority of famous names, even though this attribution may be a pure fiction.

Pseudo-Albert's and his commentators' use of authorities may be characterized as existing on three levels. The first of these is actual dependence upon the authoritative text for substantive ideas. In this category Aristotle is prominent, although real use of Aristotelian ideas is confined to specific topics of natural philosophy. We see Aristotelian doctrines emerge in relation to human generation considered in a large sense (in the introduction), the generation of imperfect animals without seed, the formation of compounds from the four elements (discussed in relation to deformities), and the function of heat and humidity in animal life (contained in the chapter on the formation of sperm).⁴⁴ Averroes' philosophical works form the basis for pseudo-Albert's metaphysical discussion of how celestial bodies influence the developing fetus. The Arab philosopher is invoked in treatment of the order of forms in prime matter and their presence in the first mover, and in treatment of the generation of the elements and their parts. Avicenna's *Metaphysics* is used to explain monstrosity as being caused by disobedience or insufficiency of matter.

In an effort to lend weight to his statements, pseudo-Albert sometimes inserts authentic quotations from authorities that are peripheral to his discussion. Aristotle, once again, is his favorite choice. Maxims such as "humid things naturally flow" and "nature does nothing in vain," for example, are interjected in a discussion of why menses flow in women and sperm does not flow in men. In the same vein, we see a commentator stretching the scope of a quotation. In treating the influence of the constellations on animal seed, Commentator B cites Albertus Magnus's *Physics* for the information that a cow gave birth to a calf that was half human. Although this is indeed found in the *Physics*, the rest of the story—that the villagers tried to burn the shepherd at the stake for having sexual intercourse with the cow—is not present in this text.⁴⁵

Finally, the author and commentators on the *De secretis mulierum* present us with false attributions. Some of these may be the result of erroneous citations by authors from whom they are drawing; others may be due to errors in copying or other problems in the transmission of the text, and others, indeed, may perhaps turn out to be caused by a failure on my own part to

find the correct passage. This phenomenon occurs frequently enough, however, so that we may consider it to be a definitive characteristic of the *Secrets*. An example of this false attribution is found in Commentator B's discussion of orgasm. The commentator raises the question as to whether the male or female experiences greater delectation in coitus. He responds that Aristotle discusses the question in his first book *On the Generation of Animals*, and that after dealing with the arguments on both sides, the philosopher replies that delectation can be understood intensively or extensively, and the answer will vary depending upon this interpretation. The passage is clearly scholastic in character; no one could possibly believe that Aristotle had answered the question in that manner. Similarly, when discussing the seven-chambered uterus Commentator B cites Aristotle's *Book on Sperm*, although he is clearly drawing here from the pseudo-Galenic *Liber de spermate*. We experience in these two instances almost a knee-jerk reaction: the commentator (or his source) wants to lend weight to his statements, so he attributes them to the philosopher.

An example of deliberate falsification in these texts, and one that has more serious implications, occurs in pseudo-Albert's discussion of planetary influences. He attributes to Avicenna and Albertus Magnus material that is clearly drawn from Arabic astrological writings. This is discussed in more detail in the section of this Introduction on "Astrology." The commentators choose antifemale statements for many of their false attributions. In order to support their denunciation of women with Aristotelian and medical authority, they claim to find in the revered authors affirmation of statements that condemn the female sex. Thus Commentator A tells us that Hippocrates stated in his book *On the Nature of Man* that a menstruating woman corrupts the air and fouls the insides of a man. Commentator B asserts that Avicenna held that the female womb is like a sewer situated in the middle of a town where all the waste materials run together and are sent forth. Finally, in a related passage, he declares that Aristotle believed the milk of a black woman was better than that of a white woman. I have found none of these references in the authoritative writings, thus I am assuming that these citations are pure fabrications, either on the part of the

commentators themselves, or on the part of intermediary sources used by them.⁴⁶

Although the commentators use the sources in the same way as pseudo-Albert, there are differences among the three. Commentator A is not prone to quote authorities, although he does mention Aristotle and Averroes on occasion. He also refers to the *Centiloquium* twice, and to Hippocrates once in the passages selected for this translation. Commentator B, on the other hand, appears to be more widely read or more eager to display his learning than the other two authors. In particular, he makes extensive use of Aristotle's writings on animals, which are germane to the topics discussed, especially in his treatment of physiological matters. He also uses Avicenna's *Canon*, Hippocrates' *Aphorisms*, Constantine's *Pantegni*, and Averroes' *Colliget* in the rather full treatment he gives to some medical matters. There is no significantly different pattern of citation in the passages that were not selected for translation in either of the two commentaries.

One problem that I have not been able to solve involves the citation of Avicenna's "Book on Floods" in discussion of spontaneous generation after a universal flood, where pseudo-Albert disagrees with the Muslim philosopher and uses Aristotle to disprove both the possibility of a universal flood as well as the generation of perfect animals without seed.⁴⁷ Pseudo-Albert goes on to relate that Avicenna said that if the hairs of a menstruating woman are placed in fertile earth under manure during the winter, in the spring or summer when they are heated by the sun a serpent will be generated, and it will produce another of the same species through seed. The Muslim claimed, according to pseudo-Albert, that a mouse was generated from putrefaction in his own time. In Book 8 of the *De animalibus*, Avicenna discusses the generation of animals, but all with seed, and the topic is not treated in the pseudo-Avicennan *De caelo et mundo*.⁴⁸ A number of Arabic alchemical treatises attributed to Avicenna touch on aspects mentioned in this passage: Pseudo-Avicenna gives an elixir to be made from hair, but says nothing about a menstruating woman; another treatise discusses putrefaction, but without bringing up spontaneous generation.⁴⁹ It is possible that the source is one of the many unpublished works of Avicenna

listed by Marie Thérèse d'Alverny in various volumes of the *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, or, indeed, pseudo-Albert may be using Avicenna's name simply to lend authority to his discussion.

A similar passage is found in the work of the twelfth-century abbess, mystic, and scientist Hildegard of Bingen, although pseudo-Albert presents no evidence of familiarity with Hildegard's writings, and therefore they may be drawing from a common source. In the preface to the eighth book of the *Subtleities*, Hildegard states that after the fall Abel's blood stained the soil and caused noxious humors to arise from which venomous and deadly reptiles were generated. These perished in the deluge, but others were generated from their putrefying carcasses.⁵⁰ The theme of spontaneous generation of lesser creatures was a favorite topic in the fourteenth century. Henry of Hesse, for example, outlined the process by which accidental qualities developed in the generation of a mouse from putrefaction.⁵¹ None of the references I have seen, however, mentions Avicenna directly.

Finally, it is significant that the text provides more than one reference in the third person to the works of Albertus Magnus. Clearly statements such as "note that according to Albert in his treatise *On the State of the Sun and Moon* there are four phases of the moon" argue against Albertus Magnus's authorship of the *Secrets*. In the course of the *De secretis mulierum*, Albertus's *Meteorology*, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, *On Generation*, and a treatise on menses are referred to specifically by the author.

HUMAN GENERATION

The topic of human generation holds a central place in the *De secretis mulierum*. Pseudo-Albert brings up the subject immediately: after a brief introduction he begins by citing Aristotle (fourth century B.C.), Averroes (twelfth century A.D.), and Boethius (fifth to sixth century A.D.) on the exalted nature of human reproduction and then proceeds to devote the first chapter to the generation of the embryo. Subsequent sections treat the development of the fetus and the influence of the planets and constellations upon it.